

2.1 The UNPRPD theory of change

2.1.1 A systemic approach to social change

The UNPRPD takes a systemic approach to social dynamics, which acknowledges the significant role played by environmental factors in shaping opportunities for change, but also recognizes the inherent ability of social actors to bring about transformation through individual and collective efforts.

In the approach underpinning the work of the UNPRPD, social actors are seen as purposive agents pursuing multiple goals in spaces characterized by a variety of social norms, which can be formally codified — as in the case of laws and policies — or informal, as in the case of culturally defined standards of conduct. In order to achieve their objectives, social actors deploy a range of resources, which can be material and immaterial, and seek to extend their influence by entering collaborative arrangements with other like-minded agents through different forms of partnerships.

The content of social norms, the level and distribution of resources, and the configuration of networks that connect agents in collaborative (or antagonistic) relations have a profound and lasting impact on the circumstances of individuals and collectivities. They can be seen therefore as structural features of social systems. These features are some of the key channels through which discrimination is enacted and sustained over time. Hence, it is critically important that they are systematically addressed in order for equality to be promoted and human rights to be advanced.

→ **WHAT IS A “SYSTEMIC APPROACH”?**

A systemic approach does not focus exclusively on the environmental factors that affect, positively or negatively, people’s lives. Nor is it concerned exclusively with people’s ability to modify their environment. Rather, it looks at the interactions between actors and environment, or what is often referred to as a “social system.”

→ **WHO ARE “SOCIAL ACTORS”?**

“Social actors” are simply people who engage in interactions with other people in the pursuit of certain goals. As such, they can be very different in nature. They can be individuals or groups and, in the latter case, formally or informally organized. They can operate for themselves or on behalf of others and in different spheres of life: the state, the market and civil society. Actors operating within public institutions – for instance as elected holders of political office or civil servants – are vested with a special power that derives from the authority of the state. However, within a human rights based approach like the one adopted by the UNPRPD, this power comes with a special responsibility: to discharge the duty bearer role of the state in relation to all the individuals that fall under the authority of that state (i.e. the rights holders).

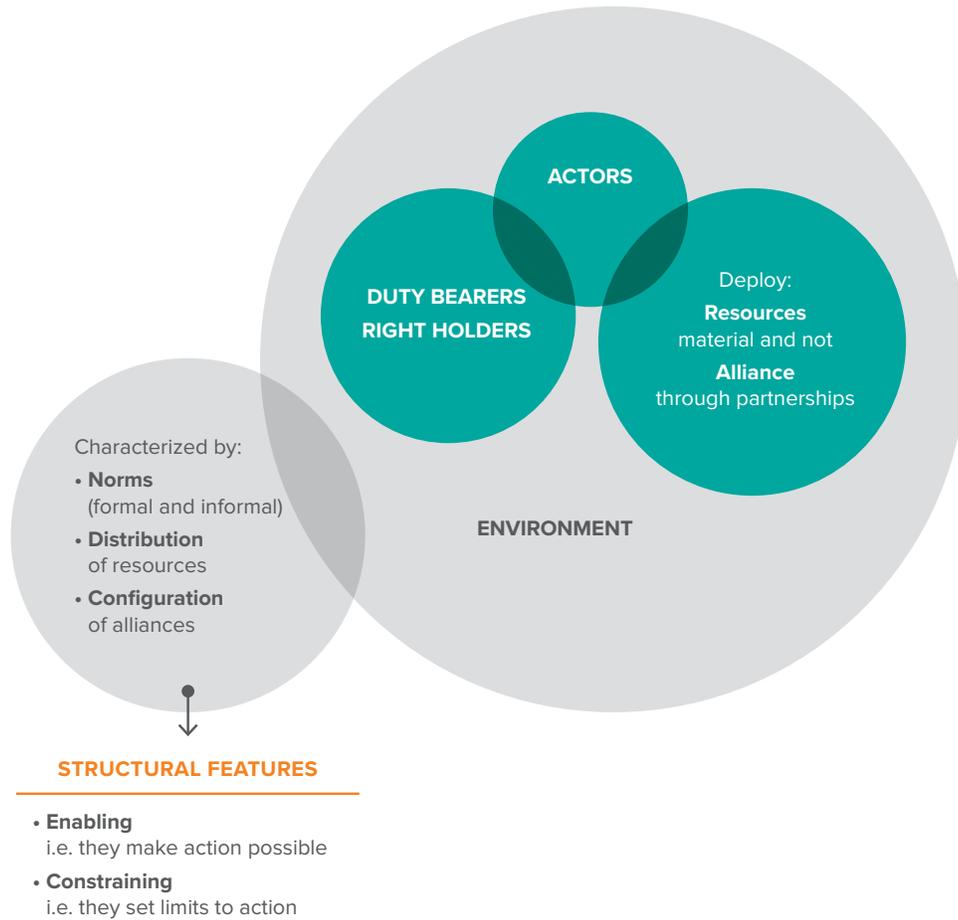
→ **WHAT ARE “RESOURCES” IN SOCIAL ACTION?**

“Resources” for the purposes of the UNPRPD theory of change are the means that actors use in order to achieve their goals. These means include obvious material assets, such as financial resources; and, in the case of collective actors, human resources. But they also include immaterial assets, such as for instance the authority that stems from legislation or informal cultural norms. Knowledge, linguistic competence, access to decision-makers and social capital are some other resources that play an important role in social action. The set of resources that an actor can tap into when pursuing its objectives is often referred to as “capacity.”

