

EVIDENCE-BASED BEST PRACTICES FOR DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE DISASTER RISK REDUCTION AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE

2022 – 2026

A CASE OF
MALAWI • ZAMBIA • ZIMBABWE



Documenting proven, community-led approaches that strengthen disability inclusion, disaster preparedness, climate resilience, and sustainable recovery across Southern Africa.



INCLUSIVE
PREPAREDNESS



ACCESSIBLE
EARLY WARNING
SYSTEMS



RESILIENT
LIVELIHOODS



“ Disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction and climate resilience are essential to building communities where everyone can prepare, respond, recover, and thrive. ”

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“ Leaving no one behind is not only a commitment, it is the foundation of building resilient communities. ”



FOREWORD

Building Resilience Through Inclusion: Leaving No One Behind

“The increasing frequency and severity of climate-related disasters across Southern Africa continue to expose and deepen existing inequalities. Among those most affected are persons with disabilities, who often face disproportionate risks due to persistent barriers in access to information, services, infrastructure, and decision-making processes. These realities underscore the urgent need for disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation strategies that are inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the diverse needs and capacities of all members of society.

It is with great pride that the Southern Africa Federation of the Disabled (SAFOD), together with our partners, presents this publication documenting evidence, experiences, and lessons emerging from the implementation of Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction (DIDRR) initiatives across Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

This booklet reflects the collective efforts of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), government institutions, civil society organisations, development partners, humanitarian actors, and communities who worked together to advance inclusive resilience-building. Through regional collaboration, policy engagement, institutional strengthening, community-based interventions, and livelihood resilience initiatives, the project has demonstrated that meaningful inclusion is not only possible but essential for effective disaster risk management and climate adaptation.

The experiences captured in these pages highlight the critical role that persons with disabilities play as leaders, advocates, innovators, and agents of change within their communities. They also demonstrate the importance of strengthening systems that enable full participation and ensure that disaster preparedness, response, and recovery efforts leave no one behind.

As Southern Africa continues to face increasingly complex climate and disaster risks, the lessons presented here provide practical evidence and inspiration for policymakers, practitioners, development partners, and disability rights advocates seeking to advance inclusive approaches within their own contexts. We hope that these experiences contribute to broader efforts to strengthen resilience, promote social justice, and ensure that disability inclusion remains central to disaster risk reduction and climate action agendas at all levels.

On behalf of SAFOD, I wish to express our sincere appreciation to the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Christian Blind Mission (CBM), our national implementing partners, government counterparts, Organisations of Persons with Disabilities, and community members whose commitment and collaboration made this work possible.

“Together, we can build resilient communities where every person is valued, every voice is heard, and no one is left behind.



Wabotlhe Chimidza

Chairperson
Southern Africa Federation of the Disabled (SAFOD)



“Disability-inclusive climate action and disaster risk reduction are essential to building resilient, equitable, and sustainable communities where no one is left behind.”

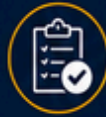
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Together in Partnership for Inclusive Resilience

This publication is the result of the collective efforts, expertise, and commitment of numerous individuals and institutions who contributed to advancing disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction and climate resilience across Southern Africa.



We extend our sincere appreciation to the traditional leaders, civic leaders, government officials, community representatives, civil society organisations, and development partners from Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Malawi whose valuable contributions of time, knowledge, experiences, and perspectives enriched this study. Their insights and engagement provided a strong foundation for documenting the lessons, achievements, and evidence presented in this booklet.



We wish to express special recognition to Peter P. Chibatamoto and Francis E. Ng'ambi of Maipet Investments Consultancy Firm for their professional leadership in conducting the project evaluation and for their meticulous documentation of project outcomes, lessons learned, and emerging best practices. Their dedication and technical expertise were instrumental in the development of this publication.



Our sincere gratitude is extended to the technical partners and implementing organisations, including the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA Zambia), Zambia Federation of Disability Organisations (ZAFOD), Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI Zimbabwe), Federation of Organisations of Disabled People in Zimbabwe (FODPZ), Federation of Disability Organisations in Malawi (FEDOMA), Churches Action in Relief and Development (CARD), and the Malawi Council for Disability Affairs (MACODA). Their commitment, technical guidance, and partnership significantly strengthened the implementation of the initiative and the quality of the evidence generated.



We further acknowledge the invaluable contributions of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), community disaster risk reduction committees, government institutions, teachers, students, smallholder farmers, savings and loan group members, and community volunteers who actively participated in project activities. Their experiences, leadership, and commitment continue to demonstrate the transformative value of inclusive approaches to disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation.



Finally, we express our profound appreciation to the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and CBM Christian Blind Mission (CBM) for their generous financial support, strategic partnership, and unwavering commitment to disability-inclusive development. Their investment made the implementation of this regional initiative and the production of this publication possible.

“

To all those who contributed to this journey, we offer our heartfelt thanks. Your dedication continues to advance a future where persons with disabilities are recognised as equal partners, leaders, and agents of change in building resilient, inclusive, and sustainable communities across Southern Africa.

”

“

Inclusive resilience is built through collaboration, mutual respect, and shared purpose.

Together, we are building communities that leave no one behind.

”



ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

The following abbreviations and acronyms are used throughout this booklet.

