

NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT ON THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN GEORGIA



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NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT ON THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN GEORGIA

September 2025

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This publication is developed within the framework of the Council of Europe Project "Further Enhancement of Social and Economic Rights in Georgia."

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Cover design and layout:

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List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full name
CSO	Civil society organisation
ESC	Revised European Social Charter
LEPL	Legal entity of public law
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SEN	Special education needs
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Executive summary

Over the past three decades, Georgia has taken important steps towards advancing the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities. Legal and policy reforms have laid the foundation for a more inclusive society, with increasing public awareness and the establishment of key protections across sectors. However, while Georgia has made commendable progress since gaining independence, the implementation of these rights has been hampered by the lasting influence of the Soviet-era medical model, associated societal stigma, compounded by limited resources, regional disparities and recent political tensions affecting cooperation and support.

This report, produced as part of the Council of Europe’s “Further Enhancement of Social and Economic Rights in Georgia” project, aimed to examine Georgia’s current legislative and regulatory frameworks and practices concerning the social and economic rights of persons with disabilities. Guided by Article 15 of the Revised European Social Charter (ESC), which guarantees the right to independence, social integration and participation in community life, and by Article E, which provides for the enjoyment of these rights without discrimination, the study assesses how Georgia’s approach aligns with Council of Europe and international standards. It seeks to analyse and present the existing achievements and to highlight areas requiring further improvement, serving as a benchmark for future developments – a document of the “here-and-now”.

The report focuses on the themes of education, employment and social integration, looking also at cross-cutting issues such as accessibility, gender and the role of civil society organisations and of non-governmental organisations. Although it traces developments over approximately three decades, the study assesses more recent legislative and policy shifts in particular.

The methodology involved desk research and a fact-finding mission. The desk research included analysing the legal framework (constitutional provisions, anti-discrimination laws and persons with disabilities-specific legislation), relevant grey literature from international and national organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Georgia’s Public Defender’s Office (Ombudsman), and documents obtained during the fact-finding mission (internal policy documents, statistical data and reports). The fact-finding mission involved engaging directly with national-level institutions, representatives of persons with disabilities, and organisations advocating for or working with them (CSOs and NGOs) to gather first-hand perspectives. Consultations included representatives from various ministries and government agencies, the Public Defender’s Office, representatives of persons with disabilities and their organisations, along with international NGOs.

With regard to the current state of policies and practices, it can be seen that Georgia has made significant progress, especially since ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2013 and enacting the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2020. Key legal instruments provide guarantees for persons with disabilities, prohibiting discrimination and emphasising equality and non-discrimination. Georgia’s Constitution prohibits discrimination and mandates the State to create special conditions for persons with disabilities. The Law on the Rights of

Persons with Disabilities further defines discrimination, establishes the State's obligations, and recognises principles like reasonable accommodation and universal design. The Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination cites disability as a prohibited ground and provides a framework for combating discrimination across various areas of life. The Civil Procedure Code provides a framework for supported decision-making, allowing persons with disabilities to be assisted in making decisions, a significant shift from the previous guardianship system. The Labour Code prohibits workplace discrimination based on disability and mandates reasonable accommodations. National Human Rights Strategies and Action Plans have aimed to guarantee equal opportunities and to promote independence, employment and accessibility.

A major policy development has been Georgia's transition from a medical model to a biopsychosocial one in the process of assessing disability status, guided by an Action Plan adopted in 2023. This model emphasises the individual's needs and the social and environmental barriers they face, rather than focusing solely on medical conditions. International donors and organisations have been instrumental in driving this shift.

The needs assessment highlights that the main issue is not the lack of policies but the lack of implementation. Significant challenges include the slow implementation of the biopsychosocial model due to limited resources and political challenges. At the time of drafting, the biopsychosocial model had not yet been integrated into national legislation or practice, and the medical model continues to be used. At the same time, all stakeholders (representing government and non-governmental organisations alike) strongly agree that adopting the new model is essential to making an impact and creating a whole new basis for recognising and defining disability. For this reason, it is urgently needed. The crucial Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has shortcomings of its own, e.g. in defining equality for certain disability groups, and lacks clear criteria for "disproportionate burden" regarding reasonable accommodation, which, though minor, still affect its successful enforcement.

The education system is transitioning towards inclusive education in mainstream schools, regulated by relevant laws harmonised with the UNCRPD. While specialised schools exist for certain disabilities, most children are enrolled in mainstream settings and are identified based on special educational needs rather than formal disability status (i.e. one assessed through the lens of the medical model). Progress has been supported by international projects, leading to the development of inclusive education support systems, training for professionals and infrastructural improvements. Higher education institutions are also mandated to accommodate students with disabilities, and vocational training is intended to be accessible, with adapted environments and support services. However, although significant progress has been made, education faces challenges like data discrepancies between ministries, the need for parental consent for special educational needs assessment, outdated infrastructure, limited accessible transport and the shortage of qualified specialists, particularly in rural areas. Vocational training is limited, often offering short courses with certificates rather than complete qualifications, and gaining access to it is particularly challenging for those with intellectual impairments.

With regard to employment, reforms to the Labour Code prohibit discrimination and mandate reasonable accommodation. The State Employment Promotion Agency supports employment for persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups through programmes like vocational training, internships and wage subsidies, based on an "appoint-train-retain" principle. However, employment rates for persons with disabilities remain very low, a fact which could be attributed to employer stigma, lack of awareness, insufficient incentives for businesses, as well as the focus primarily being on employee capacity-building and individual responsibility, rather than making the open labour market more accessible and inclusive. There is also a mismatch between the education received and the available jobs.

Social integration and participation involve legal capacity reforms, social benefits, services and deinstitutionalisation. The social package, a monetary benefit, is administered by the Social Service Agen-

cy based on legally recognised disability status. However, its amount, although it has seen a notable progression, remains insufficient for many, leaving recipients below the minimum subsistence level. Discrepancies exist between the estimated number of persons with disabilities and those receiving benefits, potentially due to assessment criteria and benefit limitations. The State Care Agency oversees additional social services, including assistive devices, housing support, nutritional and medical services, along with tailored programmes for children. Although services such as personal assistance and supported living programmes have expanded, they face challenges in relation to accessibility, quality monitoring, uneven distribution across regions and staff shortages. Deinstitutionalisation, moving individuals from large institutions to smaller, community-based homes, is ongoing; initiatives like the USAID-funded Independent Living Centres have provided direct support and advocacy. Home care and personal assistant services are also being introduced. Nevertheless, deinstitutionalisation for adults is slower than for children, with some large institutions still operating.

Social and political participation for persons with disabilities is hindered by inactive formal mechanisms and strained government-CSO relations. Awareness and advocacy are present. However, recent political developments, particularly the so-called “Foreign Agents” Law (also known as the “Foreign Influence” Law), have negatively impacted relationships between the government and civil society, affecting cooperation and advocacy efforts (e.g. by halting meetings of the collegial body, the Unified Coordination Council, and its Committees). Municipal Disability Councils, which were intended to involve persons with disabilities locally, often face issues with transparency.

Physical accessibility standards exist to a degree, but lack full implementation and enforcement. Physical barriers persist across public life, including in the transport sector and in government buildings, alongside barriers in communication and access to information. While gender dimensions are formally addressed in legislation, the absence of detailed guidelines and disaggregated data result in significant disparities in access to education, employment and healthcare for women and girls with disabilities.

Lastly, the challenges mentioned are further compounded by intersectional factors, particularly for ethnic minorities, those living in remote regions and persons with an intellectual disability, who face additional barriers due to the combined effects of limited support, systemic stigma and geographic inequality.

Strategic recommendations focus on the practical realisation of rights and strengthening the existing framework. The key needs identified are: obtaining precise and unified statistical data on persons with disabilities; strengthening the effective enforcement of existing legislation through increased accountability and monitoring; clarifying vague legal concepts like “reasonable accommodation” with detailed guidelines; accelerating the implementation of the biopsychosocial model with dedicated resources; implementing widespread, culturally sensitive awareness-raising campaigns to combat stigma; and rebuilding trust and re-establishing functional channels for the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and their organisations in decision-making, potentially through alternative platforms or support for local initiatives, given the current political climate. Continuing and tailoring capacity-building initiatives for stakeholders is also crucial, as it has been especially appreciated by its beneficiaries. Addressing the shortages of qualified specialists in education, improving accessibility and funding for inclusive education, enhancing employment opportunities through employer incentives and alternative models, increasing social package amounts, and expanding the scale and quality of monitoring of social services are also recommended. Specific attention is needed for intersectional vulnerabilities, particularly for women and ethnic minorities with disabilities, which require equity- rather than equality-focused approaches. The report also acknowledges that challenges related to limited resources and the political environment may impact the pace of progress.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The purpose of the report

This study, conducted as part of the “Further Enhancement of Social and Economic Rights in Georgia” project, examines how Georgia’s legislative and regulatory frameworks, as well as resulting practices, align with the Council of Europe and international standards regarding the social and economic rights of persons with disabilities.

Guided by Article 15 of the Revised European Social Charter (ESC) – which guarantees the right to independence, social integration, and participation in community life – and by Article E, which provides for the enjoyment of these rights without discrimination on any grounds, the study seeks to determine whether Georgia’s laws, policies and practices effectively and inclusively uphold these principles.

The report aims to showcase both the existing achievements and the areas in which further efforts are needed and will serve as a practical resource for the Council of Europe and other stakeholders committed to fostering a legal and regulatory environment that empowers persons with disabilities in Georgia. It is also intended to serve as a document reporting the here-and-now so that future developments can be seen against this backdrop.

1.2 Scope

The scope of this report is defined by several key parameters that define its overall reach and focus.

The report focuses on the aspects of social and economic rights of persons with disabilities, guided by Article 15 of the ESC and other relevant international instruments (mostly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD). More precisely, the analysis focuses on the thematic areas determined by the ESC provisions on education, employment and social integration. Those areas are further supplemented by the inclusion of some more intersectional areas of concern, the cross-cutting issues of gender dimensions, the overall accessibility of services, and the role and cooperation with civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Those aspects also guide the report’s structure.

While the historical background traces developments spanning approximately three decades to provide the specific context of the ongoing legacies from the post-Soviet era, the study assesses more recent legislative and policy shifts, paying particular attention to laws and initiatives adopted in the last five years. Key legal and policy documents – such as the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the anti-discrimination legislation – form the backbone of the analysis and came into being in that precise timeframe. The methodological approach relies on the analysis of two sources: desk research, supplemented by stakeholder consultations. The latter, which, although not exhaustive, offered an in-depth qualitative insight into the current situation and the ongoing challenges.

Nonetheless, due to the broad and complex nature of disability rights, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- ▶ Given the extensive scope of the impact that disability has on different areas of life and, therefore, on disability rights, the report prioritises the areas most relevant to the obligations under Article 15 of the ESC but acknowledges that further research may be needed to provide a more detailed examination of certain specific topics.

- ▶ It should be noted, for example, that the issue of access to healthcare was not included in this report as a separate dimension, since more extensive research is needed to fully understand the challenges to equal access to health services for persons with disabilities.¹ The author also recognises the barriers and challenges faced by parents of children and adults with disabilities. However, the report's primary focus is on persons with disabilities themselves: this complex issue intersects with the broader questions of care, support and social policy and would, therefore, require additional, dedicated research in order to be fully explored.
- ▶ Furthermore, different disabilities entail different needs and challenges. The experiences of individuals with physical, sensory, intellectual and psychosocial disabilities vary greatly. While the study incorporates input from consultations with relevant institutions and representatives of persons with disabilities (see sub-chapter 1.4 Methodology), and those dimensions are included in the analysis, it cannot fully (and in detail) capture the diverse lived experiences of all disability groups. It focuses on providing a more high-level analysis to the Council of Europe with meaningful recommendations which do require this more generalist approach.
- ▶ The findings may not fully reflect the regional disparities within Georgia. As the analysis suggests, the situation of persons with disabilities differs significantly between urban and rural areas (especially in the mountains) due to variations in service availability, infrastructure and policy implementation at the local level. The report attempts to include this perspective, though it presents findings on a more general – national – level.
- ▶ Some recognised gaps in statistical data and the lack of comprehensive national research on certain disability-related issues limit the ability to provide a fully evidence-based analysis.

Despite these limitations, this report aims to provide a meaningful analysis of the selected focus areas.

1.3 Structure of the report

The report is organised to move from an overview of the study's objectives and methodology to an exploration of current legal frameworks and practices, followed by an assessment of existing gaps. It concludes with recommendations.

- ▶ Chapter 1 provides basic information about the study and introduces the report's purpose and scope, as well as providing a historical background on disability rights in Georgia. It also outlines the methodology employed in the analysis and defines some key terms that shape the study's approach and findings.
- ▶ Chapter 2 focuses on the present-day policies established to protect the rights of persons with disabilities in Georgia. This chapter is divided into sections on education, employment, social integration, cross-cutting issues (such as accessibility, gender, and their intersectionality), and the roles of civil society and advocacy in line with the ESC provisions. The intention is to offer a picture of the legal, institutional and policy landscape affecting people with disabilities; however, it does not discuss the practices.
- ▶ Chapter 3 – building on the observations in the previous chapter – presents a the lived experience of persons with disabilities; that is, it presents the main gaps and challenges identified from the research. It is organised in alignment with the preceding chapter's focus areas and follows them in its structure.
- ▶ Chapter 4 offers recommendations aimed at advancing disability rights in Georgia. These suggestions draw on the gaps identified in Chapter 3, as well as established Council of Europe and international standards.

¹ While equal access to healthcare can be, and often is, understood as a part of social rights, the specificity of the subject and lack of data do not allow it to be meaningfully included in the report.

1.4 Methodology

The analysis relied primarily on two main sources of information: **desk research** and a **fact-finding mission**. The findings from consultations, in combination with the desk research, form the basis of this report's analysis so that both **legal frameworks and lived experiences** are reflected. While, as discussed above, the study does not claim to represent every possible perspective, it seeks to provide an assessment grounded in the documented policies, institutional viewpoints and stakeholder experiences.

While most of the data collected were qualitative, some limited quantitative information was also considered where relevant; hence, the study employed mostly a qualitative research approach.

The **desk research** involved a thematic review of three main types of sources, guided by the scope of the assignment:

- ▶ First, an analysis of the legal framework was conducted to assess the national laws vis-à-vis both practices and the ESC. This included constitutional provisions, anti-discrimination laws, regulations specifically addressing the rights of persons with disabilities, and other relevant legislation, as needed.
- ▶ Second, the study reviewed relevant grey literature, including reports from international and national organisations, such as those published by the Public Defender's Office of Georgia or the United Nations Development Programme, and academic literature that provided context and comparative insights. These sources, in particular, contributed to understanding the practical implementation of disability rights, showcasing achievements and gaps in policy execution.
- ▶ Third, documents obtained during the fact-finding mission – internal policy documents, statistical data and reports shared by national institutions and organisations – were reviewed.

The full list of the documents and desk research sources included is provided in Annex 1.

The analysis of those sources was structured by theme² and findings were categorised under the four key areas that shape this report.

In addition to desk research, a **fact-finding mission** was conducted to engage directly with national-level institutions and representatives of people with disabilities, organisations advocating on their behalf or working with them on a daily basis. The primary objective was to gather first-hand perspectives on the challenges, achievements and implementation of policies, as well as to gain a well-rounded understanding of the approach, internal logic and systems logic of national-level actors with respect to persons with disabilities and their rights.

The fact-finding mission included meetings and interviews with key stakeholders, summarised in Table 1 below:

Table 1 *Overview of participants in the fact-finding mission interviews*

National authorities and institutions
Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia
Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs: Department of Social Protection, IDPs and Labour Policy
Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs: Social Service Agency
Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs: State Employment Promotion Agency

² Thematic analysis involves identifying patterns in qualitative data, which are then reported as themes (Clark & Brown 2017; Kiger 2020, Lochmiller 2021)

Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs: State Care Agency
Public Defender's Office: Department of Persons with Disabilities
Representation of persons with disabilities
Board of the Georgian Disability Network
Independent Living Centres
International non-governmental organisations working with and providing services for persons with disabilities

Source: *Ecorys*

In some cases, only one representative from an institution participated, while in others, group interviews were conducted. The latter approach was employed at the stakeholders' discretion when different departments or branches were involved, allowing the gathering of a broader institutional perspective.

All interviews were conducted with prior consent and, where necessary, real-time translation from Georgian to English was provided. Additionally, with prior permission, interviews were recorded for note-taking purposes.

In addition, the first draft of the report was shared with a limited number of stakeholders, with a request to provide any corrections to the data included (if required) or additional comments. Those contributions are cited as "stakeholder feedback".

1.4.1 Terms used in the report

The language and frameworks used in this report are intended to align with the evolving discourse on disability inclusion. Therefore, the key terms and concepts are briefly outlined below to provide some fundamental understanding for the subsequent analysis and ensure clarity and consistency in discussing disability rights. This also helps set the overall tone of the report, as certain concepts emerge as being especially significant in the course of the analysis.

→ Persons with disabilities

The debate over person-first language (e.g. "**persons with disabilities**") versus identity-first language (e.g. "**disabled persons**") reflects different models of disability and evolving perspectives on inclusivity (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). Person-first language aims to emphasise the individual over their disability (Lynch et al. 1994; Dunn & Andrews 2015). The terms "people with disabilities" and "persons with disabilities" are often preferred over "disabled people" since they seek to maintain the integrity of individuals as human beings and avoid reducing them to their disabilities (e.g. Sharif et al. 2022). Furthermore, the Georgian legislation (as established by the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), the ESC and the UNCRPD also use person-first language. Therefore, in the report that follows, the term "persons with disabilities" will be used.

At the same time, it should be acknowledged that persons with disabilities have varying preferences for identity-first language (Sharif et al. 2022; Dunn & Andrews 2015), and the use of the term "disabled persons".

→ Medical vs. Bio-psycho-social model of disability

Both in legal and academic discourse, there has been a shift away from the **medical model of disability** (Barnes, Mercer 2003). This model relies on the normative categories of "disabled" and "able-bodied" and assumes that disability is an individual medical issue requiring only a personalised medical solution – whether through treatment, rehabilitation, or adaptation to existing conditions.

Furthermore, it does not recognise persons with disabilities as a group facing systemic challenges arising from the way society is structured. The medical model, therefore, perceives disability as a pathophysiological condition and a problem to be solved (Areheart 2008, pp. 185-186). While this model does not reflect the intellectual stance of contemporary researchers or persons with disabilities themselves, it does illustrate the framework of norms that historically shaped the concept of disability in Western societies, and this context is of special importance in the context of the Georgian policy framework.

On the other hand, the **biopsychosocial model of disability** emerged as an alternative to the medical model, which focuses on pathology, and to the social model, which emphasises societal barriers (Petasis 2019). This model attempts to integrate the biological, psychological and social dimensions of health (Waddell et al. 2008) – it integrates aspects of the medical and social models, recognising that neither alone is sufficient to explain disability fully. According to this model, a person’s ability to work and participate in society depends not only on their health and medical treatment but also on factors such as education, skills, infrastructure and workplace accessibility.³

→ Intersectionality

Intersectionality, in the context of this report, refers to the understanding that persons with disabilities may also belong to other marginalised groups, and these overlapping identities can compound their experiences of discrimination and inequity. Persons with disabilities may hold, for example, other marginalised identities, such as gender, ethnicity or nationality, or socioeconomic status, which can exacerbate health inequities and social barriers (e.g. Brinkman et al. 2022; Weiss et al. 2024; Berne et al. 2018). Those dimensions, in particular, will also be reflected in the analysis, especially in the context of education and social protection.

→ Equity vs. equality

One of the important distinctions in this report lies in how policies and strategies address equality versus equity. In the context of disability policies, **equality**, in principle, means offering the same resources or opportunities to everyone without making distinctions based on a person’s specific needs or circumstances. As such, it can overlook the unique barriers faced by people with disabilities. **Equity**, on the other hand, takes those differing needs into account so that the support and resources are specifically adjusted to them. While many current initiatives aim to make Georgian society more inclusive by treating individuals equally, they may not always incorporate an equity-focused perspective. This distinction is particularly evident in areas such as employment and social benefits, where support for different vulnerable groups exists but may not fully consider the specific needs of persons with disabilities (treated as one of those vulnerable groups).

1.5 Rights of persons with disabilities under Article 15 of the Revised European Social Charter

Article 15 of the ESC addresses the rights of persons with disabilities to independence, social integration and participation in the life of the community.

“Article 15 ESC obliges States to take appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively exercise their rights and integrate into society through its three components: education and vocational training, employment and access to work, and social integration and participation”.

3 At the same time, it has to be acknowledged, that while suggesting a more holistic definition of disability, the biopsychosocial model is not exempt from criticism, especially in the context of policymaking. In its version, associated with UK government policies on disability benefits, it has been accused of blaming victims and justifying entitlement restrictions (Shakespeare et al. 2017). Critics argue that it may also serve the political agendas related to welfare reform and healthcare spending cuts (Hunt 2022).

Article 15 – The right of persons with disabilities to independence, social integration and participation in the life of the community.

With a view to ensuring that persons with disabilities, irrespective of age and the nature and origin of their disabilities, the effective exercise of the right to independence, social integration and participation in the life of the community, the Parties undertake, in particular:

- 1** to take the necessary measures to provide persons with disabilities with guidance, education and vocational training in the framework of general schemes wherever possible or, where this is not possible, through specialised bodies, public or private;
- 2** to promote their access to employment through all measures tending to encourage employers to hire and keep in employment persons with disabilities in the ordinary working environment and to adjust the working conditions to the needs of the disabled or, where this is not possible by reason of the disability, by arranging for or creating sheltered employment according to the level of disability. In certain cases, such measures may require recourse to specialised placement and support services;
- 3** to promote their full social integration and participation in the life of the community in particular through measures, including technical aids, aiming to overcome barriers to communication and mobility and enabling access to transport, housing, cultural activities and leisure.

The other key document, which will be discussed throughout the report, is the **UNCRPD**: an international human rights treaty adopted by the United Nations in 2006. It aims to protect and promote the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities, guaranteeing their full and equal participation in society. It covers the issues of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, as well as accessibility, participation and inclusivity, which are covered in the 50 articles that follow the preamble.

As already mentioned, Georgia ratified the UNCRPD, but did not ratify all the points of Article 15 of ESC – a fact which may be found to be counterintuitive. Both Article 15 and the UNCRPD share a common goal of protecting and promoting the rights of persons with disabilities. While Article 15 is more strictly focused on social rights and is part of a regional framework, the UNCRPD, on the other hand, provides a more globally recognised set of standards and obligations that cover nearly every aspect of life. The Convention, which covers the issues included in the ESC, though with a broader scope and more precisely (*vis-à-vis* different aspects of life), has been ratified in its entirety, but Article 15 of the ESC was not. This poses the still unanswered question as to why this is the case (see Chapter 2.1.3 below).

2.0 Current state of policies and practices for persons with disabilities

2.1 Background

To understand the recent changes in Georgia's approach to disability, it is important to acknowledge the system's origins and recognise the historical context that shaped its current development. An understanding of this background is also important to appreciate the progress made in recent years. National politics and the overall political environment continue to influence the situation of persons with disabilities in Georgia – a dynamic that will be explored in the chapters that follow, especially in relation to advocacy and donor support.

