

***Disability-Specific Measures and Roles of Disabled People's Organizations in Supporting Persons with Disabilities and Families during COVID-19 Pandemic***

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**Abstract**

This qualitative study aimed to analyze disability-specific measures and the roles of Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) in supporting persons with disabilities and families. The subjects selected by means of purposive technique which consisted of 42 members of 7 DPOs and were divided into 3 groups of 14. The data were collected by focus group discussion to reach saturation. The data were analyzed by means of content analysis. Finding revealed that supporting measures provided for people in general could not meet the needs of persons with disabilities. For example, the Community Isolation (CI) center is not accessible for persons with disabilities. Moreover, persons with certain types of disabilities need to stay with family members or caregivers but their families or caregivers are not allowed to stay at CI centers if they not infected by COVID-19. To solve this problem, DPOs that represent persons with each type of disabilities, with cooperation of the hospitals and their network organizations, set up CI centers to support their own members. The services at CI centers included free accommodation, foods, and medical care. With the advocacy of DPOs, the government launched disability-specific measures. Then DPOs monitor and evaluate the measures to ensure that they can meet the needs of persons with disabilities and families. They also give suggestions to the government concerning the revision and implementation of disability-specific measures and policies related to COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19, Persons with Disabilities, Disabled People's Organizations, Measures, Policies

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## **Introduction**

The World Health Organization (2020) declared that Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) was a pandemic. Up till now, the Pandemic has spread all over the world, affecting lives of millions of people including vulnerable groups such as children, persons with disabilities, the elderly and those living under poverty line. Persons with disabilities are facing more challenges in dealing with the situation due to their limitations. For example, persons with mobility disabilities cannot avoid touching the seat when they try to sit. Wheelchair users cannot wash their hands because they cannot get close to the sinks, or the sinks are too high. For persons with visual disabilities, it is difficult for them to avoid touching handrails when they walk up or downstairs. When they are guided by sighted people, they have to hold on to the guide's elbow, making it difficult to avoid physical contact (WHO, 2020). Persons with disabilities living in rural areas even face more challenges as they already have limited access to health care services. They, therefore, have more difficulties to access preventive care and treatment during COVID-19 Pandemic. Some of them are not vaccinated because they cannot go to health care units that provide vaccination. Moreover, some support systems are not accessible for persons with disabilities. For example, the Community Isolation (CI) supports those who are infected by COVID-19. CI Centers provide free meals, medication and accommodation for COVID-19 infected persons. However, these places are not accessible for persons with disabilities. In later stages of the Pandemic, the government provided one CI Center for persons with disabilities who are infected by the Pandemic at Sirindhorn Science Home. But it is obviously insufficient for more than 2 million persons with disabilities in the country. Besides, persons with different types of disabilities need different kinds of support. These factors cause more challenges to persons with disabilities and their families than those without disabilities. As Thai citizens, persons with disabilities and their families are eligible for the measures provided by the government in response to COVID-19. The example of the measures such as reduction of required contributions to the Social Security Fund (SSF) for employers and employees, reduction of electricity and water bills, income compensation of 5,000 baht per month for three months for workers not covered by SSF, emergency loan of 10,000 baht per person at 0.1% monthly interest, Lowering the interest rate of state-owned pawnshops of 0.125% a month for two years.

Nevertheless, not all of these measures can meet the needs of persons with disabilities as they need more comprehensive measures that can respond to the needs of persons with all types of disabilities. Therefore, the disabled people's organizations (DPOs) play an important role in the advocacy for persons with disabilities. The Disability Thailand is an umbrella organization which consists of 7 representative organizations of persons with 7 types of disabilities i.e., mobility, visual, hearing, learning, psychosocial, intellectual disability, and autism. It represents persons with all types of disabilities. So it initiated specific relief measures for persons with each type of disabilities. It organized meetings with the associations of persons with all types of disabilities to collect the challenges that persons with disabilities and families face due to COVID-19. Then it had dialogue with the authority in charge, Department of the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, concerning the needs of persons with disabilities and families. It also submitted an official letter suggesting the measures to be provided by the government to relieve the challenges that persons with disabilities face during the Pandemic.