ABBREVIATION / ACRONYM	FULL TERM	ABBREVIATION / ACRONYM	FULL TERM
ADRA	Adventist Development and Relief Agency	REPSSI	Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative
BMZ	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development	SAFOD	Southern Africa Federation of the Disabled
CBM	Christian Blind Mission	SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
CARD	Churches Action in Relief and Development	UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DIDRR	Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction	UNDRR	United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction	WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
FODPZ	Federation of Organisations of Disabled People in Zimbabwe	ZAFOD	Zambia Federation of and for Organisations for Persons with Disabilities
FEDOMA	Federation of Disability Organisations in Malawi	ZNCH	Zambia National Council for the Handicapped
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change	RNGO	Registered Non-Governmental Organisation
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support	PVO	Private Voluntary Organisation
MACOHA	Malawi Council for the Handicapped	DIDRR	Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation	M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
OPD	Organisation of Persons with Disabilities	ToR	Terms of Reference

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Evidence, Experiences and Lessons for Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction in Southern Africa

This booklet presents evidence-based best practices and lessons learned from the implementation of Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction (DiDRR) initiatives across Southern Africa. Drawing on experiences from field interventions in **Zambia and Zimbabwe**, it highlights practical and scalable approaches that strengthen the resilience of persons with disabilities and promote their meaningful participation in disaster risk reduction, preparedness, response, and recovery processes.

The increasing frequency and intensity of climate-related hazards continue to **disproportionately affect persons with disabilities**, who often face heightened exposure to risk due to persistent barriers in access to information, services, infrastructure, and decision-making processes.

These challenges underscore the need for disaster risk reduction strategies that are **inclusive, rights-based, and responsive** to the diverse needs and capacities of affected populations.

In response, the Southern Africa Federation of the Disabled (SAFOD), in partnership with CBM and other stakeholders, implemented a regional initiative aimed at **strengthening disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction capacities** and enhancing resilience to climate-related disasters.

The initiative sought to move beyond traditional protection-focused approaches by promoting the active **leadership, participation, and empowerment of persons with disabilities** as key actors in building resilient communities.

This booklet documents **proven practices, innovative approaches, and key achievements** emerging from the initiative. It provides evidence of how inclusive policies, strengthened institutional capacities, community-based interventions, and meaningful engagement of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) can contribute to more effective and equitable disaster risk management systems.

The lessons and recommendations presented herein are intended to inform **policymakers, practitioners, development partners, humanitarian actors, and disability rights advocates** seeking to advance inclusive resilience-building efforts.

Collectively, they demonstrate that sustainable and effective disaster risk reduction can only be achieved when persons with disabilities are fully included as equal partners in planning, implementation, and decision-making processes, ensuring that **no one is left behind**.



BACKGROUND

Climate Change, Disability and Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction in Southern Africa

Climate change continues to intensify the frequency and severity of disasters across Southern Africa, disproportionately affecting persons with disabilities (PWDs). In Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, recurring floods, cyclones, droughts, and extreme weather events expose systemic inequalities that heighten vulnerability among persons with disabilities.



HEIGHTENED VULNERABILITY AND EXPOSURE

Poverty, geographic location, and disability intersect to increase disaster risk. Many persons with disabilities, particularly in rural communities, reside in fragile housing and disaster-prone areas with limited access to resilient infrastructure, healthcare, transport, and social protection systems. These conditions significantly reduce preparedness and adaptive capacity during climate-related emergencies.



BARRIERS TO ACCESSIBLE EARLY WARNING AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Emergency preparedness and response systems frequently remain inaccessible to persons with disabilities. Early warning messages during disasters, including cyclones and floods, are often unavailable in accessible formats such as sign language interpretation, Braille, audio messaging, plain language, or alternative communication methods, limiting timely access to life-saving information.



GAPS IN INCLUSIVE DISASTER RISK GOVERNANCE

Despite growing commitments to disability inclusion, disaster risk reduction (DRR) policies and practices have historically treated disability as a peripheral issue. Slow implementation of inclusive approaches, inadequate disability-disaggregated data, and limited participation of organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) continue to undermine effective preparedness, response, recovery, and resilience-building efforts.



“ Disability-inclusive climate action and disaster risk reduction are essential to building resilient, equitable, and sustainable communities where no one is left behind.”



PROJECT OVERVIEW

Project Goal and Objectives



THE DIDRR INITIATIVE

The Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction (DiDRR) Initiative (2022 – 2026) was implemented across Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe to strengthen the resilience of persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups against climate-related hazards including droughts, floods, and cyclones.

The initiative promoted inclusive disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation systems that respond to diverse needs, capacities, and lived experiences while strengthening participation, leadership, and resilience at regional, national, and community levels.



PROJECT GOAL

To strengthen the resilience, preparedness, adaptive capacity, and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups in disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation processes across Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

1



REGIONAL LEVEL

Promoting Disability Inclusion in Regional DRR and Climate Action

- Strengthen participation of OPDs in regional policy dialogue.
- Promote disability-inclusive DRR and climate adaptation frameworks.
- Facilitate knowledge sharing and learning across countries.
- Document and disseminate best practices.

2



NATIONAL LEVEL

Strengthening Systems and Stakeholder Capacity

- Build capacity of government and non-government actors.
- Improve disability inclusion in DRR policies and plans.
- Strengthen coordination among stakeholders.
- Enhance participation of OPDs in decision-making processes.

