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Arab Civil Society Organizations and the Issue of Disability, Inclusion and Sustainable Development

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The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations Democracy Fund.



Foreword

During the past decade, significant developments have been made in addressing social and economic inclusion issues at civil society and the international community level. This coincided with increasing human rights demands and pressure by organizations representing marginalized groups worldwide. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 by the UN General Assembly, followed by the approval of a set of relevant and specialized frameworks, shed further light on such issues. Addressing social and economic inclusion within these reference frameworks came after a long period of struggle marked by several milestones and achievements, most notably, the UNGA's unanimous adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006¹, which came into effect in 2008². Undoubtedly, all these conventions and frameworks adopted a human rights development approach and have had a profound impact in bringing about significant transformation in civil society organizations (CSOs)³ activities and programs in many countries, including several countries in the Arab world⁴.

However, after nearly six years, i.e., more than one-third of the period specified for achieving the 2030 Agenda, this transformation has barely translated into action and remained along the lines of speeches and slogans rather than reflecting the aspired change or translating into reassuring indicators of the progress made towards fulfilling the main principle of the 2030 SDGs: **"To leave no one behind."** Perhaps the most conclusive evidence that this transformation remains incomplete is the ongoing and increasing marginalization and

exclusion of vulnerable segments of society, especially after the outbreak of Covid-19. Persons with disabilities are uncontestedly mostly marginalized and excluded from decision-making processes and transparent participation in policies and programs, thus condemning them to be left behind on the path towards development.

CSOs in the Arab world have assumed a key role in ensuring that no one is left behind and have spared no effort to make sure that disability issues are reflected in policies and programs that are more comprehensive and inclusive of the rights of persons with disabilities in line with the sustainable development goals and targets. In this context, this brief paper aims to shed light on the overall course of action and circumstances affecting their efforts in this regard by examining the following aspects:

- The general framework of economic and social inclusion;
- The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which mainly provides for the integration of disability issues, in line with the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD);
- An analysis of the most critical structural and strategic elements defining the extent to which disability issues and the rights of persons with disabilities shall be integrated into civil society organizations' initiatives that push forward the progress towards the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals;
- The conclusions and recommendations would help activate the participation of persons with disabilities in Arab civil society initiatives demanding economic and social inclusion through policies and programs concerned with implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development goals by Arab governments.



Research Background and Methodology

The present research paper falls within the context of the ANND initiative to include in its strategic plan the necessary steps to empower its members in Arab countries in the field of including persons with disabilities in their initiatives demanding the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals at the economic and social levels. Thus, this paper assesses the civil society organizations' advocacy for the inclusion of persons with disabilities within the 2030 sustainable development framework in each of the following countries: Jordan, Tunisia, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, and Yemen. ANND is conducting this research in the context of its partnership with the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF)⁵ and in cooperation with the Arab Forum on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The research methodology is based upon several tools, including the following:

- Reviewing the chapters of the strategic plan approved by ANND's general authority for the coming years to assess the extent to which it reflects the principle elements, strategies, and mechanisms for integrating disability issues within its areas of work
- Conducting two separate focus groups: the first aims to introduce ANND members to each other's experiences in addressing and including disability issues, persons with disabilities, and their representative organizations in ANND's programs pertaining to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, while the second aims to examine the perspectives of a group of member organizations in

the Arab Forum on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities regarding the overall reality, problems, and challenges facing the inclusion of persons with disabilities and disability issues in Arab civil society initiatives to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals

- Conducting a series of interviews with a group of experts and representatives of ANND's executive body to learn about the latter's orientation towards including persons with disabilities and taking into account their current situation in ANND's areas of action regarding significant development issues.



The participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations in civil society activities: the current reality

During the past decade, significant transformations have taken place regarding the participation and activity of persons with disabilities as a component of Arab civil society⁶. This coincided with the political transformations in many Arab countries in the context of the Arab Spring revolutions. Thus, the participation of persons with disabilities was represented by forming local and national organizations and unions to serve as a starting point for their human rights activities and demands towards achieving their comprehensive social and economic inclusion. As a result, several organizations were founded within the movements, rejecting the ongoing social and economic marginalization of a broad segment of the poorest and most vulnerable groups in Arab societies. Similarly, in an attempt to organize their efforts through NGOs, persons with disabilities also strived to express their stance, refusing existing care systems and parental guardianship that have contributed, for decades, to perpetuating the marginalization and stereotyping of disabilities and persons with disabilities⁷.

Few Arab countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco have well-established organizations for persons with disabilities (DPOs). Since the 1980s, such organizations have been playing a leading role in launching a human rights movement that advocates for consecrating the social and economic inclusion of persons with disabilities. Factors

that contributed to promoting the role and participation of DPOs in these countries include the prevailing conditions, which allow a minimum level of relative democracy and freedom, which triggered the activities of civil society organizations in general. The increased awareness of various human rights and development issues among CSOs in these countries, such as women's issues and combating poverty, has offered an excellent opportunity for developing the course of action at the organizational and human rights levels in various organizations, including DPOs. In addition, such development contributed to motivating DPOs towards increasing their direct and solid interaction with active CSOs and international organizations in each of the abovementioned countries.

