ITALIAN AGENCY FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US

in collaboration with

Regione Emilia-Romagna

Emancipatory Disability Research

EDR

West Bank - Palestine

EducAid

rete italiana disabilità e sviluppo

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BIRZEIT UNIVERSITY

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EDR

West Bank - Palestine

CONDUCTING EMANCIPATORY RESEARCH IN THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES
THE EXPERIENCE IN FOUR GOVERNORATES

REALIZED WITHIN THE PROJECTS:

Nothing about Us without Us (NaUwU) AID (011869)
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EducAid

SOCIAL INNOVATION
AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION
FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Foreword

The Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) has always paid significant attention to the promotion and protection of the rights of persons with disabilities (PwDs). The first Guidelines dedicated to disability were adopted in 2002. Subsequently, following the 2007 signing by Italy, and the subsequent ratification in 2009 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), AICS carried out a mapping and analysis of the initiatives it finances. This resulted in the following report, *Disability, International Cooperation and Development: The experience of Italian Cooperation 2000–2008*, which details the dimensions and characteristics of the Italian Cooperation's efforts to address disability. In 2010, the *Guidelines for the introduction of the topic of disability within the policies and activities of Italian Cooperation* – the drafting of which I had the honour of participating in – were approved. In 2013, an operational tool for the application of the Guidelines was adopted – the *Disability Action Plan of Italian Cooperation* – followed by an updated version of the Guidelines, in 2018. This constitutes the foundation on which the agency currently anchors its actions.

In this framework, the realisation of the latest *Guidelines for Disability and Social Inclusion in Cooperation Interventions* (2018) constitutes the most recent phase of a process undertaken by the AICS on issues pertaining to disability. The Guidelines reaffirm that the promotion of the full enjoyment of rights for PwDs, through international cooperation interventions, is realised through various tools designed to promote inclusive and participatory development. Within this approach, even monitoring and evaluation are considered essential, and so this must necessarily entail the active involvement of PwDs and their organisations.

In this regard, emancipatory research (ER) is a key instrument for promoting the active involvement of PwDs and their organisations in decision-making processes regarding relevant policies and programmes. Not only has ER and its methodology led to successful and accessible publications being produced on this topic in collaboration with the people who co-conducted the research; it also and above all empowers PwDs by making them the protagonists in knowledge production processes that relate to their condition and lived experiences. This helps to identify the barriers that prevent the equal participation of PwDs in society, which, consequently, prevents their real needs from being understood and met.

In addition to being a means of empowerment and a tool with which to obtain research output, ER is also an extremely valuable tool for policy planning, as it offers a reading of society from the perspective of PwDs. Only by starting with such perspectives can we hope to trigger mechanisms of change that will lead to the development of more inclusive societies.

In Palestine, AICS has been consistent in its efforts within the field of disability, although much remains to be done, not only in relation to the inclusion of PwDs but also in light of the complexities of the Israeli–Palestinian context, and in reason of the application of international humanitarian law itself. International humanitarian law is based on the four Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols. As far as the Palestine is concerned, international human rights law (IHRL) must also be addressed due to the prolonged nature of the Israeli military occupation. As always, when it comes to international humanitarian law and IHRL, the main problem lies in the failure of one party (State or occupying power) to fulfil its obligations. The Palestinian State has strived to integrate international conventions within its local legislation despite the difficulties faced in implementing them fully. The fragmentation of the Territories should certainly be highlighted, to point out how Israel has so far done nothing to ensure the implementation of the Conventions, particularly in the areas under its administration. A consideration arises spontaneously in noting that in this case, as for

other UN resolutions, there is a noticeable inability or unwillingness on the part of the international community to enforce these obligations or to apply possible sanctioning regimes to punish such conduct.

The main priority areas related to the issue of disability, which is of fundamental importance in terms of continued intervention in Palestine, are the following:

- **Create a database to account for the PwD population in Palestine, as well as the services provided to them.** The latest official Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) data report that PwDs account for 2.1% of the population of Palestine (West Bank and Gaza). However, this figure is believed to be underestimated and does not include all types of disabilities, such as those of the so-called intellectual disabilities (including various degrees of autism), disabilities resulting from new genetic diseases, and hearing and visual disabilities, which are often inadequately detected and thus not covered by any form of state assistance. By way of comparison: in Italy, PwDs represents 5.2% of the population (Istat, 2019), and in Europe, 24.7% of the population over 16 years of age is restricted in carrying out daily activities (European Commission, 2021).

- **Address the cultural stigmatisation and prejudice experienced by PwDs.** If not supported by an open and encouraging family framework, PwDs remain subject to severe social discrimination and various forms of abuse. Stigmatisation affects different social sectors (such as school, work, and society) where disability is primarily viewed as a health issue. Therefore, it is necessary to address disability within institutions, civil society, municipalities, and schools).

- **Protect of the rights of children and women with disabilities**. Minors and women comprise the most vulnerable demographics, as they cannot easily access services and often remain the hidden victims, within certain family contexts, of poverty and conservative societies it is, therefore, necessary to increase investment in awareness-raising actions among the families of PwDs and the broader Palestinian population. Notably, 10% of children with disabilities (CwDs) are not enrolled in school, according to the latest data provided by PCBS (2020).

- **Improve the capacity building of Palestinian institutions** working on disability issues (such as Ministry of Social Development) so that interventions that favour PwDs are carried out in a coordinated, efficient and consistent manner and ensure a high degree of transparency and effectiveness.

- **Contribute to the continued harmonisation of Palestinian legislation,** following Palestine's accession to the UNCRPD in 2014, and clear allocation of responsibilities to the ministries involved in this process.

- **Ensure that PwDs have access to basic services and the functioning of the disability card**, which is a card that allows PwDs to obtain state support. It should be highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic has severely limited the provision of support services to PwDs, thus disadvantaging their families by increasing their workload.

- **Strengthen networks between institutions and civil society**. The connection between national institutions, governors and municipalities is weak and limited when it comes to disability issues. There is a notable lack of social and healthcare services or a common vision on how to approach the socioeconomic empowerment of PwDs.

- **Provide adequate training to civil society organisations (CSOs) and disabled peoples organisations (DPOs)**. Training is necessary to better identify potential individuals that are capable of acting as representatives of PwDs and of dialoguing with institutions;

this will improve the transparency and accountability of CSOs and DPOs.

- **Encourage the creation of employment opportunities for PwDs**. According to the latest available data from the PCBS, in 2017, unemployed PwDs accounted for 37% of the population in Palestine. It can be reasonably assumed that this figure has significantly worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent contraction of the Palestinian economy. It is therefore necessary to implement actions that will lead to the effective inclusion of PwDs within the labour market.

Job inclusion and inclusive education are the two main areas in need of urgent intervention, to ensure the inclusion of PwDs within Palestinian society. It is also essential to increase the involvement of the Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPD) in cooperation programs and interventions, so that tailored interventions that respond to the daily needs of PwD beneficiaries are provided. In this regard, intervention actions must consider the importance of the concept of *ownership* within their initiatives, so that PwDs are seen as a valuable resource and as contributors to cooperation interventions, rather than mere beneficiaries. As such, they become actors and agents who contribute to Palestinian policies and society.

There are several initiatives funded by AICS, both in the multilateral sphere (UNRWA in the Gaza Strip provides primary health services to refugees), and many others, conducted by Italian CSOs. This research project is a part of the following initiative: Nothing about Us without Us: Strengthening the role and skills of the organizations of persons with disabilities (DPOs) for the promotion of the rights of PwDs in Palestine. Other noteworthy projects that espouse the rights of PwDs deserve mention:

- An emergency initiative to protect the Palestinian refugee population at risk of forced displacement, which saw the CSOs, COSPE and EducAid directly involved in the provision of social and healthcare services to people with congenital and/or acquired disabilities, following the clashes and violent episodes of the 2018–2019 border protests known as The Great March of Return. This project, which ended in February 2021, aimed to strengthen community-based organisations (CBOs) that respond to traumatic events and/or violations of the rights of vulnerable populations residing in the Gaza Strip, particularly where they involve female victims of violence, PwDs and women with disabilities (WwDs).

- The PADIS initiative strives to promote and strengthen the rights of PwDs in Palestine by supporting various relevant actors – state, regional and local institutions and civil society organisations (particularly those formed by PwDs) – and by focusing on the rights of children and WwDs. In December 2020, as part of this initiative, an agreement was signed by AICS and EducAid for the *E.M.I.: Empower, Mainstream, Include. Promotion of the rights of PWDs in Palestine* project, which aimed to:

Strengthen expertise on disability at the municipal and civil society level; and

Contribute effectively to the promotion of the rights of PwDs through the socioeconomic empowerment of PwDs, their families and DPOs.

This initiative is designed to strengthen the socioeconomic inclusion of PwDs through their participation in various planned activities, such as training and educational workshops for WwDs, awareness-raising campaigns, renovation of public buildings or community interest to increase integration of PwDs. The initiative employs a twin-track approach that simultaneously strengthens the

professional competencies of PwDs – particularly WwDs and mothers of CwDs – while contributing to society as a whole by providing support for enterprises that are willing to actively engage PwDs in their activities. This action is multi-faceted in that is aims to encourage both self-employment and traditional job placement in existing cooperatives. The initiative also provides small grants to fund the creation of economic activities and a consortium to facilitate and monitor business activities that involve PwDs and which are realised through the project.

Another project was financed through a Promoted Call for Proposals by the headquarters of AICS Rome: *I-CAN: Independence, Capability, Autonomy, iN-clusion. Center for Independent Living for PWDs in the Gaza Strip*. This project enabled the creation of a centre to promote the independent living and social inclusion of PwDs in Gaza. The centre focuses on addressing the self-esteem, socioeconomic empowerment and stigmatisation of PwDs – all interrelated factors. It considers the specific needs of PwDs and then designs individual and group programmes to maximise their independence and empowerment in terms of autonomy, access to education and the labour market, as well as generates increased social awareness of PwD realities. The centre is an innovative institution that provides aid and services thanks to the support of a multidisciplinary team of specialists.

The research presented here by EducAid as part of the initiative *Nothing about Us without Us*, which featured the fullest participation of PwDs to date during its implementation, represents one facet of the ongoing action by the AICS to support Palestine in its realisation of its obligations under the UNCRPD, which it signed in 2014. It also serves as an applicable tool for all local and international institutions that are interested in disability issues and that strive to promote the fullest inclusion of PwDs within Palestinian society.

Finally, I take this opportunity to thank EducAid for its commitment to the projects and activities it carries out daily in Palestine. I am certain that its collaborative efforts and resulting achievements are of the utmost importance and will bear numerous fruits for PwDs in Palestine, as well as for Palestinian society more broadly.

Guglielmo Giordano
Director of AICS Jerusalem

About EducAid, RIDS and the project

Nothing about us without us: strengthening the role and capabilities of disabled people's organizations (DPOs)' is a collaborative project involving three Italian organisations: EducAid, the Italian Network on Disability and Development (RIDS) and the Action Research for CO Development centre and three Palestinian universities: Birzeit University (Centre for Development Studies), An-Najah University and the Palestine Ahliya University (Community Development and Continuing Education Institute).

The project operates in both the West Bank (Bethlehem, Ramallah and Nablus) and the Gaza Strip (Gaza City and Rafah) in Palestine. It aims to promote the rights of persons with disabilities (PwDs) by empowering DPOs through profound capacity building interventions that help to reinforce PwD skills and capabilities. The project also provides opportunities for job placement for PwDs (especially women with disabilities), facilitates access to inclusive education for children with disabilities and introduces the innovative peer counselling approach. All actions directly involve PwDs, who are the true protagonists of their own stories of empowerment and emancipation.

The intervention strategy further aims to develop the skills and capabilities of local DPOs in data collection and assessment capacity, fundraising capacity, intervention planning and management, lobbying and advocacy. It also delivers concrete tools to support PwDs to promote and claim their rights, particularly with respect to the right to education and employment. This is intended to strengthen systematically the skills necessary for local DPOs to increase the efficacy and impact of their actions and to strengthen their role as representatives of PwDs in Palestine.

EducAid, an Italian NGO, is the leading partner of the project. Founded in 2000, it operates according to the belief that concrete action is required to promote and disseminate active and inclusive education practices worldwide. Such practices are essential if we are to initiate educational and social renewal processes that can address and overcome the conditions that exclude and marginalise vulnerable children and adults.

To this end, EducAid supports individuals, groups and local and national institutions engaged in creating democratic, inclusive, fair, open and supportive communities. It intervenes internationally in educational and social cooperation, both of which are linked to long-term development cooperation.

EducAid's objective is to contribute to the development of educational communities in countries facing challenging situations and contexts, building on the experience and knowledge gained from programmes implemented in its own territory, and informed by contemporary evidence based research resulting from partnerships between EducAid and various international universities, research centres and scholars.

In 2013, EducAid collaborated with the Italian Association of Friends of Raoul Follereau (AIFO), Disabled Peoples' International (DPI) and the Italian Federation for Overcoming Handicap (FISH), to establish the Italian Network on Disability and Development (RIDS). In 2020, the Italian NGO, OVCI, joined the network.

RIDS' objective is to implement national and international projects and initiatives and to facilitate actions specifically dedicated to PwDs, within the field of development cooperation. Furthermore, its advocacy, training and consultancy activities relating to the protection of the human rights of PwDs adhere to the stipulations outlined in Articles 11 and 32 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

RIDS' mission and principles were founded on the belief and recognition that the realisation and long-term sustainability of the UNCRPD is possible only if PwDs and their organisations are empowered. As such, disability actors must be strengthened and emboldened so as to become capable of interacting with public and private institutions and civil society actors.

This innovative approach demands a re-evaluation of how PwDs are perceived and interacted with. The most widespread stereotype results from an outdated medical model that presents PwDs as a vulnerable and fragile population that must be acted upon, primarily to guarantee access to health and welfare services. In practical application, adopting this paradigm leads to their being treated as mere beneficiaries and the object of interventions decided by others.

The UNCRPD criticises reductive notions of disability that present PwDs as medically disabled and thus only partially functioning members of society, who are subjected to stigmatisation and discrimination (both direct and indirect) by and within their communities. In fact, many PwDs are impoverished as a result of societal mistreatment and inequality. They encounter real, structural and institutional barriers and obstacles in their daily lives that prevent their full and free participation as equal citizens and that impede their access to equal opportunity.

RIDS' approach is novel in that it holds PwDs to be freely acting subjects and agents. The network empowers individuals and DPOs to participate actively in the implementation of UNCRPD initiatives in-country, by directly involving PwDs in research design and programme planning and by assisting them to carry out national, regional and local advocacy and actions. This increases the likelihood of impact and sustainability.

To this end, RIDS has developed a series of innovative and transferable tools for DPOs in the countries where it operates. These instruments are considered empowerment tools for PwDs, designed to achieve appropriate application of the principles of the UNCRPD. The design and dissemination of these 'tools of empowerment' implies a conception of positive power as growth, development and emancipation. The purpose of such tools is to promote and encourage personal and social development, in the belief that true empowerment demands participation and representation.

Key to this is RIDS' promotion and incorporation of emancipatory disability research (EDR) as an essential tool for empowerment. EDR is a unique research approach whereby qualitative methodology is employed to collect data on the lived experiences of PwDs. This coheres with Article 31 of the UNCRPD, which stresses the importance of conducting research 'to identify and remove the barriers that people with disabilities face in exercise of their rights'.

RIDS actively collaborates with international and national universities and experts to train PwDs in transferable research skills, so that they themselves become researchers and drive the production of knowledge on disability issues, including those rights already recognised and outlined by the UNCRPD.

Notably, an EDR tool developed by RIDS in Palestine (West Bank and Gaza) and Mongolia is currently being implemented in Liberia and Mozambique.

Emancipatory Disability Research as an instrument for the realisation of the UNCRPD

Disability only becomes a tragedy when society fails to provide the things we need to lead our lives — job opportunities or barrier-free buildings, for example. It is not a tragedy to me that I'm living in a wheelchair.
Judith Heumann

The human rights of approximately 1.3 billion PwDs worldwide[1] are now recognised and affirmed. The principles of non-discrimination and equal opportunity apply to them as with any other human being. Necessary changes instigated by the UNCRPD are now the international standard, with 185 countries having ratified the Convention (95.8% of which are UN member states). Ongoing debate and relevant proposals and publications are now mainstream at the international level (e.g. the Sustainable Development Goals[2]); however, there is little evidence of application at national or regional levels.

To fully understand people's lived experiences of disability, and thus tailor interventions and appropriate policies to remove barriers and obstacles and to combat discrimination, it is first necessary to define disability and determine who is considered a PwD[3]. Only then can we begin to identify and address the challenges PwDs face. These challenges are often created by the societies in which they live. Disability is a social construction not solely reducible to physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment. Although some individuals may be challenged by impairment, it is when they encounter various physical, structural or institutional barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society that these conditions of impairment become disempowering. By overlooking or failing to address contributing factors that result in PwDs being excluded, society becomes complicit in denying them their rights as citizens and human beings.

Evidence of a lack of awareness or willingness to prioritise disability issues is the collection (or the lack thereof) of relevant data and statistics. This issue was flagged by the World Health Organization in its first world report on disability[4], which highlighted the scarcity of data on PwDs, who have been overlooked completely in many countries. The problem of data scarcity is compounded by the prevailing medical model paradigm, producing mostly quantitative data concerning PwD population count, pathology type and diffusion, and associated welfare and pension costs to the state.

One example of internationally recognised tools are the question sets developed by the Washington Group on Disability Statistics[5], a UN Statistical Commission. The questions sets investigate the motor, sensory, cognitive and mental functioning and limitations of PwDs, and the statistics generated have subsequently been included in more than sixty national censuses. This is certainly a step forward, but these are often optional questions and produce quantitative data only. We are still far from achieving the stipulation of Article

[1] World Health Organization, *Global report on health equity for persons with disabilities*, 2022.

[2] United Nations, *Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development*, 2015, available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf

[3] 'Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.' (UNCRPD, Art. 1, Para. 2).

[4] World Health Organization, *World report on disability*, 2011.

[5] World Health Organization, *World report on disability*, 2011.

31 of the UNCRPD that member States 'collect appropriate information, including statistical and research data, to enable them to formulate and implement policies to give effect to the (...) Convention' and that innovative elements in data collection and statistics 'shall be disaggregated, as appropriate, and used to help assess the implementation of States Parties' obligations under the present Convention and to identify and address the barriers faced by persons with disabilities in exercising their rights'.

Unfortunately, research studies employing such methodology are scarce, and most national statistical agencies are still far from adopting such objectives. However, if this information were available, it would commit important member states' resources to ensure the human rights of PwDs are upheld and respected. Though these fundamental rights have been seriously violated over millennia, this is especially apparent in contemporary times in the form of PWDs' impeded access to public services and full participation in society.

The EDR approach complements existing data collection and information dissemination methods precisely because it collects qualitative data that support the implementation of the UNCRPD. In fact, its primary objective is to identify the very barriers, obstacles and discrimination that PwDs encounter in daily life which prevent them from enjoying full citizenship rights as recognised by the UNCRPD. EDR equips competent PwDs with the tools to conduct research and data collection. When trained to conduct scientific research using appropriate methodologies, PwDs become active agents and researchers in the field of disability studies, capable of determining study choices and the means of data collection and information sharing. Furthermore, they become protagonists in their own lives and emancipation. Simultaneously, and as a result of leading research through design and conduct, they develop awareness and acquire skills that often make them leaders of associations and independent managers of their own lives, as we witnessed in Palestine.

RIDS[6] has developed and implemented EDR projects in India, Mongolia, Liberia and Palestine, publishing final research reports relating to various rights (accessibility, education, work, family, etc.) and promoting the empowerment of the PwDs involved. The RIDS approach is informed by Article 4, Par. 3 of the UNCRPD stating that 'In the development and implementation of legislation and policies to implement the present Convention, and in other decision-making processes concerning issues relating to persons with disabilities, States Parties shall closely consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations'.

We affirm that PwDs are no longer to be subjected to decisions made by others, and we recognise them as agents of cultural and technical change. When they are given opportunity and enabled to participate competently, they produce innovation. Nothing about us without us!

Giampiero Griffo
President of the Italian Network on Disability and Development

[6] RIDS is a network comprised of three international development cooperation NGOs (AIFO, EducAid and OVCI) and two DPOs (DPI Italia and FISH).

About ARCO

The Action Research for CO Development centre (ARCO) is a research centre located within the University of Florence that offers research, consulting and training services locally (Prato), nationally (Italy) and internationally.
With more than 10 years of experience in local development, social economics, inclusive development, M&E and impact evaluation and circular innovation and sustainable commodities, we combine scientific rigor with practical solutions.

We embrace a multisector and multidisciplinary approach and engage the expertise of economists, statisticians, political scientists, sociologists and commodity scientists.

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Executive summary

This report presents the results of four emancipatory research (ER) studies that focused on inclusive education and employment for persons with disabilities (PwDs) in Palestine. It was conducted within the framework of the project Nothing about Us without Us (NAUWU), and its objective is twofold:

- First, to deepen knowledge on the inclusion of PwDs within **education, vocational training and employment sectors**. This entailed the identification of **facilitators** and **barriers** to the inclusion of PwDs, as well as concrete domains for **action**, to elaborate policy recommendations for an **operational strategic plan on disability.**

- Second, to enhance **local empowerment** by actively involving four different groups of PwDs in an ER process, in collaboration with Palestinian disabled people's organisations (DPOs) and universities.

The project was funded by the Italian Agency for International Cooperation (AICS) and led by the Italian NGO, EducAid. It has been implemented in the West Bank and Gaza strip, specifically in the municipalities of Bethlehem, Gaza, Hebron, Jenin, Nablus and Ramallah. The research project saw the participation of the Palestinian Ministries of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) and Labour, EducAid, Ahlya University, An-Najah National University, Palestine Ahlyia University (PAU), Birzeit University (in particular, its Centre for Development Studies), the Action Research for CO-Development centre (ARCO), PIN S.c.r.l. (University of Florence), Rete Italiana Disabilità e Sviluppo (RIDS) Onlus. ARCO, a research lab within the University of Florence, assisted the project by providing research support and two trainers to oversee the facilitation and implementation of the entire ER process. Project partners included several DPOs based in the municipalities targeted by the project, namely the General Palestinian Union of People with Disability (GUPWD) (in Beit Sahour), Stars of Hope (in Ramallah) and Aswat (in Nablus).

The use of ER is presented as a more comprehensive approach to the empowerment of PwDs and their organisations in Palestine, with similar experiments being carried out in recent years. For example, in 2015, an ER project that was focused on the link between gender and disability-related discrimination was carried out as part of the PARTICIPACTION project (ARCO and RIDS, 2016), while in 2017, another ER project conducted by ARCO and EducAid (2017) focused on the accessibility of the Palestinian education system. Indeed, ER has been explicitly welcomed by the AICS as a valuable instrument for data collection and the evaluation of development programmes, in coherence with Art. 31 and 33 of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) principles, as it represents one of the most advanced and innovative approaches in the domain of participatory research and, as such, contributes to fostering progress towards fully inclusive societies.

The concrete participation of PwDs in decision-making processes allows for a nuanced picture of facilitators of and barriers to the inclusion of PwDs within education and employment sectors, while also identifying domains for action policy recommendations towards an operational strategic plan on disability. Furthermore, since the value of emancipatory disability research (EDR) is also reflected in the augmentation of researcher skills and knowledge, their emancipation and empowerment results from assuming ownership of the steps contained within the research process. As such, each chapter is enriched by the inclusion of specific text boxes titled 'Voices from the fieldwork', which depict the ER experience from the point of view of the field researchers involved.

In contemporary Palestine, PwDs represent one of the most vulnerable demographics: they

face extreme difficulties in daily life and are subject to severe discrimination, which prevents them from fully enjoying their rights as citizens. According to the latest data provided by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2017), 87.3% of PwDs in Palestine are unemployed, and 53.1% are illiterate. The Independent Commission for Human Rights points out that students with disabilities (SwDs) make up only 0.3% of the total number of students in Palestine, due to the lack of accessibility of the institutions and lack of inclusive education methodologies, while the lack of inclusion of PwDs in the labour market results in a 3–7% loss in GDP, according to the International Labour Organization.

PwDs, and especially women with disabilities (WwDs), face heavy discrimination and social stigmatisation: 54.5% of the 189 WwDs interviewed for the EducAid baseline in Gaza (2017)[1] stated that social stigmatisation represents one of the most difficult obstacles to gaining employment, while 23.1% of PwDs face serious difficulties accessing education due to social discrimination, according to UNICEF.[2] Regarding DPOs, the same baseline (conducted by EducAid within the framework of the I-Can project) confirms that these organisations suffer from low levels of management and intervention capacity, which consequently limits their effectiveness in promoting the rights of PwDs and prevents their being recognised as key actors in this field. This was confirmed by a World Bank study, according to which the PwD movement in Palestine suffered major collapse after the Second Intifada; however, new opportunities have since arisen to revitalise the movement, following the Palestinian Authority's ratification of the UNCRPD in 2014.[3]

Although progress has been made, it remains important to strengthen Palestinian DPOs and their ability to advocate for the rights of Palestinian PwDs, for the reasons stated above and to achieve deep and long-lasting results. The comprehensive adoption of a biopsychosocial approach to disability – as opposed to the ingrained medical welfare approach – would allow these organisations to be recognised as key figures in the promotion of PwD rights. This, in turn, makes it possible to improve collaboration among DPOs, as well as to bolster human and financial resources through fundraising, assessment, data collection, lobbying and advocacy.

The research presented in this report was developed by four diverse teams comprised of university researchers and disabilities experts. The four studies differ in their methodologies, sample size and research hypotheses; however, they all fit within the theoretical framework of UNCRPD, apply ER methods and adopt the same processes, articulated in several steps: training, piloting, elaboration of research protocol, tools and sample size, data collection (quantitative and qualitative), data analysis and reporting.

The report is structured as six chapters. The two introductory chapters guide the reader through an exploration of the theoretical framework of ER, its origins and applications within social science studies, and present an outline and the context of this project. Chapter 3 presents the ER conducted in Nablus and Jenin: here, the team, coordinated by Samah Saleh (An-Najah National University) and Sameh Sawalha (disabilities researcher), focused on education and employment for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDDs). The study addressed the existing gap between legal theoritical frameworks and their

1. See https://www.educaid.it/portfolio/i-can-independence-capabilities-autonomy-inclusion-centro-per-la-vita-indipendente-per-le-persone-con-disabilita-della-striscia-di-gaza-2018/

2. See https://www.unicef.org/sop/media/201/file/ODI%20Report.pdf

3. Sources used for a preliminary assessment include qualitative and quantitative data from the PCBS, the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Center for Development Studies (Birzeit University), the World Bank, the ILO, the Palestinian Independent Commission for Human Rights, UNICEF and various Palestinian legislation on disability. In addition to these sources, the project drew upon baselines conducted by EducAid (Baseline Survey on DPOs in West Bank, 2015) and ER conducted in Gaza and the West Bank during previous interventions.

practical implementation, to represent the main challenges that PwDs face in the fields of education and employment. Through this research, the Nablus group aimed to elaborate legal tools and strategies for the inclusion of persons with IDDs.

In Chapter 4, the team from Ramallah conducted qualitative research on special schools, with a focus on boarding schools. This research was coordinated by Imad Sayrafi (Birzeit University) and Ziad Amro (disabilities expert) and seeks to understand the effects of boarding schools on the development of students' social identity. The results highlighted several controversial aspects, in particular that although boarding schools offer SwDs access to education, they also isolate, discriminate, and exclude SwDs from social life.

Chapter 5 presents the results of the research carried out by the team in Bethlehem. Rasha Suboh (Ahlya University) and Awad Obayat (disabilities expert) centred their research around primary schools in Bethlehem and Hebron, gauging how and to what extent inclusive education principles such as acceptance, accessibility, participation and accomplishment are integrated and implemented within primary schools. The study confirmed the schools' lack of effectiveness and failure to practically implement these principles, as well as their negative impact on the lives and development of SwDs. Furthermore, the research highlighted that it is necessary to implement further processes aimed at increasing accessibility and inclusion in schools.

Chapter 6 presents the research of the team from Gaza, comprised of Ghassan Abu Hatab (Birzeit University), Dalal Mohamed Al Taj (disabilities expert) and Soha Jebreel (Project Coordinator) , who coordinated an ER project focused on the role of vocational education training centres (VTC) in inclusive education and sustainable employment. Their research sought to determine what factors and actors facilitate or undermine PwD inclusion in technical education and vocational training (TEVT) centres, as well as PwD transition from VTC to the labour market. This research considered various factors and characteristics of TEVT centres, such as motivation, structural features and building accessibility, programmes proposed and skills developed, in addition to the characteristics of the students who attend these centres. The research protocol also included an analysis of legal frameworks and the job market in the Gaza Strip. To conclude, the final chapter summarises the most important findings from all four of the research works, drawing forth and presenting a series of interrelated conclusions and policy recommendations.

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List of acronyms

AAIDD: American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

CA: capability approach

CBOs: community-based organisations

CSOs: civil society organisations

CwDs: children with disabilities

DPOs: disabled people's organisations

EDR: emancipatory disability research

ER: emancipatory research

ESCWA: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia

GDP: gross domestic product

GUPWD: Palestinian General Union of People with Disability

ILO: International Labour Organization

MEHE: Ministry of Education and Higher Education

IDDs: Intellectual and developmental disabilities

NaUwU: Nothing about Us without Us

NGOs: non-governmental organisations

PCBS: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics

PwDs: persons with disabilities

PwIDDs: persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities

RIDS: Rete Italiana Disabilità e Sviluppo

SwDs: students with disabilities

TVET: technical and vocational education training

UNCRPD: United Nation Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNRWA: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees

VTC: vocational education training centres

WwDs: women with disabilities

1. General theoretical framework

1.1 Emancipatory research: from Freire to emancipatory disability research

1.1.1 The pedagogy of the oppressed

Emancipatory research (ER) is a type of action research aimed at investigating the dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion from the perspective of people who experience specific vulnerabilities. This methodology was developed from several converging strands of work that emerged from an overall dissatisfaction with the power structures embodied in 'traditional' research processes. It is grounded in the dissemination of participatory research techniques and methods, as well as the reflections and practices that stem from the work of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal (Biggeri and Ciani, 2019; Deepak et al., 2014).

The work of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal has strongly inspired the development of emancipatory approaches to social research, as they pioneered this type of methodology through their work in the field of education (Justo and MgSc, 2005). The Brazilian philosopher and pedagogist, Paulo Freire, in his fieldwork in São Paulo's favelas, emphasised that marginalised people possess sharp analytical skills as long as they are provided with opportunities to investigate their own realities and reflect upon their living conditions. The action-research methods that he created were experimented with for the first time in São Paulo's favelas, while Freire was working among the poor and illiterate of those communities.

Through that field experience, he pioneered a type of popular education and awareness-raising that he defined as *conscientização*, which subsequently spread throughout Latin America during the 1970s. His *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1996) became a key text for social and political reference precisely because of its intrinsic power to discuss and re-envision, through the psychosocial analysis of oppressed–oppressor relationships, traditional educational approaches and mnemonic teaching methods.

The starting point of his reflection was his belief that everyone, including 'the illiterate', has important knowledge and the ability to participate in the production of knowledge. For this reason, the central tenet of his philosophy was one of inclusive and universal active participation in educational and cultural processes, and the reconciliation of theory with action, both individual and collective. This approach does not question the importance of the right to institutional education but rather places it alongside the extraordinary power of self-education.

The main principles laid down by Freire were destined to become the basis for the development of ER (Kumar, 2002; Biggeri and Ciani, 2018): (i) the poor and the marginalised have the capacity to analyse their world and their problems; (ii) emancipatory processes are needed to develop and practise these analytical skills; (iii) it is necessary to develop critical self-awareness; and (iv) the more one is placed on the margins of society, the more one has the potential to be a catalyst for change.

Strongly inspired by the methods and principles of Freire, as well as by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Brazilian artist, director and educator, Augusto Boal, founded the Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal recognised in theatre an ideal tool to give voice to those who had none, believing that each of us can actively influence socio-political

developments. He created a theatre that aimed to transform viewers into actors, not only on stage but also in real life, by providing tools for analysis and personal and social transformation, through awareness (Freire's *conscientização*) of the mechanisms of oppression imposed at all levels by the dominant society and power.

During the same period, other instances of radical reappraisal were taking place in Europe. Don Lorenzo Milani (1927–1967), a priest and intellectual from a bourgeois family of Florence, was appointed as prior of the church of Sant'Andrea in Barbiana in 1954. In the 1960s, he opened the School of Barbiana in a small town in the deeply deprived mountain areas of central Italy. In response to the widespread illiteracy and poverty he encountered in his parish, Milani developed an innovative educational method for the school: he kept it open seven days a week and shared the educational objectives and methods with the students (Lauria, 2011). The School of Barbiana lasted almost a decade (1954–1967), garnering widespread interest and attention in Italy, especially after Milani published his famous 'Letter to a teacher', a text co-authored with his students, which read as a manifesto of a social and pedagogical revolution that called for a more inclusive schooling system.

Freire himself was directly influenced by the work of Italian activist and philosopher, Antonio Gramsci, who developed the concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 2007). This concept perceives bidirectional relationships through which social actors are able to influence current ways of thinking and decision-making processes. In particular, Gramsci claimed that to control knowledge production processes is a precondition to achieving social change and reshaping power relations, that workers themselves should be the subjects shaping cultural processes, and that knowledge should not only be transmitted but also discussed and re-elaborated through collaborative work. This implies to produce organic knowledge processes that redirect the collective struggle and change educational culture. Knowledge is thus constructed rather than transferred.

These approaches highlight that conventional social knowledge – and, therefore, research – more or less implicitly presents the perspectives of dominant social actors (who are often wealthy, able-bodied, heterosexual males). Conversely, emancipatory approaches propose a horizontal, non-hierarchical, subject–subject relationship be established between researchers and research subjects, whereby all participating parties are held in equal importance and considered interchangeable as problem-solvers, thinkers and learners (Glassman and Erdem, 2014). From this perspective, research is conceived of as a fundamental to the work of 'emancipation' and 'conscientisation', as it improves subjects' skill development and problem-solving abilities while increasing self-determination and offering greater influence over decision-making processes, thanks to a stronger sense of ownership of and control over knowledge production processes (Boog, 2003).

1.1.2 Participatory methods and emancipatory research

Early action-research efforts fielded in the slums of São Paulo influenced the work of British scholar and development practitioner, Robert Chambers (1982), whose work challenged traditional social research, in particular the relationship between social research and development project programmes. Chambers directed his critiques at the dynamics of social research, for the fact that they (a) separate the researcher, as the actor endowed with the knowledge and power necessary to interpret the phenomenon in question, from the research object, who is mostly a passive entity from whom information is obtained and (b) because conventional data collection and analysis procedures result in persistent ethnocentric attitudes on the part of experts, researchers and practitioners.

Chambers' critique gave rise to new streams of research that contributed to the development of alternative toolboxes and of participatory research procedures. Rapid rural appraisal (Chambers, 1983) and participatory rural appraisal (Chambers, 1994) are perhaps

the most well-known examples of standardised procedures for conducting participatory research: their flexibility allows for a strengthening of the links between participatory methods and practical actions, thus contributing to its success (Macdonald, 2012).

The evolution of participatory methods involved a complex and broad review of dominant models of research and fieldwork activities. This, in turn, has produced nuanced understandings in analyses of social and economic development, in particular. In participatory research, the degree of participation varies according to method and approach. It has evolved from early forms of participatory approaches (prevalent in the 1990s) that merely consulted people and shared research results, to its current conceptualisation as a process by which marginalised groups can influence society and increase awareness of their own conditions. ER represents the way forward in that it provides those involved with an opportunity not only to express their point of view or facilitate surveys but also to take full ownership of the research process.

The notion of participation that emerges from the mentioned experiences is one of both research practice, through the development of appropriate methods aimed at encouraging the creation of spaces for listening, expression and interaction, and as a right in itself, being a tool for the full realisation of other rights (Ferguson, 1999). In the early 1990s, Mike Oliver (1990) coined the term *emancipatory research* to merge these components within one novel approach that offers richer perspectives and overcomes the limits of conventional research as a result. The term is now used in diverse ways by persons working with different marginalised population groups, as this kind of approach overlaps with and links to intersectionality (Noel, 2016).

1.2 The involvement of marginalized groups in research processes

The main aim of ER is to promote **empowerment among marginalised groups in society**. Through ER methodology, which involves training and awareness-raising, the research object becomes the subject of the research process. This approach enables marginalised groups to acquire specific knowledge on active participation and research implementation, and so they develop awareness regarding their own social and economic conditions. Through critical discussion and analysis of the research questions, marginalised persons (a) become aware of their rights and of the structural causes of their oppression, (b) elaborate practical solutions to improve their living conditions and (c) become able to control the processes of knowledge production that relate to them. Moreover, this strategy sensitises and empowers communities and institutions, which in turn encourages social transformation and inclusive policies (Biggeri and Ciani, 2019).

One of the most important characteristics of this approach is that the **process** allows participants to acquire personal and technical skills so that they can critically analyse their living conditions and elaborate problem-solving strategies. In ER, participants take ownership of the entire research process, participants and researchers being the same entity. By acquiring the skills and expertise necessary to conduct the study, research subjects lead all research activities through all phases, from determining an appropriate research strategy to the final phase of results dissemination. The professional researchers involved act only as supports and facilitators, advising on scientific methods and approaches. This **shift of power relations** is a determinant for individuals to become active players in the knowledge production, decision-making and policy-making processes that concern them. It is now clear that development interventions cannot be sustainable and long-lasting without the effective inclusions and active participation of relevant stakeholders throughout the whole

process. ER processes are structured and implemented through collaboration between expert researchers and those individuals and groups who represent vulnerable and marginalised social groups. All research activities are collaboratively determined and decided upon, with research being carried out by those participants who are trained for precisely that purpose. Thus, this approach aims to change the dynamics of social relations within research production (Oliver, 1992) and, by extension, to generate social change within the current dynamics of marginalisation that dominate society.

