

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

Webinar transcript

KAVEH ZAHEDI: Very good morning to all colleagues, friends, partners who have joined us today for our webinar on protecting and empowering persons with disabilities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. My name is Kaveh Zahedi. I am the deputy at the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. I would like to welcome you on behalf of all of my colleagues to our webinar on the protection and empowerment of persons with disabilities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This session has been organized by us at ESCAP with the support of the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General on Disability and Accessibility, Ms. Maria Soledad Cisternas Reyes, whom we will hear from in a moment.

Before I continue colleagues, let me take a tiny pause just to make sure that YouTube, the YouTube link is working and visible. And maybe I will look to colleagues to see whether I should start again. OK, just to err on the side of caution and to make sure that nobody feels left out in anyway, let me again welcome you to this webinar on protecting and empowering persons with disabilities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As I said, my name is Kaveh Zahedi. I am the deputy at UN ESCAP. I would like to welcome all of you to the webinar on protection and empowerment of persons with disabilities. The session has been organized by the team at the UN ESCAP with the support of the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General on Disability and Accessibility, Ms. Maria Soledad Cisternas Reyes, whom we are going to hear from in a moment. We are also fortunate to have an extraordinary line-up of panelists and discussants that I will introduce to you after Maria speaks.

But first, if you could just allow me to provide you with a little context for why we felt it so critical to organize this session during such a challenging time and to bring together all of these experts, policymakers, changemakers that have been working on championing disability-inclusive development in Asia-Pacific and beyond. And really the reason is simple. While we all try to adjust to the new normal, for persons with disabilities, this adjustment is much harder and sometimes simply unattainable. How well suited has the response to COVID been for persons with disabilities? What does social distancing mean for people that rely on personal assistance? What does work from home mean for those that simply cannot? And as billions of dollars pour out in fiscal stimulus packages, how well are the needs of persons with disabilities, usually the most financially insecure, being met? And we hope that our panelists can help answer some of these questions for us.

But we all know that even before the pandemic, persons with disabilities face barriers to full and effective participation in society. The COVID-19 pandemic has simply magnified existing poverty, magnified existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, and put the lives of people with disabilities at risk. And that is why, for ESCAP, the promotion of disability rights and disability-inclusive development has been a priority for more than three decades. The Incheon Strategy to Make the Right Real for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific, that was launched in 2012 along with its disability-specific targets, disability-specific development goals, has helped our member States to track progress towards improving the quality of life and the fulfilment of rights of our region's 690 million persons with disabilities. The Beijing Declaration and Action Plan, adopted by our governments two and a half years ago now was another push towards realizing disability rights and disability-inclusive development.

And then with the advent of the system-wide United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy last year, ESCAP has now entered a new phase in its disability inclusion efforts characterized by a whole-of-organization approach. And in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are now repurposing all of our work and mechanisms to continue to protect and empower persons with disabilities, and this webinar is just a small example of our efforts. In this case, to provide a regional platform for our governments and stakeholders to share early experiences and find some badly needed solutions for developing disability-inclusive responses to COVID-19.

Some of you were either involved or would have seen our policy brief on ensuring disability rights and inclusion in the response to COVID-19 that identified some minimum standards in the early days of this pandemic, including standards on consultation and partnership with persons with disabilities, on providing access to goods and services, on the delivery of public information in accessible formats, on making medical and quarantine policies and processes accessible and disability-inclusive, on safeguarding income security and livelihoods, and on protecting the rights and wellbeing of persons with disabilities living in institutions and facilities. These recommendations provide a framework for developing disability-inclusive responses to COVID-19. How much are they being applied? Well, let's drill down on that deeper during the webinar today with our panelists and participants.

Now with the context set, it is my great pleasure to introduce our keynote speaker Ms. Maria Soledad Cisternas Reyes. She is the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General on Disability and Accessibility, and Ms. Cisternas was chairperson of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of the United Nations. She's a recipient of the National Prize of Human Rights. She also served as an expert for the ad hoc committee that actually developed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities for which she is also the rapporteur for individual complaints. And above and beyond that all, she is an extraordinary champion for disability-inclusive development. So, Maria, if I could hand over to you for your keynote speech and it is with great pleasure that I do so.

MARIA SOLEDAD CISTERNAS REYES: Thank you very much, and good morning everyone over there and good evening here in my country. 10:00 o'clock. And for me, it is a great pleasure to share with all of you and I would like to recognize the real commitment of you, Mr. Kaveh Zahedi, as the chief of the team with your permanent commitment with persons with disabilities and different topics about this sector of the population. When I proposed this seminar, you responded immediately. And now we have the possibility to share with the audience. And thank you very much to the audience for their participation, to speak about different aspects in relation to persons with disabilities and the pandemic.

First, I would like to remember that we have two main instruments, CRPD, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of the United Nations and the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development. And I would like to underline that the pandemic doesn't suspend the application of CRPD and doesn't suspend the application of 2030 agenda. On the other hand, there is a reality before the pandemic and another quite different after the pandemic. I am sure that our future will not be the same without COVID-19. And in relation to persons with disabilities, it is very important to be clear about the diagnosis, because the pandemic affects the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

In this order, as a special envoy, I elaborated some statements with different important topics in relation to persons with disabilities. First, with the chairperson of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, about the impact in the life of persons with disabilities with the pandemic touching the aspect of health care in health centers. And the needs of treatment, medicines, and the inclusion of support for the life of persons with disabilities. The training of the staff in relation to the treatment for

persons with disabilities. But at the same time, we thought the topic of quarantine, because persons in general suffer from the restrictions of liberty, and in the case of persons with disabilities, the situation is harder. For this reason, it is very important to ensure persons with disabilities in relation to the provision of water, foods, medicines, personal assistance, rehabilitations to be a continuing service in relation to these provisions. The third aspect is taking account of the policy brief of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, because he underlined the inequality of persons with disabilities before the pandemic and the situation of the mass marginalization increasing in this moment with COVID-19.

And in this sense, the Secretary-General recommended to put in the center of our concern the situation of persons with disabilities, to get an inclusive response to the pandemic for persons with disabilities based on some pillars. First, no discrimination. Second, intersectionality, because it is necessary to cross the perspective of persons with disabilities with gender, childhood, ageing, poverty and other different circumstances. The third is that full participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations with incidence in the public policies to give a real response for the needs of persons with disabilities. Other aspects that he mentioned is data collection because it is very important. Disaggregated data in relation to persons with disabilities, sex, gender, age, poverty, rural or urban areas etc.

And the topic of accountability. I would like to emphasize that when the pandemic will finish, it will be necessary that the State Parties report to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Here is Monthian Buntan, my colleague in the committee to present the report to the Committee and in relation to the High-level Political Forum that reports information on social development. For this reason, I think that is very important to take the experience during the pandemic, because the pandemic shows us that the Convention and the 2030 Agenda needs to progress in its fulfillment. And taking this experience, it is important to plan the future in relation to the fulfillment of the rights of persons with disabilities in the line to create an inclusive, sustainable and accessible society with the full participation of persons with disabilities.

To finish, I would like to emphasize the importance of the political decision at the level of the States Parties and the agencies inside the States Parties. I mean, the ministry of health, education, social development etc. Second, the political decisions of the local and regional authorities in city halls who organize in rural areas for their special connection with the citizens, including persons with disabilities. And the political decisions of the organizations of persons with disabilities to fight to put on the table their needs. We need to count with the commitment of the private sector, obviously, and other stakeholders. And it is important to begin the dialogue now. Thank you very much, Kaveh.

KAVEH ZAHEDI: Thank you so much, Maria. Thank you for staying up so late to join us. Thank you for really spurring us into action on this webinar and especially thank you for reminding us of something absolutely vital, that the pandemic in no way means the suspension of CRPD, of the move to implement and accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as it applies, of course, to persons with disabilities. And much of this was underlined in the Secretary-General's policy brief that you kindly referred to, as well as the detailed Chair statements of the Committee of the CRPD. And all of this material is available and I am going to give people the link to the website at the end of this session. But again, thank you so much Maria for your keynote speech and your opening words. With that said, we would now like to hear a little bit more from persons with disabilities in our region, in a short video that is being put together by the team called "Leave Us Not Behind." So, if I could turn over to the colleagues for the short video.

Thank you so much for that video and you know it really is a heartfelt one that goes to the core of the problem. No money, no food, no medicine, no soap, what if my parents die? And it is exactly this kind of struggle that we are no doubt seeing replicated across our region, and these are really some voices and messages that we have to keep in mind as we proceed to explore the opportunities to protect and empower persons with disabilities. And that sets the scene very nicely for the next part of our webinar, which is our policy crucible that contains two components. The first is a panel conversation and the second piece is a series of structured interventions that will dig deeper on the specific issues raised by the conversation today. The panel conversation focuses on the challenges and opportunities of developing disability-inclusive responses in policy areas. And the structured interventions will then showcase specific good practices in specific policy programmes or practice areas, the application if you will. And then after the interventions by our panelists and discussants, we will open the floor to all of you for questions and reflections.

