

Equitable Growth: Ensuring Disability Inclusion in The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Dr. Sneha Sharma¹, Ms. Rishika Gupta^{2*}

ABSTRACT

The world population surpasses 15% with disabilities, yet these individuals remain insufficiently integrated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). People with disabilities face ongoing barriers to inclusive development when the SDGs aim to achieve equity through 2030 in education, employment, healthcare and infrastructure sectors. The following analysis studies the disability inclusion factor in core SDGs No Poverty, Quality Education, and Decent Work to Sustainable Cities with emphasis on the barriers and potential remedies for global development participation. The process of barrier elimination and environmental inclusion strongly depends on three main factors: technology implementation, regulatory adjustments, and heightened public disability awareness. The United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres stated that protecting disability rights creates opportunities for future development that transcend issues of fairness. The implementation of disability inclusion serves essential social as well as economic, and moral purposes. Every development stage must have accessibility integrated to fulfill the "no one left behind" promise stated in the United Nations (2023). This research article emphasizes the need to develop a future society where disability does not prevent anyone from succeeding.

Keywords: *Disability, PwD, SDGs, Challenges, Inclusion.*

Disability encompasses physical, sensory, intellectual, and psychosocial conditions that impact social inclusion. According to the World Health Organizations and The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, disability arises from individual and societal limitations. Sustainable development aims to meet current needs while ensuring future generations have opportunities, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals, which specifically advocate for accessibility and equal treatment for individuals with disabilities.

The global disability prevalence surpasses 1 billion, constituting 15 percent of the world's population, with the majority living in developing countries. The disability community faces higher unemployment rates and limited educational opportunities, further compounded by gender-based discrimination. Amartya Sen rightly pointed out in 2009 that disability extends

¹Assistant Professor (Department of Psychology), S.S. Jain Subodh P.G. College, Jaipur, Rajasthan

²Student (M.A. Psychology), S.S. Jain Subodh P. G. College, Jaipur, Rajasthan

*Corresponding Author

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beyond just medical definitions as it encompasses a mix of social and economic difficulties that require inclusive policies for resolution.

There is a reciprocal relationship between low income and disability, hindering access to healthcare as well as employment and educational opportunities. Women with disabilities encounter dual forms of discrimination, leading to a heightened risk of violence and restricted access to educational institutions and healthcare benefits. Numerous educational institutions fail to accommodate disabled students or provide specialized teaching staff and inclusive learning materials, which hinders their academic potential.

The progression of disability rights began with the United Nations recognizing equal rights for all societies through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. In 1981, governments globally acknowledged disability issues during the UN International Year of Disabled Persons. In 1993, the UN established Standard Rules to guide policies on disability rights. The UNCRPD was adopted in 2006 as a binding international treaty that safeguards disability rights. The introduction of the SDGs in 2015 integrated disability rights across various systems of education and employment, along with equality standards. Ban Ki-moon, while serving as the UN Secretary-General, emphasized the need to eliminate all barriers so that individuals with disabilities can fully participate in societal activities.

Understanding SDGs Through the Lens of Disability

Examining disability from the viewpoint of those who are disabled allows us to move beyond statistics and legal frameworks, enabling us to grasp their genuine experiences and challenges. An alternative viewpoint sees disability as linked to accessibility barriers that limit opportunities for dignity. Oliver (1990) explains that social models of disability recognize impairment while concentrating on how society creates disabilities for those with impairments.

Comprehending Disability Through Experience - It is essential to recognize that disability is more than just physical constraints, as barriers generate significant hardships for individuals with disabilities. Those with disabilities cannot evaluate their potential based solely on health issues because physical and societal hurdles, such as inaccessible environments and social biases, serve as their main restrictions. True empowerment begins when all obstacles are eliminated from our paths.

Everyone strives for autonomy rather than receiving it automatically -- Poor design and exclusion give rise to substantial difficulties in daily tasks that typically pose no challenges for able-bodied individuals.

The Impact of Stigma Exceeds That of Disability - Disabled individuals often find that social bias and discrimination are more limiting than their physical impairments. They seek acknowledgment, not pity. Workplace policies often neglect to accommodate individuals with disabilities, leading to social exclusion, according to Barnes & Mercer (2005).

Access to Opportunities Transforms Lives - The right combination of proper resources, education, and job prospects enables individuals with disabilities to thrive. Society encounters a genuine obstacle when it fails to implement accessible solutions for disabled persons. Nussbaum (2006) argues that true empowerment is achieved by equipping individuals of all abilities with the necessary capabilities for a good quality of life.