3



COMMUNITY LEVEL

Building Resilient and Adaptive Communities

- Strengthen inclusive community DRR structures.
- Improve accessible early warning systems.
- Support climate-resilient livelihoods and savings initiatives.
- Promote participation of persons with disabilities in local disaster management processes.

STRATEGIC FOCUS AREAS



REGIONAL INFLUENCE

- Policy Advocacy
- Knowledge Exchange
- Learning and Best Practices



NATIONAL SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING

- Capacity Building
- Coordination
- Inclusive Planning



COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

- Preparedness
- Early Warning
- Resilient Livelihoods



FROM PROTECTION TO EMPOWERMENT

The initiative advanced a shift from protection-focused approaches towards meaningful participation, leadership, and empowerment of persons with disabilities as active contributors to resilient and inclusive communities.

“ Inclusive disaster risk reduction ensures that resilience is built with communities, not merely for them. ”



PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION STRUCTURE, GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE AND TARGET GROUPS

Evidence, Experiences and Lessons for Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction in Southern Africa



PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION STRUCTURE

The project was funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and Christian Blind Mission (CBM), and implemented through a multi-level partnership structure spanning regional, national, and community levels.

At the regional level, overall coordination and technical leadership were provided by the Southern Africa Federation of the Disabled (SAFOD) Southern Africa Federation of the Disabled (SAFOD), which supported cross-country learning, harmonisation of approaches, and regional exchange on disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction (DiDRR) and climate change adaptation.

At national level, implementation was led by established Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) and development partners working in close collaboration with government and civil society actors. These included the Zambia Federation of Disability Organisations (ZAFOD) and ADRA Zambia in Zambia, the Federation of Organisations of Disabled People in Zimbabwe (FODPZ) and REPSI Zimbabwe in Zimbabwe, and the Federation of Disability Organisations in Malawi (FEDOMA), CARD (Churches Action in Relief and Development), and the Malawi Council for Disability Affairs (MACODA) in Malawi. This structure ensured strong national ownership while promoting consistent implementation of inclusive DRR approaches across all three countries.



TARGET GROUPS

The project targeted persons with disabilities and their families living in high-risk, climate-vulnerable communities, who are disproportionately affected by disasters such as floods, droughts, and cyclones. It also engaged Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), both formal and informal, as key stakeholders in strengthening community-level inclusion and promoting participation in disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation processes.

In addition, the project worked closely with national and local government disaster management structures, UN agencies, and civil society organisations involved in disaster preparedness, response, and resilience building.

At community level, key target groups included civil protection committees, teachers and students, smallholder farmers, and members of savings and loan groups, who were actively involved in training, awareness-raising, and local resilience-building activities.

Together, these groups formed a broad network of beneficiaries and stakeholders contributing to more inclusive, community-driven disaster risk reduction and climate adaptations across the three countries.



GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

The project was implemented in climate-vulnerable and disaster-prone communities across Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Zambia.

In **Zimbabwe**, activities were concentrated in the flood- and drought-affected rural communities of Muzarabani District in Mashonaland.

In **Malawi**, implementation focused on Nsanje District, one of the most flood-prone and food-insecure areas in the southern region.

In **Zambia**, activities were carried out in Gwembe District in the south and selected communities in the eastern region, both highly exposed to droughts, erratic rainfall, and agricultural shocks.

Across all three countries, the project also facilitated regional exchange and learning among stakeholders to strengthen inclusive disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation practices.



HIGH-LEVEL PROJECT INTERVENTIONS

Building Inclusive Systems. Strengthening Capacities. Empowering Communities.



1 REGIONAL ADVOCACY AND POLICY ENGAGEMENT

The project strengthened the participation of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) in regional and international policy processes on disaster risk reduction and climate change. This included engagement in continental and global DRR platforms, alongside structured learning and exchange between the three countries. A particular focus was placed on advancing inclusive policy dialogue through regional collaboration on gender and disability inclusion in Kenya, where cross-country learning on gender-responsive DRR and inclusive development approaches was strengthened. These engagements enabled persons with disabilities to actively contribute to policy discussions and ensured that inclusion was better reflected in emerging regional frameworks and practices.



2 REGIONAL LEARNING, EXCHANGE, AND EVIDENCE GENERATION

The project facilitated structured peer-to-peer learning between Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Zambia through exchange visits, joint workshops, and virtual collaboration platforms. These exchanges allowed partners to share practical experiences on inclusive disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation. In addition, the project documented emerging best practices and implementation lessons, generating evidence to support advocacy, replication, and scaling of inclusive approaches across different contexts. Capacity strengthening of regional disability actors further supported their ability to engage effectively in policy dialogue and influence decision-making processes.



3 NATIONAL CAPACITY STRENGTHENING AND POLICY INFLUENCE

At national level, the project strengthened the capacity of government disaster management institutions, civil society organisations, and UN agencies to integrate disability inclusion into disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation systems. Training and mentoring focused on inclusive policy implementation, early warning systems, and programme design. Organisations of Persons with Disabilities were also strengthened to engage in advocacy and policy influence, enabling more structured participation in national planning processes. In addition, targeted analysis of national systems helped identify gaps in inclusion and informed more responsive and evidence-based programming.