This interaction has manifested in the increased participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations in activities and campaigns on generic issues, such as trade unions or women's movements. Moreover, DPOs showcased an increasing interest in strategic development areas, such as calling for enhancing work transparency in public administrations and advocating for the inclusion of persons with disabilities and their organizations in decision-making on public policies, including those pertaining to budget allocation or development plans and legislation on disability issues in areas of education, labor, healthcare, social protection, participation in political life, and the adoption of access and inclusion standards specifically in areas of civil development as well as parliamentary and local elections, etc. Thus, these organizations' awareness of the importance of concluding partnerships with other CSOs and international organizations active in Lebanon and Morocco was an essential strategic resource. This contributed to strengthening the mutual

interaction among such organizations, whereby CSOs, in general, have started realizing the importance of supporting disability issues, specifically in achieving economic and social inclusion for persons with disabilities. Therefore, CSOs have become more open and aware of the importance of fostering the participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations in activities, albeit relatively and as deemed possible in light of the circumstances and capacities of each, and of fulfilling all requirements that would ensure the effective and full participation of persons with disabilities in their activities.

Partnerships between CSOs and DPOs in Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco achieved relatively high success and progress. These strategic partnerships also encouraged and influenced the rise and resurgence of movements by DPOs in other Arab countries, especially those that underwent political transformations during the last decade, such as Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, and others. However, this does not necessarily indicate that these emerging organizations, despite active efforts, have been able to induce qualitative change in promoting the inclusion of persons with disabilities and their issues in CSOs, especially in achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. For that purpose, many persisting problems and challenges must be addressed and overcome by all concerned parties, particularly organizations of people with disabilities on the one hand and CSOs on the other hand. What problems and challenges hinder the inclusion of disability issues into Arab civil societies, specifically in achieving the 2030 Agenda goals? To answer this question, it is necessary to reflect the inclusion of persons with disabilities in policies

and programs related to implementing the Sustainable Development Agenda before tackling the roles that CSOs can play in this regard.



Sustainable Development, Disability, and Inclusion: Concepts and Roles

First: What is the concept of inclusion?

Today, the literature of entities and organizations concerned with development and human rights issues⁸, including the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND), expresses these organizations' commitment to respecting and safeguarding the rights of all people. This principle is based on their understanding of the essence of diversity⁹ and inclusion, which consists of the differences among individuals in terms of social class, economic status, culture, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, religion, language, national origin, or disability¹⁰. These characteristics should not be considered a reason to deprive individuals of the right to participate in life, society, and production¹¹. Everyone has the right to equal access to all rights, including education, work, healthcare, housing, movement, freedom of expression, and participation in political life. Moreover, these rights should be enshrined for all people through local, national, regional, and international legislation, policies, programs, and activities. It is also incumbent upon decision-makers to secure all means,

physical and political conditions to fulfill this fundamental right through different forms and channels of cooperation and strategic partnerships. Accordingly, it is imperative to guarantee the right of individuals to participate in production processes and contribute to the development and promotion of opportunities for a decent life for all people. This will ensure development opportunities for societies and continuity for all social groups, irrespective of the abovementioned differences. The role of such groups is reinforced in their unhindered participation in rights and duties and production and reproduction processes through practices that do not marginalize, exclude, or discriminate against them.

Second: What is the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the sustainable development framework?

The integration of disability issues in the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development can be traced back systematically to binding legal frameworks starting with the adoption of the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006¹². Articles 3 to 9 of the CRPD outline the general human rights principles that all State Parties must adhere to by aligning their required national legislation and laws with the provisions thereof. Among essential principles¹³ are those stipulating the right of persons with disabilities to equality, non-discrimination, access to quality services, and the need to adopt comprehensive standards that guarantee the right of persons with disabilities to access, use, and benefit from places and information.

In addition, Articles 10 to 31 of the same Convention define a set of rights that mirror these principles by allowing persons with disabilities to enjoy inclusive education, decent work, access to healthcare and rehabilitation services, social protection, participation in political and cultural life, and freedom of movement and expression, among others. The Convention also obligates States Parties to enact binding laws for all relevant public, private, and civil society entities responsible for these rights, in a manner consistent with the set of fundamental principles specified above. To ensure the implementation of the Convention's provisions, Article 32¹⁴ identifies a set of key practical measures, including building strategic partnerships between various stakeholders, especially DPOs and various international, regional, national, and local bodies, including civil society organizations. The Convention also obliges states to adopt follow-up methods to monitor the extent to which the concerned bodies are committed to implementing the rights stipulated in the provisions of the Convention, either by forming specialized national bodies or by including this as part of the responsibilities of national human rights councils. The responsibilities undertaken by these bodies include receiving complaints submitted by persons with disabilities and their organizations concerning any violation that constitutes a violation of the principles and provisions of the International Convention and relevant national laws. In addition, the Convention stipulated the formation of a permanent committee composed of members elected periodically by the States Parties. The Committee's headquarters shall be located at the center of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva, and it shall be responsible for monitoring the extent to

which states comply with the provisions of the Convention. Under such measures, the Convention requires States Parties to submit periodic annual reports showcasing the extent to which rights and the relevant conditions are fulfilled.

Similarly, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was approved in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly in line with the provisions of the CRPD¹⁵. Several SDGs, including a number of related targets and indicators¹⁶, provide for the principle of inclusion of persons with disabilities as one of the most marginalized groups that should not be excluded from the development process¹⁷. Stipulating the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the Sustainable Development Agenda consolidates the latter's compliance with and integration of human rights issues as previously established by the CRPD¹⁸.

Third: What role do CSOs in sustainable development, disability, and inclusion?