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The principle of inclusion goes beyond merely charitable assistance - Individuals with disabilities want equal access across all life domains (work, education, politics, and decision-making) rather than merely specialized services. Equal treatment embodies true inclusivity as it honors individuals with disabilities as regular members of society.

Changing Our Perspective - Understanding disability can only be achieved by actively listening to those who experience it. Individuals living with disabilities should have a say in shaping policies related to urban planning, work environments, and educational institutions. Fostering an inclusive and sustainable society necessitates full involvement, paving the way for a genuinely inclusive reality. Swain et al. (2013) indicated that the intersection of physical barriers and negative stereotypes creates an environment that excludes individuals.

Deep Dive into Each SDG and Disability Inclusions

Individuals with disabilities frequently face discrimination in financial services, hindering their ability to attain SDG 1 (No Poverty). A blind entrepreneur experiences bias when seeking loans, preventing them from starting or sustaining their business, thereby increasing their economic insecurity. Disabled individuals face discrimination in employment and educational opportunities, alongside barriers to public space access, despite existing laws, according to Barnes & Mercer (2010).

Challenges such as limited mobility and lack of resources prevent people from accessing adequate nutrition, which is essential for achieving SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). A rural child with cerebral palsy suffers negative health and developmental outcomes when they struggle to find healthy food.

Disabled individuals often have difficulty accessing healthcare services, which relates to the goal of SDG 3 (Good Health & Well-being). The lack of sign language interpretation can pose significant issues for deaf female patients during hospital visits, leading to unclear medical communication and inadequate care.

Under SDG 5 (Gender Equality), women and girls with disabilities experience layered discrimination due to both their gender and disability. Many disabled young girls are denied their educational rights due to societal stigma, which limits their opportunities and exacerbates gender inequality.

For effective participation in society, inclusive infrastructure is necessary as outlined in SDG 9. Accessibility issues within public transportation become more pronounced when manufacturers fail to include ramps and elevators, restricting the independent travel of wheelchair users.

The execution of SDG 13 (Climate Action) illustrates that natural disasters pose greater risks for individuals with disabilities. Inadequate emergency response measures for those with disabilities can leave them trapped during floods, as evacuation centers often lack accessibility, putting them at increased risk of injury or death.

Education and Skill Development for Persons with Disabilities:

Inclusive educational policies provide individuals with disabilities access to equitable learning opportunities. Key elements such as an accessible learning environment, specialized curricula, and trained educators are essential as per the Right to Education (RTE) and UNCRPD guidelines. Programs for career advancement, scholarships for higher education,

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and various skill development initiatives enhance employment prospects for students. The use of modern assistive technologies, including AI-driven learning tools, screen readers, and speech-to-text software, allows for customized educational programs that overcome traditional barriers. Groce (2004) pointed out that disabled adolescents encounter societal discrimination in addition to inadequate access to education and health services.

Employment and Economic Empowerment

Economic independence is a crucial prerequisite for achieving social inclusion. An increasing number of individuals with disabilities have launched successful businesses by utilizing adaptive technologies and innovative approaches. The government promotes workplace inclusion through disability employment quotas and offers tax incentives alongside financial support. Employment initiatives by private sector companies focus on improving accessibility and accommodating work environments to assist employees in keeping their jobs. Studies indicate that organizations that embrace disability-inclusive policies experience greater commercial success and demonstrate that a diverse workforce enhances both productivity and innovation. Mitra (2006) posits that disability must be viewed from two angles: health conditions as well as the limitations on capabilities caused by social and environmental barriers.

Cultural and Social Barriers to Inclusion

The primary obstacle to the integration of individuals with disabilities stems from widespread societal biases and erroneous negative stereotypes about their capabilities. Media representation in literature and film often depicts individuals with disabilities through clichéd portrayals rather than highlighting their capacity as contributing members of society. Efforts to promote accurate and uplifting representations are beginning to change mainstream narratives. A combination of awareness campaigns, advocacy initiatives, and policy reforms is essential to dismantle discriminatory attitudes and foster more accepting viewpoints. Progressing beyond a societal focus on disability to one that emphasizes ability is critical for achieving enduring social change. Degener (2016) discusses the human rights perspective on disability, advocating for understanding it through the framework of social justice and equality rather than focusing solely on individual impairments.

Disability and Digital Accessibility

Through advancements in technology, accessibility has evolved to create improved opportunities for individuals with disabilities to pursue education, employment, social involvement, and autonomy. The absence of inclusive design can lead to digital barriers that prevent access to essential services. The integration of the Internet and assistive technologies allows societies to link disabilities with accessibility, resulting in genuine digital inclusion.

