



THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

11 May 2020

Dear Mr. Haslam,

I write to thank you for your letter dated 27 April 2020, sent on behalf of the International Disability and Development Consortium, regarding the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the United Nations' COVID-19 response.

The United Nations recognizes that persons with disabilities face particular and disproportionate risks from COVID-19. In the immediate response, as well as recovery and rebuilding, our efforts must strive to be inclusive and accessible to all persons with disabilities.

In June 2019, I launched the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy, and appointed Under-Secretary-General Ana Maria Menéndez, my Senior Adviser on Policy, to coordinate its system-wide implementation. The Strategy is my commitment to building an inclusive and sustainable society for persons with disabilities. It is also my commitment that the United Nations leads by example on disability inclusion. This encompasses the COVID-19 response.

On 5 May, I launched a policy brief on the impact of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities, which provides key actions and recommendations for governments, United Nations entities and other stakeholders on how to ensure a disability-inclusive COVID-19 response and recovery.

The United Nations COVID-19 Response and Recovery Multi-Partner Trust Fund has been established to directly support the most at-risk populations, including persons with disabilities. The Trust Fund calls are guided by the United Nations Framework for the Immediate Socioeconomic Response to COVID-19 released in April. It is envisaged that persons with disabilities will be systematically included through the various pillars of the Framework. Under-Secretary-General Menéndez and her team are coordinating with the Trust Fund to ensure that persons with disabilities are meaningfully addressed in the response, and to support greater collection of data disaggregated by disability on the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic.

Mr. Dominic Haslam
Chair of the International Disability and
Development Consortium
Chippenham

This month, entities will be reporting on their implementation of the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy, including on indicators regarding accessibility and communications. I have also requested entities to provide information in their reports on disability-inclusive actions undertaken and planned related to the COVID-19 response and recovery. This will provide a foundation to assess the extent to which the situation of persons with disabilities is addressed in the COVID-19 response, and to establish where greater focus and support is required.

However, as I noted when launching the Strategy, we face significant challenges – for example, the accessibility of our documents and online communications. There is an unevenness in our approach, and we must address these gaps in a systematic manner. In the immediate term, the COVID-19 portal, www.un.org/coronavirus, has been reviewed and updated for accessibility issues. The Department of Global Communications will produce in accessible e-Pub the eight COVID-19 policy briefs which I have launched– these will be available on the portal by mid-May. The policy brief on COVID-19 and persons with disabilities is available in accessible ePub and easy-to-read formats, and a video of the Executive Summary has been produced in International Sign. While the majority of my video messages provide captioning in all six United Nations languages, all video messages pertaining to persons with disabilities, including those on the policy briefs, include International Sign interpretation.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has advised that their web content is currently migrating to a new content management system, which will align with the AA level of the Worldwide Web Consortium’s Web Content Accessibility Guidelines version 2.1. In terms of COVID-19 information, the WHO Emergencies team is working across the organization to develop an accessible PDF format for WHO Situation Reports, which are produced daily and contain the most timely and relevant information about the pandemic. Situation Reports have been produced using the accessible template since 1 May. There is also further work under way to ensure that the larger volume of WHO COVID-19 publications are accessible. WHO press briefings are now live captioned, and the transcripts are being produced in an accessible format as of 1 May.

We have a long way to go. But, as I said when launching the Strategy, realizing the rights of persons with disabilities is an investment in our common future. We know that including persons with disabilities in the COVID-19 response and recovery process will better serve everyone and is a vital part of achieving the central promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – to leave no one behind.

A more inclusive and accessible United Nations will only be achieved with the full participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations. I therefore wish to sincerely thank the International Disability and Development Consortium for your work to advance the rights of persons with disabilities across the United Nations system, including but not limited to this crisis. Your work is essential to ensuring that persons with disabilities are not left behind, from the COVID-19 response and recovery to beyond. My team and I will remain abreast of the situation faced by persons with disabilities and urge their inclusion in the United Nations system-wide response.

A similar letter has been sent to Ms. Ana Lucia Arellano, Chair of the International Disability Alliance.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'António Guterres', with a long horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the signature.

António Guterres