To ensure the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in a non-binding form, Goal 17¹⁹ thereof stresses the importance of establishing multilateral partnerships between the relevant international, regional, and national bodies, as this constitutes an essential starting point to ensure that persons with disabilities are not excluded from the development process²⁰. One of the most prominent manifestations of these partnerships is ensuring that persons with disabilities²¹ play an active and influential role in monitoring governments' activities to honor their commitments towards the Sustainable Development Agenda²². Similarly,

one of the most crucial ways to fulfill this role is to include persons with disabilities and their organizations, along with other CSOs, in preparing the voluntary national reviews²³ submitted by countries to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), held by the United Nations annually at its headquarters in New York²⁴. Alternatively, DPOs can participate in these forums as part of the International Disability Alliance²⁵, a network of CSOs, and provide their feedback on the voluntary reviews submitted by countries. Moreover, persons with disabilities can also be included in the preparation of voluntary reviews²⁶ which tackle the extent to which countries have implemented the Sustainable Development Goals. They may also participate in drafting shadow reports or periodic reviews²⁷ on governments' adherence to human rights principles in relevant policies, legislation, and executive procedures in force.

The participation of persons with disabilities certainly reflects the many factors that contribute to the empowerment of civil society organizations in decision-making at national and local levels. The majority of representatives of civil society organizations and experts, especially those included in this research paper, unanimously agree on the inevitable role that these factors play, individually or collectively, in determining the effectiveness of civil society activities in Arab countries, including civil society's expected role in pressing on governments and other stakeholders to fulfill their commitment towards implementing the principles and objectives stipulated within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These principles and objectives include the involvement of persons with disabilities in setting relevant national development programs and policies,

particularly those related to achieving economic and social inclusion. The following sections discuss, in detail, the nature of these factors as well as their role and repercussions on civil society organizations' adoption of an approach towards achieving economic and social inclusion of marginalized groups, particularly persons with disabilities, through either practical or research-based programs and activities.

However, before discussing these factors, it must be clarified that:

CSOs may not assume a direct role or be solely responsible for implementing the SDGs in general, as this role must, first and foremost, be assumed by the various governmental entities and institutions. However, CSOs²⁸ play another role consisting of advocacy for implementing these goals. Moreover, the participation of these organizations as a key partner in the path towards sustainable development represents an influential factor in raising the level of awareness required to monitor and review the effectiveness of the development path by taking into account the implications, targets, and indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals. This is predominantly evident in the long path taken by civil society organizations so far to establish normative dimensions and principles, starting with the Millennium Goals and reaching the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which includes areas of work that strengthen the opportunities for including marginalized groups into development programs and policies. The path towards development also reasonably focused on the issue of disability and development, representing an additional step in the thousand-mile journey towards achieving comprehensive and inclusive

integration of all marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities. To this end, many obstacles still need to be addressed, and strong efforts are required by the various concerned bodies, including governmental bodies, international organizations, private sector institutions, civil society organizations, DPOs, and even academic and consultative centers concerned with development issues from an academic and research perspective.



Sustainable Development, Disability, and Inclusion: Influencing Factors

First factor: Awareness, human rights, and inclusion

The integration of the inclusion strategy for marginalized groups into the priorities of national development policies reflects the awareness of those concerned²⁹ with developing these policies about the nature and importance of this strategy at the level of development and human rights. Undoubtedly, the awareness of concerned parties, whether at the level of governments or civil society organizations, about the importance of the inclusion strategy and its significance within the Sustainable Development Agenda is increasing today, as shown at the beginning of the present paper. However, reports submitted by these same governments or organizations indicate that this awareness is still in its very early stages. This is most clearly reflected by indicators that reveal the very humble participation of marginalized groups, particularly persons with disabilities, in what could be categorized as national development policies and programs. These indicators confirm a weak or delayed integration of economic and social inclusion standards of persons with disabilities in such policies and programs. This, in turn, reflects the awareness level of the concerned bodies in terms of the extent to which the inclusion strategy is linked to issues of economic and social development, and more importantly, the extent to which

these bodies consider persons with disabilities as a group of individuals who have the right to citizenship and who must, therefore, be given the opportunity to participate and interact in both issues and processes of sustainable development like other groups of the society³⁰. According to experts on disability and human rights³¹, this is due to the stereotypes surrounding persons with disabilities that have prevailed in Arab societies to date. In these societies, people have always associated disability with a state of helplessness that directly classifies the disabled, i.e., persons with disabilities, as a lower-ranking social class, making them unable to be economically productive and socially active. These societies' point of view was reflected in the initial reaction of the concerned parties, specifically in the public sector, upon raising the issue of disability, among other sustainable development issues. This reaction also reveals the prevailing misconceptions about persons with disabilities and disability issues. According to those concerned, persons with disabilities represent a social group that cannot actively participate in the development movement; therefore, their issues have nothing to do with sustainable development policies and programs. Otherwise, at the very least, those concerned may consider that disability issues should be limited to social welfare programs, which, even if categorized under human rights issues, remain part of charity work. Thus, disability issues are usually excluded from all other areas of development with their various strategies, policies, and even programs due to this point of view. This is consolidated through the development decision-makers' adamantness to adopt the sectoral welfare approach, addressed in the following section³².

Examining the role of DPOs³³ in addressing this matter, one cannot but acknowledge that these organizations play a minimal role at the level of development. Very few organizations have taken the initiative to address development issues due to the lack of awareness among those in charge or circumstances that provide the necessary factors and opportunities to get involved in the development field. A review of the prevalence of these organizations shows that they are confined to a few Arab countries, not exceeding five countries. Even according to those in charge, the activities of a vast majority of DPOs are still limited to awareness-raising and a strictly service-oriented action approach. These organizations find themselves compelled to limit their activities to these two aspects due to the vacuum created due to the neglect of the state and the bodies concerned with disability and the needs of persons with disabilities.

