

YouthProAktiv 2025 Youth Declaration on “Restoring the Social Value of Disability”

YouthProAktiv promotes proactivity and entrepreneurship in education and policy, while upholding the European Union’s commitment to empowering all citizens equally in society and democratic life. As young Europeans, we believe that restoring the social value of disability is a moral, political, and social imperative. Disability is not a limitation but an integral part of the diversity that strengthens our societies. Still, too many young people with disabilities remain excluded from the spaces where their voices, talents, and ambitions are most needed.

The European Union has already taken important steps, from the ratification of the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) to the adoption of the *Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030*. These frameworks underline the right of all people to equal participation in political, educational, economic, and social life. But rights on paper are not enough. They must be transformed into daily realities for the more than 101 million Europeans with disabilities, including millions of young people whose futures are at stake.

This Declaration highlights **four central pillars** through which the social value of disability must be restored: participation in democracy, education as the foundation of opportunity, employment as dignity and independence, and social inclusion in daily life. Each of these dimensions is essential to ensuring that young people with disabilities are recognised not as outsiders, but as equal contributors to the European Union’s future.

Participation in democracy begins with representation. Despite progress, young people with disabilities continue to face systemic barriers to full democratic participation. Reliable data on their representation remains limited, making them nearly invisible in the political arena. According to Eurostat’s 2024 data, nearly a quarter (23.9%) of Europeans over the age of 16 live with some form of disability. Nevertheless, this vast part of our population is barely reflected in parliaments, councils, or advisory boards.

The CRPD and the *EU’s Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2021–2030) both emphasise political participation as a fundamental right. Initiatives such as the *Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme* (CERV) provide crucial funding for civic engagement and inclusion. However, structural discrimination, inaccessible voting systems, and the persistent underrepresentation of young people with disabilities in political life continue to undermine democracy. This absence from democratic life is mirrored in another key area: education.

Education is the foundation of inclusion and equal opportunity. Article 24 of the CRPD recognises the right of persons with disabilities to inclusive education at

all levels. However, the reality remains far from this ideal. In 2022, Eurostat data showed that 22.2% of young people with disabilities aged 18–24 were early school leavers, compared with only 8.4% of their peers without disabilities.

The EU has acknowledged this gap through the Disability Strategy, which calls for barrier removal and equal access to quality education. Still, challenges such as limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and high student–teacher ratios persist, as noted in a 2024 European Parliament study. Unless addressed, these systemic barriers will continue to deprive young people with disabilities of their right to education and the opportunities it unlocks. Beyond schools, the labour market reflects the same exclusion.

Employment is more than a livelihood: it is dignity, independence, and social participation. Young people with disabilities, however, face entrenched disadvantage in the labour market. According to Eurostat, in 2024 the employment gap between people with and without disabilities stood at 24 percentage points. The European Disability Forum’s *Right to Work report* (2024) highlighted that young people with disabilities are particularly disadvantaged, with only 47.4% in paid employment.

The European Commission’s *Disability Employment Package*, launched in 2022 under the umbrella of the *Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, sought to expand opportunities. At the same time, progress on inclusion remains too slow. Without accessible workplaces, targeted training, and firm measures against discrimination, too many young people with disabilities remain excluded from the dignity of work and the chance to contribute to Europe’s economy and society. And exclusion from work too often leads to broader forms of exclusion in daily life.

Social inclusion in daily life remains unfinished. Eurostat reported in 2024 that 24.1% of young people aged 15–29 in the EU (17.3 million individuals) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, three percentage points higher than the general population. This vulnerability manifests in limited access to healthcare, cultural life, sports, and civic participation, leading to isolation and inequality.

The EU has introduced important initiatives such as the *European Disability Card*, *AccessibleEU*, and the *European Social Fund Plus* (ESF+). In practice, nonetheless, these tools will only succeed if they are fully implemented at national and local levels. Communities are where inclusion must become visible: in accessible public spaces, inclusive cultural programmes, and peer-support networks that bring people together. Restoring the social value of disability means ensuring that every young person can take part fully in community life.

To restore the social value of disability, immediate and coordinated action is needed at all levels of governance.

At the **European level**, we call on EU institutions to:

- Sustain and strengthen the Disability Platform, AccessibleEU, and DOTCOM as hubs for awareness, knowledge, and coordination.

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- Ensure the systematic inclusion of young people with disabilities in EU consultations, youth structures, and European Parliament processes.
- Increase EU funding for inclusive education and employment through Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, and ESF+, with a focus on adaptive technologies, inclusive curricula, and accessible workplaces.
- Improve EU-wide data collection on young people with disabilities to inform evidence-based and youth-focused policymaking.

At the **national level**, we call on Member States to:

- Develop National Action Plans for Inclusive Education with measurable targets to reduce early school leaving among young people with disabilities.
- Guarantee political representation of young people with disabilities in National Youth Councils, Youth Parliaments, advisory boards, and government bodies.
- Strengthen inter-ministerial coordination across youth, education, employment, and disability portfolios to ensure coherent policies.
- Foster partnerships with the private sector to create accessible and supportive workplaces.
- Provide sustainable funding for youth organisations that promote disability rights and inclusion.

At the **local and community level**, we call on municipalities and civil society to:

- Invest in mentorship programmes, peer-support networks, and youth-led initiatives that empower young people with disabilities.
- Implement EU initiatives such as Inclusive Cities and the European Disability Card to improve accessibility in public spaces and services.
- Support awareness campaigns that combat stigma, promote visibility, and restore the social value of disability in community life.
- Encourage inclusive cultural and civic programmes that bring young people with disabilities into the centre of local participation.

Closing this Declaration, we affirm our collective commitment. We, the youth of Europe, state clearly that young people with disabilities are not only rights-holders but also changemakers, leaders, and innovators. Their contributions are vital to building a Union of Equality.

Decisions taken today will shape their access to education, employment, political participation, and social inclusion for generations to come. While strategies and commitments already exist, inclusion is not a final destination but an ongoing process; one that demands investment, courage, and continuous partnership with young people themselves.

We call on the European Parliament and all EU institutions to join us in restoring the social value of disability. By amplifying youth voices, ensuring meaningful participation, and transforming rights into lived realities, Europe can truly become a place where every young person, regardless of ability, thrives and shapes our shared future.

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