



Whither the disabled in the post-COVID context? Making a Case for Alternative Livelihood Development

September 19, 2020

Centre For Advocacy And Research (CFAR)
Bhubaneswar

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Background

While the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the entire world immeasurably, the most affected are the poor and marginalized communities who have had to struggle to meet their basic needs. They work predominantly in the unorganized sectors where employment is dependent on an erratic market situation. Within the community, the most adversely affected are persons with disabilities (PwDs) who struggle to make ends meet even in normal circumstances but are finding it impossible today to even sustain those inadequate earnings and take care of their families.

The challenges faced by PwDs are many – from averting contact to stay safe during the pandemic to earning a living for the family. Much of the communication on staying safe during the pandemic has not factored in the inability of people who are immobile or have a mental illness and cannot, therefore, follow instructions related to social distancing, self-isolation and other recommended measures. This is because PwDs often rely on the support of others to eat, dress, bathe and to carry out much of their daily activities.

CFAR in its advocacy and communication strategy has played a convening role in getting community representatives and leaders, policy-makers, civil society organizations and other stakeholders on platforms where issues are discussed and solutions are suggested and offered. The webinar - **Whither the Disabled in the post-COVID context: Making a Case for Alternative Livelihood Development** - was one of a series of such interactions. CFAR collaborated with Swabhiman, a leading community-based organization working for persons with disabilities. Swabhiman is supported by Water for Women Fund, Australian Government. The webinar brought together experts and community representatives to deliberate on the struggle of persons with disabilities, particularly during the time of the pandemic, and to develop a collective perspective on what more can be done to provide assistance to enable them to overcome their challenges. It was attended by 182 participants from Odisha and other parts of India.

Panelists

Dr. Sruti Mohapatra, CEO, Swabhiman, Bhubaneswar

Shri Jagdananda, Founder, Centre for Youth and Social Development, Bhubaneswar

Mr. R. K Sharma, Assistant Director NCSCDA, Bhubaneswar

Mr. Umi Daniel, Regional Director, Aid at Action, Bhubaneswar

Mr. Ghasiram Panda, Programme Manager, ActionAid, Bhubaneswar

Mr. Prakash Kumar Rath, CEO, Open Learning System

Dr. Birupakhya Dixit India Coordinator, Practical Action, Bhubaneswar

Mr. Niranjana Behera, President of Odisha Vikalang Manch (OVM)

Mr. Sannyashai Kumar Behera (OAS-1) SSEPD Department, Govt. of Odisha

Dr. Manjulata Panda, Lecturer, Political Science, Hirakud Degree College Sambalpur, Odisha

At the start of the webinar, a short documentary film, prepared by CFAR on persons with disabilities, was shown. The video helped draw the attention of the panelists and the participants to the difficulties faced by PwDs and helped set the context for the discussion.

Key points

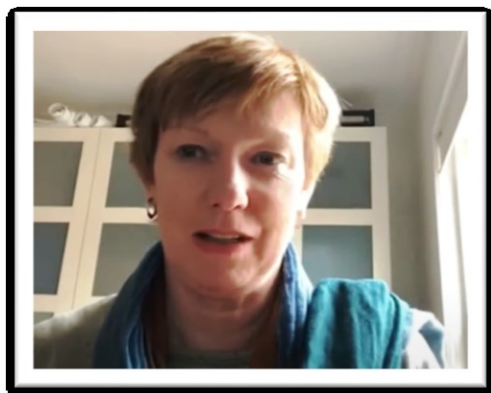
Akhila Sivadas, Executive Director, CFAR



“Concerns of disability that must be led and shaped by disability leaders, activists and advocates”

While explaining the main objective of the webinar, Ms. Akhila Sivadas, Executive Director, CFAR, underlined the concerns of the community that must be led and whose discourse shaped by disability leaders, activists and advocates. She mentioned the community champion Swagat Jhankar Malik, a PwD and an active advocate for the group, understood the problems of disabled persons and helped bring their concerns to the relevant platforms. She added that the webinar was an attempt to bring together activists working on disability issues and policy-makers and organizations committed to advancing the rights of PwDs and find the way forward.

Alison Baker, Fund Manager, Water for Women Fund



“Holistic, inclusive approach for sustainable WASH is mandatory”

Alison Baker, Fund Manager, Water for Women Fund, emphasized the commitment of the Australian Government towards disability-inclusive development by creating opportunities for persons with disabilities to have productive lives and livelihoods. It will be possible to achieve this by changing our perspectives and perceptions of people with disabilities and see them as active and equal members of our community who have important contributions to make. She also emphasized that Water for Women looked beyond WASH when seen in the context of marginalized communities, and believed in holistic approach for sustainable solutions. She congratulated CFAR for working closely with the community and addressing the issues beyond the area of WASH.

