

The 2030 Agenda and Persons with Disabilities

Lessons to be learned from the coronavirus crisis for the implementation of sustainable development

Policy paper

With the coronavirus pandemic, the world faces unexpected challenges. Worldwide, societies are required to orient themselves in a “new normal” and to close gaps in their coping strategies as soon as those gaps tear open. Starting as a health risk, this development has rapidly had consequences for other spheres and puts education systems, labour markets and, last but not least, social communities to the test. Current events highlight the fact that, in crises, silo mentality is out of place and all people are vulnerable. What is more, they also show that the financial, human, or infrastructural resources available to states for responding to such a threat differ greatly. Particularly the countries of the Global South can rarely rely on resilient state systems. There are concerns that inequalities existing within and between countries will manifest through the pandemic and that already discriminated groups will be disproportionately affected by the crisis. It is true that the virus does not discriminate but its impacts do. The coronavirus crisis is on the brink of turning into a global development crisis.

In adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development back in 2015, the international community has agreed on a comprehensive framework with the intention of shaping global development under consideration of ecological, economic and social criteria. Admittedly, the Agenda 2030 could not anticipate the coronavirus crisis but it provided many answers, also to future challenges. Had its principles and targets been implemented more consequently since its adoption, the pandemic would have had less dramatic consequences for many structurally disadvantaged people in the present. Instead, we are now facing setbacks in achieving the hard-earned development goals, and those who are already the furthest behind are particularly affected.

This applies, in particular, also to one of the most structurally disadvantaged minorities worldwide: persons with disabilities. There are altogether about one billion of people with disabilities, 80 percent of whom live in countries of the Global South. During and after the coronavirus crisis, politics must prioritise their concerns and ensure that the development of their conditions catches up so that nobody will be left behind. Therefore, it is important to pose a question from their point of view: what is the sustainable way out of the crisis shown by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which may also be taken by persons with disabilities to give societies enhanced, all-round resilience?

This policy paper will address this issue with the help of five theses and it will outline the lessons to be learned from the coronavirus crisis for the implementation of the Agenda 2030.

1. In the crisis, lack of access to health services and of measures to combat diseases put especially persons in vulnerable situations at risk.

The least developed countries bear the main brunt of infectious diseases like HIV, malaria and neglected tropical diseases associated with poverty like, for example, trachoma, dengue fever, or bilharzia. This places a heavy burden on already weak health systems which, not only in times of crisis, are strained to their limits. In addition, many of the mentioned diseases lead to lifelong handicaps and

may become lethal. Furthermore, they may increase susceptibility to infection with the coronavirus. This is one of the reasons why the proportion of persons with disabilities in the overall population is considerably higher in poorer countries than in industrial nations. However, through comprehensive healthcare, which is affordable, fully accessible and also reaches vulnerable population groups this could be prevented. These reasons alone should justify investing in inclusive health systems now and not only when a pandemic threatens the Global North. Only if everyone’s health is taken into account across sectors and disciplines, global health can be strengthened.

In the current coronavirus crisis, about 800 million people with disabilities in the Global South are acutely affected by lack of access to healthcare services at four levels: firstly, due to external circumstances they are often unable to maintain hygiene standards which could protect them from an infection. For instance, they lack accessible sanitary facilities but they increasingly need contact to persons outside their households (for care and rehabilitation services and other assistance). Secondly, one must assume that more than average they will not receive treatment if they have been infected with SARS-CoV-2, because in poorer countries persons with disabilities are three times less likely to have access to health services than the overall population.¹ Thirdly, there is a high probability that, due to the overburdened health systems, general medical or rehabilitative treatment will not be provided any longer. And, fourthly, they are at risk that in case of triage decisions their disabilities will be associated with frailty which, accordingly, may lead to the deprioritisation of their further medical treatment. It must be guaranteed that despite the focus on fighting the coronavirus the achievements of recent years are not jeopardised but the necessary health programmes can be continued in an optimised way.

Against this background, the pursuit of the following Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda should be prioritised with regard to people with disabilities in the Global South now more than ever:



SDG 3.3 By 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, water-borne diseases and other communicable diseases.

SDG 3.8 Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all.

SDG 3.b Support the research and development of vaccines and medicines for the communicable and non-communicable diseases that primarily affect developing countries, provide access to affordable essential medicines and vaccines, (...) and, in particular, provide access to medicines for all.



SDG 6.2 By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations.