It is important to recognise that the Soviet system had a profound impact on Georgia's policy on disability. Combined with the political unrest that followed the country's independence, this legacy impacted the transition towards a socially-oriented model of disability. The effects of this historical period are still visible today.

Under the Soviet Union and in the countries under its influence, persons with disabilities were marginalised and often labelled as "invalids". They were institutionalised or confined in their families, socially isolated, and denied access to mainstream society. Furthermore, the State monopolised all disability-related services, leaving little room for advocacy organisations. This created a highly stigmatised view of disability rooted in the medical model (see above), which framed disability as being caused by the deficient functioning of the body or mind and requiring treatment. This perspective wholly failed to acknowledge the social barriers faced by individuals with disabilities.

Following the collapse of the Soviet system, positive changes began, slowly shifting from the medical and institutional model to a more socially oriented understanding of disability (Rasell & IÅrskaa-Smirnova 2014). In Georgia, this transformation began in the early 2000s with a gradual process of deinstitutionalisation (Tatishvili 2018). However, the challenge of moving from the medical to a social (or biopsychosocial) model persists, despite the fact that more than 20 years have elapsed since this shift was initiated – the ongoing efforts are still in place to create a more inclusive and equitable society. Following Georgia's independence, grassroots initiatives for and by persons with disabilities were allowed to emerge, some of which remain active today.

Two key developments in the last decade have reinforced this ongoing evolution: Georgia ratified the UNCRPD in 2013 (it came into force in 2014), and the protocol to it in 2021. Additionally, in 2020, Georgia enacted the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The country also ratified Article 15§3 of the ESC, as discussed in Chapter 2.1.3 of this report. While the policy environment has gradually improved, guided by those documents, this must be viewed through the lens of the inherited

medical model, which still largely frames the system. Although the medical model is now recognised as insufficient, the progression to a biopsychosocial model is still ongoing. Therefore, the advancements discussed in this report should be understood within the broader context of this ongoing transition – as a work in progress – acknowledging the challenges of a political and societal nature involved since the process began. National politics and the broader political environment continue to shape the situation of persons with disabilities, as will be discussed in later chapters.

There are currently no precise data on the number of persons with disabilities in Georgia. However, the 2014 general census conducted throughout Georgia (excluding the occupied territories) by Geostat determined that the population of Georgia as of November 2014 was 3 713 804 people.⁴ The census also included the **estimated number of persons with disabilities**. This was a voluntary process, and therefore, these data are not complete and accurate. However, the number of persons with disabilities identified as a result of the census was 1 301 675 people, which is approximately 35.05% of the total population. Table 2 provides an overview of the types of impairments that were self-reported in this process:

Table 2 Self-reported types of impairments (2014 census)

Type of impairment (self-assessed)	Total no.	Percentage (in all answers to this question)
Visual impairment	576 348	44.2%
Hearing impairment	239 204	18.3%
Impaired movement, standing	220 998	17%
Impaired consciousness, concentration, memory	100 724	7.7%
Impaired self-care skills	98 452	7.5%
Impaired communication skills	65 949	5%

Source: based on 2014 census

Importantly, the census data might point to a broader understanding of disability, more aligned with the biopsychosocial model, since it focuses on the self-assessment, which may include individual perception of barriers, not only the medical status. At the same time, it should be noted that 39 912 respondents to the census did not answer the question about possible disabilities. Looking at the other sets of data, the number of people receiving the social package, that is, people with legally recognised disability status, in 2020, amounted to 126 851 persons with disabilities – a significantly smaller number than that estimated by the census. Of those, 77 531 were male, and 49 320 were female. Accordingly, it is clear that among the persons with disabilities receiving the social package, there are approximately 22.2% (28 211) more men than women (UN Women, UNICEF 2021).

The nationwide census in Georgia began on 14 November 2024, and is conducted every 10 years. The preliminary results of this census are projected to be published in June 2025, and the final results in June 2026. Therefore, we are not yet able to use the information collected by the new census.⁵ It should also be noted that different government structures have different statistics regarding persons with disabilities. To this day, unified official statistical data remain a challenge.

2.1.1 Overview of Georgia’s current legal framework

The current legal landscape offers several key guarantees for persons with disabilities, reflecting an increasingly supportive policy environment. The following overview focuses on the most significant legal instruments while recognising that disability is a multifaceted issue intersecting with various areas of law and policy. For this reason, only the primary, high-level documents are summarised here,

⁴ <https://disability.ge/ge/blogi/aq-unda-iyos-statistika>
⁵ <https://www.geostat.ge/en/single-news/3171/2024-population-and-agricultural-census>

with other legislative frameworks discussed in the thematic chapters, as per the area they cover (education, employment, etc.).

→ Georgia's Constitution

Under Article 11.1 of Georgia's Constitution, discrimination is prohibited on grounds such as race, colour, sex, origin, ethnicity, language, religion, political or other views, social affiliation, property or titular status, place of residence, or any other basis; additionally, all persons are deemed equal before the law. More specifically, Article 11.4 provides that:

"the State shall create special conditions for persons with disabilities to exercise their rights and interests."

Importantly, the 2017 constitutional amendments introduced both the prohibition of discrimination and the explicit acknowledgement of the rights of persons with disabilities, which have further reinforced the above-mentioned positive developments in this regard in recent years.

→ Georgia's Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

When discussing the rights of persons with disabilities, the law with the highest authority is the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted by the Georgian Parliament on 14 July 2020. This law defines discrimination against persons with disabilities. Drawing on the principles of the UNCRPD, the law establishes the State's obligations and responsibilities in guaranteeing the rights and fundamental freedoms of persons with disabilities. It adopts the UNCRPD's broad definition of disability, recognising individuals with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments whose full and effective participation in society may be limited by various barriers.

This Law guarantees the rights of persons with disabilities and prohibits discrimination against them in all areas of life. It emphasises the principles of equality, non-discrimination and reasonable accommodation. In particular, it lays out the following obligations and provisions:

State obligations:

- ▶ It shall promote the realisation of the **rights and fundamental freedoms** of persons with disabilities and ensure the protection of their personal dignity.
- ▶ It shall ensure the **equality before the law** and the realisation of the rights of persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others in all spheres of public life (Article 3, paragraph 1).

Rights of persons with disabilities:

- ▶ Persons with disabilities have the right to **live independently**, without discrimination and on an equal basis with others, and to participate fully in all aspects of life (Article 1).
- ▶ Any discrimination on the grounds of disability is prohibited (Article 5, paragraph 1).

Reasonable accommodation:

- ▶ The State recognises the principle of reasonable accommodation, which means making necessary and appropriate modifications which do not impose a **disproportionate or undue burden** to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy their rights and freedoms on an equal basis with others (Article 2, paragraph g).

Universal design:

- ▶ The State recognises the principle of universal design, which means the design of products, environments, programmes and services in a way that they can be **used by all people** without the need for adaptation or specialised design. Universal design does not exclude the provision of aid and support for particular groups of persons with disabilities where this is required (Article 2, paragraph d).

Accessible environment:

- ▶ The State shall ensure an **accessible environment** for persons with disabilities, which means the ability of persons with disabilities to have **equal opportunities to enjoy all public amenities** (participation in cultural, sports, political or other public activities, as well as the use of transport, information and communication) on an equal basis with others (Article 2, paragraph f).

Rights of women and children with disabilities:

- ▶ The State shall ensure the realisation of the **fundamental rights and freedoms of women and girls** with disabilities on an equal basis with other women (Article 6, paragraph 1).
- ▶ The State shall ensure the realisation of the fundamental rights and freedoms of children with disabilities on an equal basis with other children (Article 7, paragraph 1).

Education, employment and healthcare:

- ▶ The State shall ensure that persons with disabilities have the right to **inclusive education** (Article 8, paragraph 1).
- ▶ The State shall ensure that persons with disabilities have access to **health services** on an equal basis with others (Article 9).
- ▶ The State shall **promote employment** and the realisation of the right to work for persons with disabilities (Article 11).

Protection from exploitation, violence, and abuse:

- ▶ Persons with disabilities, including women and children, shall be protected from all forms of exploitation, violence and abuse (Article 12, paragraph 1).

Political and public life:

- ▶ Persons with disabilities have the right to take part in public and political life, either directly or through freely chosen representatives (Article 14, paragraph 1).

Adequate standard of living:

- ▶ The State shall ensure an adequate standard of living for persons with disabilities, by means of, among other things, the development of **social protection and poverty eradication programmes** (Article 15, paragraph 2).

Leisure and recreation:

- ▶ The State shall promote the leisure and recreation of persons with disabilities and their participation in cultural, sports, recreational and other public activities on an equal basis with others (Article 16, paragraph 1).

Awareness raising:

- ▶ The State shall promote awareness of the potential of persons with disabilities and their contributions to society and provide information to families and the community about the rights of persons with disabilities (Article 17, paragraph 1).

Access to justice:

- ▶ Persons with disabilities shall have access to justice on an equal basis with others (Article 18, paragraph 1).

The Law also explicitly prohibits all forms of discrimination, including:

- ▶ Direct discrimination – when a person is treated less favourably simply because they have a disability.

- ▶ Indirect discrimination – when a general rule or requirement, although applied equally to everyone, disadvantages persons with disabilities.
- ▶ Harassment – any action that diminishes or intimidates the dignity of a person with a disability.
- ▶ Accessibility barriers – when a person with a disability does not have equal access to buildings, public transport, information or other essential services.

However, the Law on Discrimination did not receive a corresponding amendment, which has not prevented individuals from challenging discriminatory actions in court.

→ Georgia’s Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination

Furthermore, upon the ratification of the UNCRPD in 2013, Georgia adopted the Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, which names disability as one of the prohibited grounds of discrimination. This law provides a general framework for combating discrimination, including discrimination based on disability. While it does not include explicit articles solely focused on disability rights, several articles have significant implications for persons with disabilities:

- ▶ Article 2: Notion and prohibition of discrimination

This article broadly prohibits all forms of **discrimination, including direct and indirect discrimination, harassment, and denial of reasonable accommodation**. This article explicitly prohibits discrimination based on disability in all areas of life, including employment, education, healthcare and access to public services.

- ▶ Article 4: Measures aimed at eliminating discrimination

This article emphasises the importance of **proactive measures** to prevent and eliminate discrimination, such as awareness-raising campaigns, affirmative action programmes and the collection of disaggregated data. These measures are important for addressing the specific needs and challenges faced by persons with disabilities: raising awareness about accessibility issues and developing targeted programmes to promote their inclusion in society.

- ▶ Article 5: Inadmissibility of discrimination

This article prohibits discrimination in all areas of life, including employment, education, healthcare and access to public services. It explicitly prohibits the **denial of reasonable accommodation as a form of discrimination**.

- ▶ Article 12: Protecting persons using the procedures defined by this Law

This article protects individuals from retaliation for filing a discrimination complaint. This protection is to encourage persons with disabilities to report instances of discrimination without fear of reprisal.

In addition, under this legislation, the **Office of the Public Defender of Georgia is the primary enforcer**, empowered to receive and investigate complaints from individuals who believe they have experienced discrimination, including on the basis of their disability status.⁶

The adoption of the Law on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination was followed with relevant legislative amendments in other normative acts, including Georgia’s Labour Code, its Law on the Protection of Health and its Law on Education, which will each be discussed in the appropriate sections of the report.⁷

→ Georgia’s Civil Procedure Code

This law provides a framework for establishing supported decision-making arrangements. It ensures that persons with disabilities **have the right to make their own decisions with appropriate sup-**

6 <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/2339687?publication=0>

7 <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/2339687?publication=3>

port, while also protecting their rights and well-being. The law emphasises the importance of individual assessment, court oversight and the periodic review of support arrangements.

In particular:

- ▶ Article 5 – Administration of justice only by the court based on the equality of citizens

1. Only a court shall administer justice on civil matters based on the equality of all persons before the law and the court.

2. For the purposes of participation on an equal basis with others in administering justice, parties and participants with disabilities shall enjoy the rights and opportunities granted under the Georgia’s Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, including through participation with the status of special plaintiff.

- ▶ Article 363¹³: This article states that any petition to become a **supported decision-maker** must follow the procedures outlined in this specific chapter of the law.

- ▶ Article 363¹⁴: This article outlines who can file a petition for supported decision-making. This includes:

1. the individuals themselves
2. a family member
3. a legal representative
4. the guardianship and trusteeship body
5. psychiatric or specialised institutions

It also specifies where the petition should be filed: in the court where the individual resides, or if they are in a medical facility, in the court where the facility is located.

- ▶ Article 363¹⁵: This article details the specific information that must be included in the petition:

1. the court where the petition is being filed
2. the specific areas where the individual needs support
3. the reasons why the individual needs support
4. evidence to support the claim, including any medical or psychological evaluations
5. the specific request being made
6. any additional requests or information

- ▶ Article 363¹⁶: This article outlines the court’s process for accepting the petition. It specifies a timeframe for the court to review the petition and to determine if it is complete. If the petition is incomplete, the court will give the petitioner time to correct the deficiencies.

- ▶ Article 363¹⁷: This article allows for the **appointment of a person to provide temporary support (temporary supporter)** while the court case is ongoing, especially if there is a risk of harm to the individual.

- ▶ Article 363¹⁸: This article outlines the court hearing process, including the required attendance of the **individual and a representative from the guardianship and trusteeship body**. It also addresses the situation where the individual is unable to attend the hearing due to health reasons.

- ▶ Article 363¹⁹: This article mandates that the individual seeking supported decision-making must have legal representation.

- ▶ Article 363²⁰: This article requires a psychological evaluation of the individual to determine their specific needs and the appropriate level of support.

- ▶ Article 363²¹: This article outlines the content of the court’s decision, which will include:
 1. The specific areas where the individual will receive support
 2. The rights and responsibilities of the supporter
 3. The duration of the support arrangement
 4. The frequency of reviews of the support arrangement
- ▶ Articles 363²², 363²³ and 363²⁴: These articles relate to the termination of the supported decision-making arrangement, the modification of the support plan and the appeal process.⁸

→ Georgia’s Labour Code

In summary, Georgia’s Labour Code prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities in the workplace and **mandates reasonable accommodations** to ensure equal opportunities for employment. It also lists specific provisions regarding the rights of employees with disabilities, such as support from a legal representative and protections against night work.

- ▶ Prohibition of discrimination:

Discrimination on the grounds of disability is prohibited in employment relationships (Article 2, paragraph 3).

- ▶ Reasonable accommodation:

To ensure the equal treatment of persons with disabilities, employers are required to take **appropriate measures**, when necessary, to provide persons with disabilities with equal opportunities for employment, career advancement, training and retraining unless such measures would impose a **disproportionate burden** on the employer. This burden shall not be disproportionate if there are State support programmes, benefits or other alternative means in place for persons with disabilities in relation to the specific measure (Article 9).

- ▶ Employer obligations:

Employers are obliged to facilitate the realisation of the rights of persons with disabilities in the workplace, including by complying with the mandatory standards/norms provided for in Article 36 of the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, within the framework of reasonable accommodation (Article 23, paragraph 5).

- ▶ Support for employees with disabilities:

A legal representative or supporter of a person with a disability has the right, in addition to rest days, to one additional paid day off per month or to agree with the employer on a different working schedule than that provided for by the internal labour regulations (Article 24, paragraph 10).

- ▶ Prohibition of night work:

Persons with disabilities are prohibited from performing night work (Article 28, paragraph 3).

→ Georgia’s Tax Code

According to Article 82 (Paragraph 2) of Georgia’s Tax Code, the taxable income of up to 6 000 GEL received by a person with a disability since childhood, as well as people with an apparent or strongly apparent disability during the calendar year, shall not be subject to the income tax.

Import of goods necessary for the movement of a person with disabilities from childhood or a person with a severe and significant disability: “The import of goods necessary for the movement of a person with disability since childhood, and of a person with distinct and significant disability, is exempt from VAT (sub-paragraph “c” of paragraph “a” of Article 173 of the same Code)”.

⁸ <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/29962?publication=165>

Exemption from excise duty for adapted vehicles: "A motor vehicle that is factory-adapted for use by a person with a disability is exempt from excise duty if the importer of the vehicle is a person with a disability who requires a wheelchair" (sub-paragraph "k1" of paragraph 5 of Article 194 of the same Code).⁹

→ National Human Rights Strategies and Action Plans

In line with the Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, the Government of Georgia adopted the National Human Rights Strategy (2014-2020) along with the corresponding Action Plans covering the periods of 2014-2016, 2017 and 2018-2020. The Government's Action Plan for the years 2018-2020 specifically addressed the needs of persons with disabilities and included an obligation to harmonise national legislation with the UNCRPD standards (United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – UNPRPD 2021).

■ 2014-2020

A key focus of this strategy, in relation to disability, was to ensure equal opportunities for persons with disabilities and establish mechanisms for reasonable adjustment. Under the section "Access to equal rights for persons with disabilities and application of the principle of 'reasonable adjustment'", the strategy sets out an overarching objective: to guarantee that persons with disabilities can participate fully and actively in all social spheres.¹⁰

To meet this goal, the strategy outlined several tasks, stating that those efforts have to start with securing equal rights for persons with disabilities by taking into account their unique needs and integrating the principle of reasonable adjustment into relevant legislation and policies. In addition, it aimed to promote the independence and active participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making, also by recognising their inherent dignity. This inclusivity extended into the political sphere, where the strategy encouraged the active engagement of persons with disabilities in political life.

Another task focused on enhancing employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, stressing the need for the creation of supportive measures and accommodations that will encourage labour market inclusion. To facilitate broader participation in society, it also mentions infrastructure and service accessibility, particularly in public services and transport. Lastly, the strategy called for raising public awareness of disability issues.

Unfortunately, a strategy has not been developed for the 2020-2022 period.

■ 2022-2030

One goal directly concerns persons with disabilities to strengthen the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities and increase their participation in all areas of public life. The objectives of this goal are:

- a) to introduce a social model of disability assessment and, in accordance with its principles, to strengthen health and biopsychosocial protection mechanisms;
- b) to promote independent living of persons with disabilities and strengthen accessibility guarantees;
- c) to strengthen guarantees of equality of persons with disabilities and ensure equal participation of persons with disabilities in public life by introducing the principle of reasonable accommodation;
- d) to strengthen national mechanisms for the protection and monitoring of the rights of persons with disabilities;
- e) to strengthen the protection of persons with disabilities against discrimination and to respond effectively to crimes committed against them;

⁹ <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/1043717?publication=227>

¹⁰ https://www.gov.ge/files/429_51454_924779_STRATEGYENG.pdf

- f) ensuring employment and access to education for persons with disabilities and implementing other social and economic support measures defined by the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;
- g) raising public awareness about the rights of persons with disabilities.¹¹

→ **Biopsychosocial Action Plan**

The existing legislation requires the government to shift from a medical to a biopsychosocial assessment model in 2023, although the process started much earlier.¹² In March 2023, the Action Plan on introducing a biopsychosocial model of assessment for disability status, as presented by the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs, was approved by the government (European Commission 2023).

Its overarching objectives include creating an institutional mechanism for biopsychosocial-based disability status determination – which focuses on the intersecting barriers rather than on a medical diagnosis (since it is the mechanism already in place), approving a refined assessment methodology and providing training to multidisciplinary teams responsible for implementing this new approach. The Plan also focuses on defining and securing the financial resources needed for those assessments, establishing accessible services for persons with disabilities, and improving the administrative oversight and the monitoring of the quality of the determination process.

A main priority of the Plan is for persons with disabilities to be able to access disability status determination services, provided by local government, in their own regions, in line with the principles of reasonable accommodation. The Plan also outlines the need to update legal frameworks, aligning them with the UNCRPD. Public awareness campaigns are also included to inform persons with disabilities and the broader population about this new approach, its objectives and the expected changes in service provision.

Finally, the Plan includes enhancing social protection measures for children and adults with disabilities, basing these supports on individual assessments rather than general or one-size-fits-all solutions. Table 3 below provides a summary of the Plan’s objectives based on the unofficial translation of the original document.

Table 3 *Biopsychosocial Action Plan*¹³

Objective no.	Objective name and description		Intended timeframe for implementation
Objective 1	Creation of an institutional mechanism for determining the status of a person with disability and a case management system based on the biopsychosocial model		2023-2025
	<p>Objective baseline value:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The institutional mechanism of the biopsychosocial model has not been created; 2. The role and functions of the participating parties are not defined; 3. The concept of case management is developed. 	<p>Objective outcome value:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The institutional mechanism of the biopsychosocial model has been created and approved; 2. The role and functions of the participating parties are defined; 3. The institutional mechanism of the model includes a case management system. 	

¹¹ <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/5757268?publication=0>

¹² Interview with the Ministry of Health.

¹³ The following table is a summary of the internal Action Plan in its unofficial translation to English.

Objective 2	Approving the assessment methodology based on the biopsychosocial model and the rule for determining the disability status		2023-2024
	<p>Objective baseline value:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Biopsychosocial assessment methodology has been developed and needs final validation (clarification) for all types of disabilities, including oncology patients; 2. Biopsychosocial assessment tools and questionnaires have been developed; 3. The rule for determining the status of disability has not been developed. 	<p>Objective outcome value:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Biopsychosocial assessment methodology has been approved, which takes into account the needs and interests of all types of disabled people, including oncology patients; 2. Assessment tools and questionnaires have been approved; 3. The rule/algorithm for determining the disability status has been developed and approved. 	
Objective 3	Training/retraining of multidisciplinary team specialists		2023-2025
	<p>Objective baseline value:</p> <p>Not all disability status health facilities have a trained multidisciplinary team with at least 3 members: a functional assessment specialist, a case manager/social worker, and a medical expert.</p>	<p>Objective outcome value:</p> <p>All health facilities that determine disability status have a trained multidisciplinary team with at least 3 members: a functional assessment specialist, a case manager/social worker, and a medical expert.</p>	
Objective 4	Determination of financial resources and sources of funding related to the implementation of the system for determining the status of persons with disabilities based on the biopsychosocial model		2023-2025
	<p>Objective baseline value:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Unit cost of biopsychosocial assessment is not defined. 2. There is no initial budget for status-determining institutions to initiate the process, and there is no source of funding. 	<p>Objective outcome value:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Unit (“per capita”) cost of biopsychosocial assessment has been defined. The administrative costs required for all status-determining institutions have been calculated. 2. A full evaluation of the biopsychosocial model has been prepared. 3. The budget for the initiation of the process for status-determining institutions has been defined and allocated. 	

