



► Policy Brief

June 2020

COVID-19 and the World of Work:

Ensuring the inclusion of persons with disabilities at all stages of the response

Persons with disabilities, 15% of the world's population,¹ face marginalization in social, economic and health terms, as well as limitations by public services to reach them. This marginalization increases the threat to lives and livelihoods that the COVID-19 crisis poses. In response to the crisis, an approach that is inclusive of persons with disabilities is essential to mitigate the negative effects of the crisis and ensure a sustainable recovery.

This brief highlights key issues that a disability-inclusive COVID-19 response, as called for by the UN Secretary-General,² should address. It is based on the ILO approach to promoting decent work for all and ensuring employment and social protection for persons with disabilities. Doing so will contribute to each of the ILO's key pillars in fighting COVID-19 in the world of work.³

► Making lockdown and other containment measures responsive to the situation of persons with disabilities

Persons with disabilities are more likely to have health conditions that increase the risk of getting COVID-19.⁴ Generally, persons with disabilities are less able to ensure physical distancing, face accessibility barriers in obtaining relevant information, and may experience a worsening of existing social isolation and enhanced exposure to violence and harassment. The over-representation of persons with disabilities among the poor and in the informal economy increase their risk of infection. Many of these risks are compounded for women and older persons with disabilities.⁵

At the same time, some recommended COVID-19 prevention measures might create new barriers for people with disabilities. All these risks should be addressed in ways that protect persons with disabilities from contagion, while permitting them to maintain their jobs and incomes. In Uganda, a survey among 10,000 persons with disabilities and family members in late April 2020 showed that 45% of people with disabilities worried about how they would feed their family compared to 14% who worried that they might get infected by COVID-19.⁶

1 WHO and World Bank (2011) [World report on disability](#)

2 UN Secretary-General (2020) Policy Brief: [A Disability-Inclusive Response to COVID-19](#)

3 Stimulating the economy and employment; supporting enterprises, jobs and incomes; protecting workers in the workplace; relying on social dialogue for solutions: ILO (2020) Policy Brief: [A policy framework for tackling the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 crisis](#)

4 WHO (2020) [Disability considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak](#)

5 UN Secretary-General (2020) Policy Briefs: [The Impact of COVID-19 on older persons](#) and [A Disability-Inclusive Response to COVID-19](#)

6 Light for the World, TRAC FM (2020) [The Impact of COVID-19 on Persons with Disabilities in Uganda](#)

Ensure protection from COVID-19 through disability-inclusive occupational safety and health (OSH) measures. Employers should ensure that the information for workers about the health-risks of COVID-19 is provided in an accessible way. Some risk factors can be mitigated through relevant adjustments on the premises or through telework or paid leave, when work on site is too risky. According to a survey done by the ILO Global Business and Disability Network (GBDN) in May 2020,⁷ the most frequent company practices to prevent COVID-19 infections among employees with disabilities are telework, flexible working hours and paid leave. These solutions should be discussed case by case, as not all workers with disabilities face the same risks. Many of the companies that responded to the ILO GBDN survey, mentioned that they are providing **mental health support** to their employees. Many persons with disabilities are also facing mental health issues because of the COVID-19 crisis that affects them in distinct ways.⁸ Mental health-related support measures need to be accessible also to employees with disabilities, and pay particular attention to persons with psychosocial disabilities, while avoiding stigma and discrimination. The Specialised Training & Disability Centre of the Employers' Federation of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) has highlighted the need for measures to ensure accessible reporting mechanisms and victim assistance services for women and girls with disabilities facing domestic violence and harassment.

Work organization and working arrangements need to be accessible and inclusive. When designing and implementing alternative working arrangements or reviewing onsite working arrangements, accessible environments and reasonable adjustments based on individual needs should be ensured. In the case of telework, it is particularly important that digital content be made accessible, and, where needed, sign language and accessible meeting formats provided. Some workers with disabilities will need access to adaptive software or equipment they had in the workplace, or further adjustments in their new work environment. Employers'

organizations can guide their members on how to support employees with disabilities through relevant working arrangements.⁹ The Specialised Training & Disability Centre of the Employers' Federation of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) developed policy recommendations to ensure reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities working in offices as well as from home.¹⁰ The UK Trades Union Congress (TUC) launched a guide on reasonable adjustments in April 2020 to address issues resulting from telework among workers with disabilities.¹¹