And just to get you all ready, please type all inputs into the YouTube chat box, which is to the right of the YouTube video and the ESCAP team will be monitoring and collating the questions and reflections throughout the webinar. We hope to get to all of the questions. If we don't, we will have other ways of answering you as well. We will tell you about it at the end of our session today.

Now it brings us to our panel, and it really is my distinct pleasure to introduce a very distinguished series of panelists to you, speaking in the following order: Madam Zhang Haidi, who is the Chairperson of the China Disabled Persons' Federation, as well as the President of Rehabilitation International. She will be followed by Mr. Masahito Kawamori, who is the Co-chair of the Focus Group on Media Accessibility of the International Telecommunications Union. Followed by Mr. Stephen Sui, who is the Senior Expert and former Secretary of Labour and Welfare of the Government of Hong Kong, China. Followed by Ms. Anjlee Agarwal, who is the Executive Director of Samarthyam, and Member of the National Institution for Transforming India CSO Standing Committee. And our last panelist is my dear colleague, Ms. Valerie Julliard, who is the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Nepal.

Before I hand the floor to you, Madam Zhang, I would like to just remind people about your background. As well as being the chair of the China Disabled Persons' Federation since 2008, Madam Zhang is also currently President of Rehabilitation International, which is an almost century-old non-government organization. She is also Executive President of Beijing Organizing Committee of the 2022 Olympics and Paralympic Winter Games, member of the Standard Committee of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and winner of multiple awards, and renowned role model and author for me and all of us that work on disability-inclusive development.

Madam Zhang, it is an absolute pleasure to have you with us. And as a disability champion, we know you have worked tirelessly to mainstream disability inclusion into China's COVID-19 response, by mobilizing resources from all sectors, from government and the community. Can you share with us a little bit of this experience? China is a bit ahead of most of our countries on the COVID-19 wave and your experience there, especially the whole-of-nation approach to protecting and empowering persons with disabilities, will be of great interest to all of us gathered here. Madam Zhang over to you.

ZHANG HAIDI: Respected Mr. Kaveh Zahedi, respected Ms. Maria Soledad, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, good morning. It's my honor to attend this webinar organized by ESCAP. ESCAP has played a leading role in promoting disability-inclusive development in the Asia-Pacific region. As COVID-19 spreads, we are much concerned about our brothers and sisters with disabilities. We greatly appreciate

ESCAP's special attention and timely action at this difficult time. This webinar is of special significance, I think.

As we were all expected a good year of 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak hit the world. More than four million people, including over 80,000 in China, have been infected. While the pandemic causes disruptions in every aspect, people with disabilities have felt the strongest impact as they face more difficulties and inequality at this challenging time, I think. I care dearly about them and wish they have timely help. Soon after the outbreak, we learned a disabled child in Hubei was infected. We worried about it. We asked our local Disabled Persons' Federation to provide immediate help, although it was very late at night. We worked with the government to offer special care for persons with disabilities at the earliest possible time, especially for those with severe disabilities at nursing homes.

We must take the best care for them and put them first. For example, in Zhumadian City of Henan province, there are 2000 people with disabilities living in more than 100 care centers. And now and so far, none of them has been infected. I am very glad to hear the good news. We have assisted the government in meeting the basic needs of persons with disabilities, providing care to adults and children in need, and ensuring that they have adequate food, drinking water and protection. We have helped children study online, giving counselling and advice on home-based rehabilitation, offered psychological health services and provided vocational trainings so that they could be better prepared to find jobs or start businesses after the pandemic.

As president of RI International, I have worked with my colleagues to promote the protection of the rights and the interests of persons with disabilities during the pandemic. On behalf of CDPF and RI, I have written to ESCAP's Executive Secretary Dr. Alisjahbana, as well as President of the UN General Assembly Professor Bande, UN Secretary-General Guterres, WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros, Chair of the Bureau of the Conference of State Parties to the CRPD Mr. Galgos, and the leaders of other international organizations concerned, counting upon the international community to protect the rights and interests of disabled people in the pandemic responses.

President Bande replied to me that he would work with UN Member States and take action to control the virus and mitigate its impact on society and the economy, especially on persons with disabilities. SG Guterres also called on the government to protect the rights and interests of the persons with disabilities and ensure their equal access to medical services and assistance. I have also exchanged views with the leaders from other international disability organizations. We mailed protective masks to friends overseas. RI has decided to allocate 200,000 US dollars on joint projects with ESCAP for the protection and the empowerment of persons with disabilities in this region, during and after the pandemic.

Dear friends, I have three proposals here to make today. First, we should respect and protect disabled persons' rights to life and health. I think, every life is invaluable, persons with disabilities also have good aspirations. There should be no discrimination against them and their value. We must assure that persons with disabilities, the elderly, women and children in particular, have access to treatments and the other services against the virus. We should meet their needs for basic living conditions, rehabilitation, education and employment. Second, we should protect persons with disabilities against the virus. To achieve this, we need to set up a long term protective mechanism and offer targeted guidance based on their specific needs. We need to build a network of co-operation among government, society and disability organizations, so as to deliver effective protection, treatment and the recovery services, as well as to support their poverty relief and their employment after the pandemic.

Third, we should enhance international collaboration. The pandemic does not mean suffering of any single country; it is a challenge to all humanity. We must work together to defeat it in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. We will coordinate policies, share experience, and learn from each other so as to better help the world's one billion persons with disabilities tide over the crisis. CDPF and RI will continue to support and echo the UN and ESCAP's initiatives and actions in the disability-related field and make our due contribution to disability inclusion. Through solidarity and collaboration, we will surely defeat the virus and achieve the goal of leaving no one behind. Thank you.

KAVEH ZAHEDI: Thank you so much, Madam Zhang. It is nice to hear, of course, the huge policy network that you are mobilizing to make sure that persons with disabilities are not left behind, but it is also heartening to hear the stories of individual people that you have reached out to. It really is the perfect combination, and thank you so much for your intervention.

So our next speaker is Mr. Masahito Kawamori, who is the rapporteur of accessibility to multimedia systems and services at the International Telecommunications Union. He is also currently involved with standardization and promotion of accessibility-related ICT with international bodies such as WHO, clearly a vital, vital role in these times. His current projects include planning and building inclusive and resilient smart cities in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, and he is also professor at Keio University in Japan. So, Kawamori-san, thank you so much for joining us. You are an expert on information and media accessibility. We saw in the video what a critical role accessibility and information plays, especially during a pandemic. So, can you share with us some of the good practices whether by governments or CSOs in ensuring the accessibility of COVID-19 related public information at the national and local levels?

MASAHITO KAWAMORI: OK, thank you. Can I turn on my video, is it OK? OK, thank you. So let me, thank you very much for your very nice introduction. It is my great pleasure to be here among the distinguished panel. If I may, let me introduce ITU a little bit. International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is part of the United Nations. As the UN specialized agency for information and communication technology, it is the oldest international organization established in 1865. And ITU is unique as a United Nations agency, because it is the only United Nations organization that has private sector members in it. So we have Netflix, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft and other big companies and small companies as part of our membership of ITU.

As I explained, at ITU, we've been working on information and communication standards for persons with disabilities such as telephone relay service, which allows deaf persons and hard of hearing people to communicate through telephone networks with hearing people. This is the technology that's vital in the current situation, where people cannot go directly to hospitals and clinics to get consultation. And we are also standardizing accessible remote meetings for persons with disabilities to be able to participate fully in distant conferences such as this one. And also, we are working on audio navigation for the visually impaired, and we also are discussing with autism organizations on how to help them get access to information. And ITU is also working closely with the World Health Organization (WHO), to provide vital information about COVID-19 worldwide.

So during this COVID-19 pandemic, ICT has become essential. Without ICT, there will be no social distancing, obviously, and COVID-19 is the first pandemic in human history, where technology and social media are being used on a massive scale to keep people safe, productive and connected, while being physically apart. So in this sense, ICT is an essential tool in providing vital health information to the wider population, and this is especially true for persons with disabilities. And in this regard, ITU is especially

working with persons with disabilities worldwide, especially in the Asia Pacific, such as the deaf community in the Philippines, as you have just seen in the video presented before.

However, as the new normal, what we call new normal progresses, it has become clear that new additional barriers are emerging, as pointed out by the concept note of ESCAP, that I hope the audience is able to see. I think the current COVID-19 situation presents us new challenges for persons with disabilities, which I believe we should tackle and overcome with developing further technologies, especially in the area of information communication, such as artificial intelligence and augmented reality. Robotics may also be an important area. And also we can work on more inclusive digital healthcare, eHealth and telemedicine.

