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People with disabilities, sustainable development and work: from invisibility to priority?

Pessoas com deficiência, desenvolvimento sustentável e trabalho: da invisibilidade para a prioridade?

Abstract

The sustainable development goals reaffirmed human rights and articulated global commitments that will only be achieved by including all individuals among these people with disabilities. Despite concerted international and national efforts to uphold their rights, experiences of discrimination, social exclusion, and lack of opportunities for full and effective participation in society persist. This theoretical essay, with a reflective and interpretative nature, explores the relationship between the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace and the promotion of sustainability. It uses the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a basis for analysis and the Brazilian normative framework. The discussion highlights the essential role of people with disabilities inclusion in achieving specific SDG targets, particularly those related to work, given the role of this activity in promoting equality and sustainable economic growth. Thus, it emphasizes the need to formulate strategies to boost the participation of people with disabilities in work, ensuring access to employment, permanence in the activity, and professional development.

Keywords: Disabled Persons; Sustainable Development; Diversity, Equity, Inclusion; Occupational Health; Work.

Resumo

As metas para o desenvolvimento sustentável reafirmaram os direitos humanos e articularam compromissos globais que só serão alcançados com a inclusão de todas as pessoas, entre estas, as pessoas com deficiência. Apesar dos esforços nacionais e internacionais na direção da afirmação e implementação dos direitos dessa população, ainda persistem as experiências de discriminação, exclusão social e falta de oportunidades para participação plena e efetiva na sociedade. Este ensaio teórico com natureza reflexiva e interpretativa tem como objetivo explorar a relação entre a inclusão de pessoas com deficiência no trabalho e a promoção da sustentabilidade, utilizando como base de análise a Agenda 2030 para o Desenvolvimento Sustentável e os Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável (ODS) da Organização das Nações Unidas e o referencial normativo brasileiro. Com isso, apresenta-se uma discussão que destaca como a inclusão das pessoas com deficiência é primordial para a concretização de metas específicas dos ODS, especialmente aquelas relacionadas ao trabalho tendo em vista o papel desta atividade para promoção da igualdade e do crescimento econômico sustentável. Assim, salienta-se a necessidade de formulação de estratégias para impulsionar a participação das pessoas com deficiência no trabalho, garantindo o acesso ao emprego, a permanência na atividade e o desenvolvimento profissional.

Palavras-chave: Pessoas com Deficiência; Desenvolvimento Sustentável; Diversidade, Equidade, Inclusão; Saúde do Trabalhador; Trabalho.

Introduction

According to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)¹, promulgated by the United Nations (UN) in 2006 and ratified by 184 countries, “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” (p. 29).

From this perspective, the CRPD considers bodily specificities and their expressions, but emphasizes that the restrictions to people’s full and effective participation arise from the interaction between the body with impairments and social barriers. The Convention recognizes the issue of disability as a matter of justice and human rights and that ensuring a dignified life is not limited to the provision of health goods and services but also requires the guarantee of a social environment accessible to the diversity of bodies².

This vision presented by the CRPD is in line with the conceptual model of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF), which preceded it and was an essential milestone in redefining the understanding of disability in the field of health^{3,4}. Its importance is due to recognizing disability as a dynamic phenomenon resulting from the interaction between intrinsic factors - such as genetic conditions and personal characteristics - and the social context, which can create barriers or facilitate participation and the performance of activities^{3,4}.

Thus, both the CRPD and the ICF adopt a biopsychosocial perspective, which understands disability as the result of a complex interaction between the individual and the environment and not simply as a personal or biomedical limitation^{3,4}.

It is estimated that there are currently 1.3 billion people with disabilities (PwD), approximately 15% of the global population, 80% of whom live in low- and middle-income countries⁵⁻⁸. Various studies point to the existence of a complex and interdependent relationship between poverty and disability, forming a cycle in which one can be both a cause and a consequence of the other^{5,9-12}.

Thus, on the one hand, economic poverty can lead to disability due to a lack of access to health services, inadequate nutrition, and unsafe working conditions. On the other hand, disability can push individuals and their families into poverty due to discrimination, social exclusion, and lack of employment opportunities^{5,10}.

Moreover, girls and women with disabilities, those living in rural areas, and those with intellectual, psychosocial, or multiple disabilities are particularly deprived of access to basic goods and services, which ends up exacerbating the inequalities experienced by these groups^{11,13}. In this context, it is also important to consider that the additional costs faced by families with members with disabilities can have an effect on income and accentuate poverty. These costs include direct expenses related to PwD’s specific needs, revenue loss, and the demand for care provided by a caregiver.

