

The Impact of COVID-19 and Its Policy Responses on Disabled People in Taiwan

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Barriers to obtaining information

The COVID-19 broke out at the beginning of this year. The biggest fear it has brought to mankind is that there is still no cure for it, and no one knows what will happen next. Everyone may be the target of attack. However, the COVID-19 has been controlled so quickly in Taiwan, the main reason is that our information about the pandemic has been provided to the public in real time and transparently, and we quickly implemented preventive measures. Nevertheless, in the process, the needs of disabled people are neglected, such as: (1) There was no barrier-free format, and many people could not obtain information in real time. (2) The government did not have sufficient information to grasp the needs of the disabled people; for example, deaf people in quarantine still received telephone interview and phone greetings. There were no statistics showing how many disabled people have been infected with COVID-19 and what kind of difficulties they people have faced. (3) In addition, there was too much information or fake news spreading everywhere, causing many people to be anxious, depressed and panic. (4) The relief plan introduced by the government was too complicated and difficult to understand, and it was hard to meet the eligibility requirements. These problems have created high barriers.

However, it is worth mentioning that Taiwan's press conference on COVID-19 pandemic has been held every day. At the beginning, there was neither sign language translation nor subtitle, arousing the anger of disability rights groups. They responded and made suggestions every day, creating pressure for rapid improvement. Originally, everyone wanted sign language interpreter to stand behind the speaker, but later because of the need to maintain social distancing, the split screen was finally adopted to ensure the needs of the deaf people to obtain information. Subtitles can also be viewed on the Internet.

Barriers to material acquisition

In addition, our government quickly initiated the mask-rationing plan to ensure that every citizen can obtain masks and reduce the risk of infection, that's why COVID-19 has been controlled so quickly in Taiwan. However, while taking the measures the government did not take into account the needs of the

disabled people. Most of the pharmacies and stores that sell masks and consumers' goods are not barrier-free for the disabled people to enter. They often took hours to find a shop that was accessible and barrier-free, but the masks and supplies have already sold out. For some the disabled people or the elderly, it is difficult to obtain masks and supplies through the Internet or using apps. For the disabled people, not only is the barrier-free environment very important, but also personal assistants are needed to help them buy daily necessities and pandemic prevention supplies. However, the personal assistant service hours were severely insufficient, making it difficult for some disabled people to go shopping. In addition, the lack of barrier-free transportation in rural areas has made the situation worse. During the pandemic, prices have soared, especially the prices of masks, alcohol, and thermometers were 5 to 10 times higher than usual, putting a huge burden on the economically disadvantaged. Many problems have existed for a long time. The COVID-19 has highlighted the insufficiency of barrier-free environment and related service policies for the disabled people.

Difficulties in community life and institutional services

The domestic care manpower has already been very insufficient in Taiwan and became scarcer when the pandemic broke out. It has also become more difficult for foreign caregivers to come to Taiwan. Many disabled people need regular consultation or rehabilitation, which was interrupted due to the pandemic. Visits to institutions providing residential services were prohibited, causing residents in the institutions to be isolated from the outside world. In addition, the families of the disabled people who were worried that they might be infected prohibit the disabled people from going out. In order to prevent the pandemic, the government issued an order to maintain a social distance of 1.5 meters, but what should be done for the disabled people who need personal assistance and caregivers? The government mandated that everyone needs to wear a mask in certain places, but there was no alternative plan or reasonable accommodation for the disabled people who are not able to wear masks or need to read lip language, so that many of them have had difficulties with daily living activities.

Barriers to economic income

Many disabled people are poor because they are jobless, peddling goods on street, or need financial support from their families. The pandemic has made them and their families have no income and cannot afford living expenses and high costs welfare services. We believe that most disabled people pay more for living expenses than ordinary people, and their livelihood must be ensured during the pandemic.

Actions during the pandemic

At the end of March, we began to collect the information about the plight of disabled people, present it to the public and the government, and participate in academic research on the impact of COVID-19 on the disabled people. We have also participated in international seminars, symposiums, received media interviews, and published the relevant information about Taiwan on the internet to let the world know about our plight, hoping to urge the domestic government to take it seriously and make some changes. We have translated foreign information, in the hope that would be useful as reference. In addition, we have raised money to buy masks and food and send them to those in need, and sent masks and protective raincoats to foreign partner groups.

We hope that the government must actively deliver masks to those in need, provide information in barrier-free format and improve the accessibility of the medical environment by taking various initiatives and actions. The government has accepted our request and made reasonable accommodation to the work of the disabled people in our organization during the pandemic, so that they can work from home. This was not allowed before and at that time the government ordered us to go out to work in the office, otherwise the grant for the entire year would be cancelled.

In addition, during the pandemic, Ms. Wang Xuezheng (汪雪真) who is a severe disabled people, was quarantined, and her experience highlighted the fact that barriers are everywhere in medical environment. She was forced to sleep in a wheelchair and go to the toilet under the ward monitor because there was no barrier-free restroom and transfer lift in the ward. After she was discharged from the hospital, she spent 6 hours blocking the minister's way at the station and handed out her petition to him in person. As a result, the minister made a promise: the government shall subsidize the labor costs of people with disabilities when they are quarantined and make a budget to build barrier-free wards and assistive equipment. We are currently tracking the progress of follow-up implementation.

Changes due to the pandemic

The outbreak of COVID-19 has caused people to have many common experiences and understandings, such as the discrimination and exclusion experienced by medical personnel or people infected with COVID-19, the experience of people being isolated, unable to go out or wanting to work but unable to work for earning money, and the experience of inconvenience to life and work. All these have

narrowed the distance between disabled people and ordinary people, and created a barrier-free lifestyle, such as increasing the opportunities to get education, do work, and attend conference through the Internet. Because of the pandemic, e-commerce and meal delivery service have been booming, increasing the convenience for the disabled people and ordinary people equally. In order to prevent the infection control breach, the government has paid more attention to disabled people and marginalized groups (such as homeless people). It is worth mentioning that when the pandemic broke out, in order to allow everyone to stay at home for 14 days with peace of mind, the government gave a grant of NT\$ 1,000 per day to each person under quarantine so that they would not be in financial difficulties. Many policies or service deliveries have been formulated from a new perspective due to urgency and pressure and have been reviewed. These also let us see that in a disaster, on the other hand, it may be a good time to bring about radical social change society and launch initiatives. The pandemic has caused us to learn and reflect more, and then create a better society.

*The link to the PPT, that was used, is <http://www.arsvi.com/2020/20200718lc.pdf>