I also think that in the equation for successfully overcoming these new barriers, partnership with private sector will also be essential, especially for creating a sustainable ecosystem for inclusive society. We can invite more companies to take a more active role in making our world more accessible during and after this pandemic. So, the partnership between persons with disabilities, governments, NGOs and also the private sector, supported by technology such as ICT (Information Communication Technology), emerging technologies, as well as old technologies, will be the key for coping with this unprecedented pandemic that we are seeing right now as COVID-19. And in that regard, I would like to stress again that Information Communication Technology is the key for not leaving anyone behind. Thank you very much. It has been a pleasure.

KAVEH ZAHEDI: Thank you so much, Kawamori-san. You know you're speaking to a captive audience that is already, I think, converted in a way, because we are all using technology right now to keep in touch, to maintain ourselves in the work environment. But it was interesting to hear what you said, that the new normal that we all find ourselves in is also shining the light on a few barriers, new barriers that are emerging, especially for persons with disabilities. And this is where bringing in these multi-sectoral partnerships is going to be vital for overcoming the barriers and making available things like eHealth that you referred to. So thank you very much for your intervention and for the work of ITU. Thank you so much.

Our next speaker is Mr. Stephen Sui, who has been the Commissioner for Rehabilitation and responsible for coordinating and mapping out policies and measures pertaining to the wellbeing of persons with disabilities in Hong Kong, as well as the Under Secretary and Secretary for Labour and Welfare of the Hong Kong SAR Government during 2008 to 2017. So exactly the right kind of person who was in the policy-making role. Really one of our target audiences for today's conversation. So Mr. Sui, the pandemic has ravaged economies around the world and many persons with disabilities now simply find themselves in hardship. They are not unique, but they are in particular hardship. What types of social protection, what types of employment promotion measures are required in this time, in terms of the immediate response and the medium and long term response, and how can governments actually afford all of these measures? So Mr. Sui, over to you.

STEPHEN SUI: Thanks, Kaveh. Dear friends, ladies and gentlemen. So it is time to dip into our reserves in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic to help businesses and individuals promptly. In particular, the vulnerable, to ride out this storm. It's an unprecedented crisis with needed and timely action. But at the same time, should not lose sight that it is also an opportunity to invest into our social protection and employment support systems, for long-term development and strengthen our capacity to respond effectively at times of crisis.

Given the pandemic's catastrophic impact on the economy worldwide, the government has to dig deep into its physical reserves to help our businesses and people, especially persons with disabilities. Most of them are financially insecure and more vulnerable in employment. So in designing the policies and measures, mainstreaming disability is necessary, to ensure that persons with disabilities will equally enjoy and not be discriminated against in any support and protection for all.

So in tandem, targeted measures and reasonable accommodations should also be in place to facilitate the more vulnerable persons with disabilities to enjoy equal rights with others. So, in the face of those unprecedented challenges, economic activities worldwide have been severely disrupted. Some come to a complete halt. So many businesses face pressure of closing down; so massive staff lay-offs are anticipated, causing hardship to families and individuals. So, immediate measures along three strategic directions, namely helping business to stay afloat, retaining workers in employment and relieving financial burdens of individuals and businesses are required. So these measures should be easy to access, quick to disburse funds and sufficiently broad-based, while providing extra relief to hard-hit sectors and individuals. So while we need to help those unemployed, the urgent task is to stop the bleeding. So hence, foremost, it's the component of job retention, job creation and job advancement.

Taking Hong Kong SAR as an example, the Hong Kong SAR Government has introduced an employment support scheme. So whereby the government provides wage subsidies, amounting 50% of wages subject to a wage cap in a period of six months, to employers to retain employees in return for employers undertaking not to implement redundancies. So people on self-employment, including freelance workers and those in the so-called slash economy, will also be assisted through a one-off lump-sum subsidy.

In tandem, 30,000 time-limited jobs in public and private sectors will be created in the coming two years. The government as the biggest employer will recruit for over 10,000 civil service jobs and 5,000 interns for young people and deploy additional resources to support job advancement projects in the private sector, to facilitate employees in the private sector to learn new skills, to strengthen their work capacity and adaptability to a changing work environment. So, saving businesses hard hit by the pandemic is conducive to saving jobs. So in this regard, the government will also provide subsidies and loans, grant rental concessions and fee waivers, and defer tax and loan repayments to reduce the financial burdens.

So on social protection, there is in place of standing scheme in Hong Kong, namely the means-tested Comprehensive Social Security Assistant, that is the CSSA, which is a safety net for any family not having sufficient means and the unemployed. So the access limits of this scheme will be relaxed for six months to allow more families with people unemployed to become eligible. So to help relieve financial burdens of individuals, there will also be the deferral of salary tax payments, concessions for rates and charges, reduction of public transport fares, etc.

And complementing the above general relief measures, targeted measures to help the poor and vulnerable, in particular persons of disabilities, are also put in place. These include additional payment of a disability allowance and other assistance under the safety net. These are on top of the established measures to help those with employment difficulties, including persons with disabilities and women with low skills. These standing targeted measures include unemployment support, a job matching for employers and job seekers with disabilities, and related consulting and support services. And a job trial and on-the-job training for job seekers with disabilities, together with a nine-month allowance for employers as an incentive. And continuous counselling service for employees with disabilities, the

employers and peers. And a cash reward to those who serve as their mentors, to facilitate employees with disabilities to settle in.

On the side of social protection, under the CSSA, there is a higher monthly payment and special subsidies to cover medical and other additional expenses arising from disabilities. And also a monthly non-means-tested disability allowance to persons with disabilities and a monthly special allowance to persons with severe disabilities, to hire carers while sustaining employment.

So, for countries yet to put in place such measures, it is the opportune time for them to phase in these initiatives in this difficult time. And so turn them into a standing practice, as long term social protection and employment support measures. So as to become resilient in safeguarding the wellbeing of the people, in particular person with disabilities and the under-privileged, in the face of another crisis in future. So in fact, many experts believe that COVID-19 will still be with us and become the new normal. So it is imperative that social protection systems including redundancy compensation, that is severance payment or long service payment, and CSSA in the context of Hong Kong, employment support policies and legislation against disability discrimination and unreasonable dismissal are established, and continuously enhanced along social and economic developments.

So, in the process, we need to act in concert. So, while the government has the undeniable obligation to take the lead, the government has to involve the entire community, including employees, employers, civil societies, organizations of person with disabilities, trust funds, NGOs etc., to form strong partnerships to fight the virus and front up the economic thunderstorm. Thank you.

KAVEH ZAHEDI: Stephen, thank you, thank you so much for that and that was such a rich intervention full of the kinds of details that many, many countries and governments, national and local, are now looking for how to support. So we would definitely be coming back to you to get more of your notes, but I did particularly like the way that you've captured it. Many of the measures that are now being put in place in this urgent situation are actually ones that should become standard practice, because they are part of investing in people. They are part of the broader social protection that we need to bring in place. And I think they even gave everybody a motto for the way they should act, in terms of the support being provided to businesses, to persons with disabilities, to their employers. You said easy to access, quick to disperse, and I think with that you capture exactly what is needed. So thank you. Thank you very much for your intervention.

If we could now move to our next panelist who is Anjlee Agarwal. Anjlee is an award-winning disability advocate, author, researcher and social entrepreneur. She is Co-founder of Samarthyam, an organization of persons with disabilities founded in 1993. She is also a member of the National Institution for Transforming India, the CSO Standing Committee. She recently founded the COVID-19 Action Collaboratives. So the perfect person to speak with us. She was Team Lead and Chief Access Auditor of Accessible India campaign. Anjlee was awarded the Role Model National Award, presented by the President of India in 2003, as well as the Best innovative Policy Award by the United Nations in 2016. Ms. Agarwal, you're an active member of the Indian Government's CSO Committee, so could you share your perspective on how CSOs, in particular organizations of persons with disabilities, are playing a role of partners in both policy design and service delivery, especially at such a critical time? Over to you.

ANJLEE AGARWAL: Thank you very much, Mr. Zahedi. I am honoured to be with the distinguished panel. Few countries have some universal disaster management protocols addressing the concerns of the world's largest minority. In India, there are approximately 150 million people with disabilities. When the

COVID-19 lockdown was announced on 21st March 2020, we were not prepared to deal with the crisis. The question was service delivery and access to caregivers. We prepared to deal with the crisis, but we needed local support systems, resolution methodologies and graded response, based on disability restrictions and dependency. I am sharing our Samarthyam Organization's successful example of COVID-19 action collaborative of government and civil society organizations, including organizations of persons with disabilities.

Our multi-sectoral collaboration and policy partnership was planned for pan-India connectivity for people with disabilities. This is to reassure that their survival is a priority and there is a huge anxiety among people with disabilities towards recovery and also life after COVID-19. We started working with the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India. In close partnership, we had some strategic interventions and quick-wins which I am going to share now.

