

**6th International Conference on Disability and
Development: Disability and COVID-19**

London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

**Plenary 4
Towards inclusive responses to COVID-19 & beyond**

**The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Persons
with Disabilities in Ukraine:
Perspectives of Organisations of People with
Disabilities.**

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Context: War in Ukraine.

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Photo: urban street in Ukraine devastated by war. Photo by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine:
<https://www.facebook.com/mvs.gov.ua>

Overhead 3: Context: War in Ukraine.


I come from Ukraine originally which I left in 1999 to study abroad for my Masters' in Human Rights. No one could have predicted then that 23 years later the whole of the country will be in peril. A site of violence and extreme suffering. A death zone, in which the very core of what makes us human - the ethics of recognition, connection, compassion and care - will be consumed by the death work of rockets, missiles and gunfire. Of making others expendable, where suffering is justified by what is claimed to be a greater good.

At the moment, part of my family are missing and have not been in touch since the end of February. They live in an area in the South, which has been occupied by those who came on a pretext of liberation. My other family members, friends and colleagues are hiding in bomb shelters when the sirens go; sleep in the underground car parks when the night comes; make more Molotov cocktails when they hear the news of the Russian army advancing; and they join other volunteers to help friends, neighbours and strangers who have less mental or physical strength as they are confronted with unimaginable violence. That they

are not left stranded, disregarded or abandoned.



Research Project.

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- Focused on the impact of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities.
- Designed and delivered together with the National Assembly of People with Disabilities & Institute of Sociology (NASU).
- Funded by GCRF/AHRC.
- Methods/data collection:
 - Phase 1: online survey of OPDs from across Ukraine.
 - Phase 2: interviews with people with disabilities from ten regions in Ukraine.
 - Phase 3: written diaries and audio and video-testimonies self-recorded by internally displaced people with disabilities.

Overhead 4: Research Project.

This Presentation is based on a research project which explored the impact of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities in Ukraine.

It was designed and delivered together with the National Assembly of People with Disabilities of Ukraine and with the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences. The National Assembly brings together more than 120 OPDs from all regions of Ukraine.


My colleagues in Ukraine cannot join us today; they are as safe as one can be in this nightmare. But the stories they tell me are truly horrifying. I am grateful to have worked with them and I admire their courage and bravery and humanity.

The project was funded by GCRF and AHRC and included three data collection phases.


Phase 1 used an online survey to explore the views of OPDs from across Ukraine.

Phase 2 involved interviews with people with disabilities from ten regions in Ukraine.

Phase 3 relied on a system of written diaries and audio and video-testimonies self-recorded by internally displaced people with disabilities.



Vulnerable Situations: Multiplied and Magnified into a Catastrophe.

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Gerard Quinn:

- 'Persons with disabilities tend to be disproportionately affected by armed conflicts. This seems not to register as an important reality to the extent that it should' (UN General Assembly 2021, para 47);
- '...no such thing as an inherently vulnerable person, but only persons with disabilities placed in vulnerable situations' (UN General Assembly 2021, para 16).

'Vulnerable Situations' before COVID-19: magnified and amplified by the pandemic; and turned into a catastrophe by war.

Overhead 5: Vulnerable Situations: Multiplied and Magnified into a Catastrophe.

In his report on the rights of persons with disabilities in the context of armed conflicts, the Special Rapporteur Gerard Quinn notes that

'Persons with disabilities tend to be disproportionately affected by armed conflicts. This seems not to register as an important reality to the extent that it should' (UN General Assembly 2021, para 47).

He also said that there is 'no such thing as an inherently vulnerable person, but only persons with disabilities placed in vulnerable situations' (UN General Assembly 2021, para 16).


Our research suggests that a wide range of 'vulnerable situations' shaped the lives of persons with disabilities in Ukraine before the pandemic.

COVID-19 and the government responses to the pandemic amplified both the volume and the scale of such vulnerable situations.


The war tuned these vulnerable situations into catastrophe which fell heavily on persons with disabilities across Ukraine.

Little verifiable research can be collected at this stage; but by talking to colleagues in Ukraine we know that people with disabilities are confronted with the issues of both availability and accessibility of information, essential healthcare, evacuation procedures and safe zones; essential services and medication.

These life-changing challenges are on the top of what all civilians are facing in Ukraine: deliberate destruction of civilian infrastructure, lack of food and water, and, increasingly, indiscriminate targeting of the civilian population.



Triple Whammy x 2 for Persons with Disabilities in Ukraine in the context of war.

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Tom Shakespeare et al. (2021): triple jeopardy - increased risk of poor outcomes from C19; reduced access to healthcare; adverse social impacts of efforts to mitigate.

In Ukraine: another triple set of 'cascading vulnerabilities':

1. Vulnerable situations: existing barriers to full social and economic inclusion (before C19).
2. Pre-C19 vulnerable situations: multiplied and magnified by the pandemic and responses.
3. Ongoing war: turned 'doubly' vulnerable situations into a catastrophe.

Overhead 6: Triple Whammy x 2 for Persons with Disabilities in Ukraine in the context of war


In his opening speech Tom Shakespeare referred to his and colleagues' article in the Lancet. They talk about the triple whammy or triple jeopardy that confronted persons with disabilities across the world as the pandemic unfolded: the increased risk of poor outcomes from COVID-19 itself, reduced access to healthcare, and the adverse social impacts of efforts to mitigate the pandemic (Shakespeare et al. 2021)

In Ukraine, there is now another triple set of what I would describe as interlocking and cascading vulnerabilities which reinforce each other and cascade into the lives of persons with disabilities:

(a) Vulnerable situations arising from pre-COVID barriers to full social and economic inclusion of persons with disabilities in Ukraine.