Thus, despite advances in understanding the phenomenon of disability and its relationship with human rights, the disabled population still faces barriers that prevent or restrict their full participation in society throughout their lives. Although other social groups may also be exposed to situations of social exclusion and vulnerability, PwD are affected by these unequally and disproportionately, with greater difficulties in accessing education, health, work, leisure, and social protection^{8,14,15}.

All these areas of life are interconnected and mutually influence each other. Specially regarding work, it is important to highlight that this activity is recognized as central to social inclusion, economic empowerment, personal and professional development, and consequently can break the cycle of poverty and marginalization in which PwDs may be inserted^{14,15}.

Considering the above, this essay explores the relationship between the inclusion of PwD at work and the promotion of sustainability, using the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals

(SDGs) as a basis for analysis. In this discussion, the aim is to highlight how the inclusion of PwD is essential for achieving the specific goals of the SDGs, especially those related to work, given the role of this activity in promoting equity and sustainable economic growth.

This theoretical essay is reflective and interpretive, constituted by the interaction between objectivity and subjectivity¹⁶. The essay was initially constructed based on an exploratory and unsystematized study of national and international literature that correlated the themes of disability, sustainable development, and work without the intention of exhausting the analysis of existing publications. The text comprises reflections that emerged from reading and involvement with the theme, discussions, and critical analysis to understand the reality studied, highlighting new approaches to research.

From this perspective, this text will initially discuss how the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs address the demands of PwD, highlighting specific criteria and indicators for this group. Next, the inclusion of PwD in the workforce will be analyzed in the context of the international commitment to “*leave no one behind*” and the Brazilian legal framework designed to reduce the inequalities faced by PwD in the labor market. This includes the Federal Constitution, the Quota Law, and the Brazilian Inclusion Law (LBI). Finally, recommendations for the future will be presented, focusing on practical strategies tailored to the Brazilian context, emphasizing the need for effective policies, the production of disaggregated data, and continuous support for the inclusion, retention, and professional development of PwD.

People with disabilities and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

In 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was established, preceded and considerably influenced by the CRPD. This agenda reaffirmed human rights and articulated commitments to global development based on eradicating poverty, protecting the environment and climate, and ensuring peace and prosperity for people everywhere.

The 2030 Agenda applies to all signatory countries and people, with and without disabilities, has 17 goals, 169 targets for action, and explicitly mentions the terms “disability” and “persons with disabilities” 11 times in five of its goals (4, 8, 10, 11, and 17) and their respective indicators. Furthermore, this group is covered in the definition of vulnerable people, thus recognizing the unique challenges that people with disabilities face in their quest to realize their rights and participate in society with equal opportunities^{7,15,17}.

Table 1 provides an overview of the SDGs mentioned, highlighting how each addresses issues related to PwD.

Table 1 Breakdown of how the SDGs address people with disabilities

SDGS	Summary of goals	How PCDs are addressed
SDG 4 - Quality education	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.	Eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the most vulnerable, including the PCD, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations and build and improve the physical conditions of learning environments so that they are safer, non-violent, inclusive and effective.

Continue

SDG 8 - Decent work and economic growth	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.	Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including young people and the disabled, and equal pay for work of equal value.
SDG 10 - Reducing inequalities within and between countries	Promote social, economic and political inclusion, guaranteeing equal opportunities and reducing inequalities, through policies that seek greater equity, better financial regulation and safe and orderly migration.	Empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, regardless of age, gender, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, economic or other status.
SDG 11 - Sustainable cities and communities	Making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.	It emphasizes the need for “access to safe, accessible, sustainable and affordable transport systems for all”, as well as access to public spaces, with special attention to the needs of people with disabilities among the groups highlighted.
SDG 17 - Partnerships and means of implementing the SDGs	Strengthen the mobilization of financial resources and investments for developing countries, promote cooperation in technology and capacity building, and improve the quality of data and global partnerships for the effective implementation of the SDGs.	The need to produce demographic data with greater quality and reliability by country and disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographical location and other relevant characteristics.

Source: prepared by the authors based on: <https://brasil.un.org/pt-br/sdgs>

The SDGs address both criteria for identifying the sources of exclusion and inequality faced by PwD when compared to the general population, as well as indicators related to the specific demands of this group. Among the particular indicators aimed at PwDs, we highlight the expansion of access to health and rehabilitation services and the provision of adaptations for school and work inclusion, among others^{7,17,18}.

However, despite the efforts of different organizations and countries, there are still barriers to the participation of PwD in society and the inequalities that this population experiences throughout their lives, which is related to different SDGs¹⁹, such as SDG 1, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11, and 16. The exclusion of PwDs is associated with various factors, for example, discrimination, stigma, and negative attitudes towards this population that prevent or limit access to education, which is vital for inclusion in other contexts.