Creating a WhatsApp group of high-level government officers with support from the Department-Secretaries, Chief and State Commissioners for persons with disabilities, to ensure outreach in rural and remote areas as well. The group shared government orders, details of local nodal officers, procurement and dissemination of daily needed items, e-passes for caregivers, etc. It is an excellent networking platform and huge support to local authorities to learn and get local media news to connect effectively.

After the lock down, an immediate action was to get a comprehensive disability-inclusive guideline for protection and safety of persons with disabilities in light of COVID-19. This was issued by the Secretary, Department of Empowerment of Persons with disabilities to all the states. Also, a notification was sent to state health authorities to provide accessible facilities for people with disabilities in quarantine centers and health facilities. State Commissioners for persons with disabilities did not have an official twitter handle and they were encouraged to create and maintain one. Many Twitter handles were created. Hence, social media connectivity and linkages increased multi-fold. State officers have started tackling grassroot issues and networking with organizations of persons with disabilities to ensure "leave no one behind."

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown measures imposed forced exclusion, rising inequalities and distress, impacting girls and women with disabilities. Majority of them were otherwise facing a lockdown situation and now being confined to their homes, having experienced increased domestic violence. They were unable to reach out to the volunteers of organizations of persons with disabilities in times of distress. The partnership helped in leveraging connectivity, and I want to share a case study here. A leader of an organization of persons with disabilities residing in a semi-urban area was unable to buy ration and self-protection materials including gloves, masks and sanitizers, due to unstable financial situation in the family. The government and OPDs' local area support system, that is a WhatsApp group, helped her to get food packets and commodities delivered at home. She is now being respected in her family. The COVID-19 crisis is new. Our government-CSO partnership has provided many tangible solutions, including integrating gender perspectives into the disability-inclusive responses.

Dear friends, I have some policy recommendations to make, in the current situation. So, I was talking about the policy recommendations which I wanted to make. First, in the current situation, enhanced prevention, preparedness and readiness to ensure a robust response of connectivity with the poorest of the poor, persons with disabilities. Second, strategize local plans to address unique issues post-pandemic. Local support system integrated with access to essential service delivery, personal medical emergencies, food and financial resources. It is vital that the civil society organizations, government and

local councils work with markets to recognize and prioritize women with disabilities' access to food and medical services. Local governments, in association with organizations of persons with disabilities, need to create awareness through virtual platforms to break stereotypical gender roles. This will support women and girls with disabilities in a big way. Government, civil society organizations and organizations of persons with disabilities partnership can foster strengthening preparedness for eventual recovery, future emergencies, and implement gender, age and disability-inclusive exit strategy.

I want to end by quoting Professor Stephen Hawking, "The past, like the future, is indefinite and exists only as a spectrum of possibilities." It is time that we include people with disabilities as co-creators of COVID-19 inclusive responses, as champions, problem solvers and not as victims. Friends, all of us must collectively act, interact, and communicate to get quality of opportunities in ensuring we leave no one behind. Thank you.

KAVEH ZAHEDI: Thank you very much for your intervention and for reminding us at the very end that whatever solutions we find, persons with disabilities have to be at the heart of those solutions, in defining those very solutions, whether they are technological solutions or solutions in terms of accessing the food and medicine that you mentioned. I was heartened to see that something as simple as a WhatsApp group, can have such a big effect in such a large and important country. So thank you for bringing some of those stories to life for us. Thank you again.

So, we now move onto our final panelist, who is my colleague, Valerie Julliard, United Nations Resident Coordinator for Nepal. She has been the Resident Coordinator in Nepal since 2016, and before that has also served as Resident Coordinator in other countries, including Guatemala and the Dominican Republic. She worked for 14 years with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), so she knows intimately what it is like to be responding to crises. And prior to joining the UN system, she was working at Handicap International as programme director for Serbia and Bosnia. So I think we actually have found the perfect person for the panel from within our UN leaders. Valerie, because of your leadership, Nepal has been chosen as a pilot to implement the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy. Could you share a little bit of your views and examples of how the UN and the UN country teams can better partner with governments, with stakeholders, to develop disability-inclusive responses, especially in crisis times like we find ourselves in right now? So welcome and over to you.

VALERIE JULLIAND: OK, thank you very much for organizing this forum. I think it is very important that we give the attention to the people with disability. This is definitely a topic that doesn't get enough attention, despite all the efforts that we all do.

And in order to respond to your question, Kaveh, maybe I'm thinking of using the example of Nepal since I'm the RC in Nepal, so I would like to use this example. And first you said that in Nepal, of course the people with disability face here the same problem as anywhere else in the world. But in addition, it is an invisible population because the census of 2011 did not give an opportunity for the people with disability to be well counted, so therefore they are invisible. We don't see them. They represent, as per the census, less than 2% of the population. And all the censuses that we have done after that, other studies demonstrate that the figure is certainly closer to 15% instead of 2%. And of course they have low literacy rates, very high unemployment, and among them, the women are definitely the most affected. So this being said, it's nothing new, because I'm saying. I know it is happening in many other countries. So the good practices that we have in Nepal, actually, I would like to summarize them around those points.

First, we have a strong partnership with the National Federation of People with Disability and I insist on the National Federation because, while we have international agencies or NGOs working with that, it is important that we go with the national one because, for instance in the context of Nepal, in addition to the discrimination that can exist against people with disability, you have to add up all the other forms of discrimination that accumulates, like for instance the caste discrimination, ethnic discrimination and that makes the situation for the disabled people even more difficult.

Also, I have to say that when it comes to the crisis, because it was your question Kaveh, is that all these partnerships were established before the crisis. So when the crisis occurred we were ready, we had this link with the organization. Then the other partnership that is essential to establish is with the government, and in the case of Nepal, it's a federal country. So we have established this partnership at federal, provincial and local levels, so that we are sure that when we discuss our intervention and what we can do, we work with all the layers of the government. Another thing we have done here in Nepal is that we have established a task force on the people with disability, on disability. Mostly because if we just talk about it, without having a real mechanism and endeavor to carry it through, then it remains a rhetoric. So having a task force means that we have a group of agencies that are dedicated to looking at this issue on a regular basis.

Secondly, we always have a twin approach to the issue of disability that is on the one hand, the mainstreaming, but at the same time a targeted approach. Mainstreaming is essential to change the mentality to slowly impact on policy, while a targeted approach gives you the possibility to really go and affect in a positive manner the life of people. We should not stay at the level of mainstreaming only because sometimes it can resemble, you know, sprinkling a bit of sugar on the cake. And what we want is the cake to be really sweet, so we want to have the targeted approach as well.

Another thing that is really important is the joint programmes. So I was talking about task force, I was talking about all these joint approaches, but it has to translate into a joint programme where we really work together towards one or several objectives that have been defined. I also mentioned it earlier on, but I want to come back on to the multiple forms of discrimination, because we know that people with disability are discriminated, but they are not only discriminated because they have a disability. Take the case, as I say for instance in Nepal, of a woman, Dalit, which is the caste that is the least respected in Nepal, then with disability and let's say she's poor, in addition to that, because poverty is also a big source of discrimination. So this multiple forms of discrimination have to be addressed as they are, that is to say, we have to take into consideration each aspect of the discrimination and address it individually.

Then data. I know that many of the speakers before me have mentioned this issue of data and I said it at the onset, in Nepal, people with disabilities are invisible. They are not counted and if you are not counted, you don't count. So that is very important. And here we are working on the next census for 2021, making sure that the Washington sets of questions are in, although I am not sure we will succeed. But we are working on that. We have done some rapid needs assessment, of the needs of the people with disability, so that we are not talking in general, we have their responses. And of course they are included in the social-economic impact assessment that we are going to do for COVID.

And also here in Nepal, we walk the talk. We had the UN house completely assessed by an organization of persons with disabilities, to tell us what we needed to change to make sure that the UN house was disabled-friendly and we have invested the money to equip the house. We have elevators; we have all the necessary signs. Everything was per the advice of the organization of persons with disabilities. Then of course, we are training our staff and we are addressing these issues with our staff, so that they know

exactly what it means, what they have to do, how they can incorporate this into a program and we have of course a disability approach to human rights, to procurement, to all the different aspects. Now I would like to give you some specific examples of the response to COVID, where disability has been included.

First of all, it is a standing agenda in the UNCT. So once again it is not something we talk about on occasion. No, it is a standing item in our agenda. Secondly, we did a rapid needs assessment and we didn't do it directly. Handicap International has organized this assessment and now we are using the results in our own programming and assessment. Secondly, we have mainstreamed the issue of disability throughout the country preparedness and response plan that each country has been elaborating to respond to COVID. So once again, it was not enough to have thought, it was from the beginning.

