



Inclusion Is Not Optional: Putting GEDSI at the Heart of Earthquake Response

Lessons Sharing from Indonesia for Myanmar and the Region

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When an earthquake strikes, it doesn't choose its victims. But how we respond often does.

The humanitarian community has long acknowledged that certain groups — women, children, elderly people, and persons with disabilities — are more vulnerable during disasters. But recognition alone is not enough. **Inclusion is not about listing vulnerable groups in a report. It's about ensuring that every step of the response — from assessment to aid delivery — actively involves and protects those most at risk.**

Indonesia's experiences responding to multiple earthquakes provide valuable lessons in **how inclusion must be practiced**, not just promised. And as Myanmar faces the devastating aftermath of its recent earthquake, these lessons can help ensure that recovery efforts do not leave anyone behind.

Disaggregated Data Is Just the Beginning

Collecting sex-, age-, and disability-disaggregated data (SADDD) is a necessary first step — but it's not the end point. Too often, data is collected but not analyzed, used, or linked to programming decisions.

In Indonesia, we've seen that where humanitarian agencies have invested in interpreting and using disaggregated data, they were able to tailor assistance more effectively — from shelter layouts to hygiene kits to distribution points. Data must be used not just to describe a population, but to challenge assumptions and shape design.

Inclusion Is a Strength, Not a Burden

Too often, inclusion is framed as a challenge. But Indonesia's experience shows that when people who are typically considered vulnerable are informed, capacitated, and meaningfully involved, they become key actors in the recovery process.

- Women-led groups in Aceh helped redesign shelters to improve privacy and safety.
- OPDs (Organizations of Persons with Disabilities) in Lombok played critical roles in mapping accessibility needs and advocating for inclusive design.
- Elderly community members were central in sharing local risk knowledge and leading community coordination efforts.

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- In Yogyakarta, a group of persons with disabilities volunteers in disaster management initiatives, operating under the auspices of the Social Service

Inclusion is not charity — it's a catalyst.

Earthquakes Create New Vulnerabilities

Another overlooked reality: earthquakes often create new persons with disabilities. Injuries from building collapse, lack of access to emergency medical care, or psychological trauma can have lifelong impacts.

This means that responders must not only identify existing vulnerable groups but continuously assess and update who is most at risk as the situation evolves. The “vulnerable” are not a fixed list — they are shaped by the crisis.

Inclusion Requires Continuous Assessment

Situations change rapidly after a disaster. Needs shift. Risks increase. Populations move. That's why inclusion must be adaptive and informed by ongoing assessment — not just one-time surveys.

In Central Sulawesi earthquake response, humanitarian responders used iterative community consultations to identify who was missing out on aid and adapted their outreach strategies accordingly. Inclusion isn't a checkbox at the start of a project — it's a commitment throughout the response cycle.

Meaningful Participation is Essential for Inclusive Humanitarian Action

Effective inclusion in humanitarian action necessitates the active and meaningful participation of representatives from the most at-risk groups. Organizations representing women, persons with disabilities, older people, and other marginalized communities possess unique insights into their specific needs and challenges during crises.

Their involvement ensures that aid is tailored, accessible, and respectful, preventing further marginalization. Direct participation empowers these groups, fosters resilience, and promotes equitable humanitarian responses. Without their active engagement, humanitarian efforts risk overlooking critical needs, exacerbating existing inequalities, and failing to uphold the principle of "leaving no one behind."

A Call to Action for Myanmar and the Humanitarian Community

As Myanmar and its partners mobilize to recover from the devastating earthquake, this is a critical window to embed GEDSI in action, not just language. We call on:

- Policy makers to make inclusive design and data use as a requirement and not as an option.
- Humanitarian actors to build meaningful partnerships with women's groups, disability organizations, and local leaders.
- Donors to fund programs that prioritize participation and dignity — even when it takes more time or effort.

Because inclusion isn't just about who gets aid — it's about who gets a say in how recovery happens.

We welcome your thoughts.

This article is part of a series reflecting on Indonesia's experience in disaster response, aimed at contributing to shared learning and regional dialogue — particularly in the context of the Myanmar earthquake response. We warmly invite others to share their perspectives, experiences, and ideas.

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