4 INCLUSIVE EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS AND INFORMATION ACCESS

A key area of intervention was the strengthening of early warning systems to ensure accessibility for persons with disabilities. This included participatory assessments of existing systems, identification of communication barriers, and development of more inclusive approaches for disseminating risk information. The project supported improvements in how early warning messages are communicated at community level, ensuring they are understandable, timely, and accessible to all groups, including persons with disabilities.



COMMUNITY-LEVEL DISASTER RISK REDUCTION SYSTEMS

At community level, the project strengthened local disaster risk reduction structures through participatory assessments that identified barriers and enablers affecting persons with disabilities. Capacity and vulnerability analyses were conducted to support evidence-based local planning. Community disaster risk reduction committees were trained and supported to integrate inclusion into their planning and response systems, while Organisations of Persons with Disabilities at local level were strengthened to actively participate in decision-making and preparedness processes. Disaster preparedness plans were developed and tested through simulation exercises to improve community readiness for climate-related hazards.



LIVELIHOODS AND HOUSEHOLD RESILIENCE

The project enhanced household resilience through the establishment and strengthening of Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), which provided financial inclusion and improved coping mechanisms for vulnerable households. In addition, smallholder farmers were trained in climate-resilient agriculture, conservation farming, and livelihood diversification. Demonstration plots were established to support practical learning and promote adoption of improved agricultural practices. These interventions contributed to improved food security, income generation, and long-term resilience at household and community level.



SCHOOLS AND YOUTH AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

Schools were used as key entry points for awareness and behaviour change on inclusive disaster risk reduction. Teachers and students were trained and supported to develop school-based disaster preparedness plans, conduct drills, and integrate risk awareness into daily learning. Young people played an important role as multipliers of knowledge, sharing DRR information within their households and wider communities, thereby strengthening community-wide awareness and preparedness.



8 INTEGRATED APPROACH TO INCLUSIVE RESILIENCE BUILDING

Overall, the project combined policy engagement, institutional capacity strengthening, community systems development, and livelihood resilience interventions into a single integrated model. This approach ensured that persons with disabilities were not only reached as beneficiaries, but were actively involved as participants, contributors, and leaders in disaster preparedness, response, and resilience-building processes across all levels.



3. DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE DISASTER RISK REDUCTION IN PRACTICE

Building Resilient Communities. Leaving No One Behind.



Across Southern Africa, climate change is intensifying the frequency, severity, and complexity of disasters. Recurring droughts, floods, cyclones, heatwaves, and erratic rainfall patterns continue to threaten lives, livelihoods, and development gains across the region. While these hazards affect entire communities, their impacts are not experienced equally. Persons with disabilities are among those most disproportionately affected due to persistent barriers in access to information, infrastructure, services, and decision-making processes.



Globally, an estimated 1.3 billion people—approximately one in every six people—live with some form of disability. Yet despite increasing recognition of disability rights, persons with disabilities continue to be largely excluded from disaster preparedness, response, and recovery efforts. Research by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) demonstrates that persons with disabilities are significantly less likely to receive accessible early warning information, participate in disaster planning, or access evacuation and relief services during emergencies.



3.1 UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction (DiDRR) is an approach that ensures persons with disabilities are meaningfully included in all stages of disaster risk management, including prevention, preparedness, mitigation, response, recovery, and resilience-building. Rather than viewing disability as a source of vulnerability, DiDRR recognizes that vulnerability is often created by exclusion, inaccessible systems, discrimination, and limited participation opportunities.

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 recognizes persons with disabilities as key stakeholders whose knowledge, capacities, and lived experiences are essential for effective disaster risk reduction. Inclusive approaches acknowledge that persons with disabilities are not merely recipients of assistance but active contributors to preparedness, response, and community resilience.

Experiences from Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe demonstrate that when persons with disabilities participate in disaster planning, early warning design, community preparedness activities, and governance structures, disaster risk reduction efforts become more effective, equitable, and sustainable.



3.2 CLIMATE CHANGE AND DISABILITY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Southern Africa remains one of the regions most exposed to climate-related hazards. Recurrent droughts threaten food security and livelihoods, while floods and cyclones increasingly displace communities, damage infrastructure, and disrupt essential services. These risks are particularly severe for persons with disabilities, who often face additional obstacles in accessing transportation, healthcare, communication systems, emergency shelters, and livelihood opportunities.

Evidence from global and African studies consistently shows that persons with disabilities experience higher levels of disaster-related mortality, displacement, and economic loss than the general population. During emergencies, inaccessible infrastructure, inaccessible communication systems, and the absence of disability-inclusive planning can transform manageable hazards into life-threatening situations. In some disaster contexts, mortality rates among persons with disabilities have been found to be two to four times higher than those of the general population.

The 2023 Global Survey on Persons with Disabilities and Disasters found that 84% of persons with disabilities do not have a personal disaster preparedness plan, while only 11% reported being aware of disaster risk reduction plans in their local areas. The survey also revealed that many individuals would face significant challenges evacuating during emergencies, even when advance warning is provided.

These findings highlight the urgent need to ensure that climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction initiatives are designed with, rather than for, persons with disabilities.