→ **WHAT ARE “STRUCTURAL FEATURES” OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS?**

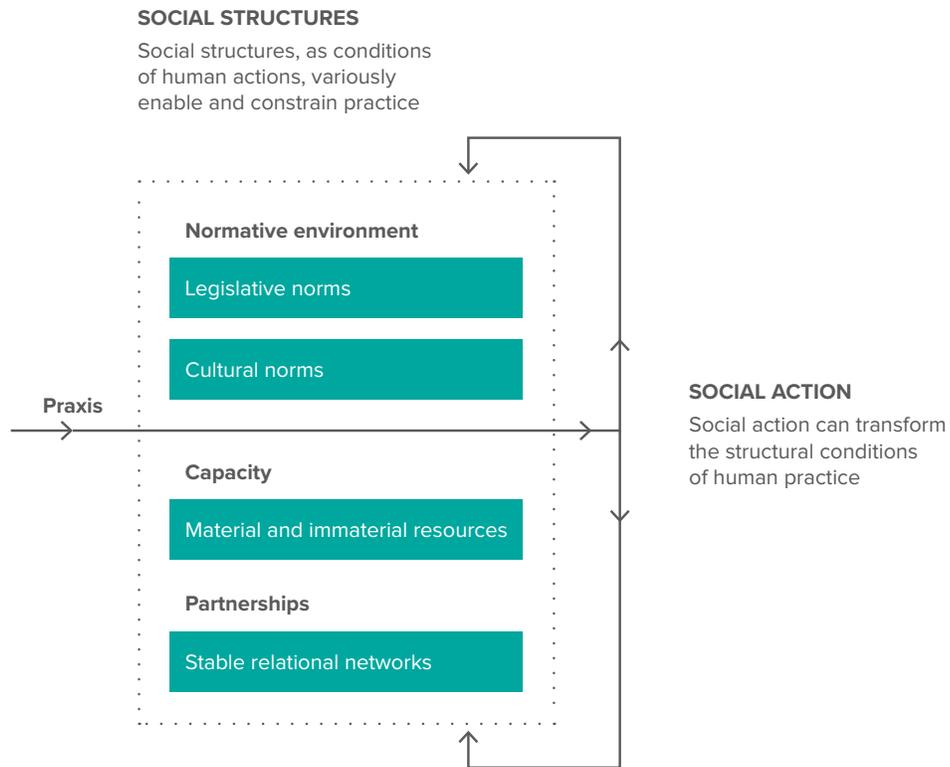
Structural features of social systems are the long-term underpinning conditions that shape social interactions. Among others, the metaphor of language has been used in social theory to explain the role of structure. Language makes communication possible, but at the same time limits the realm of what can be said. Similarly, structural factors enable but also constrain human praxis. As such, they can have both a very positive and a very negative impact on the realization of the human rights of specific segments of society.

Figure 1. Social systems as interaction between agents and environment



The structural aspects of society may, at first, appear as a “fact of life”, or an immutable “given” to discrete actors – especially to those groups, like persons with disabilities, that have historically experienced significant discrimination, marginalization and disempowerment. However, it is important to note that structure is nothing but the outcome of social action and can be eventually transformed, particularly when a broad coalition of actors is mobilized around a shared interest, set of values or vision of society.

Figure 2. **Social structures as conditions and outcomes of social action**



Based on the assessment of the status of disability rights contained in Section 1, taking into account the key elements of comparative advantage described in subsection 1.4, and in keeping with the system approach described above, the following objectives and operating modalities have been identified as the foundation of the UNPRPD's work in its second phase.

→ THE UNPRPD OBJECTIVES AND OPERATING MODALITIES

The UNPRPD will seek to enable structurally focused social action aimed at advancing disability rights, in keeping with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

It will do so by working with duty bearers, recognizing the primary role played by the state in ensuring the realization of human rights. But it will also work with right holders — persons with disabilities and their representative organizations — in keeping with the principle “nothing about us, without us.”

In pursuing its objectives, the UNPRPD will adopt strategies that variously combine the following elements:

- Promotion of normative environments that are conducive to the fulfillment of disability rights (with respect to both legislative and cultural norms);
- Coalition-building among and within constituencies and across the state-citizens divide through a partnership infrastructure approach; and
- Capacity strengthening for key actors (both duty bearers and right holders) that are committed to the realization of disability rights.

The operating modalities of the UNPRPD will be designed to leverage the Partnership’s main elements of comparative advantage, which include:

- Its ability to further the integration of UN normative and operational mandates in relation to disability rights;
- Its capacity to foster a ‘One UN’ approach to the promotion of disability rights at country level; and
- Its potential to serve as a convener of dialogue and facilitator of collaboration among multiple stakeholders.

