

## Endnotes

1. HelpAge International, *A study of humanitarian financing for older people*, HelpAge International, London, 2010
2. *Integrating older people: A training of trainers' manual for successful mainstreaming of age friendliness in Canadian Red Cross's programme in Aceh*, HelpAge International, 2007, p.45
3. *Building a better future: older people in Serbia*, HelpAge International, 2001, p.16
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5. Erb Susan, 'The protection of older people in Northern Uganda: needs, contributions, and barriers to return', HelpAge International, 2008, p.13
6. *Ageing and emergencies*, Ageways issue 66, HelpAge International, December 2005, p.5
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8. *Older people's associations in community disaster risk reduction: a resource book on good practices*, HelpAge International, Asia/Pacific, 2007, p.13
9. *How to build an accessible environment in developing countries: Manual #1, Introduction & accessibility standards*, Handicap International, 2008; *Accessibility: How to design and promote an environment accessible to all*, Handicap International, 2009
10. *Inclusion: principles and practices in Myanmar*, HelpAge International, ActionAid, The Leprosy Mission International and Ever Green Group, 2009

## Resources

A two-page summary of these guidelines is also available.

HelpAge International resources on ageing and emergencies are available at: [www.helpage.org/resources/publications](http://www.helpage.org/resources/publications)

Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) guidelines on gender and mental health in shelter programmes are available at: [www.onerresponse.info](http://www.onerresponse.info)

IASC, *Humanitarian action and older persons: an essential brief for humanitarian actors*, August 2008

*Older people in disasters and humanitarian crises: guidelines for best practice*  
HelpAge International, 1999

*Participatory research with older people: a sourcebook*  
HelpAge International, 2002

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# Guidance on including older people in emergency shelter programmes



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# The background

Shelter is a basic human right for people of all ages, but for older people, the sense of security and comfort that a home provides is particularly important. Losing their home in a disaster or conflict therefore has a profound psychological impact, particularly on the “oldest old” (people above 80 years).

Suitable housing for older people is crucial to ensure a dignified life. When managing a shelter programme, it is essential to identify and address the needs of vulnerable older people and engage them in decision-making, in order for age-appropriate decisions to be taken. Yet various studies have pointed to a lack of attention to older people in shelter programmes. A recent study by HelpAge International shows that in 12 humanitarian emergencies between 2008 and 2010, in CAP and Flash Appeals, only one funded shelter project specifically highlighted the needs of older people.<sup>1</sup>

**“If invisibility, exclusion and powerlessness are common themes emerging from the experience of older people, then consultation, inclusion and empowerment through partnership have emerged as the primary indicators for best practice.”**

*Older people in disasters and humanitarian crises: guidelines for best practice, HelpAge International, 1999, p.2*

The United Nations defines older people as those who are above 60 years of age. However, the definition should be adapted to local contexts. For example, in many developing countries, people aged 50 years are considered to be old.

# The commitments

The UN Principles for Older Persons (UN General Assembly resolution 46/91) calls for ensuring the independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity of older people. It specifically states that older people should have access to basic services including shelter.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights affirm the universal right to adequate housing. The UDHR also affirms the right to privacy (Article 12) and the right to security of person (Article 3). The 1951 Refugee Convention recognises refugees’ rights to adequate housing.

The UN Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) states that “adequate housing must, at a minimum, include elements of adequate services, affordability, habitability, accessibility, location and cultural sensitivity”. Article 21 of CESCR states that disadvantaged groups, such as older people, should be guaranteed some degree of priority consideration and accessibility in shelter projects.

The Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response calls for participation and targeting of the most vulnerable groups, including older people. The 2002 Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing states that “in emergency situations, older persons are especially vulnerable and should be identified as such because they may be isolated from family and friends and less able to find food and shelter” (Objective 2).

# The action points

These guidelines recommend five key action points for including older people in shelter programmes.

These action points are not exhaustive but provide a framework for the different phases of a shelter programme: temporary, transitional and permanent. Not all the action points will be applicable to all these phases; however, each will be applicable to at least one phase.

# Key action points to address older people's need for shelter

## **Action point 1: Understand the needs and capacities of older people**

- Sensitise and provide training to your team on the importance of collecting data on older people, disaggregated by sex and age.
- Make your assessment tools age-friendly by including questions on the needs and capacities of older people.
- Conduct focus group discussions and individual interviews with both older men and women in various age groups.
- Ensure that your assessments include the most vulnerable older people – isolated older people, those with health problems, those aged 80 and above and skipped generation households (where the middle generation is absent). See Action point 3.
- Identify what already works around accessibility, inclusion and participation of older people and what needs improving.

