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The Deinstitutionalisation of Children with Disabilities in Times of Armed Conflict: The Russian Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine

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Plain English/Lay Summary

Introduction to the paper

This paper examines the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on families with children with disabilities, focusing on the challenges of deinstitutionalisation during armed conflict. It explores how the realization of socio-economic rights, especially the right to inclusive education, can both facilitate family reunification and resettlement and avoid re-institutionalisation in the reconstruction process. By analysing existing literature, reports, and policy guidelines, the article argues that removing children from institutions is insufficient unless their socio-economic rights are secured. The paper also highlights the importance of listening to the voices of children with disabilities and their families in shaping a human rights-based approach.

Summary of methods

The paper draws on qualitative research, including academic scholarship, reports from Ukrainian families, and international policy analyses. It uses as normative framework the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The analytical approach combines international human rights, social inclusion theory and intersectionality to assess how armed conflict exacerbates existing vulnerabilities. Emphasis is placed on understanding lived experiences, policy implementation gaps and structural barriers to inclusion into society, with particular attention to the interplay between institutionalisation, inclusive education, and community-based support.

Main findings and argument

Armed conflict significantly increases the vulnerability of children with disabilities and their families. Families face threats to safety, loss of income, disrupted infrastructures, lack of

mobility devices and limited access to education, health and social services. In Ukraine, evacuation processes are often delayed or impossible due to the complex needs of children with disabilities, leaving some in unsafe areas or institutional care. Institutionalisation often remains the default response in times of armed conflict, which is reinforced by the lack of inclusive education.

The paper argues that deinstitutionalisation requires a human rights-based approach that caters for children with disabilities socio-economic rights. Access to healthcare, rehabilitation, education, housing, social services as well as family support is essential for this purpose. Inclusive education is a central component: children must not only be placed in mainstream schools but also provided with support to develop skills and talents to their fullest potential. Evidence shows that lack of access to inclusive education contributes directly to institutionalisation.

Listening to the voices of children with disabilities and their families is critical. Both the CRC and CRPD mandate child participation and family consultation in decision-making processes. Participation strengthens and ensures services meet real needs. Disabled people's organisations (dpos) play a key role in facilitating these voices, especially in emergency situations where separation from family complicates access to support.

The examples of Ukraine demonstrates that simply removing children from institutions does not guarantee independent living. Without community-based services, children may face re-institutionalisation. Reconstruction efforts provide an opportunity to integrate education, healthcare, and social services in the community, supporting family reunification and resettlement. The paper highlights that embedding support within the community rather than institutions, is essential for achieving the right to live in the community on an equal basis with others, as guaranteed by Article 19 of the CRPD.

Main implications

The findings emphasise that policies must shift from institution-focused approaches to community-based services that empower families with children with disabilities. Disabled people and their representative organisations are central to designing, implementing and monitoring programs, ensuring children's voices are heard and needs addressed. Inclusive education strengthens social inclusion, reduces reliance on institutions and promotes participation in society. Policymakers and practitioners must recognize that removing children from institutions without comprehensive socio-economic support risks re-institutionalisation and violates international human rights law. Through the adoption of a social justice perspective, the paper underscores the need to address systemic inequalities and ensure equitable access to essential services. For theory and research, the work highlights the intersection of disability, armed conflict, and socio-economic disadvantage, suggesting future research should focus on child and family participation in both during armed conflicts and in post-conflict contexts.

Finding out more

For further information, resources include the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the UN Committee on the rights of the Child, UNICEF, the European Disability Forum, and Human Rights Watch reports on children with disabilities in conflict zones. The paper also draws on publicly available academic scholarship. Readers can consult the references for full reports, guidelines, and international human rights instruments relevant to the socio-economic rights of children with disabilities.