Persons with disabilities need to continue their professional development throughout the crisis. The Bangladesh Business and Disability Network is facilitating job matching services during the crisis for persons with disabilities who lost their job or are looking for their first job, and the Philippine Business and Disability Network is launching a reskilling initiative to help workers with disabilities acquire skills for post-crisis work.¹² Canadian unions have been coordinating with Disabled Women's Network Canada (DAWN) which has developed a set of case studies of exemplary employers from a variety of sectors, where good practices can be shared with other businesses. They are focused on holding employers accountable to enable them to continue hiring, retaining and promoting persons with disabilities within their businesses, including a fund to support small and medium sized businesses to not suffer undue hardship in accommodating disabilities.¹³

The situation of persons with disabilities who are self-employed or in the **informal economy** is particularly challenging. These workers need to receive support to maintain their livelihoods and allow them to take adequate precautions. Trade unions have highlighted the vulnerable situation of workers with disabilities in the informal economy, particularly in respect of the measures taken to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus.

7 ILO (2020) Disability inclusion in company responses to COVID-19: results of a survey among National Business and Disability Networks and their members. *In May 2020, the ILO Global Business and Disability Network conducted two surveys to identify needs and good practices in COVID-19 responses: one targeted the company members of National Business and Disability Networks (NBDNs), while the other targeted NBDNs themselves. A total of 157 company members from 21 NBDNs replied, as well as 17 NBDNs.*

8 UN Secretary-General (2020) Policy Brief: [COVID-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health](#)

9 ILO (2020) [An employers' guide on working from home in response to the outbreak of COVID-19](#)

10 ILO (2020) Disability inclusion in company responses to COVID-19: results of a survey among National Business and Disability Networks and their members

11 Trades Union Congress (2020) [Covid-19 and reasonable adjustments - guide for reps](#)

12 ILO (2020) Disability inclusion in company responses to COVID-19: results of a survey among National Business and Disability Networks and their members

13 DAWN (2020) [A message from DAWN about COVID-19](#)

Targeted social protection measures¹⁴. The current pandemic has shown the vital role of social protection in addressing the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. Countries with more comprehensive and inclusive social protection systems have been in a better position to provide urgent support to persons with disabilities. Up to May 2020, at least 60 countries had taken specific measures for these persons:¹⁵

- **Cash-transfers.** Many countries have provided extra or increased payments for persons with disabilities who were already getting disability benefits. Some, including France, Kyrgyz Republic, and Saudi Arabia have relaxed administrative requirements to ensure continued access to the disability benefits. Rwanda and Sri Lanka have expanded coverage to include more persons with disabilities. Some countries have adopted paid leave for parents or family members of persons with disabilities to maintain support.
- **In-kind support.** Many countries have provided food or non-food items and home-based support services. Jordan, Morocco and several states in India have created help-lines for people with disabilities.
- **Adaptation of delivery mechanisms to prevent risks of contamination and overcome lockdown restrictions.** Examples include setting specific dates to withdraw benefits to avoid crowds in South Africa, home delivery of cash transfers in Albania and Armenia, or online registration and remote access to disability certificates in Russia.

The Uruguayan trade union *Plenario Intersindical de Trabajadores - Convención Nacional de Trabajadores* (PIT-CNT) provides information to workers with disabilities on access to benefits, in collaboration with relevant organizations of persons with disabilities, contributing to the promotion of on-line dialogue on this issue among trade unions in Latin America.

Maintain and develop support services for persons with disabilities during lockdown and the health crisis. Adjustments in provision of care and assistance are essential for persons with disabilities. As women shoulder the majority of care responsibilities,¹⁶ these adjustments need to be gender-responsive,

to address women's needs as both receivers and providers of care, and to support the redistribution of care. Care, assistance, disability-related services (including provision of assistive devices), need to continue throughout lockdown and other containment measures. This entails designating these services and workers as essential. Funding should be ensured for service providers that deliver critical support and assistance to persons with disabilities of all ages. Peer support systems for persons with disabilities are especially needed to address the risk of increased isolation. People with disabilities can contribute to work-related peer-support schemes by sharing their resilience strategies and leading the conversations about teleworking for those who are transitioning to this form of work during the lockdown. Platforms can be developed to help match at-risk people and those who can provide assistance.¹⁷ Workers' organisations and their members also play a key role in the promotion of disability inclusion by assisting workers with disabilities to meet their social and economic needs, making workers' centres accessible to them, and establishing alliances with organizations of persons with disabilities.¹⁸

