



# PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES MAKING THEIR VOICES HEARD IN FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19 IN LIBERIA

By: Luther Sangar Mendin, AIFO Liberia Staff Writer

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In order to help stop the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of Liberia on April 10, 2020 declared a state of emergency. Among the measures imposed, residents are asked to stay at home and should come out unless otherwise necessary. Travel between Liberia's 15 counties are prohibited.

Already, about 14% of Liberia's population have some form of disability and since the lockdown measures were imposed, this huge population have been greatly affected by quarantine measures aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19. In an already complex, fragile and vulnerable environment, news of the coronavirus has brought with it even greater insecurity, fear and heightened stigma and persons with disabilities face the harsh reality of this nightmare.

"People here are extremely afraid," Felix Chelleh says. "As a person with disability myself, I too was very afraid, when I heard that the disease had arrived in Liberia."

But Felix is not allowing that fear stand in the way of the duty he has signed up to which is to protect people with disabilities and help prevent the spread of the virus in the community.



Before COVID-19, Felix was trained in human rights and basic journalism as part of the Disability and Startup Project implemented by AIFO and funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation. About 24 young people with disabilities from Bong, Nimba, Grand Gedeh and Montserrado Counties received training in basic journalism skills, human rights reporting and disability rights, thanks to the partnership with the Liberia Media Center and a hosts of community radio stations.

The participants, all of whom are persons with disabilities, now lead an adapted COVID-19 radio program titled: “We are One”. We are One is a friendly disabled radio program that aims to provide greater awareness on the Coronavirus and its impact on people with disabilities in the response. The program currently has a partnership with 11 community and national radio stations. The adapted COVID-19 and Disability Rights radio program has been running since the second half of April. Guests appear remotely through phone calls to participate to the program. Notably among the guests that appear are Disability activists, health workers, social workers and human rights officers. A total of 33 live radio talk show on COVID-19 and its impact on people with disabilities have been recorded.

An important component of the radio program has been discussions on the impact of rumours associated with the virus and the role that people with disabilities can play in combatting false information to keep their communities safe. As misinformation about COVID-19 has spread, the “We are One” radio program have become more valuable than ever. In addition to the radio program, AIFO has also launched a social media campaign to update about the COVID-19 situation in the country and has strengthen engagement with the Risk

Communication Pillar of the Ministry of Health to develop tailored messages that are more relevant and accessible to people with disabilities. For example, in one of the messages, it states that “Mental Health is Everyone’s Business so is COVID-19”. Series of IEC materials including messages for deaf persons have also been developed to provide greater awareness to this population of people with disabilities.



*Felix Chelleh, a physically challenged leads a radio broadcast discussing COVID19 on a community radio programme in Zwedru, Grand Gedeh County.*



“Every time I hear about fake information; I fight against it by sharing accurate information. I know, for example, that there’s currently no vaccine for COVID19, and I tell people just that.”

Today, Felix is leading a radio show on COVID-19 on TOP FM, a local community radio station in Zwedru, Grand Gedeh County. He says that people with disabilities are an essential part of the response to COVID-19.

“It’s important for people with disabilities to understand this illness, because they’re also part of the society”.

Felix’s words resonate in a country that has experienced extreme and entrenched marginalization against persons with disabilities over the past years and even now. And as COVID-19 cases continue to increase in Liberia, accurate information provided by people with disabilities trained in promoting social cohesion has become even more vital.

### **Strengthening Active Citizenship and Increasing Social protection**

AIFO’s COVID-19 response also targets isolated communities to strengthen active citizenship and increase social protection. Through the adapted community mental health and COVID-19 program, a total of 550 households made up of persons with disabilities and family members have received assorted sanitary kits and IEC materials approved by the Ministry of Health. At least 550 persons with disabilities and family members have also participated in series of Focus Group Discussions to gather accurate information related to the pandemic.



*AIFO-Liberia CBR Worker leads a focus Group Discussion in Sanniquellie, Nimba County*

Sam Dee, 37 and head of the Salala Disabled Association in Bong County, has also been playing his part in protecting against the coronavirus. With his mask in place, he is visiting local marketplaces in Bong County along with other people with disabilities to talk about the Coronavirus and handwashing.



*Same Dee, 37 far left, share COVID-19 prevention messages among people with disabilities in Salala as part of the Sanitary materials distribution organized by AIFO and the Bong County Health Team*

“We target places where people with disabilities gather, such as market places and bus stops,” he says. Sam admits that not everyone they meet is receptive to their messages about COVID-19.

“Some people don’t believe the disease is a problem here, and they don’t always respect what we do,” he says. “Sometimes people say that the virus can’t survive in hot areas. Sam says that such conversations have been important in addressing rumours and false information. “There’s been a real difference since we started sensitizing people with disabilities and the community about COVID19,” he says as he mounts his crutches.

“People are beginning to listen. They are beginning to ask us questions so that they can understand better.”



*Albestine Tozay, 34, head of the Nimba Disabled Community receives handwashing buckets and sanitary materials on behalf of his group.*

### **About the Author**

Luther Sangar Mendin has extensive experience on psychosocial support and community integration for disadvantaged and marginalized persons. Much of his stress of work has been on supporting persons suffering different kinds of stigmas in rural, semi urban and urban communities. He is specialized in working in ethnically diverse settings. His work history includes supporting persons with disabilities, persons affected by the Hansen Disease (Leprosy), persons affected by epilepsy and persons suffering different kinds of mental health disorders including schizophrenia, psychosis, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders. Luther currently serves as Communication and Program Officer of AIFO-Liberia,



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