

COVID and disability

by Alexandra Bingham and Lucy Daniel

25 June 2020



Mohammed Deyab, a worker in Classic Fashion Apparel Industries, Jordan. (Credit: ILO Asia-Pacific/Flickr CC BY NC-ND 2.0)

As COVID-19 continues to disrupt life as we know it, and its impacts are felt far and wide across the world, there is a growing need to ensure those most vulnerable are not left behind. In particular, the world's **one billion people with disabilities**.

For many and varied reasons, people with disabilities are highly vulnerable during this pandemic. For one, people with disabilities are more likely to experience pre-existing health conditions that put them at a higher risk of illness and death due to COVID-19. They are also more likely to fall within the category of low-income earners, increasing their likelihood of living in a crowded home. They may also lack access to adequate water, sanitation and hygiene services and not be able to afford medical assistance and medication. People with disabilities are often excluded from receiving public safety information. People with disabilities are also represented in age groups most impacted by COVID-19, making up one third of people aged 50 or older in low and middle-income countries.

It is not just about people with disabilities being at higher risk of contracting COVID-19. The many other flow-on effects of the pandemic heighten the difficulties people with disabilities face. At various stages, up to half of the world's population have been in some form of lockdown. For people with disabilities, this increases the risk of isolation and can limit their ability to access essential items, services and support. Marife, a Country Officer of CBM Philippines, explains the impacts of COVID-19 on her personally:

I am a person with disability. I am independent and I like socialising. But the situation now is challenging. Public transport, including the ride-hailing transport I use, is now suspended. It is good that there is a nearby shop, I can

buy my food there. But how about those who live far from the shop? How about those who rely on public transport to buy their needs?

The pandemic is also having higher economic impact on people with disabilities, with many reports that people with disabilities are at increased risk of losing income and employment due to the crises, while at the same time facing additional expenses. In light of COVID-19, many countries have seen their government expand social protection programs to offer more support to vulnerable people. Yet a [paper](#) released last month by the Centre for Inclusive Policy found that of the 181 countries that have adopted social protection measures, only sixty countries have specifically referred to people with disabilities while announcing their relief measures. This shows that while there is some progress for people with disabilities and their families, there is still much to be done to ensure they are meaningfully included and supported throughout COVID-19 response work.

Job insecurity and economic impacts during COVID-19 are gendered. This includes increased risk of gender-based violence for women and those who identify as females, as reported in a [global survey](#) by Women Enabled International, which reveal women with disabilities are experiencing violence from partners and family members at least two to three times the rate of other women during quarantine measures in the pandemic.

So, what does a disability-inclusive approach to COVID-19 look like? CBM Australia, together with disability advocacy and representative organisations, have published a statement on how our global response can both include and protect people with disabilities. This includes:

- Ensuring the active participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of COVID-19 work, including perspectives of people with disabilities and their representative bodies across the region in all consultations, response and recovery planning;
- Providing all information about the pandemic and responses in a broad range of accessible formats;
- Continuing disability support services and pre-existing programs towards the inclusion and empowerment of people with disabilities, even in the context of physical distancing and other pandemic responses;
- Providing those working on COVID responses with guidance on how they can achieve disability inclusion in their activities and ensuring they report on how people with disabilities are included and benefiting from their work;
- On a policy level, factoring disability inclusion into all high-level dialogue on COVID-19 between governments and the many other development actors and funders.

In recent years, Australia has made significant inroads to bring disability inclusion into action through our humanitarian and international development work, and it is encouraging to see that people with disabilities were mentioned as a priority in the Ministerial Foreword to DFAT's recently released *Partnerships for Recovery* COVID-19 response strategy. Progress towards disability inclusion has been a sector wide effort with the Australian Government providing vital funding and many NGOs embracing disability inclusion in their programming. This kind of collaborative approach is what is needed during this new era.

Those of us working in the international development space have a unique opportunity to influence the COVID-19 response and recovery in our region and further afield – to meaningfully engage with people with disabilities and ensure they are at the centre of our efforts. In a recent address, the UN's Secretary-General António Guterres stated that, “when we secure the rights of people with disabilities, we are investing in our common future.”

We can all work towards this common future by ensuring no one is left behind in our efforts.

This post is part of the [#COVID-19 and international development](#) series.

Author/s:

Alexandra Bingham

Alexandra Bingham is the Advocacy Communications and Media Officer for CBM Australia, an international Christian development organisation devoted to improving the lives of people with disabilities in the poorest places on earth.

Lucy Daniel

Lucy Daniel is the Executive Officer of the Australian Disability and Development Consortium, a collective voice working for the inclusion of people with disabilities across the Australian international development sector through sharing expertise and advocacy.

Link:

<https://devpolicy.org/what-does-a-pandemic-mean-for-the-worlds-one-billion-people-with-disabilities-20200625-2/>