Second Factor: The prevalence of the service-oriented welfare approach over the human rights development approach

Since the emergence of national states, Arab countries have been governed by welfare authorities established based on supporting so-called social service institutions. These institutions include what was historically known as institutions for the care of the disabled³⁴. Such welfare institutions relied on the financial support they received from the state through government care programs and the donations of benefactors from the elite and other community members. In most cases, these welfare institutions are mainly characterized by a religious or political character (as is the case

in some countries such as Lebanon, where such institutions were affiliated to a religious, sectarian, or political reference directly linked to the ruler, i.e., the emir, the king or the head of one of the authorities in the state). But, in most countries, these welfare institutions were and still are administratively and financially affiliated almost entirely with the state, as is the case in Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Iraq, and Tunisia³⁵.

The role of these authorities in perpetuating this welfare system is a crucial factor in shaping the level of public awareness about issues such as those related to persons with disabilities. With the decline of disability services within these institutions, the previously mentioned stereotype surrounding persons with disabilities was reinforced for an extended period until the present. On a more serious level, the perpetuation of this welfare approach adopted by these institutions for disability services has made addressing disability issues limited to this approach only, given the fact that those in charge of decision-making processes, in particular, and the society, in general, consider it to be the only reference in this regard.

Moreover, many disability experts in the Arab world note that most DPOs are still affected by this service-oriented welfare approach until today. For instance, they may refuse to engage in development activities as they do not consider this a priority. Those in charge of these organizations fail to realize the importance of development work as they are influenced by the ongoing prevalence of the welfare approach due to the presence and dominance of welfare-based policies represented by excluded state-supported or affiliated care institutions. Perhaps these people in charge of DPOs find neither the time nor opportunity to raise their awareness about other issues such as

development. Therefore they become bound by the narrow sectoral approach imposed by the state's welfare policies while having to meet the increasing need to provide direct services for persons with disabilities due to the scarcity of resources and the failure of those concerned to fulfill their duties as stipulated by relevant applicable laws.

Third Factor: Civil society organizations and independent decision-making

In addition to the level of awareness among decision-makers about the inclusion of marginalized groups, mainly persons with disabilities, in developing policies and programs on the one hand, as well as the adoption of the non-inclusive sectoral approach in setting development policies and programs, on the other hand, other factors control the extent to which civil society organizations interact with and adopt inclusion strategies at the organizational level and human rights level. In one way or another, these factors influence not only the way these organizations respond to and adopt inclusion strategies but also their ability to determine their orientations and interests, and thus their ability to independently carry out decision-making. The most prominent factors are discussed below. They are divided into generic and specific factors related to the capabilities of each organization to adopt an economic and social inclusion strategy for persons with disabilities in its development activities and programs.



Civil society organizations and the adoption of an economic and social inclusion strategy for persons with disabilities: general factors

Several general factors affect the extent to which civil society organizations interact with inclusion and disability issues based on the prevailing objective circumstances in each country. These factors can be defined as follows:

First: Countries' Economic Growth

Countries with low economic growth are considered the least responsive to the issue of disability³⁶Based on inclusion principles and strategies. The development indicators of these countries³⁷ reflect a significant decline in government policies' and programs' integration of strategies that enhance inclusion opportunities for persons with disabilities into economic and social development. Moreover, these countries' deteriorating economic and social conditions impose obstacles that prevent civil society organizations from taking into account inclusion strategies for persons with disabilities³⁸. This could either be the result of minimal awareness among those in charge and their failure to prioritize disability and inclusion or to the fact that these organizations merely limit their priorities to service-oriented

frameworks in response to the needs imposed by widespread poverty among the largest segment of the country's population, as is the case in Mauritania for example.

Second: The Security Situation and Wars

The deteriorating security situations and the wars taking place in many Arab countries, such as Iraq, Yemen, and occupied Palestine, have contributed to a significant decline in the adoption of inclusion strategies of persons with disabilities by various actors at the levels of the government and civil society. In light of the existing correlation between the increase in the number of people with disabilities as well as the destruction of infrastructure and human capabilities thereof as a result of the problematic security situations and the ongoing wars and occupations in these countries, initiatives aiming to spread the culture of disability,

inclusion and human rights face many obstacles that prevent their consolidation in existing programs aimed at achieving the Sustainable Development Goals³⁹. Thus, the priority of disability issues becomes limited to emergency activities, primarily based on purely service-related work⁴⁰ despite the active movement of civil society organizations supported by initiatives implemented by various international organizations in these countries. This activity contributed to advancing a reasonable number of human rights concepts, such as the issue of gender, youth participation in political life, etc. However, these initiatives have yet to attain the desired level of enforcing principles of human rights and sustainable development, including

the inclusion of persons with disabilities at the economic and social levels.

Third: Democracy and freedom of civil society organizations

Development experts in the Arab world, who were interviewed in this research, have observed that the democracy in several Arab countries had the most profound impact on how civil society organizations⁴¹ interact with sustainable development issues and strategies, including the inclusion of persons with disabilities. In many countries, especially those that have witnessed political transformations in the last decade in the context of the Arab Spring revolutions⁴², it is quite disappointing that the activities of civil society organizations are restricted on the pretext of preserving national security and preventing the interference of foreign organizations in the internal political, economic and social affairs of the state. This was primarily reflected in limiting the freedom of activity of civil society organizations, including organizations active in economic and social development. In order to continue their activities, these organizations must resort to one of the following actions: Submitting to the existing political system, and consequently complying with the regulations and provisions it imposes, would control the orientations and priorities of these organizations in their areas of work, including development issues.