Objective 5	Ensuring equal access to the process of determining the disability status and strengthening the participation of persons with disabilities		
	<p>Objective baseline value:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Status-determining institutions are not geographically equally accessible to people with various disabilities; 2. If necessary, an assessment of the child/adult is carried out at home in order to determine the disability status; 3. Due to physical and communication barriers, the process of determining the disability status is less accessible to a person with various disabilities. 	<p>Objective outcome value:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. People with various disabilities can determine their disability status in their own region; 2. In order to improve geographical accessibility, the support for the transport of status seekers by local governments has been strengthened; 3. In the process of determining the disability status, the principle of reasonable accommodation has been ensured, and all stages of the process are accessible to people with various disabilities; 4. In addition to evaluation in the institution, there are alternative ways of evaluation. 	
Objective 6	Improving the mechanism of administration and quality monitoring of the disability status determination system based on the rights of persons with disabilities.		2023-2025
	<p>Objective baseline value:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There is a monitoring system based on the medical model; Monitoring system exists and is based on the medical model of disability 2. There is no professional supervision. The current system does not provide for professional supervision. 	<p>Objective outcome value:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A monitoring system based on a multidisciplinary approach has been created, which takes into account the rights of persons with disabilities. 2. A component of professional supervision has been created, which provides support to specialists and medical institutions determining the status of a disabled person. 	
Objective 7	Updating of the legal basis of the system of determining the status of disability		2023-2025
	<p>Objective baseline value:</p> <p>- The legal framework regulates the medical model of status determination.</p>	<p>Objective outcome value:</p> <p>- The legal framework has been modified in accordance with the biopsychosocial model and is in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.</p>	

Objective 8	Informing persons with disabilities and people seeking disability status and raising public awareness about the introduction of the biopsychosocial model and expected changes in the system for determining disability status		2023-2025
	<p>Objective baseline value:</p> <p>People with disabilities living in Tbilisi, Ajara and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions and their family members are informed about the biopsychosocial model.</p>	<p>Objective outcome value:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Persons with disabilities and people seeking disability status are informed about the implementation of the biopsychosocial model and the expected changes in the system of determining disability status. 2. The public receives information about the introduction of the biopsychosocial model and expected changes in the system of determining the status of disability through mass media and workshops. 	
Objective 9	Improvement of social protection measures for children with disabilities and adults with disabilities according to biopsychosocial assessment data		2023-2025
	<p>Objective baseline value:</p> <p>Social protection measures for children with disabilities are general and not based on individual needs.</p>	<p>Objective outcome value:</p> <p>Social protection measures for children with disabilities are specific and based on the individual needs of the child.</p>	

Source: Ecorys, based on the unofficial translation of the Action Plan

The Action Plan was developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs, with extensive support from **Agence Française de Développement (AFD) Group/Expertise France**, as part of the project “Strengthening Human Capital Development in Georgia: Support to the Government of Georgia’s Human Capital Development Programme (2024-2027)”. Under Component 2 – focused on improving social and employment service delivery to vulnerable groups, particularly persons with disabilities and incorporating a gender perspective – the parties involved are to contribute to the development of the aforementioned Action Plan. At the same time, this component also encompasses the implementation of the Action Plan on the biopsychosocial disability model, which includes establishing institutional arrangements, organising procedures and developing protocols. Additionally, gender-sensitive training for social workers in healthcare and education is to be provided at the municipal level, along with developing services for early childhood intervention and personal assistance programmes. Further measures in this cooperation include the capacity building of institutions to improve disability status assessments and support for monitoring and quality control mechanisms.

All in all, in the whole Action Plan, of the 44 activities under the objectives provided in the table above, 19 are to be implemented by Georgia's Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Protection for IDPs from the Occupied Territories, 10 by the AFD, and 13 by unspecified donors, illustrating the extensive involvement of international organisations in furthering the rights of persons with disabilities. This will be covered in more detail in Section 2.2 on Support of international donors and organisations.

→ **Unified Coordination Council of Georgia's Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Protection for IDPs from the Occupied Territories**

The Unified Coordination Council of Georgia's Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Protection for IDPs from the Occupied Territories (hereinafter referred to as the Council) is a **collegial body established to implement the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** throughout the country – it is a coordination mechanism at the national level.

The Council aims to promote the implementation of measures envisaged by the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 26), such as the introduction of a biopsychosocial model in the system for determining disability status and increasing the accessibility and quality of social and alternative care services/programmes that promote equal opportunities with others, promoting employment, and improving access to healthcare services.

The Council's purpose is to establish a unified national platform that will deepen the cooperation of various governmental and non-governmental organisations, interagency, professional and academic organisations on disability issues and facilitate unified coordination of activities at the state level. The aim is, therefore, to introduce a biopsychosocial model of disability status determination, develop social and alternative care services/programmes that promote equal opportunities with others, improve the quality monitoring and evaluation mechanism, and promote the integration of services that provide equal opportunities with others for persons with disabilities at the local – municipal – level, as well as improve access to employment and healthcare services.

The Council consists of the following committees:

- ▶ Committee I – Committee for Promoting the Implementation of the Disability Status Determination Mechanism (Bio-Psycho-Social Model);
- ▶ Committee II – Committee for Promoting the Development of Deinstitutionalisation and Alternative Care Services;
- ▶ Committee III – Committee for Promoting the Development of Social Services Promoting Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, Improving the Quality Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanism;
- ▶ Committee IV – Committee for Promoting the Integration of Services Promoting Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities at the Municipal Level;
- ▶ Committee V – Committee for Promoting the Employment of Persons with Disabilities;
- ▶ Committee VI – Committee for Promoting Equal Access to Healthcare Services for Persons with Disabilities.

→ **Deinstitutionalisation strategy of 2023**

In February 2023, the government adopted a strategy on deinstitutionalisation and independent living for persons with disabilities, together with a 2023-2030 Action Plan (European Commission 2023). The aforementioned goal is included within the unified 2030 Strategy.

The specific objective of this strategy is to “improve mechanisms for the protection of children's rights and their well-being, taking into account the best interests of the child, and strengthen policies that

promote independent living". One of its key tasks is to ensure the deinstitutionalisation of children's care, including children with disabilities, and to promote the prevention of family separation.

→ **The National Accessibility Standards, approved by the Government of Georgia, established accessibility standards for all buildings, public places, and public spaces.**

These standards relate to physical accessibility for persons with disabilities (in certain specific areas).¹⁴

→ **2022-2030 Mental Health Strategy and the Action Plan**

This Strategy supports the deinstitutionalisation of mental health services by strengthening and promoting community-based care for people with mental health issues, which is important from the stance of the long-term institutional care provision for persons with disabilities (in this instance, psychosocial ones; European Commission 2023).

2.1.1.1 The disability status assessment process

Georgia's Law on Medical and Social Examination remains rooted in the medical model of disability, as reflected in its provisions and the accompanying ministerial orders. This law, together with Orders #1 and #62 of the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs, regulates the disability assessment system and establishes the criteria for determining whether a child or adult qualifies for disability status.

This Law determines legal, economic and organisational grounds for medical and social examination. The purpose of this Law is to ensure health care for the citizens of Georgia and stateless persons, to determine disability status and to prevent its causes, and to provide proper conditions for the rehabilitation and social integration of that category of persons.

Within this Law:

- ▶ Articles 1 to 5 define the **legal and organisational foundation for disability determination**. The stated goal is to facilitate "medical, professional, and social rehabilitation" for persons with a disability, but the process remains **dominated by medical criteria**. Article 7 assigns medical institutions the responsibility for conducting quality examinations - a system that is primarily physician-driven rather than interdisciplinary in practice.
- ▶ According to Article 11, a **specific list of deficiencies and impairments** approved by the Ministry (the aforementioned Orders #1 and #62) dictates whether a person may work "under special or individual conditions". This list specifies which diagnoses qualify a person for disability status, and sets the intervals for mandatory re-examination.

A partial shift away from a purely medical perspective is evident in the 2015 Law on Psychological Needs Assessment,¹⁵ which introduced the concept of assessing individuals' capacities and needs rather than automatically deeming them "legally incapable". Under this law, a multidisciplinary team, consisting of a psychiatrist, psychologist, occupational therapist and social worker, evaluates a person's psychosocial needs – as such, it targets the capacities within the process rather than the evaluation itself.

In practice, under the Law on Medical and Social Examination, the process is as follows:

1. A claimant or their representative starts this process by applying to a medical institution, where the required documentation and procedures are then explained to them.
2. The medical institution carries out an examination which is centred on the medical diagnoses listed in the ministerial order. Physicians from specific specialities assess the condition.
3. If the diagnosis aligns with the criteria set by ministerial orders, the medical institution deter-

¹⁴ <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/5051805?publication=0>

¹⁵ <https://disability.ge/storage/files/doc/matsne-2788241-0.pdf>

mines the degree of disability and sets a timeframe for re-examination (since the disability status is temporary). Recommendations for assistive technology or other supports can be provided at this stage, but usually with a limited focus on social or environmental adaptations (rather than on physical ones).

4. After the medical institution determines the disability status of the interested person, the applicant applies to the service centre of the Social Service Agency to be assigned a social package.
5. Based on the identity document, the employee of the Social Service Agency verifies the information on the determination of the person's disability status in the electronic system (Registry) and, having confirmed it, takes a decision on the assignment of the social package. (In accordance with the legislation, the package is assigned from the first day of the month following the confirmation of the information; UNPRPD 2021 and stakeholder feedback).

The medical facilities – of which there are currently 70 – are responsible for and entrusted with the assessments and fall under the jurisdiction of the Pharmaceutical and Medical Regulation Agency within the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs.¹⁶

2.1.2 Understanding Georgia's non-acceptance of Article 15.1 and 15.2 provisions

While Georgia accepted Article 15§3 in 2006, the other two paragraphs (§1 on education and §2 on employment) remain non-accepted, potentially pointing to the ongoing yet not fully realised efforts to align national legislation and practice with the Charter's standards. Over the years, the Committee has published reports discussing the progress made and the continuing challenges.

The following sections present an overview of these reports:

→ **European Social Charter (revised) Reply to Supplementary Question First National Report on the implementation of the European Social Charter submitted by the Government of Georgia for the period from 1 October 2005 until 31st December 2006 on Articles 1§1, 2, 3, 4, 10§2, 10§4, 15§3, 18§1, 2, 3, 4, 20**

Georgia emphasised that its current legislative framework - constitutional provisions, the Law on Trade Unions, the Labour Code and the Criminal Code – already prohibits all forms of discrimination, including anti-union dismissals and discrimination against persons with disabilities. The Government also pointed to recent pilot projects and upcoming initiatives aimed at training and employing persons with disabilities, as well as newly introduced construction regulations that mandate physical access to public buildings. In its view, no amendments to the Labour Code were deemed necessary at this stage, given the lack of recent complaints regarding trade union discrimination and the country's ongoing efforts to promote the social inclusion of persons with disabilities.

→ **European Committee of Social Rights (2012) First Report on the Non-Accepted Provisions of the European Social Charter. Georgia. Report.**

In the 2012 report on non-accepted provisions for Georgia, the Committee indicated that, following the adoption of the 2007 Law on Vocational Education and Training (VET), considerable progress had been made to support and promote vocational training, including by improved access to vocational education and lifelong learning for various groups. A National Council was also established to strengthen social partnerships involving NGOs, and since 2009, ten schools in Tbilisi have implemented inclusive education and mainstreaming programmes for children with disabilities. However,

¹⁶ Interview with Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs, and with the Social Service Agency

despite these steps, financial barriers have persisted in guaranteeing effective access to education for all vulnerable groups at all levels, including higher education. In addition, the Committee noted that it had not been established that persons with disabilities enjoy effective protection against discrimination in areas such as housing, transport, telecommunications, culture and leisure activities.

→ **European Committee of Social Rights (2015) Second Report on the Non-Accepted Provisions of the European Social Charter. Georgia. Report.**

The Committee considered that there were no legal obstacles to the acceptance of Article 15§1, but that there is a possible problem regarding conformity with Article 15§2 on the rights of persons with disabilities.

It also gave a positive assessment of Georgia's efforts to ensure persons with disabilities had access to general and vocational education. The Committee acknowledged the establishment of inclusive vocational training, pilot institutions and specialised support staff, but called for additional information on the inclusion of children with disabilities into primary and secondary education, and on any existing non-discrimination legislation. Regarding Article 15§2 (access to employment), the Government stated it was still implementing pilot projects and drafting legislation – thus, it still could not accept this provision. The Committee stressed then that prohibiting disability-based discrimination, ensuring reasonable accommodation in the workplace, and providing sheltered employment only for those who cannot access the open labour market are key requirements but that these standards are already broadly reflected in international instruments such as the UNCRPD, which, as previously stated, Georgia has already ratified (see above).

→ **European Committee of Social Rights (2021) Third Report on the Non-Accepted Provisions of the European Social Charter. Georgia. Report.**

The latest report on Georgia acknowledged the ongoing efforts to improve the inclusion of persons with disabilities in education and employment. The report pointed out that the Government had made considerable improvements in vocational education, e.g. by reserving 15% of placements for students with disabilities and developing adaptive testing procedures. However, the Committee also pointed to the need for further integration efforts in both mainstream and special schools so that both provide equal and non-discriminatory education. Regarding employment, the Labour Code supports equal access to work and reasonable accommodations, and initiatives like protected workplaces and employment support programmes for persons with disabilities have been implemented. While the Committee commended these positive developments in promoting the employment of persons with disabilities, it called for more detailed information to assess compliance with the ESC's provisions and encouraged further improvements to ensure the effective access to the open labour market for persons with disabilities.

Furthermore, the 2020 conclusions from the monitoring pointed out that there are still issues with full compliance with the ESC Article 15§3, which was accepted, as it had not been established that:

- ▶ persons with disabilities have **effective access to housing**;
- ▶ persons with disabilities have **effective access to transport**;
- ▶ persons with disabilities have **effective access to communication technologies** (European Committee of Social Rights 2021a).

These reports consistently acknowledge positive developments in advancing the rights of persons with disabilities in Georgia, while also pointing to persistent gaps that currently prevent the full acceptance of Article 15 (which also should be viewed in the context of the full acceptance of UNCRPD, which includes more detailed guarantees). As already noted, these measures should be viewed as part of an ongoing process or work-in-progress, and the purpose of the report that follows is to provide a deeper insight into the areas covered by Article 15.

2.2 Support of international donors and organisations

International organisations have played a significant role in advancing the rights of persons with disabilities in Georgia, especially in the timeframe considered. While specific examples are provided throughout this report, it is important to acknowledge that the overall scale and diversity of international support extend far beyond the individual cases mentioned. This support has been delivered in two primary ways.

- ▶ First, international organisations have **contributed to capacity building** by providing technical assistance and expertise to central and local (municipal) government institutions. This support has been almost critical for improving the abilities of schools, ministries, and various government agencies - such as the State Employment Promotion Agency, State Care Agency and Social Service Agency - to align with current best practices in the field of disability rights. Given that the processes related to disability rights in Georgia are relatively new, this **capacity building was recognised as essential** in encouraging the development of the necessary expertise and is universally seen as very valuable by the stakeholders interviewed across the disciplines and areas of influence.
- ▶ Second, many international organisations have **independently initiated and implemented projects** to improve various aspects of inclusion. Those projects cover a range of activities and initiatives designed to, among other things, enhance inclusive education, increase employment opportunities, support independent living, as well as address social stigma related to disability.

Among the international stakeholders mentioned by interviewees are:
→ Asian Development Bank (ADB)
→ World Bank
→ European Union
→ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
→ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
→ United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (for example, in collaboration with the Government of Norway)
→ United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)
→ United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
→ Expertise France/Agence Française de Développement (AFD)
→ World Vision International
→ Danish Refugee Council (DRC)
→ Czech Development Agency (CDA)
→ Austrian Development Agency (ADA)
→ Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)
→ Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)
→ Czech Caritas (Caritas Czech Republic)
→ MAC Georgia
→ Government of Norway
→ Government of Poland
→ Embassy of Japan in Georgia
→ Embassy of the Czech Republic in Georgia

As noted, while specific examples will be provided throughout the report, it is important to emphasise and acknowledge the critical importance and impact of this support on furthering disability rights. Interviewed authorities have cautiously observed that, **without such international assistance, progress would have been limited**, given the restricted local resources available.

The chapter that follows examines the policy framework governing disability rights in Georgia, focusing on the legislation and overall approach adopted by national institutions and authorities in the areas of education, employment, social integration and other cross-cutting issues. It provides an overview of how disability rights are addressed in official documents, setting the stage for a discussion of actual practices in subsequent chapters.

2.3 Education

The current model of education for children with disabilities, as well as for their vocational training, focuses on the **principle of inclusivity**, moving from the more separated model of general and specialised education. Georgia also recognises the UNESCO Salamanca Declaration on Inclusive Education, which asserts that all children – including those requiring temporary or permanent educational assistance – have the right to attend school in an inclusive environment. Inclusive education in Georgia is regulated by the Laws on “Early and Preschool Education”,¹⁷ “General Education”,¹⁸ “Vocational Education”¹⁹ and the National Curriculum. The Laws on Early and Preschool, General and Vocational Education are harmonised with the UNCRPD. Since 2005, the Ministry has started to develop inclusive education at the general education level. Georgia’s Law on General Education and the National Curriculum recognise the individual and alternative forms of education. The introduction of inclusive education in Georgia started in 2005, and it has been implemented in all public schools since 2011.

Aspects related to inclusive education are regulated by the Law of Georgia on General Education and the Order of Georgia’s Minister of Education, Science and Youth No 166 of 21 February 2018 on “the Approval of the Rules for the Introduction, Development and Monitoring of Inclusive Education, as well as the mechanism of the Identification of Children with Special Educational Needs”.²⁰

In 2022, during the UN Transforming Education Summit held alongside the 77th UN General Assembly, the then Prime Minister of Georgia formally committed to guaranteeing equal access to education for all. In line with this commitment, the Government approved the Unified National Strategy of Education and Science 2022-2030 (Gov. Decree No. 446, 31 Aug 2022), built on three pillars, including equity and inclusion:²¹

1. ensuring a quality and sustainable education and science system focused on the needs of society and the state;
2. ensuring an equitable, inclusive and diverse education and science system;
3. ensuring a system of management and accountability of the education and science system.²²

While there are schools (boarding schools) that offer special education for some types of disabilities, in principle, their students – e.g. students with hearing or vision impairment – are enrolled in mainstream education, where they should receive tailored curriculum, support and assistance. Importantly, however, this will have its consequences, as will be discussed in the second part of this report; the system does not necessarily recognise children with disability, but rather, students with special educational needs – which may or may not also include disabilities. Since it will be important for the

17 <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/3310237?publication=17>

18 <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/29248>

19 <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/1869134?publication=0>

20 [On the Approval of the Rules for the Implementation, Development and Monitoring of Inclusive Education, as well as the Identification Mechanism for Students with Special Educational Needs | Skip to main content](#)

21 Interview with the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth; <https://mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=13130&lang=geo>

22 <https://mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=13130&lang=geo>

later discussion, it should be noted that a child with a disability may not necessarily be recognised as having special educational needs, while a child who was not assessed as having a disability may require the specialised approach.

The Ministry currently develops support resources, guides and manuals that serve to support the teaching of special education needs (SEN) students and which are intended for specialists in the field, teachers and parents.

Teaching methods and curricula have been brought into compliance with acknowledged child development and national curricula requirements. Also, in order to support inclusive education, the National Centre for Teacher Vocational Training, a legal entity of public law (LEPL), currently provides training modules which aim to strengthen and support school administration, SEN teachers, teachers and parents in the field of inclusive education.

2.3.1 Public education (primary, secondary education)

The whole system - including recognition - is established in the framework of the Law on General Education.²³

Georgia's **Law on General Education** mandates that students with special educational needs (SEN) be included in the general education process with their peers. **It defines a pupil with SEN as someone who needs modifications to the National Curriculum, their learning environment, or both.** In these cases, a tailored individual curriculum must be developed to focus on aspects including their education, social adaptation and integration. The National Curriculum sets the expected academic achievements for all students, including those with SEN, and provides modified versions to suit their needs.

The law prohibits any discrimination in student admissions, although competitive selection may apply in specialised institutions, taking into account an applicant's SEN. Special educational needs teachers who provide instruction to these students must receive explicit training in special pedagogy, and hold qualifications that include a Bachelor's degree in special education or an equivalent, as well as be certified by means of an approved educational programme. The State is required to provide education for SEN pupils in their native or official language as close to their residence as possible and to provide the necessary support, including financial aid, for students who require individualised learning plans. In general, schools must accommodate students with SEN by adapting their curricula and providing the support they need.

In particular:

- ▶ **Article 2** defines inclusive education as: "an equally accessible educational process, within the framework of which all students are provided with education taking into account their individual educational needs and abilities".
- ▶ **Article 33**, among other issues, introduces the obligation of a general education institution to create conditions for the implementation of inclusive education.

At the national level, inclusive education is governed by a range of different legislative acts, such as Georgia's Law on Early and Preschool Education,²⁴ which specifically defines the framework of inclusive education in preschool settings. Furthermore, prior to the adoption of the UNCRPD, the order of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia No. 99 of 1 October 2010 "On the approval of the regulations for the authorisation of educational institutions and fees" mandates that schools create an appropriate educational environment for students with SEN.²⁵ Building on this, Georgia's Ministry

²³ <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/29248>

²⁴ <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/3310237?publication=17>

²⁵

of Education, Science and Youth began introducing inclusive education into the Georgian vocational educational system in 2013 (Georgia's Ministry of Education, Science and Youth (n.d.)). Additionally, Georgia's Law on Higher Education requires that a student with a disability has the right to a higher education, and institutions have to create appropriate conditions for receiving that education.

Formally, Georgia has established a system modelled on the Norwegian approach. A joint project with the Norwegian government and UNICEF contributed to this progress and can be considered to have been a successful initiative and a key step towards developing inclusive education in recent years. The project was implemented over the 2021-2023 period and was the third project supported by the Norwegian government.

“Building Inclusive, Equitable, and Quality Preschool and General Education Systems for Children in Georgia” is a three-year programme implemented by **UNICEF in partnership with Georgia's Ministry of Education, Science and Youth and the Norwegian Government Agency for Special Needs Education (Statped)**, and funded by the Government of Norway. The programme focused on supporting children with SEN and disabilities, as well as teachers, professionals working with them and parents. It covered both Early Childhood Education and General Education levels.

Most importantly, in the context of this report, a **new model for an inclusive education support system was developed**, intended to be implemented by the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions. The necessary legislative amendments for the reform of the inclusive education support system were submitted to the Georgian Parliament for approval.