Several key elements distinguish the ER approach from others. First, it is crucial to ensure that **all participants play an active role in research and decision-making processes**. All activities must be interactive, and the role of any expert researchers must remain marginal, so that the facilitation of research processes is mostly conducted by the participant researchers. Second, it is important to use **methods** (such as focus group discussions, life course interviews, in-depth interviews) **that help people to dialogue, share and learn from each other's experiences and struggles**, to foster an understanding of any potential means to overcoming barriers and obstacles. As a result of ER processes, participants gain a new or increased awareness on the structural causes of their living conditions and thus can more easily formulate strategies to overcome discrimination and marginalisation.

The third key issue that this kind of research methodology facilitates is an increased **awareness, on the part of participants, of their national and international rights and entitlements**. Through ER processes, legislative frameworks and rights entitlements become useful instruments for discussion and reflection. Persons involved in ER processes become able to examine their own life experiences in light of their rights as citizens. In this respect, the most important international reference is the UNCRPD (Deepak, 2012). The final important aspect is the **dissemination strategy**. The results of ER are communicated and disseminated more effectively when coordinated and synchronised with institutions and organisations able to influence or affect relevant policy change and thus improve the daily lives of marginalised persons and groups. To encourage sensitivity and build awareness of the conditions and lived realities of marginalised groups, on the part of targeted institutions and the public, helps to increase support for the realisation of solutions that promote and protect human rights.

1.2.1 Main steps for planning and implementing emancipatory research

ER methodology is characterised by extreme flexibility with respect to the topics and groups it can be applied to, as well as the tools used (Behar-Horenstein and Feng, 2015). A prerequisite for the success of any ER process is the full awareness and acceptance by expert researchers of their supporting role, which implies the curtailment of their own egos. In the experience of the ARCO research team, ER is predominantly used in disability studies and intersectional analyses of gender and disability (Biggeri and Ciani, 2019; Pellegrino and Massari 2021) and is articulated in the following 10 steps:

1. Identification of an appropriate group to lead research processes.

2. Identification of external scientific support persons to monitor the quality of research processes.

3. Identification of a research question that emerges from a collective analysis of the barriers present in mechanisms of deprivation.

4. Provision of training for the persons who will conduct research processes.

5. Identification of supporting mechanisms for the ER implementers.

6. Definition of a methodology that is a fair compromise between the research group's vision, any limitations in terms of feasibility, and coherence with the research question.

7. Community involvement throughout the research process.

8. Analysis of research results.

9. Dissemination of research results.

10. Evaluation of the research process in terms of the empowerment of the individuals who participated as co-researchers and of their impact on decision-making processes.

The emancipatory approach is particularly suitable for research conducted on disability issues. The Italian development cooperation systematically adopted ER methodology as both a contextual knowledge tool and an action aimed at strengthening the capacities of PwD organisations and empowering individual PwDs (Deepak, 2012; Biggeri and Ciani, 2019). Moreover, the use of ER has been explicitly encouraged by the AICS as it is a valuable instrument for data collection and the evaluation of the coherence of its development programmes with Articles 31 and 33 of the UNCRPD[4]. In the following paragraphs, applications of the emancipatory method within disability research will be developed, with particular attention paid to the UNCRPD.

1.3 Emancipatory disability research: UNCRPD, human rights and the bio-psychosocial model of disability

The application of ER principles and practices to the field of so-called disability studies began with the work of Mike Oliver (2002), who perceived three main limitations to disability research: (1) that perspectives of PwDs were insufficiently reported, (2) that it lacked impact on decision-making processes, and (3) that it neglected the political dimensions of disability. Oliver proposed that PwDs should participate in the research process more directly and in greater depth, so as to produce *'collective accounts of collective experience'* within ER (Oliver, 2002, p. 4). Starting from his pioneering research, we begin to speak of emancipatory disability research (EDR) as a type of research by which PwDs and their organisations cease to be 'objects' of research and instead become active subjects in the production of knowledge about them, the world around them and the social, economic and cultural dynamics that serve to marginalise them. In this framework, the professional researcher plays the role of technical support and facilitator, helping to raise awareness and empower communities and institutions by promoting social transformation and the definition of inclusive policies (Biggeri and Ciani, 2019).

The ER approach recognises the moral right of research subjects to lead, control and exercise ownership over the knowledge produced about them (Biggeri and Ciani, 2019). This is a human rights issue, and it constitutes the right to democratic political membership within a community. The slogan 'Nothing about Us without Us!' refers precisely to this belief and has been used by disabled people's organisations (DPOs), as part of a global movement, to obtain full participation and equal opportunities for, by and with PwDs. The active involvement of PwDs in the elaboration of the first **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)** was a powerful example of how to put into practice the right of full participation, to ensure the development of inclusive societies.

4. https://www.aics.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/LINEE-GUIDA-DISABILITA-2018.pdf

The emergence of EDR, besides its clear links with the aforementioned developments in the field of social research, can be traced back to major changes in the way disability has been approached, both socially and politically. The progressive success of the social (and, subsequently, biopsychosocial) model of disability, as well as the elaboration and wide adoption of the UNCRPD as the main global standard for addressing PwD rights, created conditions that allow the biopsychosocial model of disability to be linked to the upholding of and respect for human rights. Disability research is, therefore, expected to simultaneously address different aspects of disability, including an effective analysis of barriers and facilitators. The six principles for the application of EDR foresee that it should (i) be rooted in the social model of disability, (ii) acknowledge its political dimensions, (iii) promote self-emancipation, empowerment and the removal of barriers, (iv) emphasise the collective dimension of individual experiences, (v) adopt a plurality of methods for data collection and analysis that address the needs of the PwDs involved and (vi) allow PwDs and DPOs to exercise the highest possible degree of control over research processes (Stone and Priestley, 1996).

In comparison, the social model of disability views disability as a condition arising from the interaction between any person who lives with an impairment and the barriers and/or facilitators that characterise the social context, while the medical model views PwDs as sick, incapable and invalid persons. In contrast, the biopsychosocial model elaborated by the American psychiatrist George Engel in the late 1970s is grounded in a respect for human rights, viewing disability through biological, psychological and social dimensions and offering a holistic approach addressing socially constructed barriers (Borrell-Carrió, Suchman and Epstein, 2004). In 2006, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) was approved by the UN General Assembly. The UNCRPD promoted a new approach to disability – the biopsychosocial approach – that is coherent with a respect of human rights. In particular, the UNCRPD promoted the full and effective participation in society of every person with or without disability, on an equal basis, regardless of any physical, intellectual or sensory impairment.

In addition, the capability approach (CA) elaborated by Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen (Sen 1999, 2005), has been an extremely influential tool for evaluation, social assessment and development of policies aimed at improving the well-being of PwDs (Biggeri et al., 2014; Mauro, Biggeri and Grilli, 2015). The CA arose as a challenge to solely economic measures of human development (Carpenter, 2009) and as 'an alternative to utilitarian (resource or income-based) approaches to human welfare' (Hopper, 2007, p. 874). Moving beyond these, Sen considered the effect of rights, freedoms and policies, as well as social, political and economic arrangements, on people's capabilities and lives – that is, on people's 'well-being'.

Applied to disability, CA pays attention to what a person can do and be; that is, it considers their practical opportunities and space of freedom. It sees disability as occurring whenever an individual is deprived of practical opportunities because of an impairment (Mitra, 2006). An individual with an impairment can be considered disabled if they have fewer opportunities than an individual with similar entitlements (the available basket of goods and services) who shares a similar living context (such as family, environment or culture) and has similar personal characteristics (excluding, of course, the impairment itself) (Biggeri and Ciani, 2019).

The approval of the UNCRPD in 2006 marked the global adoption of a biopsychosocial approach to disability and served as an acknowledgement of the existing link between disability and the much wider issue of human rights promotion and safeguarding. The UNCRPD, which comprises part of United Nations international law, was elaborated through participatory processes and represents the theoretical basis for the right of participation of PwDs and, also, for all interventions of participatory and ER in the field of disability.

In fact, Article 1 states that 'The purpose of the present Convention is to promote, protect

and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity' (UNCRPD, 2006), while Article 3 of the Convention summarises its main principles in respect to PwDs:

- Respect for inherent dignity, independence and individual autonomy (including the freedom to make choices)
- Non-discrimination
- Full and effective participation and inclusion in society
- Respect for difference and acceptance of disability as part of human diversity and humanity
- Equality of opportunity
- Accessibility
- Equality between men and women

As we can see, the principles of the Convention correspond to the basic assumptions of the emancipatory approach. Moreover, the principle of equal rights implies that 'each person and all individuals are of equal importance, that these needs must become the foundation for the planning of society and that all the resources are committed in such a way to assure that each individual has the same opportunity to take part' (UNCRPD, 2006). Therefore, **the Convention represents the fundamental international framework for participatory and emancipatory disability research.**

In line with the biopsychosocial model, it is stated in the preamble of the Convention that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others' (UNCRPD, 2006). Moreover, Article 33 of the Convention indicates a preference for national and international monitoring mechanisms to be conducted by PwDs themselves. The features of ER fit perfectly with the monitoring system of the UNCRPD, it being a political instrument that gives voice to PwDs, making them the protagonists in promoting and safeguarding their own rights. Although all articles put forward in the UNCRPD are of equal importance, considering the framework that encompassed the four EDRs that feature in this report, we must focus briefly on the specific UNCRPD articles related to education and employment.

Education

Art. 24 (UNCRPD): *States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to:*

(a) The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;

(b) The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their intellectual and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;

(c) Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society. [...]

Employment

Art. 27 (UNCRPD): *States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labor market and work environment that is open, in-*

clusive and accessible to persons with disabilities. States Parties shall safeguard and promote the realization of the right to work, including for those who acquire a disability during the course of employment, by taking appropriate steps, including through legislation [...]

Though the topic of education is addressed in several UNCRPD Articles, inclusive education is addressed only in Article 24 and related General Comments. As per the Convention, an inclusive education system is one that accommodates all students, irrespective of their abilities or requirements, and at all levels (preschool, primary, secondary, tertiary, vocational and continued education). An inclusive education system is one that does not segregate students with disabilities (SwDs) but treats them equally to students without disabilities. Inclusive education both adapts the design of and structures within the physical environment and tailors its teaching methods and curriculum to students' needs, so that the culture, policy and practices of educational environments are non-discriminatory and accessible to all students; to place SwDs in mainstream classes that are not adapted to them does not constitute inclusion. Inclusive education is culturally specific and thus subject to change and variation according to context and over time; so, as the UNCRPD Committee stated in its General Comments (UNCRPD, 2016), profound challenges persist. Millions of PwDs continue to be denied their right to an education, and for many more, education is available only in settings where SwDs are isolated from their peers and where the education they receive is of a relatively inferior quality (UNCRPD, 2016).

Concerning the right of PwDs to equal employment opportunities, the UNCRPD reinforced and updated the rights already outlined in other international instruments. The right of PwDs to employment has been acknowledged and espoused since the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (Art. 23), because in many societies, work is considered a fundamental means by which an individual can contribute to their community. Therefore, employment is a key factor in determining the ability of PwDs to participate fully in society and to ensure a decent standard of living for themselves and their families.

Article 27 of the UNCRPD requires that state parties recognise the right of PwDs to equal employment opportunities, including their right to earn a living through work freely chosen or accepted in the labour market, in an open, inclusive and accessible work environment. Furthermore, it presents measures for the implementation of the rights recognised in the Convention, which are intended to eradicate discrimination on the basis of disability, by any person, organisation or private enterprise. Notably, the UNCRPD recognises the importance of the involvement of PwDs, through their representative organisations, in the development and implementation of legislation and policies designed to realise and implement the Convention, as well as in other decision-making processes concerning issues relating to them. While the barriers to equal access to education and employment for PwDs can be attributed to multiple factors, we address those that in the Palestinian context represent the most important constraints. These are highlighted in the UNCRPD Initial Report (2019) as follows:

- A general failure to understand or implement human rights models of disability, which results in disability continuing to be conflated with impairment rather than attributed to enabling/disabling environments;
- A persistent discrimination against PwDs, including physical discrimination;
- A lack of knowledge regarding the advantages of inclusive education and diversity;
- A lack of disaggregated data on PwDs;
- A lack of political will and/or technical knowledge related to disability;
- A lack of legal measures and mechanisms to report and address violations of PWD's rights;
- A shortage of specialist teachers with the capacity to monitor and fully meet the needs of SwDs;
- A lack of financial resources; and Insufficient coordination between institutional bodies (government and NGOs) that work with PwDs.

In recent years, there has been significant growth in domestic antidiscrimination legislation, as well as persistent efforts by international agencies and DPOs to promote equality of opportunity and treatment in work and employment, and so important inroads into the economic and social exclusion of PwDs continue to be made. However, on an international scale, PwDs too often continue to be denied the right to work. Regarding employment, statistics indicate that rates of unemployment, underemployment and economic inactivity among PwDs tend to be much higher than those of other workers.

Many PwDs withdraw from actively searching for employment and instead rely either on disability benefits (where they exist) or the informal economy. This tendency is exacerbated by persistent discriminatory barriers and mistaken assumptions about their capacity to work, as well as issues regarding accessibility (in terms of work environment) and the perceived and real risk of losing social security benefits once employed.

The cultural and intellectual evolution outlined both signalled and wished for within the framework of the promotion of PwDs' rights. The UNCRPD adopts a twin-track approach to monitoring the implementation of the Convention, and this approach necessitates the participation of PwDs (Stein and Lord, 2010; Biggeri and Ciani, 2019). First, governments commit themselves to report periodically to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, regarding their efforts to implement the UNCRPD. Second, the UNCRPD encourages DPOs, specifically, and civil society organisations, more generally, to establish mechanisms for the independent monitoring of the Convention's application.

This emphasis on participation has a twofold effect. It clearly indicates that disability is to be defined in terms of upholding human rights rather than as addressing weaknesses or the need for social protection. Simultaneously, it reiterates the pivotal importance of DPOs' and PwDs' participation in monitoring processes, in line with UNCRPD structures, methods and procedures. This reaffirms the importance of strengthening the capacity of DPOs to influence policy-making processes, which encapsulates the focus and objectives of NaUwU project research and actions.

2. The 'Nothing about us without us' project: emancipatory disability research in Palestine

2.1 The project

This chapter presents the 'Nothing about Us without Us' (NaUwU) report as an emancipatory research (ER) project, financed by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation and implemented by the NGO, EducAid. The project adopted the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNCRPD, 2006), ratified by the Palestinian National Authority in 2014, as its overarching international framework. As its primary normative national-level framework, the project references both the *National Strategic Plan for Disability Sector* in the West Bank and Gaza, adopted in 2013 by the Palestinian Ministry of Social Affairs, and National Law No. 4/99, which establishes equal rights for persons with disabilities (PwDs) within the Palestinian territories.

The aim of NaUwU is to support and strengthen regional disabled peoples' organisations (DPOs) as key players in the promotion of the rights of PwDs. The intention is to increase capacity building to fuel transformative processes both at the organizational and social level, which requires that DPOs be seen to be leading processes of change, both by PwDs themselves but also by other stakeholders and key actors, such as government bodies and public institutions.

In 2018, EducAid provided support by conducting a preliminary needs assessment, literature review, study of programme and policy documents for the Palestinian territories and an analysis of the impact of similar initiatives previously conducted in the field of disability, to provide contextual reference for this project. It also acted as coordinator between project members and local and international organisations actively engaged in disability studies and advocacy in Palestine. Additionally, EducAid conducted focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews involving PwDs, DPOs and key stakeholders: four focus groups involved 20 local DPOs, and six involved 60 PwDs, the aim being to identify and record the expressed needs of PwDs and their representative organisations, while in-person interviews were held with representatives of key stakeholders, such as the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) and the Ministries of Labour, Social Affairs, Economy and Education.

This intervention was coordinated with the help of various members of the International Disability Alliance, which represents various international organisations actively engaged in the field of disability. Of these, GIZ acted as co-coordinator of the group, assisting EducAid by participating in meetings held with local DPOs, with the aim of coordinating relevant capacity building interventions. Furthermore, this intervention drew heavily on the experience and knowledge gained from EducAid Palestine's strategic programme titled "Empower and Include" (conducted between 2015–2020), aimed at supporting the socioeconomic empowerment and social inclusion of PwDs in the Gaza strip but which also resulted in the considerable expansion of the geographical scope of intervention in the West Bank area.

NaUwU and its actions achieve the anticipated outcome of strengthening local DPOs' strategic planning capacities. This encourages a more change-oriented approach to their activities, which in turn allows them to project beyond and overcome limited, short-term, project-oriented perspectives, establishing DPOs as primary actors within disability frameworks and inclusive policy-making and roundtables. Because solid research skills are essential for effective planning, the intervention strategy's intention is to reinforce local DPOs' data collection and analysis capabilities, as well as their project management, lobbying and advocacy skills, particularly in regard to advocacy for equality of education and employment.

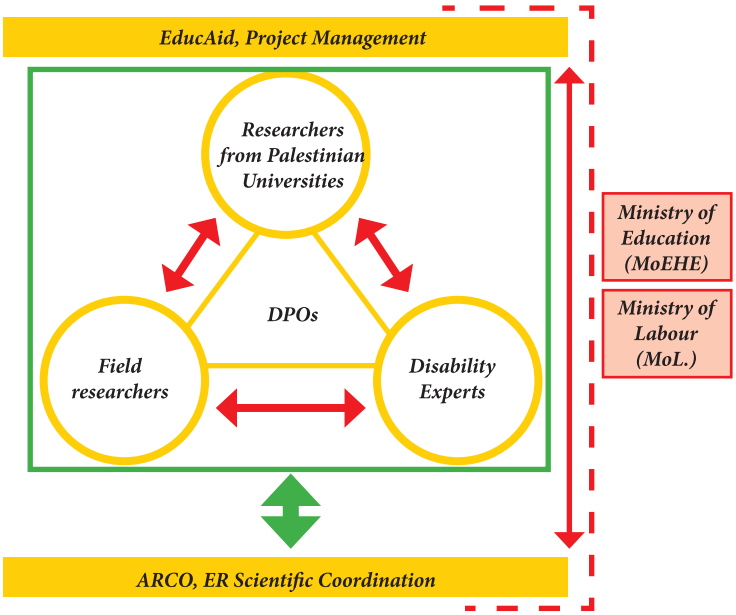
NaUwU project activities were brainstormed, determined and implemented with the direct involvement of PwDs, as protagonists in their own empowerment and emancipation. In keeping with the twin-track approach to intervention, there was a heavy emphasis on networking throughout the entire project, to allow DPOs to establish relationships with key stakeholders and actors, including government and public institutions, private sector actors and local and international organisations. Furthermore, the elaboration of an operational strategic plan on disability provided DPOs with an opportunity to put forward their own agenda on disability interventions in Palestine, adopting a bottom up and participatory approach that allows for adequate consideration of PWDs needs, as understood and expressed by PwDs themselves.

While EducAid was in charge of coordinating and facilitating the project at the local level, it also engaged the expertise of local and international partners. The following partners were invited to participate as scientific coordinators of field research within the targeted municipalities: four researchers from three Palestinian universities (Palestine Ahliya University, University of Birzeit and An-Najah National University) and four disability experts from local DPOs. These partners were responsible for training research groups comprised of DPO members, whose responsibility was to carry out necessary fieldwork. In addition, the Action Research for CO-Development Centre (ARCO), in Italy, assumed the role of external scientific coordinator of NaUwU, responsible for advising on training and capacity-building activities and supporting the project's participatory research processes. These collaborations resulted in the elaboration of the four different emancipatory disability research (EDR) processes presented in this report. These will be detailed in the following sections.

2.2 The emancipatory research process in Palestine

The primary research team was comprised of **three research coordinators from ARCO**, **four local research coordinators from Palestinian universities**, **four disability experts** and **twelve local researchers from Palestinian DPOs**, some of whom are PwDs. The DPO researchers worked directly with local university research coordinators to define research and fieldwork protocols and methodology and were directly involved in the data collection and results validation. The local research coordinators were, in turn, in constant dialogue with the research coordinators from ARCO and provided them with regular updates on the research steps, challenges and results. In turn, ARCO's research coordinators monitored the progress of the project remotely, supporting the local Palestinian research groups in results analysis and drafting the report.

Figure 1. The EDR process and actors involved



Source: authors' elaboration

The project was divided into phases (see Figure 2), following the ER methodology described in the previous chapter. A **preliminary phase involved meetings** held between ARCO coordinators, local Palestinian university researchers and DPO disability experts in each governorate, **to discuss, devise and organise training**. ARCO was forced to participate remotely due to imposed travel restrictions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, in effect for the project's duration, which made it impossible for ARCO coordinators to meet project partners in person. Instead, the scientific and project coordinators held meetings through online platforms.

In **Phase 1**, the ARCO research coordinators, local DPO experts and university researchers in charge of training, together with local coordinators from EducAid, devised a **common theoretical and methodological platform** for the successful development of the ER process, which resulted in a **co-created training process and agenda** aimed at facilitating the involvement of field research teams (comprised of Palestinian PwD researchers). As such, this initial phase presented a pivotal opportunity to set intentions and expectations, understand local experts' interests and objectives and ensure that the interventions intended for each governorate were coherent and adapted contextually to the particularities of each location, given their unique characteristics and constraints.

In **Phase 2,** the **local partners held training sessions for the would-be field researchers** (DPO members)[5]. The COVID-19 regulations in place in the Palestinian Territories at that time permitted trainings to be held in person provided that these were in spaces that guaranteed accessibility and adhered to emergency health decrees. The training sessions lasted six days in each area (Nablus, Bethlehem, Ramallah and Gaza), and each university researcher in charge of facilitating training adapted the sessions and materials to meet the needs and features of each group and context.

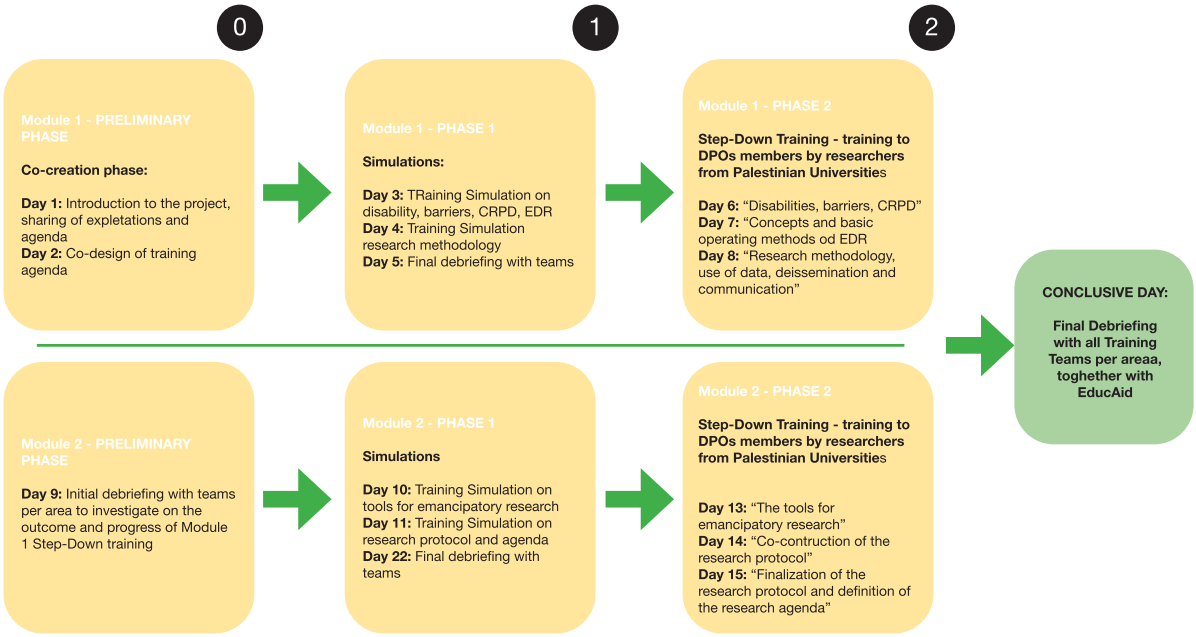
5. Field research team members were PwDs belonging to the following DPOs: the General Palestinian Union of People with Disability (regional branches), Behimetkom Society and Al-Salam Sports Club for People with Disability.

All training sessions used **participatory methodologies** and group activities to help the PwDs to identify the most relevant topics that met the objectives of NaUwU. Collaboration between scientific coordinators, disability experts and DPO researchers proved key to gaining a deeper understanding of the most sensitive issues and discriminatory practices needing to be addressed through structured policy proposals. A feature common to all training sessions was the stated objective of promoting positive action towards PwDs empowerment and the realisation of their full rights as citizens.

The training was generally structured to be both theoretical and practical (learning to use and apply research tools). These sessions led to each research group defining its own research hypothesis – grounded within the field of inclusive education and employment – and deciding on the most appropriate methodology for data collection. This process resulted in the following four research topics:

- Gaps in the implementation of legal frameworks for persons with intellectual disabilities in Nablus and Jenin;
- Development of social identity for SwDs in special and boarding schools in Ramallah;
- Inclusive education in primary school for children with disabilities in Bethlehem and Hebron; and
- Inclusive education and sustainable employment for PwDs in the Gaza Strip, focusing of the contribution of vocational training centres towards the inclusion of PwDs in technical education and employment sectors.

Figure 2. The Training Process



Source: author elaboration

Following the finalisation and validation of the research project structure, a pre-test phase for the data collection process was conducted, followed by the data collection itself, which lasted three months. The four groups encountered various challenges during fieldwork that required them to adjust the data sample somewhat; nonetheless, they managed to complete and fulfil the data collection requirements within the allocated time period. The groups chose either purely qualitative or mixed methodologies for data collection, depending on their research objectives, data sample and targets. The data were then analysed, and the

results used to inform the report included in this publication, as well as policy recommendations for the *National Strategic Plan for Disability*.

During the entirety of this process, the scientific coordinators from ARCO and local universities maintained an ongoing dialogue through regular meetings, to support all teams in their different tasks. This included the finalisation of research tools, validation of data analysis and harmonisation of research structures for the drafting of this report. The regular meetings allowed them to share experience and further training on qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods, as well as ensured that all parties remained aligned throughout the project in regard to the research being carried out.

2.3 The four emancipatory research protocols

The ER conducted in Nablus and Jenin (see Chapter 3) focussed on education and employment for persons with intellectual disabilities and was coordinated by **Samah Saleh** of An-Najah National University and disability expert, **Sameh Sawalha**. The study aimed at understanding the main challenges faced by PwDs in the fields of education and employment by **addressing the gap between legal theoretical frameworks and their application,** to elaborate legal tools and strategies to integrate persons with intellectual disabilities. The research highlighted the different types of discrimination suffered by persons with intellectual disabilities and investigated how this influences their participation in public life, work, education and leisure.

The ER conducted in Ramallah was coordinated by **Imad Sayrafi** of Birzeit University and disability expert, **Ziad Amro**, who focussed on special schools for PwDs (see Chapter 4). In particular, their research aimed at understanding how students with disabilities' experience in special schools affect their identity development. Applying Amartya Sen's capability approach to the concept and construction of social identity, the research considered the following aspects of this specific kind of development, common to so many PwDs in Palestine: social cohesion, interaction with the school staff, specificities of boarding schools and relationships with parents. These were all analysed for their impact on the identity formation process of PwD students. The results shed light on various controversial aspects of special schools, namely that while they do offer an education and life skills that can be beneficial to SwDs to some extent, these schools are also places of isolation, discrimination and violence for many students.

Inclusive education was also the focus of the ER conducted by the research team of Bethlehem and Hebron, coordinated by **Rasha Suboh** of Ahliya University and disability expert, **Awad Obayat**; however, the focus here is on public primary schools (see Chapter 5). The research studied to what degree inclusive education principles – such as accessibility, acceptance, participation, accomplishment – are implemented in public primary schools in the Palestinian Territories. What emerged from the study was a clear picture of which accessibility and inclusion elements are necessary to transform the school environment into something appropriate for SwDs. Furthermore, the notable lack of effectiveness that this study uncovered enlightens us as to the negative impact that public primary school education can have on the intellectual health of SwDs, who are often discouraged in their desire to continue their education.
Finally, **Ghassan Abu Hatab** of Birzeit University, disability expert, **Dalal Mohamed Al Taj** and Soha Jebreel, EducAid field coordinator in Gaza, coordinated the ER in the Gaza Strip, focusing on inclusive education and sustainable employment (see Chapter 6). Their research investigated the factors and actors that either facilitated or hindered the inclusion of PwDs in vocational training centres, as well as the transition from vocational training programs to the labour market. Motivation, structural features, skills and accessibility were

all considered, to assess the readiness of vocational education and training centres and workplaces to accommodate SwDs and PwD employees. The data gathered indicates that legal frameworks still constitute a barrier to the inclusion of PwDs in education and sustainable employment. The research also identifies the most relevant obstacles and facilitating factors that either prevent or allow PwDs to overcome these barriers. The following table summarises each research topic and tools used for data collection:

Table 1. Research protocols by area

Area	Research topic	Research target	Research tools
North Palestine	Education and employment for persons with intellectual disabilities. Understanding gaps in the implementation of legal frameworks in Nablus and Jenin Governorates	- The families of children with intellectual disabilities - PwDs, teachers and school principals - Employees and employers	**Qualitative Tools** - **Life course interviews** with the families of children with intellectual disabilities - **Semi-structured interviews** with PwDs, teachers and employees and employers - **Focus group discussions** with teachers, school principals and the families of students with intellectual disabilities
Nablus and Jenin Governorates			
Central Palestine	The development of social identity in PwDs attending special and boarding schools	- PwDs who studied in special schools - Teaching staff - The families of PwDs who studied in special schools	**Qualitative Tools** - **Life course interviews** with PwDs who studied in special schools - **Semi-structured interviews** with teaching staff and the families of PwDs who studied in special schools - **Focus group discussions** with PwDs who studied in special schools
Ramallah Governorate			
South Palestine	The application of inclusive education components in primary schools for CwDs in Bethlehem and Hebron.	- CwDs in primary school - Teaching staff and civil servants - The families of CwDs - SwDs who dropped out of school	**Mixed methods** - **Questionnaire** administered to CwDs in primary school - **Semi-structured interviews** with CwDs in primary schools, teaching staff and civil servants - **Focus group discussion** with the families of CwDs - **Case studies** of SwDs who dropped out of school
Bethlehem and Hebron Governorate			
Gaza Strip	Inclusive education and sustainable work for PwDs in the Gaza Strip: the conditions of the VTCs in terms of inclusion of PWDs in technical education and work sector.	- VTC SwDs - VTC trainers and managers - VTC SwD graduates - Education experts - Employers - Ministry of Labour - NGOs	**Mixed methods** - **Questionnaires** administered to VTC students, trainers and employers - **Semi-structured interviews** with VTC graduates, education experts and employers - **Focus group discussions** with VTC trainers, managers, (ex) students, private employers, Ministry of Labour and NGOs

Source: authors' elaboration

3. Education and employment for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities (idds) in Nablus and Jenin

By: Samah Saleh, Sameh Swalha, Gadeer Yaish, Sly Zioud and Amjad Qasim

3.1 Introduction

The definition of intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDDs) is controversial. The World Health Organization defines an IDD as 'a condition of arrested or incomplete development of the mind, which is especially characterised by impairment of motor skills and social abilities' (WHO, 1992). The American Association on intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) describes IDDs as being characterised by significant limitations not just in intellectual functioning but also in adaptive behaviour, as expressed in social and practical adaptive skills (Weiber, 2011).

In other instances the terms 'mental' and 'IDD' are used, as in the case of the Palestinian Law on the Rights of the Disabled: 'IDD encompasses any permanent, complete, or partial limitation – affecting any of the senses, or physical, psychological, or intellectual capacities – which restricts one's ability to respond to his/her living needs under the same circumstances as lived by the non-disabled' (Law No. 4, 1999). In addition, a Palestinian Executive Bylaw adopted in 2004 states:

- IDD is the disability resulting from impairment of the higher functions of the brain, such as concentration, counting and memory; it causes learning and cognitive difficulties or behavioural disorders; IDD is the disability resulting from mental, inherited, or genetic illness, or whatever prevents the mind from performing its normal functions (initial report submitted by the State of Palestine under Article 35 of the Convention, 2019).

Each of these definitions complements the conceptual basis of disability in the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The UNCRPD defines persons with disabilities (PwDs) as rights-holders whose human rights are violated by the existence of environmental, cultural and legislative obstacles and barriers that limit their full participation within society.

According to a report issued by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2019), around 2.1% of Palestinians live with a disability: 48% in the West Bank and 52% in the Gaza Strip. However, there is no data disaggregation available concerning persons with IDDs (PwIDDs) in Palestine. Indeed, statistics show that 39.9% of individuals with learning disabilities require psychological support services, 37% require a special education programme, 35.8% require occupational therapy and 31.1% require speech therapy (PCBS, 2019). This gap in the data reflects a more general gap in related research on the difficulties experienced by persons with IDDs in Palestine, specifically. Nonetheless, the existing evidence suggests that widespread social discrimination and a marked social stigmatisation of PwIDDs exists

in Palestine. This causes significant marginalisation of PwIDDs, which adversely affects their participation in public life, work, education and leisure. The situation is worse for women with disabilities (WwDs), who are additionally limited in terms of exercising their right to marry, have families and live independently (UNCRPD, 2019).

3.2 Methodology

This study was carried out to identify and understand the **challenges** that PwIDDs face in regard to education and employment in Palestine, but specifically in Nablus and Jenin. The first step was to **address the gap between current legal frameworks and their implementation**, by examining the obstacles affecting the realisation of rights enshrined by Palestinian legislation concerning disability and PwDs' right to employment and education. The research also investigated the role of government and private institutions in dealing with PwIDDs through actions that foster inclusion and provide support.

The overall methodological approach is based on emancipatory disability research (EDR), which actively engages PwDs as researchers who participate throughout all phases of research preparation and implementation, in addition to being the target group as beneficiaries of the research (see Chapter 2 for an explanation of EDR).

The research topic was developed during the initial preparatory phase and decided on collaboratively by a research team comprised of professional researchers from An-Najah National University and PwDs co-researchers drawn from DPOs in Nabul. The researchers shared several common traits, in that they all have had **direct personal experience with disability**: one is a mother of a child with Down syndrome; others work as support teachers within DPOs, while several are engaged in various support programmes targeting persons with IDDs. The outcome of co-creation and training meetings – during which the research team shared ideas, formulated action plans and drafted a research protocol – was that the team decided to focus the study on the **challenges faced by PwIDDs within each governorate**. Discussions about IDDs and marginalisation were fuelled by the team members' practical knowledge and lived experiences, which resulted in the identification of primary issues: the necessity of determining what challenges are faced by PwIDDs in regard to employment and education, followed by an understanding of the gaps in legislation concerning the inclusion of PwDs within society and how this impacts PwDs practically and determines their lived realities.

Concerning legal frameworks related to inclusive education, we refer to the *Legislative Decision on Education and Higher Education*, adopted in 2017, which upholds the right of children with disabilities (CwDs) to an education, like any child without disability. Regarding legal frameworks for inclusive employment, we refer to the *Employment and Civil Service Laws* to amend principles to ensure that PwDs obtain decent jobs commensurate with their capabilities.

The team collectively decided to use a toolbox of **mixed qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection**, administering a total of **74 interviews** to several target groups. First, **21** parents of PwIDDs were interviewed using life course interviews. Life course interviews are a qualitative data collection technique that, applied to this study, enable researchers to gain an overview of the challenges faced by PwDs throughout their lives and across various domains of interest, ranging from education and employment to family and social relations. The interviews were designed to investigate the challenges faced by family members – especially mothers and primary caregivers – in meeting the material and immaterial needs of persons with IDDs within the household. Then, **15 life course interviews** were conducted directly with PwIDDs. In some interviews, a family member was present to assist in facilitating communication and to provide clarification on responses.

Another bundle of data regarding inclusive education for PwIDDs was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews administered to **17** schoolteachers. Here, the aim was to gauge the teachers' knowledge and approach towards PwIDDs. Regarding employment, the research group conducted semi-structured interviews with employers and factory owners, to learn about the challenges they face as employers of PwIDDs. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of **19** community-based organisations (CBOs) and governmental organisations currently active in disability work and advocacy. Here, the focus of investigation was to better understand CBO strategies, as well as rehabilitation and inclusion programmes for PwIDDs, within different employment sectors. Furthermore, the team elaborated two case studies of factories and companies that employ PwIDDs, by way of providing positive examples of meaningful employment and success stories.

3.2.1 Methodological challenges and coping strategies

As a result of the rich research protocol and decision to use a mixed methods approach to data collection, the team encountered various challenges throughout the research process. First, they discovered there was a significant gap in the existing literature on disability in Palestine, particularly in regard to the lived realities of PwIDDs. This could be construed as an initial proof of the 'invisibility' of PwDs – especially PwIDDs – in the public sphere and academic debate. However, the biggest obstacle presented itself when the team began to administer quali-quantitative questionnaires to teachers and PwIDDs through schools and organisations: the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) did not allow the researchers to enter schools, which resulted in the data collection process being stalled for several weeks. By the conclusion of the fieldwork period, 39 questionnaires had been administered, but they failed to provide important information regarding the area of distribution and residency of the PwIDDs.

To overcome these obstacles, the field research team decided to **focus on using the qualitative research tools** (semi-structured and life course interviews) that were addressed to two primary target groups: (a) the parents of PwDs and (b) PwIDDs who are able to communicate independently. The field research team also conducted semi-structured interviews with schoolteachers in private schools and with factory employers.

Most interviewees were located and reached through the research team's personal and professional networks, which was advantageous in that this made it easier to arrange interviews and build relationships of trust between interviewers and interviewees. The same strategy was used to reach schoolteachers of PwDs, particularly as the MEHE refused to cooperate in allowing the researchers' access to interviewees through schools. Both schoolteachers and factory employers were recruited as respondents through the researchers' personal and professional networks or through the snowball strategy.

The research team faced other challenges in administering questionnaires, due to families' suspicions regarding the research aims. This was largely overcome thanks to the availability and professionalism of the researchers, who explained to respondents that the research aim was to understand the challenges faced by PwIDDs and who encouraged respondents to share their personal experiences. However, the most difficult challenge was with public sector respondents, especially schoolteachers, most of whom were concerned about confidentiality. Despite the researchers' assurances that confidentiality was guaranteed, the respondents feared that the information shared would expose them and threaten their careers. This fear was exacerbated by the complications that arose with the MEHE, which essentially denied the researchers permission to enter school grounds. However, the remainder of respondents were collaborative and supportive of the research aims: to understand and thus improve the lives of PwIDDs. Interviews with government bodies, NGOs and private organisations were

mainly conducted with well-known institutions in the governorates of Nablus and Jenin. This was fundamental to guaranteeing the researchers cooperation with local authorities, which strongly enriched the research results and resulting policy recommendations.

