



Inclusion *worldwide*

Country report with a difference

South Africa

SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa's Path to Inclusion: Successes and Limitations



Picture 1 – Participants at a DEF-event

South Africa is at a crucial point in its inclusive development. Despite legal progress and growing political attention, around 5 per cent of the population continues to face barriers to education, employment and participation. At the same time, developments such as the recognition of South African Sign Language and international sporting successes demonstrate the potential that arises when barriers are actively broken down. Dialogue formats and practice-oriented approaches have proven to be effective. However, ensuring the equal participation of people with disabilities requires the continuous commitment of all social actors.



Initial Situation

According to current surveys by Statistics South Africa, around 3.3 million people with disabilities live in South Africa, which corresponds to approximately five percent of the population.¹ This figure illustrates that inclusion is not only a socio-political goal, but a task for society as a whole. Despite important legal progress, access to education, work and social services remains limited for many of those affected. The National Development Plan 2030 (South Africa's long-term strategy to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality by 2030) explicitly points out that people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by poverty, unemployment and social exclusion and therefore require special political attention.²

At the same time, there is a growing awareness that inclusion is an essential component of sustainable development and democratic participation. The social debate on accessibility, equality and the empowerment of people with disabilities shows that structural changes are necessary to reduce existing inequalities. Against this backdrop, this report examines how South Africa will advance the issue of inclusion politically, socially and institutionally in 2025.

Social Context

The social reality for people with disabilities in South Africa is characterised by significant structural barriers. This is particularly evident in the field of education. According to data from Statistics South Africa's General Household Survey, around ten per cent of children between the ages of seven and fifteen with special needs do not attend school.³ This proportion has remained virtually unchanged for several years and is significantly higher than for children without disabilities. Without a doubt, lack of access to education is one of the biggest obstacles to social and economic participation later in life.

In addition to limited school attendance, there are fundamental infrastructural deficits. During Child Protection Week 2025, Statistics South Africa highlighted that many schools still lack barrier-free access.⁴ Ramps, lifts and suitable sanitary facilities are often not available or not functional. In addition, there is a massive shortage of support services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy and individual learning support. These services are essential for children with disabilities, but are hardly available, especially in disadvantaged and rural areas.

¹ [From the desk of the President - Monday, 2 December 2024 | The Presidency](#)

² [National Development Plan 2030: Our future - make it work](#)

³ [Child Protection Week 2025: Spotlight on Education Access for Children with Special Needs | Statistics South Africa](#)

⁴ [Child Protection Week 2025: Spotlight on Education Access for Children with Special Needs | Statistics South Africa](#)

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The Stats SA Strategic Plan 2025/26 to 2029/30 also reveals significant regional differences.⁵ Families in rural areas often have no access to specialised schools or support services, which means long journeys, high costs and an additional burden on family carers. These unequal conditions reinforce existing social inequalities and make it difficult for children with disabilities to participate in an inclusive education system.

Political Framework

In recent years, South Africa has laid important political and legal foundations for strengthening the rights of persons with disabilities. In 2007, the country ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, thereby committing itself to equality, non-discrimination and full participation.⁶ At the institutional level, the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities was established in 2009 to coordinate national strategies and promote programmes for inclusion.⁷ Every year, the government brings the issue to the forefront of public attention during Disability Rights Awareness Month, which runs from 3 November to 3 December.⁸

In various political speeches, President Cyril Ramaphosa has repeatedly emphasised the importance of accessibility and participation. At the Transport Summit, he stated that accessibility is not a voluntary concession, but a fundamental right.⁹ In his State of the Nation Address (the South African president's annual speech to the National Parliament in which he outlines the state of the country) in February 2025, he also announced the National Skills Fund Disabilities Programme, which in its first phase will support more than ten thousand people with disabilities through targeted training opportunities. Another key instrument is the SASSA Disability Grant, which provides basic security and thus a minimum level of social participation for over a million South Africans.¹⁰

Despite this progress, the implementation of political guidelines remains a key challenge. The Employment Equity Act stipulates that at least two per cent of employees in companies should be people with disabilities. However, according to the Commission for Employment Equity, the actual employment rate is significantly below this target at 1.2 per cent.¹¹ This discrepancy between aspiration and reality is also evident in other areas, such as the accessibility of public buildings, the provision of support services and the implementation of policy

⁵ [Stats SA Strategic Plan 2025_26 - 2029_30.pdf](#)

⁶ [Remarks by President Cyril Ramaphosa at the Transport Summit on Universal Accessibility, Birchwood Conference Centre, Ekurhuleni | The Presidency](#)

⁷ [Overview – DWYPD](#)

⁸ [Disability Rights Awareness Month | Government Communication and Information System \(GCIS\)](#)

⁹ [State of the Nation Address by President Cyril Ramaphosa, Cape Town City Hall, 6 February 2025 - DIRCO](#)

¹⁰ [From the desk of the President - Monday, 2 December 2024 | The Presidency](#)

¹¹ [From the desk of the President - Monday, 2 December 2024 | The Presidency](#)

framework documents such as the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.¹² Nelson Mandela summed up this responsibility decades ago when he declared that the new South Africa would only become a reality if all people had free and equal access to social opportunities.¹³

Example from society: Successes at the Paralympics

Sport is a visible sign of society's recognition of people with disabilities. At the 2024 Paralympic Games in Paris, the South African team achieved remarkable success, winning two gold and four bronze medals.¹⁴ These achievements attracted widespread attention from the public, the business community and the media. They illustrate the potential that can be realised when people with disabilities receive targeted support and access to high-quality training opportunities.

