

# MOBILIZING SUPPORT

TO ENSURE ACCESS TO ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY  
AND REHABILITATION IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES

**Humanitarian crises are increasingly threatening the health, safety, and security of millions globally. Whether due to disaster, climate change, conflict, public health emergency, or other causes, the disruption to health care and subsequent impact on individuals is often extreme.**

WHO is currently responding to 42 graded emergencies, including 17 Grade 3 crises – the most severe. An alarming combination of conflict, climate-related threats, and economic hardship means that over **300 million people will need humanitarian assistance and protection this year alone.**

In each instance, WHO expertly matches the right solution to the highest priority needs, protecting health and minimising the knock-on effects of crises. This includes both rehabilitation and assistive technology services, essential for many in mitigating and recovering from the impact of these events.

World Health Assembly Resolutions 71.8 *Improving access to assistive technology* and 76.6 *Strengthening rehabilitation in health systems* call on WHO to support Member States integrate rehabilitation services and access to assistive technology into emergency preparedness and response – **to ensure people with disabilities, older persons, the injured and people with health conditions are not left behind.**

**The need for rehabilitation and assistive technology rapidly increases during emergencies due to injury and trauma from conflict or sudden onset disasters.**

Unfortunately, in many countries assistive technology and rehabilitation services are fragmented, poorly integrated into health and other systems, and rarely included in emergency preparedness or response.

**Population displacement also drives an increase in need.** Assistive technology is a priority whenever people are displaced, due to existing assistive products being damaged or left behind. Resettlement of those with previously unidentified and unmet needs requires a rehabilitation and assistive technology response. For example, almost 25% of refugees surveyed in Jordan and Lebanon had an impairment, injury, or chronic health condition. Adapting to new, often temporary, and potentially inaccessible and crowded accommodation is a challenge for people with disabilities, older persons, and anyone with a short term or chronic health condition. Assistive technology and rehabilitation enable people's capacities, avoid loss of dignity, negative physical and mental health consequences, isolation, and discrimination.

## ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

Assistive technology is an umbrella term for assistive products and the related systems, policy and services required for their safe and effective provision.

Assistive products may be physical or digital products and include wheelchairs, prostheses, walking aids spectacles, hearing aids, toilet chairs, software, and augmentative communication devices.

## REHABILITATION

Rehabilitation is defined by WHO as “*interventions to optimize functioning and reduce disability in individuals with health conditions in interaction with their environment*”.

Rehabilitation is provided by a range of health and other personnel working together, and often includes provision and training in the use of assistive products.

Globally, as many as **2.5 billion people** need assistive technology, and **2.4 billion people** would benefit from rehabilitation.



# WHO's ROLE IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXT, INCLUSIVE OF REHABILITATION AND ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

In an emergency every minute counts. WHO is on the ground, ready to assess needs and rapidly deploy a response. We are a key humanitarian partner in health responses, coordinating and collaborating with health ministries, UN agencies, international organizations, and local actors to deliver vital health assistance during crises.

Working with the WHO Emergency Medical Team Initiative, we ensure the inclusion of rehabilitation professionals and supplies in Emergency Medical Teams. We have added rehabilitation equipment and priority assistive products to the WHO Trauma and Emergency Surgery Kit to strengthen emergency preparedness and response. To further support inclusive approaches, we have published and continue to develop global guidance on rehabilitation and assistive technology in emergencies, and have established a growing community of practice with representatives in over 50 countries.

WHO teams – working through the IASC Global Health Cluster and the Emergency Medical Team initiative – have facilitated coordination of rehabilitation and assistive technology inclusive responses including in Ukraine, North-West Syria, Sudan, and Gaza, where **more than 6,000 quality assistive products have reached those impacted or are in the pipeline**. With our partners, we provide remote training webinars and mentoring in emergency rehabilitation, and rapid training using WHO's online Training in Assistive Products to upskill health personnel and ensure safe provision of assistive products.



