



Amplifying the voices of DPOs

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The attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers that exist for people with disabilities are being heightened and reproduced as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread, pushing the already marginalised group to a higher risk of exposure. Considering the long-term impact of the pandemic and the country's UNCRPD pledge, it is essential to protect the rights of people with disabilities, and develop mitigation plans and preparedness strategies by understanding how the pandemic is affecting them.

BRAC organised a consultation with members of Disabled Persons' Organisations (DPOs) to learn about the challenges that people with disabilities are facing during the pandemic. We aimed to provide a platform for the members to raise their concerns so that they can be supported more effectively in the recovery period and sustainable solutions can be developed.

Background

Bangladesh signed and ratified the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons' with Disability (UNCRPD) in 2007 and its Optional Protocol in 2008. The UNCRPD includes people with disabilities as "those with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society as equals". It makes the state responsible and obliged to ensure accessibility, independent living and inclusion in the community, personal mobility, inclusive education, health, habitation and rehabilitation, work, etc. The Optional Protocol also allows people with

disabilities whose rights have been violated, to bring complaints to the committee on the rights of people with disabilities.

While HIES 2016 highlights that people with disability comprise 13.09% of the population in Bangladesh, the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) report 2018 by United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) states, "Till now, about 1.534 million people with disabilities have come under the registration process". This means that approximately 0.09% of people with disabilities have been registered while a massive 12.2% remain excluded.

While 123 programmes have been developed under the social safety net, only seven of them cater to people with disabilities. The operating budget Ministry of Social Welfare allocated for people with disabilities for programmes and activities in FY 2019-20 & 2020-21 is BDT 1876.96 crore and they aim to reach 23.69 lakh people with disabilities. That being said, as noted in the UPR, Bangladesh will continue its pro-people development agenda with particular focus to women, children and people with disabilities.



COVID 19 and people with disabilities

Key challenges voiced out by the members of the DPOs include:

- The enlistment mechanism for the Suborno Nagorik List is not disable-friendly. It contributes to the exclusion of a massive number of people with disabilities preventing them from accessing the services and benefits from the government and non-governmental organisations which would be extremely essential during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The inexistence of a Disability Census that is inclusive of all person with disabilities in Bangladesh
- Intimate partner violence against women who have disabilities have increased significantly because of heightened COVID-19 related household stress. Consequently, both their mental and physical health is being affected.
- The scopes of employment and entrepreneurship have been hindered due COVID-19. Students with disabilities are in danger of dropping out.
- Financial assistance from the government is not reaching people with disabilities in dire need.

Voices of the members of the DPOs



Nasima Sajeda, NCDW

“The mechanism of being identified as a person with disability in order to be enlisted in the Shuborno Nagorik Talika is lengthy and not disabled-friendly. Often the social welfare office does not want to give the form easily and doctors are often found unaware of the different kinds of disabilities that exist. We are asked to come multiple times and there are also additional financial implications to ensure that the entire process goes smoothly. Along with that, travelling to these places for testing is a major challenge due to added cost implications and inaccessibility of public vehicles.”



Vashkar Bhattacharjee, YPSA

“Is there a legal foundation for the Suborno Nagorik list?” asked Mr Bhattacharjee

He said, “Digitisation of the mechanism for disability identification is extremely essential. People with disabilities who are eligible for the disability identification card are not receiving it and for those who are receiving the disability allowance, it is just not enough. Education must also be digitised. The state must provide accessible books and ensure they reach students of all abilities.”

“We must advocate for stronger protection for people with disabilities—that they are not fired from their jobs and that institutions may extend the grace period to repay loans”.

“Currently, many researches are being conducted. People with disabilities must be included as experts when conducting them. They should not be the placeholder for clappers in the background, rather, they should also be given the opportunity to lead.”



Bably Begum, DDC

“The Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) is responsible for identifying people with disabilities and providing the identification card. However, the list they have compiled is filled with errors. The technical personnel from MoSW should collect, input the information in their laptops and enlist them. They are the ones who should send the information to DG health or the medical officers assigned in the localities. This should be possible at the upazila level.”

She suggested, ‘The MoSW should conduct a health camp every month and develop a well thought out plan to ensure that the excluded people with disabilities at upazilas or unions can be included. Before executing the plan, it should be shared with us with timeline and budget, and implementation strategy. Based on the plan, a budget should be allocated for FY 2021– 2022.’



Saifur Rahman, Protik



“In order to fill up the forms for disability identification, one has to have a certain level of education or need to be accompanied by someone who can assist in writing down the information. Sometimes the forms are not there in the office and have to be collected from a nearby photocopy shop. There are multiple steps involved in the disability identification process. However, even if one is able to complete in and obtain the identification card, there are often multiple errors in it. For instance, the name may be wrong or a different kind of disability may have been noted. The process to correct that basic essential information is a whole different challenge.”