- Limiting the activities of these organizations to welfare and service fields of work, as previously explained.
- Resorting to secret, undeclared activity, which may expose these organizations

to confrontations and clashes with the political authority, thus putting those in charge of these organizations at risk of being prosecuted, imprisoned, or exiled.

- Adopting any of the above approaches by civil society organizations does not necessarily allow them to provide effective models of work that can advance the integration of inclusion standards and strategies for persons with disabilities in development programs and policies due to the increasing control exercised by authorities that still adopt a sectorial welfare approach in economic and social development. Some countries, such as Tunisia, have been able to achieve fundamental transformation in adopting a development and human rights discourse and achieving comprehensive inclusion of issues of marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities. However, CSO-specific factors still prevent them from practically and systematically adopting economic and social inclusion strategies for persons with disabilities. These factors are examined in the following section.



Civil society organizations and the adoption of an economic and social inclusion strategy for persons with disabilities: specific factors

All organizations covered in this research, whether through focus groups or individual interviews, emphasize their commitment and belief in including persons with disabilities in their programs and activities to spread and achieve the principles and goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Moreover, they all stressed that the inclusion of persons with disabilities, whether in general development programs or economic and social development programs in particular, is unarguably considered a human rights issue. These organizations also affirmed that they constantly seek to ensure the participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations in the activities they organize at the national or local levels, especially activities aimed at spreading the culture of human rights and development. Such activities include, for example, the protection of women from cases of violence and discrimination, the demand for modern and inclusive educational policies, the demand for improving the working conditions of marginalized groups, particularly women, or the demand for inclusive social protection programs that ensure the effective participation of marginalized groups in production processes.

However, on the other hand, this commitment to ensuring the right of persons with disabilities to economic and social inclusion faces several

factors specific to these organizations. These factors represent obstacles that impede organizations' activities in this field. They are not necessarily limited to the organizations targeted in this research paper but also include all other civil society organizations, as affirmed by experts in development and disability in the Arab world. A brief discussion of these factors is presented below:

First factor: the level of awareness and understanding of related concepts

Many activists in civil society organizations revealed that despite their commitment to support the disability issue as well as economic and social inclusion, they still need much training and still lack awareness on concepts related to these issues, such as: what does the concept of disability mean, how to ensure the participation of persons with disabilities and their access to information, and how to find the necessary resources to ensure the participation of persons with disabilities in the activities they organize in particular, or in the development movement in general.

Second Factor: Individual capabilities to achieve inclusion

The participants in the research, who are representatives of CSOs, reiterated that they are always keen on involving persons with disabilities in their activities. For example, they have incorporated questions on disability in the questionnaires used in field surveys and information gathering processes. They have made sure to conduct their activities in places that allow for the participation of persons

with disabilities, especially people who use wheelchairs, while some even ensure sign language interpreters are available to allow deaf people to participate in their activities. However, organizations' ability to do so remains highly dependent on the availability of financial resources and conditions. Many participants indicated that they make all these arrangements without relying on specialized teams within their organizations. They have only taken the initiative in this regard based on the experience they gained through their interaction with some local organizations directly concerned with the issue of disability.

Third Factor: Availability of Information

Some participants who are representatives of civil society organizations indicated that, despite their keenness to integrate issues of disability as well as economic and social inclusion in their programs and activities, their efforts are impeded by the lack of sufficient and accurate information⁴³ about persons with disabilities, their needs, and their whereabouts⁴⁴. According to these participants, the lack of such information consequently affects the access to the framework of references required in these organizations' activities to ensure the integration of disability issues, specifically in the field of development⁴⁵.

Fourth Factor: Funding Programs and the Transition to Elite Work

Expert observers in the field of development note that international organizations that donate to and finance the activities of most civil society organizations in the Arab world

have a significant role in determining these organizations' course of action and priorities⁴⁶. The policies of donor organizations are based on their countries' orientation and the political and security factors in the region. On the other hand, the general objective factors mentioned earlier in this research contribute to pushing civil society organizations towards semi-full dependence on the funding provided by these same donor organizations. However, these observers also note that despite the vital role played by donor organizations in supporting the activities of civil society organizations, particularly in the field of development, this results in several considerations that seem to essentially control the nature and course of Arab civil society activity, just like all other civil societies in developing countries. The most important of these considerations can be summarized as follows:

First consideration: the priority of adapting to funding programs.

Most civil society organizations' activities are greatly restricted by the organizations' priority of adapting to the current orientations of donor organizations, which often shift and change according to the prevailing political and security conditions, as previously mentioned. Few organizations still deal with donor organizations based on parity and can thus impose their viewpoint on the nature and courses of their activities. In most cases, this limited group of organizations constantly suffers in finding funding sources, which naturally affects the scope and sustainability of their activity effectively as often desired by such organizations.

Second consideration: adopting an elitist orientation and withdrawing from local priorities.

Expert observers in the field of development also note that the work pattern international development organizations have imposed over the past few decades is namely represented by imposing a new culture that has dramatically dominated the activities and interests of those in charge of civil society organizations in the Arab world and other regions around the world. This culture takes on an elitist nature, which is expressed in the keenness of civil society activists to participate in international events such as forums, conferences, and workshops or to limit their activities to preparing reports and preparing research papers and studies. However, not all activists may have the chance to participate in such events for the following reasons

- Financial resources: given that most of these activities, especially the most important, are held abroad, participation in such activities requires activists to travel to the host countries, which entails high costs that not everyone who wants to participate can afford without financial and logistical support. Thus, the lack of financial resources obligates those wishing to participate in such events to consider several requirements and criteria often determined by funders or organizers.
- These events require linguistic skills as most of these events are held in English or French, not in Arabic, excluding, of course, events held by the United Nations, which should provide Arabic translation, as it is one of the UN's official languages.