*A young girl with an orthotic receives rehabilitation from a WHO health worker in Peshawar, Pakistan.*

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## KEY FACTS

- An estimated 2.5 billion people in 2021 needed assistive technology, however, there is significant inequity of access with as few as 3% having access in some settings. Assistive technology is most needed by older people, children and adults with disabilities, injuries, trauma, acute illness, or long-term health conditions.
- An estimated 2.6 billion people in 2021 had a health condition that rehabilitation can benefit. This includes people with physical, mental, and social functioning limitations due to ageing, a health condition, injuries, or trauma. In some settings, less than 50% of the population have access.
- Rehabilitation and assistive technology are essential components of Universal Health Coverage, playing a vital role in enhancing participation and inclusion in all aspects of life. Equitable access is necessary to ensure no one is left behind in achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Assistive technology and rehabilitation services are essential during humanitarian crises, for recovery of the injured or unwell, safe passage for those forced to flee, and the well-being, dignity, and inclusion of displaced and refugee populations. However, access barriers are exacerbated during crisis due to strained health facilities and workforce capacity, supply chain disruption, and restricted population movement.
- The *WHO and UNICEF Global Report on Assistive Technology* estimated that every US\$1 invested in assistive technology in low- and middle-income countries could yield up to US\$9 in economic returns over 55 years. This does not include additional benefits to health, wellbeing, and inclusion.
- In an emergency every minute counts. Preparedness and immediate integration of rehabilitation and assistive technology planning improves outcomes for individuals.

# MOBILIZING SUPPORT

WHO and our partners have demonstrated that effective integration of rehabilitation and assistive technology into emergency response has tremendous positive impact on individuals. However, with more than 300 million people currently impacted by humanitarian crises, current efforts fall far too short.

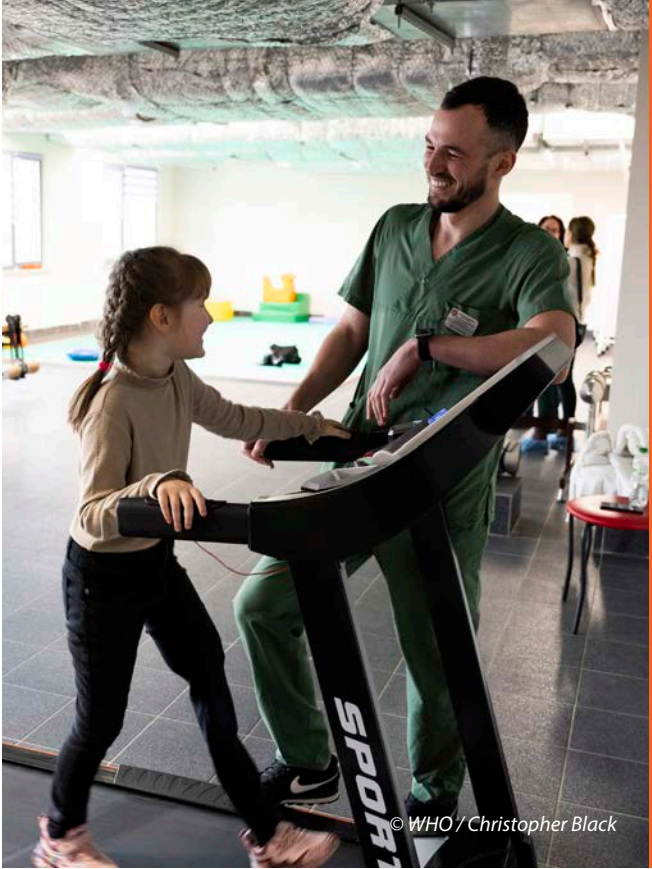
With our mandate from the World Health Assembly, unique partnership with Member States and other UN Agencies, and our position as the lead agency of the Global Health Cluster and Secretariat of the Emergency Medical Teams initiative, **WHO is ideally positioned to lead and support accelerated action on assistive technology and rehabilitation services within humanitarian responses, ensuring no-one is left behind.**

WHO is seeking US\$35 million over the next three years to establish a multi-partner programme for rehabilitation and assistive technology in humanitarian crises response, targeting all those impacted including the newly injured, people with disabilities, older persons, and those with health conditions.

To achieve the reach and sustained success required, WHO will engage our partners to collaboratively address all facets of a comprehensive approach, to drive people-centred action across three key areas of work: **institutional readiness, country preparedness, and response.**

## KEY AREAS OF WORK

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|---|--|
| 1 | INSTITUTIONAL READINESS AND PRE-POSITIONING                |
| 2 | COUNTRY PREPAREDNESS                                       |
| 3 | REHABILITATION AND ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY INCLUSIVE RESPONSE |



In response to the conflict in Ukraine, WHO established and leads the rehabilitation technical working group, coordinating government ministries and non-government partners. We have supported rapid access to priority assistive products including procurement, delivery and online training for 90 health personnel across ten health facilities. Almost 3000 people received assistive products through this initiative in the first year.

