

Covid-19 and people with disabilities in South Africa

Published on 11 December 2020



Stephen Thompson

Post-Doctoral Research Fellow



Mary Wickenden

Research Fellow

Tim Hart

Senior Research Manager, DCES HSRC

André Kalis

Policy Adviser NCPD

The severity of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has starkly exposed the fragility of both national and global health, social and economic systems. Emerging evidence is showing that people with disabilities are being disproportionately affected, with it becoming clear that [those who were already most marginalised](#) have been even harder hit by the impact of the pandemic and the various measures implemented to contain the disease.

[Recent IDS work in Bangladesh, Nigeria, Uganda and Kenya](#) has shown that the situation is particularly worrying in low-income settings, where there have been increased cases of gender-based violence, deteriorating mental health and exacerbated poverty experienced by people with disabilities during the pandemic. The situation in South Africa warrants even greater concern where, in pre-Covid times, many people with disabilities already faced discrimination, inequality and exclusion.

What's happening in South Africa?

Despite the South African government's ratification of regional and international disability treaties -such as the UN [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (UNCRPD) – and general anti-discrimination legislation, there is still a lack of specific laws protecting the rights of people with disabilities. Legislative and policy provisions that do exist are not being properly implemented, and people with disabilities are excluded from existing protections, resulting in even greater limitations on the provision of justice for the most marginalised.

The Covid-19 pandemic is now adding further challenges to the equitable provisioning of a range of services to people with disabilities across the country, but the experiences of people with disabilities nationally have yet to be deeply investigated.

To date, much information has been gathered on how [South Africans generally are experiencing Covid-19](#), with the main challenges being lack of food and financial resources, which led to hunger, unrest, and some shop looting. Some [recent studies](#) relating to this population have focused on specific impairments, selected locations, or particular communication and/mobility challenges, however there is still no substantial countrywide data revealing the full extent of the impact.

An exciting new partnership

[Today's announcement](#) of a new collaboration between IDS, and two South African partners, the [Human Sciences Research Council](#) (HSRC) and the [National Council of and for Persons with Disabilities](#) (NCPD) is refreshing and timely as it aims to address the information gap.

With funding from [UK Research and Innovation](#) (UKRI), the team will explore whether the South Africa National Disaster Management Act is seen to be compliant with the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities and South Africa's [White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#).

New comprehensive data will provide the Ministry of Women, Youth and People with Disabilities with evidence to inform the monitoring framework for the inclusion of people with disabilities in mitigations during and after pandemics, shocks and crises. The partners will jointly undertake a national online survey with people with disabilities, to identify experiences and challenges that they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ensuring greater inclusion of persons with disabilities in South Africa generally as well as during times of crisis protects their rights to foster greater social cohesion and inclusion. There is hope that this new collaboration will lead directly to recommendations that the South African government can acknowledge and follow through on to help to ensure that their rights are upheld when implementing measures to mitigate against the impact of the pandemic and lockdown.