

## EMPOWERING AND PROTECTING PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

### Discussant Interventions

- *Ms. Afamasaga Faauiiga Mulitalo, Chief Executive Officer of the Ministry of Women, Community & Social Development, Samoa*

Ms. Mulitalo offered Samoa's best practices on disability-inclusive policies and measures to enhance pandemic preparedness. She explained that Samoa had embarked on a mass media campaign to raise awareness for disability-inclusive COVID-19 responses and to prepare communities. This included panel discussions and television advertisements, and ensuring that these messages are also communicated through sign language. She also said that they have been working with their partners to distribute food supplies to the families of persons with disabilities. She explained that they are embarking on a targeted outreach programme to further reinforce the messages of the media campaigns in communities.

- *Mr. Victor Pineda, President of World ENALBED, Co-Chair Cities for All Global Platform, and Founding Member, G20 Smart Cities Alliance*

Mr. Pineda gave insight into the COVID-19 initiatives of his organisations and on accessing goods and services at the municipal level during pandemics. He pointed to the present opportunities of innovation in technology to create more inclusive and resilient systems as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and emphasised the importance of cities in this. He also reiterated the need to bring the Sustainable Development Goals into sharper focus. Based on a series of discussions on reimagining the potential for cities in the post-COVID-19 new normal for persons with disabilities, he stated that many actors did not know what measures to take to protect and empower persons with disabilities and that city leaders needed guidance. He highlighted the importance of capacity training and multi-sector collaboration in this, and added that comparative data brings a greater understanding of challenges and ensuing opportunities. He suggested a global knowledge hub for this purpose and for resource sharing.

- *Ms. Lee Sin Yi, President of Singapore Physiotherapy Association*

Ms. Lee illustrated the challenges and good practices of accessing rehabilitation services during pandemics. Due to the suspension of face-to-face outpatient and community services under lockdown measures, teleconsultation has been encouraged in Singapore as a new mode of rehabilitation. She explained the challenges in adapting to the technology, its accessibility amongst certain groups and the inability to perform hands-on assessments. To protect and be the voice of vulnerable patient groups, the Singapore Physiotherapy Association compiled an evidence-based list of reasons why certain population groups require essential rehabilitation services to give to the Ministry of Health. As communities gradually reopen services, the Association has been working in close coordination with the Ministry of Health to procure personal protective equipment and conduct related training, as well as to produce practice guidelines for practitioners on infection control. To adapt to the challenges of tele-rehabilitation, the Association has published guidelines in coordination with other agencies and are working with the World Confederation for Physical Therapy to explore knowledge and skill-sharing in the region. She affirmed that these long-term partnerships are essential for building better technology infrastructure and gathering resources which will be critical for lower-income countries.

- *Ms. Ng Lai Thin, Project Officer of the National Early Childhood Intervention Council, Malaysia*

Ms. Ng shared an overview of early childhood intervention services during pandemics. She reaffirmed the importance of ICT during COVID-19 to ensure that persons with disabilities stay safe, productive and connected. She reported that, in Malaysia, telehealth services were used to ensure that children with disabilities had continuous learning and intervention services. She also expanded on a collaboration with UNICEF Malaysia to reduce the financial burden on families with disabilities to gain access to intervention services. She highlighted four lessons from this project: the importance of tailored interventions to the needs of each child with disabilities and their family, particularly in establishing a suitable home routine; that practitioners needed to shift their focus to parent coaching; to consider various telecommunications methods for families without internet access; and the importance of psychosocial support and psychological first aid support to children with disabilities and their caregivers. She also noted that the National Early Childhood Intervention Council had provided guidelines for preparing the reopening of face-to-face services.

- *Mr. Nazmul Bari, Director of the Centre for Disability in Development, Bangladesh*

Mr. Bari spoke about community-level initiatives to protect and empower persons with disabilities. He raised the question of whether it is possible to have access to disability-disaggregated COVID-19 data, specific to different disability groups and inclusive of persons with disabilities in facilities. He also shared good practices from the Centre for Disability and Development in Bangladesh which was already working with other organisations and local government institutions prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. These pre-existing links allowed for quick mobilisation and dissemination of accessible risk information. It also helped inform stakeholder of the different issues that they should consider when planning responses and issuing policy guidelines. As a result, both local governments and OPDs came together, forming various committees that are influencing the decision making process, representing the voices of persons with disabilities and keeping lists of persons with disabilities so that they are included in local government initiatives. All these actions have ensured that national-level policy is supported at the community level by persons with disabilities. He also noted the importance of a database in maintaining these connections. Furthermore, Mr. Bari explained how these good practices would be crucial to inclusive building back better in the future.

- *Ms. Angeline Chand, Team Leader (Programmes) for the Pacific Disability Forum, Fiji*

Ms. Angeline Chand shared experiences of community-level initiatives to protect and empower persons with disabilities in Asia and the Pacific. She spoke about the Pacific Emergency Response Unit, which had pre-existing partnerships across organisations for responding to natural disasters, and explained how this platform was used in the case of COVID-19 to set up different cross-sector clusters groups on food security, livelihoods, education, health and a sub-cluster on gender-based violence. This also influenced core documents that have been shared with other organisations' programmes in support of persons with disabilities. Ms. Chand noted that most of the Pacific governments have promoted the use of sign language during national news. They are also working on easy-to-read versions of core documents and have partnered with the UNFPA, which distributes disability-inclusive dignity kits to women in times of emergencies. Additionally, Ms. Chand spoke of the value of information sharing. She shared that they were working on situation reports by collecting stories from OPDs and have a photo blog on Facebook ensure that the voices of persons with disabilities are heard to improve future assistance.

- *Ms. Georgia Dominik, Social Affairs Officer, Disability Team of the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, United Nations*

Ms. Dominik discussed the role of the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS) in the new normal of COVID-19. She reiterated her fellow speakers' messages of the importance of information sharing and a coordinated approach to achieving disability-inclusion. Ms. Dominik

gave a system-wide view of how the UNDIS strives to achieve this by driving leadership and coordination, and touched upon employment, accessibility, communication and consultation with persons with disabilities. In terms of leadership, the strategy has been effective in generating high-level political commitment on disability-inclusion, as seen through the Secretary-General's policy brief on persons with disabilities and the COVID-19 response and the development of a letter by UN Member States calling for disability-inclusive COVID-19 responses. The strategy has also supported coordination and seen through a timebound emergency working group to ensure that disability inclusion is mainstreamed in response and recovery efforts and that entities report on how persons with disabilities are being included.

- *Ms. Dipawali Sharma, Deafway Project Officer of the Nawalparasi Association of the Deaf, Nepal*

Ms. Sharma described community-level initiatives to protect and empower persons with disabilities. She explained her use of social media to share important information with the deaf community. She noted that whilst many local governments provide live Nepali Sign Language interpreters during their official briefings, she and other stakeholders are still advocating with the central government to make critical information accessible through live interpretation and video relay services. Ms. Dipawali Sharma has used her time in quarantine to begin a basic Nepali Sign Language tutorial online and is translating Nepalese songs into Nepali Sign Language to help bring deaf people entertainment and relieve stress; she has made these videos accessible on social media. Whilst the government has delegated the responsibility for relief aid to local government bodies, many local representatives are unfamiliar with the specific needs of certain disabilities. In this context, Ms. Sharma explained that organisations are working to collaborate with government bodies on immediate aid for persons with disabilities affected by the pandemic, as well as on issues such as accessible quarantine, isolation, safety kits for home-quarantined persons with disabilities and awareness-raising about the needs of people who are severely disabled.