

# Learning Guide: Disability Inclusion in Action

## Why disability inclusion matters

Persons with disabilities frequently face profound discrimination. They are often excluded from access to essential services, public spaces, economic prospects and meaningful roles in household and community decision making. They are also more frequently exposed to poverty, isolation, and physical and sexual abuse.



As of February 2022, disability in Syria was almost 29%, nearly double the global average of 15%<sup>1</sup>. This

extremely high figure, combined with the severity of economic deterioration, and the intersectionality between disability, gender and age significantly erodes the socioeconomic wellbeing of entire households and communities.

The Syria Resilience Consortium (SRC) believes disability inclusion is central to ensuring all Syrians can build their resilience. In line with the guidelines issued by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), an inter-agency forum of UN and non-UN humanitarian partners, our disability inclusion programming, developed and championed by SRC member Humanity and Inclusion (HI), aims to ensure safe and equitable access to income opportunities for persons with disabilities, whilst also tackling harmful norms and exclusionary practices which cause environmental, attitudinal, information and institutional barriers preventing meaningful participation in economic life.



With a modified scooter, farm inputs and training from the SRC, Faisal (name changed) has rebuilt his life after multiple displacements. A shrapnel injury left him paralyzed from the waist down. However, he now supports himself and his family with the income he earns from raising sheep and growing tomatoes.

*"I finally feel useful and productive again in my community and my family. My work keeps me busy and feeds my family." - Faisal, (name changed), 26*

## How disability inclusion programming is implemented in Syria

### Step 1: Recognition of diversity

The first step to inclusive programming is promoting diversity within the general population and the understanding that persons with disabilities are not homogenous. Factors such as age, gender, education, location, and socio-economic background (among others) must also be considered alongside disability.

Studies in Syria indicate that most persons with disabilities want to engage in

<sup>1</sup> UN. Humanitarian Needs Overview for the Syrian Arab Republic. 2022.

economic activities if they are provided with reasonable accommodations that facilitate full participation (e.g., special tools, and environmental and/or method adaptations)<sup>2</sup> <sup>3</sup>. However, environmental, attitudinal, information and institutional barriers often prevent persons with disabilities from accessing economic opportunities and playing a role in household and community decision making. Some attempts have been made in Government Controlled Areas to increase employment for persons with disabilities, including a recently passed law that requires businesses to employ a minimum of 4% persons with disabilities.

However, the quota is rarely implemented or enforced<sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup>, and has not been replicated in areas outside government control. Additionally, livelihood interventions offered to the general population are rarely adapted to the needs of persons with physical, sensory (vision/hearing), intellectual or psychosocial difficulties<sup>6</sup>. In fact, social norms, especially in rural areas, strongly discourage the participation of persons with disabilities in many spheres of daily life.

Furthermore, although both men and women with disabilities face discrimination, defined gender roles make this more pervasive among women. Only 15% of women with disabilities are employed compared to 72% of men with disabilities<sup>7</sup>. Persons with disabilities who succeed are typically adult men with strong social networks and/or who had mastered a trade or established themselves prior to having an impairment. Women with disabilities, on the other hand, may struggle more to gain the trust and support of the broader community and are more likely to be seen as worthy only of charity<sup>8</sup>.

## Step 2: Ensuring participation and engagement of persons with disabilities in programming

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> SRC. Building a more resilient Syria Report. 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> CARE. Supporting Resilience in Syria. Women's experience of the conflict and the 'new normal'. 2020

To ensure disability inclusion in resilience programming, the SRC's initial assessments comprise of:

- detailed mapping of existing services and their capacities to support persons with disabilities;
- analysis of barriers and gaps in services faced by persons with disabilities;
- focus group discussions; and
- identification of persons with disabilities and their locations.

These activities go on to support a case management approach where interventions are tailored to the needs of individuals. Trained staff record the disability type of each persons. Using Washington Group questions, they collect disaggregated data as per IASC guidelines, and identify the specific physical and societal barriers that prevent access to and meaningful participation in economic life. Full engagement with persons with disabilities is critical to tailoring interventions appropriately. Structured conversations identify and explore:

- the extent to which persons with disabilities access their communities and available services;
- how the intersectionality between disability-gender-age influences the level of *participation* in family and community processes, especially the planning processes used by the SRC;
- potential *barriers* that persons with disabilities may face in participating in project activities and how these can be overcome; and
- differences in accessibility *between* persons with and without disabilities to identify when and where discrimination and exclusion occur.

## Step 3: Removal of barriers

The SRC addresses participation barriers through a “twin-track” approach. The first track focusses on

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR Disability Prevalence and Impact. Syria Arab Republic. 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