3.3 KEY BARRIERS

Experiences across Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe reveal several persistent barriers that continue to undermine disability inclusion in disaster risk reduction. These include:

- ✗ Limited disability-disaggregated data for planning and targeting interventions;
- ✗ Inaccessible early warning systems and emergency communication channels;
- ✗ Physical barriers within evacuation routes, shelters, and public infrastructure;
- ✗ Limited participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes;
- ✗ Insufficient institutional capacity to mainstream disability inclusion;
- ✗ Persistent stigma and misconceptions surrounding disability.



“Nothing about us without us.”
Meaningful inclusion leads to stronger, safer communities.



OPPORTUNITIES

However, the project also identified significant opportunities for strengthening inclusive resilience. Strong Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), community-based disaster management structures, inclusive early warning systems, disability-sensitive data collection approaches, and multi-stakeholder partnerships emerged as powerful enablers of change.

The use of disability-disaggregated data, participatory risk mapping, accessible communication methods, inclusive preparedness planning, and climate-resilient livelihood interventions demonstrated that practical and scalable solutions already exist.

Emerging evidence from across Africa further confirms that meaningful collaboration between governments, OPDs, humanitarian actors, development partners, and communities is essential for advancing disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction and ensuring that no one is left behind.



The following sections present evidence-based best practices, field experiences, lessons learned, and recommendations from Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, showcasing practical approaches that have successfully strengthened disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction and climate resilience across Southern Africa.



BEST PRACTICES

What Worked Across Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe

The implementation of the Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction (DIDRR) initiative generated valuable lessons and evidence on effective approaches for strengthening resilience among persons with disabilities and their communities. Across Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, several practices consistently demonstrated positive results in promoting inclusion, strengthening local capacities, improving access to information, and enhancing community preparedness. The following section highlights the key best practices that emerged from project implementation and offers practical insights for replication and scale.

“



“ *Inclusive resilience is strongest when persons with disabilities participate as leaders, decision-makers, and agents of change.* ”

Community-led Geospatial Mapping of Persons with Disabilities



PRE-INTERVENTION

Prior to interventions, local DRM plans in Muzarabani district (Zimbabwe) and Gwembe district (Zambia) consistently excluded PWDs [People with Disabilities] due to systemic and environmental barriers. Living in highly flood-prone river basins, PWDs were omitted from disaster registers because authorities relied on inaccurate macro-level estimates. Consequently, mitigation plans left PWDs exposed to predictable hazards.

Specific barriers included:



Mobility Impairments:

Evacuation methods assumed individuals could walk long distances over waterlogged terrain.



Sensory Barriers:

Standard sirens and radio early-warning broadcasts bypassed deaf residents.



Visual Limitations:

Rising floodwaters made navigation impossible for blind residents.



Institutional Invisibility:

Committees treated communities as homogenous, causing search-and-rescue teams to bypass isolated households with high support needs.

BEFORE

PWDs Excluded and Left Behind

- ✗ Not captured in disaster registers
- ✗ No accurate location data
- ✗ High risk during floods
- ✗ Evacuation plans did not consider specific needs
- ✗ Search and rescue teams bypassed isolated households



PWDs were invisible in data, invisible in plans, and most vulnerable in disasters.

AFTER

Informed, Inclusive and Prepared

- ✓ Mapped and registered by the community
- ✓ Exact locations identified in relation to flood zones
- ✓ Evacuation plans tailored to specific needs
- ✓ Early warnings and response reach everyone
- ✓ No one left behind



Data drives inclusion. Inclusion drives resilience. Resilience saves lives.



THE INTERVENTION

The project replaced passive census tracking with a proactive, community-led geospatial framework. Disability-disaggregated data was collected by persons with disabilities (PWDs) using the Washington Group Questionnaire. Disaster management agencies mapped exact locations of vulnerable individuals relative to flood zones using Geographic Information Systems, layering demographic data with poverty, housing integrity, and transit access.



KEY TASKS EXECUTED



Capacity Building:

Project teams trained leaders from organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) to conduct localized audits and geospatial mapping.



Requirement Mapping:

Teams documented specific evacuation needs—including wheelchair compatibility, medical equipment dependencies, and sensory requirements—prior to crises.



Database Integration:

Grass-roots data was integrated directly into district disaster databases.

COMMUNITY-LED GEOSPATIAL MAPPING OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES



From Invisibility to Inclusion: Mapping Lives, Saving Lives

Before the intervention, persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Muzarabani (Zimbabwe) and Gwembe (Zambia) were invisible in disaster plans and registers. After the intervention, community-led geospatial mapping ensured that every person is seen, counted, and included in disaster preparedness and response.

