



secretariat@sada.org.za

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PRESS RELEASE

THE IMPACT OF STAGE 6 LOADSHEDDING ON PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

The extended loadshedding now in place in South Africa has had a disabling effect on persons with disabilities.

People with physical disabilities and mobility impairments and those that use assistive devices and mobility aids have been immobilised by the fact that there is very little opportunity for them to charge their power wheelchairs, lifting and assistive devices. Many people with high-level spinal cord injury using CPAP therapy and oxygen have been at risk of breathing complications as well as sleep deprivation. Many people with wheelchairs have been caught in compromising situations whereby they have been stuck in lifts, left in spaces of darkness and denied access to any evacuation procedures that depended on power. There has been more than one case of a person with quadriplegia having passed away as a result of loadshedding, its highest impact level. The ventilation systems have failed which caused tragic consequences. Loadshedding has paralysed people with mobility impairments and is violating the UNCRPD Article 10 – Right to Life.

People using communication devices have been cut off from their communities as very few people who depend on power for their functional existence can afford inverters or the opportunity to be off the grid.

Article 9 of the UNCRPD clearly protects Accessibility for people with disabilities to live independently and participate fully and equally in society. The Loadshedding situation completely compromises Article 19 and Equality Act which provides for all barriers to be removed that inhibit freedom and opportunity for people with disabilities.

Most Deaf people (rich and poor equally) are affected by load shedding periods especially hearing impaired (Deaf, deaf, hearing impaired and Deafblind) people in our country who are suffering in silence as they can longer communicate or socialize in the darkness as power outages continue.

In Sign Language, facial features are important as information is visual. There is no further communication opportunity when it is dark during loadshedding and the use of candles has often compromised the safety of people with disabilities. Communication for

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Associate members: South African National Association of Blind & Partially Sighted Persons (SANABP); Occupational Therapy Association of South Africa (OTASA); Rare Diseases SA; Quadriplegic & Paraplegic Charitable Trust – South Africa (QPCTSA); Western Cape Network on Disability (WCND)



people who are non-speakers is severely affected as communication devices are not functional during loadshedding. Charging of cochlear implants and hearing aid batteries is severely impacted.

The negative impact of loadshedding on economic participation and job security for people who are Deaf, deaf, hard of hearing and hearing impaired has been severe as it curtails participation on virtual platforms as some networks such as MTN, Cell C, Telkom and Vodacom are not connected during load shedding. Virtual meeting platforms that also allow for captions are not accessible.

Access to Video Remote Interpreting services as part of video relay service for public services are also impacted making it difficult for people with disabilities who require this technology to gain access to public services.

Health services delivered for people with disabilities have been severely compromised as laboratory results take much longer to reach the constituency of people with disabilities. Organisations for persons with disabilities are inundated with requests for funding of battery options for their ventilators, oxygen machines and TPN feeders.

The hundreds of protected homes and institutions as well as self-help centers cannot afford solar solutions or batteries and inverters and are ready compromised in the sustainability as a result of poor support from Government.

Many people with disabilities have had the opportunity to work from home which came out of the lockdown in the coronavirus pandemic. Most of those persons with disabilities are now compromised by not having any backup systems in their homes to continue employment. It is not the employer's responsibility in terms of reasonable accommodation to provide of grid solutions.

Recently there was an announcement of the increase in the cost of electricity by more than 18% and this alone is now a final straw on the pocket of people with disabilities whose disability grant is meager as it is.

An immediate solution would be for the provision of inverters for all people with disabilities who depend on electricity for their mobility aids, assistive devices and communication devices. A rollout of such a short-term solution could be implemented immediately. Until then there is an immediate risk to life as well as a disruption in the functionality within communities of people with disabilities. Surely Government has learnt from the tragic case of Life Esidimeni and should respond immediately for this call to action and resolving the electricity crisis.

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The members of the Presidential Working Group on Disability and the South African Disability Alliance shall support any non-partisan call for action, not limited to marches and demonstrations but to join a legal challenge and action against Eskom and the Government either as friends of the court or as a sectoral party.

Issued on behalf of the South African Disability Alliance

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