
Girls' Education Challenge

Disability and COVID-19

Guidance note for projects

27/04/20

Information and recommendations

Key messages

- COVID-19 raises the potential for an increase in stigma, discrimination and rights violations against girls with disabilities¹ in the countries in which the GEC operates – remember that existing barriers will still be there
- Girls with disabilities face high safeguarding risks (e.g. gender-based violence (GBV), isolation, lack of information and exploitation)
- ‘One size fits all’ approaches to learning in this emergency situation are unlikely to reach girls with disabilities – they will need more targeted assistance
- It is really important to maintain connections with families/households to make re-entry into education more likely.

General information

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is having a profound impact on education and schooling across the world. As of 13 April 2020, 192 countries have implemented school closure programmes affecting 91.4% of the global student population. 1.57 billion learners are now out of school ([UNESCO](#)).

Continuous updates on the health situation are available from the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#). Key messaging from the WHO currently advise that:

- Adults and children with disability may be at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 because of:
 - barriers to implementing basic hygiene measures, such as handwashing (e.g. handbasins or sinks may be physically inaccessible, or a person may have physical difficulty rubbing their hands together thoroughly)
 - difficulty in enacting social distancing because of additional support needs
 - the need to touch things to obtain information from the environment or for physical support
 - barriers to accessing public health information.

Anecdotal evidence from the disability movement in the global south suggests that disabled people in general are already significantly concerned about what impact COVID-19 will have on their lives. This is due to the fact that stigma and discrimination are already high in many countries in which the GEC operates, access to healthcare for disabled people is poor, and access to public information can be limited.

Public health campaigns that are not universally accessible and inclusive of the experiences of disabled people will put lives at risk. For example, learning from Humanity & Inclusion’s (HI) work in Sierra Leone during the Ebola crisis found that national prevention messages distributed in pamphlets and via radio were not always accessible. Messaging also failed to

¹ For further information regarding girls with disabilities and safeguarding. Please see the FM’s guidance note on safeguarding and COVID-19: https://dfid-gec-api.s3.amazonaws.com/production/assets/34/Safeguarding_and_COVID-19_Partner_Guidance_April_2020.pdf

address the challenges some people with disabilities face in following government guidelines such as not touching others, if they relied significantly on carers. Anecdotal evidence suggested that members of the blind community died before messaging could be made accessible to them. In response, HI worked with local disabled people's organisations (DPOs) to develop appropriate messages and disseminate these through community-based rehabilitation volunteers (CBRV), including delivering audio and Braille prevention guidelines to people with visual impairments.

It is important to bear these issues in mind when considering how COVID-19 might impact on the health of beneficiaries with disabilities.

What we can say from the evidence currently available

The key thing to be aware of at this stage is that we are working from a very limited evidence base. Analysis from previous health emergencies involving an education component (such as Ebola or the HIV pandemic) rarely considers the impact on children with disabilities. It is still rare to find disability disaggregated data in humanitarian and development sector reporting. Where projects have been collecting and collating disability disaggregated education data, they will be in a reasonably strong position to be able to better understand the impact of school closures and the move to distance learning on disabled girls. But we need to ensure we are paying attention to girls with disabilities, both in respect to accessing new planned interventions and in how those interventions are being monitored. **It is really important, therefore, that where possible, programmes continue to look for ways to disaggregate information by disability status and to consider the experiences and needs of disabled girls as new plans are implemented.**

Considering that gaps in primary completion rates between children with and without disabilities have been growing in recent years (Male and Wodon, 2017²), there is a risk that school closures for COVID-19 may **exacerbate existing inequalities**.

Evidence from Sierra Leone during the Ebola health crisis suggests that additional efforts may be required to support girls with disabilities back into education after school closures end. According to HI, parents of children with disabilities had been reluctant to send them back to school once the state of emergency was lifted, undoing significant progress to overcome negative attitudes to education for children with disabilities. In response, HI launched a very targeted back-to-school campaign including distributing in-kind resources such as notebooks and pencils.

Information from a recent DFID-commissioned paper (Meaney-Davis et al 2020³) suggests that beyond the obvious educational disruption created by school closures there may also be a series of associated risks including reduced access to:

- vital food programmes
- personal assistance, assistive technology and medications/treatments
- networks of social and emotional support.

² Male, C. and Wodon, Q. (2017). 'Disability gaps in educational attainment and literacy'. *The World Bank*. Available at: documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/396291511988894028/pdf/121762-replacement-PUBLIC-WorldBank-GapsInEdAttainmentLiteracy-Brief-v6.pdf

³ Meaney-Davis, J., Lee, H. and N. Corby. (2020) *The impacts of COVID-19 on people with disabilities* (No. 35). London, UK: Disability Inclusion Helpdesk.