At the same time, this example makes it clear that inclusion is particularly effective where resources are made available and barriers are actively removed. These sporting successes can therefore be seen as an indication of what social participation can look like when political objectives, institutional support and individual promotion work together.

Example from politics: Recognition of South African Sign Language

The recognition of South African Sign Language as the twelfth official language in 2023 is considered one of the most significant political advances for the deaf community in South Africa.¹⁵ It is the result of years of work by advocacy groups and civil society organisations that have worked together to ensure that the language and culture of deaf people are socially visible and recognised by the state. This step sends a clear signal: it emphasises that barrier-free communication is a fundamental democratic right and should not depend on individual circumstances. With official recognition, a legal framework has been created that obliges schools, authorities and public institutions to improve access to information and interaction for deaf people.

At the same time, this development shows how political will and the continuous commitment of dedicated groups can enable structural change. The recognition of sign language creates new opportunities for inclusion in education, the labour market and political participation,

¹² [White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Fifth Annual Progress Report: April 2020 to March 2021](#)

¹³ [Disability Rights Awareness Month | Government Communication and Information System \(GCIS\)](#)

¹⁴ [From the desk of the President - Monday, 2 December 2024 | The Presidency](#)

¹⁵ [From the desk of the President - Monday, 2 December 2024 | The Presidency](#)

and strengthens the position of the deaf community in public decision-making processes. It makes it clear that progress can be achieved when state institutions and civil society actors act together. This example thus stands for the transformative power of political reforms that break down barriers and expand social participation.

Inclusion in context of G20

With its assumption of the G20 presidency in 2025, South Africa has moved into the global political spotlight. Under the motto 'Inclusive Growth,' the country is pursuing its goal of linking economic development more closely with social justice, solidarity and sustainable prospects for the future.¹⁶ In addition to traditional topics such as trade, climate and global financial stability, the issue of social inclusion has thus been given much higher priority on the international agenda.

Since the G20 summit in Brazil in 2024, the Disability 20 Initiative has been established as a format that aims to bring the perspectives of people with disabilities more strongly into global political processes. Its goal is to become part of the G20 structures as an official dialogue partner in the future and thus to permanently bring issues of inclusion into the international decision-making process. During South Africa's presidency, the G20 summit provided a platform to raise the profile of this issue. This made an important contribution to anchoring the social participation of people with disabilities as an integral part of global development strategies.

Contribution of Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS)

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation works with partner organisations in South Africa to promote greater social participation and equal opportunities. One focus is on promoting the inclusion of deaf people. In cooperation with the Deaf Empowerment Firm (DEF), several dialogue and education formats have been organised since 2024, bringing together decision-makers from politics, business and civil society. More than 100 participants took part in these formats, over 80 per cent of whom are deaf. These events have raised awareness of structural barriers and deepened the exchange between public institutions, employers and the deaf community. Through practice-oriented discussions and joint approaches to solutions, a sustainable contribution has been made to breaking down barriers, anchoring inclusion as a responsibility for society as a whole and visibly strengthening democratic participation in South Africa.

¹⁶ [G20 Presidency – G20 South Africa](#)

First-hand perspective: Interview with Sikelelwa Alex Msitshana

To gain a first-hand perspective on how inclusion is implemented and promoted in practice, we spoke with Sikelelwa Alex Msitshana. She is the founder and managing director of DEF and a member of the Presidential Working Group on Disability (PWGD). DEF is a social enterprise based in Soweto, a district of Johannesburg with over two million inhabitants. The organisation's goal is to strengthen the socio-economic participation of deaf people and people with hearing impairments in South Africa. Since its founding in 2015, DEF has pursued a central mission: to close the employment gap for deaf South Africans by providing access to education, training and sustainable income opportunities. This valuable work is based on the belief that economic participation is a fundamental right and should not depend on the type or extent of a disability.

In this interview, Ms Msitshana talks about the biggest challenges facing people with disabilities, successful support approaches and cooperation between government, business and civil society.



Picture 2 – Sikelelwa Alex Msitshana

What challenges do people with disabilities most frequently face in your work?

Ms Msitshana: Despite important legal advances, the reality of life for many people with disabilities in South Africa, especially deaf people, remains far from truly inclusive. Their labour force participation rate is less than one per cent. Within this group, deaf people, especially deaf young people, are particularly affected. Their unemployment rate is over 85 per cent and is the result of persistent barriers to education and communication. These figures underscore the urgency of systemic change and demonstrate the importance of initiatives led by the deaf community itself, such as those of DEF.

