



Dear Fellow South African,

If we are to ensure that the recovery of our economy and society in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic is meaningful, then we need to ensure that all South Africans are included and that all benefit.

This was one of the key views that emerged from the meeting of the Presidential Working Group on Disability that was held virtually last week. The Working Group brings together several sectoral organisations and government departments to guide the realisation of the social and economic rights of persons with disabilities.

Significantly, the meeting took place on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. The government delegation underlined our priority to mainstream the rights of persons with disabilities across government planning, and to ensure all departments are held to strict targets when it comes to inclusion and empowerment.

We reiterated our commitment to fully implementing the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and to meeting our international obligations with regards to advancing the rights of persons with disabilities, notably the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

While the coronavirus pandemic has caused great hardship for all South Africans, the impact has been particularly severe for many persons with disabilities.

The restrictions on movement and activity that were put in place at the onset of the pandemic, together with the pressure that was put on health facilities, meant

that many persons with disabilities found it more difficult to access the health care and other support services they needed.

This time was particularly difficult for those persons with disabilities who rely on family, friends and community members for help with various tasks and activities. Many people, including the elderly, spent weeks and months in relative isolation.

Because persons with disabilities are disproportionately more likely to be unemployed or not in education or training, many have been more vulnerable than most to the devastating impact of the disease on lives and livelihoods.

It is therefore fitting that the United Nations said that the International Day of Persons with Disabilities should this year focus on 'building back better'.

This is precisely how we need to approach the issue of disability as we rebuild our country and our society in the wake of the coronavirus. We have said that we do not want to merely return our economy to where it was before the crisis, but to build a more inclusive and transformed economy.

By the same measure, we want to ensure that the circumstances of persons with disabilities are fundamentally and permanently improved. We must make up lost time and move forward with greater focus and urgency to progressively achieve the equalisation of opportunities for person with disabilities.

This work must take place in all areas of life.

In developing the Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan, we have emphasised that businesses owned and run by persons with disabilities need to play a significant role in the infrastructure build programme. Persons with disabilities will also be supported to form cooperatives in key sectors such as retail, agriculture, financial services and manufacturing, and, in addition to women and youth, will be prioritised in accessing funding for business initiatives.

This needs to take place alongside a concerted effort to increase the proportion of persons with disabilities employed in both government and the private sector.

The private sector has to do more to empower, capacitate, train and employ more persons with disabilities, and to making workplaces more conducive and accommodating.

Closely linked to the task of economic empowerment is the struggle for inclusive education, ensuring that children with disabilities are able to access and receive a quality education that is suited to their needs. It is estimated that around half a million children with disabilities of school-going age are not in school. Many are in specialised schools and centres, often located far from their families and communities and without proper care or teaching.

Our goal should be to enable children with disabilities to attend their local schools and ensure that these schools have the resources, personnel and physical infrastructure to accommodate their specific requirements. Among other things, this requires training of educators in inclusive education and challenging attitudes that give rise to discrimination and stigmatisation.

Another area that is fundamental to inclusion is communication, making sure that persons with disabilities are able to receive and impart information regardless of the nature of their disability. It is for this reason that we have been promoting the designation of South African sign language as our 12th official language, and why we are looking at how government information and services can be made accessible to people who are blind or visually impaired, who are deaf, or have psychosocial or intellectual disabilities.

As a country, we still have a long way to go. But if we are to make progress, we need to start by improving the understanding across society of the ways in which persons with disabilities are excluded and marginalised. We need to tackle discrimination against, and victimisation of, persons with disabilities.

The achievement of equal opportunities for persons with disabilities is necessary for the realisation of the rights contained in our Constitution, and is an important part of the objectives of our National Development Plan and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

We will therefore not be able to achieve a truly inclusive, just and prosperous society without the needs, concerns and rights of persons with disabilities being fulfilled.

This must be one of our foremost priorities as we recover from the coronavirus pandemic, so that we can truly build back better for all South Africans.

With best regards,

*Cyril Ramaphosa*

