



## **The Social Model of Disability**

### **Working Together to Remove Barriers and Build Accessible Communities**

The social model of disability views disability as a societal construct, rather than as a medical impairment. It is an alternative to the medical model, which looks at disability in a very narrow and clinical way.

The social model frames disability as a collective issue – caused by the physical environment, inappropriate or inaccessible services and attitudes, and a lack of understanding - rather than one that derives from the health of an individual.

Although the actual phrase was coined in 1983 by Mike Oliver, a disabled academic and activist, the thinking behind the concept can be traced back to the Independent Living (IL) movement in the 1960s. As a concept, it found expression in the 1970s in the United Kingdom (UK), at a conference where disability was described as:

“the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by contemporary social organisation which takes little or no account of people who have impairments

and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities. Disability is a particular form of social oppression".<sup>1</sup>

Importantly, the social – or human rights – model of disability is embedded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and is described in 'Preamble, e', which says that:

"Recognizing that disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others".

The social model recognises that disability affects every aspect of our lives, not just our health. It shows the need for disability to be addressed at every level: social, economic and political. It must become the first key consideration when drafting plans and making decisions. Everyday things should not be a barrier or even a special accommodation. People with disabilities have the right to enjoy the same childhood as their non-disabled siblings and friends, to attend the local mainstream school, to use public services, like transport, and to take advantage of the same employment opportunities as everyone else.

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<sup>1</sup> Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation, *Fundamental Principles of Disability*, 1975.