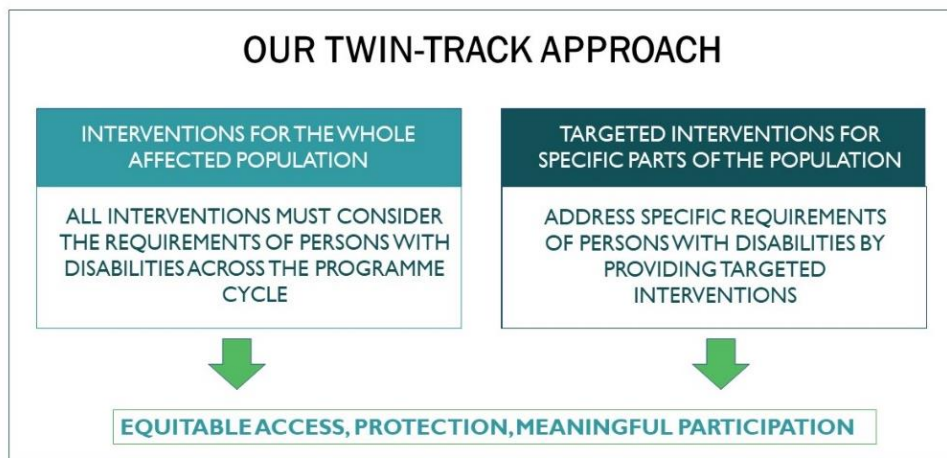
<sup>8</sup> SRC. Building a more resilient Syria Report. 2020.

mainstreaming disability inclusion in policies and processes throughout the project cycle, targeting staff, partners and participants. The second track specifically works with persons with disabilities in livelihood programmes through case management and empowerment.

While persons with disabilities face many barriers, a main concern, as reported by participants in SRC programs, is earning an income in a dignified and respectful work environment. Studies show that creating a supportive attitude among family and community members is crucial, and that those facing social ostracism and discrimination are particularly vulnerable in their economic lives, and in relation to their psychosocial wellbeing.

To encourage greater inclusivity, the SRC pairs case management with a grassroots level **ambassador initiative** to demonstrate that persons with disabilities can be advocates and leaders within their communities. Individuals with disabilities who are active in their communities and motivated to advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities are identified for the ambassador program. They receive training<sup>9</sup> to build their confidence and capacity to:

- Raise awareness among persons with disabilities and the community (persons with and without disabilities) about the rights of persons with disabilities.
- Advocate for modifications to improve accessibility in the home and community.
- Advocate for the creation of suitable livelihood and income opportunities.
- Create support networks with other persons with disabilities within their communities.



### Step 4: Tailored approaches

Mapping of existing services, initial assessments, and information gathered from inclusion ambassadors provides the SRC with invaluable information used for intervention adaptations. This information reiterates that each person with disability has specific needs and vulnerabilities that can only be determined on a case-by-case basis. Case management addresses these specific vulnerabilities and barriers, and tailors the necessary adaptations to ensure safe and equitable access to income opportunities.

Tailored examples from SRC programming include specialized livelihood equipment/tools; improved accessibility in marketplaces, training facilities and transportation; and adaptations in home/work environments (e.g.: ramps, rails, accessible toilets). Social support and social integration support is also facilitated. Referrals are made to other SRC members for participation in additional program activities, and where possible, between the SRC and external service providers for specialized support.

### Results of disability inclusion programming in Syria

Environmental, information, institutional and attitudinal barriers to economic participation remain pervasive across Syria for persons with disabilities.

<sup>9</sup> Training topics include advocacy and communication skills; coping skills; recognizing social, legal and institutional barriers; gender-based violence; psychosocial support.

## INCLUSION AMBASSADORS GUIDING OUR RESPONSE

*"I am a living proof that a person with a disability can achieve anything they want if they receive the right type of support. It is incredible what we have achieved so far. I feel the stigma is finally lifting, and that we are coming together with others, growing our community spirit. Even my own family has changed their behavior towards me and treat me with more respect. I am so proud that people around me believe in me and my abilities."*

— Sabah, Inclusion Ambassador, born with a visual impairment.



However, learning and evidence from SRC programming and project evaluations show that combining an ambassador initiative that empowers and advocates for the rights of persons with disabilities with case management support to adapt and link persons with disabilities to specific livelihood assistance is very effective within the Syrian context.

Findings from a recent SRC program endline evaluation concluded that greater accessibility had been created for the inclusion of persons with

disabilities to build self-reliance, and to engage in successful livelihood activities. Program participants are making greater decision-making and financial contributions to their households. They have gained confidence, become more engaged, and become more aware of their rights and on how to advocate for them.

There have been many success stories of changes in attitudes among community members towards persons with disabilities, of barriers being reduced, and persons with disabilities becoming independent and empowered, through the work of the ambassadors. Additionally, some ambassadors have gone on to work outside the SRC program as civil activists and have participated in explaining civil rights to local authorities, the humanitarian sector in Syria, and at international conferences<sup>10</sup>. The SRC is encouraged by these results and is confident that if scaled up, this approach will make a significant contribution towards the socioeconomic wellbeing of entire communities across Syria, as well as ensure that persons with disabilities have equal rights and opportunities within society.

### OUR IMPACT AT A GLANCE

- Improved incomes and economic self-reliance for people with disabilities
- Improved social networks and connectedness
- Increased confidence and support systems for persons with disabilities
- Better links with local authorities to advocate for inclusion
- Enhanced visibility of persons with disabilities within their communities
- Constant feedback loop: Inclusion ambassadors guide our response on a continuous basis, contributing to key SRC assessments about barriers.

**About the SRC:** *The Syria Resilience Consortium was formed by six International NGOs to equip individuals, families, and communities in Syria with tools and skills for a better economic future. Between 2016 and 2023, the SRC assisted 2.98 million people across the whole of Syria to rebuild their lives and livelihoods.*

<sup>10</sup> SRC. PERSERVERE. Endline Evaluation Report. 2022.