

Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue of the DCID Journal on Systems of Support to Enable Community Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities and their Families

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Disability rights advocates are increasingly highlighting the critical importance of care and support systems to functioning societies and economies, recognizing their capacity to promote dignity, social inclusion, and human rights of persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2026). For example, using a disability-rights-based approach to understanding community support for persons with disabilities, the United Nations Human Rights Council has recognized a need for knowledge around support strategies and practices to enable community inclusion of persons with disabilities around the world (A/HRC/55/34). The need for improvement of human rights-oriented care and support systems was also a key focus at the 19th Conference of State Parties to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in New York in June 2026. Despite existing global momentum around the care and support agenda, significant challenges persist, and especially in the Global South. Issues such as resource scarcity, inadequate coordination between formal and natural support mechanisms, and enduring stigma are particularly pronounced. Within this context, families and community networks often assume the primary responsibility for providing essential care and support to their loved ones with disabilities, often without adequate recognition, formal training, or supportive policy frameworks. Formal support providers are often functioning in resource constrained contexts and experience great challenges providing adequate levels and quality of care and support required. Nevertheless, these grassroots actors are also at the forefront of developing innovative, contextually relevant practices that promote inclusion and compensate for the deficiencies of formal systems.

We are delighted to introduce this special issue, which sought to identify research from the Global South that would enhance our understanding of support systems for individuals with disabilities and their families, with a particular priority on highlighting good or promising care and support practices. This special issue features studies from different countries in Africa, including Ethiopia, Ghana, and Tanzania.

In Ethiopia, Gebeyaw and colleagues have explored experiences of giving and receiving natural support for persons with disabilities and their neighbours. This study illuminates how people with disabilities in Gondar, Ethiopia receive support for essential necessities, such as food, clothing, and school supplies, among others. Authors also identified that persons with disabilities were not passive recipients of support, but rather they were active contributors in their communities, offering important emotional and instrumental support to their neighbours in turn. In Ghana, Cobbina and colleagues examined how adolescent mental health support systems intersect with families, schools, communities, and policy frameworks through a narrative review of the landscape of support systems for adolescents with mental health disorders and challenges. Although this review

identified valuable existing support structures in Ghana and highlighted the importance of rights-based, integrated community-based rehabilitation (CBR) approaches in promoting inclusivity, it also highlighted similar challenges to those highlighted by Gebeyaw and colleagues, including limited resources, stigma, and lack of trained professionals. Finally, to round out the special issue, de Groot and colleagues discuss the impact of peer-based coping interventions for adolescents with Albinism in Tanzania. In this study, authors demonstrate how natural support systems such as connections to peers with similar lived experiences can combat stigma and ableist cultural norms. This study showcases the strength of collective resilience, peer mentoring, and empowerment—values that resonate deeply with CBR’s commitment to participation and local inclusion. Across all these studies, we can see strength and opportunities to mobilize naturally existing resources within each community, yet also the challenges that can arise when natural support networks are not built upon a strong foundation of formal supports, particularly those that might be expected from various levels of government. This collection of studies also shows us how integrated support systems are typically entrenched within environments of stigma and misinformation. These findings not only inform us but also inspire action toward a more inclusive and supportive future. This special issue adds to the growing body of evidence that integrated support systems require formal (and government-led) investments for individuals and families and thrive through community-driven efforts based on participation, respect, and human rights.

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