As you know with COVID, we have to quarantine people, so we have evaluated all the quarantine sites and one of the elements of evaluation was, was it disabled-friendly? And since we saw it was not, we immediately engaged in an advocacy approach with the government and telling them, please, can we agree that people with disability do not go to quarantine sites but home quarantine? Because since the sites were not good for them, let's make sure they go to their home and the government has agreed with that. Then of course we have put together services of psycho-social support and we have trained counsellors to the special needs of people with disability. And we also extended the psychosocial support to the caregivers of people with disability. So that we have done that really, once again, integrating disability from day one.

We are using the people with disability as our key informant in all the assessments we have been doing and also in our own response plan. We have had a differential approach to relief. For instance, we need to have special packages of relief when it comes to hygiene, for instance, for people with disability, this is not the regular hygiene kit. So all this has been included. And when it comes to communication, we have been really putting a big emphasis. First of all, all the daily press briefings that are done by the Ministry of Health, now, are also with sign language. So it was important. Secondly, there is a video on self-care for people with disability that we have put together. Another example, is a radio jingle on mental health that we have that we are playing around and around and around the country, to make sure that people with disability get it. Then we have a rehabilitation video series for home care intervention, that is also with a focus on people with disability. Then of course, sign language has been incorporated in all our communication and we also have an infographic. And finally, we have developed some specific guidelines for the continuation of essential services, rehabilitation services, for people with disability, as well as some guidelines on disability-inclusive COVID-19 healthcare services. So all these two guidelines are really helpful for us, but also for our partners, the NGOs.

So finally, where to go from there? It was also an aspect that may be the big lessons that I wanted to extract from those examples, which I hope I am helping in explaining how we can include and incorporate all these dimensions. First, we have to remember that as the UN, what we do has an impact, even if sometimes we may think that we are not so important, which we are not indeed, as we are not the only players. But the UN is important in countries and if we do, if we have the right approach on disabled, on disability, it will influence the government, civil society, private sector. So what the UN does has an impact. It is heard. We set a trend and that is why it is important that we have to put our act together. We cannot stay at the level of the rhetoric.

Secondly, data, data, data. As I said, what is not accounted for, does not count. So we really need as the UN to continue to invest on collecting data, on helping governments to have the proper data. Of course, the multiple agency focus is important. The issue of disability does not pertain to one agency only. It is a

little bit like the issue of gender. You know, some decades ago, we were saying 'oh gender, it's only one agency.' No, now we know that gender has to be taken on by all the agencies. The same for disability. We have to achieve with disability what we have achieved with gender. But it comes with the political will of all of us, to push it forward systematically and consistently.

Third or Fourth, I don't know now. Give the voice to the people with disability. One thing that we say constantly, people with disability have some abilities. So let them speak for themselves. They know what they need. They are not helpless people and we have to give them voice and you see, as the UN, that is our main responsibility - to speak for those, sometimes who have no voice, because if they cannot talk, then we need to talk for them. And that is why we have privileges and immunities, because what we say has no impact on us, we are protected and sometimes we know that local people cannot speak up so easily, because they may risk retaliation or problems. So we have to give voice to the people with disability and we have to be their voice when they don't have one.

And two last points, we need to harness their skills. As I said, people with disabilities have abilities, they have different abilities and they may not have certain abilities, but they have many others. So we have to harness their skills and this translates into my last point. We need to recruit people with disability, because the same, we talk and talk and talk. How many people with disability work in the UN? How many people with disability work in government? How many people with disability work in others, in the private sector? For instance, in my country, companies are obliged to recruit people with disability, a certain percentage, and if they don't, they pay a fine. Guess what? Most of the companies would rather pay the fine than recruit people with disability. So we have to change all that. And to be forceful in the fact that if we want to include people with disabilities, we have to include them everywhere, including in our own organizations. I will stop here. Kaveh, thank you very much.

KAVEH ZAHEDI: Thank you, thank you so much. I won't summarize because you did it perfectly yourself. I think you have captured it. But what stays with me is we have to lead by example, exactly as you are doing in Nepal. And I took very much to heart the importance of working with the national institutions, the national set up, that is already in place, because as many speakers have said, yes this is a crisis but many of the things that we are doing now were needed anyway and will be needed even once hopefully we get over this crisis. And we are going to be watching very carefully to see how you do and how well you fare with the implementation of the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy so we can learn from that and share with the rest of the region, and especially when it comes to the data, the making the invisible visible. This is at the heart of the Incheon strategy. This is something that governments have, I would say, committed to and so making that link will enable us to hold them to that high bar that is expected. So thank you so much for joining us, Valerie.

Colleagues and friends, we are now moving to the next segment of our conversation, where people, real experts from governments, experts in institutions, CSOs, UN are going to have the near impossible task of speaking on the issues for two to three minutes only. But I think that we are already going to get a lot of richness out of it, because even in those two or three minutes, we are going to get a glimpse of the situation across the board, whether it is within the government and the government perspective, the CSO perspective, the UN perspective. And to kick-start us we have an extremely distinguished participant, Ms. Afamasaga Faauiga Mulitalo, who is the Chief Executive Officer, Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development of Samoa. So we really look forward to hearing the perspective and the voice of the Pacific, over to you.

AFAMASAGA FAAUIGA MULITALO: OK, thank you so much. Once again, greetings from Samoa, it's lovely to see you. Unfortunately we can't see everyone from my end, but given the very short time allocated for this exercise, I'll just quickly take you through. I understand, and I think that everyone has got their own best practices and systems and mechanisms in place to engage our people with disabilities and also look at ways to address the needs of our people with disabilities. And relating to COVID-19 and our efforts to ensure that we include and engage our people with disabilities in the programmes and the interventions we've been undertaking, not only to prepare our communities and our people for COVID-19, but also to respond in the event that COVID-19 actually reaches our shores.

We have embarked on our media campaign, a mass media campaign, and we engaged the director of the umbrella organization for disability organizations in Samoa, in one of our panel discussions on the television. Mainly the program is to prepare our communities. Right from the clinical side of things, we also have our associate minister, who is also a doctor, to talk specifically on what to do in order to prepare for home isolation. For example, maintaining cleanliness and hygiene in the homes and in the neighborhood. So we engage our people with disabilities through that mechanism and we also put up our television advertisements, and also utilize our interpreters to make sure they deliver. Our deaf population groups understand the messages through the sign language.

And we have also been working together with our disability partners and we've also distributed food plants, crops, for families with people with disabilities. The whole idea is not only to focus at the current situation, but looking ahead and looking beyond COVID-19 to ensure that there's always food and we have sufficient food supplies to rely on. So even in the absence of both, or in the shortage of food supplies from overseas, we don't panic, knowing that we have enough food supplies around our homes and our communities.

We are planning our outreach programme from next week, Wednesday, and we are also targeting people with disabilities. This is mainly to reinforce the messages that were conveyed over TV and radio and also having an opportunity to interact with the people and actually demonstrate what's been talked about over our media campaign programmes. So the whole idea of preparing our communities includes our people with disabilities. So that's the work that we've been doing because of the nature of COVID-19 and the fact that there's no protection for people. We decided from the beginning of the state of emergency that we will do our campaigns via the media outlets until the time is right and now Samoa is still COVID-free. And we have received a declaration from the Director-General of Health last week that we are still COVID free. So that is why we have decided to implement our outreach programme, beginning from next week. But people with disabilities will certainly be included in our programme in the communities.

So that's basically what we've been doing. And, we are planning to go out, as I say briefly, and to make sure that we include all people with disabilities in the program. Thank you. I hope I haven't gone over time.

KAVEH ZAHEDI: Thank you so much. As I said, it's an impossible task and we are going to come back to you and try to collect some of these examples, because some of the things that are now happening, the greater emphasis being given to organizations of persons with disabilities, for example. These should also be part of the new normal. The new normal should also include increasing investments to make the lives of persons with disabilities easier in terms of their full participation, so thank you for sharing that with us. And next, we have Mr. Victor Pineda, who is the President of World Enabled and Co-Chair of

Cities for a Global Platform and founding member of the G20 Smart Cities Alliance. Mr. Victor over to you.

VICTOR PINEDA: Thank you very much. Do you see me?

KAVEH ZAHEDI: Yes, and yes we can hear you very well and we see a Future Cities press release.

VICTOR PINEDA: This is something that I want to share. Let me give you a bit of background before we talk about some of the new announcements. My story is that I am an urban planner, Professor and Director of Inclusive Cities Lab. But also, like many colleagues on this call, helped to draft, implement and really think about how to advance the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. And it's a great honor to work with the Special Envoy, to do just that, in a partnership of cities.

