COVID-19 and tackling inequalities in Caribbean Small Islands States: 

THE PERSPECTIVE OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

By Senator Floyd Morris, Ph.D. Director of the Centre for Disability Studies, University of the West Indies

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a deleterious effect on countries across the world. At the time of writing this Think Piece, over 105 million individuals have contracted the disease and over 2.3 million have died. Small Island Developing States (SIDS) such as those in the Caribbean and marginalized populations like persons with disabilities have seen devastating consequences of the pandemic.

According to WHO Report on Persons with Disabilities, there are over 1 billion individuals with a disability living across the world, with over 80% of these individuals domiciling in developing countries. These individuals are regarded as the most marginalized across the world. Their marginality comes about due to them having poorer health outcomes, least likely to access education, lower possibilities of being employed and deeply entrenched negative attitudes and stigma in society. Resultantly, persons with disabilities are to be found among the poorest in developing countries of which SIDS of the Caribbean are situated.

Recognizing the situation of persons with disabilities, one can expect the COVID-19 pandemic to have impacted negatively on the population of persons with disabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in what I regard as the 'clash of the models', meaning that the varied perspectives that have driven our understanding of these marginalized individuals over the years have collided during the pandemic. The welfare, medical, social and human rights models of disability have figured prominently during the COVID-19 pandemic. Governments have introduced lock down measures and this has contributed to some persons with disabilities confining to their homes and depending on welfare support from the State, family, church and other welfare providing individuals or organizations. From the panorama of the medical model, we have seen where persons with disabilities have been sidelined because health professionals have very limited knowledge in how to treat and relate with these vulnerable individuals. Furthermore, persons with disabilities have considerable challenges accessing health care facilities across the region.

have seen how children with disabilities have been further isolated from educational institutions because they do not have the requisite technological support to experience remote teaching. Access to education and modern technologies are preeminent challenges for persons with disabilities in the Caribbean. Conflatedly, these have served to impact on the human rights model of disability as the right to quality health care, a decent standard of living, right to education and access to technology is further weakened. Unequivocally, the COVID-19 pandemic and the related preventive measures have widened the inequality among persons with disabilities in Caribbean SIDS and has set back the limited progress being made for the members of this marginalized group in the region. Based on the COVID-19 responses and preventive measures implemented thus far, there is an urgent need for a more inclusive and participatory role of persons with disabilities. Indeed, if the global mantra of persons with disabilities “nothing about us, without us” is to be actualized in the Caribbean, these marginalized individuals must be meaningfully engaged in the decision-making process. Consultations must therefore be held with persons with disabilities and organizations representing these individuals to get their perspectives on varied programmes and policies to be implemented for COVID-19. For example, planning committees established by governments to execute the roll out of the COVID-19 vaccines must have representation from the community of persons with disabilities. Simultaneously, information that is being made available to the public relating to the COVID-19 vaccine or any other related programme or policy, must be readily available to persons with disabilities. For example, press conferences or national broadcasts being conducted by governments must have Sign Language Interpretation for persons who are deaf. Similarly, information should be prepared and packaged in simple formats for individuals with intellectual disabilities as well as braille for blind persons. Importantly, persons with disabilities must identify a national champion that will consistently advocate for the inclusion and participation of members of this community in any COVID-19 related activities. In order to prevent the exclusion and isolation of persons with disabilities from any COVID-19 related activities, governments within the Caribbean must make a deliberate and strategic effort to include these individuals. As a part of the strategy to establish inclusive policy-making, Caribbean SIDS have to utilize the Caribbean Community mechanisms that have been established. In 2013 for example, CARICOM developed the Declaration of Petion Ville which is the roadmap designed to guide the implementation of programmes and policies for persons with disabilities in the region. The document is disability-centric and had the input of several stakeholders from across the region, including persons with disabilities. Relatedly, in 2018, CARICOM appointed a Special Rapporteur on

3. Morris, F. 2020b. Things to know and do when dealing with a person with disability who has contracted the coronavirus.
5. CARICOM (2013). The declaration of Petion Ville.
Dr. Floyd Morris is the Director for the Centre for Disability Studies at the University of West Indies, Mona. Dr. Morris is the first blind person to be appointed to the Senate of Jamaica serving from 1998-2007 and from 2012-2016. He also became the first blind President of the Senate in 2013. He is the first person from the Caribbean to be elected to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Dr. Morris holds a Doctor of Philosophy in Government from the University of West Indies. He is also the author of multiple articles, recognized speaker, and appointed by CARICOM as Special Rapporteur on Disability for the Caribbean.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the related preventive measures have widened the inequality among persons with disabilities in Caribbean SIDS. This individual has the responsibility of advocating for the implementation of the varied programmes and policies outlined in the Declaration of Petion Ville, among other things. Additionally, in April 2020, the CARICOM Special Rapporteur on Disability issued a special communiqué on issues to be considered when relating with a person with a disability who has contracted the COVID-19. Cumulatively, the Declaration of Petion Ville and the Special Rapporteur on Disability constitute an oasis of resource for governments within the region to utilize in formulating progressive policies for persons with disabilities. Additionally, the special communiqué serves as an excellent guide on how to relate with persons with disabilities who have contracted the COVID-19. Summarily, the COVID-19 pandemic poses major challenges for persons with disabilities in Caribbean SIDS. There is, however, an opportunity for these individuals to be integrated in the varied COVID-19 responses by governments in the region. Thus, governments must ensure that these individuals have a seat at the decision-making table so that their concerns and recommendations can be included in the various policy responses to COVID-19. Similarly, champions must be appointed to consistently advocate for the inclusion and participation of these individuals to the different responses. CARICOM has a quintessential role to play by ensuring that the Declaration of Petion Ville and the Special Rapporteur on Disability are given preeminent feature among Caribbean SIDS. Disability is a right, not a fashion and therefore these individuals must be included in all aspects of development in the region in order to eradicate inequality among this marginalized group.

7. Morris, F. 2020b. Things to know and do when dealing with a person with disability who has contracted the coronavirus.