United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

Webinar: Protecting and Empowering Persons with Disabilities in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic
15 May 2020 (Friday), 9:00 - 11:00 hours, Thailand Standard Time

Concept Note

I. Background

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 experiencing intersecting disadvantages arising from disabilities interacting with other parameters, including gender, age, income, place of residence and ethnicity.

Many persons with disabilities are poor and in vulnerable employment or self-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. Furthermore, persons with disabilities are two to six times less likely to be employed than those without disabilities.

These disadvantaged circumstances make persons with disabilities even 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. For example, persons with cerebral palsy and persons with muscular dystrophy may need assistance from care attendants to manage the activities of daily living. Persons with intellectual disabilities may require support for meeting their daily needs. As for most people who were already financially insecure or living on the margins before the pandemic, COVID-19 has wiped out livelihood prospects for persons with disabilities.

In the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, governments have the responsibility to mainstream disability inclusion into pandemic responses to safeguard the health, survival, well-being and rights of persons with disabilities.

Due to the unprecedented spread and scale of the COVID-19 pandemic, most governments, including those in Asia and the Pacific, are facing new challenges in mounting coordinated and effective responses to protect their populations.

II. Objectives and themes

Against this background, ESCAP, in collaboration with Ms. Maria Soledad Cisternas Reyes, Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General on Disability and Accessibility, is organizing a webinar with the following objectives:

A. To identify, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, gaps and challenges in addressing the acute and longer-term needs of persons with disabilities; and
B. To explore collaboration focused on the economic and social empowerment of persons with disabilities, and based on harnessing synergies and comparative advantages among governments, organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), other civil society entities, private sector entities and other stakeholders.

III. Target audience

The webinar aims to involve participants from the following groups:

- ESCAP members and associate members, including representatives from ministries responsible for social affairs/welfare, health, education, labour/human resources development, local government, home affairs, as well as other concerned ministries;
- Organizations of persons with disabilities;
- Other civil society organizations, as well as private sector entities with experience in disability inclusion and insights regarding creative options for the economic and social empowerment of persons with disabilities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Persons with diverse disabilities, parents and supporters with insights regarding types of support required for the economic and social empowerment of persons with disabilities in relation to COVID-19 fallout; and
- United Nations Country Teams and other entities with a responsibility to support and promote disability inclusion.

IV. Format and modalities

A. Keynote address:

To underscore the responsibility of governments as duty bearers in upholding the rights of persons with disabilities, Ms. Maria Soledad Cisternas Reyes, Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General on Disability and Accessibility, will deliver the keynote address on rights-based approaches to protecting and empowering persons with disabilities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

B. Experience-sharing:

Real-life challenges faced by persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic will be shared via a video on “Leave Us Not Behind”.

C. Policy crucible:

There will be a panel discussion on the theme of developing and delivering disability-inclusive responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each panelist will be invited to draw on their experience and insights, share case studies and make policy recommendations on the areas of expertise.

After the first round of discussions, concise interventions shall be invited from discussants, representing various stakeholders, to share their views and good practices, not exceeding two minutes each.

In addition, through the YouTube chat window, participants may: (i) raise questions to the panelists; and/or (ii) share good practices on addressing the needs of persons with
disabilities during COVID-19, policy design and implementation in the COVID-19 context.

D. Reflections on the way forward:
A leader of the Asia-Pacific disability community will share reflections on how governments, persons with disabilities, civil society organizations, as well as parliamentarians/elected representatives could move forward in partnership to protect and empower persons with disabilities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The webinar will be broadcasted live on YouTube; a recording will also be available on YouTube after the event.

Real-time captioning and sign-language interpretation will be available.

V. Contact for further information

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