It must be highlighted that the names of all participants presented in this report are pseudonyms. This includes the names of the parents of PwDs, the PwDs themselves and, in particular, the teachers who worried about being identified, given the sensitivity of their position and fear of losing their jobs.

3.2.2 Sample description

Parents of PwIDDs

The interview sample includes both the parents of PwIDDs and the PwIDDs themselves. The team used life course interviews to identify the challenges faced by parents every day, and this gave the researchers a deeper understanding of the interviewees' personal experiences and of their influence on trajectories and transitions. As shown in Table 2, the sample covers Jenin and Nablus governorates.

Table 2. Distribution of parents of PwIDDs (interviewees)

	RELATION TO PWDS		
	Mother	**Brother**	**Stepmother**
1. Persons interviewed	20	1	1

	GENDER OF THE PWDS	
	Males	**Females**
Persons interviewed	15	6

	AREA					
	Asira	**Balata**	**Jenin**	**Nablus**	**Tubas**	**Village of Al-Taybeh**
2. Persons interviewed	3	1	7	7	1	2

Source: authors' elaborations

The sample is considerably smaller than was anticipated in the initial research protocol, and there are several reasons for this. Throughout the data collection phase, some parents refused to be interviewed or to participate in the overall research project, citing personal sensitivities and issues. Most of those who declined to participate displayed a reluctance to share their personal experiences. It was extremely difficult also to contact the families of women with IDDs; as can be seen in Table 2, the number of parents of male PwIDDs is much higher than the parents of female PwIDDs. A possible explanation for the lower representation of parents of female PwIDDs and their refusal to participate in the research study, which required answering questions concerning their daughters, is linked to prevailing social and cultural norms towards women in general. Participation in the study could potentially undermine the family's reputation, which in Palestinian society is tied to the reputation of female family members. This and other stigmas rooted in patriarchal visions of Palestinian society

could influence (potentially jeopardise) the marriage prospects of other women in the family. This is especially so wherever the wider community remains uninformed as to the cause of IDDs: there exists the mistaken belief that the risk of genetic transmission of impairment occurs through women more so than through men. This may account for the observation that parents of female PwIDDs were not as readily available or willing to be interviewed, compared with parents of male PwIDDs. Indeed, among the 21 interviews conducted with parents of PwIDDs, only six were with parents of female PwIDDs.

PwIDDs

In addition to the parents, **15 interviews** were conducted with a sample of **persons with mild or moderate IDDs**, all of whom were able to express themselves and discuss their challenges independently, although some were supported by a parent or family member, to facilitate smooth communication.

Table 3. Distribution of PwIDDs (interviewees)

FEMALE INTERVIEWEES		
Pseudonym	**Area**	**Family member supporting and/or speaking on behalf of the PwD**
Ameera	Asira	Ameera and her mother
Dina	Nablus	Dina and her mother
Sema	Nablus	Sema and her mother
Reem	Nablus	Reem and her mother
Wala	Silat al-Harithiya	Her sister
Raghad	Silat al-Harithiya	-
MALE INTERVIEWEES		
Pseudonym	**Area**	**Family member supporting and/or speaking on behalf of the PwD**
Mustafa	Asira	Mustafa and his mother
Mohammad	Nablus	Muhammad and his mother
Tayseer	Nablus	Tyaseer and his father
Sadam	Nablus	Sadam and a relative
Issa	Nablus	Issa and his father and mother
Ayman	Jenin	-
Dujana	Jenin (Marah Alsa'd area)	-
Abd	Silat al-Harithiya	-
Mohammad	Ti'anik	-

Source: authors' elaborations

The age of the interviewees ranged from 16 to 25 years old, and the sample was mainly comprised of **young women**. The reason for this is that most members of the research team were women, which is advantageous in securing access to and easy communication with female PwIDDs and their families. Some families were contacted through DPOs, whose help and support made it easier for the research team to gain entry to interviewees' homes and to establish relationships of trust. Also, to have at least one parent present improved the likelihood of an interview being granted, especially in instances where direct communication between interviewer and interviewees would otherwise have been difficult to secure.

School teachers

The objective of the interviews conducted with schoolteachers was to identify challenges present in the education system where they involve PwIDDs. Moreover, the interviews addressed the implementation (or lack thereof) of the *Palestinian Law on Inclusive Education*. The aim here was to collect interviewees' experiences of teaching programmes and curricula activities, as well as social interaction with other teachers and peers, to discover the nature and typology of teachers' approaches to dealing with PwIDDs and determine how this may affect PwIDD inclusion within the education system.

The biggest challenge faced by the research team was the lack of support from the MEHE, who obstructed the research through administrative procedures and obstacles. Therefore, the research team decided to contact schoolteachers through their DPO networks and managed to reach a total of 17 teachers in Jenin and Nablus; however, they noted that the participants were concise and cautious in responding, both during and after the interviews. The interviewers attributed this to the respondents' concerns regarding confidentiality, even though a guarantee of strict confidentiality was given. Conversely, a number of support teachers provided a clear picture about their teaching experiences, the obstacles they faced in their work, and their experiences of dealing with students with IDDs, particularly in regard to effective communication. They also discussed the limitations and problems they saw within the education system as a whole. What emerged through these interviews was a recognition of the important role that support teachers play in PwDs education, which is why parents in particular seek their support as companions to their children throughout schooling.

Relevant organisations

To understand the reality of life for IDDs, as well as the services provided to them and the laws adopted to promote their rights, the research team decided to interview relevant organisations, including government organisations and NGOs that work with intellectual disability. The aim of conducting these interviews was to better understand the challenges faced by educators and disability experts when interacting with PwIDDs and to explore the programmes tailored to this target group. The research team opted for semi-structured interviews to identify the necessary information. Table 4 depicts the distribution of the 19 organisations reached.

Table 4. Organisations that work with PwIDDs

ORGANISATION
Shotokan Karate Centre
Municipality of Asira
General Union of People with Disability
Special Needs Society
The Red Crescent

General Trade Union
Sheikh Khalifa Centre
Community-based Rehabilitation Programme
Social Development
Art to Heart Centre
National Expert in Disability
General Union of People with Disability (Jenin)
Al-Eradah Centre
Social Affairs
Medical Relief
Municipality of Qabatya
Chamber of Commerce
General Union of Workers
Directorate of Labour

Source: authors' elaborations

The private sector and factories

It proved difficult to access private sector and factory employers to conduct interviews to learn about their experiences in employing PwIDDs, particularly in the district of Jenin. Despite their efforts, the field research team could not reach all the participants they had anticipated in the research protocol. Nonetheless, the team was able to develop two case studies on two factories that employ PwDs, one of which will be presented in this report as a success story from Nablus. This case study is fundamental in understanding and individuating the factors that facilitate or prevent the employment of PwIDDs in the private sector.

3.3 Results and main findings

The following section discusses the social, economic, educational and employment challenges faced by PwIDDs across different domains, with reference to the data collected.

3.3.1 The daily lives of PwDs: social and economic challenges within the household

PwIDDs face diverse challenges that prevent their full and effective participation within society (at multiple levels), including their ability to access quality education or to find suitable employment. These challenges significantly impact their daily lives and the lives of their family members and primary caregivers. In this section, we look at the nature of these challenges as they are perceived by PwIDDs and their parents and caregivers, bearing in mind how these challenges impact social inclusion and economic stability.

Social challenges

The first challenge for most parents of PwIDDs begins with the **initial shock** of learning that their child has a disability, as many parents are unprepared or unaware that their child will be born with or develop disability. This marks the beginning of their experience with and

learning about disability. As recounted by one interviewee:

> Look... at first, it was a shock. In the beginning, it was an extreme shock, as I didn't expect it, and I didn't have any knowledge of intellectual disability. I knew about cases around us, but, honestly, to live this situation myself was unexpected. So, I was shocked... At first, I spent most of my time just crying. I was extremely affected, particularly my intellectual well-being. You can say that, up to six months after the birth, I was in an emotional state of distress. But essentially, I would say 'Alhamdulillah' (all praise to God). That's it. This is something from God.
>
> (Canda's mother, from Jenin)

A **lack of foreknowledge** about IDDs certainly amplifies the disruptive impact of giving birth to a child with an IDD. Another mother from Jenin expressed her shock similarly:

> So, for me as a mother, I was shocked. I was shocked at the way that my life was flipped upside down. I had four outstanding normal children before this, mashallah (as is God's will). Then, I had my fifth child in this way. Honestly, I was shocked.

In other instances, pre- or perinatal medical tests indicated that there was risk of the mother giving birth to a child with an IDD, but those parents were either in denial or hoped that the tests were wrong or inaccurate. One parent expressed the following:

> It's something from God, of course. We... umm, I had diabetes, of course, but they told me he [Ayman] would come out normal. Like, I don't know if it's because of the diabetes. I don't know how.
>
> (Ayman's father, from Jenin)

The shock felt by parents can also be mingled with confusion and worry, as suggested by their expression of disbelief and disorientation regarding how to manage or cope with the situation. Denial and avoidance are often expressed as an attempt to explain the child's disability as a behavioural pattern. Many parents of PwIDDs resort to explaining the disability as a trial by God, a test of patience or a means to expiate their sins. In several interviews with parents, the research team recorded a similar pattern. In one example, a father from Jenin talked about his denial and emotional state when he found out his child was born with a disability:

> In the beginning, I didn't accept him. I can't lie about that. I couldn't hold him or even get close to him. I went through an emotional state of distress that lasted for a week to 10 days.

Another interviewee said that it was his destiny to have a child born with disability:

> What should I do? It's my fate. Alhamdulillah (all praise to God)! I am a believer, and you know how believers are.

After an initial state of denial, parents eventually passed into a state of acceptance. However, they still referred to the disability as the will of God, which perpetuates traditional and charitable approaches to disability. As one mother said:

> Regardless of the situation, it is still hard. Yes, afterwards we can come to terms with it. I'm telling you, it's something from God. Even though it [requires] more

pity and caregiving than [with] normal children.

By choosing to see their child's disability as divine will, parents cope by caring for their child with a sense of pity and charity and as a form of expiation for their sins. In the following example, Hala's mother, from Nablus, expresses the main reason she takes care of her daughter:

> I just don't want her to have any rights over me. I have to do something.

Another mother from Jenin expressed similarly:

> Regardless of the situation, it is still hard. Yes, afterwards we can come to terms with it. I'm telling you it's something from God.

Parental no acceptance of their child's impairment stems from a general **lack of knowledge about the nature of disability** and/or a lack of information about **how to deal with the impairment, as well as an insufficiency and inefficiency of services and programmes to assist parents in caring for and supporting their children**. Nonetheless, most parents express fear regarding the **social stigma** surrounding PwIDDs. This is exacerbated by mainstream ideas about disability, which cause parents to become extremely preoccupied and concerned with the future of not just their children but the entire family. This was confirmed by the Director for the Ministry of Social Development of Nablus:

> There will be a negative response, for sure, because our society is like that. Our culture is like that. I am pro-inclusion, but where society is concerned, it is difficult. Only by conducting courses and raising people's awareness we can start to understand and become at least familiar with people with disability.

Economic challenges

Disability often increases poverty and economic instability within households. This was registered in the study sample, as most of the parents of PwIDDs who consented to be interviewed suffered from **high economic and social burdens**. This was due to several factors, including a lack of government support for people in such situations. The weak implementation of existing laws, combined with a lack of resources, prevents relevant organisations and institutions (including those in the education sector) from creating inclusive and enabling environments. There are a limited number of services available, mostly at cost, which places an economic burden on families, particularly when they belong to a low-income demographic.

During interviews, parents emphasised that they face economic burden incurred from obtaining healthcare and rehabilitation services provided by specialised institutions. Jamil (from Nablus) talked about the high expense he bears to send his son to a specialised centre for rehabilitation and training:

> He requires a specialised centre and a lot of money. Honestly, I became very tired, I mean I paid a considerable amount.

Similarly, Omar's mother (from Nablus) says:

> I don't work. I don't have a problem if I work. I am a housewife sitting at home and depending on him [her husband] for all the expenses... I mean, if cut my allowance, as they say to, and my expenses so that I can save up, it won't make things better. His father does not want to take him there [to a specialised centre]. I started to save up every day, he needs twenty shekels for a private taxi to

> go to Nablus. I mean, should I choke myself so I can get him there and save up twenty shekels for him.

A pattern emerges from reading the interviewed parents' responses. Often, families are forced to stop sending their children to specialised centres because of the high costs and a lack of government or community support.

For example, Yousef's mother shared her experience in sending her son to a special rehabilitation centre:

> Fifty shekels per session! She wouldn't agree to take a shekel less, and no one was willing to help us, neither private nor government centres.

Amira's mother indicated that it was impossible to afford specialised speech therapy for her daughter because of the irregular availability of personal finances for such expenses:

> I used to take her to speech therapy sessions. Sometimes, I would have the money, so I would take her. At other times, I couldn't take her because of the money.

On top of the economic stress incurred by the high cost of treatments and services is the cost of public transport. Some parents identified a **barrier to movement** between rural and urban areas. In particular, many found it difficult to reach the big cities, like Nablus or Ramallah, where the best services are located. Tawfiq (from a village near Jenin) explained:

> I mean, when I want to take him to Nablus or Ramallah, I waste a whole day. To go to the rehabilitation centre once or twice a week is not enough. I don't consider it to be enough. This child requires constant support to develop his potential. I mean... our situation here is very bad. Here, we reached out to many organisations, but no one is able to provide support.

In conclusion, families' economic position and their ability to meet major expenses, such as rehabilitation or training costs, profoundly affects the likelihood of their children with IDDs entering the educational system. Many parents simply cannot afford it. The Abdul Hade family (from Jenin) expressed this as follows:

> He stopped going to school; it's not up to us. There was a circumstance with his father at work. We had to sell the car. For a whole year, we would take him there and back by taxi, but you know... all of this requires a budget.

3.3.2 The education system: challenges and coping strategies for integrating PwIDDs

The following section focuses on the **experiences of parents of PwIDDs when attempting to include their child within the Palestinian education system**. The aim here is to understand the gap that exists between PwDs' rights to education (guaranteed under Palestinian law) and the education programmes offered and facilitated by the MEHE, as well as the lived realities of students with IDDs within Palestinian schools. The perspectives of the interviewed parents of PwIDDs are complimented by statements from interviews conducted with schoolteachers.

Reports submitted by Palestine to the United Nations regarding the coherence of its education system with the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2019) indicate

that there are 2,998 schools in the Palestinian Territories: 2,269 in the West Bank and 729 in Gaza. There are 3,100 SwDs (including those with severe disabilities) enrolled in schools in the West Bank. Of the total number of schools, approximately 50 are schools for students with special needs affiliated with the MEHE, which employs 160 teachers to complement the staff of the existing schools for SwDs.

In its own reports, the MEHE claims that it carries out many awareness-raising activities within its schools, including offering specialised staff training, adjusting the curriculum to be appropriate for SwDs and observing International Day of Persons with Disabilities, as well as other different holidays related to disability. However, the issue of disability and PwDs is only superficially and briefly addressed in education programmes and course criteria. Also, covering the topic of IDDs is nearly impossible, and this explains the lack of awareness within peers at school.

Despite the MEHE's attempts to adopt strategies that promote education as a fundamental right for all, our analysis of the Palestinian education system, especially in regard to the degree of inclusiveness shown towards PwDs, shows that students, parents, teachers and staff still encounter numerous challenges and problems. Primary among these are a lack of financial resources to provide support teachers for SwDs, insufficient staff training, an incapacity to properly tailor programmes to the needs of students with specific disabilities, and discrimination from other students and parents towards the SwDs and their families. Meeting these specific challenges is fundamental to constructing a basic infrastructure for the integration of PwDs within schools and to ensuring their right to quality education.

The following paragraphs will address three primary factors affecting the attitudes and behaviours of parents, teachers and peers, and provide a more detailed analysis of the structure of school curricula activities and specific programmes for SwDs.

Behaviours and prejudices

Data gathered through interviews with parents and schoolteachers of PwDs suggest that schools are unwelcoming towards SwDs due to social stigmatisation and the unpreparedness of the education system to meet special needs. There is a clear lack of acceptance of PwIDDs inside the classroom, either from teachers or other students. Many parents of PwIDDs have experienced having their child's application refused outright on the basis of their disability.

Abdul Hade (from Jenin) shared his experience of having a school refuse to accept his son:

> If only there was a school that would accept him, or a centre, but there isn't any here for us in the district of Jenin.

Ayman (from Jenin) shared a similar story, recounting his experience of first having other students' reject him and then having the school dismiss him due to problems caused by his presence:

> The students did not accept (me) at all. They did not accept me even though we had already met many times and even though there were many other persons.

In addition to the evident discomfort that some teachers or students feel at sharing school spaces with PwDs, what emerged from the interviews with schoolteachers was also that there is a prevalent **belief that SwDs are incapable of learning or acquiring skills.** Teacher 'M' said:

> No, No. He won't benefit from anything, and we have tried before.

Another teacher stated the following:

> But [they] won't reach the desired academic level. So, inclusion would be useless.

Many teachers believe that having PwDs physically present in the classroom fosters social inclusion but does not contribute to academic education, which is defined in terms of knowledge and skills transmission and acquisition. Teacher 'M' expressed this as such:

> The main objective would be social inclusion only. As for the academic aspect, it's extremely difficult.

Non acceptance and doubt in the capacities of PwIDDs is not only limited to teachers; these misconceptions are shared by students without disability, especially in schools that do not usually cater to PwDs. Discriminatory behaviours and social stigmatisation serve to portray PwIDDs as individuals with no self-control and whose actions are disorderly. Many teachers remarked on the unwelcoming response of students towards a SwD in their class. As one teacher recounted:

> In primary school, the rest of the children provoke this group, and this impacts the demeanour of the child.

Non acceptance and provocation of PwIDDs on the part of those without disability stems from an ignorance and lack of knowledge on this type of disability: essentially, peers are unfamiliar with PwDs and disability in general. In fact, **many parents of students without disability refuse to accept SwDs sharing a classroom with their children.** Sometimes, this discrimination and insistence on segregation comes from the parents of SwDs themselves because they **fear that their child will cause a disturbance or disrupt learning for the other students.** As one teacher testified:

> There is a lack of acceptance by students, especially the older students, for having a person with disabilities [present] as they are afraid **that [they] would be aggressive**.

The quote above clearly reflects students' **lack of knowledge and experience with PwIDDs** and expresses a common stereotype regarding disability and PwDs. In another instance, a teacher told us that:

> Students are the ones who ask us to tell SwDs' parents to withdraw their children from school, because they want to study and not be distracted.

This confirms the prevalence of damaging stereotypes regarding disability and PwIDDs and speaks to the non-readiness of the Palestinian education system to include PwIDDs. There is insufficient training for teachers and inadequate tailoring of curricula or teaching methods to meet special needs, in addition to a lack of appropriate awareness-raising action to counter misinformed beliefs and attitudes within the wider school community. One teacher commented on this matter:

> There are subjects that address disabilities in a general way, but very rarely.

While another teacher remarked:

> The subjects offered by education programmes are not as they should be. It [the curricula aims and materials] does not address IDDs at all.

The reality of special education within schools

The research shows that gaps exist between the education policies and strategies that circulate at the MEHE level and what actually occurs inside schools. The data collected from parents and teachers suggests that the education system features **major issues and inconsistencies that prevent the full inclusion of students with IDDs**. Although inclusion policies and strategies have been implemented in a positive way to some degree, as with students with other impairments (such as mobility, auditory or visual impairments), there is less or no evident progress in the situation of students with IDDs. As we will show, this can be linked to various factors: (i) ingrained stereotyping of and cultural unacceptance towards PwIDDs, (ii) lack of appropriate equipment and/or infrastructure, (iii) lack of skilled human resources (iv) Shortage of supplies in most schools but especially in remote areas.

As the quality and quantity of human resources is insufficient, the presence of a student with IDDs in classrooms causes significant and unsustainable additional burden on teachers who are often unqualified to deal with students with IDDs. As one interviewed teacher reported:

> I have a class and education programme that I have to complete. I can't leave my class and follow-up with the (special) case in the classroom.

Another teacher reported:

> You know, slow learners... let's say, legally, there should be someone to support the teacher because, you know, the teacher can't [do it alone]. He or she has 'normal' students. These children with IDDs... we don't have the potential, ability or time to deal with them as special cases.

To meet the requirements and criteria of the official teaching programme and to assure all students' full and effective participation seem too often to be irreconcilable tasks. The **lack of time given to complete course programmes** was a recurring point raised by interviewees. This dilemma often results in the neglect of students with IDDs.

Often, 'regular' teachers who are required to step into the shoes of special needs teachers find themselves unable to deal with their students with IDDs and left to their own initiative and devices in adapting to their students. As was indicated by the respondents above, some teachers neglect and refrain from dealing with the students with IDDs because they feel pressured to meet the criteria of the given course programme and ensure that the rest of the class completes on time.

Teachers elaborated on this point by explaining that this is due to a lack of experience both in support teaching more generally and in the specifics of rehabilitation practices for persons with IDDs. They explained that the situation often worsens until the point that most schools are compelled to request parents of PwIDDs not to send their children to school. Some teachers confirmed that PwIDDs represent an oppressed social group who are offered marginal opportunities within and by the Palestinian education system.

As a means to overcome this impasse, several schools proposed to the families of PwIDDs that they hire a support teacher (at their own expense) to support their child during lessons. This option clearly imposes a heavier and often unsustainable financial burden on these families. In most cases, **parents are forced to stop sending their children to school because they cannot afford the extra cost.** One mother shared that she was forced to keep her son at home because the school was unable to provide the necessary facilities and assistance for him.

At this point it must be noted that in 2015, the MEHE adopted an inclusive education pol-

EDR Box. Voices from the field: the experience of co-researchers with disability

What have you learnt from this experience in terms of topic contents and emancipatory research methods?

'I gained a lot of experience and knowledge about disability in general and about why parents accept interviews and why they reject them – emancipatory research now, for me, is normal, whereas before it was exceedingly difficult – and about discrimination in our society. Discrimination is very clear, especially towards persons with disabilities.'

How has this experience changed your concept of yourself and your confidence?

'As a first experience for me and as a first official job, it was wonderful in terms of work, commitment and forming relationships with institutions and with parents, and it boosted my self-confidence a lot.'

'Commitment to the required working hours, the ability to work under pressure and get work done on time, the ability to make decisions without hesitation, as well as an insistence to meet the challenge to change society's view of persons with disability and to change the stereotypical image of disability.'

How did this experience influence your relationships with colleagues, friends and family?

If there is any kind of barrier, it has been broken through this experience, and their confidence in us and our knowledge has increased.

Do you think that social inequalities could be reduced through your actions?

'I hope so, but I think that reaching social equality requires effort, more work, bigger projects and workshops. I think that I left an impression on some institutions and the families of persons with disabilities whom I met, by changing the stereotypical image of disability and moving towards achieving equality.'

Responses from the co-researchers with disabilities (Nablus, October 2021)

icy that promised to offer inclusive education free of charge to all students eligible to join non-special needs schools schools. However, the implementation of this policy has proved more complex and challenging because it necessitates specific strategies, policies, financial capabilities and resources. The policy outlines the responsibility of the MEHE to equip schools with the appropriate material and non-material resources to meet special needs education. For example, schools are required to have an allocated resource room, managed by a teacher/support teacher who oversees the recruitment and training of support staff. These special resources rooms are to be used by teachers and teaching support staff, who work with students with IDDs (from grades one to four), to assist them in subjects such as Arabic and mathematics. The parents of PwIDDs who participated in this research study stated that the teaching and support staff who work in the resource rooms are often insufficiently educated or prepared to work with PwIDDs, and so the parents are often compelled still to hire specialist support teachers, at their own expense.

When the subject of support teachers arose during one interview, one parent responded:

> Support teachers are [paid] at the expense of parents. They are not sufficiently academically qualified, meaning we could take anyone; they could have a *Tawjihi* Certificate (equivalent to a high school diploma) or bachelor's degree and be hired as a support teacher. But in this case, to what extent will this be beneficial? There is no benefit because there are no requirements for support teachers. It would be great to have a specific system or procedure that we can use to select a support teacher who is also affiliated to the MEHE.

In light of the lack of academic or industry qualification, it can be seen that **there is no benefit to employing support teachers in schools when they are inadequately skilled or experienced for work with students with IDDs**. Moreover, there is no confidence in PwIDDs' ability to learn, acquire knowledge or develop skills.

However, the lack of sufficiently trained staff is not the sole barrier to fully inclusive education. Additional issues include the absence of special curricula activities and programmes for students with IDDs, a lack of suitable human resources (specialised staff) and training for teachers and support teachers, a **lack of financial resources**, the dependency on projects and lack of diverse diagnostic tools. These insufficiencies are adversely complimented by a **lack of institutional coordination and cooperation, especially between government organisations and NGO's** working with disability, which is required to facilitate early detection and diagnosis of disability and to identify PwDs' needs and appropriate solutions. There is a strong **need to revise and amend school curricula activities and education programmes to embrace inclusive education at all levels,** as well as to improve **coordination and consultation between Palestinian universities and the Ministry of Social Development** regarding the training of future teaching and administrative staff of educational institutions, especially support teachers.

At the level of legislative compliance, there is a **foundational discrepancy** in regard to the MEHE's compliance with the following legislation: Article 24 of the Palestinian Basic Law on the Right to Education, which stipulates compulsory and free education for all citizens until at least the end of primary school, without discrimination in terms of sex or disability; Article 38 of the Amended Palestinian Child Law, which mandates that the state take all appropriate and effective measures to eliminate various types of discrimination in education; and Article 12 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, which states that the MEHE has a duty to ensure the equal right to education of PwIDDs.

Irrespective of relevant legislation and the MEHE's policies and strategic planning, a noticeable **gap exists between inclusive education ideals and goals and the reality of education and school life for PwIDDs**. All things considered, we consider the lack of adherence to legislation and implementation of policy and specific strategy to be at the most significant of the obstacles and challenges faced by PwDs and their parents and carers.

Lack of coherence between education policy, programmes and curricula activities

Despite the MEHE's formal attempts to include PwIDDs in the existing education system, institutions still tend to focus on certain types of disability. For example, for students with visual disability, the MEHE printed out the school curriculum for all grade levels in Braille. From the data collected, we observed that there is insufficient commitment to offer to PwIDDs suitable, adequate curricula activities or to adapt the mainstream teaching curriculum to their needs. Any attempt to assist PwDs is often at the initiative of individual teachers. One student with disability stated during an interview:

> The curriculum? No, I don't think so. My school is from 1st to 12th grade and

> does not have a specific curriculum. This is not available at all. If there is some specific action for students with disabilities, it's an initiative by the teachers.

Meanwhile, a teacher stated **that all efforts made towards PwIDDs in schools are personal efforts:**

> As a specific part of curriculum is lacking, but there are some teachers who address and try (to help) individually.

Despite attempts made by parents to voice concerns to the MEHE, in the hope of achieving tailored curricula activities for PwIDDs, their demands went unmet. One parent described this attempt:

> The most important thing is for them to have schools and a curriculum, we asked for a curriculum for them. They're our children, of course. They can't study the current educational curriculum. We just want something suitable for them.

In conclusion, **the entire education system – schools, teachers or curriculum – is unsuitable for PwIDDs, though it may address some other types of disability**. This perpetuates the **oppression of PwIDDs** by **limiting their right to equal** opportunities in education and training. It also places undue **burden on the parents of PwIDDs,** by making it their responsibility to acquire learning resources to facilitate the inclusion of their children within the formal education system. This clearly **demonstrates the existing gap between relevant legal frameworks and the realities of inclusive learning for PwDs in the Palestinian education system.**

3.3.3 Vocational training and rehabilitation: challenges and experiences

We define vocational training as a managed process that provides PwDs with vocational skills and guidance, to foster their full and effective participation in paid employment and working environments. The process of vocational training and rehabilitation requires the collaborative efforts and actions of a team of professionals to support PwDs through a process of capacity assessment and development so that they may achieve their fullest human potential and embrace the utmost possible benefits as contributing members of society (Al-Qaryouti & Al Bustami, 1995; Az-zamt, 1993.

As defined by the *Law on the Rights of the Disabled*, 'rehabilitation is a number of services, activities and social, psychological, medical, educational, pedagogical and professional support that enables the disabled to live their life with independence and dignity.' Article 5 of the same law states that 'The State must provide all forms of rehabilitation to the disabled based on the nature of the disability, and the disabled shall contribute to no more than 25% of the cost.

Throughout our research, we identified three main typologies of constraints and inefficiencies that heavily impact the lives of PwIDDs, especially in regard to their development and transition from childhood to adulthood.

The first major constraint is that **in the north of the West Bank, there is no specialised rehabilitation centre for PwIDDs**. Instead, PwIDDs are monitored until they finish primary education or that have finished the 14 years rehabilitation period (often at the Red Crescent Society rehabilitation centre).

After this time, there is no structured programme offered to PwIDDs in vocational training and rehabilitation. This places a heavy burden on their families and caregivers. Hala (from

Nablus) shared her experience of the rehabilitation services provided by government organisations and NGOs:

> I am looking for a centre to learn something from, like a profession.

Similarly, Mujahed's mother said:

> I was thinking of taking him to learn a profession, but they say they only take specific people; but no, I want to take him when he gets older, so he can learn something.

The second major problem is the location of existing vocational and rehabilitation centres. Indeed, many parents of PwIDDs search for centres and organisations that can offer something to their children, but many are unable to find anything near or within reasonable travelling distance to their place of residence. For example, Ali (from Jenin), a father of a PwIDD, shared his experience of struggling to find a suitable centre for his daughter:

> I wish there were centres... I asked the charities in Jenin. We need centres that offer everything regarding rehabilitation and speech therapy. But even if there were some, every time they change their training staff. I mean, sometimes we get used to working with a specific trainer... then they change him/her and she [Ali's daughter] has to start with a new one.

From the information shared by interviewees, we learnt that a major **challenge for the families and carers of PwIDDs arises from a lack of basic healthcare or rehabilitation services**, which is exacerbated by a general inefficiency on the part of the MEHE to offer structured rehabilitation programmes. Normally, rehabilitation services for PwDs in Nablus and Jenin are provided through VTCs affiliated with the Ministry of Social Development, and the staff of these centres are trained to deal with various disabilities. However, VTCs in the West Bank are affiliated with the Ministry of Labour; they offer 21 different training programmes, with 69 training courses distributed over nine centres, but these programmes do not specifically address PwIDDs or the specifics of their disability.

The *Law on the Rights of the Disabled* issues the following guidance:

> In the area of rehabilitation and empowerment: A - Prepare qualified technical staff to work with the different disabled groups. B - Guarantee access to rehabilitation facilities and vocational training centres in compliance with the laws and regulations in effect and the basis of equal opportunities and provide suitable vocational training programs to the disabled.

Article 4 further outlines the duties of various ministries, particularly the Ministry of Social Development, regarding the rehabilitation of PwDs. It states that if government organisations are unable to provide adequate rehabilitation services, then this service must be sought from suitable NGOs. However, from this research study and especially the interviews conducted between parents of PwIDDs and representatives of relevant organisations, we discovered that the focus of most rehabilitation centres is rarely to provide a launching pad for PwIDDs to enter the job market. Indeed, the services provided by these centres are mostly socialisation activities, as well as speech therapy services and health-rehabilitation services, as required. Far fewer resources are being utilised to equip PwIDDs with the necessary tools and skills to increase their employability and grant them access to decent employment.

Indeed, the rehabilitation centres and/or programmes currently available in Nablus and Jenin cater to children with IDDs until they are enrolled in the formal school system or within a local organisation programme for a foreseeable period (usually until age 14). Issa's father

shared his and his son's experience:

> Up until 14 years old and then the official at the Red Crescent called me and told me: that's it. He is done from here; he is too old. So, I said 'what should I do? How is he going to continue his life'?

Halima (from Jenin) commented saying:

> Since she was 8, 10 or 11 years old, she used to go to a centre in Tubas, and they would accept her. Then afterwards, they stopped. There's nothing for them to teach her.

The third major problem has to do with the type of service that these centres are able to provide to PwIDDs and with their staff. From the data collected through interviews, we discovered that many centres refuse to accept PwIDDs in their programmes because staff either have limited or no knowledge of intellectual and intellectual disability or are not trained to work with PwIDDs. Mustafa's mother, Jaheda (from Nablus), explains how she tried to enrol her son in a vocational rehabilitation programme but was rejected:

> Not one centre would accept him. They all said the same thing: 'this is an IDD'. They are concerned about the machines and blades; no one would bear responsibility. Even the packaging manufacturer would not agree to hire him because of fear.

The director of the Vocational Rehabilitation Centre for Persons with Disabilities (in Nablus) explained that although the centre was established with the mandate to integrate and include PwDs, this did not extend to PwIDDs because the centre's teachers are unqualified to work with PwIDDs or to manage the equipment.

The parents of PwIDDs realise that a lack of training and rehabilitation disadvantages their children when it comes to accessing the job market. One father commented:

> They won't enter the labour market, they don't have any vocational training, and they won't benefit anyone.

Similarly, another father (from Jenin) said:

> With regard to social inclusion, he is integrated. The objective is to integrate him educationally or in employment; but now it would be too late and there aren't any programmes that primarily target this group.

In light of this, we assert that a lack of training and rehabilitation for PwIDDs puts **great pressure on parents and carers**. A major difficulty is that PwIDDs' school attendance is limited to the age of 14 years old or younger. After this age, if their parents do not have sufficient resources and there is no external aid, children with IDDs are basically left alone and without opportunity for further development in education or training. Generally, there is a lack of accessible programmes available to families that would seek to benefit their children, and many parents complained about this. For example, Dina's mother said:

> I felt as if they stopped her entire life; I don't know, we need something other than leisure activities. I want something for her, because she can [do it] ... there aren't any opportunities, there isn't anyone that can take advantage of her capabilities. I don't know how we could make use of her capabilities because Dina can [do it]. Generally, there aren't any opportunities for her to work.

Ameera's mother, who taught her daughter hand embroidery so that she could make use of her free time, said:

> Currently, she's sitting at home... she doesn't work, but she gets really excited when someone orders a hand embroidery or anything of that sort.

Another mother said:

> There is a lot of free time. There isn't anything that they can do; they're just at home.

In the absence of education, training or job opportunities, the quality of daily life for PwIDDs tends to be low. Reem's mother prefers her daughter to stay home and watch television:

> As you can see, she is at home with me. She stays on the TV changing the channels.

Whereas Mohammad's mother expressed her burdens as follows:

> Since my son turned 17 or 18, he sits at home and constantly needs care and wants me to be around him all day.

Most parents affirmed that they would like to receive from **institutional centres any kind of support, skill or suggestion in how to deal with their children.** For instance, Jaheda (a mother from Jenin) taught herself (through self-study) about rehabilitation methods, so that she could support her son:

> I feel like, compared with other people or other children, Ali is in great condition, all praise to Allah. I am always trying, but I can't go to Jerusalem to take rehabilitation programmes. If only there were guidance on rehabilitation, something of that sort, so that I could know how to act with Ali. Ali is young now, but in the future he will... Like now when he gets angry and I don't give him what he wants, he starts to move the chair aggressively. It's... Right now, he's barely matured yet, he's only eleven-and-a-half years old. How will he be when he gets a little bit older? I would stay in fear. Also, this is his last year with his teacher, Mr. Jalal. When he goes to another school, how? I have fears regarding this. That's all.

This experience reflects the concerns of parents of PwIDDs regarding their children's' futures, as well as their fear of being unable to support or assist them later in life. For example, Tayseer's mother expressed the **importance of having access to rehabilitation institutes and specific centres or programmes**:

> It's impossible for my child to be alone outside playing in the street; at the same time, I can't always be with him. So where would he go? On the streets? So, the charity association plays a key role: he can be there, and when he's there, it means that there's someone to take care of him and to see what he suffers from and what his problem is.

This last comment also reflects **parental fear of losing control over their children** and of their falling into poverty and misery due to the negligence and inefficiency of private and public institutions when it comes to addressing intellectual disability.

Another type of problem arises for large families. In such cases, parents, and especially mothers, have difficulty monitoring and caring for their child with IDD because there are other children (sometimes newborns) to attend to. Mothers find themselves juggling numerous obligations and burdens, simultaneously tending to children with IDDs while also

parenting other children, all the while attempting to meet each child's need for attention and care. Furthermore, mothers of PwIDDs often lack experience in dealing with IDD issues, and this increases their frustration and exacerbates problems.

3.3.4 Employment for PwIDDs: challenges and success stories

Whether or not PwIDDs and their families can access quality vocational rehabilitation programmes determines the possibility of PwIDDs finding employment or opportunities suited to their capabilities and potential. Together with the social stereotypes attributed to PwIDDs and the social stigmatisation that this encourages, PwIDDs are affected in the full enjoyment of their same right to education and employment as all other citizens. Another range of problems contributes to the pressures placed on the parents (particularly mothers) of PwIDDs and exacerbates their fear of seeing their child exploited, harassed or abused. Moreover, the pervasive fears and misconceptions of both parents and society create barriers to employment for PwIDDs.

Statistics show that the general unemployment rate among PwDs in Palestine was about 37% in 2017: 19% in the West Bank and 54% in the Gaza Strip (PCBS, 2017). Exact statistics for PwIDDs is unavailable due to a lack of data. However, all related indicators suggest that PwDs are generally excluded from employment opportunities due to the lack of technical and vocational education training (TVET) services available to them and because of prevalent negative stereotypes attributed to their specific form of disability.

Article 5 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act obligates private and public sector organisations to ensure that at least 5% of their employees are PwDs. The Labour Act No. 7 for the year 2000 declares employment a right for all citizens who are capable of working and is to be offered on the basis of equal opportunity and without discrimination:

> A person with disabilities is a person suffering from the incapacity of certain of his/her physical, sensory or intellectual faculties as a result of disease or accident or a congenital or genetic factor, resulting in his/her inability to work, continue to work or to be promoted at work, or which has diminished his/her ability to perform any of the basic functions of life and who needs care and rehabilitation in order to integrate or reintegrate in society.

