Leonard Cheshire Policy Briefing

Access to information on Covid-19 for persons with disabilities

This briefing aims to outline what Leonard Cheshire considers to be the most urgent challenges regarding access to information that persons with disabilities will face in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and what can be done to ensure that persons with disabilities are not left further behind as a result of this global crisis, but are properly included in policy and programmatic responses to Covid-19.

a) State of play

Most governments are prioritizing projects to ensure everyone accesses information to protect themselves and play their part in slowing down the spread of the virus. However, barriers to accessing information puts persons with disabilities at a higher risk of contracting Covid-19.

It is essential that information about how to stop the spread of the virus, as well as information about emergency measures being put in place by national governments in response to the pandemic, is made available in accessible formats. This includes, for example, closed captioning, sign language interpretation, large print, high contrast print, and accessible digital media.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, Catalina Devandas, recently warned that little has been done to provide persons with disabilities with the guidance and support needed to protect them during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, even though many of them are part of the high-risk group.

b) Challenges

Without face to face contact, a lot of the information about the virus will be shared online. For instance, UNICEF is actively taking steps to provide accurate information about the virus by working with online partners like Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and TikTok to make sure that accurate advice is available, as well as taking steps to inform the public when inaccurate information emerges. UNICEF also worked with WHO to develop online training modules for health workers, and FAQs and guidance for pregnant women and children.

Yet, this represents a challenge as the information presented online is not always accessible to persons with disabilities. In addition, many people in low and middle-income countries have limited access to these technologies, and those with disabilities are less likely than their non-disabled peers to have access to online services. Therefore, many persons with disabilities continue to rely on low-tech means of communication.
c) **What needs to be done?**

- All Covid-19 information and prevention initiatives need to be inclusive, and Governments have a responsibility to ensure the information reaches everyone, whether they have access to the internet or not. Countries need to increase access to electronic devices and new technologies to all, especially to persons with disabilities.

- Government entities have a responsibility to provide communication that is equally effective to all audiences at all times, and reaches everyone, and all new platforms and funding initiatives supporting the dissemination of information on the virus must be accessible to all, including to persons with disabilities.

d) **Opportunities**

In a pandemic, the health of all society is determined by the health of the most marginalised. Through producing accessible documents and communications about Covid-19, **there is an opportunity to ensure that vital public health messages reach everyone, therefore strengthening public health.** As organisations become aware of how to produce accessible communications, this awareness and skill will remain for future crises.

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