

The Social Model of Disability: What is it?

The Social Model of Disability is a framework that was developed by people with disabilities for people with disabilities. According to the Social Model, disability is not solely determined by an individual's physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental health differences. Instead, disability is primarily caused by our society's failure to reasonably accommodate and include individuals with impairments. In other words, the Social Model emphasises that disability is a social construct rather than a personal deficit.

The Social Model originated from the disability rights movement and gained prominence in the late 20th century. It highlights the importance of removing barriers (in societies like ours) and creating an inclusive society that enables individuals with disabilities to participate fully and equally in all aspects of life.

Principles of the Social Model of Disability include:

1. ***Disability is caused by social barriers***

The model suggests that physical, attitudinal, and institutional barriers, such as inaccessible buildings (many of which may be found in our local town and shopping areas), discriminatory policies (for example, a wheelchair user is not employed, because an employer thinks he/she may not be able to function effectively), negative attitudes (verbal abuse), and lack of appropriate support services (i.e., lack of self-sufficient/independent services) are the primary causes of disability.

2. ***Focus on removing barriers***

Rather than attempting to "fix" individuals with disabilities, the focus is on identifying and eliminating societal barriers that hinder their full participation and inclusion in everyday activities. This involves:

- making changes to the built environment by fixing pathways in our Caribbean cities so that wheelchair users may traverse as non-disabled people do;
- Improving the current infrastructure such as accessible parks, banks and general places of business;
- enforcement of existing policies and the creation and implementation of new ones in line with international standards.
- changing social attitudes towards people with disabilities, through continued educational programmes to bring about more awareness.

3. ***Equality***

The Social Model advocates for equal rights and opportunities for people with disabilities. It emphasizes the need for society to address systemic discrimination and the promotion of social justice by ensuring equal access to education, employment, healthcare, reasonable accommodation, transportation, and other essential services.

4. ***Empowerment, self-advocacy and individual independence***

The model promotes the empowerment of individuals with disabilities, encouraging them to exercise their human rights to free speech, while challenging discrimination, and active participation in decision-making processes. This will further promote the making of independent choices that affect their lives and the overall improvement towards self-sufficiency.

5. ***Language and the way we speak*** The Social Model encourages the use of person-first language, which focuses on the individual rather than the individual's disability. For example, instead of referring to an individual as a "disabled person," the social model suggests that using "person with a disability" puts more emphasis on the idea that disability is not the defining characteristic of an individual.

Lastly, the Social Model of Disability does not deny the existence of impairments or health conditions but rather shifts the focus to the societal factors that create disability. It has been influential in shaping disability policies, legislation, and advocacy efforts worldwide, promoting a more inclusive and equitable society for people with disabilities.

Conclusion

The Social Model of Disability provides a powerful framework for understanding disability as a social construct rather than an individual deficit. In highlighting the role of societal barriers and attitudes, this model promotes empowerment and human rights for people with disabilities. However, ongoing discussions, advocacy, community buy-in, and policy and legislative revisions are necessary to ensure that the Social Model remains relevant and inclusive in addressing the diverse experiences and needs of people with disabilities in different contexts.

It is my hope that with continued education and advocacy, the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) and the wider Caribbean will, over a short time, change our way of thinking and how we view persons with disabilities. The change starts with *US*.

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