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POLICYBRIEF
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Building Inclusive Pathways for Youth with Disabilities

From Education to Employment

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Highlights

One in every six people in the world experiences a significant disability, yet 70% remain disconnected from the formal labour market. The rising rate of youth with disability falling into "inactivity traps," compounded by a surge in chronic mental health disorders, calls for urgent multi-sectoral intervention.

Recommendations:

- Ensure inclusive basic education, eliminating physical, pedagogical and systemic barriers at all levels of schooling
- Calibrate social protection to balance financial security and career coaching to prevent long-term welfare dependency
- Incentivize and regulate industry to provide decent employment and workplace adaptations for youth with disabilities
- Embrace the opportunities of digital transformation by building inclusive and evidence-informed digital systems

Youth with Disabilities

Globally an estimated 1.3 billion people, or one in six, experience a significant disability — a population larger than that of the European Union and the United States combined (World Health Organization 2022). Inclusive and just sustainable development cannot be achieved if they are left behind.

Despite decades of international commitments, including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006 and target 4.5 of the SDGs, progress on inclusion has remained stagnant. More than 10% of children and youth with disabilities are refused entry into school, a measure that exceeds 50% in least developed countries (UN DESA 2019). By the time they reach upper secondary school age, 35% of youth with disabilities are out of school due to compounding systemic and social barriers such as bullying, low expectations, weak policy support, poverty and data gaps.

This limited access to basic education hinders acquisition of foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy, deepening persistent labour market marginalization. 70% of persons with disabilities are outside the labour force (neither employed nor actively job-seeking). This is a rate of economic inactivity 2.5 times that of people without disabilities (Stoevska 2022).

An OECD report (2022) noted that the inclusion of persons with disabilities in labour markets and opportunities for skills development remained largely unchanged between 2008 and 2019. While inclusive basic education is essential to prevent youth with disabilities from becoming inactive, continuous support for school-to-work transition is equally critical, including vocational career counselling, skills training and industry partnership.

Barriers to Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is not only a means for children and youth with disabilities to enjoy their rights; it is itself a fundamental human right. A number of physical and systemic barriers persist, however, including inaccessible school facilities, lack of resources and insufficient support for teachers.

The CRPD obliges over 190 State Parties to not exclude children and youth with disabilities from compulsory education and to provide reasonable accommodation. Reinforcing this obligation, a global indicator for the SDGs (4.a.1) monitors the proportion of educational facilities that are suitable for students with disabilities. Examples of relevant provisions include ramps, handrails, widened doorways, modified toilets and tactile markers.

Unfortunately, many countries are yet to achieve the target for accessibility. Even in high-income countries, only 47% of primary schools meet basic accessibility standards, while some resource-scarce countries such as Burundi, Niger and Samoa report that none of their primary or lower secondary schools has yet to meet the UNESCO accessibility criteria (UNESCO 2020).

Inclusive education extends beyond elimination of physical barriers. While accessible facilities are vital, inclusive education is impossible without dedicated teachers and adequate support for them such as training and pedagogical resources. In fact, one in four teachers across OECD countries expresses a high need for professional development in teaching students with disabilities. In Brazil, Japan and Kazakhstan, this applies to over 40% of teachers (OECD 2025).

Inactivity Traps

In OECD countries the proportion of young people with disabilities who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) is approximately 30% (OECD 2022). For those with severe disabilities the figure is 70%. In some areas this NEET rate is up to five times higher than for those without disabilities, reflecting a crisis that is still worsening. NEET status is associated with a higher risk of poverty, but data also suggest that household income conditions are one of the strongest determinants of NEET, creating a vicious cycle (Mussida & Sciulli 2023). Poverty oftentimes exacerbates existing health conditions and creates barriers to seeking timely medical help, initiating a continuous downward spiral of disadvantage.

Article 28 of the CRPD (2006) recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to an adequate standard of living and social protection. When effectively designed, social assistance serves as a vital mechanism during the unstable school-to-work transition. However, existing social protection frameworks face a persistent dilemma between ensuring benefit adequacy and facilitating employment activation.

In many low- and middle-income countries, social safety nets are largely symbolic. Disability benefits are provided in the form of a flat-rate monthly allowance that may not fully compensate for the additional costs of disability-related needs. In Thailand, for example, the monthly disability allowance is THB 1,000, which equates to approximately $1 per day. Furthermore, the eligibility thresholds create severe transition vacuums: in most OECD countries disability benefits are typically only available from the age of 18 (or age 20 in Japan), leaving adolescents without income support during the transition from secondary schooling to employment (OECD 2022).

Conversely, well-intended income support structures can disincentivize both beneficiaries and employers. When claiming disability benefits is more readily accessible and financially predictable than navigating a precarious entry-level labour market, youth may fall into an unintended inactivity trap. In Norway, for instance, young people can enter the disability system without first receiving sickness benefit; moreover, taking up employment may risk the loss of disability benefits. This structural disincentive has contributed to a doubling of young beneficiaries aged 18–29 receiving the disability benefits in the last decade (OECD 2026). Social protection must be regularly reviewed and recalibrated to ensure income security without permanently deactivating the early careers of youth with disabilities.

Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided for policymakers, companies and educational institutions to facilitate a smooth school-to-work transition for youth with disabilities.

1. Ensure inclusive basic education, eliminating physical, pedagogical and systemic barriers at all levels of schooling.
Studies show that inclusive education settings benefit all students, with and without disabilities, in academic and social outcomes in both developed and developing countries (Singal 2016). Despite this, in 25% of countries legislation still promotes a segregated model, while in 48% of countries it supports partial segregation.

Appropriate buildings and classroom accessibility are fundamental for inclusive education. In Japan, building on the Barrier-Free Law enacted in 2006, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology (MEXT) made a commitment that all primary and secondary schools would be barrier-free by 2025, and closely monitored progress using indicators for SDG 4 (quality education). As a result, by 2024 nearly 85% of primary and lower secondary school buildings were step-free from the gate to the building, 65% were step-free from the building entrance to classrooms and 74% were equipped with accessible toilets.

Comprehensive inclusive education requires sufficient resources for measures beyond improving accessibility, including teacher training and support, assistive learning materials and technology, and in-house specialists, to name but a few. This may be achieved by reallocating resources from separate special education into mainstream classrooms. In its 2018 inclusive education reform, the Government of Portugal reallocated existing special education infrastructure into resource centres for inclusion at public schools (Portugal 2018). These centres include a multidisciplinary team comprising a teacher, a special education teacher, a psychologist and pedagogical experts, and the budgets are shared among ministries.

Early and continuous career guides must be integrated in secondary curricula to ensure effective school-to-work transition for youth with disabilities. This includes enhanced work-based training for both social and technical competencies, and proactive outreach models for students at risk of disengaging from education or struggling to enter the labour market.

2. Calibrate social protection to balance financial security and career coaching to prevent long-term welfare dependency.
It is crucial to strike a balance between continuous career guidance and social protection to facilitate effective school-to-work transitions. This may include integrating educational attainment and employment with the social benefit system. For example, the Youth Coaching initiative in Austria is a national programme supporting youth with disabilities up to age 25, where engaging with coaching and skills development services is a requirement for receiving benefits. This ensures that youth with disabilities remain active in the labour market and avoid the trap of long-term dependency on social benefits. The programme is a multi-sectoral partnership of parents, schools and businesses, and is readily accessible through 35 local youth centres across the country.

As the transition from school to work can be a prolonged process, particularly for young adults with disabilities, it is important that transition support is not ended too early. The UWV disability support system in the Netherlands offers support for educational completion up to age 30, along with a wide range of services including job coaching, workplace adaptation, subsidies for the cost of adapted transport and start-up loans. The Dutch model shows that social protection can be integrated for vocational empowerment, ensuring that a disability does not lead to an inactivity trap.

3. Incentivize and regulate industry to provide decent employment and workplace adaptations for youth with disabilities.
Many European countries provide wage subsidies for private companies that improve employment outcomes for persons with disabilities. Quota and quota-levy systems can also be effective, but there are risks that these incentivizing and regulatory approaches can lead to creaming and stigmatizing practices. Mandating reasonable accommodations in the workplace, including flexible schedules, physical accessibility and job structure, will drastically expand the possibilities for youth with disabilities to make smoother transitions from school to work, especially when supported by government grants.

Supported employment schemes, which assist persons with disabilities in obtaining and maintaining regular jobs in the open market with help from job specialists or job coaches, can be particularly effective. Supported employment agencies are intermediaries between employers, government support schemes and workers with disabilities. They can assist employers in accessing government grants for reasonable accommodations and wage subsidies while ensuring compliance with equity and anti-discrimination legislation, eventually resulting in the reduction of public expenditure for welfare benefits.

4. Embrace the opportunities of digital transformation by building digital ecosystems that are both participatory and evidence informed.
As the rapid growth of AI and automation is reshaping education and global labour markets, policymakers should ensure that this transformation expands, rather than restricts,

the rights of youth with disabilities to access education, social protection and decent work.

Youth with disabilities must participate in the decision process of digital transformation. They must be meaningfully included in the full cycle — design, testing, implementation and evaluation — of large-scale digital services and infrastructure to ensure adherence to universal design principles. For instance, the Pacific Digital Democracy Initiative in the Solomon Islands and Tonga engages persons with disabilities in the formulation of strategies for human rights-based digital transformation.

Another critical concern is the lack of data from minority populations ("data deserts"), which results in algorithms misrepresenting human diversity in the era of AI. While it is important to promote initiatives that intentionally incorporate diverse disability data in machine learning, as a fundamental priority national ministries must collect disaggregated disability data using internationally recognized methodologies. Building an inclusive data registry requires the adoption of standardized assessment tools, such as the Washington Group Questions (WGQ) or the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), as successfully integrated in the national censuses of Colombia and Kenya. Such inclusive and standardized national registries are essential for training bias-free labour and educational algorithms and ensuring truly equitable digital transformation.

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