- These events also fail to fulfill accessibility criteria for persons with disabilities. Event organizers often overlook these criteria in their budgets, whether in choosing the event's location or providing the written material distributed during this event. Hence, the majority of persons with disabilities cannot access or participate in these events, such as, for instance, wheelchair users as they are unable to reach the place of the event, blind persons who cannot read the event material, or deaf persons who cannot participate due to the lack of translation into sign language.

As a result of the increased interest in participating in these events and their importance, the work patterns of most Arab civil society organizations were affected. These organizations further withdrew from addressing the interests of grassroots groups whom, as they claim, they are supposed to represent. These organizations secure the costs they need to participate in elite activities, such as preparing research papers and reports and participating in international events, primarily tends to be at the expense of the needs and expectations of marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities.

Civil Society, Disability and Inclusion: The Reality and the Results

The above paragraphs examined a set of factors and considerations that affect the extent to which civil society organizations adopt the inclusion of persons with disabilities and their organizations in their programs and activities to achieve the principles and goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Yet, an important question remains: what are the most major repercussions and results of these factors on the actual activity of civil society organizations in the field of disability, inclusion, and economic and social development? To answer this critical question, the following results must be outlined:

First result: the perpetuation of the sectorial welfare-based approach in formulating the state's social policies, which persists today and is reflected, even at the level of planning development policies, including policies currently underway in the sustainable development framework.

This reality prompted decision-makers, even CSOs, to adopt the most mainstream option in the planning process, i.e., a sectorial welfare approach. According to these decision-makers and as many development experts in the Arab world confirm, this approach guarantees faster results than a comprehensive planning approach, regardless of the qualitative progress in setting policies and development or service programs related to disability.

One of the most prominent examples of the prevalence of the sectorial welfare-based

approach is the current process at the level of restructuring and reforming social protection programs in many Arab countries. Despite the efforts of some entities and civil society organizations to push forward the adoption of a comprehensive approach by governments in the planning process of inclusive social protection programs aimed at enhancing the productive role of marginalized groups, particularly persons with disabilities, it is noted that, in reality, the majority of these bodies and organizations participating in the planning process re-adopt this sectorial approach. In other words, these organizations once again adopt their issues in an isolating manner rather than adopting an integrated, inclusive vision across all stages of planning, implementation, evaluation, and monitoring. Perhaps the most dangerous factor that pushes these bodies and organizations towards this path is the justifications made by some international donor organizations that support the reform process of these programs, under the pretext of:

- The lack of funding resources that would guarantee the adoption of a comprehensive approach to planning
- The limited time and the inability to carry out the planning process over a period exceeding the limit imposed by objective political conditions in the country
- The necessity of working within the specific and binding time schedules imposed by funding programs
- The failure of the various parties participating in the planning process to agree on a unified vision of the program being reformed

This makes us question the role of international organizations and how much it impacts the

orientations of civil society organizations towards adopting an inclusive and comprehensive vision regarding economic and social development issues.

Second result: the weak systematic strategic planning on including disability issues and standards in development programs and policies.

Undoubtedly, many Arab civil society organizations today are trying hard to reflect the principle of inclusion of persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups into their programs and policies. This was confirmed by the representatives of the organizations that participated in the present research. However, considering all the objective factors and considerations, these organizations' disability, development, and inclusion initiatives remain flawed. Many weaknesses remain in the systematic planning process that ensures that this issue is reflected in all phases of work, from the assessments of prevailing needs and circumstances to strategic planning, the provision of financial and human resources, and budget allocations covering the expenses inclusion. Had these organizations been able to adopt systematic planning strategies to integrate inclusion standards for persons with disabilities in their programs and activities, they would have been able to allocate organizational resources, from specialized knowledge to specialized human resources, allowing them to activate their role in the field of disability, development, and inclusion.

Third result: the weak adoption of a comprehensive inclusion discourse for persons with disabilities

Today, no one can ignore the increasing participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in various events such as conferences, seminars, or training workshops at the local, national, regional, and international levels. In addition, the disability issue has occupied a significant part of the studies and reports prepared by most Arab governments and civil society organizations, including non-governmental organizations and centers for research and studies. However, it is noted that this approach to the issue of disability does not go beyond the general framework of describing the marginalization that still affects persons with disabilities along with other social groups. The issue of disability has not yet become one of the main areas of research, studies, and reports that deal with significant issues in the development and other strategic issues in the Arab world.

Those conducting these studies, reports, and research fail to link these significant issues to the issue of disability and the right to be included in development programs. Many still insist on the pretext that there is no relation between these issues and the issue of disability. In their opinion, as previously mentioned in this research, the issue of disability and the rights of persons with disabilities can only be addressed through a sectorial service-oriented approach. Accordingly, the issue of disability has no place in research dealing, for example, with the issue of fair trade or tax justice, nor does it have a place in a study dealing with the issue of governance, transparency, accountability, and combating corruption.

It is similarly not reasonable to link the issue of disability with the issue of climate change, combating desertification, global warming, and environmental or water pollution. Some researchers go even further by overlooking the importance of addressing disability when dealing with a range of security and arms control issues, oblivious to the increasing cases of disability produced by wars and occupations in various Arab countries and by the spread of extremist armed groups.

