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## **Expert Group Meeting on the Participation and Leadership of Persons with Disabilities in Building a Disability-Inclusive, Accessible and Sustainable post-COVID-19 World**

**By Mr Kudakwashe Dube**

### **1. Introduction**

The COVID 19 pandemic has had glaring impacts on lives of people across the globe. Persons with Disabilities are at higher risk of vulnerability due to COVID-19 as they are already ostracised and discriminated against during situations of risk such as armed conflicts, natural disasters and pandemics. However, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on persons with disabilities has not been adequately documented in many African countries. This is particularly an important public policy issue as there are approximately one billion persons with disabilities globally whose majority (about 80%) live in least developed countries.<sup>1</sup>

In times of crisis and disaster, it is essential that governments, as primary duty bearers, must implement policy, legislation and strategic plans to ensure that all mitigation measures are delivered in a manner that achieves equality and equity of out of comes for all. The affected rights holders, also need to provide leadership and strong advocacy voices that have an impact on the core of decision-making and resource allocations.

The Africa Disability Alliance (ADA), established in September 2003, organised and mobilised Organisations of Persons with disabilities (OPDs), their continental, regional/ country-level networks of branches/ self-help groups and other fora all the five regions of Africa. In addition, ADA sent messages/ advice and response proposals to governments, inter-governmental organisations and humanitarian organisations working at country-level in order to ensure that persons with disabilities are not left behind in COVID 19 response strategies.

ADA also developed and implement key response strategies.

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<sup>1</sup>The World Report on Disability; WHO (2011)

## 2. ADA Response Strategies

With funding from GIZ, ADA developed a programme called **Equitable Access and Response to COVID 19 Pandemic (EAR-C 19): Ensuring Disability Mainstreaming in Key Sectors**.<sup>2</sup> This Programme has three objectives:

**Objective 1: Capacity to create disability inclusion in the new normal and COVID 19 Virus responses.** The objective is to strengthen the capacity of ADA and DPOs, their federations and networks including duty bearers (government, partners, CSO - all hereby referred to as Stakeholders), to provide appropriate responses to the COVID 19 that benefit diverse populations of persons with disabilities in Africa. It is essential that the leadership, management, activists and members of stakeholders are able to share good practices on the COVID 19 virus using emerging home-grown solutions, WHO/UN guidelines and other tools.

**Objective 2: is aimed at introducing online courses on a number of key subjects and themes that will contribute to the post-COVID 19 recovery.** The objective is to provide learning opportunities related to **disability-inclusive development cooperation** through the **atingi** (available at <https://www.atingi.org/>) and ADA online platforms (available at <https://www.disabilityharambe.org/courses/course/1/>).

We are currently uploading a course on Disability Stakeholders and Relationship Building and will upload more course to assist the disability movement to recover and build their capacity to manage the new normal.

It is our aim to ensure that **key** personnel, leaders, activists, development partners, officials of government/ inter-governmental organisations and other practitioners at operational, programming and decision-making levels are able to mainstream / include the rights of persons with disabilities in programming related to Covid 19 responses and **development cooperation** with a specific focus put on the role of OPDs in the current COVID 19 pandemic and the **reconstruction/build-back-better strategies**.

Despite our initial efforts, we soon realised that the COVID 19 pandemic brought more suffering, vulnerability and abuse of human rights of persons with disabilities. The shooting of a young person with Downs Syndrome in South Africa made international headlines.

We had to respond to this abuse of human rights by designing **the Strategy for Equitable Access and Response to COVID 19 Pandemic (SEAR) Programme**. We are deeply indebted to the Open Society Institute of Southern Africa (OSISA) for supporting this initiative.

The SEAR Project has three objectives:

**Objective 1:** To challenge Governments in 6 Member States from the Southern Africa Development Agency (SADC) to review their National COVID-19 response plans to **ensure**

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<sup>2</sup> Africa Disability Alliance (ADA) (2020) *Equitable Access and Response to COVID 19 Pandemic (EAR-C 19) Project: Ensuring Disability Mainstreaming in Key Sectors*

**inclusion of disability and gender sensitivity** which specifically addresses the needs of women and girls with disabilities.

**Objective 2: To advocate for zero budget cuts** in programmes for persons with disabilities including women and girls living with a disability in 6 SADC Member States.

**Objective 3:** To document the **impact of disability insensitive distance learning platforms to children with disabilities in 6 SADC Member States.**

The initiative **has a litigation fund** to take on violations of the rights of persons with disabilities, particularly women and girls, during this pandemic.

The needs of children with disabilities were ignored during the different levels of COVID 19 induced lockdowns. The inclusive quality education sector was already under-resourced prior to the pandemic. The Africa Disability Alliance (ADA) designed the **Sustainable Employment Strategies Through Access to Inclusive Education (SESIE)** aimed at contributing to transformation in the implementation of inclusive quality education policies/legislation (where they exist) that prepares learners for (self) employment. ADA will adopt a total of 16 (9 already adopted) inclusive education schools in 7 countries in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC).

**A Model for an Inclusive Quality Education Ecosystem (MIQEE) was also designed to support the SESIE Programme.** This was an Architecture of Response Mechanisms For COVID-19 Pandemic.

The MIQEE is a comprehensive and integrated model that addresses the needs and the abilities of all learners with/without disabilities, in our adopted schools, in a holistic and sustainable manner. The ecosystem includes short-medium-long term support, using sector-wide and sector-specific strategies, to families, school governing bodies, teachers, headmasters, communities and other duty bearers within the school environment with the child at the centre of programming and implementation processes.

Without the support of the private sector, the **First Rand Foundation and Tshikululu Social Investments**, both the SESIE and MIQEE strategies would not have been launched and implemented to achieve objectives attained to date.

When we pinned down a strategy for inclusive quality education at primary and secondary school levels, we soon realised that this was not enough. Learners were **'failed'** for them **to at least repeat classes they had passed** instead of staying at home due to lack of progression to tertiary institutions. This is a true story.

The Technical Vocational Education Training Colleges (TVET) are not accessible to persons with disabilities thus exacerbating the already high unemployment levels among persons with disabilities. In order to address this gap, ADA designed another programme entitled **Disability Inclusive Skills Development Approaches (DISDA): Good Practices that Lead to Knowledge Societies.** The support from GIZ will enable us to implement this programme.

The DISDA programme was designed to develop a model framework that ensures that persons with disabilities are included, empowered to actively benefit from TVET programmes. This will be achieved through, among others strategies, the evaluation, development and full inclusion of persons with disabilities, using accessibility tools, to online portals such as the ***African Skills Portal for Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship (ASPYEE)*** portal<sup>3</sup> which is under the auspices of the African Union Development Agency (AUDA) and the agency called the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

### **3. Conclusion**

In conclusion, persons with disabilities are primary, secondary and key stakeholders in providing leadership to address the impact of the current COVID 19 pandemic and future disasters. This leadership, advice and the extensive networks of OPDs represent an opportunity to provide support to those at grassroots levels. These networks must be utilised.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nepad.org/skillsportalfor youth>