## **Objectives of the Study and Methodology**

This qualitative study aimed to analyze disability-specific measures and the roles of DPOs in supporting persons with disabilities and families. The subjects consisted of 42 members of 7

DPOs which were representatives of persons with 7 types of disabilities as categorized by the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act. They are either persons with disabilities or parents/caregivers (in case of persons with intellectual disabilities and autism). The data were collected by Focus Group Discussion with 42 members which were divided into 3 groups of 14. The data were analyzed by means of content analysis.

## **Result of the Study**

The study revealed that even though Thai persons with disabilities are eligible for the relief measures provided by the government, these measures do not always meet their needs. Official and unofficial complaints are submitted through DPOs which are their representative organizations. Some DPOs such as the Association of Persons with Physical Disabilities in Thailand has local offices at the provincial and district levels where members are taken care of by the representatives who are also persons with disabilities selected by the members in that province or district. Some persons with disabilities do not know what services are available for them and their families during COVID-19. So the disability representatives at local branches provide information for their members and inform them about their rights and then report to the Executive Committee that acts as an advocate for its members. All 7 representative organizations of persons with disabilities, together with Disability Thailand, collected all complaints and suggestions from their members and submitted an official letter to the Department of the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, which is the authority in charge. The content of the Letter is as follows:

1. The government must ensure that persons with disabilities and families or caregivers get vaccinated.
2. To guarantee that the emergency loan of 10,000 baht can reach all persons with disabilities in need. In order to do so, unnecessary step(s) should be waived. For example, the home visits should be cancelled because during the Pandemic, travelling is limited or even prohibited in some areas.
3. The disability allowance from 800 to 1,000 baht must be available for all persons with disabilities regardless of ages or other conditions. All complicated unnecessary regulations must be revised.
4. The “Half-Half” Project should be accessible to persons with disabilities as well. In order to ensure that 2 million of persons with disabilities can access the Project, there should be special Application for them so that they do not have to struggle because registering for the “Half-Half” Project is complicated and time-consuming. Besides, it is troublesome for those who do not have strong internet signal. Having separate Application for them can reduce this issue.
5. For “Rao Chana” (We win) Project, the emergency allowance of 7,000 is to be given to those who are eligible according to the regulations. However, there are still many persons with disabilities who do not get the allowance even though they are qualified because they cannot access the Application on smartphones. So there must be an option for them to get the allowance in cash.
6. The government should work closely with DPOs. It should set up committee/working groups which consists of members from DPOs, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), and stakeholders to launch and implement relief measures.
7. Promote employment of persons with disabilities in the government sectors. The employment quota for government bodies should be 50:1, not 100:1 as it currently is.
8. There should be programs to upskill and reskill to prepare persons with disabilities for new jobs according to the “New Normal” way of life.

9. The government should work with the local authorities and Disability Service Centers to ensure that all persons with disabilities in need can receive the emergency grant of 2,000 baht allocated from the Fund for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities.

Aside from the existing relief measures, the additional measures proposed by Disability Thailand have been launched but some are still pending. During the Focus Group Discussions (FGD), representatives from DPOs gave comments and suggestions to the disability-specific measures that have been launched by the government as follows:

**1. An emergency grant of 1,000 baht.** Members of FGD mentioned that the amount of the grant is too small compared with the 5,000-baht grant provided for people in general. Although some may say persons with disabilities are also entitled for this 5,000-baht grant, in reality not so many of them can access this grant. That is why DPOs recommend that there be another channel for them to receive an emergency grant. However, the 1,000-baht grant is not allocated from the government budget. It is from the Fund for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities which is derived from employers that do not hire persons with disabilities according to Article 33 and 34 of Persons with Disabilities Empowerment Act which states that: Article 33 Employers, entrepreneurs and government agencies shall employ persons with disabilities to work in the positions suitable for them in proper proportions to the entire number of the employees in their work places in the ratio of 100:1. Article 34 Employers or entrepreneurs who do not employ persons with disabilities at the proper proportions as mentioned in Article 33 shall send money to the Fund for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities. The Fund is administered by the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, with the objective to support persons with disabilities who are self-employed as interest-free loans and to support programs and activities for employment promotion such as vocational training programs. However, the DPOs decided to allocate part of this Fund for the emergency grant because, if they wait for the government budget, it cannot promptly respond to the needs of persons with disabilities as it takes time for bureaucratic process. Due to the expense for the emergency grant, the amount of the Fund is getting smaller, resulting in less budget for vocational and employment promotion programs for persons with disabilities. So they suggested that the government allocate enough budget as an emergency grant for all persons with disabilities in a timely manner.

