

LNFOOD Desktop review of the national COVID-19 response and recovery plan and budget cut on empowerment and social protection programs for women and girls with disabilities.



LNFOOD

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Abbreviations

DPOs	Disability Peopl’s Organisation
IDAL	Intellectual Disability And Autism Lesotho
LNAPD	Lesotho National Association of the Physically Disabled
LNFOOD	Lesotho National Federation of Organisations of the Disabled
LNLVIP	Lesotho National League of the Visually Impaired
NACOSEC	National Covid 18 Secretariat
NADL	National Association of the Deaf Lesotho
PWD	Persons With Disabilities
WHO	World Health Organisation

1. Introduction and rationale

COVID-19 was first perceived as a health issue based on its profound, significant impact on public health. However, it further went on to have a significant negative impact on economic growth. The advent of COVID-19 has confronted the world with immense challenges such as trade, consumption and demand and supply chain. It has not only infected millions of people it also accounts for millions of deaths globally. Its ability to mutate from one strain to the next has spun the numbers of infected people out of control in some continents more than in others with already depleted resources, particularly in the two-thirds of world economies.

Lesotho has been very slow to come to the party, mainly because of the low number of infections at the time and some unfounded myths that bordered on attitude and climate advantages. The number of workers coming back from South Africa constituted a risk factor that Lesotho was not adequately prepared for. In an effort to arrest this unfolding crisis, the government of Lesotho and the international partners contributed to the conception and development of a response and recovery plan, whose aim was to harness every institution's advantage and resourcefulness for better coordination in order to avoid duplication of efforts result was a medley of interventions from lockdowns, social distancing to policy and legal as well as socio-behavioural responses and health infrastructure.

Studies carried out show that persons with disabilities experience poorer access to services and remain the most vulnerable in situations of crisis (WHO, 2020). The unequal access to services in various sectors, such as employment, transport, education, and healthcare, has further deepened the layers of vulnerability and compounded the challenges of persons with disabilities. Therefore, it is consequential that people with disabilities are most likely to be excluded in crisis and pandemic conditions and the allocation of relief resources (Ned 2019).

The government of Lesotho, like many governments, imposed cuts on its budget in order to attend to emerging COVID-19 dire conditions. Hard lockdowns further plunged the already bleeding economic activity into a dire situation. All of this affected not only livelihoods but also employment as well as family income in which made it impossible for parents to support their children's education which had now become online.

People with disabilities of all occupations were the hardest hit by the conditions imposed by COVID 19. Despite their vulnerability to the conditions, they were often not involved in

decision-making processes aimed at reversing the spread of the pandemic. Access to social protection, employment and government support had suffered a significant blow, and the lives of persons with disabilities have been disproportionately affected by the state of affairs.

2. Methodology

Qualitative methodological Framework

Lesotho designed and implemented a national response and recovery plan to guide the role players in interventions that will assist the country to curb the spread of the virus. The research has deemed it imperative to 1) investigate the extent to which involvement in decision-making processes or lack of, affect the COVID-19 overall intervention strategies adopted for the management of COVID-19 pandemic, on mainly persons with disabilities and 2) conduct desk-top review on the impact of the budget cut on the social protection for persons with disabilities, particularly on women and girls.

This study is situated within a qualitative methodological framework. Qualitative research aims to understand a given research question from the perspectives of the population involved, and it is particularly effective in obtaining specific information about opinions, behaviours and social context of specific populations (Bernard, 2000). Qualitative research is especially notable in obtaining socially detailed information about specific populations' values, opinions, behaviours, and social contexts. The intensity of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue

Data Collection & Data Analysis

Data for this research project was collected through a convenient sampling method using online media sources, mainly focusing on governments response strategies dated from April 2020 up to date. The reason for this timeline is since in response to combating the spread of the virus, Lesotho announced its response plan in April 2020 after setting up the National Emergency Command Centre in March (World Bank 2020). Beyond collecting data online and using print, media data was collected through conducting semi-structured interviews with 10 women and girls with disabilities, 4 staff members from DPOs and two social development officer from the Ministry of social development. In regards to the analysis, the documentation and interview transcripts were engaged in an open coding proctor to reveal critical themes.

Ethical consideration

Whenever researching people, the well-being of research participants must be the priority. The ethical concerns were addressed and discussed with the respondents before the interview commenced; no interview was conducted with the individual's consent, and the respondents were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality. All respondents who took part in the study did so under voluntary participation.