14 ILO, UNICEF, UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, International Disability Alliance, Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2020) Brief: [Disability-inclusive Social Protection response to COVID-19 crisis](#)

15 Center for Inclusive Policy (2020) [An initial overview of specific social protection measures for persons with disabilities and their families in response to COVID-19 crisis](#)

16 ILO (2019) [A quantum leap for gender equality for a better future of work for all](#)

17 [Global Cooperation on Assistive Technology](#) (GATE)

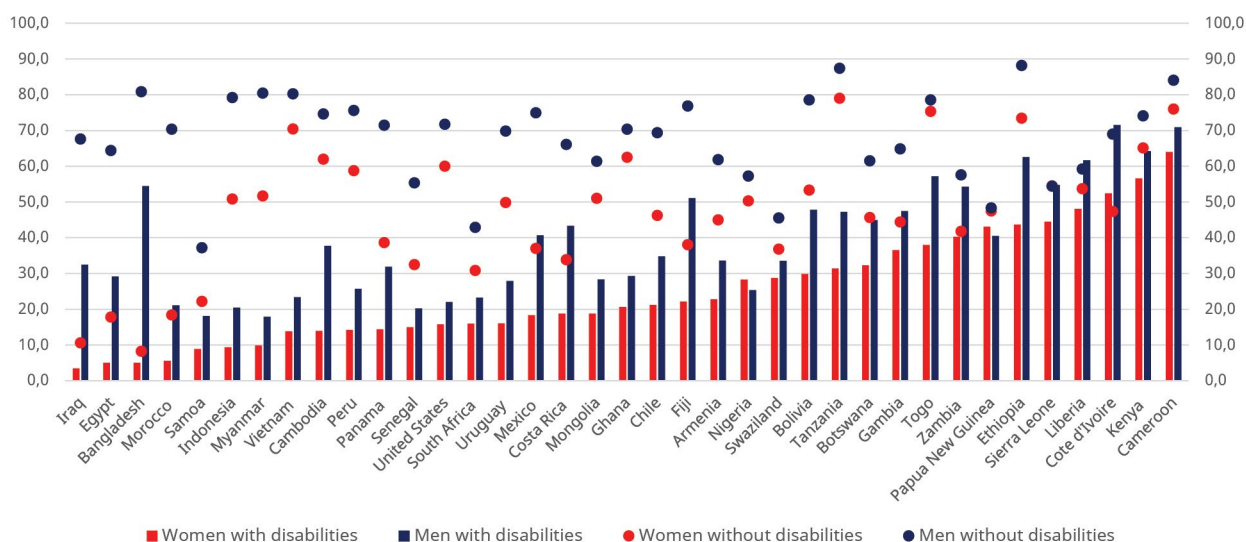
18 ILO (2017) [Trade Union Action on Decent Work for Persons with Disabilities: A Global Overview](#)

► Inclusion of persons with disabilities in the socio-economic response

Many persons with disabilities come into this crisis already facing significant exclusions in all areas of the world of work. Persons with disabilities are:

- Less likely to be in employment or have decent employment conditions than persons without disabilities.¹⁹
- More likely to be in the informal economy than persons without disabilities.²⁰
- Not adequately covered by social protection. In low and middle income countries less than 20% of persons with severe disabilities have access to disability-related social protection schemes.²¹

Figure 1: Employment-to-population ratio by disability status and sex, most recent ILO data.



These exclusions are even more pronounced for persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, as well as for persons with multiple disabilities. Multiple discrimination further exacerbates the marginalization of women with disabilities in employment and with respect to social protection coverage.

The pandemic and resulting economic shocks increase the vulnerability of persons with disabilities to further discrimination and exclusion. They are amongst the hardest hit by economic crises,²² and are more likely to lose work and have difficulties finding employment again.