The programme also resulted in, *inter alia*:

- ▶ nine municipalities developing strategies and monitoring tools to improve early and preschool education access for children with SEN, alongside the development of an authorisation system for preschool education institutions to monitor the implementation of National Standards on Early Childhood Education;
- ▶ training and capacity building for professionals, including 350 government agency staff, 230 preschool educators (supporting over 2 100 children), and 25 professors, who in turn trained 315 teachers in 105 public schools;
- ▶ professors from seven state universities trained in inclusive early childhood education, later transferring their knowledge to 400 educators;
- ▶ the development of teaching and learning materials to support inclusive education practices;
- ▶ infrastructure improvements, including piloting projects in 15 preschool institutions to improve physical environments and developing an alternative family-centred preschool model;
- ▶ strengthening inclusive education by establishing four school-based Inclusive Education Centres in public schools and seven Child Rights Centres in state universities as knowledge hubs offering training programmes;
- ▶ piloting innovative approaches in 10 public schools, such as improving resource room usage, teacher training and coaching for 263 educators;
- ▶ increasing the transition opportunities for students with disabilities and SEN from general to vocational and higher education in collaboration with 20 state and private vocational education institutions.²⁶

26 https://www.unicef.org/georgia/sites/unicef.org.georgia/files/2023-09/Brief%20Project%20Summary.pdf?_gl=1*1nljiap*_ga*MTk5MDYxMTA4OC4xNzM4NTc2Njgx*_ga_ZEPV2PX419*MTczOTM1MDE0NC4xMC4xLjE3MzkzNTAzMDMuNTcuMC4w*_gcl_au*MTAwMDA5OTQ5LjE3Mzg2NzE4MTU.*_ga_P0DMSZ8KY6*MTczOTM1MDE0NC4xMC4xLjE3MzkzNTAzMDYuNTQuMC4w

Additionally, the new system supporting inclusive education aims to strengthen the advisory component of public schools, form more effective operational teams and increase their competence in specific areas: supporting the education of children with hearing, vision and multiple learning disabilities. Since 1 June 2024, the Educational Institution Mandatory Service, an LEPL, has officially started implementing psycho-educational assessment and consultation services and has transferred the functions and powers of the Inclusive Education Multidisciplinary Team of Georgia's Ministry of Education, Science and Youth. In addition, within the framework of the psycho-educational assessment and consultation service, a specialised consultation service has been established in the areas of behaviour, hearing, vision, communication, language and speech.²⁷

Separately from the mainstream approach of inclusive public education, there are also **seven specialised schools** in Georgia:

- ▶ four for students with intellectual disabilities and severe and multiple disorders;
- ▶ two for students with hearing impairment and deaf students;
- ▶ one for students with visual impairments and blind students (Georgia's Ministry of Education, Science and Youth (n.d.))

Six of those seven specialised schools provide boarding services, and all services are free of charge.

In principle, the general education schools can hire, as required the staff (a sign language specialist, an assistant to the special needs specialist, mobility and orientation specialists) to provide the conditions necessary for a child's education. Schools, in addition to the standard voucher, are also eligible to receive targeted assistance, which is tied to the number of children with SEN, and this amount should be spent on the development of inclusive education, the purchase of appropriate resources, the remuneration of additional specialists, the arrangement of resource rooms, etc. Since 2013, the school funding model has changed, and those schools that enrol SEN students receive additional funding to support their education. In 2013, the amount of funding was 350 GEL per month for every five SEN students, and in 2021, this funding had risen to 700 GEL per month (ibid.).

As noted earlier, the **current law and education system do not necessarily equate children with disabilities with having SEN, and vice versa**. This is because the assessment process for SEN is separate from the disability assessment required for social benefits. In practice, this may, for example, mean that a person with a recognised physical disability, limiting their ability to move freely, will not be designated as having SEN if they do not require any special assistance when attending public school. On the other hand, a prospective student with behavioural issues may not be recognised as needing social benefits but does require that the educational environment is adapted to suit their particular needs.

To assess the prospective students' needs, the multidisciplinary teams were established and have been operating since 2009. At this stage, there are 55 specialists. These specialists do not conduct registration. The Ministry determines the registration deadlines for first-graders with special educational needs as the first stage of registration of first-graders; within these deadlines, the parent registers the child at school, fills out an application form requesting an assessment, and that assessment is also carried out within the specified deadlines. The first stage of registration of first-graders was added in 2019, but this did not require an amendment to Georgia's Law on General Education; the amendment was made in the Minister's Order No. 04 of 11 January 2017. A multidisciplinary team assesses the cognitive, academic and functional skills of individuals/students by means of standardised tests to determine special educational needs and to develop recommendations for schools. This assessment may include recommendations on, for example, providing specialists such as a psychologist, an occupational therapist, a speech therapist, a sign language translator, a sign language specialist, a mobility and orientation specialist assistant to a person with SEN, as well as a special

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education teacher and an assistant. Furthermore, as the Ministry reports, textbooks for students with visual impairments are printed in Braille, and audio versions of textbooks are produced. The Ministry also purchases technical aids such as Braille terminals, Braille recognition cameras, etc., to support the education of visually impaired students. Transport services are also included in these provisions.

Based on the same 2017 amendment, the special education teacher became one of the specialist roles recognised within the profession and the requirements for their education were then defined; the special education teacher standards were approved, and the special education teacher career advancement and professional development scheme were defined. Currently, there is a special education Master's degree programme at Ilia State University.²⁸ As of 2023, as part of the inclusive education promotion programme, the newly established **LEPL, the National Centre for Teacher Professional Development**, implemented an introductory professional development course for special education teachers, as well as training of a sensory nature for individual assistants for special education students. The latter concerned teaching and teaching theories for individual assistants of students with visual impairments, a sign language course, and a certification programme for the sign language (Surdo) interpretation of students with hearing impairments (see above, Georgia's Ministry of Education, Science and Youth 2024). Subsequently, the special education teacher training programme was launched in the 2024-2025 academic year. At this stage, it is being implemented in three higher educational institutions. The programme is one-year long, and the prerequisite for admission is the successful passing of the basic professional skills exam. A certificate is issued upon completion of the programme.²⁹ In 2021, a special teacher qualification exam was held (Georgia's Ministry of Education, Science and Youth (n.d.) a). The special education teacher exam is held along with the Unified National, Master's, Grant and Teacher Exams.³⁰

While recognising the progress achieved in inclusive education, the Ministry identified some issues within the system. To mitigate these issues, the Ministry developed the new Unified Strategy which is centred on three strategic directions: enhancing the quality and relevance of education; ensuring equity, inclusion and diversity; and improving governance, financing and accountability across the educational system. Inclusive education is a central component of this policy vision, broadly encompassing the right to education for national and ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. It is guided by the principle of **Leaving No One Behind** (Georgia's Ministry of Education, Science and Youth 2025).

2.3.2 Higher education

Higher education institutions in Georgia are mandated to accommodate students with disabilities through policies and standards established under the Authorisation Standards of Higher Education Institutions (Order No. 07 of 31 January 2018). These standards require institutions to offer tailored tuition, assessment methods and adapted learning environments that cater to the academic and special educational needs of all students.

At the higher education level, the legislation in force envisages the appropriate support services for persons with disabilities so that they can participate in the Unified National Examinations on equal terms with other students, in line with the principle of reasonable accommodation. The LEPL National Assessment and Examinations Centre under the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth is entrusted with conducting the Unified National Examinations. One of the main priorities is to create equal conditions for all examinees. The Centre is tasked with making sure that the necessary special conditions are created in the examination centres. In special cases, the applicants are offered scribe/ amanuensis and take the exam in this format. Since 2006, the National Assessment and Examinations Centre has been creating special Braille exam tests, providing test items with a special voice

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programme, arranging spaces adapted to examinees, extending examination duration and offering other solutions.³¹

Georgia's Ministry of Education, Science and Youth also reports it has provided further support and inclusive access by administering social programmes that finance state education and Master's degree grants for students with varying degrees of disability. The legal framework for higher education in Georgia, as outlined in the Law on Higher Education, ensures academic freedom and lifelong learning opportunities through merit-based, transparent admissions processes managed by the National Assessment and Examination Centre (Ministry of Education, Science and Youth (n.d.)).

2.3.3 Vocational training

Vocational education in Georgia is intended to be accessible to all social groups, including persons with disabilities and individuals with SEN. As a key priority of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sector reform, the State fully finances education in public vocational institutions, while financing education in private institutions is provided in accordance with priorities set by the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth. The vocational education system offers educational programmes and training and retraining programmes.

To have the right to implement vocational education programmes, educational institutions must meet the standards of authorisation of vocational educational institutions defined by the Order of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia No. 99 of 1 October 2010 "On the approval of the regulations for the authorisation of educational institutions and fees", according to which, the authorised institutions in the field of vocational education are required to offer a suitable environment to students with disabilities and to provide access to infrastructure and study materials. Since the adapted environment of the institution is one of the most important prerequisites for compliance with the authorisation standards, the VET institutions have been fully adapted.

Recognising the specific challenges faced by vulnerable groups, public TVET institutions have to establish specialised services and infrastructural arrangements. These include the provision of sign-language interpreters, personal assistants, and inclusive education specialists, as well as adapted learning materials and guides. A voucher system has been in place since 2017, providing an additional 1 000 GEL per quarter for each eligible student to support the delivery of services tailored to their requirements.

The UNDP's Creating Better Life-Long Learning Opportunities Through Local Partnerships

project is focused on Georgia's six target regions - Autonomous Republic of Adjara, Tbilisi, Guria, Imereti, Kakheti and Racha-Lechkhumi. It focused on the improvement of accessible, high-quality skills provision for life-long learning and the enhancement of employment opportunities for youth and vulnerable groups. As part of the project Career Orientation Services to Support Persons with Disabilities: A new Career Orientation Service for Persons with Disabilities was piloted in partner colleges, promoting an inclusive environment for learning and employment. It was implemented in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth. The primary objective of this service was to support individuals in making informed career decisions and support their transition to vocational education. In the fourth quarter of 2023, the pilot phase of the orientation service for persons with disabilities and special needs was completed. Mentoring groups were established, and specialists from various institutions were assigned to these groups. During the pilot phase, 56 persons with disabilities and special needs benefited from the orientation service, with approximately 48% enrolling in vocational programmes in 2023 (Ministry of Education, Science and Youth 2024).

Furthermore, since 2020, the minimum quota (10%) for applicants with special educational needs

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has evolved, with 15% of the announced places now being allocated to persons with special educational needs. Once applicants have selected a programme via an online registration platform, they are assessed by a multidisciplinary team and then undergo alternative selection procedures. After confirming the status of applicants' educational needs, the institution plans an alternative selection procedure, which involves "practical testing" for basic and secondary educational programmes or various types of accommodations (increased font size, doubled time, adapted environment) at higher educational programmes (Ministry of Education, Science and Youth (n.d.) a). In 2021, the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth and the Georgian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (GCCCI) jointly established a Skills Agency, which, among its various functions, supports the institutional development of VET institutions and coordinates activities related to inclusive vocational education. There is an inclusive development, research and student support team of education specialists at the agency that actively engages with VET institutions, and provides support and consultations on an ongoing basis. Furthermore, currently, work on the regulation for inclusive vocational education is under way, and, once the regulations are approved, orientation services for persons with special educational needs will be gradually introduced in all vocational educational institutions.

2.4 Employment

The Labour Code of Georgia underwent significant reform in 2020, spurred on by Georgia's commitments to align labour legislation with relevant EU directives on equality and non-discrimination. These amendments clarified key concepts such as direct and indirect discrimination, harassment and sexual harassment, and broadened the scope of legal protections to include various aspects of employment. One of the most notable changes is the recognition of the denial of reasonable accommodation as a form of discrimination.

Article 9 of the Labour Code elaborates on **reasonable accommodation**, requiring employers to take all necessary steps to enable a person with a disability to access employment, advance in their career, and undergo vocational or advanced training unless such measures impose a disproportionate burden. This burden is not considered disproportionate if adequate state support programmes, benefits, or other alternative remedies are available to help offset any costs associated with accommodating employees with disabilities.

The law also explicitly requires that persons with disabilities be **integrated into the open labour market on an equal basis with others**, including the use of interim measures to achieve this goal. To facilitate such inclusion, employers and policymakers are called on to develop programmes that may involve offering preferential mechanisms for employers, providing specialised training and re-training for persons with disabilities, and adapting to the physical environment.

To achieve this, the State Employment Promotion Agency is tasked with promoting employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, that is, providing them with **training and information on employment opportunities** and overall supporting employees and prospective employers. It should be noted, however, that since the Agency only started operating in 2020, any assessment of its approach and impact can only be limited.

The Agency currently implements a programme based on the European Union Supported Employment model, which was established in 1993 to enhance employment opportunities for persons with disabilities across the European Union. While the programme's approach originally focused on the model created for persons with disabilities, its scope has broadened to include other vulnerable groups such as:

- ▶ **individuals with SEN and limited functional capacities,**
- ▶ former convicts and probationers, and

- ▶ additional socially vulnerable populations (State Employment Promotion Agency 2025).

As was observed with regard to the education sector, disability per se is not the focus of the approach. The support is intended for the larger group of potentially vulnerable people, including, but not limited to, those with disabilities.

The Agency is tasked with supporting different vulnerable groups in finding work and hence increasing the capacity of the State, which is responsible for providing support to job seekers. The whole principle to achieve that, within the current programme, is the 5-step process that follows the principle of “appoint-train-retain”, which is to be achieved by:

- ▶ providing information about supported employment and the activities associated with each stage of the process;
- ▶ collecting information on the job seeker’s interests and abilities and determining a connection between these attributes and employer requirements;
- ▶ creating and reviewing a tailored action plan that identifies potential employment opportunities, assesses labour market conditions, and determines the necessary support to assist a successful job match;
- ▶ motivating employers to participate by informing both employers and job seekers about the capabilities of people with disabilities, thereby aligning the skills of the job seeker with the needs of the employer.
- ▶ providing ongoing support through work with both the job seeker and the employer (State Employment Promotion Agency 2025).

This process is to be facilitated by the Supported Employment Consultant, who is requested to support job seekers at all stages of employment.

In principle, then, the three main components of the Agency’s approach (or programme) include:

- ▶ a vocational training, retraining and qualification improvement programme,
- ▶ an internship programme,
- ▶ a wage subsidy programme and supplying financial support for employer-initiated programmes (State Employment Promotion Agency 2025).

Additionally, employers can request support in providing reasonable accommodation at the workplace, but, to date, this form of support has not yet been requested by any employer.³²

Within the context of the programme, in 2023, 17 339 job seekers were registered in the system, and 1 111 employers registered 11 470 vacancies. Consultants provided support services to 198 persons with disabilities, 120 vacancies were found for persons with disabilities, and 19 people were employed. Also, 9 employment forums were held to connect prospective employers and job seekers (Georgia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023).

In addition, there were 78 persons with disabilities employed in the civil service in 2022, compared with 80 in 2021 and 51 in 2020 (European Commission 2023).

2.5 Social integration and participation

The chapter that follows will address several issues related to social integration, although its scope will be somewhat limited since the subject can be understood very broadly. However, to cover the priority areas in this regard, the discussion will focus on the legal capacity, as well as other rights of persons with disabilities, social benefits and services, and independent living.

32 Interview with the State Employment Promotion Agency

2.5.1 Legal capacity and other rights of persons with disability

In Georgia, the Law on Rights of Persons with Disabilities introduces the concept of “special plaintiff”, whose status is defined in the relevant provisions of Article 19 of the Law.

1. An organisation with the status of a special plaintiff is an interested party which, without providing legal representation in administrative and civil cases, protects the rights of persons with disabilities in administrative bodies and courts.
2. Organisations with the status of special plaintiffs are authorised to engage in administrative and civil disputes and apply to the relevant bodies with applications and claims/complaints if the issue concerns the elimination of discrimination against persons with disabilities and/or is important for the development of legal practice in this area.
3. Organisations with the status of special plaintiffs exercise the powers specified in this Article, even in the event of a collective violation or alleged violation of the rights of persons with disabilities.
4. A special plaintiff is a non-entrepreneurial (non-profit) legal entity registered in accordance with this Law as a special plaintiff in the Registry of Entrepreneurs and Non-entrepreneurial (Non-Commercial) Legal Entities.
5. A non-entrepreneurial (non-commercial) legal entity with at least 3 years of experience in the field of civil and/or administrative proceedings on cases of protection of the rights of persons with disabilities may be registered as a special plaintiff. The period of registration of the status of a special plaintiff is 3 years. Thereafter, the decision on such registration becomes invalid unless the entity submits a request for an extension of the registration period, accompanied by documentation confirming the activity of the previous 3 years in the field of civil and/or administrative proceedings to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. The form of such documentation and the procedure for its submission shall be determined by an order of the Minister of Justice of Georgia.

In 2015, Georgia replaced its **guardianship system with a supported decision-making model**. This followed a 2014 Constitutional Court ruling that abolished the then existing guardianship framework.

The supported decision-making model enables persons with disabilities to make independent choices while allowing for them to request assistance when needed. This approach recognises that the ability to make decisions defines an individual’s identity and place in society. Depriving someone of this right leads to social invisibility, undermines their voice and agency, and increases vulnerability to rights violations. The lack of recognition of a person’s ability to make independent decisions creates conditions for various forms of violence and leaves individuals vulnerable to rights violations. In such a state of “civil death”, the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution of Georgia cannot be fully realised. This reform represents a fundamental shift from the Soviet-era guardianship system, which entirely replaced the will of persons with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities with that of their guardians. **Unlike the old system, which fully deprived individuals of autonomy, the new framework is based on human rights principles.**³³

Accordingly, a supported decision-maker has the right to:

- ▶ request support tailored to their individual needs;
- ▶ make decisions with the help of a supporter but with their own will and desire;
- ▶ choose not only one but several supporters;
- ▶ receive support and other necessary services in the community through community services.³⁴

33 <https://www.phr.ge/documents/გადანყვეტილების%20მიღებაში%20მხარდაჭერის%20მოდელი.pdf>

34 <https://phr.ge/documents/დოკუმენტი%20მხარდაჭერის%20მიმღები%20პირებისა%20და%20მათი%20ოჯახის%20წევრებისათვის.pdf>

In 2016, the Human Rights Division of Georgia's Prosecutor General's Office developed and introduced a guideline on the Investigation of Criminal Cases Involving Persons with Disabilities, to comply with the requirements of the UNCRPD. This guideline was designed to identify the specific needs of witnesses and victims with disabilities during criminal proceedings. Building on this foundation, in 2021, the Prosecutor General issued two additional guidelines for prosecutors and system investigators: one establishing standards and methods for working with witnesses, victims and the accused with disabilities, and another setting out standards and methodologies for handling cases involving juvenile witnesses, victims with disabilities and the accused. These guidelines aim to ensure the activities of prosecutors and investigators take due consideration of the individual needs and interests of persons with disabilities – including those with mental and intellectual disabilities – to safeguard their equal, full and effective participation at all stages of the criminal justice process (Public Defender's Office 2022).

Importantly, from the perspective of this report, one more document has a bearing on the rights of persons with disabilities – the Law on Patients' Rights.

Georgia's **Law on Patients' Rights**³⁵ contains provisions aimed at preventing discrimination in healthcare settings. Its **Article 6** establishes that patients are not to be discriminated against on the basis of race, skin colour, language, sex, genetic heritage, beliefs and religion, political and other opinions, national, ethnic or social origin, property and social status, place of residence, illness, sexual orientation, or negative personal attitudes (with no particular mention of disability, though this is assumed). It also provides that Georgian legislation will define the conditions under which patients' rights may be limited in relation to certain diseases. In addition, its **Article 31** reinforces these protections by explicitly prohibiting discrimination based on genetic heritage.

2.5.2 Social benefits and services

Within the Georgian system, social support is managed by two distinct agencies. The **Social Service Agency is responsible for administering the "social package" – monetary benefits** provided to individuals with a legally recognised disability status – while the **State Care Agency oversees the delivery of additional social services**. Both are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs.

Georgia's Law on Social Assistance³⁶ provides the legal framework for administering the social package - a set of monetary and non-monetary allowances to support vulnerable groups.

Article 2 of the Law's provisions applies to individuals in need of special care, deprived families, and homeless people who are lawful residents of Georgia unless otherwise specified. Within this context, the term "persons in need of special care" explicitly includes persons with disabilities. Furthermore, a person is recognised as having a disability under this Law only if they have been granted that status in accordance with the Law on Medical and Social Examination. **Article 121** of the Law defines the social package as a monthly monetary allowance and/or a collection of additional allowances, both monetary and non-monetary. The amount, eligibility criteria, procedures and conditions for disbursement of the social package are determined by a Government ordinance. The basis for granting the social package is twofold: the status of a person with disabilities and the death of the breadwinner.

The social package is part of the universal pension system; that is, there are two main types of monetary support provided: **age-based for all Georgian retirees and a social package provided to**

35 <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/download/16978/3/ge/pdf>

36 "On Amendments to the Order No. 225 of the Minister of Labour, Health and Social Protection of Georgia of 22 August 2006 "On Approval of the Rules for the Appointment and Provision of Targeted Social Assistance"; <https://www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/66100?publication=0>

people and children with a legally recognised disability, based on the assessment results, as described in the section 2.1.1.1.³⁷ The Social Services Agency receives a decision following the assessment procedure but is not responsible for the process which is up to the medical institutions entrusted by the Ministry via the Pharmaceutical and Medical Regulation Agency. There are also separate, targeted programmes dedicated to the poorest, which may or may not cover families where there are children with disabilities, mothers and forcibly displaced people. The Agency employs 1 200 people and serves about 43% of the entire population because it administers these different kinds of monetary payments paid by the State: awarding the pension appointments, providing the benefits, and suspending them, when and if appropriate. An amount of about 1 billion GEL was provided for various social assistance payments, which make up the majority of the Ministry’s budget.³⁸

However, there are some limitations to the system, such as that a person can receive only one type of benefit – for example, if a person with a disability reaches the age (60/65 years old) and becomes eligible for the universal pension for retirees, they are no longer eligible for the disability benefits in addition to the pension. The person has to choose either one or the other.³⁹

Currently, persons with the **most severe disabilities**, as well as **children with disabilities, independent of the nature and severity of the disability**, all receive the same amount of money. Apart from those, there are two additional categories which are entitled to receive a lower amount of money than the latter two. According to an amendment to the Law on Social Assistance, starting in 2022, the social package was to be subject to annual increases. The indexation method for the social package mirrors that of the state pension. Specifically, the increased amount for persons with profound disabilities and for children with disabilities will be calculated as the sum of 80 per cent of the arithmetic average of the real growth rates of the GDP over the last six quarters plus the average rate of inflation over the last 12 months. However, this increase will not be less than 25 GEL annually (Council of Europe 2023). In 2025, the social package for children and adults with profound disabilities comes to 425 GEL monthly.⁴⁰

For all other categories of persons with disabilities, the social package will be increased by the average rate of inflation over the last 12 months, with a minimum annual increase of 20 GEL (Council of Europe 2023).

Table 4 *The amount of social package in relation to the disability category*

Category	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Persons with profound (severe) disabilities	200 GEL	220-250 GEL	250 GEL	275 GEL	340 GEL
Child with disabilities	200 GEL	220-250 GEL	250 GEL	275 GEL	340 GEL
Persons with significant disabilities	120 GEL	140 GEL	140 GEL	140 GEL	175 GEL
Persons with disabilities from childhood/birth	100 GEL	100 GEL	100 GEL	100 GEL	135 GEL

Source: *Ecorys, based on Council of Europe 2023*

Overall, since 2022, **positive steps have been taken** to ensure the rights of persons with disabilities, including roughly 20% more funding for social packages to counter inflation (European Commission 2023).

As an important development, a new digital system has been implemented to operate the assessment process and link disability status decisions directly with the Agency’s database. This system eliminates the need for persons with disabilities to provide additional documentation when accessing the social package, as their details - including the type (level) of their disability and duration

37 Interview with State Social Service Agency
 38 Interview with State Social Service Agency
 39 Interview with State Social Service Agency
 40 Interview with Social Service Agency

of their disability status - are already recorded. However, due to GDPR requirements, access to this system is restricted solely to the Agency and the Pharmaceutical and Medical Regulation Agency. Since the system has only been operational for a year, the dataset that exists so far, is quite limited.⁴¹

Apart from the monetary benefits, persons with disabilities are entitled to other types of services: special aid and other types of provisions. The State Care Agency is entrusted with these provisions.