The Internet plays a crucial role in closing the accessibility gap by changing the way individuals with disabilities achieve empowerment and eliminating barriers that hinder their ability to connect with others while also enabling them to learn and engage in various activities. Online platforms provide disabled individuals with access to remote work, e-learning, telemedicine, and social networking, thereby expanding the range of services available to those with mobility, sensory, or cognitive disabilities. E-commerce sites and digital banking options support individuals in maintaining their independence by minimizing their need to visit inaccessible locations. The existing accessibility gaps highlight the need for universally designed digital spaces, as they continue to obstruct access requirements.

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Innovative technologies have led to the creation of digital accessibility tools that enhance inclusion for people with disabilities.

- The launch of text-to-speech and Braille interpretation capabilities through screen readers like JAWS, NVDA, and Voice Over assists those who are blind or visually impaired.
- Speech-to-text software (such as Dragon NaturallySpeaking and Google Voice Typing) provides support for individuals with mobility challenges or speech impairments.
- Individuals with hearing impairments gain advantages when media presentations feature transcription and captioning options.
- Eye-tracking devices and alternative keyboards featuring switch controls are part of adaptive hardware that enables people with motor disabilities to use computers and mobile devices effectively.
- The development of accessible digital platforms includes inclusive features like high-contrast visuals, keyboard navigation capabilities, and adjustable font sizes.
- Despite significant advancements, user accessibility on various digital platforms remains limited due to inadequate design practices, which emphasizes the need for awareness policies.
- Organizations across the globe have implemented legal frameworks that concentrate on ensuring digital access equity.
- WCAG provides global standards that focus on making online content perceivable and operable as well as understandable and robust.
- The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) demands that businesses and public services provide accessible digital experiences to their users in the United States.
- Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD) 2016 (India): Requires digital accessibility within both government and private sector platforms.
- The European Accessibility Act establishes requirements for digital service accessibility throughout the EU territory.
- The law requires companies to follow these guidelines because it establishes a duty of accessibility for technology that serves all users.

The Role of Governments, NGOs, and International Organizations

The collaboration required to achieve disability inclusion necessitates the joint efforts of national governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international entities. Their goals encompass advocacy, policy implementation, and resource allocation to ensure equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Global stakeholders work together to create systemic change that safeguards the rights of disabled individuals around the world. Support for disability rights at the global level is bolstered by the policies adopted by disability-friendly organizations. Countries worldwide have embraced policies that promote accessibility and equal opportunity, featuring non-discriminatory measures for people with disabilities. Important initiatives include: Numerous countries have enacted laws to prevent discrimination against individuals regarding employment, educational admissions, and access to public facilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the U.S. parallels India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD) 2016.

- Governments provide financial assistance alongside healthcare and job services to empower individuals with disabilities.
- Inclusive educational policies require the establishment of accessible learning environments and the provision of assistive technologies and specific accommodations to ensure children with disabilities receive quality education.

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- Across the globe, governments adhere to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) to develop inclusive digital services online.
- The partnership between NGOs and international organizations has become crucial as many governments have not fully implemented their commitments.
- Organizations Committed to Disability Inclusion
- Global organizations play a vital role in empowering individuals with disabilities through rights advocacy, financial support for inclusion programs, and policy development initiatives.

The United Nations (UN), along with its agencies United Nations Children Fund and United Nations Development Program works towards achieving these objectives by ensuring accessibility and fostering social integration and equal opportunities.

- The World Health Organization (WHO) focuses on providing healthcare, rehabilitation services, and mental health support to persons with disabilities.
- Visual Organization (Winterthur) operates a self-sustaining handicraft workshop that assists children and other disabled adults in securing skilled employment in socially acceptable fields.
- The World Bank invests in initiatives aimed at enhancing access to education, job opportunities, and infrastructure for all individuals with disabilities.
- International NGOs, such as Humanity & Inclusion and Disability Rights International, advocate for local initiatives, policy changes, and humanitarian assistance for people with disabilities globally.

Global Treaties and Their Impact

Policies concerning disability rights at the national level adhere to the guidelines set forth by international treaties. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) is particularly significant, having been endorsed by 180 countries. The UNCRPD highlights:

- Equal participation in society and non-discrimination.
- The necessity for accessible infrastructure, education, and job opportunities.
- Safeguards against exploitation and abuse.
- The pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that aim to fully integrate persons with disabilities into education, employment, and healthcare services by 2030.

Success Stories and Inspirational Case Studies

Arunima Sinha's narrative showcases her ability to overcome disability after she was thrown from a moving train by robbers, resulting in the amputation of her left leg.