Shahidula Islam Sazzad, DDRC



“A separate help desk should be dedicated for people with disabilities to record and maintain their allowance, identification and circulation of updated information at the Department of Social Service. In addition to that, easy accessibility, reasonable accommodation and training materials to the government training centre should be ensured so that people with disabilities have the opportunity to become small entrepreneurs.”

Moniruzzaman, BDDT



“There are many disabled people who do not have an ID (Suborno Nagorik) card. This should be given to all those deserving so they can get other benefits including allowances. Relief and rehabilitation activities for people with disabilities are very inadequate and the Honourable prime minister should be informed accordingly”

“The pandemic has taken away whatever jobs that people with disabilities used to be involved in. Before COVID-19 appeared in Bangladesh, many earned a living as shopkeepers, hawkers and through small businesses. However, the Bangladeshi government declared a shut down for around three months, forcing all avenues of income to close. The small amount of capital that they had has finished during the shutdown. Now that the government has given the opportunity to work in limited capacity by lifting the shutdown, people with disabilities are still not being able to resume their businesses due to lack of capital. Therefore, steps should be taken to re-launch their small business.”



Ashrafun Nahar Misti, WDDF

“People with disabilities have hardly received any kind of support throughout this pandemic and we receive calls on a regular basis from people who continue to lose their jobs. While garments and ceramic factories are gradually opening, employees with disabilities have not been asked to rejoin. They are not receiving any kind of salary and the financial impact is affecting their mental health. For women with disabilities, the condition is even worse. They are reported to be facing domestic violence with no way of finding safe haven.”

She suggested, “People with disabilities who are receiving the stipend may also get the Shuborno Nagorik Talika. This can be made mandatory to provide the disability identification card to any person with disability who is receiving stipend.”

‘I believe, specific programmes should be designed for people with disabilities. They must be provided with training on digital literacy to ensure they are not only kept engaged but are also prepared for economic solvency.”

“An official platform should be formed that brings all nationally recognised DPOs under a common umbrella.”

“The government should ensure equal opportunities for all. To translate that into reality, the 8th Five Year Plan and Social Safety Net Strategy must be inclusive and indicators must be developed which are vetted by people with disabilities to ensure minimum requirements for inclusivity are met”.



Mohua Paul, Access Bangladesh

“Students with disabilities, especially those with autism are in grave danger of dropping out. The ones who are out of school are losing the daily practice of learning and it will be greatly challenging for them to go back to school. People with disabilities also have been losing their jobs. While in the pre-covid era, small progress was being made in terms of self-employment but many have been greatly impacted during COVID, being forced to shut down their businesses due to lack of financial support.”

“A plan to reintegrate those who have dropped out of school, have lost their jobs and businesses must be developed in addition to making technical training available for them”.



Fatema Akter, BDDT



“It is time for making new changes for people with disabilities. Special attention can be provided for grooming them as entrepreneurs, particularly in rural areas where they can be engaged in making handicraft products and be trained with digital skills to sell them online. Vocational training must be made available based on the needs of the market for opening new scopes of employment for them. In addition to that, the education system must be made inclusive, both infrastructurally and systematically.

Special attention must be provided on changing attitudes towards disability. While employers must internalise that people with disabilities can also make valuable contributions given the opportunity, people with disabilities must also learn to take criticism positively.”

Rajib Sheikh, HDDF

“Parents or family members often do not want to invest in someone with a disability because there is hardly any return that can be expected. Recently we went to the Shuborno Bhaban for testing. However, there were no doctors present there and we were informed that now, any government doctor could test and enlist people with disabilities to the Shuborno Nagorik list. Firstly, this information was not previously communicated to us. We went to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) and the doctors asked if there was any letter from the government that stated this information which means they had also not received any such instruction”.

“The multi-step process to obtain the card is already challenging. This is amplified by additional financial implications. However, we are not able to express it to any individual who can address the problem for a sustainable solution”.

He recommended, ‘If four hospitals can be selected and assigned with selected doctors in North and South of Dhaka for conducting the identification tests of people with disabilities, this process could be straight-forward for us. In addition to that, our lives would be easier if accessibility of the hospitals could be ensured.’



Recommendations

- Make the enlistment mechanism in the Shuborno Nagorik List for people with disabilities accessible by digitising the process, assigning particular hospitals and doctors or organising health camps in the localities
- Conduct a Disability Census to identify, register and include excluded people with disabilities
- Ensure access to updated information for people with disabilities by having a separate desk at the Department of Social Service and sending mobile messages to the concerned individuals.
- Develop a plan to support students with disabilities who have dropped out of school, relaunch businesses owned by people with disabilities and reintegrate those who have lost their jobs during the COVID-19 lockdown.
- Disbursement of allowance and support for people with disabilities must be disable-friendly by providing them with two options, which may include digital cash transfer or in-person cash collection.

Bibliography

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