Since 1999, a major programme focused on **social rehabilitation and childcare** has been in operation, with its budget and content undergoing substantial changes over the past decade. In 2025, the programme's budget increased to 95 million GEL.⁴²

The Agency itself does not directly deliver these services; instead, approximately 400 service providers – primarily small, officially registered NGOs – are responsible for implementation. To become a service provider, organisations must complete a registration process (submitting documentation on their qualifications that demonstrate compliance with service standards). The Agency then collaborates directly with these providers, although there is currently no centralised monitoring system in place to assess the quality of services offered.⁴³

The largest components of the programme are the Child Rehabilitation and Education Programme, which benefits around 5 000 children across 27 municipalities, and the Early Childhood Development Programme, which serves approximately 4 000 children nationwide.⁴⁴

The services provided to persons with disabilities in Georgia fall into several categories. For more detailed information, Annex 2 provides a summary of the number of beneficiaries receiving those services in 2024 (up to August). The services include the following.

- ▶ **Assistive devices and aids** – the provision of various types of wheelchairs (electric, mechanical, paediatric), bathroom/toilet chairs, prosthetic and orthopaedic devices, and hearing aids (both paediatric and general). Additionally, other mobility aids, such as crutches, walking sticks and mobility frames, are covered, along with assistive technologies like smartphones. This heading also includes white canes for those with impaired vision.
- ▶ **Housing** – generally focusing on accessible living environments through alternative housing options, especially for children, including small family-type homes for individuals with disabilities and mental disorders. This heading also covers community-based services that support independent living, including personal assistance services within the home. Here, specific housing and support services to cater for adults with mental health conditions and alternative housing options are also included.
- ▶ **Nutritional and medical services**, such as specialised voucher programmes – to address nutritional needs through artificial feeding and condition-specific food (e.g., for phenylketonuria or coeliac disease for children).
- ▶ **A range of services targeted at children and adolescents** – early childhood development, rehabilitation/habilitation programmes and day-care centre services. These cover several areas, ranging from social inclusion and support for persons with severe intellectual disabilities to specialised care for adolescents with behavioural challenges.

Participation in the programme requires beneficiaries to undergo a standardised assessment process that includes a questionnaire to determine their eligibility for service vouchers. Once eligibility is confirmed, the government issues a voucher that enables the beneficiary to enrol in the pro-

41 Interviews with Social Service Agency and State Care Agency

42 Interview with the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs

43 Interview with the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs

44 Interviews with the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia and Social Service Agency

gramme and choose from the registered service providers. In practice, this approach allows persons with disabilities to select services that meet their individual needs, while the needs assessment is also conducted to confirm eligibility for certain services.⁴⁵

2.5.3 Deinstitutionalisation and independent living

The deinstitutionalisation process in Georgia has been under way for over 15 years, although it continues to face challenges with regard to the readiness of the surrounding community and societal reluctance to open alternative facilities.⁴⁶

As of 2023, 3 large care homes for persons with disabilities were operating in Martkopi, Dzevri and Dusheti. In 2023, 142 beneficiaries were still living in large institutions for persons with disabilities. A grant provided by the Czech government will permit the planned purchase of 7 additional small family-type homes. 18 persons with disabilities, who constituted more than 10 % of the residents of the large institutions, were transferred from Martkopi care home to 3 small family-type homes in Dusheti administrative unit, which had been purchased in 2023 by Caritas Czech Republic (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023)

In principle, the last large boarding home was scheduled for closure in 2024. However, services for those with complex medical needs - such as artificial ventilation, and for those children who are in need of specialised care and were left at maternity wards continue, with 12 children currently receiving these services.⁴⁷

From the perspective of independent living, one initiative takes the lead. In 2021, the USAID Independent Living Program in Georgia opened and financed six Independent Living Centres that have begun operations in Lagodekhi, Telavi, Kutaisi, Zugdidi, Ozurgeti and Batumi.⁴⁸ This activity was also co-funded with support from the European Union.

The **Independent Living Program in Georgia, financed by the USAID and European Union**, provides a range of services at its Independent Living Centres. These services include consultations, awareness-raising initiatives, referral support and training. Together, each year, the centres provide support to thousands of persons with disabilities. They offer assistance to help persons with disabilities by providing them with information about their rights and available services. This is particularly important in more remote areas, where access to such information is often limited. Many persons with disabilities are unaware of how to obtain official disability status, secure a wheelchair, or access other necessary services. To address these issues, representatives of the centres, for example, accompany individuals to official appointments to support them in asserting their rights.

In addition to direct service delivery, the centres also play an advocacy role. Members of the Independent Living Centres often serve on local municipal councils and commissions (as will be explored in later sections), where they raise issues affecting persons with disabilities, although the centres themselves do not exert formal influence over council decisions. In addition, the centres contribute to local employment by hiring persons with disabilities.⁴⁹

The Independent Living Centres are no longer funded by the USAID but are fully public institutions, financed from the budget.

45 Interviews with the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs and Social Service Agency

46 Interview with the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs

47 Interview with the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs

48 https://georgiatoday.ge/usaid-independent-living-program-in-georgia-the-lagodekhi-independent-living-center/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

49 Focus group discussion with the Coalition for Independent Living CSO

At the same time, within the programme of social services, home care and personal assistant services for persons with disabilities were introduced in 2024, but these remain on a relatively small scale. From January to August 2024, a total of 305 people benefited from the Personal Assistant Service Provision Sub-Program, while 423 people received support through the Home Care with Service Provision Sub-Program (see Annex 2). It also should be noted that children with disabilities were removed as a target group from the initial pilot programme for personal assistant services (after 2023) and are not a target group in the 2025 programme.⁵⁰

2.6 Cross-cutting issues

This chapter presents an overview of some arbitrarily chosen cross-cutting issues that affect multiple sectors, including the abovementioned education, employment and social inclusion aspects. Its purpose is to summarise and highlight some key themes that impact the broader landscape of disability rights and support, such as the accessibility, advocacy or gender dimensions of the policies.

2.6.1 Accessibility

Georgia's 2024–2026 Action Plan for the Protection of Human Rights (Activity 22.2.9) mandates the development of an action plan to implement the national accessibility standard. The Government of Georgia's administration has been designated as the responsible agency, with the parliament and municipalities serving as partners. The deadline for this activity is 2025 (Public Defender's Office 2024). The technical regulation, the National Accessibility Standards, has been approved, but it has not yet been implemented. Until now, no national accessibility plan has been approved and this significantly complicates the timely provision of accessibility of buildings and infrastructure for persons with disabilities. (Public Defender's Office 2023). At the same time, it should be stressed that there is no standard for communication and access to information, even though this is crucial for education, employment and social inclusion. The **current approach addresses physical accessibility** only.⁵¹

There has been an ongoing, gradual process to enhance the accessibility of public spaces. For example, all new educational institutions are required to comply with accessibility standards. This is particularly important because of the nationwide initiative to increase kindergarten attendance, which then led to the construction of new, accessible buildings. In parallel, older schools are gradually being renovated to meet these accessibility requirements. In principle, all educational institutions – at all levels, including vocational education – have to be physically accessible.⁵²

According to the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs, the physical accessibility of medical institutions in Georgia is governed by two key governmental resolutions. Medical facilities are required to adhere to the Resolution of the Government of Georgia No. 359 on the Approval of Technical Regulations for High-Risk Medical Activities, as well as the Resolution of the Government of Georgia No. 385, which sets out the rules and conditions for issuing a license for medical activities and a permit for inpatient institutions. The latter resolution explicitly mandates that inpatient facilities provide the necessary conditions for the safe movement of persons with disabilities (Public Defender's Office 2022).

Furthermore, the Georgian e-service portal – Digital Public Service Hall – is currently undergoing updating, with a mobile application in development. Work plans and schedules have been established for the portal update, with ongoing efforts focused on refining the UI/UX design. Additionally, there is work under way to replace services currently delivered in an iframe format, as this format is incompatible with the accessibility options required by persons with disabilities (Georgia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023).

50 Stakeholder feedback

51 Stakeholder feedback

52 Interview with the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth

2.6.2 The gender dimension of persons with disabilities - policies and practices

The gender dimension in the context of disability rights is not extensively addressed within either the existing legal framework or in practice. Regulatory acts tend to be general and lack the detail required to fully address gender-specific issues. For example, the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities contains provisions that address the rights of women and girls with disabilities, but these measures are broad and do not provide detailed guidelines.

Under **Article 6** of the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the State is mandated to ensure that women and girls with disabilities exercise their basic rights and freedoms on an equal basis with other women. It further requires that the State protect these individuals against discrimination in all areas of public life, guaranteeing the creation of adequate conditions that allow for equal opportunities. Moreover, the law states that any action concerning this group must be founded on the principles of gender equality and taking into account their specific needs, and it mandates the promotion of equal access to reproductive health care.

Similarly, **Article 13** addresses the inviolability of private and family life and extends these principles by prohibiting discrimination in matters related to personal and family life. This includes provisions that persons with disabilities of marriageable age can freely choose to marry and form a family and can make independent and informed decisions regarding the number and spacing of their children, supported by appropriate education on reproductive health and family planning.

Gender-disaggregated data on service provision remains very limited. However, in terms of higher education, the figures available reveal that, in 2022, 43 women with disabilities were enrolled in public and private universities nationwide. Additionally, a significant gender disparity was evident in vocational education programmes; as of 2020, 182 female students with special educational needs were enrolled compared with 264 male students (Public Defender's Office 2022).

2.6.3 The intersectionality of other minority dimensions

The intersectionality of disability with ethnic minority status and other vulnerabilities is an issue that is not frequently addressed in policy discussions, yet it is of considerable significance in Georgia. Available data suggest (although reports are not precise) that a notable proportion of persons with disabilities are non-Georgian speakers, indicating that service programmes must consider linguistic and cultural diversity. This is a particularly pressing issue in the field of education, where the majority of public schools are Georgian-language institutions. Although there are ethnic minority schools – such as those offering instruction in Azerbaijani, Armenian, and Russian, as well as one newly established Ukrainian-language school – Georgian remains a compulsory subject in all schools, and English language instruction is also a requirement. However, the extent to which services, especially for children with SEN, are provided in languages other than Georgian is not centrally monitored.

Additionally, the social benefits system in Georgia is structured to support a range of vulnerable groups but currently only permits a single type of financial support per individual. This means that the system does not fully recognise or address some individuals' complex, intersectional vulnerabilities. As a consequence, local and international non-governmental organisations have largely taken on the role of addressing these gaps.

Furthermore, Georgia's decentralised administrative structure aggravates these issues. Beyond major cities like Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi and Imereti, many remote and mountain areas depend heavily on local municipal administrations for the provision of services. Stakeholders interviewed – representing both the national institutions and persons with disabilities have pointed out that the quality and accessibility of services are largely determined by regional rather than the central administra-

tion, making **the place of residence a critical factor in the availability and quality of support for persons with disabilities and, as such, probably the most important intersectional dimension.**

2.6.4 Awareness and advocacy

The advocacy generally manifests in two interconnected forms: one within the governmental sphere, including most significantly local governance, and another as general, non-governmental advocacy, which may operate independently or in collaboration with officials.

The most important advocacy groups in Georgia include **the Georgian Disability Network**, which unites more than 200 organisations and activists, including the **Coalition for Independent Living**.

Here, some important political context needs to be provided.

In recent years, Georgia's relationship with international organisations has been significantly influenced by domestic policies, particularly within a turbulent political climate of civil unrest and anti-government protests. Central to this development was the introduction and eventual passage of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, often referred to as the "Foreign Agents" law. Initially proposed in March 2023 and reintroduced in April 2024 by the ruling party, the law requires non-governmental organisations and media outlets that receive more than 20% of their annual revenue from foreign sources to register with the Ministry of Justice as "organisations serving the interests of a foreign power".

Key figures, including Bidzina Ivanishvili and Prime Minister Kobakhidze, have publicly supported the law, arguing that it is essential for strengthening Georgia's sovereignty and countering influences perceived to be imposed from abroad. However, critics have compared similar legislation in Russia, stating that the law is intended to suppress opposition, undermining Georgia's democratic processes and its aspirations to join the European Union. Following significant public outcry – including mass protests that occasionally involved excessive use of force by security forces – President Salome Zourabichvili initially vetoed the law. Nevertheless, the Parliament overruled the veto, and the law was signed on 3 June 2024, entering into force at the beginning of August 2024 (Mills 2024).

International observers, including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), have criticised the law for its deficiencies, declaring that it falls short of international human rights standards and conflicts with Georgia's commitments as an OSCE member state. As such, this legislative change represents a central moment in Georgia's domestic policy of recent years, with far-reaching implications for the operational space of international organisations and civil society groups within the country.⁵³

Overall, the political unrest – particularly the approval of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence – has significantly strained the avenues for disability activism. As noted at the beginning of this report, while international organisations continue to play a substantial role, local and national disability organisations have increasingly refused to cooperate with the government as a form of protest due to mistrust. Consequently, advocacy efforts have been severely impacted, with a gradual severance of central-level cooperation – although this trend is less pronounced at the local level, where collaboration remains dependent on individual organisations and municipal administrations. A notable example of this shift is the dissolution of the working groups under the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs, which had previously collaborated on the creation of the biopsychosocial model.

53 <https://www.osce.org/odihr/569925>

The **Georgian Disability Network strongly opposed the draft law** on Transparency of Foreign Influence. The Network argued that the law's definition of non-commercial legal entities receiving over 20% of their annual income from foreign sources as "organisations serving the interests of a foreign power" is misleading. They stressed that their member organisations, along with other similar entities, work on vital social, educational, health, and human rights issues that benefit Georgia. The Network further argued that many provisions in the draft law are vague, impacting the rights of persons with disabilities and conflict with European values, hindering Georgia's EU integration efforts. Instead, they suggest that if grant transparency is needed, a separate law should be enacted that ensures equality regardless of funding source. The Network unsuccessfully called on the authorities to reject the draft law as it did not serve the interests of the Georgian people.⁵⁴

However, as previously stated, advocacy also tends to happen on a more local level. Following the ratification of the UNCRPD, the Government of Georgia adopted the 2014-2016 National Action Plan for Creating Equal Opportunities for persons with disabilities, which included the establishment of Municipal Disability Councils to support CRPD implementation at the local level. These councils were intended to actively involve persons with disabilities and their organisations in decision-making processes. It is noteworthy that their activities are not coordinated in any formal way with the activities of the Convention's implementation mechanism.⁵⁵

54 https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php/?story_fbid=395616433427485&id=100089373943160

55 Stakeholder feedback

3.0 Needs assessment: identifying key gaps and challenges

The overarching purpose of this chapter is to identify the gaps and barriers based on the current state of affairs described in the preceding chapters. This approach creates a logical progression from understanding how things are intended to be to pinpointing what is the actual practice and where the challenges lie and, ultimately, to proposing what can be done or where support from the Council of Europe is needed. To maintain this structure, the following sections build on the areas covered in the previous chapter, focusing on the lived experiences and practices that are – or should be – guided by the policy framework discussed earlier.

The overarching observation shared by persons with disabilities seems to be that the main issue lies not in the lack of policies but in the lack of their implementation. In that sense, the challenge is not in creating new policies but in successfully implementing the existing framework. While the policies guarantee quite extensive coverage of the rights of persons with disabilities, major discrepancies exist in practices, which are also acknowledged by the national institutions themselves.

In principle, several aspects of the rights of persons with disabilities still remain very challenging. These can be summarised or structured into a few broad categories from which the more gradual challenges stem.

Table 5 *Identified macro and micro challenges*⁵⁶

Challenges	
Macro level	Micro level
Social stigma of disability (including towards children), while decreasing, is still present among peers and among other people	Uneven distribution of services between the regions (urban/rural)
Issues with the implementation of the Law on Rights of Persons with Disabilities – while it creates a framework, implementation remains a challenge.	Differences in the quality of the services provided with no proper monitoring
The new biopsychosocial model of disability is being introduced very slowly, as political willingness, dedicated resources and strong leadership are limited.	Lack of experts (teachers, specialists, psychologists, social workers, etc.)

⁵⁶ Focus group discussion with international NGOs

Challenges	
Macro level	Micro level
<p>The existing legislation is sometimes incomplete or not sufficiently aligned with the existing standards.</p> <p>There is no distinction made between mental, psychosocial or intellectual disability in the existing legal framework.</p> <p>e.g. the law governing health does not discuss the informed consent issues for people with limited capacities; it does not discuss the access to reproductive health rights of women with disabilities. Also, the legal capacity reform does not appear to be progressing.</p>	
<p>Significant challenges still remain with regard to access to education and employment in an open labour market.</p>	

Source: *Ecorys*

At the same time, it should be emphasised that **the process that Georgia commenced to further the rights of persons with disabilities should be acknowledged and praised**. While challenges persist, stakeholders also indicated that comparing the current system and the possibilities it provides with the situation 20 years ago, they have observed multiple important and positive changes. Furthermore, it is worth recognising that in the dynamic political climate of an independent Georgia, the introduction of the new policies (and especially their implementation) faces inherent challenges given limited resources. This is also coupled with a commendable effort to follow the best practices and global standards in the creation of the new (previously non-existing) framework, which is in itself a complex task that requires such dedicated and extensive resources. Overall, the whole process working towards equity and equality of persons with disabilities in Georgian society is relatively new, so any assessments provided here aim to point to the implementation status as it is known, recognising that this process is still in its relatively early stages, ongoing, and facing significant external pressures.

3.1 Social stigma

As pointed out at the beginning of this report, Georgia has made significant progress in reaching its current stage. However, remnants of the Soviet model are still present – not necessarily in the policies themselves, though the medical model remains in place, despite efforts to counteract it with contemporary best practices. Rather, these remnants persist in **societal perceptions of disability and a reluctance towards social inclusion**. This issue was either explicitly recognised by the stakeholders interviewed or became apparent reading between the lines in discussions.

The issue is examined, for example, in the “Study on Stigmatization of Children with Disabilities” (UNICEF 2016) which found that:

- ▶ children with disabilities are viewed as different or non-normative;
- ▶ disability is perceived as a threat or contagious disease;
- ▶ children with disabilities are seen as dependent on others;
- ▶ various religious and cultural norms shape specific perceptions of persons with disabilities;
- ▶ stigmatisation has both social (e.g., low expectations for children with disabilities and self-stigmatisation among children) and psychological (e.g., stress for both children and their parents) consequences.

The 2020 report by the Institute of Social Studies and Analysis, commissioned by UNDP, presents a somewhat optimistic perspective on public attitudes towards persons with disabilities in Georgia.

The study examined the social environment by analysing public attitudes across seven key areas: awareness, stigma and stereotypes, education, employment, rights and privileges, basic needs and social integration, and state policies.

- ▶ According to the findings, 51.2% of Georgians were aware of the rights and needs of persons with disabilities, and almost 59% had personal experience of interacting with them. Additionally, 67.2% agreed that persons with disabilities can achieve the same level of success in education as others, while 49.4% believed that they can live independently.
- ▶ Attitudes toward employment and leadership roles were relatively inclusive, with 73% of respondents feeling comfortable working alongside a person with a disability, and 70% stated they would accept a person with a physical disability in a decision-making position, such as a member of parliament.

Despite these positive indicators, **33.5% of respondents believed that disability rights are already fully protected in Georgia, and over 43% view disability care as an act of goodwill** rather than a government responsibility.

Furthermore, respondents showed lower levels of acceptance for people with mental or intellectual disabilities in various social settings. Only 46.6% of respondents would accept them as co-workers, while just 36.2% would feel comfortable having them as next-door neighbours. Worryingly, 47.7% expressed hesitation about having their children share a classroom with a peer who has an intellectual or mental disability. Over half of the respondents believe that people with mental disabilities should not have children (Institute of Social Studies and Analysis 2020).

In the context of this report, stigmatisation appears to be most prevalent in **education and employment**.

In education, one key issue is that parental consent is required for a child to receive an assessment and SEN status, and this is not linked to their disability status in terms of social services. As a result, some parents refuse this status to avoid their child being labelled as “disabled”.⁵⁷ This means that stigma harms not only children with disabilities but also those without disabilities who still require educational support.

In employment, there is a significant gap between the skills of persons with disabilities and available job opportunities, as will be discussed later. While various initiatives exist such as individual consultancy, training, internships and subsidies, overall employment rates still remain low. At least partially, this issue stems from employers’ lack of knowledge about the capabilities of persons with disabilities, which is influenced by social stigma and apprehension.

In light of the above, while it is not mentioned in the following section on challenges, it would appear, even if not explicitly stated, that there is a widespread underlying issue hindering progress towards the full realisation of social rights for persons with disabilities. Misconceptions and societal attitudes continue to act as invisible barriers, affecting access to education, employment, healthcare and independent living.

Without systematic, high-level efforts to challenge these perceptions, raise awareness, and promote inclusivity, even the most well-designed policies and initiatives may fail to achieve a meaningful impact. Addressing this underlying issue must, therefore, be seen as a fundamental part of any strategy, something that the Action Plan for the biopsychosocial model addresses and recognises. As was mentioned during the interview with the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs, the objective is not only focused on changing the policy landscape, that is, changing the regulations, but also changing society’s mindset. Consequently, the Action Plan includes the components of awareness and capacity building, which should be recognised as a step in the right direction.

57 Interview with the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth

3.2 Legislative and policy framework

The existing legislation faces two primary challenges. First, it lacks precise definitions for the concepts that are needed to safeguard the rights of persons with disabilities. Second, there are significant delays in the development and implementation of the biopsychosocial model. Stakeholders have universally recognised that without fully adopting this model, many of the other challenges remain unaddressed, impeding progress and the elimination of existing barriers.

3.2.1 Law on the Rights of Persons with Disability

As reported by the Public Defender's Office, the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities falls short in several areas.

First, it does not fully incorporate important notions of equality as set out by the UNCRPD. For example, the law fails to adequately address the specific needs and priorities of people with **intellectual and psychosocial disabilities**: it does not include rights such as legal capacity, freedom of movement, and freedom of thought and expression for these groups, despite making some reference to independent living in Article 4. This article states that the State shall recognise the right of a person with disabilities to choose a place of residence independently and prohibits coercing individuals into specially designated placements unless legally necessary. Similarly, Article 18 mandates that the State provide access to legal proceedings with appropriate procedural mechanisms and reasonable accommodations but does not overcome the gap in broad protection for these rights. Following that, the guarantees provided for the protection of the rights of people with mental health problems are insufficient in terms of obliging the provision of modern community-based services. Also, there are delays in the implementation of the 2022-2024 Action Plan of the 2022-2030 Mental Health Care Strategy (Public Defender's Office 2023).

Another significant shortcoming of the law relates to the concept of reasonable accommodation. Although the law introduces this concept, neither it nor its by-laws or judicial interpretations define what constitutes a **“disproportionate” or “undue burden”**. This lack of clear criteria creates ambiguity and leaves a wide margin for private and public entities to determine their obligations toward persons with disabilities.