Before this incident, Arunima Sinha was a participant in national-level volleyball competitions in India; however, in 2011, robbers threw her from a moving train, which led to the surgical removal of her left leg. Instead of succumbing to despair, she transformed her challenging circumstances into a source of determination. With guidance from Bachendri Pal, the first Indian woman to summit Mount Everest, she cultivated an unyielding spirit that propelled her to become the world's first female amputee to reach the summit of Everest in 2013 (Sinha, 2014).

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Her story exemplifies remarkable resolve, illustrating that physical disabilities cannot hinder a resolute mind. Currently, her foundation supports athletes with disabilities, while she inspires many to tackle social challenges (Gupta, 2019).

This case illustrates how the right support, combined with determination, empowers individuals to turn obstacles into achievements, thereby affirming the power of human resolve.

In 2015, India launched the Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan) to enhance the accessibility of public spaces, transportation systems, and workplaces for individuals with disabilities. The government implemented public infrastructure retrofitting initiatives and introduced financial aid programs for assistive technology in 2020 (Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, 2020). This movement has impacted millions, promoting inclusion and equal opportunities (Sharma & Gupta, 2021).

Future Trends in Disability Inclusion and the SDGs

The evolution of AI-enhanced assistive technology systems will provide accessibility at unprecedented levels. Intelligent prosthetics combined with AI-based speech-to-text systems, self-driving mobility aids, and tailored learning platforms will empower individuals with disabilities to excel in education and the workforce without hindrances to their autonomy. The rise of workplace automation will generate job opportunities by reducing physical accessibility challenges.

- **Beyond 2030: The Next Phase of SDGs**

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) beyond 2030 will be refined into comprehensive operational strategies to ensure complete disability inclusion across all areas of human endeavor. Advancement will rely on developing universal design principles alongside digital accessibility and making inclusive education fundamental parts of global development agendas to uphold the priority of disability rights.

- **Policy Shifts & Global Cooperation**

Organizations and governmental bodies will enhance their efforts to implement stringent legal frameworks and provide financial incentives for businesses that promote inclusion, as well as enforce accessibility standards within various industries. The advancement of assistive technologies depends on public-private partnerships, as these collaborations will accelerate their development while making worldwide inclusion a necessary duty rather than an optional measure. The United Nations, through the CRPD (2006), asserted that “Persons with disabilities require full equal access to basic freedoms and human rights.

Crucial strategies must be adopted to address current gaps and encourage empowerment:

- Public awareness campaigns should be launched to reduce stigma and advocate for inclusive practices across all environments.
- Governments need to strictly enforce disability rights legislation and allocate adequate funding for the development of accessibility.
- Educational institutions should create inclusive policies by implementing universal design principles and equipping educators with standard methods for inclusive teaching techniques.

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- Every economic empowerment initiative should prioritize three key aspects: developing job skills, facilitating business foundations, and implementing workplace accessibility measures to enhance employability.
- Investing in assistive technologies, AI-driven accessibility solutions, and digital inclusion initiatives can greatly improve independence and participation.
- Community support systems should aim to bolster grassroots initiatives through peer-to-peer groups and disability advocacy organizations, ensuring sustainable, inclusive community models.

Call to Action – How Can Everyone Contribute

The establishment of an inclusive society for disabled communities offers essential change to organizations and governments, alongside essential benefits to disabled individuals. The inclusion of disability groups depends on every single type of effort, regardless of its magnitude.

People who want to advance disability inclusion should combat stereotypes while they seek accessible features in local areas and support leadership programs for people with disabilities. Inclusive communication and empowerment of disabled individuals alongside initiatives for creating barrier-free areas will generate significant advancement. Shakespeare (2006) argues that disability is a socially constructed issue that requires political action and social change to effectively tackle it.

Businesses must do away with small inclusivity attempts because accessibility must become a core component of their official policies and corporate practices. Disability inclusion underpins two primary areas, consisting of physical accessibility alongside digital accessibility, together with creating disabled employment and fostering an organization-wide inclusion framework.

Policymakers lead systemic change by establishing disability rights legislation while creating more inclusive learning opportunities and workplace possibilities, and supporting assistive technology development. Community-supported policies lead to sustained effects for society.

To build an inclusive society, businesses and citizens need to work with communities toward removing obstacles to create opportunities that establish disabled people as equal members of society. We are presently at the point where taking practical steps becomes necessary. The time has arrived to build a global environment where each member of society finds inclusion.

CONCLUSION

Society becomes truly empowering when it accepts disability among human diversity apart from treating it as a limiting characteristic. Inclusion extends past policies and accommodations because it requires a dual transformation of mental understanding and barrier removal for people with disabilities to thrive. The foundation for equal societies develops by putting action into practice. Disabled people will achieve social normalization through collaborative advocacy that creates meaningful changes along with accessibility for all. The time to act is now.

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Conflict of Interest

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