Another factor is the lack of accessibility in cities and on public transportation, making it difficult to get to school, work, leisure, and health facilities, as well as the limited availability of adaptations in these different spaces. Moreover, there is a lack of skills, understanding, and awareness of disability, which is seen even among professionals who provide services directly to this population and those involved in building public policies^{14,15}.

All these factors are interdependent and interlinked in complex relationships that influence each other. For example, the barriers faced by children with disabilities in accessing education often result in young people and

adults having lower levels of education. This, in turn, can lead to additional challenges for the inclusion of this population in the workplace, leading to more precarious incomes and a greater risk of poverty.

Moreover, the situation can be aggravated by the need to take time away from work to care for family members with disabilities, a role predominantly played by women, which contributes to the perpetuation of inequalities and economic limitations of families with people with disabilities among their members¹⁵.

People with disabilities and work: international and Brazilian scenarios

When it comes to work, the indicator that measures the proportion of the employed population of working-age is lower among PwD compared to those without. A United Nations estimate for 2006-2016, based on data from 91 countries, shows that the proportion of people in employment was 36% among PwD and 60% among people without disabilities, considering the population aged 15 and over. In all geographical regions of the world, women with disabilities are less likely to be employed than men with disabilities and people without disabilities in general. This picture points to the intersectionality between disability and gender when discussing access to work¹⁴.

The type and severity of the disability also influence the opportunities for inclusion in work activities. The employment rate for individuals with multiple disabilities is around 37%, while for those with a single disability it is 47%. Those with motor disabilities who require more support to perform their tasks are less likely to be employed compared to those who are more independent. Moreover, people with intellectual and/or psychosocial disabilities tend to be employed less frequently than those with other types of disabilities, highlighting that the psychosocial PwD group is the one with the lowest employment rates¹⁴.

When it comes to the quality of employment relationships, PwD are more likely to work part-time than people without disabilities. The main determinants of this situation are the limited availability of adaptations to the work process and environment and the lack of accessible transportation. Full-time jobs without the necessary adaptations make it impossible for workers with disabilities to have adequate time to prepare for work, commute, and reconcile basic care related to disability and health¹⁴.

Compared to the general population, workers with disabilities tend to have more precarious employment relationships, for example working in the informal sector or on a self-employed basis. It is estimated that 62% of PwD are self-employed, most often with their families, while 53% of people without disabilities are self-employed. This situation contributes significantly to the lower incomes received by workers with disabilities. The disparity in salaries can be more or less accentuated depending on the type of disability or whether the person lives in a rural area¹⁴.

In Brazil, data from the 2022 Continuous National Household Sample Survey (Pnad)²⁰ revealed that there were approximately 18.6 million people with some kind of disability, corresponding to 8.9% of the population aged two years and over. The data points to marked inequalities between PwD and their non-disabled peers, such as a higher illiteracy rate and a lower percentage of high school graduates.

Participation in the workforce also showed disparities: 29.2% of PwD were in the workforce compared to people of working age, while this indicator was 66.4% among people without disabilities. Inequalities were observed in all education groups. The level of occupation among PwD was 26.6%, less than half the 60.7% found for people without disabilities²⁰.

Around 55.0% of employed PwD were in the informal sector, while for people without disabilities, this percentage was 38.7%. The average real income of PwD was R\$ 1,860, significantly lower than the R\$ 2,690 received by people without disabilities. Moreover, more than 50% of the country's PwD are women, who have a higher prevalence of multiple disabilities compared to men²⁰.

Given the extent of the situations of exclusion that still affect the participation of PwD in society throughout their lives globally, including this population has become a priority in the 2030 Agenda, as has the implementation of

the CRPD^{18,19}. From this perspective, UN Secretary-General António Guterres stressed that *“this vision of a better future can only be achieved with the full participation of everyone, including persons with disabilities. Upholding the rights and ensuring the full inclusion of the world’s 1 billion persons with disabilities is not only a moral imperative but a practical necessity”*¹⁴ (Foreword, p. 5).

It is worth noting that work is one of the topics that has received attention in projects supported by the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD). Thus, 33% of 39 project proposals approved in 2019 referred to Article 27 of the CRPD and/or SDG 8²¹.

Legal milestones on the inclusion of people with disabilities in Brazil

The quest to increase access to work for PwDs in Brazil is backed by a legal framework that dates to the 1988 Federal Constitution. The Magna Carta expanded the rules by recognizing work as a social right for all people and establishing a ban on any discrimination regarding salary and admission criteria²².