The Public Defender's Office has further raised concerns about the overall completeness of the law's provisions. In particular, the transitional deadlines outlined in the law are excessively long, which delay providing timely solutions to systemic problems faced by persons with disabilities. This delay is particularly problematic in the context of introducing a biopsychosocial model of disability assessment (as will be discussed in the sections that follow) – a model that has been widely recognised as necessary for addressing the diverse needs of this population.⁵⁸

Apart from the shortcomings recognised by the Public Defender's Office, the stakeholders interviewed also acknowledged that the law does not provide sufficiently effective provisions and protections in regard to the reproductive rights of women with disabilities, limiting their full enjoyment of those rights.⁵⁹

3.2.2 Biopsychosocial model

The process of designing and implementing the biopsychosocial model of disability has been long and complex. **It is not purely technical – it also requires a fundamental change in societal mindset.**⁶⁰ The idea of transitioning to a biopsychosocial model has been discussed for many years, with

58 <https://ombudsman.ge/eng/190308061724siakhleebi/sakhalkho-damtsvelis-gantskhadeba-shezghuduli-she-sadzleblobis-mkone-pirta-uflebebis-shesakheb-sakartvelos-kanontan-dakavshirebit>

59 Focus group discussion with international NGOs

60 Interview Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia

specific steps taken in the last 2-3 years. At the same time, within this timeframe, the process faced struggles because of the current political context.⁶¹

From 2019 to 2020, a small-scale pilot project, supported by UNICEF and other donors, was conducted in two regions. This pilot was limited, focusing on the initial steps rather than implementing a full model. During this pilot phase, the WHO assessment instrument was translated and tested. It also provided initial insights into the challenges of transitioning to the new model. As mentioned above, in 2023, the Ministry of Health approved an Action plan for the implementation of the biopsychosocial model, signalling that the government prioritises this issue.⁶²

At the same time, the Public Defender's Office found that the country's social protection system is incompatible with the principles of the UNCRPD. The government still adheres to the outdated medical model of disability, while the Convention promotes the biopsychosocial model, which takes into account individual needs.⁶³

One of the main challenges in designing the system is balancing the role of medical diagnosis within the biopsychosocial approach. The assessment process needs to consider functional abilities, social barriers and environmental factors.⁶⁴ Although the legislation (Law on Medical and Social Examination) acknowledges the need for an "integrated assessment" that encompasses clinical, functional, social, psychological and occupational factors, in practice, the framework focuses heavily on medical diagnoses and physical, sensory or mental impairments. Consequently, the **system still largely overlooks the environmental and social barriers** that affect the everyday lives and participation of persons with disabilities.

In that sense, the disability assessment system has not yet moved away from the medical model and still largely disregards individual functioning and environmental factors that undermine the well-being of persons with disabilities (European Commission 2023)

The new framework, recognising other-than-medical barriers, is not yet in force and is facing delays. The reasons for those delays can be generally seen as two-fold:

- ▶ first, and probably most importantly, since the model was to be created in close cooperation with the international organisations and representatives of the persons with disabilities community, and the recent political environment can potentially impact the successful future implementation (see section 3.5.4 Social and political participation and protection against discrimination).
- ▶ Implementation of the new model requires dedicated resources, which are limited. While there is a strong willingness from both the Ministry and the partners to move this process forward, the obstacles seem to be overlooked, as they are grounded in broader issues faced by the Georgian government.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, implementation of the model, especially in the disability status determination process, remains crucial for furthering other rights of persons with disabilities. In this regard, all stakeholders were clear – the significance of this reform is key, and without it, the whole system will not be based on sufficiently strong and solid foundations. At the same time, in view of the challenges stemming from the political climate in Georgia, the timely implementation of the new model is in question.

61 Interview Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia

62 Interview Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia

63 Interview with the Public Defender's Office

64 Interview Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia

65 Interview Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia and focus group discussion with international organisations

3.3 Education

In the education sector, the lack of appropriate resources seems to be the key challenge. While the policy framework is designed and established so that no child is left behind, **implementing inclusive education in all Georgian schools across regions poses significant challenges** and should be seen as a work-in-progress. Here, it becomes especially apparent that the existing regulation related to the provision of quality inclusive education is already in place, but providing it in practice is troublesome or rather not well understood. Additionally, while the model of inclusive education is introduced in policy and in practice, with most of the children in general education schools, there is an incomplete understanding of the degree of implementation of this policy in everyday practice – that is, whether teachers in general education schools are appropriately equipped (both in terms of resources and knowledge) to provide quality education to all students with diversified SEN. For this reason, the section of the report that follows cannot provide a granular representation of the provision of quality special education.

It should be acknowledged and appreciated that Georgia strives to implement inclusive education built on a strong foundation. The commitment to ensuring equal educational opportunities for all children, including those with SEN, is evident, but since the process is still quite new, understandably, there is still work to be done in translating policy into practice.

It appears that two main issues are at the core of all the challenges identified, and the system as it is built now may struggle on its very basis. Both of those issues impact the education of children with disabilities from the very beginning and, as such, should be recognised as fundamental.

- ▶ One of the issues faced is that the data the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth has does not match the data held by the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs. This discrepancy exists because the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth's definition of children with SEN is not based on medical criteria. For the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs, a medical disability is still the determining factor, meaning a child with a health condition – for example, a heart problem – is classified as having a disability. However, from an educational perspective, such a child would not necessarily be considered as having SEN.
- ▶ Another issue stems from Georgia's legislation. Even if the education system informally recognises that a child has special needs, it cannot act on this information without parental consent. Special education assessments are conducted based on professional judgment rather than medical classifications.⁶⁶

These discrepancies can lead to both overlaps and underestimations in the number of children with disabilities and their support needs. Although it is understandable that not all children with disabilities require specialised educational approaches, the lack of legal linkage between disability status and educational support may result in an incomplete recognition of the scale of assistance required.

Despite various positive reforms, children with disabilities in Georgia still face many hurdles in accessing quality education. There is still a need to bridge the gap between policy and practice and ensure that quality inclusive education becomes a reality in all Georgian schools. Challenges such as outdated school infrastructure, limited transport options, and a shortage of supportive devices mean that simply showing up at school does not guarantee they receive the education they need (UNPRPD 2021). For example, while 11 765 children with disabilities were registered with the Social Service Agency in January 2021, only 1 244 children with disability certificates are recorded in the education system (ibid.), further pointing to the abovementioned discrepancies between datasets. The main cause of this could be that information about a disability is personal data, the disclosure of

66 Interview with the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth

which depends on the parent's wishes. If the parent does not declare this information to the school, the school will not be able to make the appropriate distinction.⁶⁷ Moreover, there are not enough data on children with disabilities who are left out of formal education, which makes it hard to monitor and prevent dropouts. Here, however, within the framework of the government's action, the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth is implementing a programme to determine which school-age children are not at school.⁶⁸

At the same time, as previously stated, the evolution of the Georgian education system to provide all-levels education to students with SEN has been very positive, and the barriers faced do not come from inadequate recognition of best practices but rather from the system's limitations.

As representatives of persons with disabilities have stated, the lack of a social model in Georgia severely limits access to education for children with disabilities. Despite the ongoing rhetoric emphasising the importance of socialisation, the educational environment has remained essentially unchanged since the Soviet era, with inadequate infrastructure and unequal opportunities. As a result, parents are often reassured about the benefits of social integration, even though the necessary support systems to facilitate this are lacking.

3.3.1 Lack of human resources

The development of inclusive education in Georgia has resulted in the increased demand for highly qualified staff, which the current system is unable to meet. This is because, in principle, each school that enrolls students with SEN is expected to respond to their particular needs, whatever these may be. A serious challenge is the professional qualification of teachers, not only those working with children with special needs but also teachers in general, including those teaching certain subjects. This remains a significant issue in the education system.⁶⁹ Also, in higher education, beyond issues related to physical accessibility, the preparedness and awareness of academic staff and administrators remain serious obstacles (Ministry of Education, Science and Youth, internal material). While there are special financial resources dedicated to these aspects, they are not considered adequate to make this profession sufficiently attractive (which results in shortages).⁷⁰ The Public Defender's Office (2022) also reported on the issue of inadequate remuneration for those roles.

The resource gap is particularly pronounced for students with sensory limitations, who require access to various specialists, including psychologists and assistants, to fully realise their right to education (ibid.). Furthermore, this gap is even more acute in remote and rural areas, since the necessary expertise is mostly concentrated in the larger cities. The issue of providing students with SEN with psychologists and assistants was also recognised as a special challenge in practice (ibid.).⁷¹

Addressing this shortage requires the introduction of educational programmes specifically designed to equip teachers with the competencies needed to become certified special education teachers, thereby guaranteeing that the diverse needs of students with disabilities are effectively supported. Such a public, high education programme is now in place (as discussed above), and an amendment was made to the Law of Georgia on Higher Education, based on which it became mandatory to complete a special teacher training module within the framework of integrated Bachelor's and Master's programmes for teacher training for primary school teachers and general education teachers, after which graduates of these programmes are granted the right to work as special teachers. However, it is a very new development and has not yet been able to fill the existing gap. To further support the

67 Stakeholder feedback

68 Stakeholder feedback

69 Interview with the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth

70 Interview with the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth

71 The sentiment shared also by the representatives of the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth during the interview

teachers, the new development of Resource Schools – centres, where teachers can receive knowledge and training on how to work with the SEN students (independent of the type of issues a child is having).⁷² Both initiatives showcase a very proactive approach to addressing the human resources challenges, though seeing its effects in practice will take time.

Representatives of the People with Disabilities community emphasised that the shortage of adequately trained specialists remains a major barrier to effective inclusive education. They stressed the necessity of having specialist teachers whose methods are tailored to specific disabilities, noting that current teachers have not received sufficient retraining. They also pointed out that excuses from kindergartens for not having specialists are unacceptable and must change. They highlighted that many services – such as those providing interpreters – have ceased and pointed to the significant challenges in training new teachers. In addition, they noted that professionals in this field are inadequately paid, which contributes to a shortage of qualified experts and results in low overall qualification levels among the specialists available. Also, internationally, various Master’s programmes are tailored to address specific disabilities and offer specialised education to prospective teachers to meet diverse needs. Georgia offers a single, general Master’s programme.⁷³

3.3.2 Lack of other resources

One of the major problems is the outdated or faulty infrastructure of schools, which mostly does not meet the standards of accessibility for persons with disabilities, especially the inaccessible internal infrastructure of schools, including bathrooms (Public Defender’s Office 2022). As was already stated, the new schools are built to be already adapted, but the older buildings still require rehabilitation. Further, the challenge remains to use adapted learning materials, support resources and textbooks in the teaching process, as well as to update/equip libraries with available textbooks and supporting materials (ibid.).

Here, the problem also persists with funding since the funding allocated for inclusive education is not sufficient to meet the complex needs of students with special educational needs, especially those with sensory impairments that require special aids (ibid.). It seems that the school funding system does not incentivise schools to allocate additional resources for children with special needs, which may include employment of the special education teacher, which appears to be the key challenge in providing resources overall.⁷⁴

Furthermore, in higher education institutions in Georgia, university infrastructures, spaces, websites, learning resources, and e-learning portals are not fully accessible to students with various types of disabilities (Public Defender’s Office 2024). Transport that is not adapted and limited access to the physical environments of educational institutions, particularly in higher education, force some individuals – especially women with disabilities – to discontinue their studies. This issue is especially problematic when there is an established attitude in families that a woman with a disability does not need education, while in the case of a boy with a disability, many more resources are put into overcoming barriers (Public Defender’s Office 2022). The lack of accessible transport is a critical barrier, as it directly impacts a student’s ability to attend classes and participate fully in academic life. Given that higher education institutions are only in bigger cities, such transport is a must. The lack of resources is further exacerbated by the fact that there is no unified institutional system to ensure there is access to higher education, leaving access largely dependent on individual university practices rather than on standardised regulations (Ministry of Education, Science and Youth (n.d)).

72 Interview with the Ministry of Education and Science

73 Focus group discussion with the Board of Georgian Disability Network

74 Interview with the Ministry of Education and Science

3.3.3 Centralisation of special education

With the introduction of the inclusive education model, a limited number of special schools remain. This means that, in principle, only a few schools that are wholly prepared to educate students with sensory and intellectual disabilities remain. This also means that those schools – which are intended and adapted specifically for those with sight or hearing impairments – are only located in cities, and even they have limited capacities.

As mentioned above, there are currently four special schools for students with intellectual disabilities and severe or multiple disorders, two schools for students with hearing impairments and deaf students, and one school for students with visual impairments and blind students. All the above-mentioned schools have to cater to the needs of those students with disabilities across Georgia and are highly centralised, which may limit participation. While inclusive education promotes teaching children with disabilities in general, mainstream education in Georgia, as already pointed out, is still not entirely possible or achievable due to a lack of resources to provide all schools with the necessary expertise and equipment. For this reason, the specialised schools would appear to be an appropriate alternative, as they are designed, established and already prepared to receive students with very particular needs. This point was raised in particular by the representatives of persons with disabilities:

Currently, Georgia lacks a comprehensive education plan for visually impaired individuals. Only one school with 100 years of experience offers specialised education for visually impaired students - School No. 202 is the only facility in the country that delivers an educational experience deemed more or less acceptable for visually impaired children. Additionally, there was once a single school for the deaf, but it has now been relocated to a temporary venue in the Gldani district of Tbilisi. There is also a need to establish a dedicated kindergarten for the deaf that could provide a more suitable and inclusive environment.⁷⁵

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the quality of the delivery of special education at the general education schools is still unknown, or is not centrally reported. With limited human and other resources, it may be the case that children with sensory or intellectual disabilities do not receive tailored services, as there is still a recognised professional gap to be filled. While there are initiatives in place to mitigate this issue, it will take time to fully achieve the inclusive education goal.

3.3.4 Vocational training

Since the introduction of inclusive vocational education in the system in 2013, the number of applicants and VET students with disabilities and special educational needs has been increasing. The institutions are required to adapt infrastructure in accordance with the authorisation standards, and in 5 vocational education institutions, the physical environment is tailored to the universal design principles. Furthermore, all authorised VET (public and private) institutions are obliged to have specialists dedicated to inclusive vocational education. There are currently 26 public vocational education institutions in Georgia.⁷⁶

In 2022, 75 institutions offered vocational education programmes, and 263 persons with disabilities/special educational needs enrolled in VET programmes, of whom there were 156 persons with disabilities/special educational needs enrolled from the basic education and full general education levels (Georgia's Ministry of Education, Science and Youth 2023, Public Defender's Office 2023). Overall, 269 persons with disabilities/special educational needs enrolled in VET programmes in 2023. This number included students with disabilities/special educational needs who completed their studies in the 2022-23 school year, 92 with basic education and 90 with

⁷⁵ Focus group discussion with the Board of the Georgian Disability Network

⁷⁶ Stakeholder feedback

complete general education were enrolled in vocational programmes (Georgia’s Ministry of Education, Science and Youth 2024). In 2024, more than 250 persons with a SEN/disability were enrolled in vocational education (Georgia’s Ministry of Education, Science and Youth (n.d.)).

As pointed out by persons with disabilities and their representatives during the fact-finding mission, vocational education for persons with disabilities is limited, or even non-existent, with little to no effect on real employment opportunities.

In vocational education, the level of student preparedness is key, and current plans suggest that vocational education should be accessible even for those with mental or intellectual impairments. However, for those with intellectual impairments, the only available option is a vocational college, which is located in Tbilisi. There are only a few offerings in other regions, which points to the regional disparities that exist, along with issues relating to transport and accommodation. These institutions often provide very short courses that only offer certificates rather than complete training. While the policies exist on paper to support this access to vocational training, implementation falls short in practice.

These findings are further confirmed by the limited number of those receiving this type of education, when the scale of potential participation is taken into consideration (see above). Furthermore, the lack of a comprehensive general education framework makes it especially challenging to include students with disabilities in these programmes and to provide them with a range of career options in high-demand fields.

3.3.5 Systemic limitations and regional disparities

Both the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth and representatives of persons with disabilities recognise that regional disparities remain a significant challenge. In rural and remote areas, the shortage of resources makes it difficult to fully meet children’s educational needs.

Additionally, specialised and tailored educational services are mainly available in cities,⁷⁷ which creates further problems related to transport and accommodation – issues that are especially problematic for higher education students. Transport options are very limited and not reimbursed, and the previous national education system struggled to allocate resources effectively for higher education students and their accommodation (lodgings). Although some resources were available to the Ministry, systemic issues prevented them from reaching all potential beneficiaries, leading to ad hoc solutions in individual cases. However, the new funding scheme aims to address these systemic limitations, although it is still too early to assess its overall impact.⁷⁸

The challenges experienced by persons with disabilities in education were summarised by the Public Defender’s Office representative, who also pointed out how issues in one area of life impact on others.

Employment remains another major challenge. Although government programmes exist to promote the employment of persons with disabilities, these individuals often struggle to compete with other candidates. Many barely make it through school, even fewer reach university and, for those who do graduate from university, securing a job remains highly unlikely. There is therefore a vicious cycle – without access to quality education, employment opportunities remain limited, exacerbating poverty.⁷⁹

77 Interview with the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth

78 Interview with the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth

79 Interview with Public Defender’s Office

3.4 Employment

One of the most critical aspects of inclusion and integration for persons with disabilities is employment; yet this issue remains insufficiently addressed.⁸⁰ Employment can be placed at the top of the list of problematic issues in Georgia, and the employment of persons with disabilities is an even more significant challenge. This is recognised in both the reports (Chagelishvili 2021, Public Defender's Office 2022a) and, more importantly, by the stakeholders interviewed during the fact-finding mission. The **policies and practices do not yet fully support the participation of persons with disabilities in the open labour market**, which is a requirement of Article 15.2 of the ESC. It is especially important that Article 15.2 focuses not on sheltered workplaces but on the equal participation of persons with disabilities – a goal that, to date, has not been achieved.

Although several issues can be highlighted as key in hindering this equal participation, the two key issues would appear to be:

- ▶ a lack of awareness of prospective employers of the value of employees with disabilities (which can be broadly recognised as stigma), and
- ▶ transferring a large share of the responsibility to the persons with disabilities themselves (with a focus on their skills development rather than supported employment, e.g. through employers' incentives), which limits the opportunities for people with more complex or severe disabilities (including intellectual).

It is noteworthy that the realisation of labour rights of persons with disabilities not only relates to employment; the State also facilitates the self-employment of persons with disabilities by improving their access to finance (Chagelishvili 2021), a factor that may significantly impact the issue.

In principle, it is still a challenge to realise the right to work of persons with disabilities, to support their competitiveness and to employ them in the open labour market. (Public Defender's Office 2023). In 2022, the Public Defender's Office conducted a study on the right to work and employment for persons with disabilities of working age in Georgia. The report examined both international and national legal frameworks governing labour and employment, reviewed available state employment programmes and initiatives for persons with disabilities, and surveyed their experiences in the job market (Public Defender's Office 2022a). The study's findings suggest that, since the previous monitoring exercise, carried out in 2017, little progress has been made in implementing state programmes to promote the employment of persons with disabilities. Most recommendations from the 2017 report remain unimplemented, and the actions taken by the state and the private sector have been unsystematic and temporary (ibid.).

The employment rate of persons with disabilities remains very low. Through the State Employment Promotion Agency's dedicated programme, 120 vacancies were found for persons with disabilities, and only 19 people were employed (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023). The 2014 census indicated that of the 96 102 persons with disabilities aged 15 and older in Georgia, only 4.8% – 4 571 people were employed (contracted) in 2014. The low effectiveness of the state employment programmes has also been observed in more recent years, with statistics structured as such as the following: in 2017 – 103 persons with disabilities were employed; in 2018 – 99, in 2019 – 98, in 2020 – 37, in 2021 – 115. It is clear that this number – 452 people over five years, apart from being very low, is not growing (ibid.).

80 Interview Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs

As the persons with disabilities and their representatives surveyed summarised:

The State Employment Promotion Agency has been unable to alleviate the current challenges. Despite the Agency requesting recommendations from representatives of persons with disabilities for an Action Plan aimed at supporting the employment of persons with disabilities that they were preparing, the proposed content was found to be so fundamentally flawed that, in the view of those consulted, no amendments appear capable of remedying the situation. It is difficult to find any instance of employment for people with mental or intellectual impairments and, while businesses technically have the capacity to employ persons with disabilities, they generally lack both the preparedness and the willingness to do so. The subsidy programmes offered to businesses are considered unrealistic. There is a pressing need for better incentives, such as quotas or tax reductions, to encourage employers to hire qualified persons with disabilities. Employers often fail to recognise the advantages of employing these individuals and, for most persons with disabilities, the free market approach has proven ineffective in finding employment. For example, persons who are deaf are frequently only assigned cleaning jobs as janitors despite their potential to contribute in many more diverse roles, especially with new technologies (i.e. roles that only appear to be available in theory but not in practice).

3.4.1 Employee side

As indicated in previous sections, the State Employment Promotion Agency can only promote employment by raising the capacities of potential employees, matching them with employers, or offering incentives. However, as the programme currently stands, the bulk of the responsibility for finding employment falls on persons with disabilities themselves, with the main focus being on building their capacities. This is done primarily by offering vocational training options. To ensure lifelong learning opportunities and to prepare the workforce to meet the labour market's demands, in a short period of time, since 2019, short-term vocational training and retraining programmes, including Agency programmes, have become part of formal education. These programmes are accessible to everyone, including persons with disabilities and with SEN. Upon the completion of retraining and training programmes, a state-recognised certificate is issued.⁸¹ However, these programmes last only a few months, have a limited scope, and conclude with a certificate rather than a more useful qualification, such as a professional accreditation. Also, as was pointed out in an interview with the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth and the Public Defender's Office, proper education does not guarantee employment, and persons with disabilities struggle to find employment even if they possess the necessary qualifications. There is a growing concern that as a new, more educated generation of persons with disabilities emerges, the job market will remain unprepared to meet their employment needs. Parents of those people frequently point out that while educational opportunities for persons with disabilities have improved, there has not been a corresponding expansion in employment opportunities. If individuals are provided with education, they must also be offered employment opportunities that match their qualifications and aspirations, something that is not yet happening.⁸²

Additionally, the focus of the current approach is on working with persons with disabilities through consultants who receive a general training to support such persons.⁸³ However, there is a high turnover of consultants⁸⁴ and the Action Plan has shortcomings; it is unclear whether consultants can provide tailored and appropriate support for different types of disabilities. The emphasis remains on the development of persons with disabilities rather than on addressing the overall labour market or more extensively engaging employers. The Agency also noted that sometimes there is the lack of willingness among persons with disabilities themselves to reach out for support or to seek employ-

81 Stakeholder feedback

82 Interview Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs

83 Interview with State Employment Promotion Agency

84 Interview with State Employment Promotion Agency

ment⁸⁵, which, while possibly accurate, does not fully explain the low employment numbers. Building skills alone cannot guarantee employment unless there are additional initiatives or the broader picture is taken into account. While it is understandable that the Agency has its limitations due to its structure and the scope of its responsibilities and influence, it appears that the problem extends beyond the capacities and skills of persons with disabilities and is linked to shortcomings in societal perception. In this case, as in others previously discussed, the issue is not the absence of policies but rather their adequacy and implementation.

