



Impact of COVID-19 on Persons with Disabilities in Jordan

Policy Brief

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Delivering a transformational step change in education provision for children with disabilities in conflict-affected states

Introduction

In Jordan, the critical pressures caused by the outbreak of Covid-19, have increased the strain on the country's social, economic, institutional, and natural resources and reduced access to public utilities, schooling, health services, and employment opportunities placing Jordan in a fragile situation. In March 2021 GCRF Network+ 'Disability under siege' Research Network was commissioned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) to conduct case studies in Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine to investigate the impact of Covid-19 on persons with disabilities. The research had the following aims:

- Inform the UNPRPD analytical framework to support a multi-sectoral response to increased social, educational, economic, and health challenges arising from the pandemic
- Identify future and emerging research priorities and gaps
- Develop resilience to future challenges – at individual, community, national and global levels Informing future priorities for research collaboration between researchers and the UNPRPD

Research Questions and Methodology

1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected access to services, including health, education, and community services for persons with disabilities?
2. What are the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on persons with disabilities by age, gender, and types of disability across the sectors of health, education, and economic status (including physical and mental health status)?

Methodology

A desk review was undertaken of 59 available research studies, reports, policies, procedures, notes, and rapid analysis reports conducted by the governmental authorities such as the ministry of public health, international NGOs, and UN agencies such as UNICEF, UNHCR, international disability organizations such as IDA and OCHA.

We reviewed social media content to analyze to what extent the COVID-19 awareness campaigns and media information represented people with disabilities in their media content and the accessibility level for the content particularly for people with visual, hearing, and cognitive impairments and the elderly.

Eighteen personal (virtual) interviews were conducted with parents of students with disabilities under 18 years old, a student with disabilities above 18 years old, local disability organizations, and stakeholders from the educational and healthcare services

Limitations

Several limitations restricted researchers from conducting a full evaluation of the impact of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities in Jordan. These limitations included the inability of principal investigators based in Lebanon to travel to Jordan because of Covid restrictions and instead rely on local research assistants. Poor electrical supply and internet connections hindered the ability to reach a representative sample and lockdowns and high levels of workload made it challenging to engage with key stakeholders and policymakers engaged in Covid responses.

Findings

The outcome findings of interviews conducted for this study revealed that most people's lives and daily activities were affected by Covid-19 lockdown restrictions, including people with disabilities who faced

barriers before the pandemic; however, these barriers were aggravated during the Covid-19. Five main themes are identified at policy and decision level and the healthcare, and academic services levels.

Lack of Inclusive National Preparedness and Response Plan

In February 2020, Jordan's National Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19 was set out and ready to be used as a practical guide for national authorities and health sector partners in fulfilling gaps, however, the plan overlooked responding to people with disabilities needs.

Lack of access to routine healthcare services

Covid-19 lockdown restrictions and the risk of contracting COVID-19 in healthcare centers and hospitals meant people with disabilities were limited in their ability to access health services for routine medical checkups. Furthermore, pressure on health services as a result of Covid disrupted access to routine medical prescriptions for people with disabilities and chronic illnesses. Access to specialized disability services such as physiotherapy and speech therapy was a significant challenge for those living outside of Amman as most of these services were mostly provided in the capital.

Absence of accessible Covid-19 awareness campaigns and information

Official Covid-19 awareness campaigns and Covid-19 medical information were found to be out of reach and inaccessible for people with disabilities. Findings revealed that online platform for registering for vaccination was inaccessible for people with visual and hearing impairments, and those who have learning difficulties and little literacy. To fill that gap, the Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities played a vital role in providing accessible information and guidance on coping with Covid during the pandemic and had to coordinate with the Ministry of Health to include disability information into the vaccine registration platform. The Ministry of Health responded positively to adapt the vaccination registration platform to target and support people with disabilities after initially low engagement.

Demand on providing psycho-social and mental health support for PWDs

The needs of parents and carers of people with disability were often overlooked by Covid policies and plans. Disability-led organisations believed lack of mental health support for parents led to increased stress and tension within families that resulted in poor care and abuse. With the absence of governmental psycho-social and mental health support for people with disabilities, disability-led organisations had to provide psycho-social and mental health support, including services such as a hotline for families. But most organisations reported being unable to support all the requests due to the volume of demand and the availability of trained personnel.

Lack of preparedness for inclusive education

A key finding from interviews with students with disabilities, parents, and education providers revealed that there is a lack of preparedness, inability to facilitate face-to-face education, and insufficient teacher training to support students with disabilities in all the Jordanian districts. The lack of governmental inclusive educational strategy has contributed to excluding students with disabilities from gaining access to education during the Covid-19 pandemic. While the Ministry of Education in Jordan allocated a budget for free tablet distribution to support remote learning, there were gaps in the rollout of devices for those living outside of the capital Amman.

The effectiveness and accessibility of IT technology and remote learning modalities varied dependent upon the disability. Whilst the Ministry of Education provided an online educational platform "Darsak",

many students with disabilities including students with hearing impairments could not access the educational information as they were inaccessible for their needs. Moreover, online learning also required access to the internet which created a cost barrier for low-income families. Respondents noted that while Darsak had many resources most schools did not provide additional live online lessons for their students, neither they did follow up with the students' academic progress.

On the other hand, schools that provided inclusive education were required to close during the May 2020 lockdowns, at the same time schools that only provided special education support for persons with disabilities were able to remain open. While the situation was incredibly difficult and this inconsistent approach reinforced the medical model perception of disability and undermined the inclusive approaches some schools had provided.

Recommendations

Proactive procedures must be taken in Jordan to incorporate inclusive policy at the healthcare, and academic practices services level that addresses minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged children, teenagers, elderly, migrants, and refugees, in addition to people with disabilities. Adopting a holistic inclusive approach and consulting and involving parents of students with disabilities, and people with disabilities in emergency policies, plans, and decisions made during the pandemic is recommended.

The first recommendation includes implementing existing plans "The Jordanian Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities No. 20 for the Year 2017" so that it is considered during all Covid response planning.

Another recommendation involves disruption to regular health services such as access to prescriptions for people with disability to be accounted for in response planning, in addition to allocating mobile clinics to improve accessibility to vaccinations. Moreover, support for parents and carers of people with disabilities should be included in any support packages arising from Covid responses.

The third recommendation lies in making all the written and visual information and awareness-raising campaigns accessible from the outset. Accordingly, accessibility to critical public health tools such as vaccination platforms must be integrated at the design stage. This includes online education resources that should be made accessible and tailored and provisions made for different types of disability.

The final recommendation is the feasibility study to consider if it is possible to promote inclusive education in public schools (not just private) would support with long term aims.

Conclusion

We found that while access to health, education, and information services during Covid was initially lacking for people with disabilities, efforts to address and remove those barriers were identified, and efforts to remedy them were undertaken. Research participants identified the key role the Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities played in advocating for vaccination prioritization and access, developing approaches to support learning, and in several cases volunteering to make information accessible. With the switch to remote learning, we saw real challenges with accessibility to online resources and a lack of face-to-face support which created real barriers to education for some. Efforts were made to address these challenges but improved access to assistive devices, the internet, and accessible curricula must be considered for any future lockdowns. We found that organisations providing services for people with disability also innovated and adapted services to respond to increasing needs for support. However, both organisations and respondents acknowledged the lack of availability of services

outside of Amman, and even then, a scarcity of appropriately trained personnel meant that access to essential services and support was insufficient.

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