

## Support to prevent the impacts of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities

As the global COVID-19 virus pandemic continues to evolve, we are aware of the negative impacts it may have on the lives of person with disabilities in Namibia. The Namibia 2011 Population and Housing Census (and the specific Disability Census Report) estimated that there were between 85,000 and 100,000 people with disabilities, representing 5% of the total population. However, the actual number may be higher, WHO and World Bank estimates are closer to 15%. This discrepancy can be understood in light of the continued stigma, discrimination and cultural prejudices against persons with disabilities experience in society.

The COVID-19 presents particular challenges for persons with disabilities because most likely they are at higher risk of developing health complications, being excluded from health care and health information, losing access to essential services and supports related to their disability, and feeling the economic shocks and shortages of essential goods and services in addition to stigma and discrimination (UNPRPD).

Below are few points on issues that may be faced by persons with disabilities in Namibia and some recommendations on how to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19:

### Issues

- Lack of accessible information in different formats to reach all persons with disabilities in terms of prevention, strategies specific to each disability group.
  - People with visual impairments and blind people can hear! They can access information through radio and television and through talk on the streets and in the family. They can follow the daily press conferences as well as the news. **They cannot read newspapers and if one wants to provide WRITTEN information to them, this must be in large print and/or Braille.**
  - People with hearing impairments and deaf people cannot hear AND their reading skills are generally poor. They cannot access any information via radio, on the streets or through family conversations. **TV information only becomes accessible if there is sign language interpretation.** Access to written information is severely hampered by their limited reading skills.
- Lack of knowledge on how to support persons with disabilities should the need arise, e.g. how to go for testing for a person who is Deaf, Blind or using a wheelchair
- Abuse of persons with disabilities due to lack of information by protection officers e.g. case of Walvis Bay
- Parents of children with severe disabilities struggling to provide nappies and food due to poverty and also not knowing how to support their children during COVID-19.
- Everyone's routines have been disrupted.....for persons with mental health issues including anxiety / depression and other diagnosis, this period, with all its unknowns, could be very disruptive/ troubling / setting events for a mental health crisis.
- People with disabilities and chronic illnesses not being able to access chronic medication such as people with epilepsy etc.. This issue could be worse with the current environment.
- Challenge with maintaining social distance as PWD require personal attention in most cases, especially younger children.

### Recommendations

- Ensure consideration is given to make sure people with a mental health issue or diagnosis have needed medications and / or counselling support.

- Involve individuals with disabilities through their respective organizations to go on radio and television to provide information
- Include representatives of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities such as the National Federation of People with Disabilities of Namibia and the Namibia National Association of the Deaf, Down Syndrome Association, and the National Association of Wheelchair Users are included in the National COVID-19 Response Committee and they should play a key role in raising awareness
- Support for persons with disabilities in terms of access to information Braille, sign language, sub-titles, understandable formats etc.
  - Hard-of-hearing and deaf people need simplified, easy to understand messages in written English or local languages plus a lot of visual clues to support the message. They also need well-prepared information in Namibian Sign Language, including adequate background information to help them understand the words and the terminology used. To see C-O-V-I-D in fingerspelling does not mean a thing to a deaf person
- Ongoing newspaper campaign, including inserts in local languages highlighting disabilities – various kinds, how to help, how to spot, what not to do.
- Using the Organizations of Persons with disabilities at regional and community level to identify families of persons with disabilities to benefit from COVID-19 food parcels including soap, disinfectants and hand sanitizers.
- Train and raise awareness amongst police and NDF on the different disabilities.
- *Ensuring telephone numbers and other direct channels providing public health information are fully accessible, including relay services for deaf and hard of hearing people. (Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum (CDPF))*
- *Ensuring emergency numbers (both general health emergency and specific phone numbers set up for this pandemic) are fully accessible, including relay services for deaf and hard of hearing people. (Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum (CDPF))*
- Provide information about safety and protection, in different formats, especially for girls and women with disabilities.
- Work with the Namibian National Association of the Deaf (NNAD) to ensure that signs have been developed, which are a part of Namibian Sign Language, so that Deaf persons and Interpreters have a common frame of reference. Where possible, facilitate access of sign language interpreters to accompany health officials or police officers in the event come across a deaf person.
- Empower Organizations of Person with Disabilities and disability service providers who are currently championing work in the field and working under difficult circumstances to support, in particular children and women with disabilities to enable them to further step up their efforts directly with Persons with Disabilities.
- Educate service providers and families to ensure high level of hygiene and use of protective devises e.g masks, hand washing, etc.