¹ [UN Flagship Report on Disability and Sustainable Development Goals](#) (2018)

2. In the current crisis, deficiencies in welfare systems and disaster prevention systems require targeted interventions on behalf of persons with disabilities

Primarily, the coronavirus crisis is an acute humanitarian emergency in which all people are vulnerable. Yet, only where welfare systems and disaster prevention systems are prepared to recognise a crisis and the resulting special needs of vulnerable persons and to respond adequately, they will not be further threatened beyond the general situation of danger.

Often, persons with disabilities are dependent on formal and informal help. This involves persons who perform nursing tasks, provide for their nutrition, provide information, or assist them in their mobility, communication or the organisation of their lives and, thus, provide essential support. In a crisis like this one, such mainstays may easily get lost, for example, through the erosion of solidarity in society (or, literally, social instead of physical distancing); caregivers may become infected, or they may be limited in practising their profession. To ensure their mere survival, persons with disabilities then depend ad hoc on comprehensive government assistance in order to gain access to benefits which ensure their livelihoods. For further implementation of the 2030 Agenda, it is obvious that priority must be given to the inclusive adaptation of social systems and disaster prevention systems so that, in the next crisis, vulnerable people will not again have to rely on auxiliary personnel who commit themselves explicitly to supporting them. Particularly in preparatory stages it is decisive that persons with disabilities actively participate in shaping such measures.

Against this background, the pursuit of the following Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda should be prioritised with regard to people with disabilities in the Global South now more than ever:



SDG 1.3 Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable

SDG 1.5 By 2030, build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters



SDG 2.1 By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round



SDG 10.4 Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality



SDG 11.b By 2020, substantially increase the number of cities and human settlements adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, resilience to disasters, and develop and implement, in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, holistic disaster risk management at all levels

3. Full social and economic participation of persons in vulnerable situations is key to their resilience in crises

However important social protection systems may be for persons with disabilities, the target of empowering them so that they will have to use these systems as little as possible is of equal importance. If access to participation rights is limited from the start, a crisis like the current one will be another step backwards in the participation of vulnerable persons. This will make it more difficult for them to help themselves and leave them dependent on social protection systems or even charitable help.

What is more, measures for overcoming a crisis are mostly used where, supposedly, maximum quantitative results will be achieved. Socially disadvantaged people are only taken into consideration with some delay and, as far as their participation rights are concerned, they find themselves at the same stage as before the crisis. However, if they are to catch up and the increased gap is to be closed, lasting and comprehensive investment in this development process is required.

Against this background, the pursuit of the following Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda should be prioritised with regard to people with disabilities in the Global South now more than ever:



SDG 4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education

SDG 4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship

SDG 4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations



SDG 8.5 By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value



SDG 10.2 By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status

4. Only an accessible environment will enable persons with disabilities to act in an independent and self-determined manner.

An inclusive, accessible environment will remove dependencies and is a fundamental requirement for social and economic participation. This is particularly apparent in times of crisis like these, when persons with disabilities are forced to stay at home, for example, because the assistance by persons who provide support is no longer available. Because of the barriers in their environment, they cannot use the public and private services available in their societies and are in a state of dependency. Consequently, creating an inclusive environment means, at the same time, strengthening resilience in a crisis as autonomous action beyond formal or informal support systems and a sustainable way to self-determined and independent social participation are promoted.

Against this background, the pursuit of the following Sustainable Development Goals of the Agenda 2030 should be prioritised with regard to people with disabilities in the Global South now more than ever:



SDG 4.a Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all



SDG 11.2 By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons

SDG 11.3 By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries

SDG 11.7 By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities

5. The participation of persons with disabilities in social formation and decision-making processes is of critical importance before, during and after situations of crisis

“Nothing about us without us”, a slogan of the international disability rights movement rightly propagates. Ultimately, it is a question of quality assurance whether, and to what extent, actors are aware of people’s specific needs and ready to consider them when they take action with the aim of a sustainable, global development.

But in essence this is a primary human rights obligation which requires constant debate. This applies particularly when a development phase after a crisis needs to be structured in such a way that the consequences of the next crisis can be mitigated.

Against this background, the pursuit of the following Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda should be prioritised with regard to people with disabilities in the Global South now more than ever:



SDG 4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development



SDG 16.7 Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels

SDG 16.10 Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms in accordance with national legislation and international agreements

SDG 16.b Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development



SDG 17.18 By 2020, enhance capacity-building support to developing countries, including for least developed countries and small island developing States, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts

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