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# Disability and response to COVID-19. On social protection in Sub-Saharan African countries – The case of Ethiopia

### Abstract

Across the world, it is estimated that there are more than one billion people living with disabilities and facing the intensified risk of poverty. This situation has dramatically increased since the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ethiopia is a country having more than one hundred million people; from this the number of disabled people was more than 17.6% (1.23 million people, estimating 70 million of the total population in 2011) of the total population in 2011. The Ethiopian National Plan of Action with Disabilities estimates that 95% of disabled people are living below the poverty line, and the majority of them live in the rural parts of the country where access to basic services is minimal even for the non-disabled people of the country. The main objective of this research is to assess the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on people with disability, and how social protection and other economic responses should be considered as remedies for these people in order to reduce the risk of poverty increase as a result of the pandemic. In this research, a narrative literature review was used in order to summarize the body of literature written and published on disability, poverty, and social protection. The study revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic situation is particularly challenging for people living in deep poverty, for those living with a disability where there are fewer practices and actions for social protection. There was discrimination and stigma against people with disability within the community where they live, moreover, they were beaten by the police while searching for food and some work to get cash. During the pandemic, the number of rape cases among girls with disability increased, as a result they were exposed to HIV-AIDS and other STDs, they were psychologically affected, and they faced economic problems. Besides this, ongoing war and high rate of inflation are factors affecting the people with disability. Based on the findings the researcher suggested policy recommendations on how to improve social security for disabled people in Ethiopia.

*Keywords: disability, COVID-19 pandemic, poverty, Sub-Saharan Africa, social protection, Ethiopia*

## A szubszaharai afrikai országok fogyatékossgal és a szociális védelemmel kapcsolatos, COVID-19-re adott válasza – Etiópia esete

### Absztrakt

Becslések szerint világszerte több mint egymilliárd fogyatékossgal éló ember él, akik a szegénység fokozott kockázatának vannak kitéve. Ez a helyzet drámaian súlyosbodott a COVID-19 világjárvány megjelenése óta. Etiópiában több mint százmillió ember él, ebből a fogyatékossgal éló személyek száma 2011-ben a teljes népesség több mint 17,6%-át tette ki (1,23 millió ember; a teljes népesség 70 millió főre becsülhető 2011-ben). A fogyatékossgal éló emberekkel kapcsolatos etióp nemzeti cselekvési terv becsülése szerint a fogyatékos személyek 95%-a a szegénységi küszöb alatt él. Többségük az ország vidéki részein lakik, ahol az alapvető szolgáltatásokhoz való hozzáférés még az ország nemfogyatékos lakosai számára is minimális. E kutatás fő célja, hogy felmérje a COVID-19 világjárvány hatását a fogyatékossgal éló emberekre, és azt, hogy a szociális védelem és más gazdasági válaszok mennyiben tudják csökkenteni a szegénység világjárvány következtében való növekedésének kockázatát. Ebben a kutatásban narratív irodalmi elemzést alkalmaztunk annak érdekében, hogy összefoglaljuk a fogyatékossgáról, a szegénységről és a szociális védelemről írt és közzétett szakirodalmat. A tanulmány feltárta, hogy a COVID-19 világjárvány helyzete nagy

kihívást jelent a mélyszegénységben élő emberek, különösen a fogyatékossgal élők számára, akiknek helyzetével kapcsolatban kevesebb szociális védelmi intézkedés létezik. A fogyatékossgal élők emberekkel szemben megkülönböztetés és megbélyegzés tapasztalható a közösségeikben, például rendőrségi abúzust éltek meg, amikor élelmet és munkát kerestek, hogy készpénzhez jussanak. A járvány idején megnőtt a fogyatékossgal élő lányokkal szemben elkövetett nemi erőszak eseteinek száma, aminek következtében ki voltak téve a HIV-AIDS-nek és más nemi betegségeknek. Pszichésen is megterhelésnek voltak kitéve, és gazdasági problémákkal szembesültek, emellett a folyamatban lévő háború és a magas infláció is hatással volt a fogyatékossgal élő emberekre. Az eredmények alapján a szerző szakpolitikai ajánlásokat javasol arra vonatkozóan, hogyan lehetne javítani a fogyatékossgal élő személyek szociális biztonságát Etiópiában.