In addition, the Quotas Law (Law No. 8.213 of 1991)²³ established the reservation of vacancies for PwDs in private companies with more than one hundred employees, while Law No. 8.112 of 1990²⁴ ensured the reservation of 20% of vacancies in public tenders for this population. These affirmative action instruments aimed to correct historical disadvantages and promote equal opportunities.

Since its enactment, the Quota Law has been the central policy for including PwD in the workplace and is essential for inducing hiring. In 2021, for example, 92% of workers with disabilities who were employed worked for employers obliged to hire PwD under the Quotas Law. In other words, hiring is still ensured by legal obligation. The private sector accounted for most hires, meeting 50.65% of its quota. On the other hand, the public administration only met 11.61%²⁵.

However, the Quota Law alone has proved insufficient to effectively change the lack of access to work for the disabled, as it does not articulate systemic strategies for urban and environmental adaptations that improve accessibility conditions in schools, cities, and public transport, nor to transform negative representations and persistent behaviors in relation to disability and the social participation of this population group²⁶.

In this respect, research that has analyzed the application of the Quotas Law in Brazil has observed challenges that need to be overcome to increase the social participation of this group through work. Among the challenges listed are the low receptiveness of companies to the legal norm due to the predominance of a strictly economic rationality²⁷⁻³⁰, the exacerbated competitiveness in the labor market, and the persistence of stigma on the part of employers configured as an attitudinal barrier³¹.

Moreover, the perception that the adaptations needed by companies represent a cost with no counterpart in productivity gains³⁰, together with attitudinal barriers, result in a lack of flexibility in relation to the profile required by companies^{32,33}. On the other hand, it is essential to note that the Quota Law focuses on including the PwD in the workplace but does not provide ways to promote the permanence and professional advancement of the PwD²⁶.

More recently, Law No. 13.146/2015³³, also known as the LBI or the Statute of Persons with Disabilities, addresses the Right to Work from a broader perspective, as shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2 Details of the information provided in the Brazilian Inclusion Law (LBI) on the right to work for people with disabilities

Articles	Description of how the right to work is presented in the articles of the LBI
Article 34	It establishes the right to work for people with disabilities in an accessible and inclusive environment, with equal opportunities. It includes encouraging self-employment and entrepreneurship, participation in courses, training, continuing education, career plans, promotions, bonuses and professional incentives.
Article 35	An advance on the Quotas Law, it ensures not only access, but also the permanence of people with disabilities in the workplace. It provides for professional habilitation and rehabilitation services and programs with a multidisciplinary team to support insertion, continuity or return to work.
Article 37	It defines inclusion at work as competitive placement and equal opportunities. It requires compliance with labor and social security legislation, accessibility rules, the provision of assistive technology and reasonable adjustments. Guidelines for implementation include: priority for people with greater difficulty in integration, provision of the necessary support, respect for vocational profiles and interests, support for employers, periodic assessments, intersectoral coordination of public policies, and participation in civil society organizations. Note: The proposal for supported work still needs to be regulated.

Source: prepared by the authors based on the LBI.

Unlike previous legislation, the LBI³³ promotes advances that go beyond the workplace, aiming systemically to reduce inequalities in society as a whole. By aligning itself with the CRPD, the LBI addresses the need for comprehensive transformations in access to education, health, culture and leisure, among others. These transformations have the potential to break down the barriers that hinder or prevent access to the job market for PwD, and which are difficult to address by affirmative action policies when applied in isolation.

People with disabilities, Sustainable Development, and work: current practices and recommendations for the future

To meet the challenges of including PwDs in the workplace, several countries have implemented policies and practices to ensure this right and transform the reality of work for this population. Of note is the creation of anti-discrimination legislation, which has resulted in the recognition of the right to work and the prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of disability, as we have seen in Brazil^{14,33}.

Associated with this, some countries are developing strategies to ensure the application of policies, such as reasonable accommodation, affirmative action, professional rehabilitation, and employment services that include professional training and individual support with counseling, support for job search, placement, and follow-up to remain at work or even return to work; incentives for employers; supported work and actions to change attitudes towards the experience of PwD at work^{14,33,34}.

Employment programs can also include improving accessibility to information, communication, the built environment, and transport^{14,34,35}.

Regarding affirmative actions to promote the employment of PwD, quota systems are used which oblige companies and the public sector to fill a percentage of their job vacancies by hiring people with disabilities, as we have seen in Brazil. The most effective systems are those linked to inspection and the payment of fines for each reserved position not filled. The accumulated funds can be used to support initiatives related to the employment of PwD, such as making reasonable accommodations at work¹⁴.