*Maryna, 6, receiving rehabilitation from a physiotherapist in Okhmatdyt Children's Hospital in Kyiv, Ukraine.*

WHO is seeking

**US\$ 35 million**

to establish a multi-partnership programme to ensure integration of rehabilitation and assistive technology into humanitarian crisis preparation and response.



## 1

## INSTITUTIONAL READINESS AND PRE-POSITIONING (25% of investment)

**Building on WHO's capacity and leadership in humanitarian crises, we will maximise our institutional readiness to support Member States in ensuring systematic and evidence-based inclusion of assistive technology and rehabilitation in emergency preparedness and response.**

WHO's mandate to support Member States, and our roles as Global Health Cluster lead and the Emergency Medical Team secretariat, mean that we have a unique requirement to support countries to prepare for emergencies; and to provide surge technical assistance, leadership, and coordination when crises strike. **Our global infrastructure and local presence enable our critical role in rapid transport and delivery of large volumes of essential medical supplies and health products, including quality assured assistive products and rehabilitation equipment.**

Recent emergency responses indicate enormous demand for rehabilitation and assistive technology. However, limited regional and country level capacity in this specialised area, the absence of a formal roster of personnel with the necessary skills that can be rapidly deployed within Emergency Medical Teams, and assistive product supply chain challenges constrain the ability to respond.



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*WHO's Director General (left), Executive Director, WHO Health Emergencies Programme (right) and WHO staff inspect a consignment of wheelchairs to be delivered to Ukraine as part of the emergency response effort.*

### WHAT WE WILL DO

- **Prepare authoritative guidance:** WHO will provide evidence-based guidance and resources for Member States and other stakeholders to achieve well informed integration of rehabilitation and assistive technology into humanitarian crisis preparedness, response, and recovery efforts.
- **Address procurement challenges:** WHO will pre-position stock of priority rehabilitation and assistive products for rapid provision to health facilities; and in partnership with other UN agencies establish fast track procurement mechanisms for a wider range of priority assistive products as required for newly injured, displaced and refugee populations.
- **Improve identification of need:** In coordination with other UN Agencies, WHO will integrate assistive technology and rehabilitation needs screening and referral into existing process tools for displaced and refugee populations.
- **Be ready to build workforce capacity:** Establish and prepare regional rosters of rehabilitation and assistive technology experts for rapid mobilisation in support of Member States, the Global Health Cluster and Emergency Medical Teams; and further develop WHO online and print training resources to enable rapid upskilling of health and other personnel to respond to rehabilitation and assistive technology needs in humanitarian contexts.

## 2 COUNTRY PREPAREDNESS (25% of investment)

**Leveraging WHO's role as custodians of International Health Regulations and the lead agency supporting Member States in health emergency preparedness, we will work alongside countries to integrate assistive technology and rehabilitation into emergency preparedness.**

Emergency preparedness is defined as “the knowledge, capacities and organizational systems developed by governments, response and recovery organizations, communities and individuals to effectively anticipate, respond to, and recover from the impacts of likely, imminent, emerging, or current emergencies”. Preparedness enhances response, mitigates impacts and fosters resilience.

**Education, training, robust systems and protocols, and pro-active strengthening of national health care systems, together equip countries to handle emergencies, reducing reliance on external assistance.** Ensuring that access to rehabilitation and assistive technology is incorporated into these preparedness actions is essential for ensuring the well-being and safety of all individuals.

Integrating rehabilitation and assistive technology considerations into emergency preparedness plans, enables countries to promote equity and accessibility; plan for targeted interventions and support mechanisms that will address the needs of particular groups including people with disabilities, older persons, and those with chronic health conditions; and comply with international obligations such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.



Burns require specialist rehabilitation. In the aftermath of a burns mass casualty event in Armenia in 2023, the Ministry of Health and their health personnel were well positioned to respond with support from a specialist burns International Emergency Team – due to earlier work by WHO and the Ministry in health workforce training and emergency preparation.