Disability inclusion is central to the COVID-19 socio-economic response and to ensure no one is left behind.²³ The **perspectives and life experiences of persons with disabilities can help create innovative solutions** to tackle the crisis and ensure a more equitable society for all. Mechanisms to promote disability inclusion contribute to a response that better serves everyone, making systems more agile and responsive to complex situations.

19 UN DESA (2018) [Disability and Development Report: Realizing the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with persons with disabilities](#)

20 Ibid.

21 ILO (2019) [Measuring financing gaps in social protection for achieving SDG target 1.3: Global estimates and strategies for developing countries](#)

22 Mitra, S. and Kruse, D., 2016. Are workers with disabilities more likely to be displaced? The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 27(14), pp.1550-1579

23 Lessons for the COVID-19 response and recovery can be drawn from disability inclusion in humanitarian crises, see for instance: International Disability Alliance (IDA), Humanity & Inclusion (HI), CBM (2019) [Inclusion of persons with disabilities in humanitarian action: 39 examples of field practices, and learnings from 20 countries, for all phases of humanitarian response](#)

The **UN Secretary-General has asked for a disability-inclusive response to COVID-19.**²⁴ A time-bound working group has been established by the Executive Office of the UN Secretary-General to promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the health, socio-economic and humanitarian responses and to ensure disability inclusion is taken into account in the funding that is being allocated to respond to COVID-19. The ILO launched a call for action to remind all stakeholders to include persons with disabilities in all COVID-19 response-related initiatives.²⁵

The first step in designing the socio-economic response is to **undertake a rapid assessment** of the situation. It is important that this assessment considers the specific situation of persons with disabilities, and includes questions to this effect.²⁶ Further, it is essential to ensure the participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations.

When designing the initiatives that will address the socio-economic impact of the crisis, disability inclusion needs to be pursued through a **combination of mainstreaming and targeted measures**. This twin-track approach needs to be explicitly foreseen in the funding that is allocated to the response. Global and regional funds, as well as funding from development donors, should lead by example. The recently established OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) disability marker²⁷ can be used to assess disability inclusion of projects and programmes, and donors should commit to using this marker in the context of their allocation of COVID-19 resources.

Disability inclusion as a requirement for funding will make donors and recipients accountable and ensure transparent reporting. Disability- and sex-disaggregated data, as well as reporting that explicitly provides information on how to mainstream disability in initiatives, how the initiatives have benefitted persons with disabilities and which targeted measures have been undertaken, should be considered in this context.

Many countries promote **initiatives to support employment retention and employment promotion** in the socio-economic response by supporting companies, in particular SMEs, and workers who have lost their jobs. These initiatives, including skills development, job-creation, business development services, employment services, public works, employment-intensive infrastructure programmes or other forms of labour market activation, should promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities. They can do so by foreseeing accessibility of the services, undertaking targeted

outreach and, wherever possible, establishing targets or quotas for the employment of persons with disabilities. The same applies to initiatives targeting the rural economy, the informal economy and those sectors with growth opportunities, as well as initiatives promoting youth employment.

Financial support for employers can be required to incentivize employers to be disability-inclusive. Requirements in public procurement are a useful mechanism to promote employment of persons with disabilities, including enterprises owned by persons with disabilities. In terms of government support, companies that responded to the ILO GBDN survey stated that subsidies to cover costs related to reasonable workplace adjustments and wage subsidies were priorities for a disability-inclusive business response.²⁸

Funds should be allocated for disability organizations to provide the required know-how to make relevant initiatives and services disability-inclusive. Particular attention should be given to targeted job matching and, when required, to support on-the-job, as well as apprenticeship options for youth with disabilities.²⁹

Employers have a key role in disability inclusion in the labour market. Much progress has been made in recent years to promote disability inclusion, including in developing countries. The **National Business and Disability Networks**³⁰ have played a key role in this regard and can also play an important role in ensuring that persons with disabilities are part of the socio-economic response to the crisis. National Business and Disability Networks can provide useful guidance to governments in the design and implementation of a disability-inclusive socio-economic response.

