

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

### Panellist Interventions

- *H.E. Ms. Zhang Haidi, Chairperson of the China Disabled Persons' Federation and President of Rehabilitation International*

Ms. Zhang gave an overview of the whole-of-nation approach across ministries, administrative levels and diverse sectors, to ensure disability-inclusion in China's COVID-19 responses. She spoke about the work of the local Disabled Persons' Federations and the positive impact of early intervention in nursing homes. Ms. Zhang outlined different ways that the government provided care and resources to persons with disabilities, for example, through online counselling, advice and rehabilitation, helping children with online studies and online vocational training. Ms. Zhang also highlighted her efforts in writing to other international leaders to raise awareness for the needs of Persons with disabilities during the pandemic. She explained the actions that had been taken in resource-sharing overseas. Ms. Zhang put forward three recommendations: first, to protect the rights of persons with disabilities to life, health and access to services without discrimination; second, to have a multi-stakeholder system for the protection of Persons with disabilities from the virus and their livelihoods after the pandemic; and third, to enhance international collaboration to defeat the virus through coordinated policies and shared experiences.

- *Mr. Masahito Kawamori, Co-chair of the Focus Group on Media Accessibility, International Telecommunication Union*

Mr. Kawamori shared good practices on how governments and OPDs can ensure that diverse disability groups in rural, remote and urban settings have access to public information on COVID-19. He shared some of the services that the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) promote, such as a telephone relay service, which allows deaf persons to communicate, standardizing accessible remote meetings and audio navigation for the visually impaired. Technology of this kind is vital in the current climate when people cannot always go to hospitals for in-person consultations. Mr. Kawamori highlights why it is essential to utilise ICT in the COVID-19 pandemic for overcoming the new challenges that persons with disabilities are facing. He pointed to developing further technologies, such as AI, augmented reality and robotics to tackle these barriers, as well as to promote inclusive digital healthcare. In using ICT to create an inclusive society, Mr. Kawamori stated the importance of cross-sector partnership, with persons with disabilities, their organisations, the government and the private sector.

- *Mr. Stephen Sui, Senior Expert and former Secretary of Labour and Welfare, Government of Hong Kong, China*

Mr. Sui spoke about designing and delivering social protection and employment promotion measures for persons with disabilities in the COVID-19 crisis. He stressed the importance of mainstreaming disability when implementing policies and measures, as well as targeted measures for the most vulnerable. He shared about the immediate measures in Hong Kong, which followed three strategic directions: helping businesses stay afloat; maintaining employment levels; and relieving the financial stress on individuals and businesses. He also outlined the different financial measures for business

and employment support. Additionally, he gave an extensive analysis of the versatile social protection measures that were expanded to combat the impact of COVID-19, including various targeted disability allowances. He expanded on innovative measures for creating and maintaining employment for persons with disabilities, such as through subsidies, employer incentives, and job matching support and consultations for persons with disabilities. Mr. Sui highlighted the need for prompt action, as well as the opportunity the crisis provided for long-term investment into social protection systems, which are imperative in the new normal of the COVID-19 crisis. Mr. Sui added that whilst the government should lead, it is the duty of the whole community, employers, organisations of persons with disabilities and NGOs to form strong partnerships to fight the impact of the pandemic together.

- *Ms. Anjlee Agarwal, Executive Director of Samarthyam and Member of the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI)-CSO Standing Committee, India*

Ms. Agarwal shared her perspective on how civil society organizations and OPDs partnered in the areas of policy design and service delivery in India's COVID-19 pandemic response. She identified the key difficulties faced when the lockdown commenced, namely service delivery and access to caregivers, and shared good practices and case studies in creating COVID-19 action collaboratives and local support systems between the government, civil society organizations and OPDs. The creation of twitter handles and a WhatsApp group of high-level government officers, supported by Chief and State Commissioners for persons with disabilities and local volunteers, also ensured outreach to remote areas. The group was able to share government orders, updates, details regarding the dissemination of daily needed items and e-passes for caregivers. Other actions included a COVID-19 disability-inclusive guideline issued to all the states. These partnerships and communication networks meant that persons with disabilities who were confined by lockdown were able to receive assistance through their local WhatsApp support system group. She also raised the importance of integrating gender perspectives into the disability-inclusive responses. Ms. Agarwal made three recommendations: firstly, to enhance prevention and preparedness; and second, to strategize local plans and integrate local support systems with access to goods and services, as well as creating awareness through virtual platforms. Furthermore, to strengthen preparedness for a disability-inclusive recovery plan and future emergencies. Finally, Ms. Agarwal reminded viewers and listeners to act collectively and to include Persons with disabilities as co-creators and problem solvers in COVID-19 responses, not as victims.

- *Ms. Valerie Julliard, United Nations Resident Coordinator, Nepal*

Ms. Valerie Julliard her views on actions that the United Nations Country Teams could take in partnering with governments and stakeholders to develop a disability-inclusive response, using her own experiences in Nepal. One good practice was having a pre-existing partnership with the National Federation of People with Disability in Nepal to combat all forms of discrimination and the establishment of a joint disability task force. Ms. Julliard focused on a twin approach, involving both mainstreaming disability inclusion and targeted actions. She also stated that women with disabilities were the most affected in such crises due to multi-faceted discrimination against caste, gender, disability and poverty. Another issue highlighted was the underrepresentation of persons with disabilities in Nepal's census data, which the government and her team are jointly working to change in the next census. Ms. Julliard emphasised the importance of having the United Nations itself set an example. She shared good practices for this, such as accessible facilities, disability mainstreaming, training staff and recruiting persons with disabilities. In response to COVID-19, the UN have worked with the government to find accessible solutions to quarantines and trained counsellors to support

persons with disabilities and their caregivers online. Further action has been taken with disability-inclusive hygiene kits, sign language in the daily press briefings, videos series on home self-care and rehabilitation and specific guidelines for the continuation of essential services. Ms. Julliand asserted the importance of giving persons with disabilities a voice and active input in these assessment and response plans.