## **Action point 2: Ensure that older people participate and are represented**

- Adapt your communication style to suit older people.
- Provide opportunities for older people to hold positions of responsibility and be represented on community-based committees.
- Increase opportunities for individual choice and problem-solving by involving older people and their families and communities in issues such as land rights and construction.
- Ensure that older people are engaged in complaints mechanisms and project monitoring procedures.

## **Action point 3: Target vulnerable older people**

- Target older people, especially the most vulnerable, in the process of selecting those to receive shelter assistance and in all stages of a humanitarian response.
- Ensure that isolated or housebound older people are aware of the selection process and are able to participate in it.
- Assess, through discussion with older people and their families and community, the support systems that are available to them and how these have been affected by the emergency.
- Take steps to ensure that the community acknowledges the risks and vulnerabilities of older members and that the community is supported to address these.

## **Action point 4: Incorporate age-friendly features in both household and community shelters**

- Adhere to national and international standards for durable and accessible shelter construction.
- Ensure a culturally acceptable and age-friendly layout and design.
- Incorporate features that allow older people to enter and exit their shelters easily.
- Ensure that the shelter is not too far from water sources, healthcare centres, cyclone shelters or community centres and other facilities; that older people do not feel isolated or unsafe; and that they can evacuate their shelter easily.
- Ensure that non-slip floors and handrails are installed as appropriate; and that shelters are weather-proofed and winterisation kits distributed in good time.
- Recognise that people become less mobile with age: provide access to water sources and raised beds, adequate lighting and ventilation; and opportunities to adapt the shelter to meet future needs, including home-based livelihood activities.

## **Action point 5: Promote coordination, cooperation and sharing**

- Ensure that older people's issues and data are included on the agenda of shelter cluster meetings.
- Put in place a system of monitoring and evaluation among partners and local government, so that there is a continuous flow of feedback and direction on ageing issues, and disseminate good practice and lessons learned through relevant channels, including the shelter cluster.
- Coordinate and promote partnership with other clusters (Watsan, Health, Livelihood, Protection, Camp Coordination and Camp Management) to link older people to different services.
- Link your programmes to those addressing other vulnerable groups such as children, women and people with disabilities. There are overlaps between these groups – for example, many older people care for children or have disabilities.

# Action point 1: Understand the needs and capacities of older people

To understand both the needs and abilities of older people, programme staff must be sensitised on the importance of collecting data on older people. They should be aware of ageing issues including demographic changes, international commitments, good practice and lessons learned from other projects on the vulnerabilities and contributions of older people.

## Training needs

Staff should acquire knowledge on older people through training and workshops. Training should also be provided on survey design and tools for collecting data disaggregated by sex and age (covering the age groups 50-59, 60-69, 70-79 and 80 and above). Age-disaggregated data is important, as older people are a diverse group and the needs of people in their 60s are very different from the needs of those in their 80s.

Make your assessment methods age-friendly by including questions in rapid assessment forms on family status, basic needs, health status, mobility and social support for older people. In other shelter-related assessments, add questions to identify needs that older people may have for accessibility, allocation, location, safety and personal preferences. Hold focus group discussions and/or individual interviews with older men and women in different age groups. Make sure they have enough privacy to answer questions on sensitive issues.

## Identifying capacities

Older people possess a wealth of skills and knowledge. Their vulnerability is aggravated when assessments do not recognise their potential to contribute to community-based projects and they are offered few opportunities to do so. Tools such as “role strips” are useful to identify the capacities that older people have. For more on encouraging older people’s participation, see Action point 2.

### Example of a role strip<sup>2</sup>

Decision-makers	Participants	Information sources	Recipients
Older people who can help set goals, plan and implement the programme.	Older people who can help provide services and share skills.	Older people who can take part in focus groups and be consulted.	Older people who are only in a position to receive services.

Ideally, you should gather data on everyone in your target area, prioritising the most vulnerable, based on their socio-economic and health profiles. This information can be shared with other organisations. Ensure that the most vulnerable older people (including isolated older people, older people with health problems, people aged 80 and above, and households with skipped generations – where the middle generation is absent) are included in your sample.

Needs assessment exercises with the most vulnerable and typically excluded older people will help you see how to reach them and, in turn, help to improve targeting. For more on targeting, see Action point 3.

Assess how far older people are being included in existing programmes. If they are being excluded from activities such as needs assessments or benefits, identify the reasons and how these may be addressed.