Well I believe that the cities are the future. Not only the future for addressing challenges, but addressing the opportunities. And the opportunities that we have right now is to think about leveraging innovation at the local level, technology, and leveraging ways of creating more inclusive and resilient systems as a result of the COVID pandemic. What I would like to say is that the challenges of this new society are really the challenges of the city. And a majority of the world's population, over 56%, lives in cities and this proportion only continues to rise. The COVID pandemic brings into sharp focus the challenges and contradictions that the human systems that we have created have placed upon the lived experience of people with disabilities. The series of what we are witnessing, everything, in the most exaggerated manner, it's also where conflicts, but where solidarity can emerge. Whether we are talking about the future of work, or the future of the social contract, everything will change, I believe, as a result of this pandemic. And all the big issues, that we've been looking at for the Sustainable Development Goals will need to be catalyzed and will need to be brought together into sharper focus.

I brought up this press release as a sneak peek to you all to join us on Wednesday of next week where we conclude nine weeks of discussions, with experts from around the world, really re-imagining, what a city can be in this new normal post-COVID for persons with disabilities. And there are two clear things that emerge from the nine weeks of webinars, is that city leaders and experts in disability advocacy organizations have clearly stated, as has Valerie, as has the Special Envoy, as have other speakers stated here today, that a lot of cities do not know what to do to ensure that people with disabilities have clear mechanisms and ways of protecting and empowering their rights, and they needed guidance. City leaders need guidance. And we've collected some of those learnings.

The second challenge was data. Not being able to understand the breadth and the depth of a challenge creates opportunities for really understanding what is needed. So as a result of those two challenges, we've decided to launch on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, the Global Survey on inclusive pandemic response, to really collect comparative data on what local governments have been doing and to launch declared actions for empowering local governments on inclusive pandemic response. This is in line with our partnership with UN Habitat, with the World Bank, with united cities and local governments, and with the Office of the UN Special Envoy on Disability. And I think what we should all take into consideration, is that we aren't going to be able to implement the Sustainable Development Goals, we are not going to be able to really create an inclusive future if we don't focus on the localization, on local capabilities. So we need more training, we need more capacity and we need more multi-sector collaboration at the local level, and the discussions happening globally have to have a local lens. You can join us on the global campaign called Cities for All and you can join us in ensuring

that cities have an inclusive COVID response. I will leave my email in the chat box, but the website is citiesforall.org. Thank you so much.

KAVEH ZAHEDI: Thank you very much, Victor, and we would be happy to also share the details, the video, but also the case studies that you already put together. As you say, many are scrabbling looking for the same solution, so we will definitely share that with the audience.

VICTOR PINEDA: - Can I just mention one important topic?

KAVEH ZAHEDI: We are very, very short on time.

VICTOR PINEDA: So is it possible to?

KAVEH ZAHEDI: Go ahead.

VICTOR PINEDA: - I just think that we all need to find a way to create a knowledge hub, so that we can share the resources, thank you.

KAVEH ZAHEDI: We will come to that at the end. We have a mini knowledge hub. I won't say it is the definitive global one, but I hope it will help. And then again, Thank you. Next, we have Ms. Lee Sin Yi, who is the President of the Singapore Physiotherapy Association. Ms. Lee, over to you.

LEE SIN YI: Hi, I would like to really thank everyone for this session and I really echo the panelists on speaking on importance of multi-sectoral partnerships. And I hope my sharing today will be able to provide some insights as to the critical need to ensure continuous accessibility for rehabilitation for persons with disabilities as well, whether it is during or beyond the COVID period.

So from the Singapore experience, as for many other countries during this COVID period, there has been a major shift towards a suspension of rehabilitation services beyond acute hospitals. This has happened in Singapore as well. All face-to-face outpatient and community-based rehab services have been actually suspended during our circuit breaker (lockdown) measures and they were all subjected to review by government authorities at the patient level exemption. And as a result, this has impacted community-based rehabilitation and also inevitably restricted services for persons with disabilities. So even in Singapore actually, the teleconsultation was encouraged as a new mode of rehabilitation. And rehabilitation could only continue during the circuit breaker period if it was carried out through teleconsultations.

Yet it is a new mode for both practitioners, as well as clientele, there were a lot of challenges in terms of adopting and adapting the technology, in terms of accessibility of technology among certain population groups. And we all know that for rehabilitation, a lot of our interventions require assessments, and require hands-on. And hence telehealth is new and is challenging, well, when this entire situation came about as well. And as an Association, we recognize this need for circuit breaker measures, and yet this importance to actually protect and to be the voice of vulnerable patient groups. And what we did prior to the circuit breaker measures, was really to compile an evidence-based list of the reasons of why certain population groups require essential rehabilitation services and we gathered this from a professional group and presented this over to our Ministry of Health. And we hope that these can advocate for vulnerable patient groups to the ministry, that rehabilitation is essential during this period whether it is for COVID or non-COVID patients.

Gradually, as we open up the rehabilitation services in the community, currently, Singapore is in the process of doing this in the stage-wise manner. There's a need to protect and reduce local transmission risk to the patient groups as well. And hence the Association is working very closely with the Ministry of Health to provide training to coordinate the training of personal protective equipment and also coordinate the procurement of such PPE for home-based therapists providing respiratory care. And these are particular patient groups that physiotherapists see, that are urgent and also at very high risk of also getting the condition.

At the same time, we have also worked to put together practice guidelines for rehabilitation practitioners in terms of infection control and safe distancing. We have put together some of the materials from the government into guidelines on specifics so that they can apply to their respective settings. In terms of tele-rehab, we have actually published our guidelines with the help of other physiotherapy associations and are actually working with also the World Confederation for Physical Therapy to explore ways to share knowledge and skill sets in the region. And yet, in the long run it will be important for us to actually collaborate with other agencies, to see how we can actually better build the technology infrastructure, as well as these resources that will be critical for lower-income countries, with telehealth approaches could still be limited as well for rehab. So that's just my bit of sharing from the rehabilitation perspective from Singapore. Thank you.

KAVEH ZAHEDI: Thank you very much. A very interesting perspective and I think it reinforces the need for us to bring in together so many of these guidelines etc. that have been put together but could have used way beyond, say in this case, the Singapore context and then we will definitely try to do so. Thank you so much. We will now move on to the next person, who is Ms. Ng Lai Thin, who is the project officer at the National Early Childhood Intervention Council of Malaysia. Over to you.

NG LAI THIN: Thank you very much Mr. Kaveh. I would like to just echo what Mr. Kawamori stated just now, that ICT is crucial during COVID-19 to ensure that persons with disabilities stay safe, productive and connected, which is because during the COVID-19 pandemic many local practitioners in Malaysia quickly switched to telehealth services to ensure that children with disabilities have continuous learning and intervention services. So at the National Early Childhood Intervention Council, we collaborated with UNICEF Malaysia to provide funding so that families and children continue to get targeted telehealth services and this will largely reduce the financial burden on the families with disabilities to gain access to intervention services. And in the short time that we've started this project, I would like to highlight four lessons we've learned so far in terms of conducting telehealth services from the practitioner's perspective.

Firstly, it is very important that the interventions are tailored to address the immediate needs of the child with disabilities and her family. For example, practitioners, instead of providing the usual intervention goals, they need to help the family to work out a suitable home routine and as well as ways to maintain a calm home environment, especially for children with autism. And secondly, instead of providing direct instruction to children, practitioners need to shift to a model that focuses on parent coaching. Thirdly, we must consider using various telecommunication methods because not every family with disabilities have access to the internet, computers and smartphones. And lastly, I would like to also echo what Ms. Valerie mentioned just now, the importance of psychosocial support for people with disabilities. Same for practitioners who provide telehealth services, they need to be prepared to provide psychological first aid support to both children with disabilities, as well as their parents and caregivers during this time, as it has been overwhelming and stressful.

Moving forward, NECIC also provided a guideline that is based on the Early Childhood Intervention Centers' context to prepare them for the reopening of operations for physical face-to-face intervention services. And that's all from my side. Thank you very much.

KAVEH ZAHEDI: Thank you so much. And thank you for re-emphasizing some of what we've already heard. I mean, we saw even in the earlier video that we showed that the psychological impacts of this are being felt, including by persons with disabilities. And how do we indeed respond to these? And it's not always a question of technology, so thank you for reminding us of that. Our next speaker, Mr. Nazmul Bari, who is the Director, Centre for Disability in Development of Bangladesh. Over to you Sir. We can't hear Mr. Nazmul yet. OK. Maybe we come back to Mr. Nazmul Bari, who is in Bangladesh. Yes we can hear now.

NAZMUL BARI: I am sorry, I think there were some technological challenges. So thank you for this opportunity. I would like to start with the raising of a question to anyone of the panelists. It is about disability-disaggregated data. Are we having access to this information like how many persons with disabilities, are in facilities, or being tested, or being affected, are being risked in this response in terms of their different disability groups? And if yes, is this something already in a built-in mechanism, or is it something ad hoc? Now, next I would like to share some of the good practices that we have done.