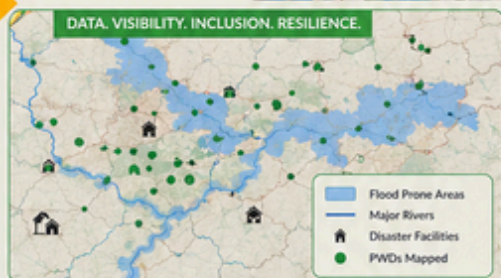
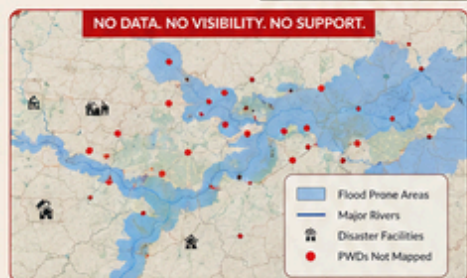
✗ BEFORE

- ✗ PWDs excluded from disaster registers
- ✗ No accurate location data
- ✗ High risk during floods
- ✗ Evacuation plans did not consider specific needs
- ✗ Search and rescue teams bypassed isolated households



✓ AFTER

- ✓ PWDs mapped and registered by the community
- ✓ Exact locations identified in relation to flood zones
- ✓ Evacuation plans tailored to specific needs
- ✓ Early warnings and response reach everyone
- ✓ No one left behind



OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

The establishment of this granular baseline allowed policymakers in Zambia and Zimbabwe to transition from reactive disaster response to proactive, inclusive disaster risk reduction.



Targeted Interventions

Emergency personnel knew exactly who needed help and where they were located before disasters hit.



Geographical Evidence

Local authorities utilized highly actionable evidence for subsequent interventions based on precise geographical risk profiles.



Measurable Metrics

Initiatives provided reliable, measurable metrics to rigorously evaluate the accessibility of early warning systems, shelter designs, and post-disaster aid distribution over time.

“ IF YOU ARE NOT COUNTED, YOU CANNOT BE ACCOUNTED FOR. ”



INCLUSIVE EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS AND ACCESSIBLE SHELTER AND EVACUATION

Leaving No One Behind When Every Second Counts



Early warnings and safe shelter save lives—only when everyone can hear, understand, and act. This practice ensures that persons with disabilities are included in early warning systems, and that shelters and evacuation processes are accessible and dignified.

PRE-INTERVENTION EXCLUSION CRISIS

During active disasters, standard disaster response frameworks historically failed persons with disabilities due to inaccessible infrastructure and exclusionary communication channels. Structural and communication exclusion turns manageable hazards into preventable tragedies.

Inaccessible Infrastructure:
Shelter steps, narrow doorways, and non-compliant bathrooms.

Exclusionary Communication:
Warnings were broadcast via single-sensory mediums (e.g., audio sirens or text-only alerts), blocking critical information from reaching deaf, blind, or cognitively impaired citizens.

Systemic Oversights:
Interventions that ignored the specific needs of disabled populations.

Evacuation Failures:
Lack of accessible transport and specialized medical transit options.



THE SOLUTION: INCLUSIVE EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS, ACCESSIBLE SHELTER & EVACUATION

Adapting Indigenous Knowledge Systems:
Project teams combined traditional forecasting (bird behaviors, wind shifts) with standard meteorology into accessible formats.

Infrastructure Strengthening & Protocols:
Leaders established safe evacuation protocols for the elderly and Persons with Disabilities (PWDs). Pathways were audited, widened, and equipped with navigational aids. Centers of Excellence were supplied with stretchers, first-aid, high-decibel speakers, and life-saving jackets.

Inclusive Drills:
PWDs, the elderly, and children actively joined community evacuation routines. These drills helped identify and eliminate physical and communication obstacles, resulting in immediate updates to the district's Disaster Risk Reduction Plans.



OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Inclusive early warning systems and accessible shelters ensure that no one is left behind—saving lives, strengthening dignity, and building resilient communities.

Timely Information for All
Everyone receives warnings they can hear, see, or understand in time to take action.

Accessible and Dignified Evacuation
Safe, accessible routes and transport ensure no one is left behind.

Reduced Risk, Saved Lives
Prepared communities reduce injuries, loss of life, and property damage.

Stronger, Inclusive Disaster Plans
Continuous learning and drills improve district plans and community resilience.



“Inclusive early warning and accessible evacuation mean everyone is informed, everyone is safe, and no one is left behind.”



MEANINGFUL REPRESENTATION – FROM VULNERABLE TO VITAL: INCLUSIVE DRR IN ACTION



When persons with disabilities are included in decision-making structures, plans become more inclusive, resources are better targeted, and communities become stronger and more resilient.



PRE-INTERVENTION

In rural Zambia, traditional leaders (Chiefs and Headmen) act as the primary custodians of land and emergency response. Historically, PWDs were excluded from local tribal courts and relief lists.



THE INTERVENTION

- Formal dialogues with the House of Chiefs unpacked the intersection of climate change and disability.
- Traditional councils enacted mandates requiring at least 30% representation of PWDs on village-level disaster relief committees.
- Leaders allocated safe, elevated communal land for inclusive evacuation shelters and climate-resilient gardens.



ACCESSIBLE FORMATS

Teams created illustrated visual aids, simplified local-language texts, and auditory signals (like distinct drum patterns) for immediate comprehension.



VISUAL AIDS



SIMPLIFIED LANGUAGE



AUDITORY SIGNALS

ZAMBIA CASE STUDY



INTERVENTION

- Formal dialogues with the House of Chiefs unpacked the intersection of climate change and disability.
- Traditional councils enacted mandates requiring at least 30% representation of PWDs on village-level disaster relief committees.
- Leaders allocated safe, elevated communal land for inclusive evacuation shelters and climate-resilient gardens.



MEASURABLE IMPACT

- In Mambwe and Bbondo wards, traditional headmen successfully integrated **142** persons with disabilities into functional disaster committees, eliminating discriminatory taboos.