**The sample size of older people in community-based assessments should be no less than the proportion of older people in the total population. The sample should represent all older people, and be balanced in terms of gender and other socio-economic factors. Older people comprise 11 per cent of the global population in 2011.**

## Assessing support systems

It is important to examine traditional support systems for older people, in order to build on these. Assess existing safety networks (community and family assistance) to find out how far these have been eroded since the emergency – which are still effective and which are breaking down. For more on targeting older people who lack traditional support, see Action point 3.

**“My husband and one of my daughters went back once to see what was left of our home, and there was nothing of ours there any more. Everything was burnt down. We’d like to get our own house, but we have no money. I don’t know what will happen to us – it’s hard to have any kind of picture of the future.”**

*Testimony of a 65-year-old refugee from Croatia<sup>3</sup>*

## Action point 2: Ensure that older people participate and are represented

An age-friendly shelter programme provides older people with “choices about how to live, chances to participate in society, and the ability to live in a community where their needs can be addressed affordably. Without community, older people become isolated and vulnerable to illness and injury; but without choices, older people can also be deprived of their privacy and their autonomy as adults”.<sup>4</sup>

### Communicating with older people

It is crucial to provide opportunities for older people to contribute to, participate in or be represented in different aspects of a shelter programme. To ensure this:

- Choose community meeting points that are convenient for older people. They should have clear access and be centrally located so that older people (and people with disabilities) can reach them easily.
- Encourage community-based volunteers to support older people who need help to come to meetings.
- Arrange home visits to housebound older people.
- Schedule meetings in the morning when people’s minds are fresh, and keep each session short.
- Speak in short sentences, in a loud, clear voice.
- Take into account disabilities such as hearing or visual impairments.
- Use large letters with a light-coloured background for printed materials.
- Make use of stories, graphics, role plays and conversations. These are effective ways of communicating with older people.
- Ensure that your messages are simple and easy to follow, as many older people, especially women, are not literate and may not understand slides or written materials.
- Take into account language constraints – older people may speak dialects or languages that are different from the language your team members speak.
- Ask older people for their opinions and suggestions in community meetings.

### Providing opportunities and support

Provide opportunities for older people to become members of community-based groups and committees and engage them in roles that suit them. Alternatively, ensure that all community-based committees take into account older people’s needs and abilities, even if they do not have older people as representatives.

For example, many older people are excellent candidates for advisory roles as they have worked as village heads or in some other official capacity involving planning and coordination. Older women can be excellent at counselling or organising community-based activities.

Older people who are physically or mentally vulnerable may not be able to take responsibility for repairing or reconstructing shelters. In programmes with an owner-driven approach, which encourage families themselves to be responsible for financial management and technical quality control, programmes should be tailored to meet the needs of vulnerable people who cannot manage all these elements on their own. These people will need to be supported by their families or communities to support the process.

**In northern Uganda, many older people have not returned to their villages, simply because they do not have a shelter to go back to. Older people lack the physical strength to collect available materials and construct shelters themselves. One older woman in Gulu said, “I want to return to the village, but I cannot build a hut and I have no family to help.”<sup>5</sup>**

Older people who cannot build their own shelters, often seek support from their extended family or community members. For older people who have no land, village or local authorities and community members can be asked to donate land. However, be mindful that rich landowners may only donate land to childless older people because they have a shorter life expectancy. It may be possible to overcome this problem if communities make rules about who will own shelters after the current owner has died. Many older people, especially widows, face further difficulties in obtaining identity cards and documents relating to land and property. These issues can be addressed in consultation with community members and village heads.

Complaints mechanisms and social accountability procedures should include older people. Existing feedback mechanisms can be reviewed to see if older people have enough opportunities to voice their opinions and problems. There are various ways of including older people in the overall monitoring mechanism. For instance, Habitat International report that they conduct “SALT Team” home visits to build relationships with vulnerable groups, especially those who are housebound (SALT stands for Support/Stimulate, Appreciate/Analyse, Listen/Learn/Link, Transfer).

## Action point 3: Target vulnerable older people

In most shelter programmes, limited funding makes it necessary to target the most vulnerable groups. There is no fixed formula for determining who are the most vulnerable. However, there are a few general guidelines:

- Focus on older men and women who are single, isolated or abandoned; are caring for children; are the main family breadwinners; living with chronic diseases, disability, or mobility or mental health problems; belong to the “oldest old” group.
- Target older widows, female-headed households and other vulnerable older women.
- Target older men and women who rank as the poorest (this applies to longer-term programmes where a participatory wealth ranking has been done).

