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# Ushering children with disabilities in the 'new normal' post-COVID-19 period: collective actions in the Philippines

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## ABSTRACT

As the world enters a new normal period following the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) global outbreak, the propensity toward the exclusion of the vulnerable group of children with disabilities is a current issue that must be given attention. This issue paper describes the collective actions to usher children with disabilities in the new normal post-COVID-19 period in the Philippines. These actions focus on assistive technologies to augment information and communication, critical services to sustain medical and developmental needs, adaptive learning methods to continue education, and other social services to improve access and mobility. Set within a single national context, this issue paper provides a view as regards the shared initiatives to improve the conditions of children with disabilities in a developing country amid the pandemic.

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## Introduction

COVID-19 cases were first reported in Wuhan, China (Shereen et al. 2020). The COVID-19 timeline shows that on January 13, 2020, the first coronavirus infection outside China was recorded; March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization announced the outbreak a pandemic spreading across the continents; and May 11, 2020, several countries like Thailand, Iran, and Spain relaxed their quarantine restrictions after a decrease in cases was observed (Secon, Woodward, and Mosher 2020).

One of the most vulnerable groups impacted by the COVID-19 is the people with disabilities, which number around one billion worldwide (Armitage and Nellums 2020). As a response to the ongoing global impacts of the crisis to this group, the United Nations (2020) has generally called for its members to introduce measures to assist people with disabilities amid the crisis. It

encouraged its members to consent people with disabilities to work from home, pay leave to guarantee their financial security, and provide equitable adaptation to them. It further suggested establishing clear processes to ensure that, when medical resources are inadequate, access to health services does not put these people at a disadvantage.

In the Philippines, as the country entered to new quarantine types last May 16 for different government units with varying risk levels, selected businesses have reopened. As a safety measure, a set of behaviors called new normal had to be institutionalized. Relative to this, the House of Representatives has filed House Bill No. 6623 to guide people on how to live in a new normal environment. It defines new public behaviors like physical distancing. Furthermore, “[g]uided foremost by the principles of protecting the most vulnerable, ensuring health and safety for all, guaranteeing respect for human rights, and facilitating the inclusive and holistic economic well-being of all sectors and industries, this proposed bill envisions a whole-of-society approach in ushering a hopeful yet well-planned path toward the new normal,” (Mercado 2020; Publico 2020).

However, the Commission on Human Rights or CHR (2020) in the Philippines observed that children with disabilities are often excluded in the decision spaces about the development of programs and services amid the continuing COVID-19 community quarantine. As estimated, one out of seven or around five million children in the country are living with disabilities. This figure may even quite be an underestimate as there is a problem with the accurate statistics of the population of children by type of disabilities because of the lack of diagnostics (Jaucian 2020).

Ushering especially children with disabilities in this early stage of new normal can be quite hard. They may need support in comprehending new information, acquiring new skills, and adopting new social functions, which are needed in the new normal period (Cahapay 2020). The Save the Children Philippines or SCP (2020), a private organization, stated that even the quarantine measures have serious impacts on the lives of children with disabilities and their families due to various constraints in the access to programs and services, which are supposed to support in the transition to new normal.

The University of the Philippines (UP) COVID-19 Pandemic Response Team, a group of experts from the national university that releases projections and analyses to aid decisions as regards the current crisis, has suggested to implement programs related to COVID-19 response that is inclusive of the disability group. It has supported the suggestions for universal assistance as regards the provision of vital and exceptional needs of “basic sectors.” It should be stressed that the “basic sectors,” as defined by Republic Act No. 8425, cover the persons with disabilities (Nonato 2020). Though it remains a desire to fully address the needs of children with disabilities come new

normal period, there have been emerging initiatives that attempt to consider the conditions of this vulnerable segment.

This issue paper describes the current collective actions that aim to usher Filipino children with disabilities in the new normal post-COVID-19 period.

### **Actions to usher children with disabilities in the new normal**

The following emerging actions have been done in the Philippines and are continuously being put forward toward tangible attainment. These actions are focused on assistive technologies, critical services, adaptive learning methods, and other social services for children with disabilities.

