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Protecting and advancing human wellbeing and ending poverty [Most closely related SDGs: SDG 1, SDG 3, SDG 4, SDG 6, SDG 16, and SDG17]

The moment the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the principles of “leave no one behind” and “reach the furthest behind first” evaporated into thin air. Overwhelmingly, persons with disabilities and older persons became the most affected. The vast majority of deaths have occurred among those above the age of 60. The pandemic has exacerbated an already tenuous situation for those most vulnerable.

The focus of the immediate response to the pandemic was on keeping healthcare systems operational and the indirect impact of the pandemic was ignored. This and physical distancing, isolation and a weakened economy have all led to devastating effects, which has increased poverty for many older persons and persons with disabilities.

These challenges have been compounded by a lack of access to information, confusion, sense of abandonment, disruption of education, loss of income and/or social benefits, suspension of accessible transportation services, isolation in residential homes, and increased difficulties to access regular healthcare treatments, medications, and assistive devices. Family dynamics have changed with home-schooling, putting an enormous burden on families ill-equipped to handle specific challenges of persons with disabilities and older persons who are often care-givers as well.

Efforts to enhance human well-being in the context of the SDGs have been severely curtailed. Poverty levels have drastically increased and life has become a daily fight for survival. Local and national actions have not been effectively aligned, creating confusion and have further impacted the most vulnerable and marginalized groups.

As some countries move into the re-opening phase, life for persons with disabilities and older persons is full of insecurity. Care and attention, kindness and comfort have been replaced by fear, anxiety, discrimination, increased cases of neglect and abuse. We can confidently say today that for them, their well-being has been shattered. Regardless of the outcome of the pandemic, one key message needs attention: inclusion.

They must be included, as active participants in all levels and stages of decision-making processes and as key agents of change in the health, humanitarian and socio-economic pillars of the COVID-19 response and beyond, which must be guided by human rights and the SDGs, because policies going forward are truly about whether older persons and persons with disabilities live, die or are forgotten.

There can be no doubt now that for them, immediate implementation of universal social protection floors as well as strengthening of universal health and care services are essential to end multidimensional poverty and overlapping deprivations that accumulate throughout life.

Protecting and advancing human well-being and ending poverty require stronger and more targeted efforts to ensure we do not fall short of the SDGs. It also requires inclusion of those most vulnerable among us, to ensure that they are not left behind. Persons with disabilities and older persons are not disposable.

455 words