The Centre for Disability and Development, you know we have been already working on disability inclusion in the country, whereby we have been working with the organizations of persons with disabilities, self-help groups, supporting in leadership, of different groups of persons with disabilities, women with disabilities, advocacy, and there are linkages with the local government institutes. So there was already some sort of connectivity, you know, even before the COVID-19 struck. So once the COVID-19 pandemic has struck our country, what we have seen in some of these areas, the organizations of persons with disabilities and the self-help groups can quickly mobilize and started with the risk information, making sure that persons with disabilities at risk, they have access to the information, on what are the preventive measures, where they can and should go if the situation should arise.

At the same time, informing the State parties, the responders, of the different challenges and the different issues that they must be considering when they're thinking about these responses. So this was already being done, and now they are also reaching the families. And once a different step level initiative started on COVID-19 responses, like policy and humanitarian assistance guidelines which were talking about forming committees who would do the lifting and including different people, having that connectivity and the recognition at the community level of these groups of persons with disabilities in some of these areas, what we have seen and experienced is that both of them have come together, the organizations of persons with disabilities groups as well as the local government initiatives, where the persons with disabilities have become members of these different committees, that are influencing the decision-making process and the selection, and they have also represented the voices of different groups of persons with disabilities. And since they had a list of persons with disabilities, disaggregated by age, gender and different disabilities, so all of these groups were being able to be connected with the local government initiatives and the State government initiatives on the COVID-19 humanitarian response.

And so the recent event is worth being addressed, which could be done. A database plays a huge contributory role. They could connect with the local government and link with the different agencies that they had, that was also important. And so all of what we have seen has linked up very nicely with the national level in the policy advocacy that was being done by CDD, by other disability specific

organizations, umbrella organizations of persons with disabilities, so that the things that were being said there and those are being supported and practiced at the community level with the support of organizations of persons with disabilities.

Now what I would like to end by saying is that you know, we do have many challenges. There's no doubt about that. It is not all positive everywhere, but there are also good practices and successes. And let us really learn from those and strengthen the enabling factors and let us be better prepared for anything like that in the future. And let us really be inclusive, truly inclusive, and build back better in the future. Thank you very much for this opportunity.

KAVEH ZAHEDI: Thank you so much. And really your conclusion is my conclusion from this webinar. So much happening, so many good practices that we can share, learn from, and quickly implement in building back better. So thank you so much for reminding us of that. And thank you for joining us. Our next speaker Ms. Angeline Chand, who is the Team Leader of the Programmes for the Pacific Disability Forum in Fiji. Delighted to have another Pacific voice, over to you.

ANGELINE CHAND: - Thank you. Greetings from the Pacific Disability Forum. It is a pleasure to be in this webinar, highlighting the voices of the Pacific. But firstly, I would like to thank our distinguished panelists for your very rich insight to the various topics. For the Pacific Disability Forum, prior to COVID-19, we already had a Pacific Emergency Response Unit, which meant that we had already established partnerships with organizations to deal with natural disasters and climate change. So with COVID-19, we were able to get into that platform again, working with different cluster groups such as on food security, livelihoods, education, health, the sub-cluster on gender-based violence. Serving on these different cluster groups allowed us opportunity to promote the twin-track approach, getting up because the cluster groups are made up of government representatives, donor partners, NGOs and the civil society.

So it's about promoting disability inclusion, how they could better include persons with disabilities in whatever interventions they were doing. And we were also reminding the different partners of the cluster groups when they are working at the national level, to ensure the voices of national disabled people's organizations. We've also worked on core documents that have been shared to our partners to help them for their inclusion of persons with disabilities in their different programs. And we've also developed messaging that organizations could use, and as our colleague from Samoa highlighted, most of the governments are promoting the use of sign language during national news and they are also paying for sign language interpreters.

We are also working on easy-to-read versions of the core documents and we have also partnered with UNFPA, as we know that UNFPA in times of emergencies, distributes dignity kits to women. So they have come to us in this COVID period to request women with disabilities have access to those dignity kits, to ensure what else in addition to their normal dignity kits would be useful and vital for women with disabilities. Once that list is finalized, once the kits are available, it will be distributed to women and girls with disabilities in the Pacific. We've also started on working with a situation report collecting stories from DPOs, what has worked well, what has been their challenges and how the Pacific Disability Forum would be able to assist them.

Finally, we also have a photo blog on our Facebook page where we are trying to collect stories of persons with disabilities, to ensure the voices of Pacific persons with disabilities are not lost, so that they are able to share their experience on this COVID-19 period. So I guess for us, a key message that we would like to leave is, as all the speakers have said, we do a lot of good jobs, but we need to share what's happening

and I think the sharing of that information, the voices of Pacific persons with disabilities, is very vital. Thank you.

KAVEH ZAHEDI: Thank you so much. Very vital indeed, and certainly count on us to help you amplify those voices and to share the stories that you are collecting. Thank you so much. Next, we are going to go all the way to the other side of the world to my colleague Georgia Dominik, who works in the disability team in the Executive Office of the United Nations Secretary-General and has been one of the driving forces of the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy that many of us are working on, including Valerie in Nepal, so Georgia over to you and thank you for joining us so late.

GEORGIA DOMINIK: Thank you very much, I should mention that I am actually in New Zealand at the moment. So it's the afternoon here, but really thank you very much for inviting the disability team of the Executive Office of the Secretary-General to join you in this discussion today and it is a big task to come after so many incredible speakers. And I mean if I can pull one key thread that runs through all of this, I think, and Angie said it very well just now is, you know, that we have to learn from each other and a coordinated approach is really key to achieving disability inclusion.

In terms of the role of the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy, that's really one of the areas of focus that we have. The strategy was launched in June 2019 and it was established because it addressed that, across the UN system we have, while we do have pockets of good practices, we do have a number of gaps and challenges in relation to disability inclusion, and so the strategy it really tries to lay a foundation for how together we can work towards a road map or it represents a road map for how we can achieve that. And we've heard across all of the speakers today, elements that are really addressed in the strategy that we know are also relevant to a COVID-19 response and recovery that is inclusive of persons with disabilities. Whether you're talking about employment or accessibility, consultation with persons with disabilities, communications, all of these are elements that the strategy touches upon and it has really provided a foundation for how we can think about a COVID-19 response.

But I wanted to maybe pull two elements out in particular, the first one is leadership and the strategy really aims to bring a high-level political commitment and leadership on disability inclusion and to drive that conversation forward. And you know, I think that we can see, in terms of COVID-19, what has that meant? Well, we've had, as was mentioned in the beginning, the Secretary-General's policy brief on persons with disabilities and COVID-19 response. This is one of a number of policy briefs and one of the first on persons with disabilities specifically. The policy brief has also pushed forward the development of a letter by Member States which is reiterating a number of the recommendations that are included in the brief and calling on a disability response. So it's really pushing forward the importance of leadership and highlighting disability inclusion as a key issue that we need to be focused on in this response and recovery.

And then just to go back to the point on coordination and to share with you that you know one of the aims of the strategy is to support coordinated implementation on disability inclusion. And so in relation to that, Under-Secretary-General Menendez, who's the Secretary-General's senior advisor on policy has established a timebound emergency working group of entities to coordinate our engagement and response to COVID-19 and to ensure persons with disabilities are included in mainstream response and recovery efforts. And then also entities have been requested to report on how they are including persons with disabilities and how they plan to include persons with disabilities in their COVID-19 actions, both that are occurring now and in the future. So I think it's really an opportunity to have a system-wide view

of what is going on and also to really benefit from the many lessons learned in the excellent practices that are going on across the system.

KAVEH ZAHEDI: Thank you so much and really we look forward, all of us, on this webinar, look forward to working to translate some of this political momentum into real action, into real investments. Of course, through the United Nations and through our member States. The last person who was going to intervene is Miss Dipawali Sharma, from Deafway Project, a Deafway Project Officer at Nawalparasi Association of the Deaf in Nepal. Now because of some technical issues that all of you have probably noticed, we have a pre-recorded message from her to share with us. So let's go ahead with the message.

DIPAWALI SHARMA: Being a deaf woman and mother myself, and interested to be a social worker, I chose my own sector, the deaf sector. For the reason of many deaf people who are not achieving quality sign language interpreters, I collect vital information and share to the deaf community via social media. Most local governments provide live Nepali Sign Language interpreters on their official briefing. However, we are still advocating with the central government to make critical information accessible to the deaf community through live sign language interpreters. We are also advocating for video relay services.

Utilizing the COVID-19 crisis and home quarantine, I had begun basic Nepali Sign Language tutorial online. In addition, I am also translating Nepalese songs into NSL to help quarantined deaf people get some entertainment and deal with mental health issues, so that everyone can easily access my classes and entertainment videos on Facebook and YouTube. Our friends with disability are also working in current issues like accessible quarantine, isolation, safety kits for home quarantined disabled people.

