

## **COVID 19 Resilience Strategy / Sustainable Solutions for Persons with Disabilities – Educational and Rehabilitation Outreach**

**By Sudeep Goyal as shared in AIWEFA Webinar**

Mr. Sudeep Goyal started his presentation by first describing the challenges faced by persons with disabilities due to the execution of new guidelines during Covid-19 pandemic. He presented the data provided by UNESCO stating that around 1.5 billion children are out of school all over the world due to Covid-19 outbreak and lockdown situation. In his address, he mentioned that as the current situation being entirely unprecedented in the history of pandemics, there is a vacuum of information. On the other hand, due to its unknown behaviour, there are new research findings and forecasts every other day leading to an overflow of information. Though there is an abundance of information available, the absence of any concrete evidence, leads to an information vacuum. The weak information network has added to our anxiety, fear and stress levels.

Regarding children with disabilities, he stressed that rigid restrictions due to the pandemic have posed several challenges for persons with disabilities. Furthermore, these challenges vary with the type of disability i.e. all children with disabilities may not face the same type of challenge. Firstly, the lockdown has not only curtailed the education but has restrained many other scenarios such as a conducive environment for growth and learning, peer learning, sense of protection, emotional support, psycho-social support, inclusive development, mid-day meal facility and much more. Moreover, their confinement at home has induced some behavioural and emotion problems in them. Besides, the situation has led to increased work pressures on family members especially mothers.

Secondly, the lack of access to health services is another big challenge for persons with disabilities. He emphasised that children with epilepsy or children on medication need continuous health care and medical services.

Thirdly, children with intellectual disabilities have limitations in understanding issues like threat perception or the importance of personal hygiene.

Fourthly, children with visual impairment who most times act based on their tactile stimulus face a huge challenge during this period of social distancing.

Similarly, children with hearing impairment face great difficulties in lip reading due to masks worn by other people.

Another issue highlighted by Mr. Goyal was concerning social distancing. In this context, he underlined that this segment of persons with disabilities was already cut off from the mainstream. Therefore, further imposing of the social distancing clause during the Covid-19 pandemic has pushed this segment of the population to the periphery. Bringing out this hard fact, he mentioned that on one side where we talk of inclusive growth, this pandemic has forced them to live in isolation and to deal with their limitations on their own.

During his address, he also put forth the adverse climatic conditions of Rajasthan, like scarce water, obstructing the norms of a new normal, advising frequent washing of hands. Mr. Goyal stressed that both washing hands and sanitisation are difficult in rural areas specifically in certain parts of rural Rajasthan.

Another aspect highlighted in his presentation pertained to the maintenance of a database comprising of PwD details. In this context, he elaborated that RPD Act, 2016 (Rights for Persons with Disabilities Act) mandates the maintenance of record of PwD details with NDMA (National Disaster Management Authority) and SDMA (State Disaster Management Authority). The database is foreseen as a ready reckoner to reach out to persons with disabilities during such pandemics or any other exigency and for doing resource mapping for other development activities. However, the database is missing in our government systems. Elucidating on the current situation of the pandemic, he mentioned that the government has details of only those children with disabilities who are associated with formal institutions. However, those children with disabilities who are not connected with any institute or education centres; the government does not have any record. In this context, Mr. Goyal highlighted the effective role played by his organisation in reaching out to children with disabilities who were otherwise not associated with any institute.

In the next section of the presentation, Mr. Goyal described a three-fold approach adopted by the organisation as a coping mechanism against the stressful situation of Covid-19.

The approach included:

- i.) Relief and Reach
- ii.) Recovery and Resilience and
- iii.) Reforms

Under relief and reach activity, the organisation reached out to the parents of all of their students and conducted counselling sessions on an individual basis. Besides creating awareness on the Covid-19 pandemic, the organisation also provided relief support in the form of dry ration kit, face masks, sanitisers and immunity-boosting ayurvedic 'Kadha'. Also, these families were facilitated to obtain government benefits to which they were entitled such as advance pension payments of two months, one-month extra ration to families.

Above all, the organisation also pursued for the appointment of a nodal officer in each district of Rajasthan for persons with disabilities under CCPD (Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities) guidelines. Under the provision, the District Social Welfare Officer would be the nodal officer for persons with disabilities who could be contacted for any government benefits related issues, medical issues or any other issues. This also provides a toll-free helpline number in every district.

Under recovery and resilience, the organisation focused on the education of its students. Similar to other organisations, they developed online modules and e-learning platforms. This also included the development and execution of assignment worksheets along with the support of their parents. Basic therapeutic sessions including occupational therapy were also conducted with the support of parents. Besides this, the children are also being trained in simple household work, art & craft and yoga to increase their beneficial role at home. Mr. Goyal stressed that e-learning has its limitations like many students have connectivity issues or sometimes their mobiles are not recharged. Moreover, children with disabilities require physical interface including physical prompting or emotional prompting which is lacking in e-learning platforms. He emphasised that the organisation, therefore, might have to look into solutions that are more robust and long-lasting. In his address, he also mentioned about a 24- hrs Childline service that was active throughout the lockdown period.

From a perspective of reforms, he underlined various advocacy level issues that were taken up by the organisation in collaboration with other organisations and national bodies. Regarding employment, he stressed the need to work harder to create employment opportunities. As the economy of the country was already experiencing weaker growth, the shock of Covid-19 has further sullied the situation, in cases of persons with disabilities. In this respect, Mr. Goyal stated about collaborative efforts that include 5% reservation for persons with disabilities under the NREGA programme. Similarly, the organisation attained the permission of allowing a caregiver to the intellectually disabled person at the hospital who is Covid positive.

Looking forward to the post lockdown period when the restrictions would be lifted and schools would reopen, Mr. Goyal underlined the need to make some more inclusions such as new seating arrangements in classrooms and transportation, temporary suspension of some activities like morning prayers, annual day or parent-teacher meet.

While describing long term reforms in the education system, he stated that the introduction of life skill training, emotional intelligence training, experiential training, capacity building of educators and development of some software are the next course of action.

He ended the session by stating that Covid-19 pandemic certainly has given deep schisms in our economy and human capital but in some of the areas it can be seen as an opportunity especially from the government's perspective as it has created a platform to reinforce good health practices in the community and need for investing in public health systems.

*Q. How will the teachers be able to handle problems which are happening this new normal due to lockdown?*

*A. Here, self-care is very important. As a teacher or special educator, we have to give our best and not what is left. Therefore, it is very important for teacher, caregivers and special educators to build their own emotional intelligence and mental balance. In this context, we must continue paying their salaries which is required for their emotional balance. In addition, capacity building of persons working with children with special needs is a mandate while striving for coping mechanisms in this unprecedented situation.*