



# Final Statement of the 2024 Plenary Session on Disability and the Human Condition

Changing the Social Determinants of Disabilities and Building a New Culture of Inclusion



In light of an anticipated rise in disability prevalence in the coming years, the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences marked its 30th anniversary by focusing on the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities and those who are vulnerable. The Academy set forth a threefold objective: Firstly, to conduct a global analysis of current approaches to these issues and assess their effectiveness; secondly, to re-examine the conceptualization of human rights for people with disabilities from a relational standpoint; and thirdly, to advocate for innovative measures at international, national, and local levels aimed at advancing social inclusion for this demographic.

## 1. The persistence of social disadvantage and discrimination

Participants agreed that, in most countries, disability continues to be discriminated against despite being an integral aspect of the human condition. Individuals with disabilities encounter disadvantages across critical domains of social life, including health, living standards, education, income, and employment. The global Multidimensional Poverty Index for 2023 covered 110 countries and 6.1 billion people, identifying 1.1 billion individuals (18%) as multidimensionally poor due to a combination of deprivations related to health, education, and living standards. The interplay between poverty and disability is significant. Acquiring a disability can lead to job loss or underemployment, resulting in reduced economic resources. Moreover, the heightened costs of medical care, personal services, transportation, housing adjustments, and other expenses can exacerbate the risk of poverty. Notably, households with children with disabilities often face higher

levels of undernutrition. Poverty also contributes to deteriorating health and precarious working and living conditions, all of which can exacerbate disability. Additionally, inaccessible spaces and transportation further restrict social participation for individuals with disabilities. Among disabled populations, adults over retirement age constitute 50%, and older disabled people who are no longer economically active may grapple with poverty, loneliness, and mental health challenges. During times of war, climate change, disasters, and pandemics – such as the Covid-19 pandemic – persons with disabilities face heightened marginalization.

## 2. Rethinking Human Rights for Persons with Disabilities

It is essential to reconceptualize human rights to honour the inherent dignity of persons with disabilities. This involves their active participation in shaping policies and measures that address discrimination and inequality. Emphasizing subsidiarity, solidarity, and fraternity, we advocate for participatory methods that go beyond merely closing the gap between varying levels of disability and functionality. Our goal is to foster an inclusive society where the universal nature of rights accommodates individual circumstances. Achieving this necessitates a relational understanding of rights that transcends an individualistic or uniform approach. Disability should be viewed as a product of one's social environment, which can either exacerbate or mitigate their challenges.

## 3. Innovative Strategies for Enhancing Social Inclusion

The Plenary recommends that disabled and non-disabled individuals collaborate to implement innovative strategies that effectively uphold the rights of people with disabilities. These strategies include: **a. Prioritizing relational approaches** to foster comprehensive social inclusion. This involves co-producing relational goods between people with and without disabilities; **b. Proactively eliminating barriers** that hinder full participation; **c. Providing reasonable accommodation** as needed; **d. Not defining the needs of people with disabilities in a separate and categorized manner.** For instance, cases of violence and abuse against minors and adults with disabilities should be addressed within mainstream protective services rather than in isolation; **e. Promoting transitioning from institutional care to community-based support systems.** Directing funding toward supporting families with disabled members and enhancing local care services, rather than maintaining traditional institutions like orphanages and care homes.

## Practical Actions to Achieve Comprehensive Inclusion

**A) International Strategies:** Support international efforts to collect and disseminate data on living conditions, challenges, and intervention outcomes for people with disabilities of all ages worldwide. This knowledge base will inform effective actions. Encourage international cooperation to share best practices, resources, and expertise in promoting human rights and full inclusion. In particular, ensure that development programs and humanitarian aid address the unique needs and rights of persons with disabilities and their families in lower-income countries, conflict zones, and

during natural disasters or other crises. We recommend promoting and supporting multimedia content structures that use inclusive and positive language and formats for people with disabilities. We also recommend paying particular attention to how disability is portrayed on social media platforms and considering their impact on mental health and safety, especially for children and young people.

**B) National Strategies:** Develop and strengthen national legislation and policy frameworks in alignment with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD); Consider disability policies as integral to all levels of political decision-making; Give greater priority to understanding disability conditions across all sectors of society; Guarantee respect for the rights of people with disabilities; Promote legislation that enables their active participation in service planning and decision-making; Implement universal health coverage to ensure access to necessary healthcare services, rehabilitation, and assistive technologies; Foster inclusive education policies and practices tailored to diverse student needs; Create an environment of equal opportunities within the education system, ensuring that, at any level, the education system supports all learners in realizing their full potential; **Promote equal job opportunities, guaranteeing** flexible and remote work options for people with disabilities, whilst acknowledging the risk of limiting social inclusion and mental health; Enhance the diversity and specific abilities of people, including neurodivergent or dyslexic individuals, in AI and new technology development; Encourage collaboration with those who have greater support needs, to ensure meaningful occupation for all.

**C) Local Strategies:** **Support self-organized groups** of individuals with disabilities; Provide care services and resources for families of individuals with disabilities to ensure they can adequately care for their loved ones while actively participating in community life; Offer **leadership support for family members**, involving them in innovative service design; Develop community-based programs that actively engage persons with disabilities (including intellectual disabilities) in local decision-making processes and activities, fostering a sense of belonging within the community; Invest in creating accessible public spaces, transportation, and communication infrastructures to facilitate the full participation of persons with disabilities at the local level; Encourage cultural, recreational, and sporting organizations to become more accessible and inclusive for people with disabilities.

The Catholic Church plays a pivotal role in cultivating fraternity and communion by instilling in the faithful the recognition that we form a singular 'us' within the Church, rather than 'us' and 'them'. We specifically advocate for specialized training for catechists, seminarians, along with other religious educators on perceiving disability as an intrinsic aspect of human diversity. Furthermore, it is crucial to eliminate physical obstacles alongside sensory impediments during liturgical services and pastoral engagements so as to facilitate unobstructed participation from individuals living with disabilities.