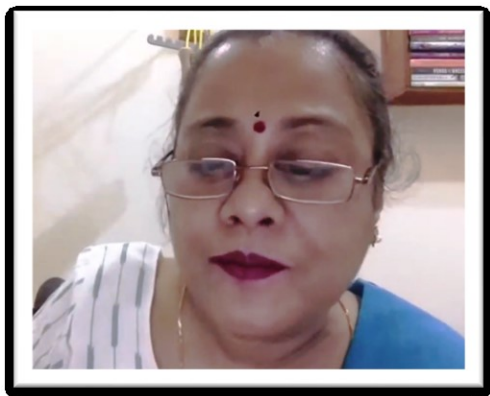
Swagat Jhankar Mallick, CFAR



“The pandemic has pushed us further to a situation of hopelessness and despair”

Swagat Jhankar Mallick from CFAR and an advocate for the rights of PwDs, shared his findings on the experiences of working on the ground during the pandemic. He stated that while persons with disabilities (referring to the persons in the film) with all their determinations were struggling to earn a living, the pandemic had completely disrupted their small businesses and occupations, leaving them in a state of despair. His observation was that no one wanted to support disabled persons running small businesses due of the fear of contracting the infection. The disabled were not only burdened by the lockdown and the pandemic but were also feeling stigmatized and discriminated against. Their voices needed to be heard, and extra effort was needed as they lacked the physical capabilities of their able-bodied counterparts.

Dr. Sruti Mohapatra, Chief Executive Officer, Swabhiman



“Persons with disability are further excluded during the pandemic due to their inaccessibility to the digital world”

“High aspirations and ambitions in life would eventually help persons with disabilities to accomplish and make them real.”

Dr. Sruti Mohapatra, Chief Executive Officer, Swabhiman, expressed concern over the isolation and exclusion of persons with disability during the pandemic. She said in these difficult times when everyone was adapting to digital systems, persons with disability were further excluded due to their inaccessibility to the digital world. Earlier, while there had been strong advocacy on making websites accessible to persons with disabilities, the sudden transition of the education and governance systems and the corporate working culture had increased the challenges for persons with disabilities. She elaborated about the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016.

Dr Mohapatra also highlighted the Sustainable Development Goal 8, which promotes sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment by allowing persons with disabilities to fully access the job market and providing decent work for all. She also highlighted that the youth and children need to have high aspirations and ambitions in life that would eventually help them accomplish their dreams.

Mr. R. K Sharma, Assistant Director, NCSCDA, Bhubaneswar



“Enhancing motivation, building capacity, improving ability to be independent and have life skills, and support in networking and building strategic partnerships will help persons with disabilities secure their livelihood and lead a life of dignity”

Mr. Sharma said that the Government of India had devised several ambitious programs such as the National Skill Qualification Framework, 2013 (NSQF), Skill Development Initiative (SDI), Skill India Mission and Apprenticeship Training

scheme, etc. All these schemes and programmes substantially focused on skill development of persons with disabilities, and were legally backed by the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD), 2016. Stakeholders needed to work more closely to ensure that the benefits reached PwDs. He elaborated about the need for skill development for PwDs and shared his perspective on their inclusion through RPWD 2016, New Education Policy 2020, Skill India, NSQF, 2013, Modular Employable Skill (MES), SDI, Skill in Odisha/OSDA, Project Implementation Agencies (PIAs) and Social Security & Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Department (SSEPD)

Mr. Sharma also said that there were specific trades for PwDs before COVID-19 such as mushroom farming, operating kitchen gardens, making bio-fertilizers, gardening, dairy farming and bee-keeping. In the post-COVID scenario, new trades had been introduced which included home nursing, handlooms, music and dance.

He said that with more awareness and sensitization within the PwD community on the various schemes available to them, they could avail more opportunities. He added, "This includes enhancing motivation, building capacity, improving ability to be independent and have life skills, enhance their entrepreneurial skills and support in networking and building strategic partnerships." Stakeholders needed to work more closely, he advised.

Mr. Umi Daniel, Regional Director Aid at Action, Bhubaneswar



"Create social capital by disseminating information for providing social security to the most vulnerable and marginalized population."

Mr. Daniel said that during the pandemic, when the entire country had been talking about migrants returning to their hometowns, there had been no mention of the marginalized communities, the "invisible section" which included single women, the elderly, children and persons with disabilities. After the declaration of lockdown, while abled-bodied persons could even walk down to their hometowns, no one gave a thought about the difficulties of disabled migrants.

He said that while MNREGA, the flagship programme for wage employment, had different categories of work for PwDs, but most of the time the community – especially in rural areas – were not aware of these and missed the opportunities. "We should try to create social capital by disseminating information, providing social security to the most vulnerable and marginalized populations," he said.

Mr. Ghasiram Panda, Programme Manager, ActionAid, Bhubaneswar



“Intersectionality within the category of disability has to be taken into consideration”

Mr. Panda said there was intersectionality within the category of disability, such as *dalits*, single women, the elderly, and transgender persons who had disability. These categories further lived with even more distress and were left with no option other than begging, which had been affected due to the pandemic. But since there were various types of disability, and different people had particular needs and limitations which affected their ability to work, all planning should be based on individual assessment to achieve transformative change. He stressed that the representation of disable persons in the formal sector was meagre, which reflected the prevalent mindset vis-a-vis disability. Even during the pandemic when employees had been laid off in the formal sector, the first ones to lose their jobs were persons with disability. There was an urgent need to provide social security to them, he said.