Despite this law, employment and TVET opportunities for PwDs, especially PwIDDs are scarce, and PwDs are often neglected and left to fend for themselves or rely on their families. Moreover, it must be stressed that governmental policies do not explicitly focus on or mention IDDs. This became evident from the complaints of the parents and PwIDDs themselves, who highlighted the fact that no one places any importance on employing or training them. Sema's mother elaborated on this:

> No one would agree to employ my daughter despite her efforts of applying to different hair salons.

Mohammad's mother expressed that, clearly, there were no places that would employ her son:

> No one agreed to employ him. I would search for jobs for him, and his father would do so too. But still, it was no use.

According to Ayman's father (from Jenin):

Success stories: employment and training experiences in factories and private companies

With the help of their personal and professional networks, including community-based organisations and different government bodies, the research team approached various private institutions, factories and other companies that employ PwIDDs. However, the team faced difficulties in making contact, especially in the governorate of Jenin. This may be because there are fewer factories and job opportunities in Jenin than in Nablus, where the team succeeded in collecting data from interviews with factory owners and manufacturing companies that employ PwIDDs.

Tayseer

The first case concerned Hijjawi Printing Co., a printing company that employs PwIDDs. It emerged during an interview with the owner of Hijjawai that he had a 32-year-old son with Down syndrome, named Tayseer. Ever since he was young, his father sent Tayseer to different private organisations to educate and socially integrate him. When completed primary school, his father allowed him to work in the printing company. That was the first step in his father's decision to implement relevant legislation regarding hiring PwIDDs in his company. Tayseer's father also provides training and rehabilitation services, with the help of other employees, and supervises employees with disabilities during working hours. Hijjawi Printing Co.'s commitment to hiring PwDs is almost certainly influenced by the fact that the owner has a child with an IDD. When asked about his experience, Tayseer said:

First, I want to introduce myself: I am Tayseer Abdullah Abdulrahman Hijjawi. I am 32 years old. When I was a young boy, I was in preschool in the Omari School, then I went to Shuja3 Preschool, then Al-hikma School, and then I went to The Manahil School, from grades three to eight. I also started working at the printing company, preparing the printing machines that Ala'a Al-Kharaz taught me how to use. I also worked at the head receptionist office. I watch entertainment shows and series, Toyor Al-Jannah songs, Karameesh and religious songs. I work normally.

I worked at Palestine Red Crescent Society as a supervisor for the Special Olympic Games. I was a supervisor at the Crescent Society and used to train the young kids under my supervision and teach them Arabic, English, Mathematics and patriotic songs and everything else. I also learned how to use knitting needles. Also, the Special Olympic Games, tennis; I also taught them tennis, and they had fun playing. I also travelled to Spain and Abu Dhabi... and I travelled to Egypt and to Jordan, to the military camps. I also travelled to Abu Dhabi in 2008 and 2019... we went to Spain and everything. I played tennis and soccer in the Special Olympic Games and would win in first place, second, third and fourth place.

The number of medals I have is 60 medals. I also have (sports) cups: a cup that I won in 2007 from a contest in the Islamic School; I had a sports contest at the Islamic School in 2007. I have a big tennis cup. I also have a cup, and Mr. Coach Club... I was a player at the inclusion club. First, I need my name but let me just remember the names. I was coached by Coach Mahmoud, and I had a friend there at Mr. Coach. I also have Coach AbdulRaheem. I also have trainees there at Mr. Coach and many friends at the Abdul Raheem Hijjawi Company.

We can derive from Tayseer and his father's experience that opportunities for PwIDDs to become active members of society are strongly increased through close family members' support, with proper assistance throughout every step, and by realistic attempts to integrate PwIDDs into various activities and programmes, such as social activities and sports. Had this been otherwise for Tayseer, his abilities and potentials would possibly have been exploited.

Success stories: employment and training experiences in factories and private companies

Ali

Parents of PwIDDs that own businesses or factories sometimes try to integrate their children into the labour market, less out of financial need but more so to keep their children occupied and to alleviate the pressures of caretaking and problems inside the home. One business owner in Nablus shared his experience of having his son with Down syndrome working at the family store:

No, we only stayed among the family, because he is not in need of work. He comes to work with us only, so that he doesn't stay at home. He never used to interact with people or go to other stores in other branches. Only when we opened this store.

Although he works at their commercial store, Ali's parents still fear sending him to institutions and other faraway centres. It must be pointed out here that his parents at first refused to be interviewed. The parents eventually agreed to grant an interview, following repeated requests by the research team. This interview was brief and concise, and the parents refused to allow the researchers to speak directly with their son with Down syndrome, despite his ability to communicate.

Many parents try to safeguard the future of their children with IDDs, because they are aware of the lack of opportunities or resources to support and aid them through government or private organisations. One mother (from Jenin) explained:

I am proud of Abu Ali, my husband. That he was accepting. At first, he was shocked; but honestly, he used to work at an engineering office, as a partner, in Jenin. So, he left his job, and we started treating Ali when we knew that he had some problems and needed constant treatment. All praise to Allah, we had some savings. And when we spent our savings, he [Abu Ali] sold his share of land. Thanks to God for everything!

His parents, brothers and sister argued with him, telling him that Ali isn't his only child, and he should leave something for the rest of his kids. I work at cafeterias, and I do some work around the house by planting and making some money. I'll do anything for Ali. There's a woman working as a rehabilitation specialist at the municipality, who met a group of foreigners that supports parents of children with special needs.

So, my husband was an engineer and wasn't accepting of the idea to open a supermarket; but we convinced him, and we started the business project. With the will of God, he completed the project, and Ali now has a supermarket. Thanks to God for everything! Ali will be 18 years old and with financial prospects and a job. He now has a job. Thanks to God for everything! And thanks to my husband as well, this is all due to him. Thanks to God for everything!

In conclusion, it is often the parents of PwIDDs who hire their children and support them, with many parents opting to safeguard their children's financial security by creating their own enterprises and small businesses, because they have lost hope in finding suitable employment opportunities for their children through other networks or institutions. Cleary, parents are aware of the lack of social services and resources, and they know that the laws and regulations that safeguard the rights of PwDs are either unrealised or fail to be implemented. However, not all parents are able to start up independent business projects to support their children, due to poverty and challenging social circumstances.

> If only, if only they would find them a job, any simple job. If only there were a solution for them. That's a problem they face.

Evidently, different parents and PwIDDs encounter similar challenges, reflecting the considerable gap in the promotion and implementation of laws and regulations regarding PwDs and, in particular, those with IDDs.

The head of the General Federation of Trade Unions in Jenin confirmed this:

> Unfortunately, the law is not implemented. Despite the fact that Article 13 of the Palestinian Labour Law and Law No. (4) for the year 1999 on the Rights of the Disabled clearly states to employ the minimum number of persons with disabilities, regardless of their disability, whether it was intellectual or any other type of disability, and for them to constitute at least 5% of the employees in the institution but, unfortunately, this legal article is not implemented in institutions.

Many organisations working with disability in various ways, such as those that provide support to find employment or community-based work, all agree that it's **extremely difficult to integrate PwIDDs** into the labour market or **for society to accept their presence in workplaces**. As a representative of the Federation of Trade Unions in Nablus and Jenin indicated:

> Regarding IDDs, I wouldn't expect it, no. However, in the framework of other disabilities, some organisations consider welcoming them. There are environmental benefits regarding the entrance, bathroom, and the devices that they might use. Whereas, for IDDs, there is no attention [paid to them].

Concerning workplace environment and facilities, the infrastructure of most workplaces is limited, and there is scarce concern at to how to reasonably accommodate PwDs. For example, one interviewee believed that the main reason for the lack of employment inclusion is because many small- to medium-sized enterprises **fear incurring losses if they hire workers with disability**:

> To be quite frank, regarding mild IDDs, to an extent it's hard for business establishments to welcome them because they [businesses] are merely profitable institutions.

He also added that some PwIDDs are exposed to financial exploitation in that they may not receive their salaries or be treated the same as other employees:

> He might not get his full rights, like any other person at work, regarding salary or treatment. The stakeholder might... it's just a law... let's assume that the stakeholder hires a person with disability, but will he be given his salary like everyone else?

The Employment Sector Strategic Plan is coherent with the Strategic Framework for Persons with Disabilities of Palestine and stipulates the provision of programmes for PwIDDs, including projects for employment, vocational training, workplace inspections, labour protection, union organisation, wages and social security. The Ministry of Labour also encourages private sector employers to employ PwDs, and it has drawn up measures to ensure compliance. However, this is not yet fully compulsory, and thus far there are no punitive measures that can be made against an employer who fails to comply. As such, employers continue not to comply and refuse to employ PwIDDs, as is evident from the testimonies of PwDs and their families, in addition to the observations of workers in social and labour organisations and trade unions.

(Over) protection from exploitation, violence and harassment

Many parents expressed their concerns that their children would become the victims of **exploitation** whenever they left the house, including while at or traveling to work. Young female PwDs in particular are identified as a target for **sexual harassment and abuse,** although male PwDs are at risk as well.

Mohammad's mother (from Nablus) spoke about her fears for her son:

> My sister-in-law asked [me] to send Mohammad to the local supermarket. I said, 'God forbid'. I worry about him.

This also explains why PwDs spend most of their time at home: overprotection is also a barrier. Susu's mother would like her daughter to work in a factory so that she could acquire useful skills but fears the risk of her being abused or sexually assaulted because she is a young woman. Likewise, Hala's mother said:

> I don't feel comfortable with her going to the supermarket unless someone is with her, but by herself, as a young girl, no I don't like it."

Dina's mother also feared her daughter leaving their house:

> Obviously, leaving the house alone, no. Obviously, no. If the taxi takes her from the house to the institution, yes. I would tell her and take her down walking because I fear that someone would assault her.

This kind of protective pressure applies to women generally in Palestine, but especially so to women with IDDs because it is easier for them to be exploited. Raghad (from Jenin) expressed her concern for her daughter:

> In our times, we worry over our 'normal' young girls, let alone in cases when she has a disability.

Many parents are aware that their son or daughter has the potential to work. Nonetheless, as Susu's mother said:

> They might work in packaging or in supermarkets. But we don't intend on sending her. I don't really like the idea of her working.

From these quotes, we understand that parents themselves remain hesitant due to worry and fear of stereotypes about their children that prevent them from entering job markets and society in general. This is especially so for their daughters with IDD because societal beliefs determine female PwDs' opportunities. Zeina (from Jenin) said:

> I wanted to register my daughter in a centre in the occupied territories, but I heard they gave girls pills. [So] I put the idea out of my head.

This fear of potential assault is not limited to women with IDDs. There is also fear concerning men with PwIDDs being sexually or physically assaulted, as articulated by Mustafa's mother, who fears her son leaving the house alone:

> You know, I am scared that the boys would assault him.

3.4 Summary and recommendations

The primary discovery of this research study is that a significant **gap exists between legal frameworks that are designed to promote and protect the inclusion of PwIDDs in education and employment and the actual lived experiences of young PwIDDs**, as well as their parents, families and other stakeholders (teachers, businesses) in the northern governorates of Palestine.

The results presented in Section 3 identified numerous barriers that prevent PwIDDs from full and effective participation in formal education, vocational training programmes and, subsequently, employment.

The first set of barriers can be identified as the coping mechanisms and strategies **developed by the families of PwIDDs on realising that a child will be born with or develop disability**. The most common mechanism for parents is to link acceptance of the child's disability with an acceptance of divine will. This tends to lead to a family environment that provides protection, love and care for children with IDDs. However, this does mean that parents tend to base their childrearing strategy on a relationship of charity and overprotection, which tends to diminish the personal empowerment of PwIDDs. Moreover, prevalent discriminatory beliefs continue to shape social perceptions of IDDs, further exacerbating demoralising attitudes towards IDDs.

Formal educational institutions are largely unable to create inclusive learning environments for students with IDDs. This is so for several reasons. The first is an **inadequacy of human resources,** both in terms of quantity (support teachers are often in short supply) and quality (insufficient or inadequate training of curricula and support teachers to prepare them to deal with students with IDDs). The second is a lack of a **coherent and adapted curriculum** for students with IDDs, which would otherwise enable students, teachers and families to elaborate tailored and coherent strategies for each student with an IDD. The third is the prevailing attitude among other students and families that denies acceptance and inclusion of PwIDDs. In the absence of a structured inclusion project, discrimination and fear tend to prevail.

The lack / inadequacy of existing public services leads to excessive **financial burdening of the families of PwIDDs**. Families often have to rely on their own financial resources to cover expenses for support teachers, public transport, assistive devices and/or rehabilitation services. This is often simply impossible and so the only remaining option is for one family member (usually the mother) to remain at home with their child who has an IDD.

Access to TVET is even more complicated, as there are few or no **TVET services that cater to young adults with IDDs**. For young persons with IDDs older than 14 years, often the only solution is to spend time at home under the supervision of at least one family member. Moreover, existing services (if any) are often solely focused on rehabilitation or socialisation activities, rather than on training and skills development.

It is thus extremely difficult for PwIDDs to access employment. The lives of young adults with IDDs are marked by exclusion from education, overprotection within the family, lack of adapted TVET experiences when seeking training and skill development, and so they are barely able to reach the job market. This becomes near impossible a situation when one considers that small- and medium-sized enterprises in the private sector are often struggling to survive also.

To identify an intervention strategy is outside the scope of this study. Nonetheless, the evidence that has emerged allows us to hypothesise a set of plausible recommendations for different stakeholders. Notwithstanding the peculiar role of each stakeholder, a first gener-

al recommendation is that such a multidimensional fragile framework requires a multi-actor and multilevel approach to promote the desired structural change and to progress in the direction identified and described by the CRPD.

A preliminary and non-exhaustive set of plausible recommendations is reported hereunder.

Education system:

- Provide appropriate support and curricula in schools with teachers properly trained in inclusive education strategies for IDDs, to educate and deal with students with IDDs.

- Develop tailored curricula activities so that appropriate individualised learning processes can be identified for persons with different types of disability, considering also IDDs.

- Adapt school infrastructure in order to ease the inclusion of PwDs.

- Plan activities to promote change in the social perception of IDDs, especially among other students and families. This should be done through the involvement of non-school actors, such as mainstream and social media. Change in social perception could also be achieved by sharing success stories with the public and by highlighting the challenges faced by PwIDDs and their families.

Government authorities:

- Provide clearer and more explicit consideration of PwIDDs in elaborating policies and strategies and promoting the actions of different government organisations.

- Act to reduce the gap between existing legal frameworks and actual implementation, paying particular attention to the special needs of PwIDDs.

- Invest in appropriate public services to foster the participation of PwIDDs in education, TVET and rehabilitation programmes, particularly where this is lacking in the northern areas of the West Bank.

- Explicitly promote change in the social perception of IDDs through education, training, communication, etc.

- Dedicate financial support to the parents of PwIDDs, to help them meet extra costs and the financial burden incurred from having a child with disability.

Local community-based organisations and disabled people's organisations:

- Promote programmes and use traditional and social media to change stereotypes about IDDs and to raise societal awareness on the rights of PwDs and the discrimination and marginalisation they currently face.

- Cooperate with government organisations to create all-inclusive services and programmes for PwIDDs.

- Create support and aid networks for parents of PwIDDs so that they can share their experiences and knowledge.

- Develop essential welfare services for PwIDDs that attend to their specific needs through various mental-health, rehabilitation and social support programmes.

- Promote and support the creation of advocacy groups to fight and advocate for the rights of PwIDDs.

- Promote the direct participation of PwIDDs through advocacy and communication activities.

- Create special and professional programmes targeting PwIDDs.

4. Special schools for pwds: the issue of social identity

By: Imad Sayrafi, Ziad Amro, Wala' al Jamal, Hamza Naser and Mohammed Abu Khalil

4.1 Introduction

The discussion on special education in existing disability education literature is vibrant. Special schools are contested political terrain within both disability studies and activism: the right to education is considered one of the most important rights for persons with disabilities (PwDs) because it enhances their participation in society. Article 24 of United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006) proclaimed the right to inclusive education, stating that children with disabilities (CwDs) should not be discriminated against and, therefore, educated in mainstream schools. The reality in today's Palestine is that many CwDs either do not attend school or are enrolled in special schools, which are often perceived to provide a lower standard of education and thus decrease the chances of PwDs finding employment. Furthermore, because students with disabilities (SwDs) are segregated from students without disabilities, some scholars argue that special education contributes to the development of negative self-image for PwDs, who perceive themselves to be second-class citizens (Lawson, 2001, p. 203).

Special education potentially plays both a negative and positive role in relation to disability and the formation of PwDs' identities. Scholarly discussion revolves in particular around issues related to different aspects of inclusive education. Analysis of the challenges involved in implementing inclusive education within the public education system framework in Palestine also uncovered some positive effects of special education on the identity formation process of PwDs, such as tailored instruction, specialised support and use of crucial resources and tools.

The development of special education is attributed to various initiatives, such as the 1981 International Year of Disabled Persons. This is considered a turning point in how disability has come to be addressed, as it was the first occasion to frame disability within a universal context. Reconceptualising disability as a human rights issue led many countries, particularly in the Global South, to pay more attention in approaches that aim to address disability, rehabilitation and special education. Nonetheless, the global and local histories of special education and special schools predate this occasion (Malki, 1998, pp. 22–23; Mazurek, 1994, p. xxxvii). Special education in Palestine can be traced back to the time of Ottoman Empire, when, around 1895, foreign missionaries first introduced special services and training for PwDs. More recently, disability came to public attention from around the late 1970s and during the 1980s, when researchers began showing an increased interest in the topic. In particular, the issue of special education gained prominence during the First Palestinian Intifada, when it became a key political issue due to the high number of Palestinians who were injured during the Intifada, motivating political leaders to expand services for PwDs.

The Palestinian education system has undergone various transitions over the years that mirror the political changes occurring within the framework of the decades-long Israeli occupation. Various entities are responsible for education today, including the Palestinian government and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), which is responsible for providing educational services for Palestinian refugees, as well as private sector bodies and NGOs. 'Special schools' in Palestine are usually private or

funded by NGOs, donations or religious organisations; and since the 1940s, some of these schools have offered specific services (Malki, 1998, pp. 22–23; Mazurek, 1994, p. xxxvii; Nasir-Tucktuck et al., 2017).

Despite significant attention given to inclusive education in relation to disability, segregated schooling remains the norm for many PwDs, whether segregated through special schools or within mainstream schools (Göransson et al., 2020). Beyond the debate on the pros and cons of special schooling, ensuring that the first-hand experience of PwDs in special schools is known, and that their voices are heard, is pivotal to building a truly inclusive education system (Cook et al., 2001).

The topic of special education frequently arose between research team members during the development of the research project in Ramallah, particularly the importance of capturing PwDs' direct experiences of education, to understand how this shapes their social and community relationships. Thanks to ongoing discussions between and with the field research team members, it became clear that the issue of special schools demands further attention, and that it is necessary to consider its complexity by highlighting different perspectives and focusing on PwDs' experiences as expressed by PwDs themselves. This would produce a deeper understanding of the position of PwDs within society and how special education works in practice. In that sense, and in relation to the literature and the framework of this project, the research team developed a set of research questions linked to central issues that deepen our understanding of PwDs' experiences.

4.2 Conceptual framework and methodology

4.2.1 Theoretical framework

The different research projects and case studies featured in the Nothing About Us Without Us project share a similar theoretical and methodological orientation. However, each was formulated according to the particularities of each group, region and case study. Beyond the general level of disability legal frameworks and models, the framework of this project includes varying levels of analysis of legislative and policy implementation, especially in relation to special schools.

Central to the theoretical framework of this particular research project is the development of social identity. This links to the capability approach (CA), developed and refined over decades by Amartya Sen through various articles, books, and lectures (Sen, 1980, 1985, 1997, 2000, 2007), according to which the exercise of personal freedoms is inherently dependent on an individual's personal, social and environmental situation. Freedoms, rights and agency are often denied or removed from people as a result of limitations placed upon them, and this deprivation subsequently implies limitations in opportunities. Accordingly, the idea that individuals are responsible for their personal circumstances, and thus should not rely on others to improve or change those conditions, is undermined by the consideration that dependence on others is sometimes necessary to reach the position of possessing rights, freedom or agency to begin with.

Importantly, self-interest alone cannot sufficiently explain the variety of human practices and actions that are oriented towards social justice (Sen, 2000, p. 284). Sen addresses social justice by stressing the importance of recognising and progressing towards social justice as an incremental process that does not necessarily require a total social restructuring (Sen, 2000, p. 254). It is, therefore, important to demonstrate, through public discussion

and empirical analysis, that social injustice is not inevitable (Sen, 2000, p. 287).

In his book, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (2007), Sen explores the construction of social identity and the implications this has in relation to the inclusion and exclusion of different groups, considering also its link to violence, as well as how other identity formations are linked to the construction of social identity. That is, some forms of identification produce or encourage violence towards other identities, and some identities are developed in response to experiences of exclusion, marginalisation and violence. This understanding has important analytical implications that relate to processes of identity formation for PwDs, and we can begin to understand how special schools play a role in influencing how PwDs are oriented towards various types and levels of social identity. This is particularly important if we consider that people construct, assume and identify themselves as belonging to multiple various identity categories and communities, attributing various degrees of importance and hierarchical value to certain identities over and at the expense of others (Sen, 2007, p. 19).

Furthermore, identity both influences and is influenced by choice: individuals can and do choose how they identify, and this carries explanatory potential at the social level (Sen, 2007, p. 30) and helps us to understand the degree of inclusion or exclusion of PwDs. In one example, Sen discusses the role of faith-based schools in categorising children and influencing the construction and exercise of their social identities, by narrowing rather than broadening their exposure to difference, thus limiting choice (Sen, 2007, pp. 117–118). Accordingly, the theoretical framework of this research project draws upon CA in examining special schools and their role in social identity formation. As regards capability, the research questions address the role of special schools in enhancing individuals' freedom and agency, while at the social identity level dealing with how they influence social identities, choices, forms of identification and the implications of social identity, not solely through educational practices but by thinking of inclusion and exclusion in their broadest sense.

4.2.2 Research questions and methodology

The research aimed at understanding the effects of special schools on the identity development of PwDs. To answer the research question, we identified the following sub-questions, which would help us to pursue our objectives:

- How can Sen's CA and the concept of social identity be used to understand the impact of special schools on the identity of PwDs?
- How do special schools for PwDs affect social cohesion and harmony?
- How do interactions with school staff (including teachers and counsellors) affect the formation of the identity of a PwDs?
- What effect does the school experience have on a PwDs' identity?
- What effect does the relationship between the PwDs' parents and the special school have on the formation of the child's identity or social cohesion?

The present research was guided by the emancipatory research (ER) methodology common to all research projects and case studies within the NAUWU project (see Chapter 1). ER was inspired by Paolo Freire's (1968–2000) educational methodology that espoused the liberation of the oppressed and is based on Freire's theory that the oppressed are dehumanised through several structural factors. According to Freire, the 'oppressed' themselves can play

a central role in the process of their own liberation if supported by others.

Within the framework of the NAUWU project, this theoretical assumption was realised through the active role played by PwDs as researchers who participated in all research phases, from initial theorisation through implementation and the final phase of dissemination of results and advocating for change, as was anticipated by the orchestrators of the NAUWU project. Indeed, liberation from structural oppression cannot be reduced to either pure action or reflection but rather requires an integration of both.

> Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated. At all stages of their liberation, the oppressed must see themselves as women and men engaged in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human. Reflection and action become imperative when one does not erroneously attempt to dichotomize the content of humanity from its historical forms. The insistence that the oppressed engage in reflection on their concrete situation is not a call to armchair revolution. On the contrary, reflection—true reflection—leads to action (Freire, 1968/2000, pp. 65–66)

For the research project in Ramallah, the selected PwD researchers collaborated with their counterpart research groups in the training sessions carried out by lead researchers and disability experts. In addition to training offered on the theoretical, methodological and practical aspects of conducting research, a reflective space was created within the group setting. This space enriched discussions on how this research is linked to and reflective of the co-researchers' own personal experiences. It also prompted them to think about issues related to disability that are central when discussing work and education, as well as about how the research might be useful to understand and improve the situation for PwDs in Palestine today and in the future.

The subject of special schools frequently arose during ongoing discussions and interviews with PwDs about their experiences, and this led to the development of the aforementioned research questions by the co-researchers. These were then refined and connected to the theoretical framework through ongoing discussions between the research team members, who also determined how best to answer the research questions, drawing upon the training material on data collection tools that was provided to them.

As the research project in Ramallah aimed to delve deep into different experiences and perspectives of special education, the research team agreed on the use of qualitative data collection tools, including semi-structured interviews, life-course interviews and focus group discussions. The data collection tools selected were considered suitable for investigating social identity and the lived experiences of PwDs enrolled in special schools because they allow narrative evolution to be tracked over time and details of importance to the analysis to be identified. The ongoing discussion between the lead researcher and the co-researchers was also important to better frame the analysis.

4.3 Data and results

4.3.1 The data sample

The data sample consisted of 20 interview participants and one focus group. The participants were 10 PwDs (five women and five men) who had either already completed their studies or were currently enrolled in special schools, three parents of PwDs (three women) and seven employees from the teaching staff of special schools (four women and three men). The types of disability included in the sample varied but were mostly visual (five persons), auditory (four persons) and cognitive-intellectual impairment (one person). The interviewees live in diverse settings: urban, rural and refugee camp settings, and the employees of special schools who were interviewed included PwDs.

Participants for interviews were found and contacted using the research team members' personal and professional connections: DPO contacts, personal acquaintances, other organisations engaged in disability, formal contacts made through schools. The researchers also employed snowball sampling to recruit interview partners. There were challenges in recruiting interview participants, which led to a smaller data sample than originally anticipated; some participants initially agreed and then cancelled their interviews, while others were willing to discuss their experiences but did not want to be formally interviewed. This indicates that discussing the topic of disability is difficult and controversial for some PwDs.

4.3.2 Data analysis

The data depicted the complexity of PwDs' lived experiences in relation to the education they receive in special schools. The impact of these experiences on their lives became apparent through the sharing of different perspectives, including those of PwDs themselves, as well as their families and school employees. The information gathered through narrative-based data collection tools, such as life course interviews, effectively indicates how these experiences morph over time. The researchers identified several patterns among the interviewees' stories, in terms of common or shared effects, experiences and challenges. A central point of interest is the glaring differences in interviewee assessments of special education services and experiences, with the perspectives expressed by SwDs who attend or attended special schools differing from perspectives of the employees of special schools. It must be highlighted, here, that the data sample featured students of varying age groups who were enrolled in special and boarding schools at different times: the sample range includes students enrolled in special schools during the 1990s to those still enrolled at the time of writing.

The analysis of data gathered from interviews indicates that many SwDs face discrimination and maltreatment as students, and this has a long-lasting effect on their lives beyond their schooling years. The interviewed employees of special schools also acknowledged various challenges and issues involved in the education of PwDs. Moreover, the role played by PwDs' families is complex but essential to understanding the effects of special education on SwDs, as will be discussed in the course of this analysis.

Although each situation in unique, almost every SwD will inevitably encounter exclusionary practices in various domains, and this contributes to their social identity being formed and developed according to processes that associate disability with isolation, which further reinforces a sense of 'being different'. Furthermore, freedom of choice and agency are often limited. We develop this argument over the following sections, drawing on the results of data

gathered within the framework of this research project. Our intention is to delve into various issues while respecting the plurality of perspectives offered up by those interviewed.

4.3.3 Main services offered by special schools

The different interviewees suggested that, compared with public schools, special schools that adopt education strategies and techniques in line with the capability approach provide better learning experiences for SwDs. This is particularly so in regard to learning to use assistive devices and developing basic life skills that offer PwDs equal opportunities with peers when the time comes that they find themselves in shared settings. Previous studies feature in an ongoing debate as to which modalities are most effective in offering SwDs opportunities equal to those offered to their peers, especially given the diversity of SwDs experiences and challenges arising within inclusive education (Magumise and Sefotho, 2020). However, it is also important to contextualise the pros and cons of special schooling by demonstrating how they are intertwined with and reflect comprehensive approaches to disability as a social issue.

On one level, the data indicate that special schools offer education and rehabilitation opportunities to SwDs who would otherwise have remained illiterate and uneducated were it not for the establishment of such schools and programmes. This is confirmed by previous studies that indicate the complexity of the effects of special schools, both positive and negative (Lawson, 2001, p. 203).

> In the past, there were no special schools; there were many difficulties. The deaf were always in coffee shops and illiterate. There were no associations, no union, no centres, no institutions. [Then] people started to go visit [them] and gathered young deaf men and women. They opened a small school of 20 people, which really changed the situation of people with hearing disabilities. (Interview with an employee of a special school, 26 June 2021)

It is important to note that special schools vary in their focus and orientation towards different forms of disability. This translates into differences in how they teach life skills and integrate curriculum and activities. For example, one of the special schools included in this research study offered targeted education for students with intellectual disabilities; it specialized in teaching crafts as an activity to generate income for its students.

> There were two functional trainers, and they were so efficient that they taught students how to make tea and food. They taught the girls, so that when they grow up, they can operate a washing machine, use the gas stove, etc. They used to train them in folding clothes and in movement, and they were efficient (Interview with an employee of a special school, 17 August 2021).

These positive aspects recurred more often in the interviews with special school employees, but they were also mentioned by PwDs. This suggests that through education and rehabilitation services, special schools can help to build the confidence of SwDs, encouraging them to enter society as visible participants. However, while rehabilitation service training is provided, some SwDs expressed in interviews that they felt exploited at times, particularly in relation to how such skills are taught.

> They taught us, for example, how to use the white cane, even daily life skills, such as how to do the dishes... all these things we used to do when we were young. For example, we learned this when we were five years old, standing on the sink, and doing the dishes for fifty children (Interview with a female

PwD who studied in a special school, 29 June 2021)

As the above interviewee indicated, although there was a learning component in terms of life skills and rehabilitation, students were also forced into laborious work. This came up in more than one interview with SwDs from various special schools, where students were required to perform domestic duties such as cleaning bathrooms or washing dishes. One interviewee recalled that the cleaning chemicals irritated her skin, and that being forced to clean gave her a rash and dried out her hands.

4.3.4 Accessibility

A plurality of experiences and points of view emerged in relation to the levels of accessibility of schools and their facilities and services. Interviewees reported that accessibility levels were good in some schools while poor in others, both in terms of physical environment, services, tools and teacher attitudes and behaviours. Maintenance was also a cited issue, varying significantly from school to school. One interviewee expressed that although some tools were present and accessible, they were not adequately maintained. Another mentioned that in their school, wheelchair users faced physical barriers and had to leave the building and re-enter by alternative means.

Generally, most special schools are tailored to students with specific disabilities. However, there are sometimes students enrolled with disabilities that they are unprepared to accommodate, and these students thus experience reduced accessibility:

> There was not enough accessibility, such as sign language signs, and I noticed a delay in the maintenance of the light-based school bell in the classroom, which is important. Also, the courtyard was small and unpleasant, the bathrooms were not clean, and there were no activities or games for sports classes (Interview with a female student currently enrolled in a special school for the hearing impaired, 28 July 2021).

A comprehensive understanding of accessibility expands our understanding of accessibility challenges beyond those of mere physical environment to include curricular and extracurricular activities, for example. Indeed, educational services should be diverse and varied, to support students' full potential. This is particularly important given our use of the capability approach.

While one might expect schools tailored specifically to PwDs to be accessible, data gathered from interviews showed that this is not always the case, especially when a comprehensive notion of accessibility is applied.

> In terms of accessibility, the building is accessible: you can move around in a wheelchair inside the school, and we are building a new floor for the school, which is accessible, as it contains a ramp for movement-related disabilities. There is also a special bathroom for PwDs, but accessibility is not comprehensive – it is more suitable for people with intellectual disabilities than others (Interview with the principal of a special school for persons with intellectual disabilities, 4 August 2021).

Other interviewees indicated that, over time, schools became more accessible and started paying more attention to details related to accessibility.

> The new administration started to pay more attention, not just to the physi-

> cal environment, but also details. For example, they started to use different educational tools: for example, making maps tangible and touchable for the visually impaired (Interview, a female with disability who studied in a special school for persons with visual disabilities, 29 June 2021).

Accordingly, the data indicate a certain degree of variation among schools and their administrations, as well as in the experiences of SwDs in these different environments. This also indicates that although some aspects of accessibility are addressed by individual schools, there is no consistency, and so this varies considerably from school to school. This highlights the necessity of addressing accessibility issues within the education system as a whole.

4.3.5 Quality of education

While some research studies advocate for the segregation of PwDs from their nondisabled peers, others argue that segregation does not lead to improved educational experiences or outcomes. According to the outcomes of the present study, researchers should investigate the complexities of special education without misrepresenting inclusion and its basic premises, which is essentially that schools ought to provide education for all students regardless of their differences. There are social implications to this, the goal being to foster inclusive societies through inclusive services and processes (Slee et al., 2019, p. 6).

A recurring argument in favour of special schools is that, especially during the initial schooling years, students learn a variety of life skills, benefit from important learning experiences, and learn to use tools such as sign language, braille and assistive devices. The situation becomes increasingly problematic as students move into secondary school, which become less accessible to PwDs, particularly in relation to the curriculum. Both teaching staff and PwDs expressed through interviews that the tawjihi (national high school examination) curriculum is not as accessible as it should be. According to our research, the two main problematic features are (a) the memorisation techniques necessary to prepare for the test and (b) the use of teaching methods that are particularly challenging for students with auditory disabilities. SwDs interviewed for this study expressed dissatisfaction with such teaching methods, and this was reiterated by teaching staff in schools offering targeted education for students with auditory disabilities.

> While in general things were good, there was no syllabus or books that accommodated deaf people, which makes it very difficult for us. We take the government curriculum, but this curriculum must be more accessible to make it easier for us to obtain information. Writing on the blackboard is not enough; we need more details and more ways to get such details (Interview, a female SwD enrolled in a special school, 28 August 2021).

It is important to note that some SwDs began their education in special schools before moving to regular public or private schools. This is most likely to occur in the transition from primary to secondary education, which in any case is an option only for those with certain types of disabilities, due to the lack of inclusiveness of public schools.

One interviewee stated that, on transitioning from a special school to a public school, she realised that the education she received in the special school had been of good quality. However, she also indicated a preference for public schooling, not only because the teaching methods used in her special school were harsh and punitive but also because, in her opinion, special schools 'destroy a person's identity and make them feel isolated from society'. Her statement reflects an analytical insight connected with the main argument present-

ed through this research: special schools create domains of isolation, in which violence towards PwDs is more likely to occur, and, rather than promote diversity, they serve to inhibit the development of healthy social identity.

Conversely, another interviewee (a person with auditory disability) stated that, even if given the choice to be educated differently, she would still opt to attend a special school for persons with auditory disability, as she feels a better connection with peers who share her disability. Although the qualitative nature of the research does not allow for generalisation, the research team noted that there appeared to be a more positive attitude towards special schools among persons with auditory disabilities, perhaps due to the major difficulties in granting accessibility for these kind impairments in public schools. However, whether positive or negative, the attitudes expressed by the PwDs interviewed for this study indicate that having a disability significantly affects how the development of SwDs' personal and social identities. This is an important insight in regard to the research questions.

4.3.6 Skills required to achieve full potential

Our interviews with current and former SwDs and special school staff indicate that students acquire and develop important life skills through special schools. This was so for persons with various types of disabilities, including those with intellectual and cognitive disability. However, many interviewees drew attention to issues with the rehabilitation programmes arising from their scarce implementation. Skills and learning cannot be taken out of context, especially since many PwDs have had negative experiences in special schools. This is particularly true for boarding schools, where the acquisition of skills cannot be detached from the context of acquisition. This will be discussed further in the following sections.

> There were limited rehabilitation services in the school. While a rehabilitation specialist used to come sometimes, there was no agreement – apparently – between them and the school. The specialist sometimes taught us to use the white cane, but this did not last long; this is due to the school's objection to the students leaving the school to learn outside the school. The school then brought in another unqualified specialist. Some students did not receive proper training in daily activities such as eating, drinking and wearing clothes (Interview with an SwD who studied in a special school, 29 July 2021).

The quote above suggests that there is inconsistency in the teaching of life skills and use of assistive devices, which is one of the most proclaimed benefits of specials schools. However, the data depicts a variegated picture. Additionally, interview participants expressed that they were offered limited extracurricular activities. Although some special schools succeeded in providing positive learning experiences and implementing effective learning techniques, self-autonomy and independence were not adequately addressed.

Furthermore, many interviewees reiterated that PwDs need to build a solid foundation of basic competencies. This is currently achieved, at least in part, by special schools. These basic skills are necessary to facilitate inclusion at a later stage, as interviewees have stressed. However, the degree to which special schools contribute to helping students reach their full potential is limited. The data points to a lack of consistency in how these basic skills are taught and acquired, with negative experiences countering the positive effects of special schools. This will be addressed further in the following section. It seems that PwDs do not have many options when it comes to education, as there are as many challenges arising in opting for an 'inclusive education' in public schools as there are negative experiences associated with special schooling.

4.3.7 Violence and intimidation

Previous research studies have shown that children in special schools are more restricted in their interactions, which reduces important opportunities for learning and building protective networks (Duque et al., 2021). The data gathered from our interviews suggests that PwDs encounter violence and that intimidation exists within special schools. References to violence appear in several interviews, and the data indicate that violence is a recurring and systematic experience rather that an isolated incident. Some of the forms of violence mentioned are alarming, ranging from exploitation to verbal and physical violence, or even violent intimidation. While not all interviewees recalled such experiences, the basic picture generated from interview data suggests that, generally, a special school education – boarding schools in particular – seems inevitably to imply some form of psychological violence. More than three interviewees likened boarding schools to prisons.

> Most violence was verbal. I consider boarding schools a form of psychological violence. When I was a student, I would always hear other students describe it as a prison. If I finish my daily educational program by 1:30 pm, why should I stay the night until the next morning? I mean, this period is between walls and fences; this is a form of psychological violence, and the student is not expected to understand this process, so the student perceives it and treats it as violence (Interview with a staff member and former SwD who attended special school, 4 August 2021).

A special school education creates a social identity based on separateness and difference. This then feeds exclusion, not only through the implementation of concrete exclusive practices but also by fueling a general feeling of imprisonment. One interviewee described other forms of violence against SwDs, such as students being locked in closed rooms by teachers or bullied and beaten by other students. Others who attended boarding school recalled being threatened with not being allowed to visit their families.

