 

**Education in crisis: An urgent call to ensure equitable provision and access for persons who are blind or partially sighted**

**The obligation to fulfill human rights, including the right to education, on an equal basis does not automatically cease during situations of emergency. Governments must, therefore, ensure that education is available and accessible to persons who are blind or partially sighted during and after emergencies.**

**The Issue**

During emergencies, such as earthquakes, cyclones, hurricanes, floods, outbreaks, conflicts, and war, the right to education is severely undermined. These crises cause significant damage to infrastructure, including residential and educational buildings, resulting in closure of schools. Consequently, persons who are blind or partially sighted often find themselves pushed to the periphery of society, with limited access to educational resources and support networks during situations of emergency. Despite attempts to use Emergency Remote Education (ERE) to ensure uninterrupted learning during crises, limited accessibility of digital platforms, assistive technologies, and alternative learning methods continue to exclude persons who are blind or partially sighted from fully enjoying their right to education during emergencies.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Furthermore, the widespread destruction caused by emergencies leads to essential services such as healthcare, transportation, social protection, water and sanitation, being disrupted or even completely halted. Sadly, the impact of these emergencies is not evenly distributed, exacerbating existing inequalities experienced by persons with disabilities, particularly those who are blind or partially sighted. The consequences of these disparities are far-reaching, hindering the personal and socio-economic development of those who are blind or partially sighted, who are often at a significant disadvantage in the face of emergencies. To illustrate this, the limited access to educational opportunities for persons who are blind or partially sighted, during situations of emergency, would severely limit their possibilities of securing some income when displaced or settling and sustaining a livelihood in a new setting. Moreover, persons who are blind or partially sighted are often excluded from taking on manual labour, and thus they heavily rely on attaining an education to participate in gainful economic activities such as employment.

**Our position and call to action**

The World Blind Union (WBU) and the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI) firmly believe that in times of emergencies, equitable access to education for persons who are blind or partially sighted must be guaranteed in a manner that upholds their right to education as enshrined under Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), using accessible technologies and methods in line with Article 9 (Accessibility) of the UNCRPD. Therefore, we jointly and unequivocally make the following calls:

1. **Recommendations for governments**
   1. Actively consult and closely involve organisations of persons with disabilities**,** including those representing persons who are blind or partially sighted, in all aspects of planning and implementation of Emergency Education Plans and interventions during and post-emergencies.
   2. Collect disability data, disaggregated by impairment, and implement a comprehensive data-driven approachin assessing the impact of emergencies, identifying gaps, evaluating effectiveness of educational interventions, and formulating evidence-based policies to ensure positive outcomes for learners who are blind or partially sighted during and post-emergencies.
   3. Allocate adequate budgetary support towards fully accessible educational platforms, materials and resources including in braille and large print, and provide training and support to educators to effectively utilize accessible digital tools and methods during Emergency Remote Education.
   4. Ensure and promote uninterrupted provision of Braille and mobility training, particularly within a set-up of special schools for the blind or partially sighted.
   5. Ensure and strengthen support services during emergenciesfor leaners who are blind or partially sighted including but not limited to counselling, and psychosocial support to mitigate the psychological impact of crises and effectively empower them to cope with any immediate drastic changes and long-term consequences of emergencies.
   6. Proactively empower persons who are blind or partially sighted with individualized and age-appropriate support services,such as orientation and mobility training, braille instruction, and adaptive technology training.
2. **Recommendations for non-state actors** 
   1. Advocate for governments to formulate and implement inclusive policies and interventions, in collaboration with representative organisations of persons with disabilities,and actively monitor such policies and interventions to ensure they prioritise the rights and needs of persons who are blind or partially sighted.
   2. Collaborate with international agencies and other local organisations (including private companies) to provide support servicesfor persons who are blind or partially sighted during emergencies, including but not limited to mental health support, counselling, and equipment to facilitate mobility as well as easy access to digital or distance learning.
   3. Tech developers should actively consult representative organisations of persons with disabilities, along with working with governments,to ensure enhanced accessibility of digital platforms, learning materials and technologies used for Emergency Remote Education. This extends to tech developers’ duty to ensure that digital learning platforms are compatible with assistive technologies and integrate accessibility features such as closed captioning for audio content.
3. **Recommendations for education practitioners (including teachers, head teachers or principals)**
   1. Conduct regular consultations and joint planning sessions with representative organisations of persons with disabilities, Orientation and Mobility (O&M) specialists, braille instructors and adaptive technology expertsto ensure that students who are blind or partially sighted receive the required assistance to navigate their environment and access education opportunities on an equal basis with other children during emergencies.
   2. Undergo specialized training in inclusive emergency preparedness, in order to fully understand the specific needs of persons who are blind or partially sighted during emergencies.