**2. Postponement of Disability Loan payback.** Individuals with disabilities can make loan for self-employment in the maximum amount of 60,000 baht without interest and have to pay back within 5 years. For those who want to make loans with higher amount, it will be considered case by case. However, the loan shall not exceed 120,000 baht. As for group loan, the maximum amount is 1,000,000 baht. The government authority in charge, with consideration of the difficulties that persons with disabilities face during COVID-19, offers that they do not have to pay back the loan for 12 months. But according to the opinions of persons with disabilities and families/caregivers, the postponement does not help because the time of installments is not extended. Even though they do not have to pay back the loan for 12 months, they have to pay back the remaining amount within the remaining years, which results in higher installments in later years. This can be more difficult for them in the future. What they recommended was that, aside from the 12 month-postponement, the maximum payback time should be extended from 5 years to 6 years.

**3. Emergency loan of 10,000 baht.** Aside from loan for self-employment, persons with disabilities or family members/caregivers can make an interest-free loan at the maximum amount of 10,000 baht. They can pay back within 5 years and can start paying back from the

second year. The difference between this emergency loan and regular self-employment loan is that the emergency loan does not require guarantor and also requires no home visit for those who already make loan for self-employment. Persons with disabilities said that the “no guarantor” policy is helpful for them because finding a guarantor is always a challenge. But they think the home visits should also be waived because during the Pandemic, the travel is restricted. So home visits have to be postponed. This can delay the approval of the loan and persons with disabilities may have to wait. So there should be no home visits to shorten the process and make it more accessible to those in need.

**4. Increase of disability allowance from 800 baht to 1,000 baht.** In Thailand, persons with disabilities who carry disability I.D. cards are eligible for monthly disability allowance in the amount of 800 baht. However, the disability allowance is not automatically given to all that carry disability I.D. cards. They have to submit the request and go through a process in order to get it. So there are some persons with disabilities who do not receive this allowance because they did not submit the request. DPOs have been encouraging the government to increase the amount of the disability allowance but the proposal has been postponed for years. When the Pandemic occurred, DPOs think it is a good opportunity to propose to the government again. Finally, the government agreed to increase the disability allowance from 800 baht to 1,000 baht per month. However, the increased amount is not given to all persons with disabilities. The government made complicated rules of eligibility. Only those under 18 who carry disability I.D. cards shall receive the increased amount automatically. For those who are over 18, they need to have the following qualifications: having disability I.D. cards; currently receiving disability allowance; and having social welfare cards. This is difficult for many persons with disabilities because in order to get social welfare cards, they need to apply through the government Application which is available on mobile phones or computers only. In reality, not all persons with disabilities have mobile phones or computers. Even though they do, some find it difficult because they are not good at technology especially those with old ages. So DPOs still work with the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities to make the increased amount of disability allowance available for all persons with disabilities. “We just half succeeded. We can fight for our friends to get more allowances but it is still not available for all. Not all of us can get it” An FGD member from the Association of Persons with Disabilities in Thailand said.

**5. Vaccine Quota for persons with disabilities.** At the early stage of COVID-19 Pandemic, vaccines were scarce. So the majority of persons with disabilities were not vaccinated. Realizing that persons with disabilities, due to their health conditions, are more vulnerable to get infected and might be seriously sick if they get infected, DPOs consulted with the government through the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, Ministry of Public Health and other related Ministries and finally the government allocated vaccines especially for persons with disabilities and families or caregivers on the condition that one person with disabilities can get one dose for him/herself and another one for a family member or caregiver. In addition to persons with disabilities and families or caregivers, the quota was also given to those who work with persons with disabilities including government officials. Some people in the FGD mentioned that too many people from the government received the vaccines from this special quota. “Too many government officials got the shots. They should give priority to persons with disabilities and families. They (the government officials) have more opportunities to get vaccines than us”, said a representative from the Association of Persons with Disabilities in Thailand. There was the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of vaccine quota for persons with disabilities. In this phase, families and caregivers were not eligible. “This doesn’t make sense. I have to take care of my son who have intellectual disability. If I’m

infected, then he will be infected too, of course.” A mother who has a son with intellectual disability said. However, the problem of vaccine availability is getting less serious as there are many more doses coming. Now it is much easier to get COVID-19 vaccines.