*Kulcsszavak: fogyatékossgal, COVID-19 világjárvány, szegénység, szubszaharai Afrika, szociális védelem, Etiópia*

# Disability and response to COVID-19. On social protection in Sub-Saharan African countries – The case of Ethiopia

## 1. Introduction

In the world, it is estimated that more than one billion people live with disabilities and face the intensified risk of poverty. This situation has dramatically increased since the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic in China, and the dissemination across the globe, and has been creating different social, economic and political impacts on people's lives. To reduce the short-term effect and long-term impact of the heightened risk of poverty that is caused during the pandemic, there should be global intervention from government and non-government stakeholders. Even if there are various definitions provided by different authors and institutions, for this study the author tries to coin the definition given by one of the UN wings, which is the United Nations convention on the rights of the person with Disabilities (UNCPRD) as "those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (UN, 2006).

This paper focuses on research conducted on disability, poverty, and social protection in Sub-Saharan African countries. It assesses the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on people with disability, and discusses how social protection and other economic responses should be considered as remedies for these people in order to reduce the risk of poverty increase as a result of the pandemic.

## 2. Disability and poverty

People with disability need to possess the right to social protection to compensate for the cost of having a disability, giving the means to assist them to overcome the challenges that hinder them from playing their part in the community they are living in (Beales & Gelber, 2021).

There are various models and definitions provided by scholars regarding the conceptualization of disability. According to the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (CRPD) discrimination on the basis of disability has the effect of harming the recognition, and status of all human rights and fundamental freedoms in the areas of political, economic, social, cultural and civil life.

The term *persons with disability* includes those who have long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

As Sida (2015) states, many countries in the Middle East and North Africa use narrow disability definitions in their laws that often refer to specific bodily limitations, like “loss of function in more than two limbs” or “less than 10% of normal vision despite wearing glasses” (Sida, 2015, 1). These laws are not in line with the CRPD. Beside this, CRPD can advance human rights and human rights laws, it serves to guide international development and provides a legislative framework for ensuring the rights of the persons with disability.

The CRPD’s definition of disability is focusing on the list of human rights that a disabled person has to enjoy on the same basis as others whereas ICF’s definition of disability is broader than the CRPD’s.

In this study, the researcher tries to take the model that gives a comprehensive definition of disability, which is the World Health Organization’s global grouping on functioning, disability and health (ICF).

According to the ICF framework, disability is the result of a health condition that, in interaction with personal and environmental contexts, leads to dysfunction at the level of body functions/structures (impairments), the individual (activity limitations), and/or the individual within society (participation restrictions). The ICF model also includes environmental and personal contextual factors that may heighten or lessen experiences of disability.

Personal factors, such as education level and access to rehabilitation services, and environmental factors, such as policies on inclusive employment, may improve the level of participation.

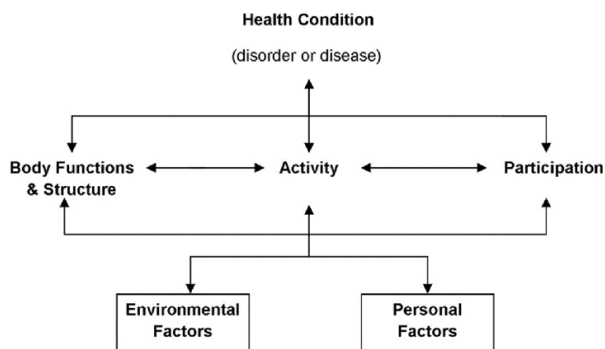


FIGURE 1. ICF FRAMEWORK (SOURCE: WHO, 2001)

### 3. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people with disability

In March 2020, COVID-19 was officially declared a pandemic by the world health organization, since the world was under pressure due to COVID-19 which had negative economic, social and political effects. The effect of this pandemic is very serious in third-world countries, mainly Sub-Saharan countries where people are living in deep poverty.

The pandemic has led to economic pressure on so many households, mainly on people with disability and their families (Banks et al., 2021).

Africa is one of the least developed continents with a larger population of people living with intellectual disabilities. Various works of literature show that having a person with a disability is more of a taboo or curse, as communities continue to hide them. Infrastructure developments are not making life easier for people living with disability (Samboma, 2021).

So many people lost their jobs and were not even able to get equal opportunities to work at home through online jobs, because the majority of disabled people in Sub-Saharan African countries engaged in the informal sectors of the economy, even though they are underemployed.

Women with disability are engaged in the informal sectors which lack job sustainability and financial security. As a result, they face challenges such as unemployment insurance, paid sick leave and career leave (Mizunoya & Mitra, 2013; Yang et al., 2020).

