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## POTENTIAL IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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### Key Points

- Persons With Disabilities (PWDs) are extremely vulnerable to the potential impact of COVID-19.
- When PWDs do not have equal access to public health information, this puts them at a greater risk of contracting the virus.
- Information of COVID-19 must be made widely available for PWDs using appropriate methods and forms of communication.
- Better access to affordable health services, transport and food is vital for PWDs needs during the pandemic.
- Government policy and plans on prevention of the spread of COVID-19 must be inclusive and take into account, the needs of persons living with disabilities.

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## POTENTIAL IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

By Sarah Kaut-Nasengom

The novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19), a global pandemic, has affected many territories and countries around the world including smaller developing and island countries. With the lockdown measures being relaxed and the new normal regulations and the *Public Health Emergency Act* of 2020 being put in place in countries like Papua New Guinea (PNG), it is necessary to consider the possible impact of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities (PWDs). There are a variety of challenges that COVID-19 may have on PWDs, but this paper only highlights the potential impact of the disease in three key areas – accessibility, food security concerns and related health issues. The paper also outlines possible strategies to ensure that the government's plans are inclusive and free from discrimination against PWDs.

### Persons with Disabilities (PWDs)

PWDs are some of the most marginalised group of people. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) highlighted that “Persons with disabilities face barriers to full and effective participation and inclusion in society, with many experiencing intersecting disadvantages when disabilities interact with other characteristics, including gender, age, ethnicity, income and place of residence, among others” (ESCAP, 2020, p.1). The World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank in the World Report on Disability (2011) indicated that over one billion people of the world's population live with some form of disability. It is important to note that the needs of PWDs cannot be clustered together and be addressed as one group. This is because different impairments or form of disability require different types of interventions, resources and services.

There is lack of accurate statistics of men, women and children living with disabilities in PNG. Although PNG has mechanisms in place such as the *National Policy on Disability 2015–2025* and has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2013, the voices of PWDs generally go unheard. Many PWDs receive very little to no government services to maintain sustainable livelihoods. Jenkin et al. (2015) reported that about two percent of PWDs receive government services.

PWDs are some of the most vulnerable in society to contracting COVID-19 as they have preexisting challenges ranging from health to socio-economic issues. The pandemic exacerbates these challenges, putting PWDs at a higher risk of becoming

victims of the disease. Moreover, with COVID-19 disrupting the lives of thousands of people around the world, the strong possibility of experiencing a second wave of the spread of the virus requires the government to be vigilant. COVID-19 might be similar to the 1918–1920 Spanish flu pandemic which is regarded as the most severe and deadliest historically. It infected about 500 million people in many parts of the world and occurred in four waves.

According to *The Guardian* (2020), the 1918 flu pandemic killed over 50 million people with the second wave being more severe than the first wave. Recent reports have reported concerns for a possible comeback of COVID-19. The World Economic Forum (2020, p.1) highlighted that, “as lockdown measures begin to relax in countries that are still battling the coronavirus, experts predict the possibilities of a second wave of infections”. With the possibility of subsequent waves of the coronavirus returning, the human rights and the needs of PWDs must be well understood and included in the country's preparedness and monitoring and prevention plans.

### Accessibility

During this time, communicating the right public health information to PWDs is of vital significance. It can be challenging for PWDs to access the right kind of information relating to COVID-19 and understand preventive measures such as proper washing of hands with soap and social distancing. Information about the disease and how to prevent it needs to be communicated appropriately to PWDs, bearing in mind that they have different impairments such as vision, hearing or cognitive disabilities.

According to the PNG *National Policy on Disability 2015-2025*, “persons with disabilities have information access requirement depending on their class of impairments” (Department for Community Development and Religion, 2015, p. 22). For example, a person living with vision impairment may not be able to read a flyer on how to prevent coronavirus. A person who has hearing impairment may find it challenging to have a fair and updated knowledge about the disease through televised or community awareness programs (without the sign language interpretation).

When PWDs do not have equal access to public health information, this puts them at a greater risk of contracting the virus. It is important to have appropriate formats such as braille, sign language interpretation and displaying texts on screen (for televised awareness programs and announcements) in place for instance. Lack of public health information being

translated into appropriate formats for PWDs will only increase the chances of transmission and infection.

Persons with disabilities may encounter difficulties reaching health care facilities to get tested for the disease. PWDs require public transport that is suitable and reliable for them to access resources and healthcare facilities to receive appropriate services. In order to equip themselves to maintain a sustainable livelihood during this time and in the likely occurrence of the second wave of the disease, equal access to public transportation is crucial. In rural areas of PNG, traveling long distances to get to the nearest healthcare facility can be geographically, economically and physically difficult for PWDs. It may be difficult for them to have their own means of transportation. They may also encounter financial difficulties of not being able to afford transport fees to get on public motor vehicles (PMVs).