We all are trying to collaborate with related organizations and government bodies to provide immediately aid for deaf people and persons with disabilities affected by this pandemic. The central government has given authority and responsibility of relief and distribution to local government bodies. Local government representatives are not familiar about the acute needs of disabled people, people with multiple disabilities, severe disabilities like hemophilia, spinal cord injuries, mental illness and those who need long-term treatment, care, and medication every day are most affected because of this pandemic, yet vulnerable to relief aid provided. We are collaborating with local government bodies in recognition of those in severe need, providing them with medicine, medical equipment and general relief. Thank you.

KAVEH ZAHEDI: Thank you very much. Thank you very much for that message. So dear friends, that brings us to the end of the second segment of our session and we had planned some time now to go into questions, but unfortunately we have run a little bit out of time. And I want to hear very much from Senator Monthian Buntan who is always really so good at distilling the kind of conversation that we have just had. But I would like to mention that all the questions we have gathered, we will provide you with the answers to that.

We have questions for Madam Zhang Haidi regarding China's disability-inclusive measures, especially about protecting the health and interests of persons with disabilities during the pandemic, including access to testing and medical treatment. We will get you some answers on that. We've had a number of questions about data, disability-disaggregated data, longer-term, as Valerie was talking about in surveys, etc., but also short-term in terms of the people affected during the crisis. We will come back to you on that. We have questions on how developing countries, that maybe don't have all of the technology, can still make technology a part of the solution and we will definitely go to Kawamori-san for some insights

there. And then we had questions on about jobs and whether persons with disability should now be prioritized as job seekers in this time, and many, many other questions. So we will answer them all and we will come back to you on those questions.

Now it gives me great pleasure to invite Senator Monthian Buntan who is a Senator of the Parliament of Thailand and Member of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Also an ESCAP Champion for the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities. Senator Monthian is going to give us some reflections on our discussions and some of the insights on how we can move forward as a community in protecting and empowering persons with disabilities. Dear Senator Monthian, over to you.

MONTHIAN BUNTAN: Thank you very much Mr. Zahedi. It is an honor for me to be given this opportunity and I think we have gone through a very comprehensive discussion and all of them are very fruitful. I would not try to reinvent what people have said, but I will just probably more or less recollect or reflect what I understand and perhaps give a short bit of my own reflection. We all know that with or without the COVID-19 pandemic, persons with disabilities have always been left behind. As one of the leaders in the disability field used to say in the United Nations in New York, that persons with disabilities are often the first to be forgotten and the last to be remembered.

The COVID-19 exacerbates such exclusion even more. You probably know that most, if not all governments, around the world, follow medical advice for social or physical distancing and this could also mean further isolation and exclusion for persons with disabilities. We touch upon the need to accelerate and to take this opportunity to accelerate disability inclusion at all levels, whether at the policy level, the operational measures level and also in terms of budget allocation. I follow quite closely and I can see that many of us are concerned that governments, many governments are, I would say all governments, often work in silos, meaning each ministry or department all have their own agenda. But with this regard, disability inclusion, in the context of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, we need more effort than ever to strengthen governments to work together and to ensure more efficiency and effectiveness, given the fact that the whole economy is being affected, either because of the slowdown or lockdown or pausing of a lot of economic activities. So there's a need more than ever for government to work in concert, to work together across ministries and sectors.

We also heard, from many of us, that several measures need to be addressed. We are talking about medical health services, rehabilitation services - that could not be put to pause even during this time of crisis, because persons with disabilities need ongoing services and access to health services related to the pandemic itself is also of great importance. The other measures to promote and protect the rights of persons with disabilities, whether its social protection schemes, employment or even cash transfers, the need for disability - the recognition of persons with disabilities that have always been in need of assistance - is probably more so than during the time without crisis.

We heard good examples of best practice of partnership, among organizations of persons with disabilities, civil society organizations, local governments, private sectors. Especially, we heard from the Pacific, Bangladesh or India or even in China. We are beginning to see that what we have been advocating for several years is finally being proven. The reality that persons with disabilities need to be involved and especially at the implementation level, at the local level, which all or most implementation takes place. As a result, persons with disabilities are not only just recipients of help or care, but take active roles in participating in the decision making, in forming guidelines and how assistance and services could be provided and that's because sometimes people are not allowed to travel so far. So it is almost like the

situation that local action has been tested and the contribution from persons with disabilities and their organizations are also being proven effective in this matter.

We also heard the reflection and also the need for information and communication technology that needs to be utilized more, given the fact that we are experiencing social distancing. However, because of lack of accessibility, still being repeated over and over again, we will probably see that at this time or moment of crisis, ICT accessibility needs to be even further addressed and I appreciate ITU for taking several initiatives. But we also would like to see emerging - I hope that it is still emerging - economies of this part of the world that will contribute to good practices in enhancing accessibility from the private sectors, especially when Mr. Kawamori mentioned that ITU is the only UN agency with private industry membership. And we have seen in many cases that implementing accessibility is often more possible through the private business implementation or living example. So we hope that more is yet to come, to make ICT accessibility the reality, so that persons with disabilities will not be locked in isolation during this pandemic.

And last, I would like to remind us that many, many thinkers, or academics, are trying to predict that we are at risk of disintegration, fragmentation, or reverse globalization, and that we may be at risk of turning ourselves against each other. But I am quite on the opposite. I think, the history of humankind has proven that when we face difficulties, the only way we can go through this is through human solidarity, collaboration, taking action together, and in this case, disability-inclusion is a now or never chance. And COVID-19 may be an alarm for us to really tell ourselves in the world that without taking this opportunity to strengthen the concept of inclusion, the concept of collaboration, or even repeating the phrase that was so popular 20 years ago, 30 years ago, "Think globally and act locally." It's still not too outdated.

I think we may not have another chance, because if we miss this opportunity to reiterate the need for global, regional solidarity and to take concerted action for further collaboration, partnership and inclusion of all aspects of development, we may not have another chance because there's a great risk of physical isolation, social exclusion that could never return back to before. So, I believe this webinar really reminds us to ask ourselves to rethink that we want to create a new normal or we want to be just passive citizens of the new normal. And I believe that the disability community and our friends and brothers and sisters throughout this region and throughout the world have our answers, that we want to be part of it. We want to be part of the game changers. We would like to be creators. We would like to be contributors and active participants in this wave to new normals. More power to all of you and I hope that we consistently give up on giving up. Thank you very much Kaveh and all.

KAVEH ZAHEDI: Thank you so much Senator Monthian. Thank you very much and really it's the perfect conclusion. This is our opportunity to accelerate disability inclusion, as you said. And having listened to everybody around this webinar today, I am more convinced than ever that maybe COVID has helped us to make sure that persons with disabilities are remembered, or have been remembered, but now is definitely our opportunity to accelerate disability inclusion and make sure it is an absolute foundation for this building back better that is becoming the new mantra. So colleagues, friends, you've been extremely patient, but we've come to the end of our webinar.

And on behalf of ESCAP I would like to thank all of you, for your participation and for your inputs. Before you go, we did want to remind you that, as Victor requested, as many of you have mentioned, as the stories you have said really make it an obligation, we will make sure that all of the material that we can get our hands on that you will share will be on ESCAP's "Make the Right Real" web portal which is maketherightreal.net. It already houses a lot of resources, but we will make sure that there is a COVID-

19 specific section there that can really help us to share very quickly some of the success stories that many of you have pointed to, so we will certainly do that.

We will also make available a video of this session. We know that there have been technical difficulties, we thank you for staying with us and are sorry for those technical difficulties, but it happens. So we will make sure a video of the session is available for you to share with your networks as you see fit, so that we make sure we maintain the momentum.

We will also make sure that the unanswered questions will be answered. We will come back to you and make sure to get the answers for the many questions that you have posed and we thank you for those thoughtful questions. I know many of them were already answered as the discussants came in, but we'll make sure to get back to all of you, as much as we possibly can. Of course, we would be happy to organize more of these sessions, come back to us, give us your reflections, give us your feedback and we will together move forward. So please do come back and let us know what is useful at this time to help amplify your voices, as we hope to do for the voices of the Pacific that we heard or to help to distribute the guidelines in the many very specific things that have been generated during COVID, across the Asia-Pacific region. So please come back and share with us. Learning from each other, as Georgia said, is a vital part of what we hope to achieve.

And lastly, I really want to thank the ESCAP team that has put this together, an extraordinary effort and I cannot name all of them. They know who they are. The team in the Social Development Division. The interpreters who have been magnificent. The technical team that has been trying so desperately to keep us going and to overcome all the glitches. Really, we are so grateful to all of you for the time you've put into making this really a superbly interesting morning possible for all of us, so thank you. Thank you to all of you who joined and we hope to see you again around this setting or another setting soon.