The UNPRPD will seek to play a catalyst role in the progressive realization of disability rights by triggering big changes with small resources. It will do so through the careful combination of targeted and mainstreaming interventions, through the systematic pursuit of effective scaling up strategies and through the rigorous implementation of a robust knowledge management programme.

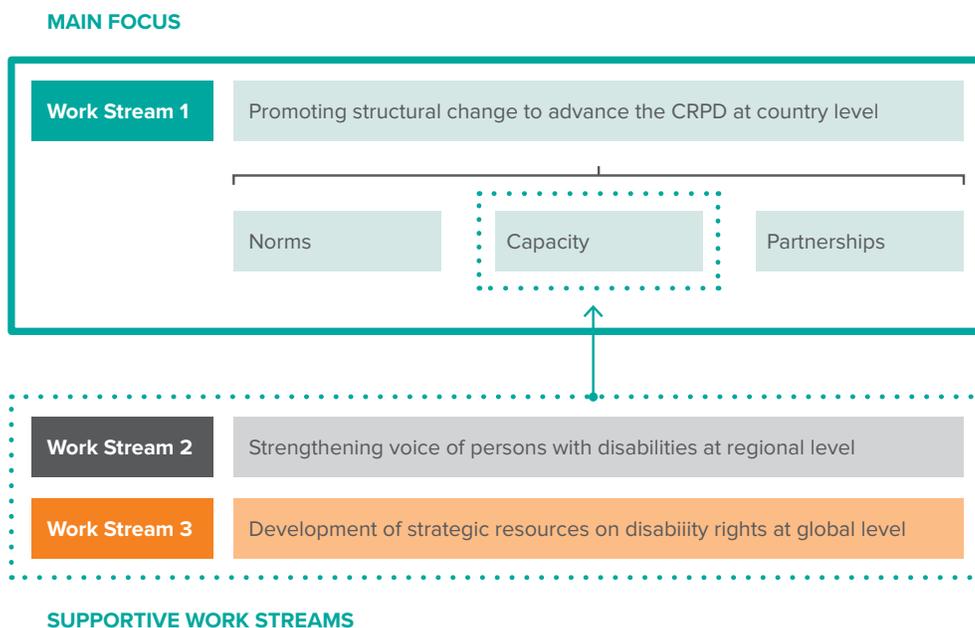
Finally, throughout its work the UNPRPD will remain committed to the highest standard of administrative efficiency and transparency and make full use of the UNDP MPTF Office support in order to meet these standards.

2.1.2 Local action with a global perspective

The primary focus of the UNPRPD will be the promotion of country-level joint programmes in which Participating UN Organizations engage in collaborative efforts with a range of partners to trigger systemic change. This component will receive the vast majority of UNPRPD funds and is the level at which the success of the UNPRPD will be assessed. Country-level programmes, however, will be supplemented by supportive activities designed to maximize the impact of the UNPRPD operations on the ground through complementary action at the regional and global level.

Key supportive work streams will include efforts to strengthen the voice of persons with disabilities at the regional level, and activities to develop strategically important resources on disability rights at the global level. Both of these work streams can be seen as extensions and reinforcements of country-level capacity development work. The regional work stream will eventually strengthen national organizations of persons with disabilities by providing them with additional opportunities to collaborate, exert influence and receive support. The global work stream will empower all actors involved in UNPRPD’s work at country level by developing additional knowledge that is relevant to their needs and challenges.

Figure 3. UNPRPD work streams



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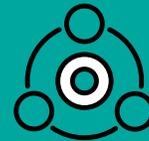
LEVERS OF CHANGE



Normative environment reform



Capacity building



Coalition building

KEY ACTORS



Duty bearers



Right holders



Multiple partners

COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGES

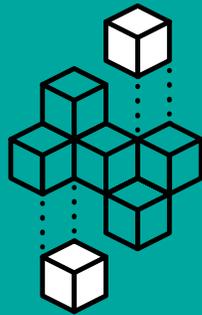
Ability to advance the integration of UN normative and operational mandates in relation to disability rights;

Capacity to foster a 'One UN' approach to the promotion of disability rights at country level;

Potential to serve as a convener of dialogue and facilitator of collaboration among multiple stakeholders;

Administrative efficiency and transparency.

OUTCOMES



Structural changes



Country level

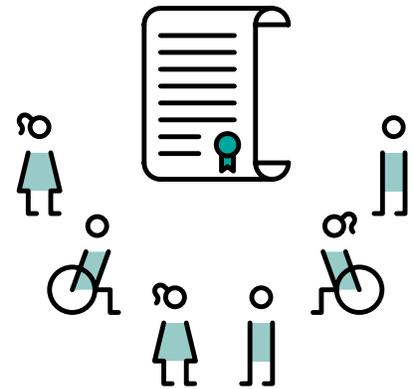


Global level



Regional level

IMPACT



**Specific rights
of persons with
disabilities are
advanced at
country level**