The UN suggests that the public sector should lead by example in being employers of PwD and that countries should invest in actions to ensure that these people are represented in the workplace, which in Brazil's case still seems a long way off, despite the legal provision for reserving vacancies in the public sector¹⁴.

Countries have also invested in technical and vocational training programs for PwD. In addition, some have adopted programs to hire apprentices who provide training for work in the development of professional practice in addition to school. Training programs also seek to encourage entrepreneurship among PwD, which also requires facilitating access to funding¹⁴.

However, it remains a challenge to produce data to monitor participation in the workplace, disaggregated by disability, gender, race, social status, economic activity, and educational background, which will make it possible to evaluate the effectiveness of policies, services, and programs being adopted in the countries, as well as making it possible to compare their realities^{14,15}.

Furthermore, social protection systems that provide benefits for the PwD in general, aligned with income and inability to work, can discourage the inclusion of the PwD¹⁴. On the other hand, worldwide access to social protection falls far short of the population's needs and does not fulfill its potential for social and economic development³⁵. What's more, especially in low- and middle-income countries, where most of the disabled population is living in poverty, it's a challenge to build a system that guarantees economic security for this population in parallel with support for remaining in employment¹⁴.

From this perspective, it is vital to highlight the need for policies and programs to ensure entry into work but also to support retention, career development, and return to work, since just like other workers, those with disabilities can also fall ill, for work-related reasons or not, and need to take time off work. The likelihood of returning to work becomes lower as the time spent away from work lengthens, which can lead to more significant economic, social, and mental health difficulties. This process is influenced by various factors, including the availability of support services for returning to work³⁶.

It should also be pointed out that disabled workers tend to remain at work longer when adaptations are made available to eliminate or reduce barriers related to environmental and social factors, such as inaccessible workplaces and negative attitudes from employers or peers. In these situations, changes to the workplace or how it should be carried out and awareness-raising among managers and peers improve the adaptation of the job to the worker, encourage participation in work, and prevent the disabled worker from remaining unemployed or dependent on social protection benefits³⁷. Although Brazilian legislation recognizes the right of workers with disabilities to reasonable accommodation to enter, stay, and return to work, we still don't have strategies to effectively support employers in these processes.

It is worth noting that the regulation of the biopsychosocial assessment of disability provided for in Article 2 of the CRPD and Law No. 13.146/2015 is under construction and could contribute to advances in making accommodations for and at work insofar as it will assess the experience of disability based on its determining factors, which include the possibilities or restrictions for participation in an activity and the socio-environmental factors that can act as barriers or facilitators. In this sense, it will provide information for identifying needs and making personalized adaptations for workers with disabilities³⁸.

Final considerations

This essay aimed to explore the relationship between the inclusion of PwD at work and the promotion of sustainability, analyzing how this inclusion is aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs.

Firstly, it looked at how the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs explicitly incorporate the needs of PwD, reflecting a global commitment to eliminating the barriers that prevent their full participation in society. Next, the analysis revealed the persistent challenges PwD face in the field of work, including disparities in education,

employment, and income, as well as attitudinal and structural barriers that limit their inclusion and permanence in labor activities.

Regarding the Brazilian reality, the maintenance of historical inequalities indicates the urgent need to formulate strategies to boost PwD's quantitative and qualitative participation in the workplace. It is, therefore, imperative that Brazil moves forward by placing demands related to the inclusion of the PwD in the workplace on the sustainable development agenda. This is because eradicating poverty, as proposed by the SDGs, requires a close look at these individuals' full and equal inclusion. Promoting accessibility systemically is, hence, fundamental to ensuring that PwD have real opportunities to work and make a significant contribution to economic and social development.

It is important to point out that this text is not intended to exhaust the discussion on the inclusion of PwD in the workplace about sustainability but rather to start a debate. In this sense, it is recognized that aspects of this discussion have not been addressed, such as the intersectionality between disability, gender, and race and issues related to generating work and income that transcend formal employment, including entrepreneurship and cooperativism. These topics are crucial for a more complete and multidimensional understanding of the issue addressed in this essay and deserve specific attention in future analyses.

As far as prospects are concerned, the regulation of biopsychosocial assessment of disability could bring important advances. Furthermore, it is crucial to foster a cultural change in perceptions of PwD, ensuring that policies and programs promote the inclusion of this group in the workplace and guarantee their continuous professional development and progress. Furthermore, carrying out studies and constantly evaluating the strategies implemented are fundamental to ensuring that access to work for PwD effectively contributes to building a more inclusive and just society.

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