24 UN Secretary-General (2020) Policy Brief: [A Disability-Inclusive Response to COVID-19](#)

25 ILO (2020) [No one left behind, not now, not ever: Persons with disabilities in the COVID-19 response](#)

26 A key tool to do this in surveys and census is the [Washington Group Short Set of Questions](#)

27 OECD (2019) [Handbook for the marker for the inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities](#)

28 ILO (2020) Disability inclusion in company responses to COVID-19: results of a survey among National Business and Disability Networks and their members

29 ILO (2018) Policy Brief: [Making apprenticeships and workplace learning inclusive of persons with disabilities](#)

30 See for instance the [ILO Global Business and Disability Network](#) and the National Business and Disability Networks linked to it

In Uganda, a **joint statement by the social partners**, the Federation of Uganda Employers and the National Organisation of Trade Unions, calls for a comprehensive response to the COVID-19 measures ensuring that no one is left behind, particularly people living with HIV, persons with disability, migrants and people in other vulnerable situations.³¹

The coverage and adequacy of social protection needs to be increased. Beyond the immediate measures identified in the previous section, it is critical to significantly increase social protection coverage and the amount of support as key measures in the immediate socio-economic response. In the case of disability benefits, these should focus on the disability-related extra costs and therefore should be compatible with also receiving income from work.

▶ Seizing the opportunity for a more inclusive and “better normal”

The immediate response to the crisis, if disability-inclusive, will shape new and better opportunities for persons with disabilities in the future. If visibility and participation of persons with disabilities in the socio-economic response is ensured, it will be a foundation for their role in the recovery. Globally, disability inclusion needs to be fully embedded in the international cooperation efforts that will support the recovery from the crisis.

The five overarching recommendations of the **report “Making the Future of Work inclusive of persons with disabilities”**³² are now even more relevant for the way forward and out of the crisis:

- ▶ New forms of work and employment relations integrate disability inclusion
- ▶ Skills development and life-long learning made inclusive of persons with disabilities
- ▶ Universal Design embedded in development of all new infrastructure, products and services
- ▶ Assistive Technologies, existing and newly developed, made affordable and available
- ▶ Measures to include persons with disabilities in growing and developing areas of the economy

Towards a disability-inclusive just transition. The response to COVID-19 needs to contribute to efforts ensuring a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies. Promotion of a just transition and creation of green jobs need to be inclusive of persons with disabilities.³³ The more that disability inclusion can be linked with these issues, the more it will be able to influence wider efforts for recovery in the

world of work.

Build universal and inclusive social protection systems. The crisis has shown the relevance of adequate social protection systems as key to protecting all persons, including persons with disabilities. It is essential to ensure a social protection floor and universal coverage of disability benefits. Inclusive social protection systems should guarantee income security, coverage of disability related costs, and access to health care and support services across the life cycle.³⁴ Delivery should be through mainstream and disability-specific schemes, and sustainable financing ensured through a mix of tax-financed and contributory schemes.

Disability-related social protection should be compatible with work and economic empowerment programmes.³⁵ Disability benefits have had a complex relationship with work. Some have been based on a supposed “inability to work”. This approach reinforces prejudice, creates negative incentives to seek work and does not take into account the extra costs that workers with disabilities incur because of their disability. It is essential that the social protection measures that address this crisis in the medium and long term do not reproduce this dynamic.

31 Federation of Uganda Employers, National Organisation of Trade Unions (2020) [Joint FUE / NOTU communiqué on COVID-19 response in the world of work in Uganda](#)

32 ILO, Fundación ONCE (2019) [Making the Future of Work inclusive of persons with disabilities](#)

33 ILO (2019) Policy Brief: [Persons with disabilities in a just transition to a low-carbon economy](#)

34 ILO et al. (2019) [Joint statement: Towards inclusive social protection systems supporting the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities](#)

35 ILO, UNICEF, UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, International Disability Alliance, Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2020) Brief: [Disability-inclusive Social Protection response to COVID-19 crisis](#)

Disability benefits should be designed to enable access to work, while recognizing that for many persons with disabilities, the barriers and lack of support will hinder their entry into the labour market.³⁶

Ensure adequate and sustainable financing for disability support services and disability organizations.

Persons with disabilities need a range of specialized interventions to access skills development and work, including assistive devices and access to employment services. The government and non-government provision of these services already had low coverage, especially in low- and middle-income countries, and they are under threat of cuts during an economic recession. These services and interventions which build capacity on disability inclusion in the world of work need to be maintained and developed further.

Take an intersectional approach to disability inclusion.