> Another teacher would wait until I was in the bathtub, as they used to bathe us, and then would beat me with a hose. On one occasion, I tried my best to refuse to get in the bathtub, telling the teacher 'you just want to beat me' [...] Sometimes, I used to urinate on myself and faced punishment from teachers. One time when I urinated on myself, the teacher bathed me, then afterwards took me out and put me in front of a barking dog. I was so afraid and screamed with panic. We would be very afraid at times and have trouble sleeping (Interview with a female student with visual disability, 26 September 2021).

Among other negative experiences recounted, one student complained about the poor quality of food offered in boarding schools and the lack of basic facilities such as heating during winter. Their accounts necessitate an immediate investigation and monitoring of practices and accommodations for SwDs in special and boarding schools.

> There were 15 students in the house, with one heater, and it was very cold. The teacher or supervisor used to take the heater for themselves and leave the students without a heater in winter (focus group participant, 20 September 2021).

It is easy to understand, from these descriptions of life in special and boarding schools, why these schooling experiences inflict long-term effects on a PwD's social identity. Our data indicate that experiences of violence mark PwDs and influence how they relate to themselves, their peers, their families and society as a whole. Stories of violence such as those mentioned above are alarming and require serious intervention and prevention.

4.3.8 Family life and the role of families

Although social identity is shaped by schooling experiences, family life also plays a fundamental role in shaping the relationship between PwDs and special schools. Indeed, it is important to analyse how familial relations influence both PwDs and their families and how this contributes to students' self-perceptions and social identities. In this respect, boarding and non-boarding schools impact these processes differently. Previous studies have shown that boarding schools isolate PwDs from society, leading to further discrimination, violence and unhealthy attitudes towards them (Friborg et al., 2020). But the research also indicates that family attitudes can hinder PwDs by encouraging resistance to inclusion and by failing to recognise or encourage their abilities (Dube et al., 2021, p. 5).

Many interviewees stressed the importance of receiving support from their families during the various stages of their lives. Others had mixed feelings about their relationship with their families, as some felt that their family had impeded or hindered their education or learning development. Some stated that their experience of attending a special school influenced how they relate to the family, though these feelings differed across the sample. Of those who reported having had negative experiences at special or boarding schools, some said they felt disinclined to return home because they then felt isolated and excluded, while for others it increased their desire to return home. For example, one parent of an SwD whose experience of school was negative recalled that her child was keen to return home and was evidently happier there, precisely because his experience of the special school was so negative. Whether the relationship with their families was positively or negatively affected, the reactions of the SwDs indicate that their schooling experience does impact and alter familiar relationships in some way.

Family relationships are an influential factor in the decision of whether or not to send CwDs to special schools, and so this merits further research. The information gathered through our interviews indicates that overprotectiveness on the part of families towards their CwDs – particularly those with intellectual disabilities – leads to their becoming isolated from the community. The data suggest that overprotectiveness is directed more towards girls and women with disabilities than male PwDs, as widespread disapproval towards women's participation in public life fuels a generalised aversion that further isolates female SwDs from their families.

> We live in an Arab society with an Arab mentality. The general social attitudes towards PwDs, especially those who are mentally disabled, are negative, and people look down on them. For example, they can call them bad words, like 'crazy', and at times they could get assaulted. So, if my daughter goes out, I can't always defend her; this is why we don't let her go out (interview with a parent of a female PwDs with an intellectual disability, 5 July 2021).

4.3.9 The Israeli occupation and PwDs in special schools

Disability research needs to address how disability intersects with various other forms of discrimination – gendered, racial, socioeconomic, etc. – and how it relates to political and natural disasters, including dispossession and forced containment (Slee et al., 2019, pp. 6–8). The Palestinian context offers important insights with regard to intersectionality, and this demands more attention and analysis, not only at a general level but also through the lens of individual experiences.

Life course interviews make it possible to trace the evolution of PwD experiences over time and shed light on the different stages in their schooling lives, especially in relation to spe-

cial schools and the various transformations the SwDs undergo. It should be noted also that the degree of violence experienced as a result of the Israeli occupation has also shifted over time: movement restrictions and incursions greatly influence the degree of mobility of PwDs, and this affects (mostly reduces) communication and connection between PwD students enrolled in boarding schools and their families.

> While at first, we could go home every week, this was no longer possible with checkpoints. Sometimes we are a month late, [sometimes] two months, [sometimes] three months. So, this also formed a barrier between me and my family (interview with a female PwD who studied in a special school, 29 June 2021).

Through the lenses of comprehensive models of disability and the capability approach, the Israeli occupation represents the cause of many barriers that reduce accessibility, and which, therefore, greatly impact the lives of PwDs. This is due to the restrictive regime imposed by the Israeli occupation on the Palestinian population, which strongly limits freedom of movement.

When violence arising from the Israeli occupation intensifies, movement restrictions increase. As was the case during the Second Intifada, this additional difficulty alters the relationship between SwDs, particularly those in boarding schools, and their families. Research that examines and highlights the specific intersections between Israeli military violence (in all its forms) and disability is an important endeavour that justifies further investment, development and in-depth analysis.

4.3.10 Social identity and inclusion

Education plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' identities and determines their participation in society, especially in relation to equality of opportunity and non-discriminatory practices. Indeed, inclusion necessarily entails participation in societal processes such as education, while the distinctively social nature of inclusion drives further social development and constructs social identity. Therefore, education shapes an individual's capability space, as well as the range of an individual's potential 'being' and 'doing'.

> Frankly, I prefer spending my time with PwDs, not with ordinary people, but I accept to love ordinary people; [it's] not that I don't like them, but I like PwDs more. When I first came out of the special school, I felt, uh, that I was different. As if I was in another world, but it was for short [time] period. In the end, I could cope gradually. We are all the same, so there is no difference (interview with a former SwD of a special school, 15 July 2021).

Existing research indicates there is a predominant feeling of exclusion created by segregated school environments and that, as the quote above suggests, these kinds of feelings are prevalent within and outside those segregated settings (Cologon, 2020, p. 12). However, this is not always the case: some PwDs are more comfortable in segregated environments, while for others, it is important to interact with peers with similar disabilities, to develop special skills for their unique disability and to learn to use specific assistive devices.

However, considering a larger framework and the inclusion of PwDs within society, segregated schooling (particularly boarding schools) contributes to the development of a social identity based on 'difference', which then further enhances the strong identification with disability. Many interviewees recalled their efforts to participate within their communities; however, public life often presents challenges, stemmig from negative social attitudes to-

wards PwDs. This highlights the need to increase and develop inclusion in the long term.

> When I was young, I was very social, but this changed. As I aged, my participation and integration in the community declined, because the more I approached the community, the more there were problems with violence, verbal abuse and being ridiculed by society (focus group participant with disability, 20 September 2021).

This quote shows how violence contributes to the construction of a social identity based on difference, which counters attempts at inclusion. At the same time, social identity is dynamic, and this research project showcased the high degree of responsiveness and initiative displayed by PwDs in Palestine, who articulated and exercised their personal agency: by challenging practices of exclusion, by establishing connections and by developing a social identity in relation to their community, in a way that did not allow them to be fully excluded. However, this continuous effort remains a challenging process that depends mostly on the efforts and resilience of PwDs themselves.

4.3.11 Conclusion

The empirical research and analysis within this study provide insight into the nature and effect of special and boarding schools on SwDs in Palestine and indicate that this is an important field deserving of further research and policy intervention. The study highlights the importance of engaging qualitative research methods in topics related to the experiences of PwDs, to better understand the complex dynamics relating to discrimination and exclusion in contemporary society. Through these experiences, we gain in-depth insight into the challenges and effects of special schools on PwDs and society as a whole.

By applying social identity, the CA and an emancipatory research methodology as theoretical framework and methodological approach, this study demonstrates that segregated schooling plays a key role in the process of PwD social identity construction and development that are not conducive to social integration and inclusion. This is particularly so because special and boarding schools isolate PwDs from society and are grounds for numerous negative (sometimes violent) experiences that reinforce difference and exclusion. PwDs enrolled in special schools do benefit from being given an education and acquire important life skills; however, they are also exposed to isolation, discrimination and violence. Segregation during schooling years impacts society as a whole, because PwDs are then less able to build positive social relationships and interactions.

This research study also exposed limitations in accessibility, educational materials and staff/teacher experiences, in relation to SwDs in special schools. Furthermore, our results show that the families of PwDs play a shifting role in this process and that the relationship between SwDs and their families influences and is influenced by the experiences of PwDs in special schools.

This study thus also confirms a key argument that has both methodological and theoretical implications, such as the focus on time, life course interviews, and how PwDs' early life experiences influence social inclusion and social identities later in life. Our analysis indicates that this is not a static but a dynamic process, and we note the agency that PwDs demonstrate in overcoming their own past experiences. The research also shows the value of adopting emancipatory research approaches because they enable us to explore research topics that stem from real experiences and issues of immediate importance for PwDs themselves.

Finally, we learned about how experiences differ according to the type of disability a person has, as well as their gender. This highlights the importance of acknowledging and factoring in these key differences in our attempts to better understand social realities. As has been repeatedly stressed by the researchers involved in this study, the participation of PwDs in knowledge production on disability can significantly affect different stages of the research process: from determining the theoretical framework of reference to the necessary topics to address all the way to witnessing the emancipatory effect on PwDs themselves, who become knowledge producers. This process may require time for its effects to be felt, but, as was argued by Freire (1968/2000, pp. 65–66), it has the potential to emancipate the oppressed from their oppressors.

As co-researchers are connected to and work with disability organisations, their research skills and output contribute to their own understanding of disability, and this influences their work on disability-related issues, which is important in emancipatory research. Indeed, some of them, when interviewed for the EDR Boxes (see below), indicated that collaborating on this research project led to their becoming aware of issues that, previously, they were ignorant of, such as that of PwDs not being able to find special schools in which to enrol.

EDR Box – Voices from the field: the experience of co-researchers with disability

Inclusive education or special schooling?
'Of course I support inclusive education, but at present it is difficult to integrate people with, for example, hearing, visual, or intellectual disabilities, at an early age, in our schools. From personal experience, I am speaking about the blind. A student would need to learn Braille language and then be included in the public school (co-researcher with disability, analytical workshop, 30 September 2021).

Empowerment and support
This experience has helped me develop a lot. I do not want to go back to how I was before this experience, and I want to stay at the level that I reached. I want to continue, I want to develop, and I want my relationship and communications to keep improving. This experience has benefited me; I am communicating better despite my hearing disability, and I was able to conduct interviews. I was able to deal with difficult topics in this research study. I want to continue with this development. My family also supported my participation in this research project, and my confidence increased. When I was transcribing, my family would help me. This strengthened my relationship with my family. I discovered how much my family supports me. There was a lot of psychological support (co-researcher with disability, analytical workshop, 30 September 2021).

New ideas and projects
One thing that caught my attention in the interviews I conducted was how difficult it is for some to find a special school. One person interviewed spent three years trying to find a special school. This information or this problem was news to me. So, I thought that as I work in the Palestinian General Union of People with Disability (GUPWD), I could follow up on these issues in my work. I started working on it. I started to look into problems faced by young students and how to reach parents through CBR programmes and through the Ministry of Social Development (co-researcher with disability, analytical workshop, 30 September 2021).

4.4 Policy recommendations

Part of the aim and rationale of this research project is to translate data, empirical evidence, analysis and conclusions into viable policy recommendations. This is enhanced by analytical discussions with the co-researchers as to how best to utilise the research findings to develop policy recommendations.

A stated aim of this study is to promote inclusive education within the larger framework of establishing an inclusive society. At the time the research was being carried out, **boarding special schools** are on the decline in Palestine, and one important recommendation concerns their continued disbandment, as these institutions **play a key role in promoting the isolation and exclusion of PwDs**. Further investigations into what drives families to send their children to boarding schools are required, so as to improve families' perceptions of their CwDs, as well as the quality of those familial relationships.

A further important consideration that affects inclusion is the **development of a comprehensive analysis of accessibility and the subsequent means to improve it**. This requires schools, academic curricula and staff to be adjusted so as to accommodate PwDs regardless of the differences between students. While this might mean **additional training, resources and teaching aid is necessary for PwDs**, our research emphasises that, considering schools as social environments, it is necessary for PwDs to establish social relations and contacts with non-disabled peers within school settings. In the Palestinian context, this necessitates further study and comparative research of other countries' experiences of inclusive education, as well as the further development of networks and monitoring mechanisms.

It is important also to **raise awareness on PwD experiences within different educational settings**, including their experiences in public schools, private schools, special schools and boarding schools. These should be used to drive the push for inclusive education, by highlighting the negative effects of segregation and the necessity of challenging the status quo, as well as by advocating for the recognition of educational settings not only as providers of formal education but also as places that shape citizens and future societies. This entails delving deeper into important aspects such as the construction of social relations, perceptions and identities.

These recommendations were discussed in depth with the co-researchers, who also highlighted the **importance of recognising and addressing challenges linked to inclusive education**, in addition to understanding how these play out in the Palestinian context. These discussions indicated that special schooling for PwDs might be still necessary, at least until a certain age, due to the current social and political situation in Palestine, but the aim should still be to achieve inclusion at an early age. From this point of view, special schooling would not be needed if schools in Palestine were to become more inclusive and able to meet the needs of SwDs. Moreover, it is important that there are frameworks in place that ensure adequate and safe school environments within private schools, as the majority of special schools in Palestine are private.

Immediate intervention is needed to address **violence against PwDs in schools**. This is of paramount importance in special schools and even more so in boarding schools. The **monitoring** of staff behaviours and attitudes in school settings, particularly in relation to groups that are prone to discrimination (such as PwDs), demands urgent attention. Such issues could be addressed through enhanced staff training and preparation but also by providing clear safeguarding policies to protest those who are more likely to be discriminated against. Moreover, there should be constant follow-up and monitoring of special schools, in addition to the introduction and expansion of practices that aim to reduce student isolation.

Also, **DPOs should play an important role in monitoring special schools and raising aware-**

ness of the challenges and experiences of PwDs in educational settings. By doing so, DPOs would contribute towards fostering inclusion in collaboration with governmental and non-governmental institutional actors. Accordingly, recommendations focus on developing pathways towards inclusion by ending isolation resulting from segregation, raising awareness, training staff and teachers, educating families, and monitoring and developing processes that help to promote inclusion and desegregation within educational institutions.

5. Inclusive education in public primary schools in Bethlehem and Hebron

By: Rasha Suboh, Awad Obayat, Hammad Samamrah, Atheer Au Rayan and Mohammed Karam

5.1 Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) declares persons with disabilities (PwDs) to be human beings with the same inalienable rights as any other. As such, the UNCRPD reconceptualises disability as merely another aspect of human diversity. Human rights are universal, and their full enjoyment should be guaranteed unconditionally. Every human being is entitled, upon birth, to their fundamental rights. That includes the right to full and effective participation in society, without discrimination, and to equal opportunity. Numerous basic material rights are predicated on this primary one – such as the right to food, drink and shelter – but to preserve human dignity, people must also be able to exercise the right to work, education, health and freedom. At the local and international levels, these combined rights constitute an integrated system of binding ethical and legal principles. However, the right to education is of particular importance, as it affects and indicates to what degree a person can access and exercise a particular set of rights and so serves as a gateway to the enjoyment of other rights.

The aim of this research study is to shed light on the **importance of transitioning towards a fully inclusive education system in Palestine**: one that fosters the full human development of all citizens, including those with disability. Inclusive education entails adopting a holistic approach towards students with disability (SwD) and instigating various changes within educational institutions, in terms of how and what type of education is offered. These changes must involve all levels of the education system, as well as the wider community. Moreover, transitioning towards fully inclusive education must be articulated in multidimensional terms, to include all aspects of educational processes. This transition is possible only if all students' individual differences and resources are considered in a way that challenges or removes discrimination and exclusion, so that their full and effective participation can be realised.

In Palestine, SwDs are among the most marginalised and excluded of social actors because they are not fully and effectively included within the current education system. One third of the total number of CwDs are not enrolled in any kind of school and thus are excluded from education entirely (PCBS, 2017). Nonetheless, a focus on enrolment numbers must not exclude a parallel engagement to promote the quality of education for all.

Ensuring the full and effective participation of CwDs within the Palestinian education system is a complex process that demands an evaluation of dynamics occurring outside schools as well as inside them. To capture a complete picture of what occurs when a SwD commences formal education, it is necessary to understand their daily, lived realities by examining their home lives and familial and social relationships: that is, what they are actually learning and what the impact of this learning is in terms of their future participation in society.

5.1.1 Legal frameworks for the right of PwDs to education: national and international standards

The holistic approach to human rights is based upon the principles of justice and non-discrimination, as stated in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

> All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

These rights are universal and not exclusive to any individual or group. The second article of the Declaration states:

> Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status.

We find the same declared in the ninth article of Palestinian Basic Law: 'Palestinians shall be equal before the law and the judiciary, without distinction based upon race, sex, color, religion, political views or disability'.

Equal rights for PwDs constitute an inalienable precondition for the enjoyment of a dignified life, and the right to education is one of the most important rights to guarantee. Many international covenants stipulate the right of PwDs to education. Among these are the UNCRPD, adopted in 1975, which guarantees PwDs a right to education; and the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC), adopted in 1989, Article 23 of which recognises the right of PwDs to education, training, healthcare and rehabilitation services, and so can be considered the first clear recognition of the rights of children with disabilities (CwDs) to education, irrespective of any efforts that may be required to fulfil this.[6]

In 2014, Palestine became a signatory to the UNCRPD, which came into effect in 2006. This choice can be considered a sign of the country's commitment to promoting the rights of all its citizens. Indeed, by adhering to the UNCRPD, Palestine committed to integrate all provisions outlined in the Convention into its national legislation, either by amending existing laws or enacting new ones, by establishing new institutions to monitor budgets and implement the Convention, by training public officials and by raising public awareness on disability issues.

In coherence with Paragraph 2 of Article 24 of the UNCRPD, the Palestinian state should ensure that PwDs have free and equal access to an inclusive, quality primary and secondary education. To ensure this, it is necessary to address accessibility and adaptability as vitally important concepts. Adequate measures must be taken to ensure that education is accessible for PwDs, and a more comprehensive conceptualisation of inclusive education must be emphasised.

This is similar to Decree Law No. 8, enacted in 2017, that entrenches 'the concept of inclusive education' within public education systems and promotes the rights of PwDs to quality

6. The UNCRC affirmed inclusive education as a set of values, principles and practices that ensures quality education for all students and doesn't stand at the side of students with disability only, but at the side of the diversity of learning conditions and requirements as well. The Public Education no.1 (2001), *The Committee on the Rights of the Child on the aims of education*, paragraph 67. For more information on Palestine and other states' observance of these conventions, see treaties.un.org

education, with all necessary guarantees. Article 14 of this decree states that 'the ministry shall adopt the inclusive education policy and supportive education that meets the needs of all students' by offering quality education for students who are most exposed to exclusion and marginalization, like students with disabilities.

In October 2015, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) implemented 'The policy of inclusive education in Palestine', which promises a suitable educational environment for all students, especially those who usually face exclusion, regardless of gender and disability. The policy included required operational tasks, responsibilities and mechanisms to achieve a level of quality education already present in the Law of Persons with Disability 1999, No. 4, Article 10, among the obligations of the Ministry of Social Affairs:

> Ensure that the disabled benefit from equal opportunities for enrolment in pedagogic and education institutions and in the universities within the framework of the curricula applicable in these institutions, provide necessary pedagogic diagnosis to define the nature and degree of the disability, provide adequate curricula, educational and pedagogic means and proper facilities, provide education of all types and levels to the disabled according to their needs and train professionals in rehabilitation of the disabled based on the nature of disability[7].

Article 41 of the Palestinian Child Law affirms that SwDs have the right to access regular public schools and to be educated within the same educational settings as children without disabilities, reaffirming the importance of real integration and of providing education of various types and across various levels according to real needs[8].

Based on the legal frameworks currently in place that govern the rights of PwDs to education, the researchers involved in this project found that **the main principle of inclusive education is the right of SwDs to receive an education alongside students without disabilities** within a school environment that achieves social integration through equal accessibility, participation and accomplishment. Inclusive education is a matter of adapting the education system itself and of making those necessary core changes – in terms of policies, resource allocation, teaching practices, curricula, evaluation and infrastructure – that can transform the education system in all its components, to become flexible and adaptable to each student's needs. In other words, achieving an overhaul of the education system by taking a learner-centred approach[9].

5.2 Research questions and methodology

The main focus of this research **study is the reality of inclusive education in Palestine as experienced by PwDs who attend primary government schools in Bethlehem and Hebron.** This study focuses on **different aspects of inclusive education,** such as accessibility, social integration, participation and the accomplishments of SwDs within formal school environments. To this end, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

- What accessibility elements are required for SwDs to gain access to educational envi-

7. Law no. 4, volume 30, dated 10 October 1999

8. Article 41 of the Palestine Child Law no.7 (enacted in 2004) affirms 'the right of children with disabilities to education and training in the same schools and centres designed for non-disabled students. In cases of exceptional disability, the State is obliged to provide education and training in special classes, schools or centres; provided that such facilities are linked to the regular education system and are suitable for the needs of the child, close to the place of residence and easy to access.

9. For the MEHE's inclusive education policy (October 2015), see www.moehe.gov.ps

ronments? How are these applied in reality?
- What elements guarantee a social culture receptive to SwDs within educational environments? How are these applied in reality?
- What criteria are required for effective participation of SwDs within educational environments? How are these applied in reality and at what levels?
- To what extent are SwDs given the conditions to achieve their educational goals and at what levels?

The study is structured according to the principles of emancipatory research, which is based on the inclusion and centrality of PwDs in research processes (see Chapter 1) and developed in coherence with human rights-based social models of disability (Oliver and Sapey, 2006) and on the capability approach (Sen, 1999). An emancipatory research approach was evidenced by the direct participation of PwDs in this research study at all stages of the research process. Indeed, the contribution of the co-researchers with disabilities who were involved in this project was integrated from the initial phase of topic selection, research protocol preparation, methodology and tools choice, until the final phases of data collection and analysis and the writing of results. The co-researchers participated in training sessions aimed at developing their emancipatory research knowledge and skills, in relation to theory, procedures, tools and their roles in the research process.

This emancipatory research process was fuelled and sustained by continuous dialogue between the researchers concerning elaboration of research tools and selection in accordance with the objectives of the research, as well as the definition of the target sample and the data collection and analysis, with consideration given to the initial theoretical framework. This process enhanced the co-researchers' contributions to the study by allowing them a prominent and effective role in the research process, thereby making them the integral actors in knowledge production about PwDs.

The research was carried out in Bethlehem and Hebron (including villages and camps) between March 2021 and October 2021, and targeted students with physical and sensorial disabilities who were enrolled in public primary schools.

5.2.1 The research sample and tools

To obtain accurate and equitable results, the research design sample aimed to reach 72 SwDs of both sexes who were enrolled in regular public schools at that time. More specifically, the study focused on children enrolled in primary school education (from first to ninth grade). The terms 'regular schools' and 'public education' are used often to refer to educational institutions that accept students both with and without disabilities, while the term 'special schools' refers to educational institutions that only accept SwDs. This study and its research sample addressed the first category of schools: regular integrated public schools.

Data collection featured the implementation of the following quali-quantitative toolbox:

- Thirty-nine structured questionnaires administered to SwDs enrolled in government-funded primary schools: 15 in Bethlehem and 24 in Hebron;
- Four personal interviews conducted with SwDs: two in Bethlehem and two in Hebron;
- Two focus groups conducted with parents of SwDs: one in Bethlehem and one in Hebron; and
- A case study on a SwD who dropped out of school.

Unfortunately, data collection was limited by several factors. The largest obstacle faced by

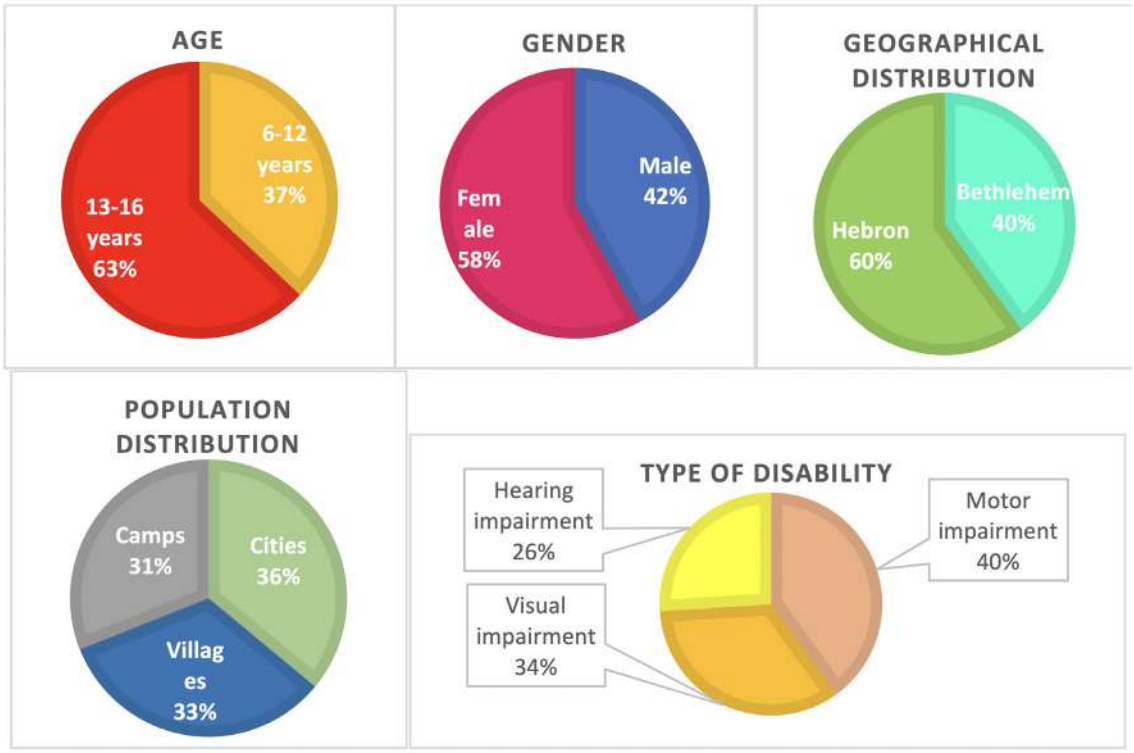
the research team concerned **difficult communication and coordination with the MEHE**, a factor that strongly reduced opportunities to reach a higher number of SwDs. Direct communication with teachers and school managers was made impossible due to the MEHE's refusal to collaborate with project management. Therefore, a snowball sampling technique was the only viable option left to the research team, which relied on its personal networks and relationships already established with relevant stakeholders, to reach potential interviewees.

A further obstacle arose in regard to emergency health and **safety protocols imposed by the government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic**, which made it difficult to communicate with potential interviewees. However, this challenge was partially mitigated by using electronic means to administer some of the interview tools whenever possible. Last, a **lack of accessible public transport** limited the mobility of both the co-researchers and potential interviewees, which made the data collection phase more demanding than anticipated.

As a result of these critical challenges, the research team had to work with a **smaller sample** than that initially planned, which raised issues regarding the generalisability of the research results. To overcome this issue and still be able to offer precise conclusions, the research team opted to treat the data gathered from the **39 questionnaires** as in-depth personal recollections, so as to qualitatively analyse their contents in light of the research questions. Figure 1 reports the distribution of the final data sample according to a set of relevant sociodemographic characteristics.

Figure 3. Main sociodemographic characteristics of the final sample (N=39)

Source: author's elaboration



EDR Box – Voices from the field: the experience of co-researchers with disability

Three researchers with disability contributed to this study, each one working in a different sector. Based on a research questionnaire, these researchers stated that participating in this emancipatory research study clearly enhanced their knowledge on disability and developed their social and research skills (especially communication skills), reinforced their conceptual understanding of the rights of PwDs, especially within a human rights framework, and motivated them to push for change and improvement within their own workplaces and communities, especially in regard to inclusive education for PwDs.

How has this experience affected your self-identity and confidence?
'My confidence and my commitment to work have increased in response to my desire to meet the aims of this research project; my social relationships have flourished as well. I have acquired and developed research skills, such as learning methods for obtaining information and data, filling out questionnaires and group-work' (co-researcher with disability, Bethlehem, October 2021).

5.3 Research results

This section is organised along four main axes, each dedicated to four issues of concern addressed by the research questions: accessibility, social integration, participation and achievement.

5.3.1 The reality of accessibility' for SwDs in public primary schools

Accessibility is a key concept to investigate and assess. The degree of access to rights for PwDs, especially concerning the right to education, refers to a set of specific procedures necessary to ensure the engagement of PwDs in all levels, activities, phases and components of the formal education system. Any inclusive education policy adopted by the MEHE should guarantee accessibility standards and show commitment to removing all obstacles relating to school environment, orientation, policies, practices and resources that prevent some students from attending local schools, regardless of their ability, learning style and need for various types of additional support[10]

This emancipatory research project addressed the concept of accessibility according to physical, technical and cognitive dimensions, to measure the degree of its realisation within school environments from the perspective of SwDs, their families and associations. This allowed the team to further investigate the main obstacles affecting SwDs' access to schools: for example, public transportation and environmental barriers inside and outside school grounds.

Physical accessibility

In regard to physical accessibility, here defined as the ability of individuals to access school grounds and facilities autonomously without facing undue barriers or constraints, the par-

10. For Palestine's inclusive education policy in Palestine, see https://www.mohe.ps

ents of SwDs expressed dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction was due to the ineffectiveness of the school in terms of meeting their children's needs and the presence of too many obstacles and barriers that prevent SwDs' effective participation in daily school life. As one parent remarked:

> My daughter (with physical impairment) has been in school for five years and there is [still] no slope.

Parents emphasised that schools themselves often create various types of barriers, beginning with initial administrative obstacles related to school admission policies for SwDs. Often, school management evades its responsibility to find and create an adequately safe and accessible school environment, so that parents are obliged to intervene to find solutions. The father of a student with motor disability said:

> I went to the school and met with the management to ask them to prepare a ramp (as an alternative to stairs), but they refused on the basis that this issue falls within the competence of the committee at the ministry.

A lack of financial resources is often used by schools as justification for the continuing presence of barriers. Nonetheless, the interviewee responses of PwDs and their families show that there is also a lack of engagement:

> After this meeting, I went to the committee, and they answered that the problem was the cost. I told them that I was prepared to pay for the ramp. Nonetheless, they kept postponing it for more than a year and a half.

One of the main pillars of inclusive education relating to accessibility is the level of adaptation of the physical environment inside the school grounds, which must adequately meet the needs of SwDs and be designed to specific standards: for example, pathways should be wide enough to allow wheelchair users to move easily and safely, guidance paths should be present, and walls should be painted in contrasting colours for students with visual impairment. In this respect, one student with motor disability mentioned:

> I decided not to buy from the school canteen, because my wheelchair bothered the other students. I used to line up because I hate asking them to buy for me.

As exemplified by this experience, the data suggest that students with motor disabilities find themselves facing physical obstacles and difficulties related to their school's infrastructure and design, which make it difficult for them to access facilities. Indeed, we decided to consider not only the accessibility of the main facilities, such as the playground and classrooms, but also of canteens, libraries, laboratories, etc. – an aspect emphasised in the UNCRPD (see Article 9/2/b).

Other types of disability require specific environmental adjustments. For example, tactile guide paths assist students with visual disabilities to navigate school grounds, while building walls with different textures is of great help for people with visual impairment; however, sometimes these adjustments are not enough to guarantee autonomy and freedom of movement for all. As one student said:

> When I moved to this school, I fell twice while I was on my way to the toilet, because there were two invisible steps; after that, the teacher used to send a friend to help me, this embarrassed me because I hate asking for help from others.

As we see in the testimony of this student, simple changes in design can improve accessibility, ensure independence and dignity and enable SwDs to experience school autonomously

through the aid of their devices and a supportive environment, without seeking assistance from others, therefore preserving their privacy and personal dignity.

All SwDs interviewed in this study indicated that their school does not have an electrical elevator and that most SwDs (especially those with physical impairments) are assigned to ground-floor classrooms. This means that these students can only access the school facilities available on that floor and so are restricted to the ground-floor classrooms for the duration of their studies. As one student with motor disability recalled:

> At the beginning of the school [year], a peer of mine asked to be transferred to another class, because she got tired of being in the same classroom as me.

This emphasises how the fact of not providing an appropriate and accessible environment facilitates the development of discriminatory dynamics between peers, as well as aversion towards SwDs. As in the case of another student mentioned earlier, this student felt guilty because her peers are obliged to remain in the same classroom as her for the entire schooling period, simply because the school is without elevators or other appropriate classroom facilities.

Physical **accessibility of spaces also relates to facilities such as toilets and bathroom furniture and fittings**. To be considered accessible, toilet cubicles should be of a certain width and have doors with suitable handles that open outwards, to guarantee the access of PwDs who use wheelchairs; toilets and bathrooms should also be adequately signed, with reflectors to guide PwDs with visual impairment. Regarding the appropriateness of facilities for PwDs, one mother of a student with motor disability said she was obliged to accompany her daughter to school all through the first grade until sixth grade, to assist her to use the toilet, because adequate facilities were not provided for students with motor disabilities:

> I used to leave my house and sons to stay with her at school in case she needed to go to the toilet.

Another parent of a student with motor disability said:

> My son is in the fifth grade, and he was obliged to wear nappies because there were no toilets adequate for students with motor disability at the school.

When it comes to ensuring the accessibility of spaces and facilities, unfortunately, formal compliance with accessibility requirements for SwDs in not always put into effect, and it sometimes happens that facilities that are adequately designed for use by PwDs (e.g. accessible toilets) are used for other purposes or are inaccessible. One parent of a SwD told us of a case where 'there was a toilet for the students with disabilities, which was then turned into a toilet for teachers'.

Another example is provided by a father of a student with motor disability (from Bethlehem):

> My son can't reach the resource room because it's on the 3rd floor, and he is on the ground floor. He can't reach the rest of the floors.

The research group found that a school building that is inaccessible to SwDs clearly negatively affects their participation in social and educational life and reduces the possibility of SwDs becoming socially integrated and engaged with their peers. As one student with motor disability said:

> I wish I could know what my colleagues learn in the laboratory, but it's on the second floor.

Many SwDs indicated that they have a hard time participating in some activities, especially in physical education classes, because the school environment is unaccommodating. Another student with motor disability said:

> In each physical education class, the teacher asks me to stay and wait alone in the classroom, I don't play with my peers in the playground. Sometimes, he asks me to call my father to pick me from school.

All of this highlights that inclusive education is an **integrative process** that requires regular periodical monitoring by the relevant authorities, especially the Ministries of Education and Social Development and local Disabled People Organisations. Ensuring the accessibility of common spaces for all persons extends beyond schoolgrounds to encompass surrounding areas, which are supposed to be safe and adequately designed in consideration of SwDs, as well as adequate and accessible public and private transportation systems. Regarding the physical accessibility of schoolgrounds via road and pedestrian networks surrounding schools (which includes sidewalks, pedestrian walkways and the placement utility and light poles), most students interviewed indicated that these are usually inadequate for students with visual and motor disabilities and impede their mobility.

As one student with motor disability said:

> The road to school is full of holes and poles, and vehicles are randomly parked on the pavements; there are no specific paths for pedestrians or wheelchair users. My parents are always afraid for me, and it was getting worse in winter; that's why I dropped out of school.

The research team considered another fundamental element of accessibility: **public and private transportation systems** available to students. The group found that public transportation is difficult to use for SwDs, especially those with severe motor disabilities (such as wheelchair users), and is mostly unavailable in some areas, namely in rural and semi-urban areas at the fringes of major city centres. This significantly restricts SwDs' capacity to physically reach school, thus affecting their attendance rate. The data indicate that in addition to inaccessible public transport, private vehicles are uncommon and beyond the budget of most families of PwDs. One student remarked that to hire adequate transportation is costly, many times more expensive than taking regular public transport. This lack of accessible transport options is considered a violation of international and national resolutions regarding inclusive education, which emphasises that good quality inclusive education must be made available without additional costs and financial burden on SwDs and their families.

In summary, the accessibility of schools in Bethlehem and Hebron is mostly inadequate and fails to allow access for those with various types of disability, which causes unnecessary distress and discomfort for SwDs and their families. A recurrent characteristic that we observed from the data is that actions to address accessibility mostly take the form of inconsistent and incoherent interventions rather than a systematic intervention strategy with clear objectives, an allocated budget and specific targets to meet. Furthermore, the absence of monitoring and control mechanisms allows for persistent inefficiencies that affect the students' psychological health, self-esteem, school results and overall quality of life for SwDs. This in turn affects their capacity to benefit from education, enjoy school life or develop healthy and sustainable social relationships.

Accessibility of information

Accessibility does not only relate to the right of SwDs to physically access schoolgrounds, services and facilities but also their ability to **access the same information as easily and adequately** as their peers. Accessibility of information concerns the degree to which in-

formation in all forms is provided to all students, with or without disability, and includes information related to curricula, internal regulations, library services and access, assistive tools usage, the use of appropriate communication methods (like Braille, sign language, etc.) and the availability of assistive technologies and software[11]. We identified the following as necessary facilities that should be present within integrated schools: resource rooms[12], support teachers and inclusive education counsellors. These could help simplify and facilitate SwDs' access to information in parallel with other students[13].

A study conducted by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS, 2020) showed that **40% of SwDs above primary school age did not complete their primary school education** and that **two thirds of PwDs above primary school age did not finish at the adequate level (64.5%)** (PCBS, 2020)[14]. We consider this statistic to be at least partly attributable to physical and information inaccessibility: this promotes exclusion and reduces PwDs' chances of obtaining an adequate quality of education and of participating in academic and social life at school. Indeed, the absence of both tangible and intangible adjustments in schools at various levels, which are necessary to ensure inclusion, deprive many SwDs of schooling age of their right to education.

