

ENSURING DISABILITY RIGHTS AND INCLUSION IN THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19



Asia and the Pacific is home to an estimated 690 million persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities face barriers to full and effective participation in society, with many having intersecting disadvantages when disabilities interact with other characteristics, including gender, age, ethnicity, income and place of residence.

Many persons with disabilities are poor and in vulnerable employment without adequate social protection. ESCAP research indicates that the difference in poverty rates between persons with disabilities and the general population can be as high as 20.6 per cent, and persons with disabilities are two to six times less likely to be employed than those without disabilities.

These disadvantaged circumstances make persons with disabilities more vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially those with existing health conditions.

Certain containment measures, including social distancing and self-isolation, may be difficult: persons with physical disabilities may need assistance from attendants to fulfil physiological requirements while persons with intellectual disabilities may require guardians to support their daily needs. The livelihoods of persons with disabilities are also at serious risk due to the economic downturn brought about by the pandemic.

In the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, governments have the responsibility to mainstream disability inclusion into pandemic responses to ensure that the rights and wellbeing of persons with disabilities are safeguarded.

Recommendations

1. Ensure that all pandemic responses are disability-inclusive, including through consultation and partnerships with persons with disabilities


All policy responses to COVID-19 should be disability-inclusive, ranging from public health and containment measures to economic stimulus packages and socioeconomic impact assessments.

Given the diverse range of disabilities and their respective specificities, there is a need for governments to consult disabled persons organizations (DPOs) throughout the process of policy design and implementation to ensure the needs of persons with diverse disabilities are adequately met, with their rights and dignity respectfully upheld. Further, there is an opportunity for governments to co-opt DPOs as service delivery partners to alleviate human resource shortages while tapping into their expertise during this critical period.

2. Provide continued access to all goods and services, including disability-specific support services, necessary for safeguarding the wellbeing of persons with disabilities

In situations of broken supply chains, widespread shortages of essential items and locked down cities, persons with disabilities may not have the resources to obtain daily necessities such as food, toiletries and medicines as well as hand sanitizers, hygiene kits and protective masks. Mechanisms, including home delivery options, should thus be established to ensure that persons with disabilities have adequate and continuous supply of these requisite items.

Governments should also ensure that persons with disabilities have continued access to essential services, including healthcare, personal assistance and rehabilitation. In particular, mechanisms should be developed to ensure that persons with disabilities continue to receive the support required to ensure their wellbeing, community-based living, independence and self-determination are not compromised, when their regular caregivers/ personal assistants are quarantined, fall ill



and/or unable to continue providing support during this period.

Where public health concerns warrant the suspension of services, e.g. temporary closure of schools and rehabilitation facilities, alternative arrangements – such as accessible online learning and/or reasonable accommodation measures (including for family members and caregivers) - should be made to minimize the disruption. Support mechanisms including hotlines and virtual peer support groups could also serve to reduce anxiety brought about by the sudden interruption of core services, especially for persons with autism and psychosocial disabilities.

3. Deliver public information in accessible formats – with public communication messaging that is bias-free and respectful of all population groups, including persons with disabilities

To empower persons with disabilities, especially those with existing health conditions, to protect themselves against COVID-19, it is critical that governments disseminate public information in accessible formats. This includes the provision of sign language interpretation and real-time captioning at press conferences and public service announcements; the development of public communication materials in audio, Braille, E-pub and easy-to-understand formats; the use of accessible digital technologies; and the compliance with W3C accessibility standards for web-based information.

In the crafting of COVID-19 messages, governments should also take extra care in ensuring that all public communications do not discriminate against or reinforce harmful stereotypes of any population group, including persons with disabilities.

4. Make medical and quarantine policies and processes accessible and disability inclusive

There is a need to make sure that designated health facilities, including testing and quarantine centres, are accessible, to allow persons with disabilities to seek medical assistance when required. Medical providers need to stand ready to offer sign language interpretation, including exploring the use of

relay services and/or remote signing via smart phone applications and video technologies. Where required, governments should allocate trained personal assistants to support the needs of persons with disabilities in quarantine. Throughout the process, the attitudes of healthcare professionals should also be respectful and non-discriminatory.

5. Safeguard the income security and livelihoods of persons with disabilities

To enable persons with disabilities, especially those with existing health conditions, to continue working while reducing social contact to reduce infection risks, governments should encourage employers to put in place reasonable accommodation measures, such as enhanced flexible working arrangements and paid leave. Where employees with disabilities work from home, the employer's digital infrastructure, including associated work tools and materials, should be made accessible so that employees do not face barriers in delivering their work outputs.

Governments should also consider legislating stricter anti-discrimination and labour laws, and strengthen enforcement of such laws to safeguard against unfair or discriminatory dismissal of persons with disabilities during the period.

On the social protection front, there is a need for governments to ensure that those receiving disability benefits continue to do so on time. Governments should also consider the provision of additional financial assistance, where required, to buffer the increased costs of living for persons with disabilities stemming from the pandemic situation, such as the extra costs of home deliveries and/or hiring of private support due to the suspension of public services.



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