**Background and rationale**

Around the world there are approximately 240 million children with disabilities, including those who are blind or partially sighted.[[2]](#footnote-2) Access to education is of significant concern for these children, particularly during situations of emergency. For learners who are blind or partially sighted, the ability to access education during emergencies transcends a mere right to learn; it is also a means through which they enjoy other fundamental human rights,[[3]](#footnote-3) including protection from exploitation, violence and abuse. Additionally, schools often serve as vital hubs for essential services such as food and healthcare during emergencies, making access to education more crucial for the wellbeing and safety of children who are blind or partially sighted. Furthermore, quality education plays a significant role in protecting cognitive development and fostering psychosocial well-being,[[4]](#footnote-4) particularly during traumatic and challenging times.

Despite the acknowledged importance of education during emergencies, it is quite saddening to note that education is often the first service suspended and the last to be restored during crisis situations.[[5]](#footnote-5) Moreover, this leaves persons who are blind or partially sighted further marginalized, exacerbating existing inequalities and challenges in accessing education as well as enjoying other fundamental human rights. The disruption of educational services during emergencies contributes to a widening educational gap between learners who are blind or partially sighted and their counterparts, leaving the former at a significant disadvantage.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable uptick in the frequency and severity of various emergencies. These range from natural disasters like earthquakes, cyclones and floods, to public health crises such as outbreaks and pandemics, and even armed conflicts and wars. These crises have significantly compounded the challenges faced by persons who are blind or partially sighted in accessing education.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Natural disasters such as cyclones and floods, along with conflicts like wars, do not just cause damage to educational infrastructure; they also create hazardous and inaccessible environments for learners who are blind or partially sighted. Additionally, public health crises like outbreaks and pandemics pose further obstacles that demand remote learning and digital accessibility. Sadly, the scarcity of accessible digital platforms and assistive technologies often perpetuates the exclusion of persons who are blind or partially sighted from remote educational opportunities.

[The WBU COVID-19 survey](https://worldblindunion.org/covid-19-amplifying-voices-our-lives-our-say/) highlighted how the pandemic exposed some deep structural inequalities within society. Especially notable was the disregard for reasonable accommodation requirements and accessibility preferences for persons who are blind or partially sighted, and other intersecting groups. Many of the digital and technical solutions developed to continue education and work during the pandemic failed to fully consider the needs of these marginalised communities, widening the gap even further.

Furthermore, the impact of emergencies on forcibly displaced populations is particularly distressing. There are approximately 83 million forcibly displaced people globally,[[7]](#footnote-7) with over 14 million being persons with disabilities, including persons who are blind or partially sighted.[[8]](#footnote-8) The significant proportion of displaced children, around 43.3 million in 2022,[[9]](#footnote-9) highlights the urgent need to address the rights of this vulnerable demographic. UNICEF reported in 2023 that children with disabilities who are on the move face severe deprivations including limited access to quality education, healthcare, food and clean water.[[10]](#footnote-10) This corroborates earlier evidence that children with disabilities in refugee camps experience heightened vulnerability to stigmatization, exclusion, isolation and violence.[[11]](#footnote-11) Although specific data on the number of school-age refugees or asylum seekers who are blind or partially sighted remains scarce, the circumstances outlined above magnify the urgency of implementing inclusive educational measures and support services for displaced children who are blind or partially sighted.

**Children and persons who are blind or partially sighted have rights in every context, including when on the move following situations of emergency.**

It is imperative to address these pressing issues with a sense of urgency and determination. Overcoming the multifaceted challenges described above would require comprehensive and evidence-based strategies to ensure equitable access to education for school-age persons who are blind or partially sighted during situations of emergency. Adopting inclusive emergency education plans that adequately address the unique needs of learners who are blind or partially sighted in education settings is paramount. This includes providing accessible information, alternative learning methods, and adequate age-appropriate assistive technologies. Governments should also proactively forge meaningful collaborations with representative organisations of persons with disabilities, non-state actors, educational authorities at various levels and other stakeholders to essentially pool expertise and resources in developing and implementing comprehensive solutions during and post-emergencies.

Collection of reliable disability-disaggregated data is crucial in understanding the extent of the impact of emergencies on the right to education for persons who are blind or partially sighted. By conducting comprehensive disability-disaggregated data collection and monitoring, governments can easily identify gaps and assess the effectiveness of interventions, leading to evidence-based policies and tangible results from targeted support services for those in dire need.