Data gathered through interviews suggests that provision of **assistive technologies** – for example, screen readers in computer labs or professional **disability experts** such as sign language interpreters for students with visual and hearing disabilities – **are not sufficiently present in public schools in Palestine.** This significantly limits easy and efficient access to education for SwDs, which prevents the possibility of their receiving an equal education to their non-disabled peers[15]. Even simple and inexpensive assistive devices are often unavailable. In one example, a student with dual disability (here, both motor and partial visual impairment) who requires a magnifying lens and new pair of glasses every six months to aid her learning, stated that she requested these devices from her school but was not offered anything:

> I can't read and understand lots of texts because I need a magnifying lens; this negatively affects my grades, especially lately.

A student with motor disability (here, wheelchair-bound and with limited dexterity) stated that she can barely handle her school bag because of its weight (a challenge shared by many PwDs):

> I wish we could use an iPad (a tablet), so we could study using that instead of carrying so many books; then I would not [need to] ask my colleagues for help.

The research team found that use of electronic tablets and other technological devices

11. SwDs have a right to access educational curricula, teaching instruction and information resources. These should be made available to them in a form appropriate for their disability and needs. This is mentioned in paragraph (2/d), Article 9 of the UNCRDP: 'To provide in buildings and other facilities open to the public signage in Braille and in easy to read and understand forms'.

12. Data confirmed that resource rooms are available in very few schools, and that these are often located on upper floors making them inaccessible to students with mobility issues. All SwDs interviewed emphasized that there were no support teachers or inclusive education counsellors in their schools.

13. Palestine's inclusive education policy stipulates the provision of a resource room: an equipped classroom in which an inclusive education specialist works with students. Students can attend this class individually or collectively for some lessons, while at other times participating in shared lessons in classrooms with non-disabled peers.

14. PCBS, 2020. Features of persons with disability in Palestine. Ramallah- Palestine, p. 51

15. Article (9/2/e) emphasises the need to 'provide forms of live assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign language interpreters, to facilitate accessibility to buildings and other facilities open to the public'.

could have a major positive impact by helping to overcome the many challenges that impede the learning process for SwDs, especially for persons with motor and visual disabilities.

Also, there is a dearth of other learning facilitation aids. For example, there are few sign-language interpreters for students with hearing disabilities, and libraries are rarely equipped with digital catalogues and audio books suitable for students with hearing impairments. These simple provisions would enable SwDs to fully and effectively access the information required for studies. The mother of a student with hearing disability said:

> My daughter has a hearing aid, yet she can't hear the teacher in the classroom. She sits in the front seat, yet she can't hear the teacher... she depends on me to teach her.

Another factor relating to information accessibility is the availability of **curricula and school material in formats accessible to SwDs,** such as learning materials being printed in Braille, large font and easy-to-read formats for persons with visual impairments. Our research showed a general **delay in implementing these materials in schools** and that there are limited appropriate innovative teaching aids available for students with visual impairments (e.g. sculptures) to supplement the more traditional methods. As teaching methods should be flexible and varied to meet individual students' differences and needs, we can assert that school curricula and materials are completely inadequate, considering the different types of disability that students present with[16]. Students with physical disabilities might not be disadvantaged by traditional teaching methods that rely on verbal explanation of concepts, but students with auditory or visual impairment likely require additional resources such as pictures, sculptures or further explanation to clarify concepts.

We could say, then, that the accessibility of the curricula being offered in schools depends not only on the provision of assistive devices but also on the teacher's ability to use these devices effectively and to adapt their teaching style to the needs and potential of every student in their class. Inclusive education cannot be achieved if teaching methods are not adjusted to account for diversity of learning styles and capacities, and so the UNCRPD (Art. 9/1/c) stipulates that governments are to 'provide training for stakeholders on accessibility issues faced by persons with disabilities'. To achieve accessibility for all, necessary training must be provided to teaching staff and students.

Despite this, **most of the students and school staff interviewed for this study did not receive any training on software programs that might aid teaching and learning.** This would have been especially useful during the COVID-19 pandemic**,** when software (such as the Microsoft Teams application) was adopted as a means for schools to continue providing education during lockdown. Most of our interviewees reported a substantial lack of support when it came to learning how to use the software, which was a challenge in itself considering they lacked technical skills or an adequate device on which to run the software.

Finally, another issue is the incapacity of **school management to offer adequate and easy mechanisms to facilitate access to examinations for SwDs**. As one student with motor disability said:

> Answering exam questions makes me tired, and teachers do not consider this during the exam or while correcting the answers.

Another student with visual disability said that he does not feel it right that his teacher asks one of his peers to answer questions on his behalf; he would prefer to sit his own exams

16. Article (36) states: the ministry shall be committed to providing the textbooks for free.

using appropriate software.

To conclude, all these inefficiencies are related to a lack of accessibility (either physical or informational), and this comes at a cost. Disability and poverty are interconnected, and as several of the SwDs involved in this research study are from less affluent families, their limited access to education is compounded with additional obstacles. These families are often unable to meet the incidental costs linked to education, and such economic barriers prevent many SwDs from participating in the education system fully and effectively. Although Palestinian government school fees are extremely low, education for SwDs often incurs incidental expenses such as the cost of public or private transportation (mentioned previously), to which is added the expense of a family member (often a man or primary income earner) accompanying the student to school.

Other expenses include essential personal assistive devices (glasses, wheelchairs, hearing aids, etc.) and assistive school devices and materials (screen readers, tablets, assistive software, etc.), depending on the student's disability. The cost of fundamental equipment creates a considerable burden for the families of SwDs, and this is often reflected in a high drop-out rate and in the real exclusion of PwDs from the formal education system.

EDR Box – Voices from the field: the experience of co-researchers with disabilities

What have you learnt from this experience in terms of disability, education and emancipatory research methods?
This experience was sufficient for me in that it helped me to realise and understand marginalisation, exclusion, discrimination and oppression against persons with disabilities in surrounding neighbourhoods and schools. It also helped me to recognise their diminished opportunities in education. In addition, I now realise that parents have very little awareness of the rights of their children with disabilities, especially in education (co-researcher with disability, Hebron, October 2021).

5.3.2 The reality of including students with disabilities in public primary school education

One of the main aims of inclusive education is to provide an educational environment receptive to all students. Inclusion is dependent not only on 'hardware' (accessibility of facilities, assistive devices, assistive technologies, etc.) but also on behaviours and aptitudes. This includes the absence of a display of special feelings for SwDs on the basis of their disability; by 'special feelings' we mean excessive compassion, astonishment, avoidance, aversion, discrimination, etc. that would not otherwise be demonstrated were it not for a person's disability. Furthermore, inclusive education does not mean that students are expected to be identical or to acquire the same skills and interests; on the contrary, it is the promotion of an educational paradigm that allows room for everyone to develop in their unique way, and this necessitates flexible and varied strategies and educational policies and programmes (Qwaider, 2019).

Social integration is associated with dignity and humanity. And since disability is part of human diversity, PwDs should not be approached primarily in light of their vulnerabilities. Inclusive behaviours, beliefs and aptitudes are factors that positively affect the inclusion of PwDs in educational processes at all levels, while a lack or absence of integration constitutes a disabling factor.

Article 8 of the UNCRPD proposes measures for parties to adopt that include:

> Initiating and maintaining effective public awareness campaigns designed to nurture receptiveness to the rights of persons with disabilities; to promote positive perceptions and greater social awareness towards persons with disabilities; to promote recognition of the skills, merits and abilities of persons with disabilities, and of their contributions to the workplace and the labor market; [and] fostering at all levels of the education system, including in all children from an early age, an attitude of respect for the rights of persons with disabilities.

Comprehensive changes in behaviours and aptitudes are required to achieve inclusion in education. This should apply at all levels and involve various stakeholders including peers, teachers, school managements and the wider community. The results of this study indicate that mainstream government schools fail to create a schooling environment receptive to SwDs at all levels. The data clearly show that SwDs **in government primary schools face many challenges concerning social integration within school environments**. The following are the most pressing issues highlighted by our study.

Bullying and a lack of respect towards SwDs

The SwDs who responded to questionnaires distributed by the research team were asked to evaluate the following: their teachers' aptitudes, their relationships with peers and school administration and how inclusive they felt their school environment was in terms of communication, language, respect and support. According to their responses, **38 out of 39 students** said that they **were dissatisfied with their relationships with peers, teachers and the school administration.** One student with motor disability said:

> The school management and teachers accused me of theft and of stealing my colleagues' belongings, even though I have a motor disability and cannot even use my hands... I feel aggrieved and terrible every time I remember this story.

This was, according to her, the school's way to have her transferred to another school or to force her to leave school.

In regard to bullying, our results showed a **strong heterogeneity** according to **gender and type of disability**. Students with motor disability were more vulnerable to bullying than students with other types of disabilities, while female SwDs were more vulnerable to bullying than males. Some students reported that they had been insulted or called names by their peers, such as 'disabled' and 'monster'. One student with motor disability recounted:

> The students didn't accept me. They used to replace my name with a curse or insult, and no one held them back. I was one of the outstanding students and ranked second in the short story competition at the governorate level; yet I didn't get recognition in my school because I am disabled.

The mother of one student said that her daughter is not accepted at school and cannot make friends or engage with her peers. So, the mother decided to save up a small portion of her monthly salary to buy sweets and gifts for her daughter to distribute among the other students in class, in an attempt to create a friendly and receptive environment for her daughter.

Teachers and administrative staff

From data gathered from our interviews and focus groups, it emerged that little **attention**

is paid to the needs of SwDs by both teaching and administrative staff. It also emerged that **school counsellors are not sufficiently engaged**, which is significant given that it is their responsibility to raise awareness on the rights of SwDs and to consider students' different interests and needs. One parent identified this as a clear failure:

> I wanted to meet with the school counsellor before my son started school, to inform them of his situation and to seek clarification in some aspects. He [the counsellor] refused and postponed my request many times. I really needed to check up on my son before he started school.

Most students reported that they found it **difficult to access their school counsellor** and that they did not receive the interaction they required from them. All agreed that the **school did not provide any awareness-raising activity for SwDs except on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.** One SwD stated:

> I purposefully don't go to school on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. I feel humiliated because they remember us on this day only.

Some SwDs also face **discriminatory treatment from some of their teachers**, which negatively affects their motivation to achieve or participate in learning. As one student with visual disability said:

> I put more effort into doing my homework, but my teachers don't care and don't encourage [it]; so, I have stopped doing my homework lately.

In addition, our data show an emphasised **lack in teachers' skills when it comes to dealing and communicating with SwDs**. One mother of a student with motor disability mentioned:

> Last year, the teachers complained about my daughter [and said] that she was causing a disturbance in the classroom. If one of her belongings accidentally falls, they kick her out of the class, claiming that she causes a disturbance.

The lack of receptive and supportive educational environment inside school administration and classrooms negatively affects the intellectual and emotional state of SwDs. Such stressors can cause disturbed behaviours to emerge in SwDs in response to the exclusion, rejection and marginalisation they experience. Examples of such behaviours include self-isolating tendencies, violent acts, crying and outbursts of anger. One student with a motor disability stated:

> I hope the corona virus and online teaching will continue so that I won't see anyone.

According to the mother of another student:

> My son pretends to be ill every day [because] he doesn't want to go to school. When I ask him why, he says that his colleagues keep annoying and calling him disabled.

The SwDs (and their **parents) recognise the negative changes in their personalities as a result of the treatment they receive from peers and teachers**. One student with an auditory disability said:

> I have no friends at school. I think they don't like dealing with me [so] I stay alone even at breaktime.

Another student with motor disability stated that she was the target of verbal violence by the cleaners at school:

> Every time I go to the toilet, the cleaner yells at me and insults me, then he locks the door so that I cannot use the toilet.

Obviously, these behaviours lead to SwDs feeling marginalised and excluded from many activities. This results in a lack of social integration that compromises the effective participation of SwDs in educational processes and undermines their achievements.

5.3.3 The reality of 'participation' for students with disabilities in public primary schools

The aim of inclusive education is to make education accessible to everyone at all levels, so that every student can participate in the educational process easily, efficiently and equally to other students, without incurring any undue burden, within a flexible educational system that addresses the individuality of students and their varied needs. This research study assessed the quality and degree of participation of SwDs within public primary schools in Bethlehem and Hebron, as one means of gauging how well certain elements of inclusive education are being applied, in consideration of the rights that international and domestic legislations recognise and guarantee to PwDs.

Article 24/2 of the UNCRPD espouses the principle of **comprehensive inclusion**. It elaborates and promotes the adoption of effective **individualised support measures** within academic and social development institutions, outlining appropriate strategies to achieve this objective.

However, local and national legislation in Palestine that affects the rights of PwDs does not explicitly address the importance of participation in inclusive education processes; neither does it not establish any legal basis for the implementation of effective policies and measures to foster the participation of SwDs in school environments. To improve the participation of SwDs at school, the inclusive education policy of the MEHE adopted a dual approach in its vision for education for SwDs that is based on (1) the identification of barriers resulting in the exclusion of disabled students from and/or within the formal education system and (2) the provision of targeted support that meets the needs of individual students and that values the unique resources of students who are at higher risk of exclusion.

Unfortunately, if we are to define effective and inclusive participation as the full engagement of all students at all stages of educational processes, the results of this study highlight clear flaws and weaknesses in the Palestinian education system. The concept of 'participation' relates to direct accessibility, as the effectiveness or limitation of participation depends primarily on both **accessibility and adequacy**. To effectively promote the participation of SwDs in schools means enabling them to partake in learning in an active way while also encouraging a proactive attitude towards the entire educational process. This implies facilitating interaction between SwDs, teaching staff and all other school actors, as well as including them in decision-making processes to the same degree as all others.

That SwDs are **not engaged in the decision-making processes** of school administrations significantly affects their ability to exercise their rights, both presently and in future. One major impact is on the students' ability to attend and sit examinations and to manage their time. As one student with visual disability stated:

> My teacher often asks me to come to the teachers' lounge during the break to sit for exams.

This is but one example of SwDs not being permitted or encouraged **to participate equally in school activities.** In many instances, students are literally denied participation and forced to be passive observers of interactive activities or workshops, which would otherwise be opportunities for them to practise skills, demonstrate knowledge acquired through lessons and to critically interact with educational content and their peers. As one student with a motor disability shared:

> For me, the laboratory class is something weird, and I hear about it from my peers. I recently watched the science experiments that my colleagues conduct on YouTube, because I [have to] stay back in the [main] classroom during laboratory class because that is on the second floor, and I can't go there.

Another student with a motor disability said:

> Throughout my schooling years, I never participated in school trips with my peers, simply because I can't [physically] participate.

This denial of participation is not only owing to physical limitation. One mother told of an instance in which her daughter wanted so much to participate in a routine morning activity that she practised and prepared herself to recite a poem on the school radio, only to have the teacher deny her permission. This is but one example of SwDs being denied the kinds of opportunities afforded to their peers to develop proactive attitudes. As a student with motor disability said:

> I would like to participate with my teacher and write my answer on the blackboard like my peers; [but] every time the teacher postpones my turn... she hasn't [yet] given me the chance to write my answer on the blackboard.

These and many more accounts of unfair treatment emerged from the interviews with SwDs and their parents. These accounts tell a broader story of the exclusion and marginalisation that SwDs are subjected to in public primary schools. This should indicate to the MEHE the critical importance of developing practical policies and measures to train teachers so that they can work with SwDs to realise true participation, openness and social integration[17]. It is equally necessary to implement the recommendations and stated aims of inclusive education policies to guarantee equal participation of all students within Palestinian schools. This means hiring support teachers and inclusive education counsellors and ensuring there are sufficiently equipped resource rooms for SwDs' learning (Mohammad, 2013, p. 12).

5.3.4 The reality of 'achievement' for students with disabilities in public primary schools

Inclusive education is meant to guarantee progress at different levels: cognitive, emotional and social. The measurement of achievement of these dimensions is linked to assessment criteria that are supposed to be flexible enough to ensure that progress continues in education and achievement. This implies resting evaluation of students not only on final exams but in accordance with the students' specific needs, as documented in the individual teaching plan.

Results of this study indicate that **SwDs face several challenges in regard to achievement** – especially **skills and cognitive competencies – compared with their peers**. Many SwDs ac-

17. Article 24 (4) of the UNCRPD

quire skills and knowledge much later than their peers, and they develop in a way that does not match the rate expected of their age group. Our study showed that most SwDs and their parents are dissatisfied with their academic achievement and evaluation.

As one mother of a SwD said:

> My daughter is in the sixth grade, and she can't read and write. I decided to stand behind the window of her class to listen to her teacher while [he/she was] teaching them and then to teach my daughter at home on my own.

Data gathered through our interviews indicated that **some SwDs who were enrolled in public schools did improve** their life skills, confidence and communication. One father of a SwD stated:

> My son has a strong personality. When he needs anything, he asks the teacher and doesn't let anyone talk on his behalf. Before school, he was shy; then, I encouraged and supported him [and] the teachers become aware of his needs (magnifying lens, reading stand, etc.). I am happy because his personality has changed.

Overall, the research outcomes underline how, instead of helping, certain school practices negatively affect students' cognitive competence and achievement, further undermining their participation and educational fulfilment. In some cases, this can be detrimental and lead to withdrawal from the school system, as was the case for the following student who said:

> I quit school for many reasons but mostly because my colleagues and teachers didn't deal with me as a normal human being. I lost confidence in myself and in my learning abilities.

EDR Box – Voices from the field: the experience of co-researchers with disabilities

How has participating in emancipatory research affected you and the people around you?

I want to say that the research has not significantly affected the people around me, but it has given me opportunity to witness the suffering of PwDs in Bethlehem and Hebron, including their oppression, exclusion and deprivation of the necessities of life. This encourages me to deepen and expand my understanding of the problems that face this demographic. It made a significant difference in my life! (Co-researcher with disability, Hebron, October 2021).

The lack of inclusive education in schools directly affects the options available for SwDs in terms of the curriculum offered to them. They are often pushed towards certain specialisations that so do not correspond with their aspirations, vocations and desires. For example, because of the difficulty of accessing scientific courses, most students with visual disabilities turn to theoretical studies in secondary school or at university.

The everyday reality of public primary schooling does not promote diversity among students. Nor does it promote positive identity formation or emotional, mental, social and cognitive growth for students with disabilities. This is because it fails to encourage equal participation or to meet the diverse and varied needs of SwDs. As recounted by one student

with visual disability:

> When we are asked to conduct research at school, I can't go to the library, and there are no audible books. Moreover, I can't read novels like my friends.

5.4 Conclusion

Inclusive education is a major and essential factor in achieving the universality of education, as only inclusive systems can bring together quality education and social development for PwDs. Inclusive education is not only a matter of allowing SwDs to attend regular schools; it also requires them to feel comfortable, respected and appreciated while in attendance. After analysing the data, the research team determined that the Strategic Plan for Inclusive Education approved by the MEHE not only has not yet been fully implemented but also lacks several fundamental elements to meet inclusive education requirements in an effective way.

First, the policy lacks an organic plan for inclusion, which means schools are not held accountable for finding and delivering effective, practical and tailored solutions for SwDs. Second, there is not a clearly defined role for school counsellors and inclusive education teachers beyond a vague mandate to create a receptive environment; like school administrations, these staff members remain unaccountable. In the end, the burden and responsibility of finding feasible solutions for SwDs falls on their parents, who are often excluded from participation in school committees and parent boards. Within this framework of undefined responsibilities and roles and lack of action plan, some types of disability are excluded and marginalised more than others, as is the case for auditory and mobility impairment, which means the physical and learning needs of those SwDs remains unaddressed.

Failure to effectively implement inclusive education actions deeply and negatively affects the psychological and emotional health of SwDs. This, in turn, reduces their desire to learn or continue in formal education, which subsequently deprives them of current and future rights and opportunities as equal citizens. Necessary equipment required to facilitate teaching and learning (e.g. assistive technology or software platforms for distance education) has not been distributed, despite the demand resulting from restrictions and limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. Students with auditory impairment have not been provided with sign language specialists, and schools have not communicated with SwDs to determine what they need to be able to keep up with distance learning. As would be expected, the parents of SwDs have reported that their children's grades and academic achievement decreased during the COVID-19 lockdown period, along with much of the knowledge and skills they had gained.

A final important point to emphasise is that a direct correlation exists between accessibility of education and social integration and participation. The more inadequate the school environment (meaning accessibility is low), the more SwDs are excluded and marginalised from both formal learning and extracurricular activities. We can thus argue that inadequacies in the learning environment (in terms of accessibility) are directly proportional to the degree of exclusion in terms of the stigmatisation, stereotyping and social exclusion of SwDs in public primary schools.

5.5 Recommendations

After considering the overall picture that emerged through the data analysis, as concerns the degree of implementation of inclusive education practices within public primary schools in Bethlehem and Hebron, the research team developed a series of policy recommendations.

Overall, the team advises the full and effective implementation of the inclusive education policies elaborated by the MEHE: i.e. Article 14 of Public Education Law (No. 8 of 2017), which guarantees equal education for PwDs in line with the guarantees articulated in the UNCRPD (especially Article 24).

For this to be possible, it is necessary to first allocate sufficient financial resources and ensure that funding is distributed according to budget. Another important step is to establish a periodic monitoring and evaluation system (managed by the MEHE) to ensure that an overall commitment to apply inclusive education concepts and prescriptions in different schools is maintained. Furthermore, a clear programme and strategy must be outlined and actioned that includes practical mechanisms to increase the enrolment rate and retention of SwDs in schools, as a matter of critical importance.

Inclusion is achievable only through a comprehensive, multidimensional and holistic approach. Mono-dimensional one-shot interventions at best have no impact on inclusion, while at worst they risk weakening inclusion and waste precious resources. This is true in the case of the school environment, where one-shot intervention fails to create accessible environments for SwDs, but it also applies at the levels of individuals, where failure to coherently tailor or adapt inclusion actions to individual students hinders them personally and academically.

It is necessary to adopt measures and strategies that **ensure that SwDs have access to quality education that provides them with an inclusive learning environment**. This includes using alternative teaching tools and methods that respond to learners' interests and needs, supports their creative capabilities, offers curricula activities and materials at appropriate times and in accessible formats and that provides sign-language instruction and assistive technologies at all times in physical classrooms and via distance learning. This may mean increasing the number of resource rooms, establishing constant coordination with specialised centres and organisations, adopting modern academic and educational evaluation methodologies and providing training to all professional teaching and teaching support staff, including inclusive education teachers, support teachers, assistive teachers and school counsellors.

Effective **communication must also be addressed**. Clear communication channels must be established between departments, directorates and government ministries to guarantee transparent and clear approaches to inclusive education policy implementation. These communication channels should be accessible and familiar to the parents of SwDs also.

To create safe and welcoming school and social environments that are receptive to SwDs, it is necessary to actively promote **awareness-raising initiatives and programmes**. These should be officially promoted by the MEHE also, and embedded within its permanent, fixed programmes as well as in the curricula, especially where those relate to socialisation and civic education that aims to promote concepts of inclusive citizenship and respect for diversity.

These kinds of initiatives incorporate **programmes, campaigns and initiatives that target all sectors of society** and the formal education system, including school administrations,

teaching and administrative staff, counsellors, peers, families and any other actors involved in education dissemination. Awareness-raising must be grounded in attempts to **spread awareness of issues affecting SwDs and to promote a culture of diversity and participation.**

Finally, the **participation of PwDs should be encouraged** in different areas of intervention. It is important to adopt a participatory approach that ensures the participation of SwDs in the devising and drafting of educational policy. Any suggestions as to solutions for the problems they face should at the very least involve their input and feedback. Additionally, **the families of SwDs must be encouraged and permitted to participate in school committees, parents' boards, local networks** and any other platform that might affect the realisation of their child's education. In essence, education authorities should make concerted efforts to include the contributions of SwDs and their families in devising and implementing its policies for inclusive education in Palestine.

Furthermore, disabled peoples' organisations (**DPOs) should be assigned a more instrumental role in pressuring relevant government ministries to apply inclusive education policies and to monitor any violations**. In this respect, a **local network of relevant organisations and institutions** should be created, to ensure that inclusive education is actively applied in formal schooling environments. This would serve to reinforce student enrolment and attendance and to ensure their access to school grounds by helping to eliminate any environmental challenges or issues they may face relating to transportation and environmental obstacles, as well as provision of adequate technologies, support tools, prosthetic devices, etc.

A local authorities' network should connect various relevant parties and stakeholders, such as DPOs, the Ministries of Social Development, Education, Transportation and Information, as well as other local authorities, Chamber of Commerce, civil society institutions and any other parties that may have an interest or impact in disability issues. Finally, this network should be tasked with conducting **periodical research and studies on issues** relevant to SwDs, to monitor the application of inclusive education policies in primary schools throughout Palestine.

Technical and vocational education

Technical and vocational education is a dual concept that applies to both technical education and vocational education.

Vocational education and training: the system that provides education and training to individuals with the aim of equipping them with skills that will help them to access the job market (European Training Foundation (ETF); 1997).

Technical education: education that prepares learners for work or a non-academic profession by equipping them with the necessary skills to perform a specific profession or type of work. Technical education includes applications of science and technology. The criteria for enrollment in technical education is a high school education or equivalent. A technical education programme may last a period of one to three years (Regional Project Coordination Office (GTZ); 2009, p. 11).
UNESCO defines technical and vocational education and training as 'the educational process, which includes, in addition to general education, the study of relevant technologies and sciences, the acquisition of practical skills, behavior, understanding and knowledge of professions in different sectors of economic life' (Hisham Kahil, Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS), 2015).

6. Localising inclusive education and sustainable work: pwds in the Gaza strip

By: Ghassan Abu Hatab, Dalal Al Taji, Soha Jebreel, Kitam Zanoun, Zarif Al Ghora and Mohammed Shehada

6.1 Introduction

The marginalisation of persons with disabilities (PwDs) leads to their limited participation in community life. These limitations are worsened by several types of obstacles: social and environmental barriers that prevent their interaction with other members of the community and those who share their experience. PwDs face prejudice simply for being disabled, as well as pervasive stigmatisation and stereotyping, lengthy and time-consuming bureaucratic procedures and a lack of appropriate and accessible means of transportation. Several institutions indirectly promote segregation and isolation, not being prepared to provide students with disabilities (SwDs) a proper educational curriculum nor social skills – all factors that would enhance their inclusion in society. The main reason for such problems lies in a lack of tolerance and acceptance of difference, as well as in the possibilities of participation in events, activities, and experiences of daily social life. Thus, the production of emancipatory knowledge by PwDs on issues that they face is a fundamental step to reconceptualising power relations in research conducted on the living conditions of PwDs in Palestine.
Inclusive education and 'sustainable' decent work are two relatively novel concepts in the Gaza Strip. Several attempts have been made to localise these concepts within educational institutions, such as vocational education training centres (VTCs) and workplaces. Articles 24 and 27 of the United Nations International Convention for Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) are at the core of these two concepts.

Through in-depth interviews and exploratory focus groups held with various stakeholders (SwDs, professors and employers), we found that technical and vocational education and training (TVET) centres offer a privileged point of observation into decent work and inclusive education. These centres provide their affiliates – both with and without disabilities – with technical knowledge and vocational education to support skill development and increase employability. Among these centres are vocational training centres specifically designed for PwDs: e.g. IRADA, a centre affiliated with the Islamic University of Gaza, and the Atfaluna Society for Deaf Children? SwDs who graduate from these institutions are offered employment opportunities through partnership agreements and exchanges established between their institutions and prospective employers and representative bodies. Such exchanges often take the form of paid internships, funded by donors, lasting three to six months.

The literature review and exploratory interviews and focus groups with experts clearly showed that **not enough attention is paid to PWDs enrolled in VTCs, especially the government-funded centres**. This prompted us to examine the degree of **readiness of VTCs to localise inclusive education and sustainable work in employment environments** for PwDs. We decided to focus on both the barriers and facilitators encountered by SwDs as they transition from vocational training to the job market, focusing on the following:

- Factors that motivate PwDs to enrol in vocational education and/or to enter the job market;
- Structural obstacles faced by PwDs in vocational education and/or the job market;
- Quality and contents of training programmes provided by VTCs in terms of location, facilities, trends, relationships, curriculum and methods of teaching, and impact in terms of employment opportunities;
- Compatibility between opportunities offered by vocational education and vacancies in the job market; and
- Accessibility of the local job market in terms of location, facilities, trends and relationships, orientations of employers and related organisations.

By examining the readiness and accessibility of training and work environments, as well as the motivations for PwDs' to seek training and employment, this research study provides theoretical explanations for how the concepts of inclusive education and sustainable work are applied in reality. This allows us to identify key areas for intervention and to improve the performance of public and private institutions, disabled people's organisations (DPOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs), in terms of effectiveness and adequacy of policymaking. The study provides recommendations for each of these actors, to aid them in effectively implementing inclusive practices.

The four basic obligations of inclusive education (the four 'A's):

Availability: provide enough educational institutions and teachers to meet students' needs. This requires education and training, recruitment, labor rights and trade union freedoms.
Accessibility: these institutions must be made accessible – physically and economically – to all students without discrimination. This requires the elimination of legal and administrative barriers, financial obstacles, discriminatory denials of access and obstacles to compulsory schooling.
Acceptability: implies parental choice of education for their children, the enforcement of minimal standards (quality, environmental and health and safety), as well as freedom from censorship and recognition of children as actors with rights.
Adaptability: it requires education to be flexible enough to adapt to circumstances and the changing needs of pupils in their diverse social and cultural milieu.

[General Comment No. 13 of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the initial report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education, E/CN.4/1999/49, paras. 42-74.]

6.2 Conceptual framework of the research study

6.2.1 Inclusive education in Palestine

TVET is a key contributor to human development, which in turn leads to sustainable social and economic development. Achieving quality inclusive education for all is one of the most effective means to achieve sustainable development, as it provides individuals with applied knowledge and the technical skills to actively participate in the economic and social life of their communities.

The push for inclusive education came after the issuance of the Salamanca Declaration in 1994, which was signed by 92 governments. The *Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All* (2000) stressed that education systems must be inclusive and respond flexibly to

the circumstances and needs of all learners, which was also emphasised by UNESCO in its *Guidelines for Inclusion* (2005)[18]. In 2006, the UNCRPD gave legal force to this concept by recognising inclusive education as the only viable way to guarantee rights to education.

Article 24 of Palestinian Basic Law guarantees the right to education, stating that primary education shall be compulsory and free, a right guaranteed to all citizens without discrimination based on gender or disability. The State of Palestine bears responsibility to supervise the implementation of these principles within its education system. The *Palestinian Children's Act*, amended in Article 38, requires the State to take all appropriate and effective measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination so that citizens may exercise their right to education. Article 12 of the *Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act* reiterates the same commitment towards PwDs, and Article 14 of the Act establishes the duty of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) to ensure that the environment in schools, colleges and universities is conducive to meetings the needs of PwDs.
In 2017, the State of Palestine released a Law on Public Education, in conformity with relevant international conventions to which it is a signatory. The decree-law stipulates the right of all individuals to an adequate level of education, regardless of economic difficulties, disability or gender. The MEHE adopted the mandate of inclusion of SwDs and promised that education would be free for all students who qualify for enrolment in public schools. The influence of the MEHE extends to private education also, as it is the entity that assigns teachers to work in private institutions and private schools that offer rehabilitation and education to students with severe disabilities. Furthermore, a policy for inclusive education was elaborated in October 2015 (Initial Report of the State of Palestine on the Convention of Persons with Disabilities, 2019, p. 49).

Moving beyond the evolution of legal frameworks, it is clear that the Palestinian education system faces several challenges that arise from a lack of ability to keep up with the evolution of the job market. Moreover, the consequences of the occupation (including the blockade imposed by Israel on the Gaza strip) massively impact employment opportunities. The job market is unable to absorb the increasing number of graduates in Palestine, which has led to the promotion of TVET, especially for PwDs. The MEHE seeks to increase the number of students – especially women – enrolled in vocational education, by expanding existing schools and establishing new ones. For this purpose, in 2016, the MEHE, in cooperation with other ministries and social partners, supported 73 new initiatives in the field of TVET.

Within this framework, the MEHE also worked to strengthen the connection between training and apprenticeship programmes while also supporting the adoption of modern teaching methods, to create more employment opportunities. MEHE currently oversees 13 centres offering approximately 22 courses, but the number of students enrolled (both in the public and private sector) in the West Bank and Gaza does not exceed 12,000 students. The MEHE aspires to enrol 3,000 more students by increasing the number of VTCs to 30 and course offerings to 50 (Nasrallah, 2018).

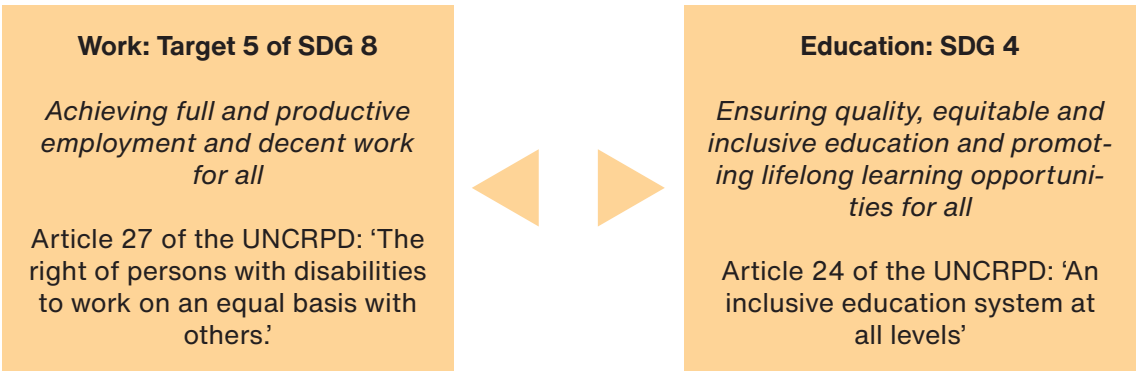
Secondary schools can also provide vocational education. Currently, 18 schools offer vocational training to students in subjects such as agriculture and home economics, but other kinds of programmes have been established: three in sustainable energy, three in modern automobile technology, two in elevator technology, one in fashion design and clothing customisation, two in beauty and cosmetics, and one in hospitality, with three new programmes being offered sole to female students in design, graphics, web design and mobile technologies (Conference on Sustainable Development in a Changing Environment, 2018, p. 8).

18. Available at http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-all/ (see Figure 33).

6.2.2 'Sustainable' decent work in Palestine

Decent work is defined as productive work that generates sufficient income and offers adequate social protection to protect workers' rights (Heba Al-Laithy, 2003). This definition covers individuals' aspirations for their professional lives and their hopes in terms of opportunities, incomes, rights, family stability, personal development and gender equality.

Figure 4. The SDGs: sustainable work and inclusive education



Source: authors' elaboration based on the data collected

Article 25 of Palestinian Basic Law guarantees all citizens the right to work, and it is the duty of the State to take any necessary steps to ensure the exercise of this right by all, by regulating labour relations, ensuring social justice and providing health and social care and security for workers. The *Palestinian Labour Law* No. 7 of 2000 also affirms that work is a right for every citizen who is able to, on the basis of equal opportunity without discrimination. The aforementioned law defines a PwD as someone 'who suffers from a disability in some of his physical, sensory or intellectual capabilities, as a result of a disease, accident, congenital cause or a genetic factor, which led to his inability to work, continue or be promoted at work, or it has weakened his ability to perform one of the other basic functions of life and needs care and rehabilitation in order to integrate or reintegrate him into society'.

One means to guarantee the inclusion of PwDs in the workforce is by establishing a quota system. Article 13 of the *Palestinian Labour Law* requires employers to ensure that at least 5% of employees are qualified PwDs, an obligation reiterated by the Council of Ministers Resolution No. 146 of 2004 and the Civil Service Law No. 4 of 1998, which addresses the issue of equal employment for PwDs in more than one article. Article 1 states that:

> 1. By order of the Council of Ministers, a percentage of jobs is to be allocated to release prisoners and those wounded in resistance operations, whose condition allows them to carry out the work required of those jobs. The decision goes on to define the wounded and rules for filling those positions.
>
> 2. The spouses of these wounded persons, or one of their brothers or sisters who support them, may be appointed in those positions in the event of their complete disability or death, if they meet the conditions for occupying those positions. As a result of their injury, the Law stipulates allocating a number of jobs to them.

PwDs in Palestine should be enabled to access employment commensurate with their

educational qualifications, practical experience and preferences. The General Personnel Council committed itself to promoting the appointment of PwDs without discrimination, according to the Initial report of the State of Palestine on the Convention on Persons with Disabilities (2019, p. 60).

Global-level data shows that the private sector is a key provider of employment opportunities for PwDs. Nonetheless, given the aforementioned constraints to private sector development in Palestine, and particularly in the Gaza strip, it is worth investigating and promoting a stronger role for the public sector. **Indeed, in Palestine, only 8% of public sector institutions employ PwDs, compared with 66% in the private sector**. The global data seem to confirm that, internationally, the private sector is at the forefront in hiring PwDs, but this does not seem to be the case for a Palestine still marked by its colonial past, where traditional neoliberal development models experience major crisis. Indeed, our research data show that 26% of the labour force in Gaza is employed by the private sector: 24% work in technical and specialised fields, while 54% are craftsmen and professionals.

6.2.3 Social exclusion

In this section, we refer to several authors to address social exclusion from a plurality of viewpoints – social exclusion being highly sensitive to cultural, historical and political influences. Robin Peace (2001) identified multiple types of social exclusion – social marginalisation, material deprivation, exclusion on the basis of race, gender or disability, etc. – and offered two definitions of social exclusion. The first is synonymous with poverty, which directly links social exclusion and poverty to inequalities in the job market; the second conceptualises social exclusion as a process leading to multiple deprivations, such as loss of familial and social relationships as well as loss of personal identity and purpose.

Social exclusion arises from a complex and multidimensional process involving an insufficiency or denial of rights, goods and services, as well as inability to participate in relationships and activities considered normal for the majority of people in a society, within different social, cultural or political arenas. Indeed, it is "both a process and a state that prevents individuals or groups from full participation in social, economic and political life and from asserting their rights" (Abdo, 2010).

Sophie Bessis (1995) identified three main dimensions of exclusion. The first is exclusion from economic activities and production, meaning restricted access to the job market, factors of production such as land or tools and from a wide range of livelihood opportunities. The second is exclusion from social participation, meaning a limited access to infrastructure, services and amenities, consumption, social services, social security and protection, public safety, social cohesion and social relations or interactions. The third is exclusion from politics, meaning a restricted access to political representation, organisation, consultation, decision-making and exercise of the rights and responsibilities that come with citizenship. It is at the intersection of these dimensions that social exclusion clearly emerges as the result of social, economic and political processes that are shaped by the power relations characterising the Palestinian context. As expressed in Chapter 1, emancipatory research reveals opportunities to challenge the status quo of prevailing structures of power relations that limit the aspirations of PwDs (Bessis, 1995).

