



Reports monitoring covid-19 pandemic in countries and regions of the Global South

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How people with functional diversity live the pandemic

The Spanish association *Foro de Vida Independiente y Divertad* (FVID, 2009) introduced in 2005 the term functional diversity, which "fits a reality in which a person functions differently or differently from the majority of society". This term was introduced by the men and women with functional diversity themselves, and it "does not give a negative or medical character to the vision of this human reality".

There are almost no official statistics on the number of people with functional diversity in different countries of the world, but these numbers can be estimated by taking into account different data and reports from agencies working with this population group. The *WHO* (2020) estimates that more than 1 billion people in the world are living with some form of functional diversity, corresponding to approximately 15% of the world's population. And 80% of them are in the countries of the Global South.

By 2018, it was estimated that there were between 60 and 80 million people on the African continent who were functionally diverse in some way (*Disabled World*, 2018). These numbers are believed to have increased in the last two years due to causes such as malnutrition, the presence of different diseases, environmental hazards, natural disasters, traffic and industrial accidents, and civil and war conflicts. These people are generally relegated to living in poverty, as it is very difficult for them to get jobs, as well as to be accepted in educational establishments. In fact, it is estimated that only 5-10% of people with functional diversity in Africa receive formal education.

A report by the *Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean* (ECLAC, 2020) estimates that there are more than 70 million people living with some form of functional diversity in this region. This group is very diverse and often experiences multiple and simultaneous forms of discrimination. These are based on different factors such as socio-economic status, gender, age, place of residence and migrant status, among others.

Both *Disabled World* (2018) and *ECLAC* (2020) agree that there is a link between functional diversity and poverty, which is an important element in the constant exclusion suffered by people with functional diversity. Moreover, functional diversity is often both a cause and a consequence of poverty (*ECLAC*, 2020). Living in poverty in these countries means limited access to health services, clean water and adequate nutrition. As well as high exposure to different forms of violence or hazardous employment. All factors that can lead to a poor general state of health and even the generation of some functional diversity, whether temporary or permanent.

With regard to health care, it is important to clarify that all people with functional diversity have the same health needs and rights as any other person, plus the additional ones due to their own condition. However, few countries guarantee adequate and quality health services for them. For example, more than half of the world's people with functional diversity cannot afford health services, the supply of appropriate services for these people is often limited, and there are many physical barriers in hospitals and health centres that make it difficult for them to access and use services. Furthermore, with respect to the current health crisis, the *WHO* (2020) reports that countries around the world did not include functional diversity in their policy response during the pandemic.

In Kenya's Nakuru region, blind people have had particular difficulty following *WHO* recommendations, according to the multimedia newspaper *KTN News*. Many of them do not have a guide stick and must mobilize themselves by leaning on the surfaces of their houses or with the help of an accompanying person, usually a family member. In these countries where it is difficult to obtain hand sanitizer, the risk of contagion for these people is even greater.

According to the newspaper *Le Mauricien*, deaf and hearing-impaired people in Mauritius have found the use of masks to be a barrier to communication and understanding. These people often rely on facial expressions and emotions, as well as lip reading, to better understand their interlocutor's message. Another barrier has been the recommendation of distancing, since these individuals often touch the person they are communicating with in order to, for example, demand their attention. In Argentina something similar happens according to the newspaper *Página12*, who adds another complaint which is the little access deaf people have had to information and to the health system during the pandemic. Among the exclusion suffered by these people, the hospitals and health centres that do not have translators and the news programs that report on prevention measures that do not have interpreters stand out. It should be clarified that in this country 8.3% of the population has reduced hearing or deafness and almost 90% of them live, work and develop in environments with people who do not use sign language.

The city of Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, is home to a group of people who have been amputated during the civil war that began in 1991 and lasted almost 11 years. The only source of income for many of them is the alms they receive on the streets of the city. The *Concord Times* reports that the confinement has left these people with no monetary income and no government support.

In Rwanda, people who use wheelchairs do not have devices to wash or disinfect their hands before entering various shops, transport or public places, reports *The New Times*. However, it has been found that it is possible to adapt these devices for inclusive use. In the city of Niamey, Niger's capital, 20 pedal hand washing devices have been installed that can be used by anyone, according to the newspaper *Le Sahel*.

As far as education is concerned, it has already been mentioned in both Reports No. 6 and No. 17. The subjects distance learning (BIOCOMSC, 2020a) and the challenges of reopening educational establishments (BIOCOMSC, 2020b) were treated. These Reports have highlighted the great difficulty in ensuring continuity of education during the pandemic. Many other

difficulties faced by children with functional diversity in the education sector should now be highlighted. In Kenya, according to the *Nation* newspaper, blind children receiving distance education cannot access screen readers or Braille typewriters. Moreover, many children with different functional diversities have been left without the special care that schools provide, such as physical, occupational and speech therapy.

Fortunately, in this time of crisis it was also seen that many people have set to work to improve the lack of schooling. Such is the case in the Dominican Republic, where the programme called *Modalidad Virtual Ampliada (Extended Virtual School)* was launched, according to the newspaper *Acento*. The programme has a medicine module, an education module and a psychology module, all of which are carried out virtually, semi-presentially and in person. Its objective is to improve the quality of life of children and young people with cerebral palsy by reducing learning barriers and improving physical rehabilitation. In addition, a Colombian has received recognition from *UNESCO for the* creation of technological and educational tools for sign language users in the Hispanic world, which have been distributed free of charge in Colombia to students who need them, reports the newspaper *El Tiempo*. Finally, in Tanzania the first digital dictionary for deaf and hearing-impaired students has been put online, according to *The Citizen* newspaper. This has been considered a historic milestone in the country's education since for the first time work is being done to fully integrate children with this type of functional diversity.

In conclusion, the term men and women with functional diversity is the name given to people who function differently from the majority of society. There are millions of functionally diverse people in the world, and most of them live in one of the countries belonging to the so-called Global South, where functional diversity and poverty go hand in hand. The crisis associated with the pandemic has highlighted the marginality and stigma suffered by a very large part of this group. Moreover, this period has seen a lack of implementation of inclusive policies in many countries. But this cannot continue to happen, and fortunately many groups of people are working to reverse this situation. Functional diversity is part of the human condition and everyone at some point in their lives can experience functional diversity, whether temporary or permanent. That is why it is important to talk about it, to make it known, to make it visible, to naturalise it, and to remove the stigma. People with functional diversity have the same rights and needs as everyone else and should have the same opportunities, as well as guaranteed access to health, education and labour systems.

References:

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The research group BIOCOM-SC from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia is in contact with different research groups and governmental offices in order to jointly predict the evolution of the pandemic covid-19. Moreover, we follow up local media in 35 African countries and 9 Latino American countries and complemented it with interviews to field experts.

<https://biocomsc.upc.edu/en/covid-19>