



ADWG AND UNDP COLLABORATION FOR DISABILITY INCLUSIVE COVID-19 RESPONSE

BANGLADESH, JULY 2020



With the outbreak of COVID-19 declared a pandemic and an international public health emergency by the WHO, the entire world is working to address it. Since the emergence of the virus in December 2019, over ten million people around the world are confirmed as cases of COVID-19¹. The estimated reproductive number of the virus is significantly higher than many other infectious diseases resulting in the capacity of health facilities becoming overwhelmed, even in countries with most developed healthcare systems². There are as yet no vaccines or antiviral drugs approved for the disease, and hence, non-therapeutic interventions to control the spread of the virus are the most effective measures to control the disease.

Bangladesh, a lower-middle-income country and one of the world's most densely populated, is struggling to combat the spread of the disease. With almost every country adopting aggressive non-therapeutic measures to control the spread of COVID-19, Bangladesh has followed the same trend – suspended international flights, imposed thermal scanner checking, closed schools and public places etc. As of 30th June 2020, Bangladesh has reported 145,483 cases of COVID-19 and 1,847 deaths³. Among the preventive measures for COVID-19 include - use of face mask and hand sanitizer, social distancing, aggressive tracing of contacts, strict quarantine, education to promote good hand hygiene practices including rapid installation of handwashing stations by the Government and development partners.

The global crisis of COVID-19 is deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing the extent of exclusion and highlighting that work on disability inclusion is imperative. People with disabilities—one billion people—are one of the most excluded groups in our society and are among the hardest hit in this crisis in terms of fatalities⁴.

“We must guarantee the equal rights of people with disabilities to access healthcare and lifesaving procedures during the pandemic.”

UN Secretary-General António Guterres, May 2020

Disability inclusive COVID-19 prevention and response measures in Cox’s Bazar district

Persons with disabilities⁵ are at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 as they may experience barriers to implement basic protection measures such as hand washing and maintaining physical distancing; lack of accessible hand washing units, reliance on physical contact to get support, inaccessibility of public services information, just to mention some⁶. People with disabilities, in both host communities and Rohingya refugee camps face a range of barriers to access public services.

These include physical barriers and environmental factors (e.g. uneven terrain or muddy ground) as well as barriers associated with built infrastructure (e.g. steps, higher height of hand-washing points, difficulty to use pump handles), non-inclusive communication tools and messaging etc. Often, institutional barriers or non-inclusive response programs overlook the special needs of the people with disabilities or prevent their participation in the design and delivery of the implementation of

¹ WHO COVID-19 Dashboard, 1 July 2020

² Li Q, Guan X, Wu P, Wang X, Zhou L, Tong Y, et al. Early transmission dynamics in Wuhan, China, of novel coronavirus-infected pneumonia. *N Engl J Med.* (2020) 382:1199–207. doi: 10.1056/NEJMoa2001316

³ Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) Press Release on COVID-19, 30 June 2020

⁴ UN Policy Brief: A Disability-Inclusive Response to COVID-19 MAY 2020

⁵ Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical (mobility related), mental (mental illness interferes with the performance of major life activities, such as learning, working, and communicating), intellectual (limited understanding, below average IQ) or sensory impairments (visual, hearing, speech) which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others' (UNCRPD, 2006).

⁶ Disability considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak, WHO, March 2020 - <https://rb.gy/icc9to>

the interventions. Addressing such concerns, Age and Disability Working Group (ADWG) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have collaborated since April 2020 to identify priority actions needed to make COVID-19 response inclusive concerning needs of people with disabilities and to implement through the Disaster Risk Management Project in Cox's Bazar.

These disability-inclusive features of the COVID-19 response implemented by UNDP in partnership with the Government of Bangladesh, SDC and ECHO include:

Disability inclusive HWS: Every hand washing station (HWS) has one unit (out of total 5 units) dedicated to people with disabilities. By 31st May 2020, UNDP completed construction of 422 hand-washing units covering all the 71 unions and 4 municipalities of Cox's Bazar District. These hand-washing Units are constructed as per ADWG technical guidance (e.g. lower height for the access of person in wheelchair, long lever tap etc.).

COVID-19 awareness products: Developed and disseminated 10,000 posters with visual messages and limited text thus slow reader/learner or non-literate people can easily understand the messages.

Radio Public Service Announcement targeted to people with visual impairment: Radio PSA is developed in collaboration with ACLAB/Radio Naf and with technical guidance from ADWG and WHO. The radio PSA is broadcast by Radio Naf (99.2 FM) in Bangla and Rohingya language since 1st June 2020, reaching out to the Rohingya refugees and host communities.

Volunteer support to people with disabilities: Volunteers mobilized for COVID-19 prevention stationed at the Government offices support people with disabilities who need assistance.

ADWG was established in 2018 in order to ensure the humanitarian response for the Rohingya crisis is inclusive for men, women, boys and girls with disabilities and older persons. ADWG is a key technical partner of the Protection Working Group (PWG) in mainstreaming Age and Disability. ADWG has expanded its representation with the participation of IOM, ICRC, UNHCR, INGOs, local organizations and Organizations of People with Disabilities. ADWG is pleased to share this good practice example and advocate for wider partnerships with interested organizations for more inclusive response.



“I have just washed my hand here and I am very excited to see this facility. Nowhere except this place I have found such opportunity for people like me.”

Shamsul Alam (age 65 years), Rajapalong Union, Cox's Bazar district

Photo: UNO Office, Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar