

Strategic roles of Nursing in the face of global and humanitarian emergencies

Papéis estratégicos da Enfermagem frente às urgências planetárias e humanitárias

Alexandre Barbosa de Oliveira¹ 

¹ Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

We live in times marked by systemic crises and overlapping risks that, by transcending geographic and political boundaries, are daily reshaping the contours of human vulnerability. Global and humanitarian emergencies do not emerge in isolation; they are, rather, intertwined expressions of historical processes of environmental degradation, cultures of neglect, social injustice, and structural inequalities,¹⁻³ profoundly challenging conventional health systems. In this volatile scenario, Nursing professionals take on unique roles, requiring not only technical excellence, but also political competence and ethical sensitivity.

The increasing complexity of global threats, which range from pandemics to climate catastrophes, military conflicts, terrorist attacks, widespread accidents, critical failures in supply chains, and migration crises, requires Nursing to reposition itself in a necessary paradigm. In the face of these global emergencies, an immediate care response is no longer enough. It is necessary to build emancipatory practices that transcend specific care and act on the social and environmental determinants of health. In this movement, Nursing moves from its historical role of implementing health policies to taking a leading role in formulating strategies to promote health, mitigate risks and strengthen community resilience.⁴

Climate change, identified by the World Health Organization as the greatest threat to global health in the 21st century,³ illustrates the scope and severity of this challenge. Its effects not only aggravate pre-existing diseases, but also establish

new patterns of illness, associated with food insecurity, the expansion of infectious vectors and the weakening of health infrastructures. In view of this scenario, Nursing needs to incorporate interdisciplinary knowledge and develop specific skills in planetary health, territorialized epidemiological surveillance and crisis management in contexts of instability.⁴

At the same time, humanitarian emergencies resulting from armed conflicts, socio-environmental disasters and institutional collapses impose increasingly complex ethical and operational challenges. Often working in areas of extreme precariousness and without minimum guarantees of legal protection, nursing takes on the difficult task of preserving human dignity in adverse contexts.⁵ This practice, based on culturally sensitive care and empathetic communication, reflects a political commitment that recognizes that vulnerability is not an individual fatality, but a product of historical dynamics of exclusion and oppression.

Responding effectively to contemporary emergencies requires more than isolated efforts: it requires overcoming the fragmentation of knowledge and building intersectoral networks of care. From this perspective, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development establish essential references to guide the strategic actions of Nursing in risk governance, in the promotion of equity and in the defense of socio-environmental sustainability.^{1,2} The active presence of Nursing in decision-making spaces, with autonomy and recognition of its articulatory and scientific capacity, is therefore an indispensable condition for strengthening safe, resilient health systems committed to protecting life in times of crisis.

Undoubtedly, investment in the critical training of Nursing professionals occupies a central position in this transformation process. Innovative curricula that integrate content on crisis management, climate justice, environmental health, bioethics applied to emergencies, and social leadership are the basis for training agents capable of competently navigating the complex scenarios of contemporary times.^{4,5} Liberating pedagogy, active interprofessional practice, and the appreciation of local knowledge emerge as indispensable strategies for shaping professionals who, beyond technical expertise, act as protagonists of social transformation.

In this context, Nursing assumes the commitment to challenge the power structures that produce and reproduce social vulnerabilities. Its practice therefore becomes profoundly political, as it disputes the distribution of resources and access to fundamental rights, in favor of historically marginalized groups.

The history of Brazilian Nursing, deeply marked by its work in contexts of extreme inequality, offers paradigmatic examples of its transformative potential. Whether in indigenous territories threatened by environmental devastation, in urban peripheries affected by structural violence, or in riverside communities impacted by climate change, Nursing professionals build care practices that intertwine science, solidarity, and the fight for social justice. This critical practice goes beyond the immediate confrontation of crises, acting on their structural roots and affirming care as an inalienable right and life as the greatest value.

In a world increasingly threatened by ecological, political, and health uncertainties, Nursing reaffirms its historical vocation for resistance and active hope. Transforming care into a practice of emancipation, professional training into a political project for social transformation, and presence in territories as a collective force for the reconstruction of social ties and technologies: these are the challenges and possibilities that are imposed on contemporary Nursing practice.

Last but not least, it is important to highlight that, as global and humanitarian emergencies intensify, Nursing not only adapts: it (re)creates its historical meaning, moving from the margins to the center of global response actions to crises. Caring for life, in all its dimensions – biological, social, environmental, ecological and spiritual – also means resisting the logic of exclusion and sowing concrete alternatives for the future of humanity. Thus, Nursing is not only part of the responses to contemporary emergencies: it is an active collaborator in the construction of a more just, supportive and sustainable world.

References

1. United Nations (UN). Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [Internet]. New York: United Nations; 2015 [cited 2025 Apr 27]. Available from: <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>.

2. United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR). Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 [Internet]. Geneva: UNDRR; 2015 [cited 2025 Apr 27]. Available from: <https://www.undrr.org/publication/sendai-framework-disaster-risk-reduction-2015-2030>.
3. World Health Organization (WHO). Climate change [Internet]. Geneva: WHO; 2021 [cited 2025 Apr 27]. Available from: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health>.
4. International Council of Nurses (ICN). Core Competencies in Disaster Nursing Version 2.0 [Internet]. Geneva: ICN; 2019 [cited 2025 Apr 27]. Available from: https://www.icn.ch/sites/default/files/inline-files/ICN_Disaster-Comp-Report_WEB.pdf.
5. Duarte ACS, Chicharo SCR, Silva TASM, Oliveira AB. Ethical-legal dilemmas of nursing practice in emergencies and disasters: a scoping review. Rev Esc Enferm USP. 2024;58:e20230233. doi: 10.1590/1980-220X-REEUSP-2023-0233en.

Authorship contribution

1 – Alexandre Barbosa de Oliveira

Corresponding author

Nurse, Doctor – alexbaroli@gmail.com

Research conception and/or development and/or manuscript writing; Review and approval of the final version

Editor in Chief: Cristiane Cardoso de Paula

Scientific Editor: Eliane Tatsch Neves

How to cite this article

Oliveira AB. Strategic roles of Nursing in the face of global and humanitarian emergencies. Rev. Enferm. UFSM. 2025 [Access at: Year Month Day]; vol.15, e1:1-4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5902/2179769292204>