

CARING SOCIETIES FOR ALL

Advancing Social Rights
for Persons with Disabilities

www.unrisd.org/wswd2025

Concept Note

World Social Work Day at the UN in Geneva 2025 aims to make a contribution to the **Second World Summit for Social Development** (WSSD, see box 1) exploring pathways to expand social rights for persons living with disabilities and to create a caring society. Globally, an estimated 1.3 billion people experience disabilities (WHO 2023), a situation that is further exacerbated for people exposed to multiple marginalizations based on class, gender and sexual orientation, age, race, ethnicity or religion, migrant or employment status or location.

Persons living with disabilities, whether temporarily or permanently, are disproportionately affected by poverty, discrimination and social exclusion. Their concerns and needs are insufficiently addressed in development and humanitarian settings. They struggle to access social services such as health and education, find adequate employment and decent work, live an autonomous life, exercise their legal rights and participate on an equal basis with others. They are also underrepresented in decision making and political participation (UN 2018). Meanwhile, our social systems largely fail to provide care in fair and ethical ways, leading to a crisis of care (UNRISD 2022). Families and communities of persons living with disabilities often take on a great deal of (unpaid) care labour, seeing to the daily needs of their child, parent, partner or neighbour, and even when available, public medical resources and other support services usually fall short. Promoting social protection, access to quality social services, full participation in societies, and voice for persons living with disabilities therefore goes hand in hand with valuing care work, both paid and unpaid. These are key concerns of the UN and the social work community, as well as fundamental pillars for building human rights-based societies, a fair care economy, inclusive sustainable development and social justice.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which was adopted in 2006 and entered into force in 2008, has the goal to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons regardless their disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.¹ However, there remain huge gaps in access to services and benefits to realize these rights.

Box 1

Second World Summit for Social Development

In 2025, the United Nations will convene the Second World Summit for Social Development (WSSD), hosted by Qatar, to address ongoing social challenges and renew commitments made in the 1995 **Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and Programme of Action**. The Summit will be an opportunity to reaffirm the objectives of the Copenhagen Declaration of poverty eradication, decent work for all, and social integration. It will also be an opportunity to identify current challenges that need to be addressed, for example those related to inequality, social exclusion and discrimination, climate change, conflict, unsustainable economies and unravelling social contracts.

Social protection for persons with disabilities and their carers is largely insufficient due to gaps in legal coverage, failure to properly assess and recognize needs, or insufficient resources to implement legal entitlements. A recent ILO report (ILO 2024: 141) explores the low coverage of disability benefits globally, noting that “Worldwide, only 38.9 per cent of persons with severe disabilities receive a disability benefit, with great variations across countries and regions, ranging from 8.1 per cent in Africa and 30.7 per cent in Asia to 74.2 per cent in the Americas and 91.5 per cent in Europe and Central Asia”.

Improving the life of persons living with disabilities involves changing social norms and developing new mindsets and policy approaches that move from a paradigm of passivity and dependence to one of self-determination and agency. Finally, it requires investments in comprehensive care systems, access to quality public social services, and adjustments in labour markets and the workplace. Recognizing the centrality of care systems and building such systems with objectives of equality, justice and sustainability is essential if we are to build economies and societies that leave no one behind (UNRISD 2022).²

Social workers around the world play a key role in supporting persons with disabilities, their caregivers, families and

communities. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) posits that social workers are strategically positioned to develop, implement, and advocate for policies, programmes, services, and research that support and benefit persons with a disability. Social work is essential to promote inclusion, respect for the rights and autonomy of people living with disabilities, while fostering societal change and greater acceptance of differences.

Social work research and training can contribute to prepare persons with disability for a more self-determined life at a micro level, participation in decision making and promote more effective implementation of legal frameworks concerning them and their carers.

WSWD 2025 at the UN in Geneva will be convened with three objectives:

- Raise awareness on the rights of persons with disabilities and the role social workers play in supporting them and their families, creating more inclusive and caring societies;
- Identify current challenges faced by people with disabilities and caregivers at local and global levels, and ways to address them;
- Contribute to a call for action for policy actors gathering at the WSSD in Qatar on how to create inclusive care systems and ensure that persons with disabilities can develop their full potential and receive the support they need.

Box 2

Global agenda for social work and social development

After a first common agreement in 2012, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Council of Social Welfare (ICSW) adopted in 2020 a Global Agenda 2030 for Social Work and Social Development. This initiative provides a common basis for joint action addressing the major challenges of our societies and identifying relevant social issues for our profession and beyond. The Global Agenda is a strong commitment to promote social and economic equality, the dignity and worth of people, and environmental and community sustainability.

Box 3

International definition of social work

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

Definition of social work adopted in 2014 by IASSW and IFSW, the international definition of social work is used by many national and international social work organizations.

The celebration of WSWD 2025 will include contributions from social workers and scholars based in various regions of the world. Through keynote speeches, interactive discussions and a policy roundtable, we will explore pathways to more just and sustainable shared futures and discuss how social work can collaborate with the UN to promote the rights of persons living with disabilities and build comprehensive care systems.

Box 4

The history of World Social Work Day

Celebrated worldwide since 1983 at the United Nations in New York and since 2012 in Geneva, World Social Work Day aims to highlight the achievements of social work, to raise the visibility of social services for the future of societies, and to defend social justice and human rights. World Social Work Day at the UN was born from the initiative of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), which have special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC). The Day has been celebrated since 2012 in Geneva by IASSW and IFSW with the collaboration of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland –Social Work, Geneva (HETS GE), since 2017 with the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), and since 2018 with the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland–Social Work, Fribourg.

World Social Work Day has the following objectives:

- Strengthen cooperation, partnership, existing contacts - or establish new ones - with United Nations organizations and international NGOs.
- Spread knowledge about social work, its values, principles and methods (practical and theoretical) among UN organizations and allied international NGOs.
- Highlight social work actions, policies and achievements in the pursuit of common goals.
- Disseminate knowledge about UN activities, goals, programmes and campaigns among social workers and social work organizations and schools.

¹ The CRPD recognizes in its Preamble (e) “that disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”.

² “Gender-transformative, disability-inclusive, and age-sensitive care and support systems are essential to address inequalities and drive just, equitable, and sustainable economies” (p. 3), Sachetti et al. 2024.

References:

ILO (International Labour Organization). 2024. World Social Protection Report 2024-26. Universal Social Protection for Climate Action and a Just Transition. Geneva: ILO

Sachetti et al. 2024. Pathways to Comprehensive Care and Support Systems: Translating G20 Commitments into Action. T20 Policy Brief.

UN (United Nations). 2018. Disability and Development Report: Realizing the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with persons with disabilities. New York: UNDESA.

UNRISD (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development). 2022. Crises of Inequality: Shifting Power for a New Eco-Social Contract. Geneva: UNRISD.

WHO (World Health Organization). 2023. Disability Fact Sheet. Geneva: WHO.