**COVID 19 AND DISABILITY LENS ON EDUCATION**

Cases of Covid-19 first emerged in December 2019, when a mysterious illness was reported in Wuhan, China. The cause of the disease was soon confirmed as a new kind of coronavirus, and the infection has spread to a number of countries around the world. The most commonly reported [symptoms](https://www.newscientist.com/article/2235847-coronavirus-what-are-the-worst-symptoms-and-how-deadly-is-covid-19/) include fever, dry cough and tiredness, and in mild cases people may get just a runny nose or a sore throat. In the most severe cases, people with the virus can develop difficulty in breathing, and may ultimately experience organ failure. Quite a number of cases have been confirmed in Zimbabwe, and the numbers are still on the rise. In this light it is critically of cog paramount to complement civil society organization’s efforts in curbing the COVID 19 and exposing faulty lines in society since it is posing a huge threat to peace, security and socio-economic development, as well as the wellbeing of the Zimbabwean people.

As an intern at Deaf Zimbabwe Trust I have witnessed great work the organization is doing in speaking out service delivery failure and disregard of human rights especially for persons with disabilities. Heat and Soul radio interview on 15 May 2020 (Life through the disability lens with Colleen Chifamba), touched on the education of children with disabilities posing a question – Is home-schooling working? There has been burning conversations about Ministry of Education addressing school curriculum via radio and television programs and online services on whether they can be able to make this accessible to everyone. Along these arguments not much has been addressed on whether they are going to be accessible to students with disabilities. Deaf Zimbabwe Trust joined the conversation as the organization believe that education empowers and the focus is access to education. In the interview Deaf Zimbabwe Trust Executive Director, Ms. Babra Nyangairi mentioned that under education program, the organization run what they call “Model school”. The school provide what works for deaf and hard of hearing learners for example sign language interpreters working together with qualified teacher’s in order to bring deaf culture into the classrooms. In essence this provides an opportunity for persons with disabilities to go to school.

Some of the reasons why learners with disabilities fall behind in education are structural barriers. Identification of children with deafness in most cases happens very late. Unlike other disabilities that are visible, deafness is invisible to the eye. Another issue is that our health system and education system do not talk to each other in the sense that when a mother gives birth to a child with disability, the records are not captured in such a way that the education system can be able to track and find out which school is the child attending, for example. This means the children are then lost in the system. The systems must cooperate instead of competing. Thirdly lack of parental ability to cope with disability hinders systems and can even get to the child. Unfortunately most societies understands disability is still very much located in the discourse of witchcraft, in the discourse of blame and in the discourse of “why me”. This mindset must be changed at some point, so that we will be able to give support they need.

During this pandemic period the challenges are huge, the barriers to entry and the barrier to access. The schools themselves are not adequately equipped to provide learners with disabilities the environment they need to thrive. Home schooling for learners with disabilities is devastating, from interventions proposed for learning (radio and television programs and online services) do not have the disability lens. They are not inclusive. At home, most guardians do not sign to be able to home school their children for education support and integration support. Deaf Zimbabwe Trust did a small survey to find out parents who have a laptop or electronic garget that could access the internet and teaching materials. Less than 20 per cent of parents have these gargets. Now how do you then send them learning materials and ensure that they are learning?. When we are in most of disastrous situations that is when our vulnerabilities are exposed, the pandemic has exposed all this. If schools

However, there is need to support distance learning (software development that accommodate persons with disabilities). Need to empower the parents or guardians to support children and home, training programs for parents to teach them how to support the children that will produce better education outcome, pyscho-social support for children and create textbooks and other materials that are inclusive.

From the above insight, the pandemic (COVID-19) has exposed the importance and necessity of such organizations. Injustices, inequalities and unsustainable systems have also been exposed. I applaud for huge efforts Deaf Zimbabwe Trust is doing for persons with disabilities to find fair footing with everyone else. Let us continue to be enablers not disablers.

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