*A physiotherapist demonstrates to Armenian health personnel how to assist a person with burn injuries to begin mobilizing following skin grafting.*

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## WHAT WE WILL DO

- Knowledge dissemination and sharing:** With Member States and partners WHO will raise awareness and disseminate expert guidance including the WHO Rehabilitation Emergency Preparedness Toolkit, Model Emergency Assistive Products Priority List and specifications.
- Regional multi-stakeholder workshops will be convened to share knowledge and build regional and national capacity to ensure inclusive assistive technology and rehabilitation planning. These workshops will contribute to a unified and proactive approach to enhancing accessibility and inclusivity in emergency response efforts globally.
- Support Member States preparedness:** At Member States' request, WHO will support countries' preparedness including (and not limited to):
  - strengthening overall rehabilitation and assistive technology country capacity;
  - integrating assistive technology and rehabilitation into emergency preparedness policy and protocols;
  - defining and building rehabilitation and assistive technology competencies within national Emergency Medical Teams;
  - developing national assistive product priority lists and specifications;
  - prioritising and pre-positioning (where appropriate) rehabilitation supplies and assistive products.

### 3 RESPONSE (50% of investment)

**Utilising WHO's established Emergency Response Framework and no regrets policy, we will work with countries through our Incident Management System and the Health Cluster mechanism to support assistive technology and rehabilitation inclusive humanitarian responses.**

Rapid and well-coordinated action saves lives, protects health, and minimizes the impact of emergencies. WHO supports ministries of health during times of emergency and establishes a health cluster to re-enforce coordination when required.

When requested, WHO assists the Ministry of Health in coordinating the arrival, registration, licensing, reception, and tasking of Emergency Medical Teams. Our support is implemented through our Incident Management System, ensuring a three level response with WHO Country Offices playing a critical role. **Through our leadership and coordination roles, WHO is responsible for rapidly directing a strategic response across hundreds of partners, ensuring the right people and supplies are in place at the right time.**

This programme will support WHO in collaboration with our 900 national and international Global Health Cluster partners, 40 classified Emergency Medical Teams, UN and other partner agencies to address the rehabilitation and assistive technology needs of people impacted by short and protracted emergencies.



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*WHO staff inspects wheelchairs to be provided in Tehran, Iran.*

### WHAT WE WILL DO

- **Assessment of need and planning:** In support of national health authorities WHO will facilitate rapid assessment of immediate and longer-term rehabilitation and assistive technology needs, and support response planning that is timely, tailored, and considers long-term system strengthening.
- **Technical support:** At the request of countries, WHO will deploy remote and/or in-country experts in support of the Health Cluster and Emergency Medical Teams to assist in the response. These experts will offer guidance, coordination, training, and mentoring as needed; will utilize WHO pre-prepared emergency guidance and tools, tailoring and translating these as needed for the situation.
- **Assistive products and rehabilitation supplies:** In coordination with other UN agencies, WHO will mobilize pre-positioned stock and/or enact fast track procurement to ensure rapid delivery of priority products that are quality assured and suitable for the impacted population and their environment.
- In parallel, WHO will work with partners to ensure use of rehabilitation supplies and provision of assistive products are managed safely, by personnel with the required competencies through technical support as described above.



## IN SUMMARY

We stand at a pivotal moment of action and opportunity and seek your support to mobilize support for the comprehensive integration of rehabilitation and assistive technology into humanitarian preparedness and response.

The achievements of WHO and our partners underscore the transformative impact of inclusive approaches, yet needs of millions remain unmet with only a handful of nations incorporating rehabilitation and assistive technology into their emergency preparedness or initial response strategies.

With our mandate from the World Health Assembly and our strategic alliances, WHO is uniquely positioned to lead this change. Our proposed multi-partnership programme seeks to raise \$35 million over three years, catalyzing comprehensive action across institutional readiness, country preparedness, and response.

Together, let us seize this moment to ensure that no one is left behind in times of crisis. By investing in rehabilitation and assistive technology, we affirm our commitment to dignity, equity, and resilience for all.

**Join us** in shaping a future where every individual, regardless of circumstances, can thrive and flourish. Together, we can make a difference that echoes through generations to come.

**For more information and to get involved, please contact:**

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*A physiotherapist assists Domingo in his home, following his injury due to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.  
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