INCLUSIVE IN ACTION



ZIMBABWE CASE STUDY



INTERVENTION

- Formed 12 functional Junior Inclusive Disaster Risk (JIDR) committees to spearhead school safety.
- Inclusive Risk Mapping: Learners with disabilities were given leadership roles to identify physical vulnerabilities on campus (e.g., inaccessible pathways).
- Operational Preparedness: Schools developed formalized Preparedness Plans and were equipped with stretchers and first-aid kits for emergency simulations.



MEASURABLE IMPACT

- Learners directly identified and modified physical and procedural vulnerabilities.
- Administrators, and committee members drastically increased local institutional knowledge of evacuation protocols and first aid.

INCLUSIVE IN ACTION



THE POWER OF MEANINGFUL REPRESENTATION



Inclusive leadership strengthens decisions and builds trust.



Diverse representation ensures no one is left behind.



Communities become more resilient when every voice counts.

“Inclusion is not charity. It is smart development.”

“

When persons with disabilities are at the table, solutions are **stronger, fairer, and more sustainable.**

”

RESILIENT LIVELIHOOD DIVERSIFICATION



Stronger Livelihoods. Stronger Communities. Stronger Resilience.

Sustainable livelihoods empower persons with disabilities and their communities to withstand shocks, adapt to climate change, and build a better future.



INTERVENTION

Climate-Smart Demonstration Plots

The initiative funded localized, climate-smart agricultural demonstration plots to shield vulnerable demographics from devastating economic shocks. These plots acted as regional learning hubs.

Self-Governed Savings Groups

Formed self-governed savings groups which ensured that localized rules met the specific financial realities of the members.

Inclusive and Accessible Training Environments

Engineers physically adapted all agricultural training sites and demonstration plots and raised planting beds and paved pathways to allow PWDs to safely master and implement sustainable farming techniques.



“ Resilient livelihoods are built when everyone has the opportunity, tools, and support to thrive. ”



MEASURABLE IMPACT



Specialized Training

Local agencies delivered specialized training in climate-smart agriculture, including vertical farming, drought-resistant crop cultivation, and indoor livestock rearing.



Financial Empowerment

Project financial officers secured independence by distributing seed capital and micro-grants directly to PWD-led self-help groups.



Accessible Infrastructure

Engineers adapted sites with raised planting beds and paved pathways, enabling PWDs to safely learn and apply sustainable farming practices.

“ When livelihoods are resilient, communities are resilient. When everyone participates, no one is left behind. ”



5. CASE STUDIES & FIELD EXPERIENCES

Field experiences from Zambia and Zimbabwe demonstrate how disability-inclusive approaches can be integrated into disaster risk reduction, preparedness, and resilience-building efforts across different contexts. While implementation approaches varied, both countries generated valuable experiences that contributed to stronger participation, improved planning, and more inclusive resilience outcomes.



Building Resilience,
Leaving No One Behind.



5.1 ZAMBIA

STRENGTHENING INCLUSION THROUGH COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION



Implementation in Zambia demonstrated the value of working closely with traditional leaders, community structures, government institutions, and Organisations of Persons with Disabilities to strengthen disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction. Through sustained dialogue and collaboration, disability inclusion became increasingly integrated into local planning, preparedness, and resilience-building efforts.



The project supported the active participation of persons with disabilities in community disaster risk reduction structures and promoted greater representation within local decision-making processes. Community preparedness activities, inclusive planning initiatives, and resilience-building interventions contributed to stronger collaboration between stakeholders and increased awareness of disability inclusion at community level.



The Zambia experience further highlighted the important role of traditional leadership in fostering social inclusion, mobilising community participation, and supporting locally driven approaches to disaster preparedness and climate resilience.



5.2 ZIMBABWE

ADVANCING INCLUSIVE PLANNING THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED EVIDENCE



In Zimbabwe, the project demonstrated how community-generated evidence can strengthen disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation planning. Working closely with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities, local authorities, and community stakeholders, the initiative supported the collection and utilisation of disability-disaggregated data to inform preparedness and response efforts.



Community-based assessments and mapping activities provided more detailed information on the location, needs, and vulnerabilities of persons with disabilities living in disaster-prone areas. This information strengthened planning processes and supported more targeted preparedness interventions at local level.



The Zimbabwe experience also reinforced the value of directly involving persons with disabilities in data collection, community assessments, and disaster risk reduction processes, ensuring that planning decisions reflected local realities and practical accessibility considerations.

6. LESSONS LEARNT

The initiative generated valuable insights that continue to shape more inclusive, effective and people-centred disaster risk reduction and climate resilience efforts.



1 Inclusion from the start works best.

Disaster risk reduction is most effective when persons with disabilities are included in planning, response and decision-making from the beginning.



2 Data drives inclusive action.

Limited disability-disaggregated data revealed the urgent need for stronger systems, including the use of Washington Group Questions to guide inclusive planning.



3 Accessible communication saves lives.

Emergency communication and response systems must reach everyone through visual, auditory, SMS, sign language and other accessible formats.



4 Community systems build resilience.

Village-level support systems, buddy networks, inclusive disaster committees, and savings groups strengthen preparedness and collective protection.



5 Institutional commitment is essential.

Governments and local structures must create permanent spaces for OPDs in planning and governance processes.