3.4.2 Employer side

Currently, employers have access to several incentives provided through the programme, although stigma and misunderstanding about hiring persons with disabilities continue to outweigh these benefits.

First, there are no widespread initiatives providing information aimed at educating prospective employers about the advantages of hiring persons with disabilities, which might help to counteract existing prejudices. Additionally, employment subsidies are temporary and tied to a training programme (internship) that requires employers to commit to employing an individual for a fixed period without allowing them the option to withdraw if they find the employee unsuitable for whatever reason. One focus group participant noted that many employers are reluctant to make such a commitment. Furthermore, the subsidies are viewed by persons with disabilities as insufficiently attractive.⁸⁶

Another significant issue is the vague definition of reasonable accommodation. Without clear guidelines, employers are uncertain about what constitutes adequate accommodations. This discourages them from hiring persons with disabilities due to the potential burden of making extensive changes to their working environments. Moreover, no employer has yet taken advantage of the opportunity to subsidise reasonable accommodations through the Agency. It remains unclear whether this is due to a lack of awareness about the possibility or because the required adjustments are too substantial, particularly in cases where the workplace is not owned by the employer.

It must be recognised that the Agency is relatively new, having only operated since 2020 and, while it cannot itself directly provide employment, its role is to support and connect job seekers with employers, as well as to enhance the skills of those who wish to work. These factors pose some inherent limitations on its impact.

At the same time, there appears to be some hesitation among employers to employ persons with disabilities, since stakeholders pointed out the gap between the level of education and employment opportunities, as discussed before. It would appear that the skills and knowledge of persons with disabilities do not translate into successful jobs that are aligned with their capacities.

Nevertheless, even in those instances, employment opportunities are more accessible for individuals with less complex or less severe disabilities. For those with more complex or intellectual disabilities, however, options are extremely limited and often unattainable. Although Article 15.2 ESC emphasises equal participation in the labour market, the only practical mechanism currently available to support would be social enterprises, of which there are few. As a result, this employment model – along with the specific needs of people with intellectual disabilities – appears to be currently systemically overlooked.

3.5 Social integration and participation

This section focuses on the challenges of supporting independent living for persons with disabilities, since achieving social integration depends on effectively promoting independence. With persistent issues in this area, discussion about other dimensions of social integration remains limited.

There are essentially two challenges: one relating to the social benefits and services system, and the other related to institutionalisation.

⁸⁵ Interview with State Employment Promotion Agency

⁸⁶ Focus group discussion with the Board of Georgian Disability Network

3.5.1 Social package

In April 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities issued concluding observations assessing the situation of persons with disabilities in Georgia.⁸⁷ During their visit, the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities identified significant shortcomings in Georgia's social protection system, particularly regarding access to social benefits, i.e. the social package. The most pressing concerns included discrepancies between the estimated number of persons with disabilities and those receiving financial support, along with the overall inadequacy of the benefits provided. The Rapporteur found that the system for identifying socially vulnerable families and assigning points has serious flaws, resulting in many persons with disabilities living in poverty and not receiving minimum subsistence benefits.

It is likely that a significant number of persons with disabilities remain excluded from the social protection system. As of October 2023, only 127 000 persons with disabilities – just 3.4% of the country's population – were receiving social benefits.

However, global indicators suggest that persons with disabilities should account for between 11-18% of the population, meaning that at least two-thirds of persons with disabilities in Georgia are not covered by the social package.⁸⁸ These statistical discrepancies are acknowledged by the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs. However, it is not known whether the introduction of the biopsychosocial model would change this situation.⁸⁹ The issue could be that, in recent years, there has been a sustained rise in the number of old-age pension recipients and this increase has been more intense than the increase in those receiving disability-related social packages, since persons with disabilities may opt to receive old-age pension instead. Additionally, since 2007, those with low-to-moderate levels of disability diagnosed with common disorders/diseases are not allocated a pension and, as such, are not included in the database.⁹⁰ This is further coupled with the inadequacy of financial assistance. Although the level of social benefits for persons with disabilities has steadily increased, the support remains insufficient. As of 2023, 65% of recipients – over 82 000 people – received financial assistance that is below the minimum subsistence level. Given the limited employment opportunities and other sources of income, these low sums place persons with disabilities at the risk of extreme socio-economic vulnerability.⁹¹

This was the opinion of the Public Defender's Office representative, who shared this sentiment during the meeting.

The level of support provided to persons with disabilities does not match that received by beneficiaries of age-based pensions. Although there has been an increase in assistance, it remains insufficient and fails to adequately address their needs. The limited financial support and the lack of diverse assistance programmes leave many persons with disabilities socially unprotected or at the risk of becoming so. A significant proportion of persons with disabilities live below the poverty line. The current level of financial aid does not substantially improve their quality of life, particularly for children with disabilities. Families receiving social assistance often use the funds for general household needs rather than for the family member with a disability (especially, a child), resulting in a further worsening of their situation. The overall socioeconomic situation in the country is challenging, with a significant portion of the general population living in poverty. Given this context, persons with disabilities are even more disadvantaged. The social protection system needs to be modernised and fails to effectively uphold the rights of persons with disabilities.⁹²

87 <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/sotsialuri-politika-2023-tslis-shefaseba>

88 <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/sotsialuri-politika-2023-tslis-shefaseba>

89 Interview with the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs

90 Stakeholder feedback

91 <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/sotsialuri-politika-2023-tslis-shefaseba>

92 Interview with Public Defender's Office

As previously pointed out, the situation is especially serious for families with children with disabilities, since the system does not recognise their diverse needs and provides the same financial benefits for all forms of disability. The UNICEF report (2023) found that:

“The current system of disability assessment and determination in Georgia does not take into consideration the structure or level of support, or the costs required for different groups of children [with a disability]; every child receives the same disability status, ‘child with a disability’, which is linked to a uniform cash transfer for children. This leads to a very large number of children with disabilities not being adequately registered or covered. The relative uniformity of the State support system does not address the different needs of children as a similar package of cash allowance and rehabilitation programmes is provided for all disability groups irrespective of higher or lower support needs.” (p. 11)

Overall, it can be concluded that, even with the indexation of the social package and its rising amount, it is still not enough to provide the person or the family with adequate resources, and these persons face the real possibility of becoming poor. This is compounded by the fact that the benefits cannot be cumulated, and it forces the person to make a decision as to which of the still-low benefits they wish to receive. In view of the very limited employment of persons with disabilities, having the status of a person with disability puts them under significant financial strain, bordering on a breach of universal social protection provisions.

3.5.2 Social services

Although Georgia is making continuous progress in expanding social services for persons with disabilities, challenges remain, particularly in terms of accessibility, quality and coverage. Persons with disabilities interviewed for this report noted that services are often not easily accessible, with the issue being especially serious in remote areas, highlighting the issue of regional disparities as an additional vulnerability factor.

On the other hand, one positive development is the new **personal assistance** programme and supported living arrangements.

The Personal Assistance programme was launched in 2024 and is currently being implemented by NGOs registered at the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs (as are the other service providers). The programme is specifically designed for adults with severe and profound disabilities. To access the service, individuals must undergo a standardised assessment process. If the results indicate that they qualify, they are issued a government-funded voucher that allows them to enrol in the programme. The State Care Agency is responsible for registering service providers, and beneficiaries have the freedom to choose among available providers – although, in some regions, options remain limited.

The programme includes two types of vouchers:

- ▶ specialised personal assistance
- ▶ regular personal assistance.

The type of voucher provided depends on the severity of the individual’s condition and their specific needs. The level of support, including the number of service hours and the nature of the assistance, is determined by means of the assessment process.

Between January and August 2024, the number of beneficiaries of those services was as follows:
Personal Assistant Service Provision Sub-Program – **305 beneficiaries**
Home Care Service Provision Sub-Program – **423 beneficiaries**.⁹³

93 See Annex 2.

The activities of a personal assistant may include:

- ▶ accompanying the individual to various public places (e.g. work, bank, shopping, walks, etc.)
- ▶ assisting with household chores (e.g. preparing food, cleaning, etc.)
- ▶ performing personal tasks (e.g. dressing, eating, etc.)
- ▶ reading books/newspapers, moving objects, etc.

In order to qualify as service providers, NGOs must confirm that personal assistants have completed specialised training based on Ministry-approved requirements. Municipalities play a role in identifying local service providers that can deliver assistance; however, final registration and approval remain under the authority of the Ministry. This means that according to the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Ministerial Order on the Standards for Managing Personal Assistance Services for Persons with Disabilities, a family member cannot be a personal assistant.

The Order of the Minister of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs No.01-13/N, of 18 February 2022, the **Standard for Management of Personal Assistance Services for Persons with Disabilities** defines the provision of the assistance services.

The standard is developed based on Article 20 of the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and takes into account the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It serves to ensure the right of persons with disabilities to live independently and participate in community life.

The standard defines the assistance as follows:

Personal Assistance Service: A service that provides appropriate support to a person with a disability to improve their quality of independent living and increase their control over their own life, as well as to assist them in education, employment, accessing public services, or carrying out daily activities. The standard for personal assistance services does not cover specialised services and support for individuals in the education system. That type of personal assistance is regulated by the regulations of the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth. However, linking to such services and facilitating access to services can be part of personal assistance.⁹⁴

Persons with disabilities have the right to choose their own personal assistant. Currently, personal assistance services are available in only 10 municipalities, with an additional 15 expected to offer them by the end of 2025.⁹⁵

Another positive development is the **supported living programme**, which provides family-type homes intended to promote independent living for persons with disabilities. Each home houses up to five people.

Supported living homes have been in place for four to five years, and some of the beneficiaries have successfully acquired employment, earning their income while continuing to receive state-provided housing. In many cases, families are unwilling or unable to support their relatives, which makes these homes an important alternative. Placement in these homes is determined by means of an assessment by social workers and a multidisciplinary team, which evaluates whether an individual has the potential for independent living.⁹⁶

On the other hand, a representative from the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs acknowledged the ongoing challenges in relation to service quality, acknowledging the need for a state-level quality assurance system. While standards and registration systems exist, there is currently no continuous monitoring mechanism to

94 <https://www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/5277562?publication=0>

95 Interviews with the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs and State Care Agency

96 Interview with the State Care Agency

assess service quality. It was also noted by the State Care Agency that a unified system for monitoring disability services is currently lacking. Although monitoring is conducted for people receiving state support, it is limited to caregivers and their obligations rather than a comprehensive evaluation of all services provided. In addition, according to the Agency, caregivers are registered in a special database, and social workers are required by law to monitor them every six months. This includes assessing the caregiver's responsibilities and visiting the beneficiaries to evaluate their living conditions, needs and challenges. However, gaps remain in ensuring consistent service provision and assessment of the needs of those people.⁹⁷

Also, one of the major issues identified by both the persons with disabilities and the Agency is the unequal availability of services across municipalities. Many areas lack essential services altogether. Additionally, there is a serious shortage of professionally qualified staff. Some programmes/services have limits and waiting lists. There is insufficient information about the existence of programmes and the possibility of participating in them, so many children and persons with disabilities who are targeted face barriers to participating in them.⁹⁸

3.5.3 Deinstitutionalisation

In addition to the obvious strain caused by the lack of employment opportunities and the low level of the social package, a further issue remains; it concerns the institutions for persons with disabilities.

The process of deinstitutionalisation, aimed at transitioning persons with disabilities from large institutions to small-group homes that provide a family-like environment, should generally be viewed as a positive development.

As stated by the representative of the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs, as part of this process, all large boarding homes for children with disabilities have been closed. These have been replaced by family-style homes and long-term care services for children with complex medical needs. In 2023, a specialised long-term care service was introduced, housing 12 children who require intensive medical care (such as artificial ventilation). Many of these children had been abandoned in maternity hospitals. **The last boarding home for children in Tbilisi, which previously housed 56 children, was officially closed.**

For adults, progress has been slower but is ongoing. In 2023, a long-term deinstitutionalisation project that had been in development for 3–4 years resulted in the closure of a large boarding home. However, two boarding homes remain:

- ▶ one in Dusheti, which currently accommodates 45 people and is described as a relatively small institution; and
- ▶ one in Bediani, which serves beneficiaries with mental health conditions.

To improve living conditions, the government is constructing smaller residential homes. Although not a full deinstitutionalisation, these new settings generally aim to provide a more home-like environment.

Additionally, there is at least one more large institution operating outside the Ministry's management. Some private and religious institutions also continue to house persons with disabilities – a situation which presents challenges in relation to proper oversight.⁹⁹

However, deficiencies have been identified in the implementation of deinstitutionalisation programmes. Under the State Programme on Social Rehabilitation and Child Care, the provision of alternative housing for individuals aged 18 and older with mental health disorders has not been fully aligned with deinstitutionalisation principles. Specifically, while the Dusheti small-group homes

97 Interview with the State Care Agency

98 Stakeholder feedback

99 Interviews with the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health

adhere more closely to the intended deinstitutionalisation policy, the Senaki alternative housing facilities do not adequately support the independent living of beneficiaries, failing to ensure the conditions necessary for their full social integration (Public Defender's Office 2024).

Furthermore, the implementation of the 2023-2030 Strategy for Independent Living and the Deinstitutionalisation of Persons with Disabilities and the 2023-2025 Action Plan should be acknowledged as steps in the right direction. However, during the reporting period, the Public Defender's Office found that practical cases that did not align with the fundamental principles of deinstitutionalisation (Public Defender's Office 2024) had emerged.

As the Public Defender's Office representative pointed out during the fact-finding mission:

Many families living in poverty struggle to provide adequate education for their children with disabilities. As a result, some families resort to placing their children in state institutions, hoping they will receive better care. While large-scale children's homes have been phased out and replaced with foster care and family-type homes, concerns remain about mistreatment in some of these settings. However, the situation is different for adults with disabilities. Large, outdated institutions for adults are still operational, and they are plagued by serious issues, including human rights violations and violence – both by caregivers and among the residents themselves. Due to socioeconomic hardships, many adults with disabilities have no alternatives. Previously, they were placed in mental hospitals, then transferred to shelters, and later moved to boarding homes. The Public Defender is preparing recommendations to transition adults with disabilities into community-based, family-type living arrangements, similar to the approach taken with children. However, transitioning individuals from large institutions to smaller, community-based homes is a costly process. Beyond the financial constraints, some individuals have spent so long in institutional settings that they have lost their ability to live independently. In some cases, communication with them is nearly impossible. Even if funding were available, these individuals would require significant support to reintegrate into society. A similar deinstitutionalisation process is ongoing for mental health hospitals, with a pilot project in Western Georgia introducing small community-based homes for up to 12 residents. However, these homes remain heavily controlled, resembling prisons, despite offering better living conditions, as they are still guarded, and the separation into individual homes is more symbolic than practical.¹⁰⁰

In the opinion of the Public Defender's Office, there is still significant work to be done to provide persons with disabilities with adequate protection of their rights. Here, as observed elsewhere in this report, the issue is more about practices than the policies themselves.

It also appears that the issue is still not fully resolved, especially for people with mental health conditions and intellectual disabilities, in the opinion of the Public Defender's Office representative. In 2023, the Special Rapporteur of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities found that a sum of over 49 million GEL was allocated to mental health services. However, more than 48% of this funding was still directed to inpatient care, while psychosocial rehabilitation services accounted for just 0.27% of the total programme budget. Additionally, the **majority of inpatient service providers (8 out of 10) continue to operate as large-scale or specialised institutions.**¹⁰¹

3.5.4 Social and political participation and protection against discrimination

There are still significant efforts required to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. The meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and their organisations in decision-making processes at various levels is among the challenges to be faced. Identifying and effectively responding to abuse

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Public Defender's Office

¹⁰¹ <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/sotsialuri-politika-2023-tslis-shefaseba>

and violence against persons with disabilities remain among the challenges related to protecting the rights of persons with disabilities (Public Defender's Office 2023).

In terms of protection, in 2022, the Public Defender examined 122 cases of alleged discrimination. The grounds for these cases were broken down as follows: sex/gender (17%), dissent (16%), nationality/citizenship (8%) disability (7%), political opinion (6%), religion (5%) and age and sexual orientation and gender identity (each 4%) (Public Defender's Office 2023a).

Currently, the lack of inclusive platforms and formal mechanisms prevents persons with disabilities from actively contributing to decision-making processes that directly affect their lives. Existing councils and advisory bodies, both at the central and municipal levels, are often perceived as inactive, non-transparent, or ineffective. Recent political developments have weakened cooperation between the government and organisations representing persons with disabilities, making it even harder to advocate for necessary reforms.

The involvement of the disability community and disability organisations in the policy-making process and the development of new systemic reforms by the State is very important. This has been pointed out to the government in numerous international documents and is required by the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Unified Coordinating Council for Measures Aimed at Implementing the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disability under the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs and the Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories has been an effective mechanism for this purpose. The Council brings together government agencies, non-governmental, donor and international organisations, the disability community (persons with disabilities, and/or their representatives: organisations of persons with disabilities, parents, others), professional associations, representatives of higher education institutions and other interested parties. The Council consists of 6 committees. Unfortunately, these committees have not met for some time due to the current political situation in the country, and their work is unlikely to resume in the near future. The inactivity of these committees has significantly hindered progress on key issues, especially the implementation of the biopsychosocial model and the improvement of social services. The strained relationship between the authorities and organisations representing persons with disabilities raises doubts that these issues can be resolved in the near future.

In addition, the Inter-Agency Committee for the Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of the Georgian Government, Consultative Council (Article 33 (3) of the Convention) did not hold a session in 2024; there was only one working group meeting held. While this is an implementation mechanism, the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs has taken on a more substantive function.¹⁰²

Some critical voices remain about the representation offered by Municipal Disability Councils – one of the main avenues that should allow persons with disabilities to make a political impact. The United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021 study found that council sessions had not been held regularly, in accordance with their statutes. The situation worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic when persons with disabilities faced additional challenges in having their basic needs met and required urgent participation in decision-making. Despite this, sessions were conducted in only 11 out of 57 municipalities, and no measures were taken to hold the sessions remotely. While the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities mandates that municipalities develop annual disability rights action plans, many of these were created without meaningful participation from persons with disabilities. In some municipalities, council membership is restricted to municipal civil servants, with persons with disabilities and civil society representatives participating only as guests. Additionally, the selection criteria for council membership are unclear (UNPRPD 2021). The ineffective work of municipal councils is also mentioned in the 2023 Parliamentary Report of the Public Defender: the study of the activities of councils showed that, out of 64 municipalities, sessions

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were held in only 36, and the number of meetings held in practice ranged from one to two sessions (half the expected number) (Public Defender's Office 2023).

Both persons with disabilities and the representatives of the Independent Living Centres who participated in meetings echoed this sentiment during the fact-finding mission:

Effectively, the concept of the Municipal Disability Councils was “dead on arrival”, with no meetings taking place and no tangible progress made. Its overall competence remains insufficient, although there are some occasional consultations with Independent Living Centres in specific cases. Members' qualifications need to be improved and transparent, and council meetings either fail to occur or, when they do take place, meeting minutes are not provided in a timely manner. Although representatives from Independent Living Centres also serve on these local-level councils and raise issues relevant to persons with disabilities, the centres themselves have minimal influence on the council decisions.¹⁰³

3.6 Cross-cutting issues

Following the structure of the previous sections, some cross-cutting issues will be explored in this chapter. These are, however, limited to the aforementioned topics of accessibility and intersectionality, including gender and other dimensions.

3.6.1 Accessibility

Despite obligations under national and international legislation, ensuring an accessible and inclusive environment for persons with disabilities remains a significant challenge. In practice, persons with disabilities continue to encounter physical barriers in nearly all aspects of public life, including penitentiary institutions. National accessibility standards are not effectively enforced, leading to persistent obstacles in accessing buildings, transport and essential services. (European Commission 2023, p. 40). Furthermore, there is no strategy, action plan, or other type of requirement to provide accessible information and communication, and the focus remains on the physical environment.¹⁰⁴

Accessibility efforts primarily focus on mobility impairments, with limited consideration for other disabilities. For example, 30 of the administrative buildings of the Ministry of Internal Affairs are accessible for people with mobility impairments. Similarly, within the Prosecutor's Office, 16 buildings are adapted for mobility impairments, while only 9 buildings accommodate individuals with sensory impairments (Public Defender's Office 2022). For children with SEN, ensuring universally designed school environments still remains a challenge. While some schools meet basic accessibility standards, they do not fully comply with the principles of an inclusive environment (Public Defender's Office 2023). Similarly, physical access to healthcare facilities remains an issue. In penitentiary institutions, accessibility issues are particularly severe. One case involved a wheelchair user who was unable to visit his son in prison because the facility did not have the necessary adaptations. Instead of being provided with appropriate accommodations, he was offered degrading and unsafe assistance. In response, the Public Defender submitted an Amicus Curiae brief to the Tbilisi City Court regarding this case (ibid.).

The accessibility issue was also raised by the Public Defender's Office representative during the interview:

Accessibility is another major issue. Public transport, especially in rural regions, is often not adapted to the needs of persons with disabilities, making it difficult for them to access schools and other essential services.¹⁰⁵

103 Focus group discussions with the Coalition for Independent Living CSO and Board of Georgian Disability Network

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And by persons with disabilities and their representatives:

Physical accessibility remains a major challenge, particularly for wheelchair users travelling from rural areas to Tbilisi. The lack of accessible infrastructure and services in both regional and urban settings continues to limit the mobility and independence of individuals with disabilities.¹⁰⁶

3.6.2 Gender dimension

Overall, the challenges that exist for persons with disabilities are essentially **doubled for women with disabilities**, according to both the monitoring institutions and the individuals with disabilities themselves. This is especially evident given the data discussed earlier, which show that in both higher and vocational education, the representation of women is very limited, even given the already scarce participation of persons with disabilities in the sector (which, to a degree, can be related to the professional path bias).

Access to health services remains a significant challenge for women and girls with disabilities. Monitoring conducted by the Public Defender's Office in 2019 revealed that, in spite of the State's obligations towards the protection of women's rights, the protection of sexual and reproductive health rights of women with mental health problems at psychiatric and state care institutions constitutes one of the most important and, so far unsolved, challenges (Public Defender's Office 2020). This was also confirmed by the Office representative during the meeting.¹⁰⁷

For example, deaf and hard-of-hearing women and girls face serious communication barriers when seeking medical care. To address this, the State Programme for Social Rehabilitation and Child Care 2021, approved by Resolution #825, introduced the provision of 10 sign language interpreters across at least eight regions of Georgia. Additionally, in the Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions, interpreters fluent in Azerbaijani and Armenian are available to assist minorities. While this initiative has demonstrated some progress, these services remain inaccessible in many areas (Public Defender's Office 2022).

