

## **COVIC 19 versus Communication Modes and Language for Persons with Disabilities**

This piece of writing depicts the real situation of different categories of persons with disabilities who remain at risk of being infected by the Corona virus. This is not only a threat to persons with disabilities but also care givers or parents or indeed support persons. Let us examine the demonstrations in the dialogue between Public Health Inspector (PHI) Kusalila and Disability Support Person (DSP) Bwino.

**PHI Kusalila:** *Hey! Look at those two people. What they are doing is wrong in this time of social distancing under the COVID 19 crisis.*

**DSP Bwino:** *Kusalila, what have the two done?*

**PHI Kusalila:** *They keep touching each other in their hands and on different parts of their bodies. Let me go and have them charged for breaking the SI 21 and SI 22. Of course also not complying to the directives given by His Excellence, President Doctor Edgar Chagwa Lungu. Look!*

**DSP Bwino:** *Hold on Kusalila. The problem with you is that you rush into conclusions before inquiring. Let me make you understand.*

**PHI Kusalila:** *There is no understanding when it comes to life or death Bwino. It is a Presidential directive and no one must break it. I am charging them under the Public Health Act. How do they keep on touching each other in public during this Corona Virus time.*

**DSP Bwino:** *Wait. Those three people are discussing a family matter. The gentleman in a blue shirt is deaf-blind. He cannot see, or speak and cannot hear at all. The lady he keeps touching with is his interpreter. She can speak hear and see. The other lady who seems to be speaking to the young lady touching him is actually speaking to him not her. She can see, speak and hear. She is his aunt.*

**PHI Kusalila:** *So! What do you mean? They speak by touching each other?*

**DSP Bwino:** *That is their alternative mode of communication. All that touching and writing on each other's palm you see is all communication. You cannot stop them from communicating with each other in their own mode of communication.*

**PHI Kusalila:** *Now what do we do? COVIC 19 will catch them. They do not respect social distancing. They are touching and so on. We have the duty to correct the situation.*

**DSP Bwino:** *I would have asked that question to you. You are a public officer. Did you think of individuals who are deaf-blind in developing those SIS, IEC materials and the rest of the interventions?*

**PHI Kusalila:** *Well! I do not know what to do. But they remain at risk.*

**DSP Bwino:** *It is you to blame. You left them behind despite your motto of “leave no one behind”. Good bye.*

**PHI Kusalila:** *Wait my friend Bwino! You are an expert of this field of persons with disabilities. You also have got the duty to educate me on any possible interventions that will ensure their full inclusion. Tell me what should I do to protect them?*

**DSP Bwino:** *Let us visit them and hear what should be done which is best for them. We should not make any decisions without them.*

**PHI Kusalila:** *But can I not give them hand gloves right away since they continue to touch each other with bare hands?*

**DSP Bwino:** *No! That is not correct. Hand gloves are a barrier to their form of communication. The gloves will not allow them to receive the communication through their naked hands. They use the sense of feeling by the way.*

**PHI Kusalila:** *Oh! I see. What about face masks to cover their nose and mouth?*

**DSP Bwino:** *Come on Kusalila. You never know. I can see that the interpreter keeps looking at the moving lips of the person who is deaf-blind. She may be using a method called lip reading. So, the mask may be a barrier.*

**PHI Kusalila:** *Bwino, you are an expert, let us go and hear from them I think that is the best thing to do. Consultation. I should also educate my bosses.... It is important for us as a government to conduct wide consultation with everyone before we rush into some of the activities that affect our communities.*

### **What is your thought? (Inclusion or exclusion?)**

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Dialogue two

**PHI Kusalila:** *Bwino my friend look at the man coming over there. Do you know him?*

**DSP Bwino:** *Of course, I know him very well. He is Mr. Mabvuto. He is one of those persons with disabilities I have been working with for a long time.*

**PHI Kusalila:** *So he is coming for you. Can I leave the two of you to discuss. When you are through I will come over. I just want to check on how the distribution of the hand sanitizers is going on.*

**DSP Bwino:** *No my friend, Kusalila. Stay around. Maybe Mabvuto is looking for assistance from you. So, stay around and we talk to him together.*

**(Mabvuto arrives and presents his case to Kusalila instead of Bwino as was expected.)**

**PHI Kusalila:** *Bwino, have you heard his complaint. He says the team in the field has refused to give him some hand sanitizers. Please attend to him since you may understand your people better.*

**DSP Bwino:** *I have heard his complaint. He says your team has refused to give him some hand sanitizers because he does not have arms. So he does not need them. This is your matter Kusalila. I am not a Public Health Inspector. Neither do I work for the Ministry of Health. Resolve this.*

**PHI Kusalila:** *Bwino can I talk to you alone first before I deal with Him. Come over here.*

**(Moving to the side leaving Mabvuto alone.)**

**PHI Kusalila:** *Bwino, why do you sometimes just want to be difficult? This man does not have hands really. Those are hand sanitizers. What does he need them for? Maybe he wants to distribute to his family. Advise me, please.*

**DSP Bwino:** *Kusalila, Kusalila, I always tell you to consult the person complaining. Go and talk to Mabvuto himself. I was not there when they refused to give him sanitizers. Talk to him.*

**PHI Kusalila:** *But...but Bwino, how? I may offend him. Talk to him and I will listen to whatever he says. I will be able to give him as many sanitizers as he wants for further distribution since he does not require them. Please....*

**DSP Bwino:** *It seems you are really stuck Mr. Inspector. Let us go I talk to him on your behalf.*

**(They get back and find Mabvuto gazing at Kusalila expecting an answer.)**

**DSP Bwino:** *Yes, Mabvuto, you said the team out there refused to give you hand sanitizers because you do not have hands or arms. I know your arms were amputated after an accident.*

(Mabvuto explains. He even explains how he uses his legs/feet to do everything he does. He said he required the sanitizers to sterilise his feet which work as his hands.)

**DSP Bwino:** *Kusalila, you have heard. I have seen Mabvuto using his feet for making door mats. Good door mats. He uses his toes to hold a pen and write. He also uses his toes to pick a table fork or spoon to feed himself.*

**PHI Kusalila:** *This is really surprising. God is great! God is really great! So...so...I....*

**DSP Bwino:** *Let us go and give him more sanitizers than these other people who use their hands. His feet are more vulnerable and susceptible to infections because he even steps on the ground. Come on let us go.*

**PHI Kusalila:** *He seems to be a good man. He is jovial and does not even seem to regret his loss of hands.*

**DSP Bwino:** *That is not important. He has got the right to receive equal protection from this COVID 19 pandemic just like any other person. The problem with you health workers is that you think you know it all. Consult the affected and they will tell you their requirements. Involve them in planning and implementation of the emergency responses and intervention to the pandemic. Then you will learn them more.*

**PHI Kusalila:** *I have learnt a lot. I learn a lot about persons with disabilities whenever I am with you. Mr. Mabvuto, my friend, let us go. I will give you the sanitizers you require. I will also register you on the list of those to carry out awareness raising on the Corona virus. Of course we shall orient you. Let us go.*

**DSP Bwino:** *Kusalila, after you are done with him, let him take you to their office. He belongs to an association which advocates for the rights of persons with physical disabilities. Get more information from the association. Bye!*

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**(Another interesting experience. Discrimination at face value – right?)**

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