Fatima, who is in her seventies, lives in a camp in Darfur, Sudan with seven grandchildren aged three to eleven. “When we came we had nothing,” she says. “Everything in our village had gone or been burnt.” Fatima made her shelter from wood and twigs, and was given some plastic sheeting. Her eldest granddaughter collects grass from around the camp to sell at the market. Sometimes she makes some money to buy food. The four boys go to school and the youngest children stay with Fatima.<sup>6</sup>

Older people’s vulnerabilities need to be addressed at all stages of shelter programmes in the disaster risk reduction and overall disaster management cycle. For example, in the preparedness phase, the needs of vulnerable older people should be taken into account in hazard and risk analyses relating to both household and community shelters.

### The disaster risk reduction cycle<sup>7</sup>

Source: UNOCHA



### Older people’s association coordinating disaster response

Moheshkali is a coastal area in Bangladesh which is highly susceptible to cyclones. Following a devastating cyclone in 1991, the government of Bangladesh built cyclone shelters and established a simple early warning system. A radio signal is now sent to villages, and identified community members use a megaphone to warn of the impending cyclone.

In Moheshkali, an older people’s association (OPA) was established as a part of the post-cyclone reconstruction project. In coordination with the government early warning system, the OPA developed a plan of action to respond to future cyclones.

When the community receives a cyclone warning, an emergency meeting is held by the OPA. If the cyclone is imminent, the OPA’s emergency sub-committee decides which shelter to go to and identifies vulnerable older people who will need assistance to reach the shelters. OPA members then secure food supplies, assist vulnerable members to reach the shelters, and then seek shelter themselves. After the cyclone, the OPA emergency sub-committee assesses cyclone damage and the action plans to assist vulnerable community members.<sup>8</sup>

### Methods of targeting

You will need to use a variety of strategies to target older people, to ensure that the most vulnerable older people are aware of your programme. The minimum age for older people (whether 50, 55 or 60) should be determined in a consultative way with older people and other community members. Home visits must be made to housebound older people to ensure that they participate in the targeting and selection process.

Discussing support systems with older people and their families and communities during the needs assessment phase helps to determine how vulnerable older people are, as noted in Action point 1. You may need to hold further discussions with immediate or extended family members to understand how the support systems functioned and whether they have been affected by the disaster. Older people who still have access to care and assistance will be less vulnerable, while those whose support systems have been eroded will become more vulnerable and experience more distress.

Take steps to ensure that the community understands the vulnerabilities of older men and women. Although communities usually look after older people, tensions and frictions can arise when older people receive benefits.

Hold discussions with the community during and after the selection process to build awareness and acceptance of the vulnerabilities of older people.

## Action point 4: Incorporate age-friendly features in both household and community shelters

To build suitable shelters for older people, a blend of modern technology and traditional preferences is recommended. To ensure that the technical requirements are met, adhere to national and international standards for durable and environmentally-friendly shelter construction (including resistance to earthquakes and strong winds and appropriate door and window sizes). Refer also to standards and guidelines on how to design an inclusive environment and accessibility in shelters.<sup>9</sup>



**Accessible multi-purpose units for storing supplies for livelihoods activities and holding community meetings were built in Bogale, Myanmar after the cyclone in 2008. The ramp makes access easy for older and disabled people, pregnant women, children and other people with mobility problems. These ramps have non-slip grips and no gaps, reducing the chance of crutches or walking sticks becoming stuck.**

### Layout and design

Involve older people in both the design and building of shelters to make sure they are age-friendly and culturally acceptable. The layout and design should reflect local traditions and beliefs. In many cultures, people prefer houses to face a particular direction or the rooms to be arranged in a particular way. For example, in India, houses facing east are preferred to houses facing west.

Consider cultural practices too. For instance, in Sri Lanka, houses were designed for tsunami-affected families without considering the width of doors. As a result, the doorways were too narrow to allow coffins to be carried through, so that the deceased could not be removed from the house in the coffin, according to tradition.

### Accessibility

Incorporate features that allow older people to enter and exit their shelters easily. For example:

- For easier access, place a wooden ramp at the entrance with a slope of 1:10. Place strips of wood across the ramp for a better grip. Ensure that steps and stairs can be easily and safely negotiated (not more than 26cm in depth and 16cm in height). Doors need to be a minimum of 90cm wide.
- Make sure that light switches and electrical sockets are at a height that everyone can reach (between 45cm and 120cm from the floor).
- Toilets and kitchens should be located where older people can access them easily. Entrances to the toilets and kitchens should be kept clear. Toilet seats can be raised or adapted to suit the needs of older people. If the toilet door opens outwards there is more space inside the toilet, especially for people who use wheelchairs or mobility aids.