According to WHO (2011), families of disabled people are inclined to have fewer employed members to get income in order to cover the families' expenses, as the disabled family members tend to lose their jobs (people with disability are more likely to be unemployed), and the other members of these families often give their jobs up to offer caregiving sustenance. The experience of disabled people during the pandemic is that even if the government eased the COVID-19 restrictions, it is

not easy for such people to enter and get jobs because of different factors, such as stigma and discrimination, difficult environment, lack of jobs (Samboma, 2021).

Another sector that has been challenged by the pandemic is the health sector. During the pandemic, different health and social securities which people with disability were looking for have been unsettled as a result of COVID-19, which increases the risk of extra costs related to people with disabilities.

Disruptions to needed services can result in deteriorating health, which may lead to higher future healthcare spending, as well as immediate and long-term losses to functioning and productivity (Shakespeare et al., 2018).

Generally, people with disability have less capacity for the above listed economic and social costs, since many of them and their families live in poverty.

## 4. Methodology

The main objective of this study is to assess the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on people with disability, and how social protection and economic support actions were taken during the pandemic, with a focus on Ethiopia. The main sources of data for this study were published materials: peer-reviewed journals, articles, governmental and non-governmental reports on disability.

In this research narrative, a literature review was used in order to gather, critique, and summarize the body of literature written and published on disability, poverty, and social protection. The Published material was searched in online databases, such as Elsevier, Scopus, Google, Google scholar and other online data bases, until November 18, 2022. The snowballing technique of literature was used to find the most relevant research based on the objectives. Keywords used in the search of these studies were: Disability OR COVID-19 Pandemic OR Poverty OR Sub-Saharan Africa OR Social protection OR Ethiopia.

## 5. Disability inclusion response during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ethiopia and some other Sub-Saharan African Countries

This Region is characterized by having a high population, falling under the category of low and middle income countries, high level of economic informality, and very low level of social protection and the marginalization of people with disability. The pandemic has increased vulnerabilities of peoples living in these regions.

People's attitudes towards disability are very negative in most parts of Ethiopia, which is why many families with children having physical and visual disabilities hide their children at home. This is especially widely practiced in the rural parts of the country, as they fear people would see these children as a result of sin. The exact figure of disabled children and adolescents are not known, but it is supposed to be unduly enormous assuming that low quality healthcare causes a mass number of avoidable disability (Fill et al., 2018).

Disabled children, youth, and adolescents face stigma and discrimination from both the community and from home (their families) (Abeshu & Baissa, 2018). Research conducted in pre-pandemic Ethiopia indicates that disabled people were facing stigma and discrimination from health and social services, which was especially the case regarding adolescents with disabilities who tend not to have access to sexual and reproductive health information and care (Emirie et al., 2020). In the capital, Addis Ababa, only 20% of the young people having physical and visual disabilities had conversations with their parents regarding sexuality related health issues, and less than half of them had used contraception (Alemu & Fantahun, 2011; Kassa et al., 2016).

Due to the pandemic and the restrictions made by the Ethiopian government, people were being told to stay at home with the intention of reducing the expansion of the pandemic. As a result, cases of domestic violence against women were continuously reported. In the capital, Addis Ababa, around 308 cases of rape were reported on women with disabilities, including visual impairment.

Earlier, males did not often desire to have sexual relations with girls with disabilities due to the social stigma. However, currently, this trend has changed, which is due to the assumption that these girls are not infected with HIV, as they have had no sexual relations with anyone. So the majority of girls with disability who have migrated from rural areas and live in rented rooms are extremely vulnerable to rape, and some of them get infected with HIV-AIDS (Emirie et al., 2020).

Access to health service is very limited for the majority of the people living with disability, especially for women. For instance, due to lockdown measures, they are not allowed to go to health centers to access the Sexual Reproductive Health Service (SRHS). Beside this, this study revealed that some of them have health conditions (skin cancer, fibroids, asthma, diabetes, schizophrenia, and breast cancer) that require periodic medical attention (UNESCO, 2020).

The studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya, Mali and Ghana revealed that women with disabilities had challenges in accessing the services they were entitled to, including healthcare, due to the fact that information concerning their rights was not available, as the offices they needed to visit were not disabled-friendly. The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated these problems. In Kenya, three quarters of persons with disabilities living in informal settlements in urban areas are not able to get access to health services, due to stigma and infrastructural limitations (Emuron et al., 2020).