While women represent more than half of people with

disabilities, gender and disability approaches tend to run on parallel tracks. Gender and disability interventions, however, share many points in common such as their mainstreaming approaches, and would have more impact if their mutually reinforcing nature was better harnessed in interventions.³⁷ Similarly, shared needs and approaches exist in the responses for older persons. Interventions focused on specific groups, such as persons living with HIV, indigenous and tribal peoples and migrant workers need to be inclusive of persons with disabilities and vice-versa.

The response to the COVID-19 crisis creates the **foundations for recovery**. It is an opportunity to reinforce the rights of persons with disabilities and enhance their inclusion in social and economic life, building on the achievements in these areas made in previous years. A more inclusive future of work is possible for all.

► Recommendations in a nutshell

During lockdown and other containment measures:

- a. Ensure protection from COVID-19 through disability-inclusive occupational safety and health (OSH) measures.
- b. Ensure accessible and inclusive working conditions in all relevant working arrangements.
- c. Social protection to provide immediate assistance to persons with disabilities through cash-transfers, in-kind support, and adapted delivery mechanisms.
- d. Maintain and develop support services for persons with disabilities during lockdown and throughout the health crisis.
- e. Develop work related peer support schemes targeting persons with disabilities.

In the socio-economic response:

- f. Ensure consultation and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in all stages of the socio-economic response.
- g. Ensure rapid assessments of the situation include persons with disabilities, both women and men, and set the basis for accountability and reporting.

- h. Ensure a combination of mainstreaming and targeting measures for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all initiatives of the socio-economic response.
- i. Make financial mechanisms and resource allocations for the response inclusive of persons with disabilities.
- j. Ensure that programmes and initiatives for employment promotion include persons with disabilities and are gender-responsive.

In the recovery:

- k. Ensure that efforts for a just transition for environmental sustainability are disability-inclusive.
- l. Ensure new forms of work are accessible and inclusive of persons with disabilities.
- m. Expand coverage and adequacy of social protection for persons with disabilities, contributing to universal social protection.
- n. Ensure social protection facilitates the economic empowerment of persons with disabilities in the changing world of work.
- o. Develop or establish disability support services that enable training and work. Relevant international frameworks and labour standards

36 In recent years, more countries have been designing disability benefits to be compatible with work. Measures to do so have been taken by Fiji, Mauritius and Thailand among others.

37 See for instance: Spanish Committee of representatives of people with disabilities – CERMI (2012) [Guide to gender mainstreaming in public disability policies](#)

▶ Relevant international frameworks and labour standards

The international community guarantees the inclusion of persons with disabilities through rights and development frameworks. These commitments need to be translated into meaningful inclusion in the response to this global crisis.

- ▶ The *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* pledges to leave no one behind, and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) explicitly include persons with disabilities in specified targets.³⁸
- ▶ The *United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* ensures the rights of persons with disabilities in all contexts and areas of life, including crises and humanitarian emergencies.³⁹
- ▶ The *ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, 2019*, sets out a clear framework for a human-centred approach to shape a fair, inclusive and secure future of work with full, productive and freely chosen employment and decent work for all. It highlights in particular the need to ensure equal opportunities and treatment in the world of work for persons with disabilities.⁴⁰
- ▶ The *ILO Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons) Convention, 1983 (No. 159)*⁴¹ and the *Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons) Recommendation, 1983 (No. 168)*⁴² promote skills development and employment of persons with disabilities. The Convention requires member States to formulate, implement and periodically review national policies on vocational rehabilitation and employment of persons with disabilities, based on the principle of equal opportunity. It also provides a key role for workers' and employers' organizations.
- ▶ The *ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202)*⁴³ stipulates that disability benefits should be part of progressively extended social protection, and that essential healthcare includes specific care required for disability.
- ▶ The *ILO Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 (No. 205)*⁴⁴ highlights the importance to address the needs of persons with disabilities in crisis and conflict settings.

38 UN (2015) [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)

39 UN (2008) [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)

40 ILO (2019) [ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work](#)

41 ILO [Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment \(Disabled Persons\) Convention, 1983 \(No. 159\)](#)

42 ILO [Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment \(Disabled Persons\) Recommendation, 1983 \(No. 168\)](#)

43 ILO [Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 \(No. 202\)](#)

44 ILO [Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 \(No. 205\)](#)

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