



World Federation of
Occupational Therapists

Position Statement HUMAN DISPLACEMENT revised

Introduction

Human displacement is the enforced departure of people from their homes due to situations such as war, persecution, and disaster.

At any time, in any country, people from any position within society can be displaced. Displacement may cause temporary occupational disruption, or cascade into prolonged exile from occupational performance and participation that is necessary to meet human needs, experience human rights, and maintain health.

People engage in vigorous occupational adaptation to survive, and strive for a future beyond displacement. Yet displacement is prolonged by socially and politically constructed barriers to full and fair occupational participation. This effectively disables otherwise healthy people and undermines community cohesion.

This paper clarifies to the public, the profession, and our partners the mandate for the occupational therapy profession to respond to human displacement.

The WFOT acknowledges that:

Human displacement has direct and indirect consequences on occupational opportunities necessary to address human needs, access human rights, and create and maintain health.

Significant and protracted disparities in occupational opportunities to address human needs, access human rights, and create and maintain health, can intensify conflicts and environmental degradation that can result in human displacement caused by war, persecution, and disaster.

All persons, including displaced people, by virtue of being human, have the right to occupational opportunities necessary to meet human needs, access human rights, and maintain health. This right is not conditional on relationship to a state, legal status, visibility and sentiment in public domain, engagement with humanitarian aid or funding trends.

Occupational therapy responds to human displacement as a self-governing profession, engaging critically with, yet not directed by the current socio-political context.

The WFOT position is that:

Individual occupational therapy practitioners together with their National Associations engage displaced people and partners to develop and carry out context-specific strategies ensuring the occupational needs and rights of displaced people are respected, protected, and fulfilled in their country.

We respect occupational strengths by valuing previous life roles, occupational adaptation, and existing occupational participation. We affirm reciprocity with displaced people, partners, and host community as normal means of reducing the impact of displacement for people and host communities affected.

We protect occupational opportunities to address the occupational causes of human displacement. We also raise awareness about participation in occupation as a human need and right. The profession advocates wherever the socio-political context violates the human need and rights for healthy participation in occupation.

We facilitate the fulfillment of occupational needs and rights by creating new opportunities for people to participate in occupations. Enabling participation fulfills the occupational needs and rights of displaced people with special needs.

The profession strives to make occupational therapy accessible and engaged along the spectrum of work to respect, protect, and fulfill occupational needs and rights for health. This involves engaging students, practitioners, volunteers, educators, and researchers within each country and between countries.

The WFOT builds capacity within the profession, and builds reciprocal relationships with displaced people and partners in the work.

Significance to Occupational Therapy

Responding to the occupational needs of displaced people uses core skills. Occupational therapy skills are used to enable occupations such as: community access, managing money, home management, employment, parenting, and maintaining culture in a new situation.

Occupational therapy skills used include: activity analysis, grading occupational opportunities, working with both individuals and designing programs, holistic approaches that look at the environment as well as the person, modifying the environment to enhance participation in daily occupations.

To respond to the occupational needs of displaced people demands that the profession engage the socio-political context of displacement. The profession's approach must be critical as well as constructive.

Occupational therapy skills can be used to identify strengths supporting an individual's occupational performance. Occupational therapy skills also identify barriers to occupational participation in an individual's context.

Services to individuals are complemented by advocacy and multidisciplinary partnerships addressing systemic barriers to occupational participation.

Significance to Society

Responding to the occupational needs of displaced people makes visible occupational injustice as both a source and a manifestation of conflict. Using occupational opportunities to re-negotiate underlying conditions, attitudes, policies and relationships that give rise to, and sustain occupational deprivation, can help transform latent conflict into robust peace which benefits the community that hosts displaced people.

Challenges and Strategies

Practitioners face the challenge of inadvertent harm.

Strategies to prevent harm include: learning about respectful helping relationships considering context, culture, and power.

The profession can learn from previous colonization and aid failures.

These broader dialogues complement and challenge contemporary occupational therapy.

Human displacement must be addressed at the local level – special interest groups with National Associations can complement the work of other local agencies.

Challenges already exist to provide access to occupational therapy in the broader health arena.

To address the occupational needs of displaced people beyond the health setting demands a strategic approach to occupational therapy roles.

This can be achieved by leveraging the profession's existing capacity, knowledge, and partners.

Practitioners can also build on evaluation and research undertaken by other fields and disciplines.

Access to occupational therapy input is new for most agencies addressing displacement within disaster, conflict, camp, urban, and settlement contexts. There is a need to support pioneers to build capacity in this field of practice.

Literature published in a policy-void, that privileges the global-North, and scarcely engages displaced people is problematic. Partnerships between countries and disciplines are needed for the research agenda to inform practice and policy.

Policy, public and political discourse related to occupational matters is rarely evidence-based.

Policy that fulfils or denies occupational needs and rights is also used as a tool for political gain.

The profession needs to speak out about the occupational implications of policy when it affects health, rights, and peace.

Occupational implications of policy affect both displaced people and the community.

Conclusion

Occupational therapists make a significant contribution by enabling displaced people to participate in valued occupations that help bridge a former life to the current situation.

This participation helps meet human needs, and helps people experience human rights.

When occupational therapists enable successful participation in everyday occupation, life roles, and the fabric of the community, people can move beyond the negative effects of displacement.

This participation also strengthens inclusion and peace within the community.

In order for the profession to fulfill this mandate, we commit to develop individual and professional capacity so that occupational therapy practitioners, researchers, educators, students and professional bodies engage effectively with both the occupational causes and consequences of displacement.