Fourth Result: The weak presence of persons with disabilities and their organizations in the development field systematically contributes to the lack of opportunities for raising awareness among civil society organizations about basic concepts related to the issue of disability and inclusion strategies.

Fifth result: the weak interaction between DPOs and components of the civil society limits the sources of information on disability, which negatively affects and limits the integration and inclusion of disability in public human rights development initiatives.

Sixth Result: DPOs and the absence of a partnership strategy
In light of the circumstances that require some DPOs to limit their activities on public awareness and services and the prevalence of a mentality fixed on a purely sectorial welfare approach, the opportunity for interaction between these organizations and other components of civil society becomes almost non-existent. Accordingly, it is impossible to involve these organizations in development activities, and thus the opportunities for forming partnerships between such organizations and the civil society also become, even if relatively, almost non-existent. The limited activity of DPOs, as

shown in the present research, results largely in their lack of the capabilities necessary to keep up with the requirements to engage in the field of development, particularly elite development work.

Addressing the general factors influencing the integration of disability issues within the framework of sustainable development in the Arab world:

suggested steps and strategies

The partnership between CSOs and DPOs offers a strategic framework for action to overcome the obstacles hindering inclusive development for all marginalized groups, particularly persons with disabilities and their families, at the economic and social levels, as previously discussed in this research. As such, several strategies and practical steps can be adopted to drive the efforts towards overcoming these obstacles and thus achieving inclusion. As for the factors influencing the progress towards achieving the sustainable development Agenda in the Arab world, the present paper discussed these factors on a general level representing the political, social, and economic situations in countries, and on a specific level directly related to the activity of civil society organizations, including DPOs. The paper also discussed how each of these factors drives the

progress towards integrating the culture of inclusion at the level of policies and programs. On a similar note, it is necessary to identify these practical and strategic steps required to bring about a fundamental transformation in the activity of civil society organizations in the field of development, specifically in the field of inclusive development and disability. To achieve this goal, a set of strategies are suggested below:

First: In terms of securing the political will of decision-makers

Securing political support from decision-makers is necessary to drive the progress towards creating a supportive environment of the sustainable development, disability, and inclusion issue, particularly working to raise awareness among decision-makers about the importance of this issue and its fundamental dimensions in terms of being a human rights issue enshrined in various international documents, including the Agenda for Sustainable Development and the CRPD. The importance of this strategic step lies in the fact that it may help establish a systematic approach in drafting and planning development policies inclusive of all marginalized groups of the society, particularly persons with disabilities. The effectiveness of this step is highlighted by the required partnership between civil society organizations representing different interests and identities on the one hand, and DPOs on the other hand, to work on:

- Launching continuous media and awareness campaigns aimed at spreading the comprehensive culture of inclusion that takes into account both diversity and human rights and targets the public opinion, especially decision-makers in various development aspects and sectors
- Strengthening joint action to launch

permanent campaigns that adopt a dialogue approach and positive interaction with decision-makers to urge them and raise their level of awareness about concepts related to the issue of development, disability, and inclusion, and thus identify the mechanisms required to address this issue practically and tangibly and at various levels of policies and programs

- Forming working groups that comprise various donor bodies, including the various UN bodies, the World Bank, and even the International Monetary Fund, to ensure an environment necessary to pressure governments in Arab countries to adopt policies and programs based on the principles and standards of social, economic and legal inclusion systematically.

Second: In terms of transitioning from a sectoral approach to a comprehensive and systematic approach in planning development policies and programs

Overcoming the sectorial approach in development planning may be one of the most challenging obstacles facing the issue of establishing inclusive development policies and programs, especially in disability. In order to overcome this challenge, work is required across several vertical aspects targeting various governmental decision-making bodies and across a horizontal aspect based on the need to form partnership platforms between the various civil society sectors and DPOs. To achieve progress in these two correlative paths, it is necessary to: Promote studies, research, and reports that emphasize systematic action to overcome the sectoral planning approach, thus shedding light on the importance and inevitable

interconnectedness among the various areas of development and its impact on the consolidation and prevalence of inclusion policies and programs;

Call for focusing donors support on projects and programs that bolster intersectionality among the various marginalized social groups and their issues in the development and human rights, and impose intersectionality as a normative condition for evaluating and accepting projects applying for funding;

- Establish networks and coalition platforms between various civil society sectors and organizations. Such networks and platforms shall be as permanent as possible. They shall include organizations representing persons with disabilities of different categories and seek to promote joint action and cooperation in various major and minor development fields. They shall foster opportunities to exchange experiences and adopt standard development rhetoric that focuses on integrating the issues and concerns of all partaking bodies and organizations.
- Launch public dialogue and awareness campaigns targeting both decision-makers and CSOs and aiming to motivate the public opinion towards rejecting the existing welfare-based approach adopted by various Arab governments and represented by institutions caring for the disabled while shedding light on the adverse effects of this approach in preventing the fulfillment of SDGs.

Third: In terms of strengthening the independence of decision-making among civil society organizations and consecrating their actual role in the path towards achieving sustainable development and the SDGs

The strategic steps required to ensure the freedom of decision-making for civil society organizations must address the range of political, economic, and security factors the world is witnessing as they inevitably affect these organizations' interaction with issues of marginalized groups, including issues of persons with disabilities, taking into account their importance in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. To this end, the various concerned bodies must commit to adopting the following strategic directions or steps:

- The issue of disability must not be overlooked, in any way whatsoever, when addressing issues and strategies to reduce the effects of poverty or wars in the Arab world, whether by including this issue in relevant periodic reports, dialogues and conferences held on these issues, or in national, regional and international campaigns against them.
- It is necessary to take advantage of the elite activity of some civil society organizations and institutions and push them towards directly interacting with issues of marginalized groups on a practical-grassroots level, not only a theoretical one.
- Searching for ways and means that contribute to reactivating voluntary work based on a sense of citizenship and social

responsibility among the various bodies and individuals concerned with civil society organizations' activities to ensure the spread of a culture of social inclusion, particularly with regards to persons with disabilities and their organizations.