Also, most of our PMVs are not user friendly for the PWDs. The Pacific Disability Forum (2020) in its situational analysis on COVID-19 update indicated that the inability of PWDs to afford public transportation may prevent them from accessing health facilities. This would minimise the chances of mitigating COVID-19 and increase the chances of PWDs being infected with the disease.

Moreover, access to clean and safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH) facilities is paramount and can be a preexisting challenge for PWDs. For those who have poor living conditions or are living in densely populated areas such as informal settlements, COVID-19 can potentially spread easily and affect PWDs who are among the most vulnerable in the society. The inadequate preventive measures such as social distancing and proper handwashing with soap which are essential for mitigating the disease can be difficult for PWDs. Those with cognitive disabilities and physical disabilities rely heavily on their families or care givers to assist them on a daily basis with activities such as accessing clean and safe water source to bathe.

Furthermore, inaccessible infrastructure or long distances to water sources can be challenging for PWDs, hence increasing their exposure and chances of contracting the virus. In addition, lack of access to clean and safe WaSH facilities can be quite challenging for menstrual hygiene management for girls and women with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. It may also lead to security and gender based violence (GBV) related issues.

### Food security concerns

In the event of the next wave of COVID-19, PWDs may face additional challenges such as food insecurity as a direct result of disruption of transportation of goods and people both locally and internationally. In its policy brief on COVID-19 and PWDs, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2020) outlined that PWDs may not be able to acquire necessities such as food on a daily basis

due to lack of resources under the circumstances where there are broken supply chains, locked down areas and scarcity of essential items.

Most PWDs depend on their care givers for physical support and may encounter barriers to stockpiling food because of social distancing, inaccessible infrastructure, lack of equal access to transport and limitations put in place to control people's movement. These may hinder the mobility of PWDs and care givers from accessing sufficient food during the pandemic. As the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (2020, p. 4) emphasised, "many persons with disabilities who rely on others for daily living (through formal support by service providers or informal support by relatives/friends) find themselves without support due to movement restrictions and physical distancing measures". Ensuring that PWDs have equal access to adequate food supply and good nutrition is essential to maintain good health and strengthen the body's defence system to protect it from COVID-19.

### Related health issues

PWDs with pre-existing medical conditions are extremely vulnerable and susceptible to being infected with COVID-19. This can further increase their anxiety and fear especially for those who have mental health issues. However, preventive measures to mitigate the spread of the virus such as social distancing or restriction of movement which confines people to stay indoors can be a disadvantage for PWDs. They need the support and assistance of care givers to carry on with their day-to-day activities.

Those with underlying health conditions such as diabetes or respiratory related issues require close attention and support to access appropriate healthcare services, medicine and equipment. For example, a PWD who is asthmatic, has vision or speech impairment and exercises social distancing may face difficulties in accessing a health care facility at the right time. This may also hinder the PWD to access the right kind of medical treatment, leading to severe consequences. This impact on their chances of survival.

This point was also made by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2020, p. 1) that, "... disadvantaged circumstances make persons with disabilities more vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially those with existing health conditions".

### Possible strategies to assist PWDs

In order for PNG to be well prepared in these uncertain times, we must all work together, take a collective, holistic and inclusive approach in our decision-making and leave no person behind. Some of the strategies that can be used to address challenges faced by PWDs during COVID-19 pandemic are the following:

- The government should work with relevant stakeholders such as the Disabled Persons Organisations (DPO) network, PNG Assembly of Disabled Persons (PNGADP) to understand the concerns of PWDs and cater for their needs. It is vital to ensure that the COVID-19 preparedness plans and decisionmaking be bias-free and non-discriminating to PWDs.
- Public health information should be written or translated into braille and sign language. Displaying of captions for the awareness programs and announcements on screen or television must be made accessible to PWDs.
- Public health information about COVID-19 should be communicated right down to the local-level government (LLG) and ward levels. LLG presidents, ward councilors and local health workers should work together and be well informed on the rights of PWDs and on how to assist PWDs during an outbreak such as COVID-19.
- PWDs should have access to public transport that is suitable and reliable for them to access resources and health-care facilities. The government should provide public transport that have user-friendly facilities for PWDs such as seats reserved specifically for PWDs and boarding platforms.
- The government should work closely with the private sector, civil society organisations and communities to ensure that PWDs have easy access to clean and safe WaSH facilities in residential communities to minimise the transmission of COVID-19.

## Conclusion

PWDs are a vulnerable group of people who are disadvantaged in various areas. Their challenges are further exacerbated by COVID-19. The government should work together with the private sector, civil society organisations and communities to ensure PWDs receive the assistance they need during this pandemic.

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