

"United, we live": Empowering elders through disaster response and recovery

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Introduction: The world's population is ageing and social supports systems are failing in capacity. For older people in 'developing' countries this can bring untold hardship. When disaster strikes, already difficult circumstances are exacerbated for elderly survivors who are amongst the most vulnerable.

Finding ways to assist elders recover from disaster and build resilience against future emergencies is a pressing yet poorly appreciated global issue. Occupational therapists are potentially well-placed to play a valuable role in addressing this need.

Objectives: This paper highlights key implications for occupational therapy arising from participatory evaluations conducted by teams led by the author of aged-related tsunami response programs across Asia from 2006 to 2009.

Description: Mid-term, summative and impact evaluations were undertaken of international cooperation programs, from which 'occupational' implications of aged-specific strategies through the relief-recovery-development-disaster preparedness cycle were derived.

Results: Although there are international mandates requiring that the needs and rights of vulnerable people, including the aged, are addressed in humanitarian contexts, a wide range of age discrimination occurs. The evaluations reveal:

- Awareness of age-specific special needs and human rights remains poor amongst governments and humanitarian organisations; where these are acknowledged, there is a substantial lack of knowledge and skills to implement appropriate actions.
- The situation is exacerbated because older people are not widely considered as legitimate stakeholders in disaster rehabilitation and development.
- Changes are required in how relief and development programs are designed and implemented: specialised interventions for older people, as well as mainstreamed age-friendly strategies.
- Practical ways in which occupational therapy can make an immediate and long-lasting impact in communities through empowering elderly survivors.

Conclusion: In the context of ageing communities, an increasing prevalence of disasters, overlaid with global resource constraints, the need to build comprehensive 'self-help' systems is paramount. Central to enabling this is an 'occupational' perspective that nurtures the roles, capacities and resilience of the aged community. Occupation has potential to empower and promote inclusion through which elder rights and wellbeing can be achieved.

Contribution: Addressing the needs and rights of the elderly in disaster contexts offers a unique, practical and highly relevant entrée for occupational therapists into the field of disaster management.