**6. Community Isolation (CI) centers for persons with disabilities.** At the early stage of the Pandemic, there were no CI centers for persons with disabilities, making it very difficult for those who were infected. DPOs then took an initiative role to have CI centers for persons with disabilities. The government agreed with this proposal and set up a CI center for persons with disabilities. However, one center was not enough. Besides, this center also accepted persons without disabilities who were infected, making it crowded and inconvenient for persons with disabilities. The facilities of the center are limited to persons with mobility disabilities only. There were no Braille and other facilities for persons with visual disabilities and no sign language interpreters for persons with hearing disabilities. “After getting infected by COVID-19, I was sent to that center which was located in the university complex. There were no facilities for blind people and the staff did not understand how to support us. I was told to do private things like urinating on bed (in the bowls) even though I could walk. I told them I could go to toilet by myself. What I needed was just somebody to guide me to the toilet. But they didn’t listen to me. They insisted that I had to do everything in bed because I was sick.” A woman with visual disability shared her experience during the discussion. Moreover, family members and caregivers were not allowed to stay at the center if they were not infected. “It’s impossible for children with autism or intellectual disabilities to stay away from parents. How can they stay in the center alone?” A parent who has a child with autism said. It is also impossible for persons with severe disabilities who need 24-hour care to stay alone at the center. “I need 24-hour care. I can’t live without my PA (personal assistant). Can they provide me a PA for 24 hours? Even though they can, I’d prefer my PA because she knows how to support me. I don’t have to tell her what to do step by step.” A man with profound mobility disability said. In order to solve this issue, DPOs decided to support their members by setting up CI centers for persons with each type of disabilities. With cooperation from their network organizations, they partner with other organizations and hospitals to set up their own CI centers. For example, the Association of Parents of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities partnered with Rajanukul Institute which is a hospital for children with intellectual disabilities to set up a CI center for persons with intellectual disabilities where they can stay with their parents or caregivers. The Association of Persons with Disabilities in Thailand partnered with a hospital and a hotel to provide a hospitel for persons with mobility disabilities who get infected. Hospitel is facility where people who get infected but not seriously sick (Green and Yellow Groups) stay. Accommodations, meals and medication are provided for free. The term “hospitel” is a combination of two words, hospital and hotel. Several hospitels have been set up in the year 2021 but none of them can facilitate persons with disabilities. That is the reason why DPOs have to set up hospitels and CI centers to support their members. They also provide transportation for persons with disabilities to go to the hospitals, hospitels and CI centers.



Figure 1: Community Isolation Center for Persons with Mobility Disabilities



Figure 2: Community Isolation center for persons with intellectual disabilities

7. **Other suggestions.** From the focus group discussion, members of 3 groups gave suggestions which include:

7.1 The government should respond to the Pandemic in a timely manner. It should reduce the bureaucratic process and adjust to the changes. Some rules and regulations should be revised to keep up with the situation.

7.2 When making decisions concerning persons with disabilities, the government must listen to the voices of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations. They should work closely to ensure that the relief measures can truly support persons with disabilities and families.

7.3 The existing relief measures for general people should be reviewed to make sure that persons with disabilities and families can benefit.

7.4 All relief measures should be comprehensive so that everybody can benefit including those in vulnerable groups such as the elderly, children, women and persons with disabilities.

7.5 Disability-specific measures are as important as general measures and persons with disabilities should be able to benefit both, as a Thai citizen and as a person with disabilities.

7.6 Families of persons with disabilities should be supported during the Pandemic. Some of them lost their job due to COVID-19 and face economic crisis just like others. Job opportunities and financial support are needed.

7.7 Medical support should include mental health promotion to reduce stress.

7.8 Related Ministries should work together. Disability matters are not only under responsibility of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security but it involves other Ministries as well.

## **Conclusion**

COVID-19 Pandemic has proved that DPOs in Thailand are strong as they play important roles in maintaining quality of life and wellbeing of persons with disabilities and families which are highly affected by COVID-19 in various ways, from health to financial issues. The study shows that many measures were initiated by them and their quick response was helpful. The government, therefore, should listen to their voices and work closely with them so that it can issue the relief measures that truly respond to the needs of persons with disabilities and families. Furthermore, comprehensive and proactive measures should be issued and effectively implemented. It should also reduce bureaucratic works in order to keep up with the fast-changing situation and render services to those in need in a timely manner.



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