In Uganda, during (and after) COVID-19, there was an increase in economic, physical, psychological and social violence. There was a dramatic loss in income after the outbreak of the pandemic; as result families lost 64% of their monthly income (Emuron et al., 2020).

Experience in Ethiopia shows that people with disabilities, including visual impairment, were beaten by police during the COVID-19 restrictions and curfew while they were searching for food and money (Emuron et al., 2020).

Generally, the effects of the pandemic on disabled people are vulnerability to home violence by boys due to schools being closed, physiological effects due to stigma and discrimination from the community, and economic effects.

Table 1. below shows the governmental responses of Sub-Saharan African countries during the COVID-19 pandemic.

TABLE 1. COVID-19 PANDEMIC RELATED SOCIAL PROTECTION RESPONSE MEASURES  
(SOURCE: GENTILINI ET AL., 2022)

Countries	COVID-19 pandemic related social protection response measures
<b>Ethiopia</b>	Social assistance  Cash benefits for the poor and valuable people for 6 months. Rural PSNP (2.9 million people benefited) Social Pensions In kind transfers (food, vouchers, school meals) Public work requirements waived Utility waivers (free public transportation) Social insurance activities including: Paid sick leave Pensions, unemployment benefits and social security contributions Work time reduction
<b>Rwanda</b>	Waved Work requirements (public work, cash benefits) Health Insurance (some amendments were made to the CBHI scheme to avoid the waiting period prior to accessing medical services via CBHI)
<b>Ghana</b>	Waved Work requirements (public work, cash benefits) Provides in kind transfer (school meals) Health insurance (350,000 Ghanaian Cedis for front health workers.
<b>Kenya</b>	Due to travel restrictions they recruited workers locally or allotted work in their vicinity Cash transfer for people with severe disabilities (PwSD-CT) (The government provided a short-term ad-hoc cash transfer of 2000 Ksh per month (\$18) to 33,000 PWD)
<b>Uganda</b>	A National Special Grant for people with disabilities (PWD) was disbursed to PWD groups of five to fifteen people. 2 billion UGX were allocated in order to assist 800 PWD living across Uganda.
<b>Zimbabwe</b>	Conditional and unconditional cash transfers School meals Health insurance coverage (for front line civil servants and health sector workers)

## 6. Conclusion and recommendation

### 6.1. Conclusion

People with disabilities suffer agonizingly and are vulnerable to social inequalities, especially during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study looked at the government and administrative responses to the COVID-19 pandemic regarding the inclusion of people with disability. This study was based on data gathered from published materials reading people with disability and responses given during the time of the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the social inequality, which results in disabled people being victimized and ignored in their community. In

SSA countries, since the Pandemic occurred, people with disability are facing much more difficult challenges than before. Thus, it is difficult to tackle these challenges with current policies; that is why these new global agendas require new policies and new responses. This social protection scheme facilitates access to support basic services, such as education, financial support and non-financial support, like providing food, water and clothes.

In Ethiopia, the COVID-19 pandemic situation is particularly challenging for people living in deep poverty; for those living with a disability where there are fewer practices and actions for social protection. There was discrimination and stigma against people with disability from their community, moreover, they were beaten by the police while searching for food and some work to get cash. During the pandemic, the number of cases of rape suffered by girls with disability increased, as result the victims were exposed to HIV-AIDS and other STDs, additionally the were affected psychologically, and they faced economic problems as well. Besides this, the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia and the current inflation are the contemporary factors affecting people with disability.

## 6.2. Policy Recommendation

Improving the attitudes of people in order to reduce the stigma and discrimination against people with disability by giving training and creating awareness among people in collaboration with alders and church leaders.

Continuous consultation and discussion with people having disabilities would make them confident to express their problems, which is a prerequisite to identifying and tackling these problems.

Clear commitment and leadership from the program and policy implementers, especially from the Ethiopian Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.

Budget allocation and management supporting regular data collection and monitoring the status of people's disabilities.

The government and non-government actors should increase the adequacy of the COVID-19 economic response, since the pandemic increased the risk of people with disability experiencing poverty.

Working on contemporary problems, such as ongoing conflicts in many parts of Ethiopia and the high rate of inflation. There should be political commitment and national dialogue in order to solve the ongoing conflicts and use different fiscal policies to mitigate the effects of the inflation.

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