6 Partnerships and learning sustain impact.

Regional learning platforms and Centers of Excellence can sustain knowledge, strengthen coordination, and improve inclusive disaster preparedness over time.



RECOMMENDATIONS

BUILDING INCLUSIVE AND RESILIENT COMMUNITIES FOR ALL

Drawing on the evidence, experiences, and lessons generated through the project, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction and climate resilience across Southern Africa.

01

STRENGTHEN INCLUSIVE POLICIES AND GOVERNANCE

For Governments

Integrate disability inclusion into national and local disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation, and development frameworks while ensuring meaningful participation of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) in decision-making processes.

02

IMPROVE DISABILITY-DISAGGREGATED DATA SYSTEMS

For Governments and Development Partners

Institutionalize the use of disability-disaggregated data, including the Washington Group Questions, to improve planning, targeting, resource allocation, and emergency response.

03

INVEST IN ACCESSIBLE EARLY WARNING AND RESPONSE SYSTEMS

For Governments, Humanitarian Actors and Communities

Ensure that emergency information reaches everyone through multiple accessible formats, including visual, auditory, SMS, sign language, plain language, and community-based communication channels.

04

STRENGTHEN OPD LEADERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

For OPDs

Support the capacity of OPDs to engage in advocacy, planning, implementation, monitoring, and accountability processes, positioning persons with disabilities as leaders and contributors rather than beneficiaries alone.

05

SCALE COMMUNITY-BASED RESILIENCE APPROACHES

For Communities and Development Partners

Expand inclusive disaster committees, buddy systems, savings groups, climate-smart livelihood initiatives, and community preparedness structures that promote local ownership and protection.

06

INVEST IN LONG-TERM INCLUSIVE RESILIENCE

For Donors and Development Partners

Move beyond short-term emergency interventions and invest in sustainable systems, institutional capacity strengthening, accessible infrastructure, and regional learning mechanisms that build resilience over time.

“

Disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction is not an optional add-on—it is a prerequisite for resilient, equitable, and sustainable communities where no one is left behind.

”

8. CONCLUSION

The Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction (DiDRR) initiative has demonstrated that inclusive preparedness, response, and recovery are not only possible but essential for building resilient and equitable communities.

By placing persons with disabilities at the centre of planning, decision-making, and action, the project has strengthened local capacities, improved accessibility, enhanced data systems, and fostered collaboration across communities, governments, OPDs, and partners.

The lessons learned and recommendations outlined in this report provide a strong foundation for scaling inclusive approaches and sustaining impact beyond the life of the project.

As climate risks intensify, our collective commitment to inclusion, accessibility, and social justice will determine whether we build a future where everyone—regardless of disability—can live safely, participate fully, and thrive.

Together, let us continue to build a Southern Africa that leaves no one behind.

“

**“An inclusive and resilient future is not just our vision—
it is our shared responsibility.”**

We thank all partners, communities, and stakeholders who contributed to this journey. Your commitment is building a stronger, safer, and more inclusive tomorrow.

TOGETHER, WE HAVE:



Strengthened Inclusion

Persons with disabilities are actively participating in disaster risk reduction and decision-making processes.



Improved Systems and Data

Better data, stronger systems, and accessible communication are guiding inclusive planning and action.



Stronger Partnerships

Collaboration among governments, OPDs, communities, and partners has expanded knowledge, resources, and impact.



Empowered Communities

Local structures, networks, and livelihood initiatives are building resilience and collective protection for all.



A Resilient Future for All

Inclusive disaster risk reduction contributes to safer, more equitable and sustainable communities.

**Inclusion is not an add-on.
It is the foundation of effective
disaster risk reduction and
sustainable development.**

REFERENCES

The development of this booklet drew on project documentation, evaluation findings, policy frameworks, and technical resources related to disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction and climate resilience.



KEY REFERENCES

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DOCUMENT SOURCES

The evidence, case studies, lessons learned, and best practices presented in this booklet were derived from:

- Project monitoring and evaluation reports
- Community consultations and field assessments
- Exchange visits and peer learning activities
- Government stakeholder engagements
- Disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction training programmes
- Community disaster preparedness simulations and exercises
- Documentation generated across Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Malawi



ANNEXURE: PHOTO HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE DIDRR PROJECT (ZAMBIA AND ZIMBABWE)



“
Alone we can do so little;
together we can do so much.”

Partnerships, inclusion, and collaboration
are the foundation of resilient communities
and lasting change.

”



This annexure presents a visual record of key moments, activities, and milestones captured throughout the three-year DIDRR project in Zambia and Zimbabwe. The photographs document the project's implementation journey, highlighting engagement with communities, partnerships, field activities, capacity-building efforts, and the experiences that shaped project outcomes. Together, these images provide a reflective overview of the work undertaken and illustrate the people, places, and collaborative efforts that contributed to the project's impact over the course of implementation.



1. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



2. CAPACITY BUILDING AND TRAINING



3. INCLUSIVE EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS



4. PARTICIPATORY PLANNING AND RISK MAPPING



5. ACCESSIBLE INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES



6. LIVELIHOODS AND RESILIENCE BUILDING



7. PARTNERSHIPS AND STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION



8. LEARNING SHARING AND EXCHANGE VISITS



9. CELEBRATING PROGRESS AND IMPACT