Factors hindering the accessibility of shelters include poorly maintained, damaged or uneven paved surfaces. The pavements and lanes in the surrounding community should be a minimum of 90cm wide, even and free from barriers for easy movement. Houses built too close to roads, obstructions such as trees and shrubs and inadequate lighting at night also hamper access.

### Location and allocation

Decisions on the location and allocation of older people's shelters should take into account levels of mobility and vulnerability. Older people prefer to live near facilities such as water sources, markets and health centres. With temporary and transitional shelters, older people should be allocated shelters that are close to toilets, health centres, cyclone shelters or other community centres and distribution points.

Older people's social connections should also be taken into consideration. Many older people feel lonely if their shelters are in isolated places because they cannot access community networks and support. In multi-storey buildings, older people should be given places on the lower floors so that they can leave the building easily in an emergency.

*Action point 4, continued on next page*

Daw Kyi is a 78-year-old woman from Bogale in Myanmar. She is a survivor of Cyclone Nargis. As an older, childless and landless widow who has a disability from a stroke, she was selected to receive an individual shelter and a cash grant of 100,000 kyat (US\$100) from a project supported by an NGO consortium. Through a community scheme for landless people, Daw Kyi was given a small piece of land to build her house on. She now sits in front of her house selling rice and mohingya (a traditional noodle dish) and feels safe and self-sufficient.<sup>10</sup>

### Safety and fall prevention

Non-slip floors, hand rails on ramps and stairs, and grab bars in toilets can improve safety and prevent falls. Indicate changes in elevation, such as steps and slopes, with signs or by using different colours.

Make sure that priority items such as winterisation kits containing blankets are distributed in good time. Weather-proofing or making shelters safe from flooding is also crucial to ensuring older people's safety. If corrugated iron sheets are used for roofing, secure them tightly to make sure that they do not fly off and cause injury during storms or strong winds.

### Adaptation and flexibility

Recognise that people's mobility declines with age and adapt shelters accordingly. For instance, in camps or temporary shelters, sleeping on a mattress can make a substantial difference to older people's health. Raised beds (higher than normal) are easier for older people to get in and out of.

In temporary and transitional shelters, ensuring the distribution of appropriate medicines and suitable food for older people is also important – for instance, medicines for chronic illness. Providing gutters to harvest rainwater from the roof gives older people access to water for both drinking and washing. Providing adequate lighting (including natural light) in the shelters helps to compensate for poor eyesight and make shelters more comfortable.

Where necessary, coordinate with agencies providing mobility aids such as walking sticks and wheelchairs, to enable older people to be more mobile and independent.

Consult older people to provide appropriate space for livelihood activities close to their shelters. Because of mobility problems, many older people prefer to set up small stores in front of their homes. You could also provide support to such livelihood activities. For a discussion of how to coordinate with others on such activities, see Action point 5.

## Action point 5: Promote coordination, cooperation and sharing

To ensure that older people's issues are not neglected or forgotten, it is crucial to include older people, along with other vulnerable groups, on the agenda of shelter cluster meetings. Often there is no mention of the situation of older people on the agendas of other cluster meetings. Lack of data on older people and their exclusion from surveys and assessments leads to their invisibility.

### Working with others

Older people often need multiple interventions. As studies by HelpAge International show, shelter, livelihoods and health are their most critical needs. You will need to coordinate with other clusters (in particular Watsan, Health, Livelihood, Protection, Camp Coordination and Camp Management), partners and local government to link older people to a range of services so that they can lead dignified lives. For example, older people receiving shelter will often need support to sustain a livelihood.

Promoting partnership and shared resources and expertise among agencies will also allow gaps to be identified and a greater number of people to be assisted. In particular, disseminate good practice and lessons learned that show older people not only benefiting from their community's development but also contributing to it. Real-life examples provide inspiration and enhance older people's visibility.

**HelpAge International and the British Red Cross Society collaborated in Indonesia to integrate ageing in the British Red Cross's livelihood programme for tsunami-affected populations in Aceh. Both agencies agreed that to do this, the partnership should operate at all levels and at all stages of the programme cycle. Thus, strategies were developed and implemented, from data collection, to representation in community-based bodies, sensitising staff and community members on ageing, and including older people in livelihood cash grants and shelter programmes.**

Coordination among agencies that are working with other vulnerable groups (such as children, women and people with disabilities) is also important. Many older people care for children or people with disabilities. A large proportion of older people are women, who are often heads of households. Older people may also have disabilities. These overlaps should be incorporated into planning and implementation of shelter programmes. Guidelines are available on gender, people with disabilities and mental health issues in emergencies.