6.3 Methodology and Procedures

6.3.1 Research tools

This research is based on a composite quantitative toolbox. The study relied on questionnaires as the main data collection tool but also included in-depth interviews and focus groups. Secondary sources included academic literature reviews, reports and university theses.

Quantitative methods and tools were used to measure the prevalence of a studied phenomenon and establish causality and correlation links (Abdul Haq, 2001), while qualitative methods contributed to a deeper understanding of perspectives as well as the relationship between and influence of social and cultural processes at play in the education of PwDs in Palestine. Quantitative methods, when applied to statistically representative samples, provide results that can be generalised to the entire research community (Al-Kharabsha, 2012), while qualitative methods presume the existence of facts and social phenomena that are built through the points of view of individuals and groups participating in the research (Kandilji, 2012). This research study was structured as an emancipatory research process across the following three phases.

***Preparatory phase**:* the research team is comprised of researchers with disabilities: a senior researcher and the research expert, each of whom was trained in emancipatory research methodologies for the purpose of this study. After conducting an initial literature review, the research team conducted five exploratory interviews with education experts and two exploratory focus groups with PwDs enrolled in VTCs. The data gathered from these interviews and focus groups helped the team to identify relevant themes regarding sustainable employment, as well as targeted questions to put towards potential interviewees and relevant actors; these included employment experts, employed PwDs, private sector representatives and government authorities, the Ministries of Labour, Social Development and Education, and representatives of relevant NGOs. This phase included a testing phase, to check the validity and reliability of the questionnaires and prepare the final version of the research tools prior to dissemination.

***Data collection*:** the team targeted 24 VTCs in the Gaza Strip for fieldwork research, which included 334 students (61.4% men: 38.6% women) and 188 teachers (67% men: 33% women). To examine the readiness of labour environments and markets to integrate PwDs, including how coherent current practices are with the concept of sustainable and decent work, field research was conducted using a sample of 71 graduates (41 men: 30 women), and 50 employers (36 men: 14 women).

Analysis: during the data analysis, four focus groups were held with the aim to draw primary main conclusions and put forward recommendations supported by the results of the study. Finally, six interviews were conducted, using the life course interview tool, with graduate SwDs of both genders, all of whom are currently employed.

6.3.2 The sample

VTCs were selected according to geographical distribution, diversity of professional specialisation, supervising body (government, private sector, NGOs and UNRWA) and target markets (i.e. some VTCs target women through focused training for specific professions such as hairdressing, while for men, focused training is offered for professions such as

carpentry and metalwork).

Table 5. Geographical distribution of the sample for inclusive education and sustainable work

Governorate[19]	Education		Labour market	
North Gaza	32%	students	8.5%	graduates
	27.1%	teachers	16%	employers
Gaza	25.7%	students	45.1%	graduates
	36.2%	teachers	32%	employers
Deir al-Balah	18.3%	students	5.6%	graduates
	20.7%	teachers	12%	employers
Khan Yunis	14.7%	students	21.1%	graduates
	9.6%	teachers	20%	employers
Rafah	8.7%	students	19.7%	graduates
	6.4%	teachers	20%	employers

Source: authors' elaboration from data collection

The distribution of questionnaires to interviewees in VTCs is as follows. Of the PwDs interviewed, 14.4% are SwDs, and 6.9% are teachers. The most common impairment among the SwDs is auditory impairment (77.1%), followed by physical (16.6%) and visual (6.3%) impairments. Among the teaching staff in the VTCs, eight teachers have auditory impairment (4.3%), three have physical impairment (1.6%) and two are without disability (1.1%).

Of those already engaged in the job market, we targeted mostly PwD graduates. Among PwD graduates, the type of impairment is almost equally distributed among those with auditory (47.9 %) and physical impairment (49.1%), with the remaining being visual and intellectual impairment (1.4%). The percentage of the data sample who are employers with disabilities is 12%, of which the predominant impairment is physical (83.3%), while the remainder is auditory (16.7%).

Table 6. Demographic distribution of the sample

	Education		Labour market	
	Students	Teachers	Graduates	Employers
Urban areas	56.9%	61.2%	71.8%	72%
Refugee camps	39.5%	37.8%	25.4%	24%
Rural areas[20]	3.6%	1%	2.8%	4%

19. The governorates of Gaza and Khan Yunis have the largest percentage of graduates and employers in the job market; they are the two largest governorates in terms of demographic distribution in the governorates of the Gaza Strip.

20. Gaza has gradually lost its rural advantage over the past decades due to population encroachment on the 'rural' agricultural areas and in conjunction with the occupation practices that restricted access to the border areas east, north and south of the Gaza Strip.

Male	61.4%	67%	57.7%	72%
Female	33%	38.6%	42.3%	28%
Age ranges	1-30 years old	> 30 years old	18-30 years old	> 30 years old
Age prevalence	72.5%	76.6%	90.1%	86%

Source: authors' elaboration based on the data collected

Gender distribution in education is linked to the nature of the TVET centres chosen for inclusion in this study and does not reflect the gender distribution trend within Gazan society. Indeed, women's orientation to TVET is still adversely impacted by complex challenges that will be addressed further through this study.

The age distribution is predictable, as students tend to enrol in TVET centres after completing their primary school education, while teachers tend to work or obtain temporary job opportunities in TVET at an age of maturity. Estimates indicate that 80% of employment for Arab youth is unstable, irregular, without guaranteed pay, and offsets any benefits from social security services (Maysa Yousef, ESCWA, 2020). All these factors contribute to raising the age at which most will gain access to secure employment in Gaza.

Furthermore, 59% of teachers have a bachelor's degree (of these, 14.9% also have a master's degree) and 25.5% have a diploma. Among SwDs, the percentage of high school graduates is 41%, while 30.2% have a diploma and 14.7% have a bachelor's degree. This raises the question of why university graduates would opt for vocational education. The job market in the Gaza Strip suffers from a catastrophic blockade and unprecedented unemployment rates, which increases competition, especially among graduates, pushing jobseekers to acquire further professional skills in order to remain competitive and meet job market demands.

Finally, concerning the distribution between public and private sector, the percentage of teachers working in the public sector is 56.9%, in the private sector it is 29.3%, and in the non-governmental sector it is 13.8%. Concerning the type of work for both PwD students and teachers, 56.9% are employed in technical and specialised fields: the percentage of teachers, technical trainers and specialists employed by TVET centres is 29.3%, while the percentage of students is 5.4%. The overall percentage of students who work is 29.3%, and of this number, 13.8% are craftsmen and professionals.

The gender gap in the job market is less pronounced among graduates. This is because our data sample is drawn from the Atfaluna Society for Deaf Children and the IRADA Centre, both of which employ roughly equal numbers of graduates of both genders. Among this sample of workers, 28.2% are university graduates, 39.4% hold diplomas and 15.5% hold a bachelor's degree. Among employers, 10% are graduates, 16% hold diplomas, 64% hold a bachelor's degree, and 4% hold a master's degree or higher. As concerns the employers of PwDs, 8% represent the public sector while 66% represent the private sector.
To conclude, we briefly touch on the challenges faced by the research team during the data collection phase, as well as the strategies undertaken to overcome them. The most significant challenge was the lack of response by the UNRWA-funded vocational training colleges in Gaza and Khan Yunis; this forced the research team to replace them in the data sample with three VTCs affiliated with the MEHE: the Hani Naim Agricultural High School (in Beit Hanoun), Deir al-Balah Industrial High School for boys, and Abdul Muti Al Rayes High Vocational School for Girls (in Gaza). Furthermore, the data collection process was adversely impacted by the state of emergency declared by the Palestinian Government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This challenge was overcome by extending the duration for data collection. Luckily, the field research team were assisted by the managers of the VTC cen-

tres, who were highly cooperative.

6.4 Main results

6.4.1 Legislation and regulations

When asked whether they believed that public institutions employ enough teachers to make inclusive education possible for PwDs, the majority of both students and teachers responded affirmatively, claiming that the low number of teachers was not the biggest issue preventing full implementation of national legislation and strategies related to education for PwDs. Focus group participants explained that this was because VTCs mostly target and cater to PwDs. The main problem, as was reported by on teacher during a focus group interview, has to do with the lack of teaching skills and experience of existing teachers, as well as the lack of demonstrated commitment to addressing disability on the part of many public institutions:

> If a trainer is employed by a vocational training centre, the Ministry of Education does not require that that teacher should be qualified or have knowledge on how to deal with persons with disabilities. It is only necessary he or she passes the recruitment examination and interview. Sometimes the teacher employed may have no experience with vocational training. How will she have experience in dealing with persons with disabilities?

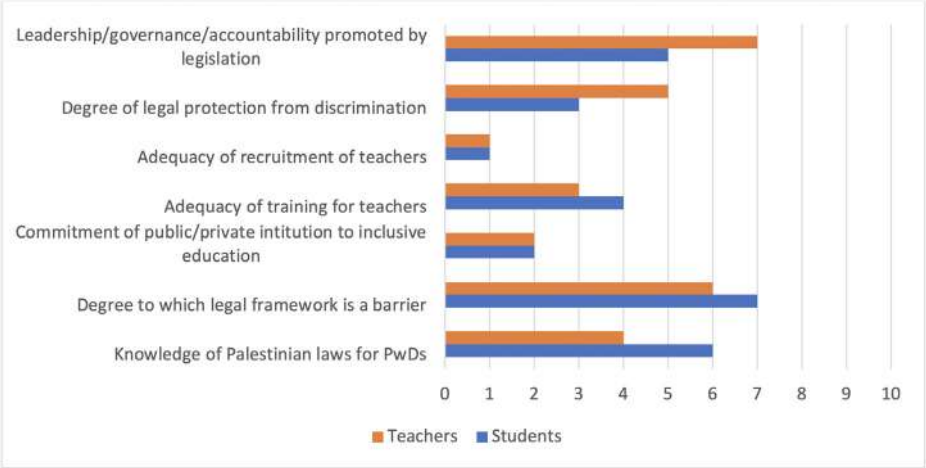
Both the teachers and students that we interviewed agreed that the **current legal framework constitutes a barrier** to the inclusion of PwDs within the **education system**, and they emphasised the need for the *Law on Persons with Disabilities* to be updated in line with the UNCRPD. The current law is outdated, being enacted more than two decades ago, and in its current form it constitutes one of the main barriers to PwDs accessing the formal education system.

A point of interest is that not one of the teachers and students pointed out the barrier represented by Israeli occupation. The reason for this is the fact that, since 2005, the Israel disengaged from the Gaza Strip and the visible Israeli presence on the ground ceased. Nevertheless, the direct effects and consequences of the blockade imposed by Israel cannot be ignored. The blockade imposed on the Gaza Strip limits freedom of communication and movement for teachers and trainers. It also makes it impossible to import materials and assistive devices (such as headphones) for education and vocational training into Palestine, the justification being that such devices may be used for illegal purposes[21].

21. For further information on the Gaza blockade and Israeli occupation, see the following report from Dashed Hopes https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/118105/dashed-hopes-continuation-gaza-blockade-301110-en.pdf;jsessionid=015F5FE2A7ABC6B65FC535AB2F14EF3B?sequence=1

Figure 5. Legislation and regulations related to inclusive education

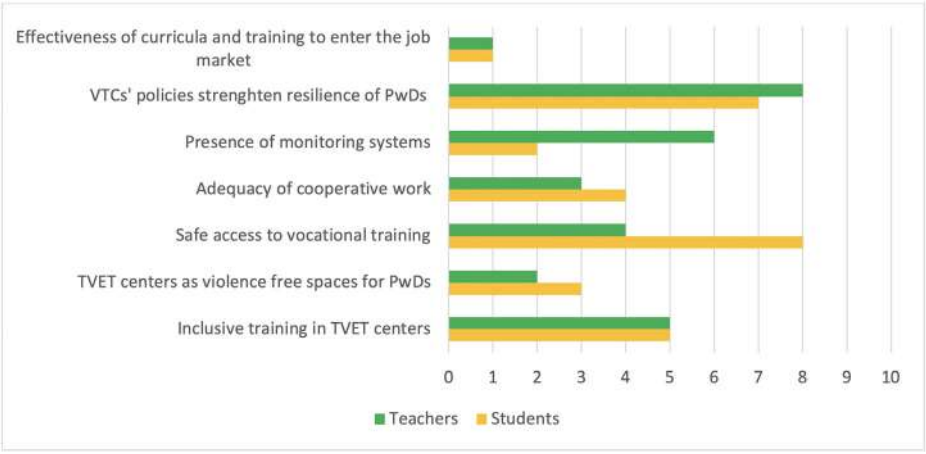
Source: authors' elaboration based on the data collected



Since the establishment of the National Authority and its institutional structure, the inclusion of PwDs has not been considered because there are specialised centres and institutions. **Teachers stated in focus group interviews that the existing policies promote safe access, inclusion and accessibility to VTCs for PwDs. While this may be true in theory, in practice, these policy guarantees remain unrealised due to infrastructural barriers, prejudices, inadequate public transportation and high costs.** Both SwDs and teachers believe much is yet to be done to improve collaboration between SwDs and their non-disabled peers, as well as between teachers and VTC management, as prevailing practices are largely non-collaborative and promote individualism (Al-Ghara, 2021).

Figure 6. Policies related to inclusive education

Source: authors' elaboration based on the data collected



PwDs opinions on how best to establish effective **monitoring systems** to track the implementation of inclusive education policies differ according to institution. The SwDs that we interviewed feel that institutions such as IRADA and the Atfaluna Society for Deaf Children have effective systems to monitor the presence, participation and empowerment of PwDs, whereas they feel that public institutions have insufficient monitoring systems that are designed only for PwDs.

EDR Box – Voices from the field: the experience of co-researchers with disabilities

How has this experience changed your conception of yourself and your confidence?

'In terms of personal experience, although I am a person with disability, work within Nothing About Us Without Us is my first experience of dealing with issues related to people with disability; thus, I have acquired a lot of information and knowledge related to disability and its issues, I have also realized that no one can claim their rights unless she/he has the same experience, as goes the proverb 'if you need something to be done, do it yourself.'

'This experience has strengthened my relationship with my coworkers and has also helped me to get to know new colleagues with whom I can exchange a huge amount of knowledge about disability. Moreover, it has helped me – through working on the project and earning a monthly salary – to meet all the household and family expenses, especially the needs of my kids. So, it has promoted my family relationships.'

'Due to this experience, my family's trust [in me] has increased; they have supported me and given me the freedom to find work. Furthermore, I have been able to support them financially due to the tough conditions in our society after siege and COVID-19.'

Do you think that social inequalities could be reduced through your actions?

'The project and experience have enhanced my role in society, in terms of expressing opinions, accountability for issues related to persons with disability and reaching and addressing decision-makers regarding disability issues. I have proved that despite my disability, I am able to work, depend on myself, claim my rights and achieve all goals.'

'When people with disability take a role in society, they put themselves on the societal map, and to prove that they are able to work and give, and so contribute to reducing social inequalities.'

'Through my actions, I have been able to reach decision-makers in vocational centers [through questionnaires and by inviting them to focus groups] to discuss adapting these centers for persons with disability. In addition to the impact of the emancipatory research prepared by the research team that I am part of, there are many institutions interested in disability and vocational training that are waiting for the outputs of this research, to benefit from the unique information and data it details.'

Co-researchers with disability (Gaza, October 2021)

The graduates and employers that participated in focus group discussions acknowledged the existence of monitoring and follow-up systems for the implementation of inclusive employment policies. However, they are also aware that national policies do not adequately address inequalities and that current social protection policies are weak and do not fully support or include PwDs.

During focus groups discussions, participants reported that **follow-up and monitoring systems are available but only in some institutions that work specifically with PwDs:** e.g. Atfaluna Society for Deaf Children and IRADA Centre. Other institutions that do not specifically deal with PwDs lack effective monitoring systems and do not push for the inclusion of

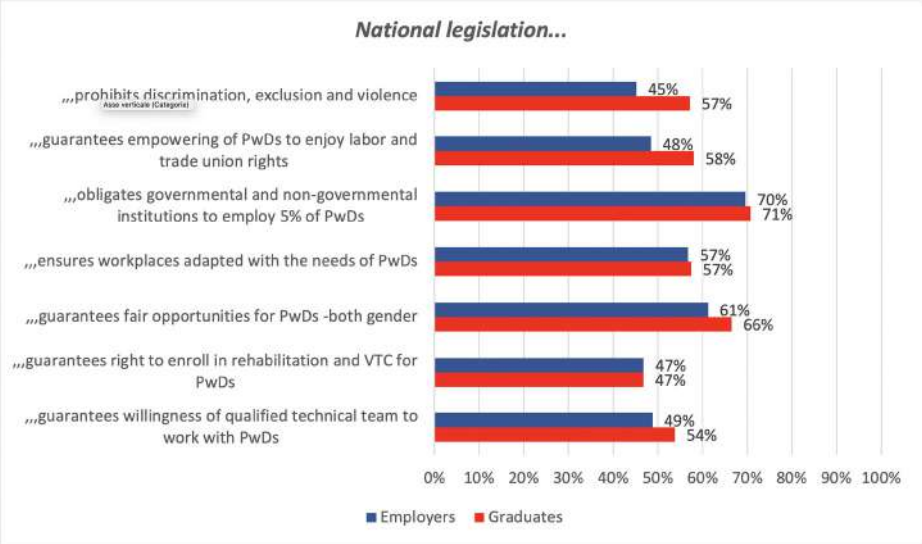
PwDs. Indeed, there is some form of monitoring and follow-up system within the Ministry of Social Development, but it is targeted to a specific age group (i.e. 14–16 years old). Ali Jibril, a person with motor disability, stressed that:

> There is a lack of awareness among institutions regarding laws and policies that address persons with disabilities, as well as a lack awareness of how to deal with persons with disabilities. [This is because] persons with disabilities are transferred to institutions [specifically] for persons with disabilities under the pretext that there are no adaptations in public institutions.

This approach reinforces social exclusion dynamics, by excluding PwDs from social participation in all its dimensions, increasing mechanisms of segregation in the job market and fuelling social stigmatisation.

Figure 7. Legislation related to sustainable work

Source: authors' elaboration based on the data collected



6.4.2 Inclusive education in TVET centres

Most teachers and students reported that the TVET curricula prepares students and provides them with skills and competencies that help them to enter the job market. During focus groups, participants based this opinion on the fact that graduates from the IRADA Centre and Atfaluna Society for Deaf Children do find employment after training. This is usually through short-term paid internships arranged through the TVET.[22]

Through their interviews, PwDs enrolled in VTCs identified physical barriers, discrimination, social stigmatisation, risk of violence and abuse from peers as the most challenging obstacles they faced. The majority of teachers and students emphasised that, generally, VTCs are unable to enrol persons with all types of disabilities because of accessibility issues and

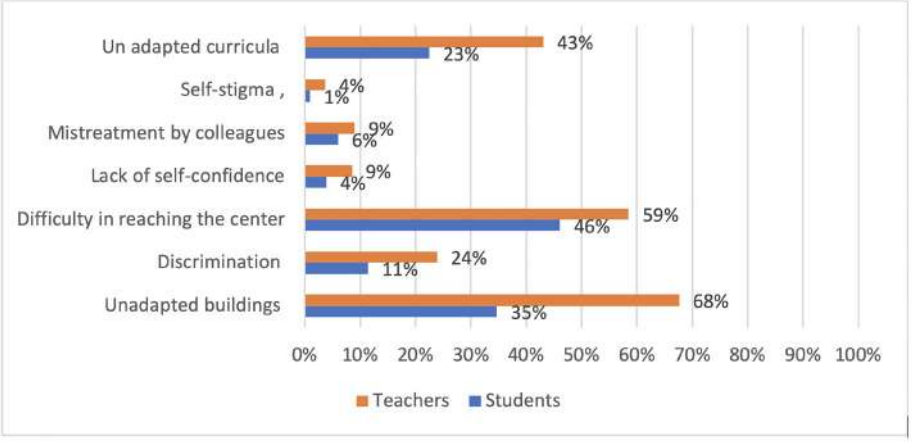
22. From three to six months.

a lack of properly adapted inclusive teaching methods. Persons with visual impairments are particularly disadvantaged because of the inadequacy and low quality of training materials.

Figure 8. The most important obstacles PwDs face in vocational education

Source: authors' elaboration based on the data collected

Interview participants reported that emergency and safety procedures in place in TVET



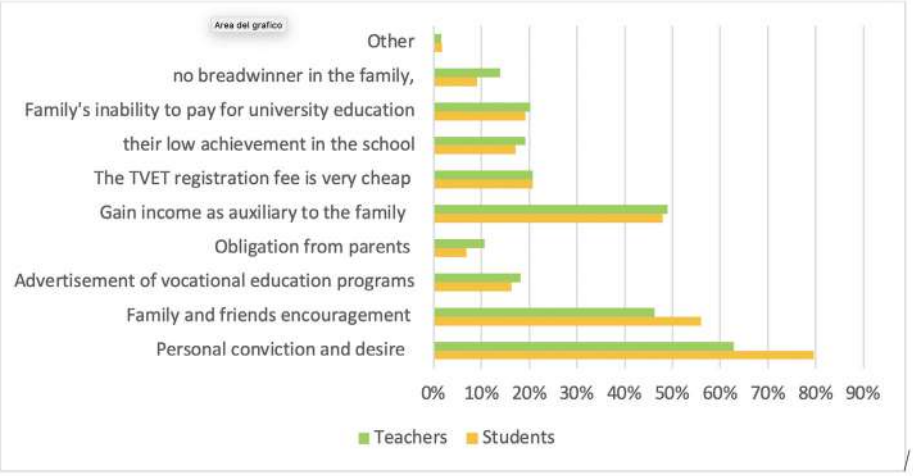
centres do not consider the specific needs of PwDs in emergency situations, nor do they address all types of disabilities. Although Article 4 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* stipulates that in cases of emergency, States party to this covenant may take measures that do not comply with their obligations, this does not include discrimination based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, social origin or disability. The covenant obliges governments to enact clear safety and security measures during emergencies (e.g. the war on Gaza and the COVID-19 pandemic) with regard to public roads and means of transport and communication, the design of centres, institutions and workplaces, and tools used for education, training and work, etc.

Although the current 47% unemployment rate (PCBS, 2021) speaks to the seriousness of the situation, around half of the SwDs and more than one third of the teachers interviewed are convinced that the vocational education offered through VTCs does help graduates to find employment.

Figure 9. Reasons given for enrolling in VTCs

Source: authors' elaboration based on the data collected

PwDs enrol in vocational training for various reasons, such as for personal satisfaction,



the desire or need to enter a profession that will generate income for the family (especially when that is the family's sole source of income), but also because VTCs are affordable and accessible also with a low level of educational attainment, as well as thanks to the support and encouragement of family and friends. But what **obstacles** do they face?

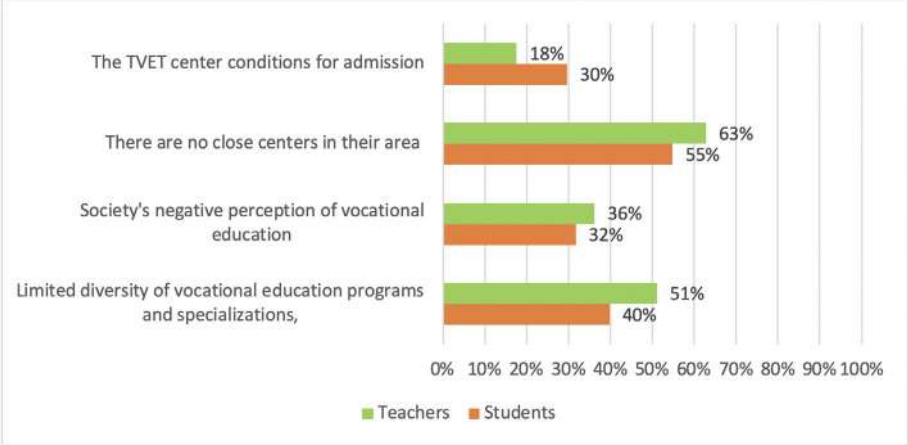
The first challenge that PwDs face in choosing vocational training is the **limited diversity of programmes and specialisations**, as well as the **widespread negative perception of vocational education**. Furthermore, VTCs are often located far from where people live, and their **admission requirements** can discourage PwDs from applying.

By comparing the responses of students and teachers, we can identify similarities in perceptions of how relevant these barriers to vocational education and training are to PwDs. For both students and teachers, the biggest barrier is a lack of unavailable centres close to their residence: this affects 54.8% of students and 62.8% of teachers. The second is the limited diversity of programmes and specialisations: this affects 39.80% of students and 51.10% of teachers. The third is the poor image of vocational education, which affects 31.7% of students and 36.20% of teachers. Finally, admission requirements were also identified as a barrier, albeit a lesser one, that affects 29.6% of students and 17.6% of teachers.

Figure 10. Main obstacles to accessing VTCs

Source: authors' elaboration based on the data collected

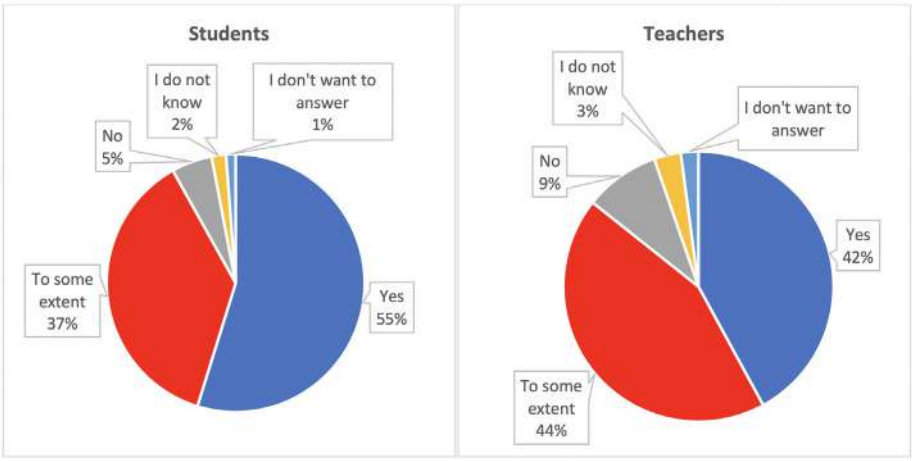
The majority of students and teachers believe, at least to some extent, that **vocational ed-**



ucation empowers self-learning capacity, improves capacity building and prepares students to contribute to community life. During focus groups, participants emphasised that vocational education and training motivates SwDs to constantly search for new opportunities to develop their communication and information technology skills. It is easy for them to acquire these skills, as well as interpersonal and online communication skills. Vocational training refines those skills for PwDs, by providing them with the practical knowledge and information needed to successfully access the job market, particularly by enabling them to practise communication skills and through experiential community participation.

Figure 11. Do VTCs boost self-learning capacity, search and analysis of information skills?

Source: authors' elaboration based on the data collected



Furthermore, the majority of students and teachers interviewed for this study believe that employment **opportunities are related to the skills and abilities provided by VTCs**. Likewise, focus group participants confirmed that they perceive a link between the type of skills acquired through vocational education and training and increased likelihood of employment. In particular, paid internships of three to six months proved to be extremely effective to facilitate their integration into the labour market.

This information confirms the advantages of equipping SwDs with new competencies and providing them with the necessary knowledge to seize opportunities on the job market. This includes life skills and remote working skills, which are becoming increasingly relevant. Indeed, the democratisation of the social structure of vocational education promotes the inclusion and participation of PwDs. This was echoed in the respondents' statements: they too believe that the more democratic the social structure, the more it enhances integration and community engagement for PwDs.

During focus groups, participants showed **great support for democratising these social structures through fair and transparent periodic elections**. These centres are mostly government-funded, and so they lack structures and strategies open to democratic transformation processes; but this ambition to democratically reform VTC structures and operations has the clear objective of enhancing the inclusion and participation of PwDs. These focus groups were held at the same time that elections for the General Union of Persons with Disabilities were taking place, and this drew public attention to the ongoing debates within society on this subject.

The majority of respondents targeted in this study emphasised the importance of the relationship between the availability and adequacy of social protection policies and how teaching practices in government-funded VTCs affect SwDs[23].

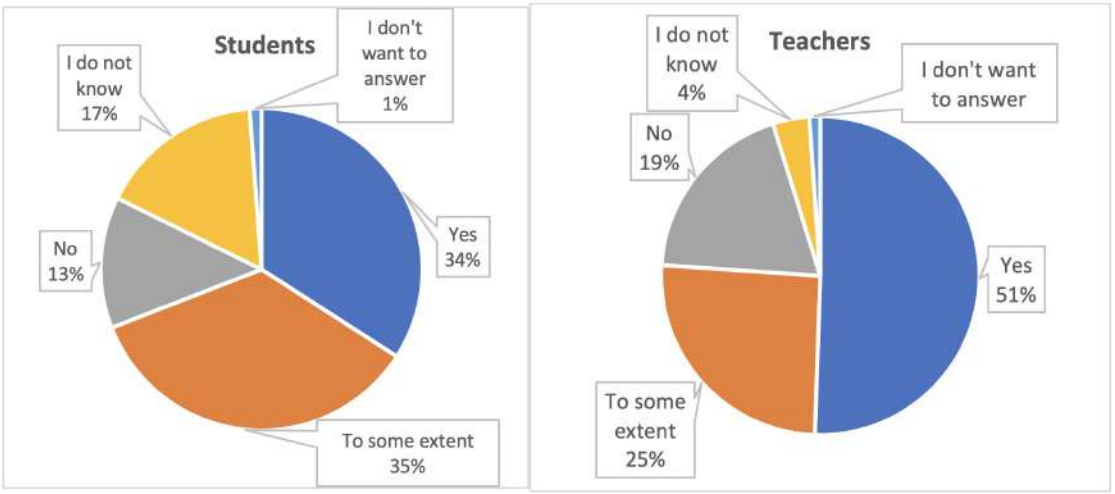
According to the Ministry of Social Development (2021), approximately 79,629 families benefit from the cash transfer programme, and the average quarterly financial payment allocated to the Gaza Strip is approximately $ 32 million. Families benefiting from the programme are about 12.4%, and the percentage of WwDs who benefit from it is 2.8%. During the focus groups, it emerged that **the weakness of social protection policies and programmes is attributable to current economic conditions in the Gaza Strip, which are marked by a reduction in salaries, premature retirements in the public sector, and the majority of employment opportunities arising in education and training centres** affiliated with the Ministries of Education and Labour and Social Development.

The weakness and unreliability of social protection programmes for PwDs is mainly due to a lack of financial support from the government, which in turn relies entirely on grants from international donors. The approval of financial transactions occurs only by Israeli consent, which is subject to high levels of extortion (for the entire Palestinian community) through compelling colonial policies and practices. This also affects NGOs and civil society organisations (CSO), which face financial deficits that limit their ability to provide social protection to Palestinian communities.

This whole situation negatively influences teachers' behaviours and attitudes towards students (see Figure 8). Of the teachers interviewed, **50% reported feeling insufficiently covered by social protection and that this negatively influences their attitudes and behaviours towards students; this was confirmed by 34% of the students interviewed**.

23. The study adopted the ESCWA definition of social protection that includes contributions such as social security and health insurance or non-contributory protection such as social assistance and free health care. Also, the International Labour Organization (ILO) definition of social protection offers a set of basic social protection guarantees, determined at national governance levels that aim to protect people from poverty and social exclusion. Social protection depends on the provision of healthcare and reliable income: the two main forms of financial security are social security and social assistance (such as public works programmes and subsidies for certain social groups, as well as tax exemptions and cash transfer programmes).

Figure 12. Does the insufficient social protection coverage affect attitudes towards PwDs?



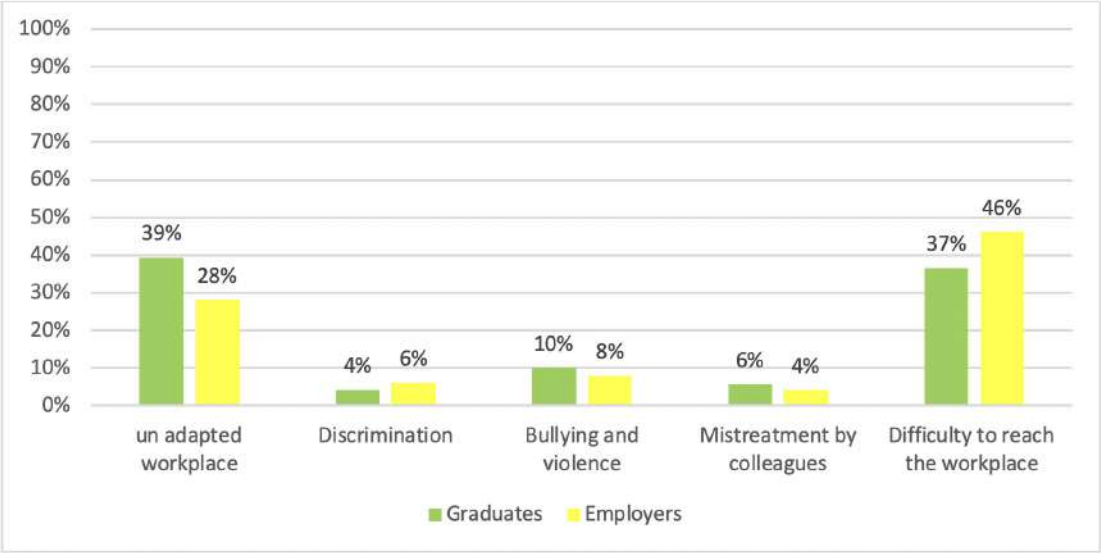
Source: authors' elaboration based on the data collected

6.4.3 Sustainable work for PwDs: achievements and obstacles

The private sector currently faces many challenges as a result of adverse economic conditions in the Gaza Strip, due to the protracted conflict between Palestine and Israel, particularly the blockade imposed by the latter. This situation was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased the marginalisation and exclusion of PwDs from active and fair community participation. The Secretary of the Federation of Industries in the Gaza Strip indicated that approximately 700 factories were either completely or partially closed in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a loss of employment for more than 1,300 factory employees, especially those in the construction, wood, metal, and food and clothing industries. Meanwhile, the service sector and other industries related to workshops and handicrafts, which employed approximately 3,800 workers, counted losses exceeding 35 million shekels. According to a report by the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (2021), nearly 16,000 workers were affected: 55% lost their jobs, with 70% subsequently falling below the poverty line.

The results of our statistical data analysis indicate that the **most significant obstacles PwDs face in employment relate to inadequacies in their workplaces: i.e. accessibility issues and instances of bullying, violence and abuse, often by colleagues**. On the other hand, the main obstacles for PwDs in workplaces cited by **employers** were: lack of accessibility (46%), difficulty reaching workplaces (28%), bullying and violence (8%), discrimination (6%) and abuse by colleagues (4%). For **graduates**, the main obstacles cited are as follows: difficulty reaching the workplace (39.4%), inadequacy – in terms of accessibility - of workplaces (36.6%), bullying and violence (9.9%), abuse by colleagues (5.6%) and discrimination (4.2%).

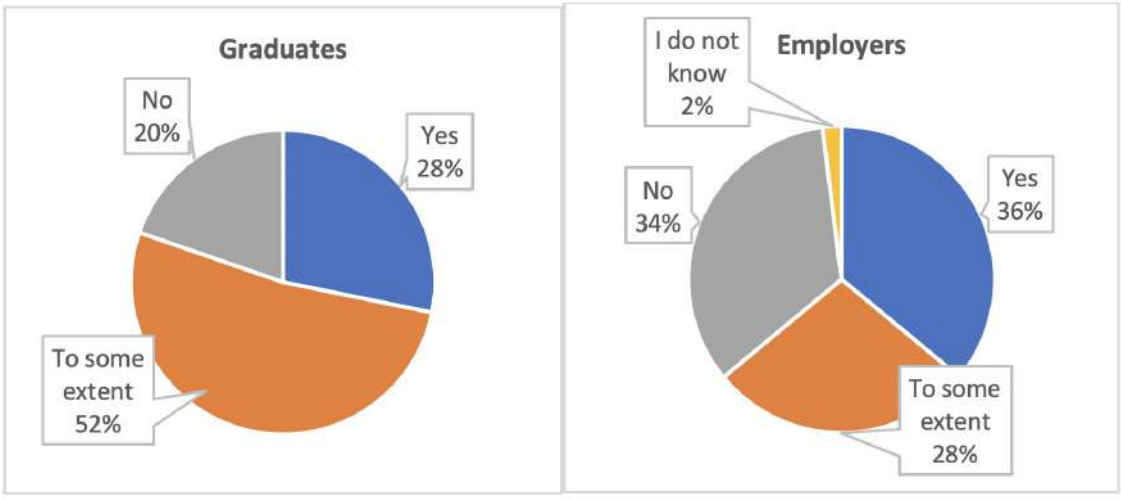
Figure 13. Obstacles faced by PwDs in the workplace



Source: authors' elaboration from the data collected

When respondents were asked if they thought that **employment opportunities were the same for women and men with disabilities, 80% of graduates and 64% of employers answered in the affirmative.**

Figure 14. Are employment opportunities similar for women and men with disabilities?

