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Inclusive new economy must prioritise citizens with disabilities

When President Cyril Ramaphosa detailed a R500 billion relief package for the nation under threat of COVID-19, he also said that government would take the opportunity to build an inclusive new economy. Riding on this are the hopes of thousands of citizens with disabilities – 7.5% of the population.

The “new global reality” is that millions more people are unemployed, jobs and livelihoods are being lost, and poverty lines are becoming starker. In this economic melee, there’s a danger that the rights of those with disabilities will become subsumed.

This is according to Professor Theresa Lorenzo of the University of Cape Town’s (UCT) Division of Disability Studies and co-lead of Inclusive Practices Africa (IPA), a new UCT research grouping.

She said: “The majority of persons with disabilities are part of our vulnerable population as a result of chronic poverty and living in rural communities, especially those with spinal cord injuries and psycho-social disabilities. So, an active, engaged and coordinated response that is disability inclusive is needed now and in the long term.”

Foster disability inclusion

The IPA focuses on reducing inequality, especially related to disability. The group is currently implementing practices to foster disability inclusion in all sectors of the country’s economy.

“Our signature project is transforming curricula through a decolonial approach and developing an inclusive learning environment and workforce, particularly in the COVID-19 context,” commented Professor Lorenzo. “This approach includes training and support to community-based workers who are able to ensure the continuity of care for children, women and youth with disabilities, as well as access resources and information about social and economic opportunities.”

Professor Harsha Kathard from UCT's Division of Communication Sciences and Disorders said disability inclusion as part of the economic transformation Ramaphosa envisions, means more than a health or social development response. "It must include radical systems thinking to generate changes that are sustainable long after the COVID-19 crisis. All social and economic strategies must be inclusive and consider all marginalised populations, particularly those with disabilities. Inclusive implementation is also critical and will require aggressive leadership to sustain the transformation effort."

Financial assistance

"We need an inclusive approach to wealth and land distribution, together with targeted poverty and inequality strategies across all sectors, in such a way that disabled women and youth are prioritised," said Professor Kathard.

While social grants play a vital role in relieving hunger and providing some assistive devices and technology, research with disabled women showed that they also use their grants as seed money to start small businesses or become informal traders. "So, a skills development grant to meet disabled youth and women's aspirations to be employed would contribute to their economic inclusion," said Professor Lorenzo.

The research with disabled youth found that those whose families support their efforts to access training opportunities do much better. "In families where the disabled person is not able to work because of their impairment, a family member needs to be given opportunities for skills development and obtaining some form of decent work," added Professor Lorenzo.

"Public transport and other services, systems and policies also play a key role. It's not enough to have an operational system. It must be accessible and affordable for people with disabilities. Those with mobility impairments who use wheelchairs are charged double fares by taxis as their wheelchairs take up extra space," she concluded.



An inclusive new economy must prioritise people with disabilities.

Photo: Supplied

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