- Providing ways and means that would restore the interest of civil society organizations in exchanging experiences and building capacities on various common issues, including the issue of disability, inclusion, and rights
- Securing all means that guarantee the representation of all marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities and their representative organizations, in all events concerned with sustainable development issues and related decision-making mechanisms.

As mentioned in the third result above the weak interaction between DPOs and the components of civil society prevents the former's voice from reaching decision-makers in the development field at all national, regional, and international levels. This reinforces the lack of representation of disability issues in policies and programs to achieve the 2030 Development Agenda.

Addressing the specific factors influencing the integration of disability issues within the framework of sustainable development in the Arab world: suggested steps and strategies

First: In terms of raising the awareness of civil society organizations about the practical concepts related to the issue of disability at the level of development

Raising awareness about concepts regarding the nature of the relationship between the issue of disability and the framework of sustainable development or inclusive development, in general, is indeed one of the priorities necessary for empowering civil society organizations to play a strategic role at this level. To facilitate the process of raising awareness in its theoretical and practical dimensions, several steps must be taken as suggested below:

- Ensuring that training and awareness programs include content that sheds light on the importance of persons with disabilities in all areas of development by benefiting from the available sources of expertise and information at the national, regional, and international levels

- Demanding that research and academic programs, especially university programs that are specialized in relevant fields of development and human sciences and that graduate workers and activists in civil society organizations, include an obligatory academic course on the nature of the relationship between the issue of disability and the various areas of development
- Seeking to increase media programs, whether through traditional media channels or social media platforms, to provide innovative means of raising awareness on the issue of disability, development, and rights, targeting the various parties concerned with the development aspect of civil society organizations.

Second: In terms of supporting the material and human resources required to ensure opportunities for inclusion and access in civil society organizations

One of the most important factors is the need to possess the minimum internal capabilities and resources required to ensure that disability issues and persons with disabilities are included in the activities of civil society organizations. In this regard, it must be noted that addressing the issue of internal resources of CSOs does not imply that these organizations be transformed into DPOs. However, it is required that these organizations have a set of resources and that they take some necessary measures to make their development programs and activities inclusive by adopting the following suggested steps:

- Conducting a periodic evaluation to ensure that the organizations' material resources, such as buildings and equipment like computers, publications, or means of transportation, are in line with accessibility criteria and physical environment qualifications
- Ensuring that all activities are inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities, whether in terms of the places where these activities are held or the materials used in their implementation
- Seeking the assistance of DPOs or other experienced parties to carry out the assessment and planning processes specified above and to identify ways to ensure compliance with the above criteria and qualifications by adopting innovative strategies to overcome the organizations' limited capabilities in this field.
- Including the standards and strategies of inclusion and access into funding projects submitted by civil society organizations to donors, provided that this is reflected in the various expenses indicated in the proposed budgets
- Benefit from the increasing experiences of countries in other regions around the world and the support of various international organizations in the field of strengthening monitoring mechanisms as well as collecting, analyzing, and using information related to disability and development issues
- Seek to establish permanent monitoring centers and collect, analyze and publish information as well as urge the use of such information at both official governmental levels and the level of civil society and DPOs
- Benefit from the information collected by DPOs through the activities and programs they implement and thus use this information as a source complementary to the information collected by national statistical offices
- Increase dialogue initiatives and exchanging experiences between DPOs and civil society organizations on the one hand, and national statistical offices and the national, regional, and international specialized statistical authorities on the other hand
- Support statistical research and monitoring initiatives on development and disability in various Arab countries

Third: In terms of providing sources of information that support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and the integration of disability issues in particular

Providing sources of information on disability has always been one of the main dilemmas in this field. In order to address the problems caused by the absence of information and relevant, reliable sources, it is necessary to adopt the following suggested steps:

In addition to all of the above recommendations, it must be noted that civil society organizations must adopt strategies aimed at motivating persons with disabilities and their organizations in the development movement, especially those concerned with achieving the goals of the 2030 Development Agenda. These strategies include:

- The need for civil society organizations to ensure the participation of persons

with disabilities, in person or through their representative organizations, in their decision-making mechanisms and within the various stages of development projects and programs they implement, i.e., planning, implementation, follow-up, and evaluation

- Ensuring the participation of DPOs in the various campaigns carried out by civil society organizations, particularly those seeking to oblige governments to adopt and implement the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
- Ensuring the inclusion of persons with disabilities and their organizations within the monitoring mechanisms implemented by DPOs to monitor the activity of Arab governments in the field of development, such as preparing shadow reports and periodic reviews reports

In conclusion, it should be noted that all the above recommendations and suggestions must be addressed in an integrated manner. Prioritizing one aspect over the other in the development field has proven to be ineffective over the past years. The inclusion of any marginalized group cannot be achieved if a fragmented approach to work continues to be adopted since fragmentation weakens the ability to achieve the desired goals of inclusive development. There are many areas, capabilities, opportunities, resources, and strategies that can be adopted to achieve inclusive development as long as the intentions of those involved are sincere and the participatory, non-sectorial work of all concerned parties is serious, especially civil society organizations. Embracing inclusion and diversity is both a style of work and a purpose that empowers everyone.

Endnotes

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