Furthermore, promoting digital accessibility and training educators on the use of accessible digital tools and methods during emergencies can significantly enhance remote learning experiences for persons who are blind or partially sighted. Provision of individualized support services, such as orientation and mobility training, braille instruction, and adaptive technology training, will empower learners who are blind or partially sighted to effectively participate in the educational process – enabling them to acquire knowledge and skills necessary to overcome challenges and build a more promising future.

As both WBU and ICEVI, we emphasize our belief that ensuring the right to education for persons who are blind or partially sighted amidst emergencies necessitates governments to lead concerted efforts. This involves fostering collaborations with diverse stakeholders, including representative organizations of persons with disabilities. Upholding an unwavering commitment to complete inclusion and substantive participation is also very important.

It remains crucial that, during the planning and execution of emergency responses, as well as in the reconstruction phase post-emergencies, governments and all pertinent stakeholders recognize the intrinsic link between education and other fundamental human rights. Additionally, they must acknowledge and address the distinct challenges encountered by persons with disabilities, particularly those who are blind or partially sighted. This recognition will significantly enrich the approach to emergency responses, ensuring that no one is left behind, even in the most arduous phases of crises.

**About Us**

**World Blind Union (WBU)**

WBU is a global organization representing over 253 million people who are blind or partially sighted. We exist to co-create a future where people who are blind or partially sighted can live with full participation, autonomy and freedom. Our mandate is to advance human rights, empower members, and improve living conditions of all people who are blind or partially sighted worldwide. Our work is based on the deep conviction that full implementation of and compliance with the CRPD will lead to a more inclusive, accessible, and equal society. We are a founding member of the International Disability Alliance (IDA), and we also serve on its board.

**International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI)**

ICEVI exists to advance the right of persons who are blind or partially sighted to access inclusive, equitable and quality education. As a global membership-based network, ICEVI discharges its mandate with a firm belief that all persons who are blind or partially sighted together with their families have the right to (1) provision of a full range of educational services and to be included in the educational programs of their respective countries and communities, (2) receive early intervention, early childhood development, care and pre-primary education; (3) support by teachers and other professionals who are properly trained; (4) provision of reasonable accommodation for their needs, including accessible educational materials, enhanced technology, teaching methods and programs that are of a high standard and conform to best practices; (5)live in environments that are free of barriers, social stigmas, and stereotypes; and (6) lead productive lives, according to their aspirations and capabilities, without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity.

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1. See, for example, a 2021 study by Voice of Vision Impairment (VVI) in Ireland which found that during the COVID-19 pandemic many teachers did not consider unique access needs of their students who were blind or partially sighted and this resulted in the remote learning interventions not working for many learners who were blind or partially sighted. Other studies include: S.M. Correa-Torres & A Muthukumaran, ‘Impact of COVID-19 on services for students with visual impairment: Experiences and lessons from the field’ (2022); and T Suraweera, R Jayathilaka and T Thelijjagoda, ‘A nightmare in a ‘darker world’: persons with blindness under the Sri Lanka’s COVID-19 shutdown’ (2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. UNICEF, *Seen, Counted, Included: Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities,* 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD Committee) underscores, in [General Comment No. 4 (2016) on the right to inclusive education](https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-4-article-24-right-inclusive), that inclusive education is a means of realizing other human rights. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), [https//www.inee.org/education-in-emergencies#event-universal-declaration-of-human-rights](file:///C:\Users\ONE%20HOPE%20MALAWI\Desktop\A\WBU\Statements\August%202023%20Statements\Position%20paper_Education%20during%20emergencies\https\www.inee.org\education-in-emergencies#event-universal-declaration-of-human-rights)  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/education/emergencies> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. CRPD Committee, General Comment No. 4, at para. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. UNHCR, [Education Report 2021: Staying the course – the challenges facing refugee education](https://www.unhcr.org/612f85d64/unhcr-education-report-2021-staying-course-challenges-facing-refugee-education) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Women Refugee Commission (2022) <https://www.womenrefugeecommission.org/focus-areas-gender-social-inclusion/disability-inclusion> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. UNICEF, Child Displacement (June 2023), <https://www.data.unicef.org/topic/child-migration-and-displacement/displacement/> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. UNICEF, *Seen, Counted, Included* (note 2 above) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Thomas M. Crea *et. al.,* Inclusive education in a refugee camp for children with disabilities: How are school setting and children’s behavioral functioning related? (2022) <https://www.conflictandhealth.biomedcentral.com/article/10.1186/s13031-022-00486-6> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)