

## EAST ASIA DISABILITY STUDIES FORUM

Special On-Line Seminar on COVID-19 and disability in East Asia

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It's an honour to be with you – if only virtually - at this network meeting of the East Asian Disability Studies Forum.

Such networks lie at the bedrock of democratic renewal. What our societies need most is imaginative space – space to connect, to share ideas and new ways of looking at the world and changing it.

It is easy sometimes to be overwhelmed by the scale of the tasks ahead. Our worldview is often highly constrained by our circumstances in life. But things do not have to be inevitable and one of the first steps toward change – change that directly affects our family, friends and community – is to have and grasp the imaginative space that the network allows to begin to see things differently and to give each other not only ideas but also hope for the future.

You meet against the backdrop of the pandemic – a pandemic that will hopefully be soon part of history. Nagase asked me to say one or two things about it in opening.

First, let's get back to ideas – or warring ideas. We all at the Network share a new framing on disability – one that starts with dignity, autonomy, inclusion and equality – instead of one that starts with protection, segregation and exclusion. We all passionately believe in the inner worth and subjectivity of all human beings regardless of ability or disability. We all instructively recoil at the objectification of any human being and especially those with a disability. We all thought that this cultural paradigm shift reached deep into society. And we all thought that this new framing would be the first - and last - point of departure for policy-makers into the future. Well, we were wrong.

We have seen around the world services (even modest services) removed and not replaced. The loss was allowed to lie where it fell. In some instances it took exceptional volunteering efforts to try make good the loss. The point is that the loss did not register as a loss.

We have seen the heightened degree of risk that persons with disabilities were exposed to around the world by service paradigms that were themselves too institutionalised or residential institutions where the disease proliferated. What we were really seeing is the slow-motion effects of an outdated service model that deeply objectified people and carried inherent risks.

What we saw were medical responses that failed to treat equally the inherent rights of persons with disabilities. Important rationing decisions seem to have been made on the basis of judgments about the worth or quality of life of persons with disabilities (and older persons).

So in a way, we were all living witnesses to a war of two paradigms – one containing the ‘myth system’ of the CRPD and other pertaining to the ‘operation system’ of most systems and governments.

I do think this was probably inevitable in any process of profound change. Changing culture high up in the atmosphere is relatively easily done. Having good law and policy is relatively easily done. But changing hearts and minds ingrained by decades if not centuries of habits is harder to do. And these habits of thought are encoded in how services are imagined and delivered. Do notice that this is exactly what the World Bank said about policy reactions to COVID during its height.

So, in the interests of change, how can we future-proof or emergency-proof our systems to serve our citizens and not simply objectify them? How can good ideas get translated into good systems that reinforce good ideas? How do we take the dynamics of change beyond ideas or law and embed them into habits of human action which are encoded in services and in how the sinews of the state touches the person? Understand, while this manifests itself differently around the world, it is truly a global issue.

Ah, but this is exactly why we have the network of East Asian Disability Studies Forum! I wish I could be there to hear your debates and learn from your knowledge and experience. I wish you a very inspiring conference and express the hope I can join you next time. We count on you for good ideas and we need to share and learn from each other.