3. Research Findings

Involvement of PWD on COVID-19 response and recovery plan

a) Community Representation at consultations decision-making levels

Community representation at the decision making level is key to the success of the plan because it ensures the inclusiveness of every citizen. Self-representation of persons with disabilities in the COVID-19 response and recovery plan is key towards ensuring that interventions are inclusive and accessible for the disability community. NACOSEC Risk Determination and Mitigation framework serves as a guide on how best to operate and be functional under covid conditions; hence, it needed to be informed by all national stakeholders, including persons with disabilities (NACOSEC 2020). However, respondents and reports indicate that persons with disabilities were left out in the consultative engagement of stakeholders (LNFOD 2020 and United Nations Lesotho 2021). This resulted in the exclusion of the disability community in the implementation of the framework.

b) Access to COVID 19 Information

Persons with disabilities are at a heightened risk of exposure to COVID-19 due to limited access to information or prevention measures, structural stigma and discrimination. Among the strategic objective of the National COVID 19 Strategy to mitigate the negative symptoms of the pandemic by preventing and containing a covid through rolling out effective proactive nationwide communications campaign aimed at enhancing awareness and nudging people into readily adopting new behaviours such as social distancing, wearing a mask and handwashing (NACOSEC COVID Strategy 2020). The education, communication and public information produced by NACOSEC was not inclusive of the disability population because it was not produced in accessible formats (LNFOD 2020). The campaigns did not consider the case of a visually impaired individual who requires the assistance of a human guide who cannot adhere to the social distancing regulation. A respondent who is a member of the deaf community said:

“There was an incident during the hard lockdown whereby our community member was brutally beaten due to the movement restriction that was addressed on LTV. When the nation was being addressed on both national tv and radio, both NACOSEC and the

Ministry of communication did not consider that we as the deaf community exist; hence, they did not put a sign language interpreter in place”.

c) Socio-economic impact of COVID on livelihoods

In terms of employment, the literature reveals that some respondents reported having lost their sources of income due to COVID. According to a study on the impact of covid on persons with disabilities (UN Lesotho 2021), persons with disabilities are unemployed in large numbers, but COVID increased the unemployed pool when others lost their jobs due to imposed covid lockdowns.

Regarding access to quality education, the non-involvement of the disability community in the development of the NACOSE Risk Determination and mitigation strategy of July 2020 compromised the quality education of learners with disabilities. The government has imposed covid 19 restrictions that made it challenging for disabled learners to be accommodated. One respondent had indicated that it is challenging to attend classes due to cloth masks tears wear, thus making it impossible to lip—read. While a visually impaired student had indicated that he could not access learning materials shared through social media because he did not have a smartphone. He had to depend on classmates in order for him to continue his studies.

Impact of budget cut on women and girls social protection and empowerment programs

Covid 19 has a significant impact both primary and secondary on people’s lives. It has proven to widen the already existing inequalities between gender identities. Paying attention to women and girls with disabilities covid has affected their lives so intensely that their rights have been infringed. India has stated that the plague of covid has resulted in women and girls with disabilities being more vulnerable to poverty, gender-based violence and discrimination in an unfavourable social matrix (Shama & Das 2021).

According to a global assessment conducted in Malawi, Chile, Fiji and England, due to covid 19, women and girls with disabilities reported to have lost formal and informal disability-related support, encounter barriers in accessing employment, education, disability-related healthcare, and meet basic needs UNFPA 2021). This section of the research findings lays out how downsizing the budget might have impacted the roles played by the social protection and empowerment programs for women and girls with disabilities.

“Social protection programmes can play a crucial role in alleviating and preventing poverty and vulnerability to securing peoples’ well being. They can also increase productivity, employability and economic development of people...” (Sefuthi 2021).

a) Women and Girls Social Protection and Empowerment programs

The Lesotho National Social Protection Strategy of 2014/15-2018/19 outlines its four formal social protection programs: social assistance, social security, social care services, and social justice. Women and girls with disabilities do not have specific programmes designed for them by the Ministry of social development. Instead, they have included the same programs highlighted in the NPSP document that other vulnerable groups are accessing. The respondents to the study were asked if they knew of women and girls’ social protection and empowerment programs, and they had all indicated that there were no such programs. The same responses were received from four DPOs who are affiliates to LNFOD.

b) Expanding Social Assistance coverage

When asked if they are aware of how the COVID might have impacted the budget allocation, particularly the budget meant to support social protection and empowerment programs, Participants did not know the budget allocation for the Ministry of social development for the fiscal year 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 hence it was not easy for them to detect if there has been a budget cut that could impact on programs. Instead, they know there is a disability grant which some of the participants were not sure of the amount allocated.