(b) Such pre-COVID19 vulnerable situations were further multiplied and amplified by the pandemic and by government responses to the pandemic

(c) The ongoing war turned these doubly vulnerable situations into a catastrophe as the civilian infrastructure is being targeted and destroyed and as all support systems are crumbling.



Ukrainian OPDs, COVID-19 and persons with disabilities in Ukraine.

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- Online Survey: June 2021. 150 OPDs invited, 108 responded.
- Included closed and open-ended questions.
- Open-ended: describe in own words (no prompts) the impact of the pandemic.
- Descriptive QUAN data: SPSS; QUAL data: BVIVO and inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006).
- Participatory analysis workshops with disability experts and activists in Ukraine.

Overhead 7: Ukrainian OPDs, COVID-19 and persons with disabilities in Ukraine


I would like to return to the survey of OPD and tell you more about the key findings which of course precede the ongoing war in Ukraine.

The online survey ran in June last year; we contacted 150 OPDs and received 108 responses. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions. In the open-ended part, we asked OPDs to describe in their own words the impact of the pandemic on people they were taking care of.


We analysed descriptive quantitative data using SPSS.

We coded and analysed qualitative data using NVIVO and relied on inductive thematic analysis to identify key themes.

We then discussed the initial outcomes with Ukrainian disability activists and experts in our Participatory Analysis Workshops. Which were also used to formulate policy recommendations.



Impact of C19 on persons with disabilities.

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Two key dimensions: availability and accessibility coalescing into 'de-prioritisation'.

Key themes (coding and thematic analysis):

- Impacts on health + availability and accessibility of healthcare.
- Impacts on psychological wellbeing, mental health, and social isolation.
- Restricted Mobility.
- Reduced access to social services, social support and education.
- Additional barriers faced by specific groups, including internally displaced persons with disabilities.

Overhead 8: Impact of C19 on persons with disabilities.

Survey responses covered two themes: the impact of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities; and the impact of COVID on the Ukrainian OPDs.

Two key dimensions in relation to the impact of COVID19 on persons with disabilities were (a) availability and (b) accessibility of healthcare, services and support.

The lack of availability and reduced or non-existing accessibility coalesced into what can be described as de-prioritisation of disability in the government response.

The key themes here are:

1. Impacts on health and healthcare. Participants mentioned existing health conditions aggravated, the

impact of long COVID, repurposing of healthcare facilities; withdrawn access to health care during lockdowns especially for people living in rural areas; the need for informal payments to receive better treatment and the need to pay for (and sometimes administer) their own medication.


2. Impacts on psychological wellbeing, mental health and social isolation: this was linked to limited or fully withdrawn access to the pre-pandemic social and professional support systems. Poor availability (due to digital poverty) and accessibility of online facilities was raised as a concern for people with sensory disabilities.

3. Restricted Mobility was linked to a series of lockdowns which limited people's access not only to shops and healthcare but also to the extended care networks. The impact was more severe in rural areas where access to these services was completely withdrawn.

4. Reduced and restricted access to social services, social support and education: the pandemic deepened the poverty experienced by many people with disabilities in Ukraine. Although a small one-off relief payment of about £30 was made available by the government in 2020, this was insufficient to cover additional costs and to compensate for increasing costs of food and medication. Financial destitution meant that some individuals and households could not afford to buy basic supplies or pay for utilities and services.

5. Additional barriers were also mentioned for specific groups: including children with disabilities, older persons, people living in rural areas, people with sensory disabilities.

6. Internally displaced people experienced issues with available and accessible housing, poverty and problems with receiving benefits which were conditional on having a registration as an IDP or as a person with disability.



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Impact of C19 on OPDs.

- Changes to mode of working and service delivery.
- Reduced or withdrawn organisational funding (even from organisations delivering social services).
- Decreased or non-existent cooperation with state authorities and with volunteers.
- Positive developments: new partnership and co-working with other organisations; some benefits of working online (improved accessibility for some but not others).

Overhead 8: The impact of COVID-19 on OPDs

Some of the key themes in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on OPDs included:

1. Changes to mode of working and service delivery: many OPDs had to change the way they worked. Some switched to hybrid working, other moved to online only, and 10% of OPDs in our sample suspended most of their activities. Almost 90% of OPDs said they struggled to give their members the computers and internet access for online work.
2. Many organisations mentioned the costs they had to cover to re-organise their service delivery and to provide additional support to people they cared for at a time when a lot of funding was simply withdrawn by donors and by the government.
3. Only 7% of organisations (out of more than 100) indicated that their partnership with the government

increased over the pandemic period. The majority felt that there was less co-operation or that co-operation was more about 'disability washing', to tick the disability engagement box.

4. Positive organisational developments included new partnerships and co-working with other organisations, and some benefits of working online.



Conclusion / 1.

- At the time of research: the outcome/course of the pandemic was (still is) uncertain.
- Today: the course and outcome of war is uncertain.
- Both: disproportionate impact on persons with disabilities.
- OPDs - one of the last remaining systems of support for people they have been taking care of in both contexts.



Conclusion / 2.

- OPD's knowledge and expertise: must inform all current and future relief efforts.
- Relief efforts: must foreground disability, respond to the difference of disability, and facilitate meaningful inclusion and participation.
- COVID-19 and Ukraine: what can we learn to be better prepared for what's to come.

Thank you!



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More information about the
project (including project
reports):

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