#### ***Assistive technologies to augment information and communication***

The UP COVID-19 Pandemic Response Team has expressed its concern for children with disabilities in the country. As such, it has voiced its concern for accessibility of communication systems especially for awareness activities and service implementation for children with disabilities. It also urged local government units to offer monetary assistance to children with disabilities in coordination with the Department of Social Welfare and Development to help cover costs such as the purchase of assistive technologies (Nonato 2020).

Moreover, the CHR (2020) has posted in its online page a campaign to support agencies to develop open information for a vulnerable group of children and with disabilities that includes those with disabilities. For one, as information is seen as a barrier for children with disabilities, the commission has advised to broadcast media for sign language interpreters in delivering news about the COVID-19. Moreover, it strongly indicated the need to provide other assistive technologies to effectively deliver important information to children with disabilities. They suggested easy-to-read materials, text captioning, braille, large format print, among others to augment the communication needs of the children with disabilities.

#### ***Critical services to sustain medical and developmental needs***

SCP (2020) has generally called for innovations to include rehabilitation, medical, therapy, psychosocial, and counseling services for children with disabilities in the revised quarantine measures. Muyot, Chief Executive Officer of SCP, expressed that “children with disabilities continue to face social exclusion, discrimination and the lack of health services and therapy during quarantine which could lead to lifelong and devastating impact in their development.” He urged local government units to take steps to sustain the medical and developmental needs of children with disabilities.

Furthermore, as an immediate response, SCP launched the “Kabataang Aralin sa Lahat Ibahagi” program which means children studies for all. It is a new program that intends to engage homes, schools, and societies to address the needs of children with disabilities. It should be further noted that SCP has been one of the staunch supporters of the passage of the bill on Inclusive Education for Learners with Disabilities that promotes for social responsibility of children with disabilities.

### ***Adaptive learning methods to continue education***

The Department of Education or DepEd (2020), in its official statement on its website, has earlier expressed interest in adaptive learning methods to implement new normal education. With the help of education stakeholders, it has been carefully developing its Learning Continuity Plan (LCP) in adapting to the new normal for the initial August 2020 class opening. The DepEd further disclosed that the LCP includes key features on curriculum adjustments, alignment of learning materials, various modalities of delivery, and corresponding teacher and parent training for home education.

Safeguarding the right to education of children with disabilities, SCP indicated support for the implementation of alternative learning methods of the DepEd. It noted that the use of adaptive learning methods will help “ensure continuity of education and protection of learners” during this time. At the time of writing (August 2020), the DepEd and SCP are closely working together with teachers and other stakeholders for the execution of its LCP and COVID-19 Response Plans to guarantee the continued learning of children, including children with disabilities (Hernando-Malipot 2020).

### ***Other social services to improve access and mobility***

The UP COVID-19 Pandemic Response Team further raised voice to establish helplines at the different levels so that children and adults with disabilities can ask for needed assistance amid the ensuing crisis and new normal. When it comes to transportation, the team advocated to ensure that transportation services are accessible to children and adults with disabilities so that they can perform their tasks such as going to the school or hospital (Nonato 2020).

The social distancing has formed a fundamental part of the new normal. However, some advocacy groups worry about the implications of this practice as it cannot be possible for children with disabilities all the time. They expressed that children with disabilities cannot be left alone and may need assistance from time to time. The Persons with Disability (PWD) Philippines wrote a strong statement on its official Facebook page that “[w]e people

with disabilities and senior citizens should be exempted from social distancing.” (Luna 2020).

## Conclusion

Under the new normal in the post-COVID-19 period, the group of children with disabilities is not spared from some forms of exclusion. While tangible works that ensure the welfare of children with disabilities are still to be fully realized, there have been emerging efforts from different individuals and groups. Though set in the national context of the Philippines, this issue paper provides a view as regards the efforts to better the conditions of children with disabilities. It is hoped to encourage the attainment of programs toward a new normal that is inclusive for all people regardless of circumstances.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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