Unlike other sectors, reports reveal that the social protection budget for both the fiscal year 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 had increased. According to the 2020/2021 budget, the allocation for the social protection budget was intended to increase by 32%, but the government had to re-align its priorities due to the introduction of COVID. While in the 2021/2022 budget, the social protection budget remains at the same level. However, the government of Lesotho expanded the coverage by implementing the disability grant to reduce vulnerable groups (Lesotho Budget Speech 2021). The budget allocation for disability grant is estimated at M10,500 000.00 (Velaphe 2021). The grant comes immediately after the Disability Equity Act of 2021 passed in parliament. Apart from the disability grant, other grants are not disability and gender-specific, but the persons with disabilities benefit if they meet the criteria of vulnerability after having gone through assessment.

Though the data was not disaggregated into gender identities, studies reveal that persons with disabilities received cash from the government due to covid (United Nations Lesotho 2021). The government further gave the National Association of the Deaf Lesotho (NADL) funding amounting to M90,000.00, which was spent on sanitisers for learners with learning impairment (United Nations Lesotho 2021). LNFOD's executive director additionally pointed out that IDAL and LNLVIP also received funding from the government to provide support towards covid. LNAPD received such support indirectly through Itjareng Vocational Training Centre, an institution established by LNAPD.

c) Accessibility to the social assistance grants

Even though COVID 19 impacted the budget allocation of fiscal 2021/2022, it did not influence how the grants under the social assistance programs will be accessed. However, there seemed to be a concern surfacing during the interviews regarding the accessibility of the grants among the disability community on how the grant was going to be accessed and when they will start receiving it. One respondent said:

“We are facing a dilemma between the social grant and the disability grant because we are asked to choose whether we receive the disability grant or the social assistance grant. This makes it difficult to decide whether we are dropping the social assistance grant, especially when it is not a guarantee that by virtue of being disabled does not mean you qualify, but the severity of one's disability and one's state of vulnerability will be the determining factors” ...

According to two Social Development officers who were interviewed around the criteria that will be used to determine beneficiaries reported, the Ministry is going to make use of two disability models to determine who qualifies for the grant, namely the medical and social model. The models are going to be used to determine the severity of one's disability. Those who meet the set criteria will receive the grant every month.

Staff respondents from disability organisations indicated that the criteria set do not guarantee that every disabled person will receive the disability grant once they apply for it. They further highlighted that though the disability grant is there, there remains a question of when the community members will start receiving it

“My concern is when will our community start receiving this grant? Life is not easy during these COVID days. The disease exposes us more to vulnerability, and we need all the support we can get”

4. Conclusion

Covid 19 has not only been a health crisis but has also unfavourably impacted the economy, and the consequences have been the loss of livelihoods and disruption of education systems. Like the rest of the globe, Lesotho had developed emergency responses mechanisms to survive under conditions. Sadly, there was limited involvement of persons with disabilities in the response and recovery plan, thus resulting in them being excluded in most of the strategies. Budget allocations have significantly been affected negatively in an effort towards economic recovery because the government had cut sectors and ministries usual allocation. However, this was not the case with the social protection budget. Instead, it had expanded coverage due to COVID. There are no precise social protection and empowerment programs for women and girls with disabilities with the exception of the disability grant. With the existing social protection programs, women and girls with disabilities were impacted positively by the budget cut government had to impose.

5. Recommendations

This section of the report serves as a recommendation based on the findings. The recommendations are measured along with the disability slogan “nothing about us without us.”

- During consultations, development, and implementation of strategies to overcome the pandemic, NACOSEC or any coordinating institution should ensure that there is representation from the disability population
- With the Support of LNFOD and DPOs, NACOSEC should produce Covid 19 information in formats that are inclusive and accessible to all diverse disabilities
- Ministry of Education, in collaboration with organisations of persons with disabilities, should conduct a teaching and learning needs assessment for learners with disabilities in order to inform the procurement of teaching and learning assistive technology and teaching material which will enable learners with disabilities to continue their learning even under unfavourable and unpredicted conditions that could lead to schools closure such as the pandemic

- LNFOD should advocate for the participation of young persons with disabilities in the recovery plans to COVID in order for them to be able to provide input in regard to access to education, social protection, and information

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