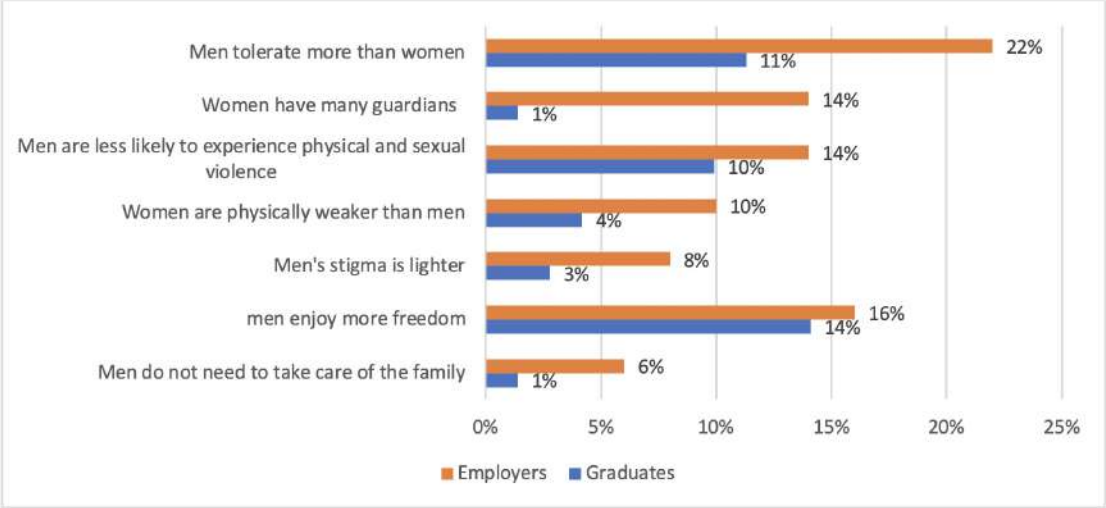


Source: authors' elaboration based on the data collected

This strongly contradicts the data of the Labour Force Survey 2020, which showed that the participation rate of WwDs in the workforce in Palestine was only 2%, compared with 23% for men with disabilities (*Bulletin on Women in the Programs of the Ministry of Social Development* 2021, Gaza Strip). Of those who consider employment opportunities to be unequal between male and female PwDs, many attribute this gender gap to assumptions that men are more resilient than women, in keeping with cultural stereotyping of women as weaker than men, irrespective of disability. Another reason is that men are considered less

likely targets of physical and sexual violence.

Figure 15. Why do WwDs not have equal employment opportunities?



Source: authors' elaboration based on the data collected

In the responses from **graduates**, 14.1% agreed with the statement 'men enjoy more freedom', followed by 'men tolerate difficulties more than women' (11%) and 'men are less likely to be subjected to physical and sexual violence' (10%). As for **employers**, 22% agreed with the statement 'men tolerate more than women' (the highest response percentage), followed by 'men enjoy more freedom' (16%), 'men are less likely to be subjected to physical and sexual violence' (14%) and 'women have many guardians' (14%).

Our results analysis showed that Palestine remains a **patriarchal society that is dictated by its cultural and social heritage, and which continues to be impacted by and governed according to a set of beliefs and customs based on the complex oppression of women. WwDs face a triple oppression: as women, as colonised subjects and as PwDs**. As Simone de Beauvoir asserted, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". **Despite improvement in the rate of women's participation in the job market during the past decade, this percentage decreases significantly when the participation rate of WwDs is considered, as WwDs suffer face multiple and intersectional discriminatory practices**.

However, our research team noted that there is less discrepancy in the gender gap in the Atfaluna Association for the Deaf, and the IRADA Centre, as a gender balance is accounted for within the association's framework, and so we found that opportunities are equally distributed among men and women in current and past projects and internships.

An important point worthy of further analysis is the question of why PwDs, despite all the challenges and obstacles previously listed, are still open to TVET. What emerges from our research is that PwDs desire to become independent and productive, and to assist their families by earning an (additional or necessary) income. Other motivating factors include the encouragement and support received by their family and friends, as well as the loss of the family's primary income earner, which is often a major financial shock for the family to absorb. Finally, many PwDs are keen **to achieve autonomy and financial stability independent of their family of origin**; t**his is** particularly so for young adults (aged 18–30). The economic, social and political conditions of life in Palestine affect individual lifestyles, especially for PwDs, who are often unable to leave the family home to build, buy or rent their own home. Such challenges can become strong motivations for them to seek productive

employment, and this explains the reasoning behind campaigns that intend to divert PwDs from university studies to TVET education in an effort to address the problem of high unemployment among university graduates. Professional and technical education is viewed by this group as a beneficial system that allows them to develop a set of useful skills that are of value to employers.

This study identified the following fundamental obstacles to job orientation and placement for PwDs:

- A high unemployment rate reflecting limited job opportunities;
- Daily challenges arising from living with disability;
- Negative perceptions and stereotypes regarding PwDs;
- Inadequate infrastructure; and
- Negative impressions held by potential employers of PwDs.

The data gathered from responses provided by employers and graduates with disability are quite similar. It showed that, of the **employers** who participated in this study, 78% consider the most significant obstacle to entering the job market to be the current economic situation in Palestine (i.e. high unemployment rates), 38% blame society's negative perceptions of PwDs and disability, 32% blame poorly or insufficiently adapted infrastructure, and 20% blame employers' negative impressions of PwDs and disability.

For the **graduates** with disability who took part in this study, 87.3% consider high unemployment rates to be the most significant obstacle to employment, 52.1% attribute obstacles to having a disability itself, 28.2% blame the society's negative perceptions of PwDs and disability, 22.5% blame insufficiently adapted infrastructure, and 21.1% blame employers' negative impressions of PwDs and disability.

During the focus discussion groups, the participants highlighted several challenges **in accessing job-related information**. An example of a barrier to accessible information is the lack of up-to-date or accessible databases that could be used to search for jobs or to contact potential employers.

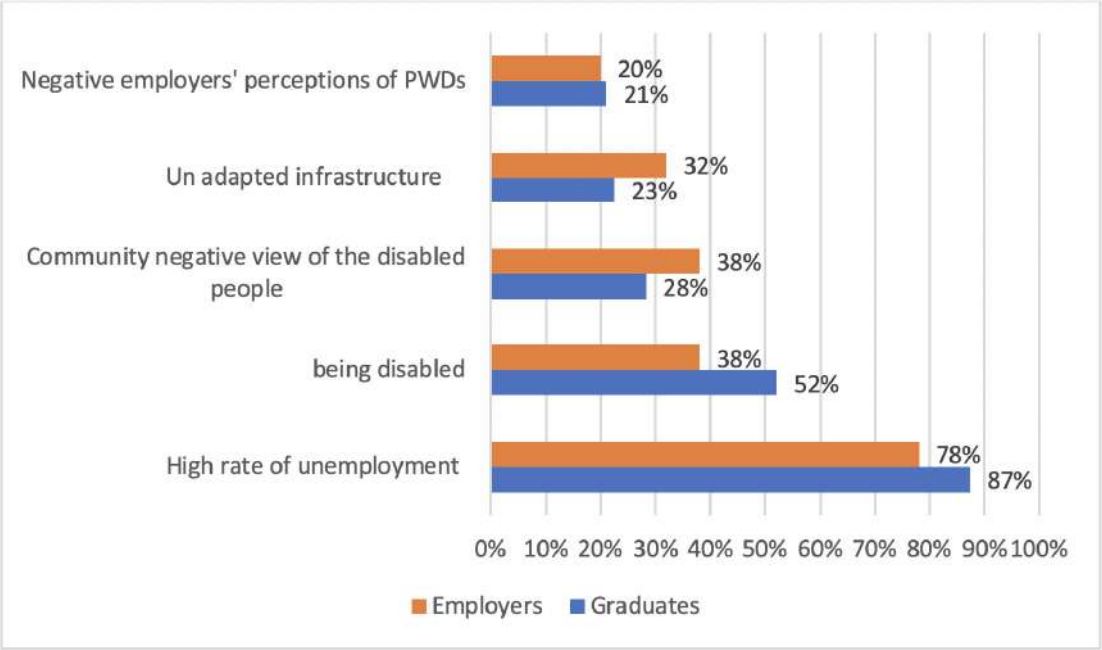


Figure 16. Obstacles faced by PwDs in the job market

Source: authors' elaboration based on the data collected

In general, **employers fail to facilitate the integration of PwDs in the workplace irrespective of the type of disability**. This results from a variety of factors, such as a pervasive lack of interest towards inclusion and an inability to adapt working arrangements (e.g. workspaces, working hours, tasks and training) to accommodate PwDs. Notably, workplaces rarely feature inclusive safety procedures. Finally, most employers are not qualified, trained or experienced in dealing with PwDs and seem to show little interest in learning about PwD rights, presumably because PwDs are not their target employee demographic. Therefore, the research team concludes that most workplaces are generally not adapted, equipped or safe for employees with disability.

The majority of graduate respondents with disability (95%) confirmed that **vocational education helped them to find a job,** because the training they received was directly related to a profession and gave them marketable skills. The PwDs who studied at the IRADA Centre and the Atfaluna Association for the Deaf **acquired sufficient job experience and were trained to meet the specific requirements of in-demand professions.**

By considering the numerous barriers and constraints related to the job market and issues of accessibility for PwDs, the majority of participants consider **vocational education to be a helpful platform that grants them access to the job market**. The reason for this is twofold: VTCs prepare students for work by equipping them with practical skills directly related to a chosen profession (e.g. business management, marketing, accounting skills) while also helping them to develop capability, competency and personal skills and to refine their soft skills. By way of example, a focus group participant explained that vocational training is useful not only to acquire technical skills related to a specific sector or profession but also to **develop transversal skills such as communication skills, ability to manage small projects, and various skills related to marketing, accounting and business management**.

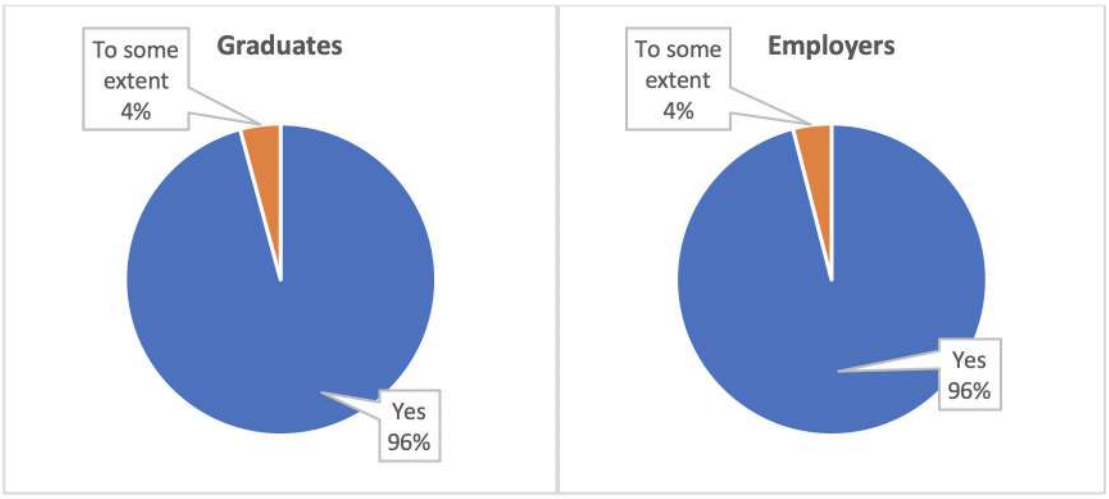


Figure 17. Does vocational education impact PwDs' job prospects?

Source: authors' elaboration based on the data collected

6.4.4 Aspirations and future perspectives

Most of the respondents involved in this study (both employers and graduates) believe that current employment opportunities are linked to the type of skills and abilities that are improved through participation in TVET programmes. Indeed, PwDs acquire varied life and social skills through their training in vocational education centres; the issue of sustainability lies in the continued influence of Palestine's colonial past, since capacity building without then applying those capacities renders them obsolete. Both personal and professional development requires capabilities and skills to be gained, built on and applied in an ongoing and sustainable manner, beyond the duration of short-term or finite projects.

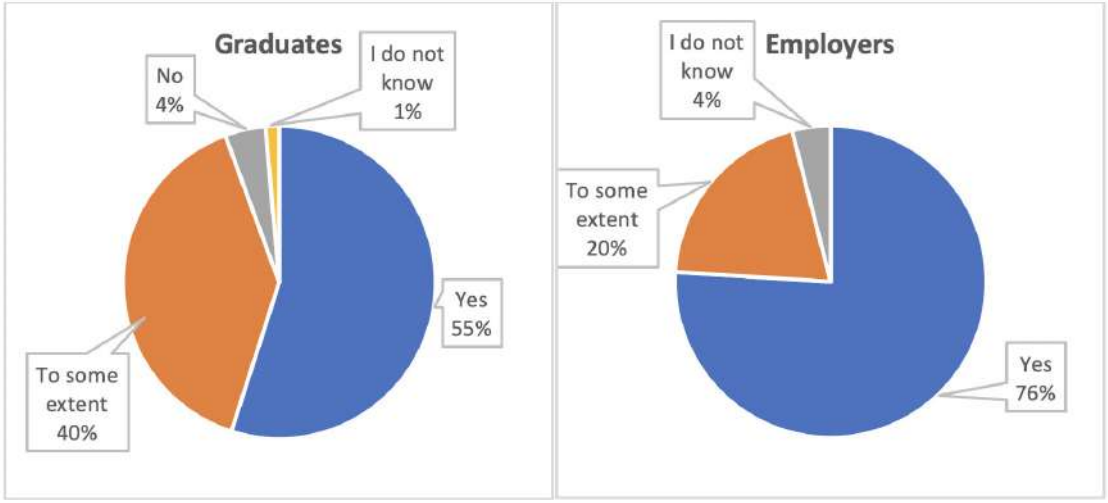


Figure 18. Should the job market focus on a national merit framework

Source: authors' elaboration based on the data collected

The majority of study participants believe that being actively engaged in workplace environments contributes to the ongoing development of life skills and community participation. During focus group discussions, participants emphasised that being in **working environ-**

ments motivates graduates with disabilities to learn new skills and provides them opportunities for communication and exchange with other learners. Applied work helps to develop the skills that PwDs need to access the job market, by enabling them to **practise life skills and community participation**.

Approximately half of the interviewees emphasised the negative impact that the shortcomings of social protection conditions for employers had on their chances of success in the job market. Indeed, policies and programmes aimed at reducing poverty and vulnerability (e.g. employment support), as well as policies aimed at reducing individuals' exposure to financial risk (e.g. income loss) or general social risk (e.g. old age, illness, inability to work, unemployment, family burdens), negatively affects attitudes and practices towards graduate PwDs.

During focus group discussions, participants blamed current economic conditions in the Gaza Strip, which has resulted in reduced salaries for most employees and affected the retirement scheme for civil servants. This greatly impacts employees of government funded VTCs affiliated with the Ministries of Education and Labour and Social Development. Other NGOs and CSOs are also affected, and they face a financial crisis that limits their capacity to provide a full range of social protection services

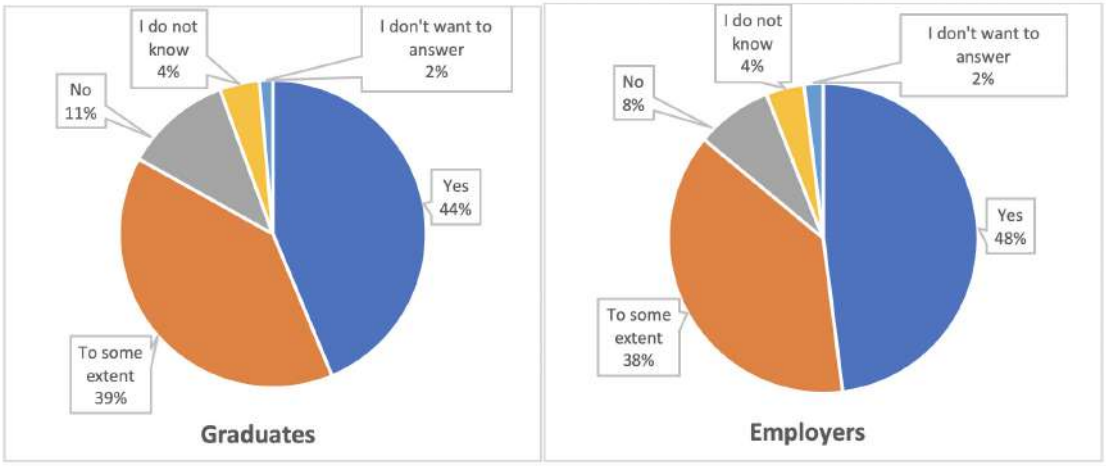


Figure 19. Degree to which social protection conditions for employers are perceived to negatively affect attitudes towards PwDs

Source: authors' elaboration based on the data collected

Regarding the role of technology, **the majority of employers and approximately half of graduates** believe that modern technology provides good employment opportunities for PwDs. During focus group discussions, participants said that learning to use **technology has increased their prospects for finding remote work in sectors such as graphic design and data analysis, provided that they continue to develop and apply those skills in relevant areas**. The diffusion of smart working due to the pandemic provides opportunity for PwD graduates to work remotely in sectors that are yet to be fully developed in the Gaza strip. Therefore, it is still valuable for graduates to acquire and develop relevant professional and personal skills, even if the local job market is unprepared or not yet ready, because these skills may be in demand on the international job market.

Finally, all respondents (employers and graduates) believe that PwDs who are currently employed or anticipate being employed ought to **join a trade union organisation**, to protect their rights and income, to have adequate representation and to ensure job security and

EDR Box – Voices from the field: the experience of co-researchers with disabilities

How has this experience changed your conception of yourself and your confidence?

'In terms of personal experience, although I am a person with disability, work within Nothing About Us Without Us is my first experience of dealing with issues related to people with disability; thus, I have acquired a lot of information and knowledge related to disability and its issues, I have also realized that no one can claim their rights unless she/he has the same experience, as goes the proverb 'if you need something to be done, do it yourself.'

'This experience has strengthened my relationship with my coworkers and has also helped me to get to know new colleagues with whom I can exchange a huge amount of knowledge about disability. Moreover, it has helped me – through working on the project and earning a monthly salary – to meet all the household and family expenses, especially the needs of my kids. So, it has promoted my family relationships.'

'Due to this experience, my family's trust [in me] has increased; they have supported me and given me the freedom to find work. Furthermore, I have been able to support them financially due to the tough conditions in our society after siege and COVID-19.'

Do you think that social inequalities could be reduced through your actions?

'The project and experience have enhanced my role in society, in terms of expressing opinions, accountability for issues related to persons with disability and reaching and addressing decision-makers regarding disability issues. I have proved that despite my disability, I am able to work, depend on myself, claim my rights and achieve all goals.'

'When people with disability take a role in society, they put themselves on the societal map, and to prove that they are able to work and give, and so contribute to reducing social inequalities.'

'Through my actions, I have been able to reach decision-makers in vocational centers [through questionnaires and by inviting them to focus groups] to discuss adapting these centers for persons with disability. In addition to the impact of the emancipatory research prepared by the research team that I am part of, there are many institutions interested in disability and vocational training that are waiting for the outputs of this research, to benefit from the unique information and data it details.'

Co-researchers with disability (Gaza, October 2021)

solidarity. During focus group discussions, participants emphasised that **trade union organisation is important for safeguarding and supporting the rights of PwDs in employment and in society more broadly.**

6.5 Summary of key findings

This research study explored several factors related to vocational education for PwDs.

The results indicate that current **legal frameworks constitute a barrier rather than a facilitator** to the inclusion of PwDs in education and employment in Palestine. They also indicate that government-funded VTCs and the majority of workplaces are not yet prepared to deal with PwDs.

The most **significant obstacle** to job orientation and placement for PwDs engaged in TVET was the accessibility of VTCs, in terms of both physical accessibility of buildings and intangible barriers related to curricula. Other relevant barriers relate to discrimination, mistreatment by peers and stigmatisation. In the transition from training to employment, the most relevant barriers for PwDs arise in relation to the overall economic situation characterised by high unemployment rates and society's negative perceptions of PwDs. Other barriers include inappropriate or insufficient infrastructure, negative perceptions held by employers towards PwDs and a lack of reasonable attempts to accommodate PwDs with different disabilities in workplaces.

This research study explored why PwDs continue to undertake TVET despite the aforementioned barriers. We found that PwDs are motivated to undertake vocational training due to their own personal ambition for autonomy and independent living, to support their families through additional income (particularly in instances where the family has lost its primary income earner), they are encouraged to do so by family and friends or because they are unable to attend university or higher education, usually due to lack of financial resources.

6.6 Policy recommendations

The results of our analysis, using data gathered from surveys and focus group discussions, showed that the **current legislative framework should be updated**, to reflect the content of the International Convention for Persons with Disabilities. We recommend that disabled people's organisations (DPOs) coordinate and lead advocacy campaigns aimed at approving the Draft Law of Persons with Disabilities, which is yet to be approved and ratified despite years of drafting and revision.

The results of this research showed there is a need to work towards overcoming obstacles to education and employment through the following actions:

- Adapt urban spaces, transports and educational institutions to be inclusive of PwDs;
- Promote inclusive education and decent employment for PwDs through structures awareness and advocacy campaigns coordinated by DPOs in partnership with CSOs;
- Address discrimination and stigmatisation through campaigns aimed at changing perceptions of disability;
- Implement internship and job placement programmes to reduce unemployment among

TVET graduates with disability;

- Create a database for graduates with disabilities to access existing and potential employment and training opportunities within local, regional and international job markets; and

- Ensure that educational institutions (including TVET centres) have emergency safety procedures in place that apply to PwDs.

Our results also show a **need for clear policies and monitoring systems** that oblige TVET centres (as well as private education and training centres) to foster the inclusion of PwDs. It also became apparent that **cooperative employment approaches ought to be promoted** both in the educational/training and productive process.

The study showed the relevance of the motivational sphere as a field of deployment **to create inclusive TVET and the opportunity to access to decent work.** The results emphasised the **need to democratise social structures within TVET centres and job markets** by enhancing the participation of PwDs in decision-making processes, so that they are properly represented within private sector and civil society organisations.

Finally, the results confirmed an **urgent need for serious action to approve social security law**, which secures social protection conditions for employers in TVET institutions and centres. There exists an opportunity to open the topic of social security law for public discussion and to push for its adoption as fundamental legislation. This requires DPOs to show initiative in revitalising public debate on the subject.

7. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report presents the results and findings of four emancipatory disability research (EDR) studies conducted in four governorates of the Palestinian Territories: Bethlehem and Hebron, Jenin and Nablus, and Ramallah (in the West Bank) and the Gaza Strip. The four studies were conducted within the framework of the collaborative international project, Nothing about Us without Us (NaUwU), which was funded by the Italian Agency for International Cooperation and led by the Italian NGO, EducAid. The emancipatory research approach implemented within the framework of NaUwU allowed the researchers not only to identify patterns of exclusion and inclusion within the domains of education and employment in Palestine but also served to empower the co-researchers and organisations involved in the study.

At its core, the project seeks to address dynamics of power and discrimination at play in the lives of persons with disabilities (PwDs), whether they are children or students, young women and men, or adults who are employed or seeking employment. The final objective of the project is to develop, through the collaborative efforts of disability activists and experts, valuable recommendations for policy actions in the field of disability, both in terms of civil society organisation (CSOs) action plans and the identification of new policies at national and local levels.

The initial phase of the project allowed the research teams to identify key research questions and for the local co-researchers to attend training sessions to equip them with necessary research processes and skills. During this phase, the research teams identified several key areas for investigation relating to education and employment for PwDs in Palestine, using different research methods to provide multiple perspectives for analysis.

The support of Palestinian university researchers, EducAid staff and ARCO researchers was fundamental to facilitate the processes of research protocol elaboration, data collection and drafting of results. Furthermore, during the initial phase of the project, during which training and exchange of opinion occurred between research team members, the experience and knowledge of the disability experts involved was paramount to identifying and prioritising appropriate topics and factors for investigation and intervention.

Each research team elaborated a precise research protocol outlining hypotheses, methodology and tools for data collection. While the research teams in Gaza and Bethlehem opted for a mixed method approach, the teams in Ramallah and Nablus/Jenin chose purely qualitative methods. The Bethlehem team gathered information on the experience of children with disability (CwDs), using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews administered to school staff and civil servants, focus group discussions with the families of CwDs and by elaborating case studies of SwDs who had dropped out of school. The Gaza team used the same kind of tools but also targeted key informants in policymaking and management, to investigate exclusion and inclusion factors operating within technical and vocational training centres (TVET) and in the current job market.

The teams in Nablus and Ramallah chose to use qualitative research tools such as life course interviews and focus groups. The first team explored the implementation of inclusive practice in education and employment by focusing on PwDs, the families of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, teachers, school managers, workers and employers. The second group explored processes of social identity formation for PwDs enrolled in special schools (especially boarding schools) by focussing on the experiences of PwDs who are currently or were previously enrolled in special schools, as well as their families and relevant school staff.

Each team's research tools were tested during a piloting phase, to facilitate their further refinement and improvement. Data collection and analysis were self-managed by each team, with the support of Palestinian university researchers, disability experts, EducAid staff and ARCO, for a period of approximately three months per team. It is worth highlighting that for the majority of the co-researchers involved, who themselves are PwDs, the entire research process represented a chance to build confidence and commitment, refine skills, individuate, and understand dynamics of power. This had clear consequences in terms of self-esteem and enlargement of their capability set, eventually leading to personal and social empowerment.

Another important issue concerns the composition of the team, composed also by researchers with disabilities. Some respondents were noticeably more at ease than others and, therefore, more inclined to provide information. This represents a meaningful success in terms of the EDR approach: thanks to the reshaping of power structures that link the researched and the researcher, it is possible to develop a process of open dialogue and exchange and to collect reliable material. The added value of the EDR approach is clear throughout the distinct phases of the research project, from elaboration of research protocols through to data collection and analysis. For this reason, we decided to emphasise and give voice to the experiences of the field researchers themselves, by including boxes titled 'Voices from the field' in the report, which serves as a platform for the disabled co-researchers to share their experiences of participating in this research study.

However, this project was not without its challenges. First, the research teams encountered several obstacles during the recruiting phase and struggled to reach respondents during fieldwork. Some of the respondents that were targeted (such as persons with severe disabilities) refused to participate in the study, citing health concerns and fear of risk of contracting COVID-19. The Nablus/Jenin team worked with persons with intellectual disability and overcame issues of interaction and communication by interviewing family members and caregivers or asking for their support to facilitate communication during interviews. Furthermore, mobility was an issue for both participants and researchers, mainly due to a lack of accessible public transport. These issues required the data collection phase to be extended but were overcome thanks to the collaboration of all parties involved and by partially rethinking some aspects of the data sample or research protocols.

A second important factor concerns bureaucratic and institutional setbacks. The Bethlehem/Hebron group, in particular, encountered a significant and protracted obstacle in its fieldwork when the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) refused their access to certain primary schools. This forced the research team to find alternative ways to contact teachers and school management. The team eventually overcame these obstacles by adjusting their sampling method: they contacted teachers and school management through their professional networks and personal relationships with relevant stakeholders. By applying the snowballing method, they were then able to reach respondents.

The Nablus research team faced similar issues in dealing with the MEHE, who did not allow the researchers to enter school grounds. This interrupted data collection for several weeks and resulted in a sizeable reduction of the survey sample. The team thus decided to alter its methodology for data collection, focussing mostly on qualitative research tools addressed to SwDs and their parents, employers and private school teaching staff, instead of collecting information within public schools.

Furthermore, some teams faced other constraints in data collection. The Gaza group did not receive the collaboration expected from one of the TVET centres it initially targeted (i.e. the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees) and so this centre was replaced with three vocational schools affiliated with the MEHE. At times, research teams were forced to reduce their sample size because the sensitive nature of survey and interview questions

and the depth of certain conversations proved too much for some respondents, who then cancelled their scheduled interviews. This particularly affected the work of the research team in Ramallah, which investigated the development of social identity for PwDs enrolled in special schools, as well as the Nablus/Jenin team, which investigated the delicate topic of intellectual disabilities.

Last but not least, another factor impacting respondent recruitment and the data collection phase was the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, all research teams were affected by restrictions imposed to curb the pandemic. The restrictions significantly affected the planning and administration of interviews or focus groups, requiring several alterations to be made to the research schedule. The research teams that opted for qualitative methods, especially in-depth tools such as the life course interviews, found themselves further challenged by the emergency COVID-19 measures, because such tools require a high degree of intimacy and confidentiality to first be established, which researchers were not always able to create due to lockdowns and distancing measures. In response, the researchers opted to use electronic devices to conduct interviews or administer questionnaires remotely. This mitigated but did not completely overcome the difficulties involved in establishing the necessary relationships of trust and reliability that underpin this kind of research.

Research results and their possible implications, in terms of policy design and future actions and initiatives, have been discussed in detail in previous chapters. This conclusion offers the opportunity, by triangulating the quantitative and qualitative results from all four research studies, to underline cross-cutting issues that prove particularly relevant. Although each study has a different research focus, all of them investigate, in one way or another, episodes of deprivation and marginalisation experienced by PwDs in the domains of education and employment. This enables us to offer a synthesised conclusion for the development of policies and recommendations and to prioritise certain actions for intervention. Indeed, despite differences in the nature of the discrimination experienced according to area, type of school, education level, gender and type of disability, we are able to highlight common inefficiencies and challenges within the education system overall.

In this report, we identify three transversal factors affecting both education and employment opportunities for PwDs. The first is the **huge gap between legislation and the daily lives of PwDs**. The second concerns the **lack of physical accessibility and inefficient transportation to educational institutions**, which makes receiving an education or participating in training and employment a challenging endeavour for PwDs. The third is the **Israeli occupation**. In Gaza, Israeli blockades limit both communication and movement for teachers and trainers and prevent the import and use of necessary materials for education and vocational training, such as assistive devices and equipment. The fourth is the incapacity of key actors (education institutions, TVET centres, rehabilitation services providers, etc.) to target disability issues by elaborating middle-term operational strategies. This is apparent when individualised learning plans are not being used to foster individual SwDs' participation in education and training. Similar consideration can be given to accessibility, the promotion of which often takes the form of one-shot interventions rather than any coherent or sustainable plan.

In Palestine, PwDs can attend public schools or special schools (i.e. boarding schools). The impact of this choice on students varies in terms of academic achievement, self-confidence, identity development and, more generally, social interaction. The Ramallah group investigated how segregated **boarding schools** influence social identity formation processes for PwDs, to understand how this type of schooling experience negatively or positively interacts with other determinants. What emerged is that while PwDs enrolled in special boarding schools do benefit from education and skills development, they are further segregated from society and community and face isolation, discrimination and violence. These schools rarely meet inclusion and accessibility criteria for all types of disability, and leads

to further isolation as students are segregated according to disability and thus interact only with peers with a similar condition. A positive value of this experience is that where regular schools cannot provide inclusive and accessible education, special boarding schools present an opportunity to learn appropriate skills and socialisation. Nevertheless, this still produces a low level of social integration that ends up fuelling dynamics of exclusion later in life. The Ramallah research team's findings and consequent policy recommendations could help to raise awareness on the negative impact that these types of schools have on the lives of PwDs, and they clearly indicate a means to progress. Recommendations are based on the recognition that special schools – in particular special boarding schools – should be disbanded or made obsolete, but the experiences articulated by PwDs makes it clear that a new path towards inclusive education in regular schools needs to be traced first before this objective can be met.

A first important and necessary action to be taken urgently regards the **public sector**. Evidence gathered through this study showed that, currently, neither public nor private schools can guarantee an equal and respectful education to all pupils. This is a key point to stress because it is evident that making public schools fully accessible and inclusive is the only way to dismiss integrally segregated school settings. Put simply, SwDs need and deserve education, and the only way to achieve this objective is to focus efforts on the public sector. But which interventions are to be given priority?

The first range of problems again relate again to the **physical accessibility of spaces and the lack of accessible public transportation for PwDs**. These two factors directly undermine student participation. Furthermore, as one might expect, inadequate physical accessibility affects some types of disability more than others (e.g. mobility impairment). However, accessibility and inclusion are not only about material or physical limitations. Indeed, here it is worth noting the prevalence of positive attitudes expressed by students with auditory disability towards segregated school environments, as was underlined by the Ramallah research study. Lack of integration and participation, as well as of assistive devices, plays an important role in determining, from the outset, whether a student can even access the education on offer.

The first barriers to be overcome are those that prevent students from getting to school, moving around the school grounds or attending and following their lessons. Then, it is of utmost importance to address barriers to inclusive practices and policies in relation to teaching and learning. The research conducted through the NAUWU project showed that **teacher availability and support for different types of disability is alarmingly weak.** There is also insufficient investment in adequate teaching and learning materials and assistive devices, as well as training for teachers and curriculum adaptation. This further inhibits progress towards inclusive education.

The Bethlehem research team investigated levels of **academic achievement** for PwDs in public schools. Their research results showed that lack of investment in curriculum adaptation and specialisation decreases the likelihood of SwDs continuing with education. Even in instances where they are able to complete their education, the lack of investment in them serves to hamper their self-realisation and aspirations, as well as their right to freely choose a branch of study and develop their skills, which ultimately limits their opportunities to find decent employment.

Therefore, the research team in Bethlehem recommends that diversity be promoted through notions of capability, such that capability becomes the foundational concept upon which curricula is reviewed and a series of refresher courses for teachers, administrators and school officials is created and offered. The areas to be covered are numerous, but our research suggests that the focus should be on 'good practices' and overcoming accessibility issues through collaborative strategies, tailored education plans, teaching methods based

on active learning, peer learning techniques and role-playing and socialisation techniques.

Socialisation is a key aspect of education that cannot be understated. School is not just about academic performance or acquiring information, knowledge and culture, it also represents one of the key primary social interactions that children and young people encounter outside their families. To attend school means being part of a community, which is essential to the development of social and communication skills and to learning how to become an active adult member of society. In school, students learn what respect, diversity and inclusion means – overcoming prejudice and discrimination according to gender, religion, disability or ethnicity – which is essential not only for PwDs, but for all students. Indeed, the exclusion of SwDs diminishes the potential benefits of the education offered to all students.

The research conducted in Nablus/Jenin added a further layer to our reflection on the challenges met by students with different disabilities as they attempt to exercise their right to education, by focusing on the **impact of intellectual disabilities on family members**. All research protocols observed that the **families of PwDs play a primary role** in shaping the education of their children and that the attitudes, economic possibilities and competencies of the family heavily influence SwDs' access to education and employment. This is even more relevant for persons with intellectual disabilities.

A recurring issue observed in the Nablus research relates to the **denial phase** that many families of PwDs experience upon learning of their child's disability. This is commonly expressed as denial, frustration and shock and seems to affect mothers the most. The denial phase is driven by a series of factors: first, lack of knowledge about disability; second, lack of information on how to deal with certain impairments; and third, insufficiency and inefficiency of services and programmes to support parents. Whereas for some families, this phase can become a catalyst for change and inclusion, for others it is a barrier. Through in-depth interviews, the research team learnt that family can be a positive resource for PwDs in some ways but a barrier in others. Family attitudes and behaviours are also influenced by the pervasive social stigma attributed to intellectual disability, as well as a widespread lack of free or subsidised services (e.g. rehabilitation, health programmes), which impact the economic well-being of families and the opportunities for employment of caregivers, which in turn affects PwDs' lives in various ways.

This research study clearly demonstrates that although there is an immense potential for the education system to promote social change, reform must occur both inside and outside schools. Indeed, inclusive education is not limited to what happens inside schools or on school grounds. Measures that support inclusive education and employment must involve actions targeting parents, family members and the broader community. It is crucial to limit the tendency of the families of PwDs to overprotect their children, so that PwDs can access public life and achieve their maximum level of autonomy. Simultaneously, families and caregivers must be able to access support services, including financial support, psychological assistance and carer's leave schemes.

Opportunities in education and employment are inextricably intertwined. Therefore, some of our research protocols aimed to explore the **transition from school to the workforce.** To better understand this, the Gaza research team investigated three vocational training centres (VTCs) catering to PwDs in the Gaza Strip. Again, legal frameworks emerged as a significant obstacle to the implementation of inclusive education practices. As current legislation is inadequate in ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of these centres, it represents a barrier to the inclusion of PwDs in technical education and during their transition into the job market.

PwDs enrol in technical education for multiple reasons, mostly in a bid to gain autonomy and independence from their households of origin. However, the widespread negative per-

ception held by society and employers towards both vocational education and disability disadvantages PwDs who want to work. From information gathered through interviews and focus groups, the Gaza research team confirmed that vocational education helps PwDs to develop self-learning capacity and prepares them for community participation by developing their soft skills. However, considering the data and the high unemployment rate of PwDs, many more initiatives are required to make VTCs work for PwDs, in terms of physical accessibility, programmes, training and preparation of teaching staff, as well as services to facilitate access to the job market through work placements and internships for SwDs.

The research protocols formulated by the Nablus and Gaza teams focussed on **access to the job market.** The team observed that workplaces are seriously inadequate and lack reasonable measures to accommodate PwDs. Through interviews and questionnaires, the team discovered that PwDs struggle to reach workplaces due to limited public transport options and accessibility. In the workplace, they are often at risk of abuse by colleagues, including bullying and violence. More generally, statistics show that the unemployment rate among PwDs was approximately 37% in 2017: 19% in the West Bank and 54% in the Gaza Strip (PCBS, 2017).

The Gaza team also uncovered a **gender gap** in the job market. Although the study respondents did not seem aware of any discrepancy between men and women at work, and despite improvement in the rate of women's participation in the job market over the past decade, the percentage of employed women decreases significantly when it comes to WwDs, who suffer from multiple and intersectional discrimination.

The Nablus group focused on job market access for persons with intellectual and developmental disability. The first indicator of inefficiency is the absence of specific data or national statistics for this type of impairment. However, through interviews conducted with relevant stakeholders, the group gathered enough data to show that PwDs are generally unsuccessful in gaining employment for various reasons, which include lack of rehabilitation and training services and pervasive negative social opinion regarding intellectual and developmental disability.

The team also identified inefficiencies related to the practical implementation of job-oriented measures intended to protect PwDs. In Palestine, Article 5 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act obligates private and public sector enterprises to ensure that at least 5% of their employees are PwDs. The Labour Act No. 7/2000 states that employment is a right for all citizens who are capable of working, on the basis of equal opportunity and without discrimination. However, despite these laws, opportunities for PwDs are seriously limited – even more so for persons with intellectual disabilities – and so PwDs remain overlooked or unrecognised as potential workers.

To conclude, the four emancipatory research studies conducted within the NaUwU project successfully identified the weakness and inefficiency of public policies aimed at fostering the full and effective participation of PwDs in education and employment. This significantly affects the overall success of social integration for PwDs. These inefficiencies are partially mitigated by the actions of civil society organisations and international cooperation projects. However, there is an evident need for coherent and structured national policies that address disability, if the UNCRPD principles are to be effectively implemented and realised. Overall, the results of the four studies present a complex framework, and the emerging recommendations propose moving away from standardised forms of service provision towards participatory forms of governance, preferably through the joint action of DPOs and CSOs.

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