Additionally, he also emphasized laying down of standard operating procedures by the Social Security and Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Department (SSEPD) for integration of persons with disability in MNREGS, skill development, etc., and that this needed to be monitored by the Disability Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities.

Dr. Birupakhya Dixit India Coordinator, Practical Action, Bhubaneswar



“Good intentions are never enough as they have to be matched with conscious action-based planning.”

Birupakhya Dixit of Practical Action urged that there had to be attitudinal change of service-providers and other relevant stakeholders. The government needed to take definite steps to mainstream disabled persons through community-based inclusive development programmes, including technical training and accessible education opportunities, especially for the youth who often dropped out of educational institutions. He stressed the fact that “good intentions are never enough as they have to be matched with conscious action- based planning.”

Sanyasi Kumar Behera, SSEPD Department, Government of Odisha,



“Collaboration between the government, INGOs, civil society organizations for formulating and implementing appropriate livelihood interventions for persons with disabilities is an urgent need.”

Mr. Behera said that the amount of risk and vulnerability of PWD households was quite high during the COVID-19 pandemic. They suffered from extreme poverty and acute malnutrition, being from the lowest economic strata. No baseline survey had been conducted in the country to know their exact financial, social, educational and health status. As per Census 2011, there were 1.68 crore PwDs in India. In the current pandemic situation, all the livelihood schemes of the government should be revisited and systematized for proper inclusion of PWDs. This would require rapid needs assessment, development of databases, providing handholding support, ensuring need-based and micro-level livelihoods intervention with appropriate implementation strategy, as well as a close and robust monitoring mechanism. Provision of essential mobility tools and other assistive technology to facilitate the activities of daily living was very essential. The government should come up with an action plan for vulnerability mapping of PWDs and respond to their acute poverty. He added that a special package could be made available to take care of the livelihood activities of PWDs who were at risk within the reduced physical spaces during the pandemic. “There needs to be collaboration between the government, international NGOs and civil society organizations in formulating and implementing appropriate livelihood interventions for PwDs.

Hemant Kumar, Vice President, Odisha Vikalang Manch



“Despite changes in policy, not much has changed on the ground”

Hemant Kumar from Odisha Vikalang Manch lamented, “Despite various levels of policy directives for supporting disabled persons, not much has changed for them on the ground, hence implementation is the key factor which needs to be addressed.”

After a lot of struggle, when persons with disabilities had been able to earn their livelihoods through small enterprises, the

pandemic had again pulled them down. He said there was no support from the government to help them cope with the loss during these difficult times. Some easy and feasible options had to be thought of for PwDs, such as plantation in office premises, temples and other public properties.

Shri Jagdananda, Founder, CYSD, Bhubaneswar



“Denial of right to live with dignity is a human rights violation.”

In his valedictory address, Shri Jagdananda from the Centre for Youth and Social Development underlined the basic principle of inclusion of persons with disabilities. “Denial of the right to live with dignity is a human rights violation,” he said. He further stated that, to achieve this inclusion, citizens, government and society had to come together

on a common platform and mount a coordinated advocacy effort to influence policy-makers at the highest level.

Dr. Manjulata Panda, Lecturer, Hiraakud Degree College Sambalpur, Odisha.



“Adopt a policy of positive discrimination, develop inclusive policies and stress on fulfilling the rights of persons with disabilities”

Dr Manjulata Panda stated that “many differently-abled persons are self-employed and the government should adopt a policy of positive discrimination, develop inclusive policies and stress on fulfilling the rights of persons with disabilities.” She further elaborated the key recommendations.

Some of the key recommendations suggested by Dr Panda, and which also emerged from the discussions, were:

- Budgets need to be prepared taking into consideration the statistics on the number of PwDs for their employment.
- Special relief package for PwDs to face this pandemic situation with timely disbursement of loans for the disabled.
- Inclusion in urban wage employment initiative and MNREGA through proper identification of jobs and by setting proper amount of daily wages.
- Special focus on those pursuing their own small business enterprises and ensuring linkage of products made by PwDs in present market structure for sale of their products.
- Corporate jobs have to strictly adhere to the protocol of recruitment of the persons with disabilities and ensure capacity-building of youth with disabilities through pre-recruitment and post-recruitment training.
- Employers need to be sensitized about the capabilities of PwDs and efforts need to be made to provide PwDs work from home facilities to continue their employment.
- Project-implementing agencies should have proper infrastructure for training of PwDs.
- Building capacity with a proper training module to be prepared for the skill development of PwDs.
- Provision of caregiver and assistance allowance and unemployment allowance need to be implemented properly.
- Effective access to water, sanitation and hygiene and inclusion in housing schemes.
- Equal opportunity policy needs to be formulated and implemented in all government and private establishments.
- It needs to be ensured that all PwDs have disability certificates with them, which will entitle them to avail all the schemes designed for them.
- Proper inclusion of persons with disabilities in all poverty alleviation schemes.
- Overall compassionate behavior and empathy needs to be shown for the persons with disability.