There is some concern that girls with disabilities might be at greater risk from **child protection issues** without the safety net of school-based programmes (Humanity & Inclusion, 2020⁴). The BOND Disability and Development Group noted in a recent briefing paper that girls may be especially vulnerable to an increased risk of stigma, discrimination, neglect, violence and abuse. There is also the potential for sharp increases in human rights violations to affect people with disabilities across the world, for example, in Kenya, the media has reported that people with albinism are experiencing increased discrimination and abuse during the pandemic with people falsely associating people with albinism with COVID-19 (Chacha, 2020⁵).

Generalised responses to learning will likely exclude many disabled girls for a variety of reasons (not all linked to impairments). Lessons via radio broadcast for example will not be accessible to deaf girls and may also be problematic for those with cognitive, visual and behavioural difficulties who are not supervised or supported. Written resource packs may also be difficult to access for these girls.

Recommendations

Based on a series of recommendations from BOND DDG, UNICEF and HI, we would recommend the following:

- **Plan for inclusion.** Ensure that any rapid assessments explicitly consider the different needs of, and the situation for, girls with disabilities. If girls with disabilities are already included in your programmes you should ensure your responses can accommodate their needs. If they are not included, consider what steps you might need to take to change this and how you might ensure that your programmes are inclusive during this time.
 - It is important to ensure that disabled girls stay connected to the project and can resume structured learning once it is safe to do so. Keeping their families/households engaged is going to be really important and can be done through positive messaging. Now more than ever, disabled girls need to be valued.
- **Ensure the participation of people with disabilities.** Consult with people with disabilities and their representative organisations in the countries and communities where you work to ensure your response is responsive to, and inclusive of, their experiences. Ensure that views are representative of a diversity of people with disabilities. Ask how you can best safeguard and work with them during this time. Where this is not possible given the current situation, consider partnering with organisations who already have links and provide the right information and insights.
 - At the very least, projects can get involved in ensuring public information / messaging around COVID-19 is accessible to young people with disabilities. Assist local disability actors involved in awareness raising to ensure their messages are reaching GEC beneficiary households.

⁴ Humanity & Inclusion - Inclusive Education sector guiding note on COVID-19 (March 2020)

⁵ Chacha, J. (2020). 'Skin deep discrimination over COVID-19' *YouTube*, 22 March 2020.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-SFw2yxF1k&feature=youtu.be>

- **Build in accessibility from the outset.** Ensure any resources you create are accessible to girls with a broad range of impairments and accessibility needs. For example, consider producing materials in formats such as Easy Read, Braille and large print, and make sure any videos have captions or sign interpretation. If you are using resources developed by others, consider whether you can adapt them to be more accessible.
- **Monitor and collect data.** Build a disability inclusion perspective into any monitoring, research or data collection that you are doing from the very beginning. Ensure that data is disaggregated by disability, using Washington Group questions (the short set would be sufficient at this time). All projects can play a key role in making sure future responses are more inclusive and increase understanding of the impact of crises such as this on girls with disabilities.

Useful resources

For projects in Kenya and Rwanda – [eKitabu](#) has been busy producing accessible digital books for early grade readers. These are available with Kenya sign language (KSL) and Rwanda sign language (RSL). In Kenya, they have launched a series of 30-minute TV broadcasts aimed at early grade readers for those using KSL. They are happy to be [contacted](#) for more information.

UNESCO have established a [COVID-19 Educational Disruption and Response](#) group which is collecting and collating useful information on response plans as well as documenting the impact. They have a good collection of information linked to [distance learning solutions](#). However, so far there is nothing here specifically linked to inclusive education or education for children with disabilities.

The [Inter-Agency network for Education in Emergencies](#) (INEE) is also collecting and posting useful information around education responses in general with some useful resources. It does have a small section related to [inclusion](#) which carries some general guidance provided by agencies and networks such as HI, UNICEF and the International Disability Alliance. Much of this is focused on advocacy, ensuring plans are inclusive of the educational needs of disabled children and young people.

Source is a useful website to go to for any information and resources linked to disability inclusive development. They now have a specific area dedicated to [COVID-19 information](#).

For a disability perspective on COVID-19 visit the website of the [International Disability Alliance](#) which is also posting useful disability-focused information.

The GEC disability advisors, Nick Corby and Lorraine Wapling are working to collate as much information as possible on the impacts of COVID-19 on disabled populations and any emerging examples of where good practice has been implemented. We are happy to receive any examples that you think might be useful to share.

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