

# POSITION STATEMENT

Wheelchair Provision in Humanitarian Situations | November 2025

## Background

**In humanitarian situations, individuals with mobility impairments, particularly wheelchair users, face heightened risks of injury, neglect, and exclusion from humanitarian response systems. The global community is currently witnessing humanitarian crises in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, and Myanmar, among many others.**



Credit: Marie Abou Saab, in collaboration with World Rehabilitation Funds, LUPD: Lebanese Union for People with Physical Disabilities & SESOBEL

Despite international commitments to inclusive humanitarian action, wheelchair users are often left without access to appropriate mobility devices, which are essential for survival, dignity, and participation in lifesaving activities<sup>1,2</sup>.

The World Health Organization's (WHO) 2025 operational update emphasises that assistive technology and rehabilitation must be prioritised in crisis settings to ensure inclusive response systems<sup>3</sup>.

Coupled with inappropriate wheelchair provision, well intended donations and charity modelled provision, can also lead to unsustainable practices, increase in waste or unused wheelchairs as well as harmful impacts to wheelchair users who aren't provided with the correct wheelchair and modifications.

## Mission & Vision

The International Society of Wheelchair Professionals (ISWP) envisions a world in which all people who need wheelchairs receive appropriate products and services with dignity and from appropriately trained personnel. Their vision and mission underscores the urgency of addressing the mobility needs of individuals in crises, where the lack of access to wheelchairs further marginalises already vulnerable populations.

As WHO<sup>1</sup> notes, timely access to appropriate wheelchairs is essential for health, dignity and participation, especially in less-resourced and crisis-affected settings. ISWP's role is to support and advocate for the prescription of appropriate wheelchairs within humanitarian contexts and assist with the development and knowledge sharing of trained wheelchair professionals across these contexts.

# Evidence-Based Justification

## High prevalence of disability in crises

- According to WHO and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), approximately 15% of the world's population lives with a disability, and this number rises significantly in conflict and post-disaster settings.
- Many injuries during conflicts (e.g., gunshot wounds, bomb blasts) result in mobility impairments requiring wheelchair provision <sup>2</sup>.

## Critical role of wheelchairs

- Access to appropriate wheelchairs significantly improves independence, reduces pressure injuries and secondary health issues, and increases access to food, shelter, and sanitation <sup>1,2</sup>.
- Wheelchairs are frequently distributed in emergencies, especially where injuries or displacement occur. However, the quality and appropriateness of wheelchairs vary widely, and many recipients do not receive proper fitting or training <sup>4</sup>. As stated in the WHO Wheelchair Provision Guidelines <sup>2</sup>, 'The best outcomes in wheelchair access occur when wheelchair users have the benefit of an individual process of assessment, fitting, training, and follow-up, provided by trained personnel.'

## Gaps in humanitarian response

- Assistive technology (AT), including wheelchairs, is frequently absent or poorly integrated in emergency response, leaving persons with disabilities stranded without mobility or voice <sup>4,5</sup>.
- 'In many fragile settings, assistive technology simply doesn't arrive. Preparedness must be built in before the next crisis hits' <sup>6</sup>.
- Importance of wheelchair services as part of inclusive humanitarian response, highlighting appropriate assessment, fitting, and follow-up care <sup>1,2</sup>.

## Examples of preparedness

- Humanity Inclusion (HI) and WHO worked collaboratively with Haitian authorities following the lessons learnt from the 2010 earthquake. The rehabilitation response and emergency health kits, including wheelchair provision, meant quicker response for future crises e.g. Hurricane Matthew in 2016 <sup>7</sup>.
- WHO's development of AT6 and AT10 kits for emergencies <sup>4</sup>.

## Call to Action

ISWP calls on humanitarian actors, governments, donors, and global AT stakeholders to:

### **Integrate Wheelchair Provision into Emergency Preparedness and Response**

- Ensure timely, appropriate access to wheelchairs during crises.
- Embed wheelchair services into national policies and disaster risk reduction (DRR) plans, even where formal systems are weak.
- Pre-position context-appropriate wheelchairs and service kits in disaster-prone regions through collaboration with humanitarian logistics partners.

### **Build Capacity of Local and International Providers**

- Use evidence-based training and assessment tools to strengthen service delivery.
- Empower community-based organisations and organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) to lead outreach and provision.
- Simplify training and tools for low-resource environments using modular, multilingual materials.

### **Adopt a Rights-Based Approach**

- Align all interventions with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).
- Ensure non-discrimination and full inclusion of people with mobility impairments in emergency aid and planning.

### **Collaborate for Quality and Sustainability**

- Partner with technical and humanitarian actors, including ISWP's global network, to ensure quality and local ownership.
- Establish regional hubs to support multiple countries or crisis zones.
- Monitor and evaluate service delivery to refine approaches and ensure accountability.

### **Fund Inclusive and Locally Adaptable Interventions**

- Prioritise wheelchair provision in emergency funding and planning.
- Support mobile service units and pop-up clinics to reach displaced or remote populations.
- Invest in scalable, sustainable models that can be adapted to diverse and challenging contexts.

## Conclusion

In line with its mission and vision, ISWP asserts that wheelchair provision is a critical, life-saving component of emergency and conflict response. Upholding the dignity, health, and rights of people with mobility impairments requires inclusive planning and action, before, during and after crises. As WHO emphasized in 2025, 'Rehabilitation is not a secondary priority – it saves lives, restores dignity and makes recovery possible'<sup>6</sup>.

**In order to integrate wheelchair provision into humanitarian standards and funding mechanisms, we collectively need to improve our data collection on disability and assistive technology needs and build local capacity of the wheelchair provision workforce.**

We must also ensure that there are detailed inclusive preparedness and response strategies for the wide range of humanitarian situations.

## References

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