The deaf community continues to face structural exclusion in education, employment and public participation. The most common challenges include:

1. **Communication barriers:** South African Sign Language was only recognised as the twelfth official language in 2023. Implementation has been slow so far due to a lack

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of qualified interpreters and knowledge of deaf culture in government agencies and businesses.

2. **Inequalities in the education system:** Most deaf children attend underfunded schools, often achieve low literacy skills and are excluded from many further education pathways that require hearing-centred access criteria.
3. **Discrimination in the labour market:** Deaf job seekers face prejudice about their ability to perform and encounter recruitment processes that are virtually inaccessible to them, often excluding them from the outset.
4. **Gaps in the implementation of policy guidelines:** Despite progressive policy frameworks such as the 2015 White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, implementation has been slow, inconsistent and lacking in sufficient oversight.

These barriers reinforce poverty, dependency and frustration within the deaf community. At the same time, they highlight that the work of organisations such as DEF is not only valuable but indispensable for breaking down structural inequalities.

Which ways of support have been deemed especially effective to promote support of people with disabilities?

Ms Msitshana: DEF has learned that inclusion cannot be achieved through training measures alone. It requires a multi-layered approach that combines personal empowerment, employer awareness, and political engagement. The most effective measures include:

1. **Accessible and accredited training programs**, i.e., integrating South African Sign Language, subtitling, and visual learning materials to enable the full participation of deaf learners.
2. **Partnerships with employers** that go beyond symbolic measures and include mentoring, sign language training for employees, and workplace accessibility assessments.
3. **Promoting entrepreneurship** through DEF's ICT Innovation Hub, which supports deaf graduates in starting micro-enterprises and strengthens innovation within the deaf community.
4. **Policy work and advocacy**, where DEF cooperates with national institutions such as the National Council of and for Persons with Disabilities, the Presidential Working Group on Disability, and the D20 within the G20 process to advance inclusive reforms and increase the global visibility of the deaf community.

These combined strategies have already achieved concrete results. To date, DEF has trained and empowered more than 550 deaf youth, produced several cohorts of deaf software developers, and enabled employment and advancement opportunities in various economic sectors.

Do you collaborate with other organizations or support networks?

Ms Msitshana: No single organization can overcome the structural barriers faced by people with disabilities. DEF therefore works closely with partners such as Deaftouch, Sign Language Education and Development, Deaf SA, and other civil society organizations. We also collaborate with universities and businesses to embed the concerns of the deaf community in research, policy-making, and business practice.

Through these partnerships, DEF expands its reach and creates a broader network for accountability and change. The collaboration also enables the exchange of best practices at the African and international levels and demonstrates how empowerment-oriented, deaf community-led models of inclusive development can influence the world.

What measures has the South African government taken to support people with disabilities, and do you consider these measures to be sufficient?

Ms Msitshana: The South African government has created several frameworks to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities. The White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the National Development Plan, and the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Codes contain key provisions to strengthen their rights and participation. The recent recognition of South African Sign Language as an official national language represents a historic milestone. In addition, various Sector Education and Training Authorities have begun to fund qualification programs for people with disabilities, opening up new opportunities for organizations such as DEF to expand their impact.

Despite this progress, implementation remains inconsistent. Funding processes are bureaucratic and rarely accessible to deaf people, policy enforcement is limited, and in many places, inclusion is seen more as a matter of regulatory compliance than as a development issue. Support services remain inadequate, especially in rural areas, and the voices of people with disabilities continue to be absent from important decision-making processes that directly affect their lives.

For DEF, inclusion means breaking down barriers at all levels, from the classroom to the boardroom. On International Day of Persons with Disabilities on December 3, 2025, we reaffirm our understanding that economic participation is the foundation of true equality. We are committed to a South Africa where deaf young people are not just recipients of good intentions, but act as leaders, innovators, and active shapers of an inclusive economy.

For this vision to become a reality, much stronger cooperation between government, business, academia, and civil society is needed to translate existing rights into concrete results. We invite partners in all areas to join us on this journey and create a South Africa that truly leaves no one behind.

Outlook for our future work

The conversation with Sikelelwa Alex Msitshana makes it clear that the reality of life for many people with disabilities in South Africa continues to be marked by profound structural barriers. Despite existing political frameworks, key challenges remain, particularly in education,

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access to qualified support services, and the labor market. The very low labor force participation rate of deaf people shows how wide the gap between legal objectives and practical implementation still is.

At the same time, the work of organizations such as the Deaf Empowerment Firm makes it clear that change is possible when affected communities are actively involved and concrete support services are provided. Training programs, cooperation with employers, and political engagement have already had a noticeable impact and are opening up new opportunities for self-determined economic participation.

For the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in South Africa, this confirms the relevance of continuing to promote inclusion as a cross-cutting issue. The cooperation with DEF has shown that dialogue formats and practice-oriented approaches can provide effective impetus. However, the way forward requires the continued commitment of all social actors to translate political commitments into sustainable improvements and enable people with disabilities to participate on an equal footing.

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