Besides healthcare, women with disabilities face exclusion from policy- and decision-making at the local level. In addition to the lack of State programmes and initiatives, low participation is also influenced by environmental inaccessibility and persistent societal stigma, which discourage women with disabilities from engaging in public life (ibid.). A 2022 study by the Public Defender's Office pointed to systemic and practical shortcomings in enforcing international obligations. The adoption of the Law on Rights of Persons with Disabilities was a positive development in that it introduced State obligations to promote gender equality for women and girls with disabilities. While this recognition is important, the law remains largely declarative (ibid.). The same study found that, at the policy level, the protection of women and girls with disabilities does not appear to be a state priority. Although some regulations and programmes have been introduced, they do not effectively address gender-specific needs, which often differ from those of men with disabilities. A major barrier that persists is the absence of segregated statistical data, which prevents a clear understanding of the challenges faced by women and girls with disabilities (ibid.).

The following are the main findings of the Public Defender's Office's study.

- ▶ The physical inaccessibility of police stations, courts, legal aid services and notary offices prevents women with disabilities from fully participating in justice processes. Investigative agencies often conduct interviews in alternative locations (e.g., at home) due to accessibility barriers.

¹⁰⁶ Focus group discussion with Board of Georgian Disability Network

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Public Defender's Office

- ▶ Justice professionals often doubt the credibility of testimony from women with mental health or intellectual disabilities, discouraging them from seeking justice. In addition, the professionals in question often hold stereotypical and negative attitudes towards women with disabilities, discouraging them from reporting violence.
- ▶ Women with disabilities lack information about their rights and the available protection mechanisms.
- ▶ Deaf and hard-of-hearing women face additional challenges due to a lack of sign language translation services.
- ▶ Sexual violence investigations involving women with disabilities are particularly problematic, especially for those with mental health conditions.
- ▶ Investigators lack training on how to communicate with and gather evidence from women with disabilities.
- ▶ Forensic examinations in cases of violence often result in secondary victimisation.
- ▶ Discriminatory practices exist in sexual violence investigations, with mandatory psychiatric evaluations for victims with disabilities, unlike for other investigations.
- ▶ Women with disabilities struggle to raise children independently due to inadequate support services. The State often discriminates against women with mental health conditions, using their diagnosis as grounds to restrict parental rights. LGBTI women with mental health conditions face additional barriers in parenting. The lack of family support services makes independent parenting difficult.
- ▶ Women with disabilities living in public care institutions face greater restrictions on their parental rights. Economic dependence and a lack of income further prevent them from exercising their right to family life.
- ▶ Paternalistic attitudes limit the ability of women with disabilities to socialise, form relationships and lead independent lives.
- ▶ The Ministry of Education, Science and Youth does not collect gender-specific data or ensure adequate inclusive education for students with disabilities (Public Defender's Office 2022).

3.6.3 Other dimensions

As was already mentioned, there are significant regional disparities in accessing all types of services, ranging from education through special services to healthcare. This aspect is also coupled with the issue of ethnic/national minorities, who experience even more serious limitations.

The issue was raised universally by representatives of institutions and by representatives of persons with disabilities alike, which suggests that the issue is well recognised by policymakers and by beneficiaries themselves. As the focus group participants summarised:

Tbilisi and regions differ very much in terms of problems encountered, and the regions are doing way worse.¹⁰⁸

Given the challenges faced by the municipal councils and the fact that services are generally provided by small NGOs, significant limitations and disparities still persist.

Furthermore, there are also recognised challenges for those who are both persons with disabilities and belong to an ethnic/national – or, in this case, a language – minority. As a representative of the Public Defender's Office pointed out:

¹⁰⁸ Focus group discussion with the Board of the Georgian Disability Network

ethnic minorities with disabilities face additional barriers, particularly due to language differences. This results, for example, in many preferring to seek medical treatment in neighbouring countries, such as Armenia or Azerbaijan, rather than in Georgia because of the language barrier. While ethnic minorities do not face distinct disability-related issues beyond language challenges, this remains a significant obstacle to accessing essential services.

The example of an initiative providing translators for women in the healthcare setting is commendable; it still showcases the scale of the problem and the lack of adequate resources dedicated to the issue.

The question of **language inclusion** also seems to be present in educational settings, yet it was not addressed in a systematic manner in the sources taken into consideration for this report. However, bearing in mind that, by default, education is conducted in Georgian, and the current model of inclusive education presumes that there will be specialists in every school with SEN, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that there are also challenges finding specialists speaking the language of a particular child with a disability (given the already acknowledged problems relating to the lack of teachers and specialists).

Lastly, one of the findings is that **people and children with intellectual or mental disabilities** face even more significant obstacles. This was the issue raised especially by the Public Defender's Office, but also by a representative of persons with disabilities. The main challenge identified is the limitation of services available to this group and the overall lack of interest in these persons, as observed by the lack of dedicated programmes or initiatives. This issue also compounds the aforementioned struggles, severely impacting the enjoyment of rights for this group:

The inadequate social protection system extends to other fundamental rights, such as healthcare. For instance, children with an autism spectrum disorder or Down's syndrome have access to very limited programmes, usually only available in major cities. In rural areas, these services are virtually non-existent, forcing families to pay for private care out of pocket. Also, there are no programmes for individuals with autism spectrum disorder once they turn 18, leaving them without the necessary supports in adulthood.¹⁰⁹

It is nearly impossible to find employment for people with mental or intellectual disabilities. Many must rely on day centres, which frequently lack specialist support; for example, a 21-year-old autistic person has no choice but to remain at home due to the limited services available.¹¹⁰

3.6.4 Support of international donors and organisations

As already highlighted in this report, international organisations remain key in advancing the rights of persons with disabilities in Georgia, particularly within the timeframe considered. However, the current political climate has impacted cooperation between the government (both at local and central levels) and international organisations. The existence of current services may be at risk, and the implementation of new services and system changes may be affected, creating uncertainty about the future. While these organisations continue to provide services, projects, and programmes, the political environment is not supportive of their work. At the same time, national administrative bodies interviewed expressed their appreciation for the ongoing support of international organisations. This positive recognition seems to be in contrast to the broader tensions affecting government cooperation with international actors, pointing to a somewhat underlying dissonance - where certain institutions remain willing to engage while the general political atmosphere presents additional struggles.

This issue is of particular concern, given that a large portion of disability-related activities in Georgia are either implemented or supported by these organisations. If they are unable to continue their efforts,

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Public Defender's Office

¹¹⁰ Focus group discussion with the Board of Georgian Disability Network

progress in disability rights is likely to stall, and delays are already evident – particularly in the introduction of the biopsychosocial model (designed and implemented in large part by such stakeholders).

Furthermore, this also negatively impacts the strengthening and support of organisations for persons with disabilities and, accordingly, their involvement, both potentially and in reality. For example, a large number of NGOs have left the Advisory Board of the Unified Coordination Council for Measures to Implement the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.¹¹¹

The situation remains dynamic but, as it currently stands, the **impact is immediate and negative**, with tangible consequences for the overall advancement of disability rights in Georgia.

3.7 Needs assessment

Over the past 20–30 years, Georgia has made significant progress in improving the rights and opportunities of persons with disabilities, particularly in terms of policy development, legal frameworks and public awareness. These changes should be recognised and appreciated, as they have laid the foundation for a more inclusive society.

However, persons with disabilities in Georgia require a more coordinated and better supported system that effectively implements existing laws, advances the transition to a biopsychosocial model of disability, strengthens inclusive education and expands meaningful employment opportunities. This should be accompanied by appropriate social protection measures that support independent living and the active involvement of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes.

It follows that, in most case, the greatest need lies not in providing more extensive or detailed legal frameworks but in securing the practical realisation of the rights already in existence.

- ▶ There are currently no precise, detailed, up-to-date statistics on persons with disabilities in Georgia, and it is unlikely that such comprehensive data will be available in the near future. The absence of unified and reliable data presents a major challenge. A clear understanding of the needs of persons with disabilities is needed for effective policy development and service provision and, thus, for safeguarding the social rights of this group. Without accurate data, it becomes difficult to assess gaps, allocate resources efficiently and ensure that the rights and needs of persons with disabilities are fully understood and addressed. This aspect remains one of the most pressing challenges and key priorities.
- ▶ Georgia already has a relatively robust legislative framework on disability rights (bearing in mind that there are some issues with the current legislation, as discussed in the next point). However, this framework lacks effective enforcement. Strengthening the accountability of stakeholders and increasing oversight (e.g., through more developed monitoring mechanisms, which are currently not in place) is necessary to guarantee that policies are closely and consistently implemented across the country.
- ▶ Some of the principles covered in this legislative framework remain vaguely defined, particularly “reasonable accommodation”, and this may lead to uncertainty for potential employers, educational institutions, or other public services. Developing by-law guidelines (e.g., what constitutes an “undue burden”) has the potential to reduce the current ambiguity. In the regulatory acts that are adopted, it will be important to include specific recommendations in detail for each area on what “reasonable accommodation” is considered to entail for that particular area.
- ▶ Stakeholders – both from public administration bodies and persons with disabilities or their representatives – broadly agree that transitioning from the medical model to the biopsychosocial model is essential. Without this transition, social and environmental barriers (as opposed to purely medical or impairment-focused ones) will continue to be overlooked in service de-

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sign and provision. While steps are already being taken to implement this new model, with an Action Plan already in place, the current political climate is significantly hindering the process. Both resources and high-level political will are needed to accelerate it.

- ▶ Widespread misconceptions about disability remain an underlying barrier and impact multiple areas of life, even if not directly. This stigma translates, inter alia, into parents' hesitation to acknowledge their child's need for special education or employers' reluctance to hire persons with disabilities. While there are examples of awareness-raising campaigns or initiatives (introduced, for example, by the State Employment Promotion Agency or international organisations), these activities are decentralised and rather limited in scope and scale. Therefore, targeted, culturally sensitive campaigns are needed. It may be expected that such campaigns will be introduced as part of the Action Plan.

In the current political climate, there are no meaningful, open, or functional channels for persons with disabilities to actively participate in political decision-making.

- ▶ At the central level, the Unified Coordination Council of the Ministry of Labour, Health, and Social Protection for IDPs from the Occupied Territories, along with its committees, has not met for a considerable period and is unlikely to resume work in the near future. This is of particular concern for the committee responsible for implementing the biopsychosocial model, since its inactivity hinders progress in critical disability-related reforms. At the regional level, municipal councils addressing disability issues are widely perceived by persons with disabilities to be inactive, non-transparent and ineffective.
- ▶ While the political climate in recent years has impacted cooperation between the government and persons with disabilities – particularly through their representative organisations – it is vital that steps are taken towards restoring open communication and mutual understanding. Although recent challenges have limited opportunities for engagement and advocacy, a commitment to inclusion could help guarantee that persons with disabilities are able to meaningfully voice their concerns and shape the policies that directly affect their lives.
- ▶ In this context, it is important to acknowledge that many of the improvements made in recent years have been largely driven by international donors and organisations. Without their support, much of the progress achieved would most likely not have been possible. However, due to the current political climate, the continuation of this support is uncertain. The implementation of the "Foreign Influence" Law has made the operations of international organisations more challenging, potentially placing them under suspicion and limiting broader cooperation at the central level. This, consequently, restricts opportunities for nationwide initiatives that could make it difficult to advance the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities. As the situation currently stands, there is a significant possibility that some of the needs of persons with disabilities (especially of children) will remain unaddressed, as the State does not have enough resources, and services hitherto supplied by donors and international organisations are restricted.

In the particular areas covered by the provisions of Article 15 of the ESC, persons with disabilities in Georgia still face challenges, which, although recognised, still to an extent remain unaddressed.

- ▶ Access to – and quality of – education for children with disabilities across the country remains a challenge. There is a shortage of teachers and specialists with adequate skills in inclusive education, particularly in rural areas. Many schools lack sufficient specialised support staff (especially in remote regions), and salaries for these roles remain low. While the issue has been recognised and appropriate initiatives are in place to address it, their scale may still be too limited and their impact too distant, despite the urgent need for high-quality, inclusive education.
- ▶ The employment of persons with disabilities seems to be one of the key issues raised by all stakeholders. Access to an open labour market remains a crucial need, especially considering the social support provided (see the point below). The current employment rate of persons with disabilities remains very low, with no evidence of an increase in recent years. While the

reasons may be complex and multifaceted, current subsidies for hiring persons with disabilities seem to be either too limited or administratively complex, and employers' awareness remains low, thus discouraging uptake. In addition, the model of focusing on potential employees' capacity-building may not resolve the issue unless there are more incentives for employers and alternative forms of employment.

- ▶ Additionally, the transition from education to employment poses challenges, as there is a mismatch between the capacities, capabilities, skills and knowledge of prospective employees with disabilities and the availability of positions. Low participation in vocational education and short-term courses that may not provide sustainable career pathways, coupled with limited employer awareness, are among the biggest obstacles. These factors continue to hinder the realisation of the right of persons with disabilities to employment in an open labour market.

This, both directly and indirectly, impacts the possibility of persons with disabilities to live an independent life.

- ▶ While the services provided for persons with disabilities have expanded in scope and their availability is increasing, there are still unaddressed issues hindering the realisation of social rights. First, while the social package – that is, financial support – has increased (and will increase in the future), most persons with disabilities still receive financial assistance below the minimum subsistence level. Additionally, there are discrepancies in the numbers of individuals receiving social benefits with the census data and international disability statistics differing by thousands. It is uncertain if and how the implementation of the new biopsychosocial model will affect these numbers. Also, support services, such as assistive devices, rehabilitation and other aid programmes, are not currently monitored for quality assurance, and access to these services is limited by regional availability, thus creating barriers for those in need.
- ▶ While deinstitutionalisation has been a long and largely successful process, persons with mental, physical or intellectual disabilities or disorders still have limited options to live independently or in smaller-scale institutions. It still happens that in such institutions, including for family-type care for children with disabilities, there is violence and harassment. Also, although there are programmes, such as personal assistance or supported housing, these are relatively new and still small in scale, not allowing needs to be fully addressed.

In terms of cross-cutting issues, there are still unaddressed needs and barriers encountered by persons with disabilities.

- ▶ Accessibility remains a challenge, both in terms of the physical accessibility of buildings and the accessibility of services and education. While efforts are under way to make public service buildings accessible, this is not yet the case everywhere, and there are still schools and even hospitals that do not meet accessibility standards. Furthermore, public spaces and transport are often inaccessible or not reimbursed to individuals with limited mobility, even in the area around the capital. Overall, access to specialised services and education at all levels for children and adults with special educational needs remains limited, with stakeholders highlighting significant disparities between larger cities and the more remote areas.
- ▶ The challenges outlined above appear to be even more pronounced in cases of intersectional status, particularly for women and ethnic minorities with disabilities. Women with disabilities face greater discrimination, including barriers to their reproductive rights, and are underrepresented in both education and employment. Ethnic minorities face additional challenges due to language barriers. Currently, there are no large-scale, nationwide, centralised programmes specifically addressing the challenges faced by these groups. The social support system is primarily built on the principle of equality rather than equity, meaning that all individuals receive the same opportunities and support. However, it appears that the above-mentioned groups, in particular, require a more tailored approach to meet their specific needs effectively.

4.0 Strategic recommendations for advancing disability rights in Georgia

While the Council of Europe is well-positioned to offer expert guidance, facilitate dialogue and promote inclusive norms, it is important to note that some of Georgia's most pressing challenges - particularly those stemming from limited resources and a complex political environment - may go beyond the Council of Europe's sphere of direct influence. These constraints can inevitably limit the scale and tempo of its impact. Nevertheless, by focusing on some specific areas, the Council of Europe can prepare important groundwork, which is still much needed.

One of the needs most frequently mentioned by the stakeholders – especially national authorities – is the call for more capacity-building initiatives. With the new biopsychosocial system progressing and multiple reforms unfolding at the same time (given the extensive developments of recent years), service providers and administrative bodies may lack guidance on how to best implement the latest policies, effectively collaborate with persons with disabilities or on what are the international best practices in the area (to implement them, as is, commendably, taking place). This challenge cuts across various sectors – national authorities and decision-makers in education, employment, social welfare, etc. – each of which has different training needs and operational contexts, depending on their area of influence. Thus far, capacity-building opportunities have been recognised as crucial in furthering the rights of persons with disabilities, and as such, should be continued, since they have proven to have had a significant impact.

Developing and delivering some capacity-building initiatives thus requires a tailored, sector-specific approach. This might include modular training programmes focusing on, for example, legal frameworks (discussing current gaps and how to address them in everyday practice), inclusive practices in education or employment, or community outreach (which is currently somewhat impacted by the political situation). Additionally, it is important to incorporate feedback from persons with disabilities throughout the training design – both as subject-matter experts and as direct beneficiaries, so that such initiatives truly address identified gaps and strengthen institutional capacities. So far, the involvement of persons with disabilities in the creation of such capacity-building opportunities seems to be lacking and introducing it will align with the recognised best practices in the field.

Given the current political climate in Georgia, there is also a pressing need to rebuild trust between persons with disabilities and the institutions that are meant to support them. Tensions at the national level have created gaps in communication channels, leaving many disability-focused organisations and advocacy groups feeling sidelined or unheard. Likewise, the same organisations are reluctant to engage with the State institutions because of mistrust. Although large-scale confidence-building programmes do exceed the Council of Europe's conventional scope, even moderate interventions –

here supporting smaller or local initiatives – can help foster more open communication in a more manageable and feasible way.

These efforts must, however, be approached with caution and show sensitivity to the current political environment. The success of any trust-building activities rests on the willingness of stakeholders to engage in constructive dialogue and to respect diverse viewpoints. This may prove difficult and unachievable, considering the state of relations. For this reason, small-scale activities may lay a foundation for greater collaboration in the future, especially since the municipal councils have been seen to have faced challenges, and there may be no other channels for establishing dialogue and cooperation.

A significant weakness identified is the lack of a comprehensive needs assessment involving persons with disabilities. Existing data – frequently drawn from official sources or authority reports – often omit the lived experiences, challenges and priorities voiced by those directly affected. This absence of direct input from persons with disabilities may cloud the key service gaps, making it harder for policymakers and practitioners to design interventions that truly meet real-world needs. Overall, the voices of persons with disabilities are, especially now, often unheard and not represented.

Establishing or supporting an alternative platform for sharing those lived experiences in a systematic manner/needs assessment could help fill this gap, particularly if official avenues – Committees and councils – remain inaccessible or inactive. Here, for example, the Council of Europe might partner with local NGOs or organisations representing persons with disabilities – something that the government is unable to facilitate – to conduct focus groups, surveys or other participatory research. Furthermore, such platforms could serve as an interim mechanism for dialogue and accountability, empowering community voices while official structures – such as municipal councils or national committees – remain underutilised or ineffective. Placing persons with disabilities at the centre of the data collection and analysis process has the potential to make those alternative forums credible in terms of their findings and should promote ownership and self-advocacy within Georgia’s disability community when other channels are lacking. The relations and communication established with CSOs/NGOs for the purpose of this study show there is potential for the Council of Europe to step in.

Despite the progress made in Georgia over the last two decades, negative stereotypes and misconceptions about disability continue to hinder the full social, educational, and economic inclusion of persons with disabilities. There is, therefore, a significant need for awareness-raising initiatives that go beyond sporadic, small-scale efforts and instead offer consistent, nationwide messaging. While the Council of Europe’s ability to fund large-scale media campaigns is limited, it can serve as a catalyst by providing expert resources (e.g. for the aforementioned capacity-building activities), connecting local stakeholders with successful practices in other member states (e.g. through nurturing already established relations), and endorsing and incorporating inclusive messaging in its public communication.

ANNEXES

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Annex 2: Services provided for people and children with disabilities as of 2024 (up to August of 2024)

Adults with disabilities		Children with disabilities	
Name	No of beneficiaries	Name	No of beneficiaries
State Program of Social Rehabilitation (Annex N1)		State Program for Child Care and Youth Support (Annex N2)	
Day Care Center Services (People with disabilities) Sub-Program	5 849	Sub-program for emergency assistance to families with children in crisis	20 529
Sub-program for providing assistive devices, including:	5 074	Component of assistance to families with children in crisis	8 799
Wheelchairs (electric)	158	Artificial feeding voucher	10 690
Wheelchairs (mechanical)	602	Phenylketonuria/Coeliac Disease Food Voucher	1 040
Wheelchairs (paediatric)	80	Early Childhood Development Subprogram	30 476
Bathroom/toilet chair	0	Children's Rehabilitation/Habilitation Sub-Program	37 960
Component of providing prosthetic and orthopaedic devices	989	Sub-program for providing services in day care centres (children with and without disabilities aged 6 to 18), including:	9 517
Hearing Aid Provision Component (Paediatric)	128	Component of providing services in social inclusion day centres for children aged 6 to 18	2 936
Hearing aid provision component	2 916	Children with disabilities	6 066
Component for providing canes to the blind	54	Component of providing services in day care centres for children with severe and profound mental retardation (children with disability status from 6 to 18 years old)	287
Component for the provision of crutches, walking sticks, canes and mobility frames for the blind	78	Component of providing services in day centres for adolescents with antisocial and difficult behaviour	228
Smartphone	67	With psychosocial counselling services	0
Sub-program for promoting communication among the deaf	1 130	Sub-program for providing shelter to mothers and children	583
Sub-program for service provision in community organisations	5 658	Foster Care Sub-Program	10 639
Component of providing community services for the elderly	1 532	Small Family Houses Sub-Program	1 778
Component of providing community services to persons with disabilities	2 685	Component of providing services to small family-type homes	1 778

Adults with disabilities		Children with disabilities	
Name	No of beneficiaries	Name	No of beneficiaries
State Program of Social Rehabilitation (Annex N1)		State Program for Child Care and Youth Support (Annex N2)	
Subcomponent for providing services that support independent living for persons with disabilities	364	Component of providing services in specialised small family-type homes	0
Alternative Housing Subcomponent	150	Sub-program for providing shelter to homeless children	1 007
Subcomponent for providing small family-type services to persons with disabilities with mental disorders	0	Mobile group service provision component	54
Component for providing alternative housing for people with mental disorders aged 18 and over	927	Component of providing services to a day centre for homeless children	672
Component for providing shelter to victims/survivors of violence against women and/or domestic violence, sexual violence	0	Component of providing services with a 24-hour shelter for homeless children	281
Sub-program for promoting the rehabilitation of war participants	36	Sub-program for residential care for children with severe and profound mental disabilities	661
Personal Assistant Service Provision Sub-Program	305	Component of residential care for children with disabilities	302
Home care with service provision subprogram	423	Component of providing residential services for children aged 7 to 18 with challenging behaviour	320
		Component for providing an assistant in the apartment of persons with disabilities	39
		Specialised Family-Based Services Subprogram for Children with Severe and Profound Disabilities or Health Problems	223
		Reintegration of children deprived of care	3 683
		Sub-program for supporting young people aged 18-21	216
		Youth Food Supply Sub-Program	20
		Long-term paediatric care	99

European Social Charter, adopted in 1961 and revised in 1996, is the counterpart of the European Convention on Human Rights in the field of economic and social rights. It guarantees a broad range of human rights related to employment, housing, health, education, social protection and welfare.

No other legal instrument at pan-European level provides such an extensive and complete protection of social rights as that provided by the Charter.

The Charter is therefore seen as the Social Constitution of Europe and represents an essential component of the continent's human rights architecture.

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

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