



Strengthening Inclusion Through Peer Support: **A Disability Inclusion Initiative in Syria**

CASE STUDY
Finnish Red Cross
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Background

In 2022, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), with support from the Finnish Red Cross (FRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), launched Syria's first peer support initiative for persons with disabilities.

This initiative was part of a broader disability inclusion and physical rehabilitation programme that included medical consultations, nursing care, physiotherapy, and the provision of assistive devices. It aimed to address the profound isolation, stigma, and lack of psychosocial support experienced by persons with disabilities throughout the country.

The peer support component was developed in response to consistent feedback from persons with disabilities, who expressed a strong need for social connection, empowerment, and recovery opportunities grounded in lived experience. The model was designed to complement clinical rehabilitation by promoting mental health and social well-being through mutual support and community participation.

The programme was developed within a context of urgent humanitarian need. Years of conflict, economic crisis, and the 2023 earthquake had severely disrupted health and social services and contributed to an increase in disability prevalence. Persons with disabilities faced widespread exclusion, not only from health services but also from education, employment, and community life. In response, the peer support initiative was designed to address these gaps by providing opportunities for social connection, empowerment, and psychosocial support.



Participants in the Damascus peer support programme engage in group sessions that promote social connection and inclusion.

Who Was Supported and How

With support from the Abilis Foundation, an Organisation of Persons with Disabilities based in Finland, basic training in peer support was delivered through both online and face-to-face sessions. Between January 2022 and September 2024, SARC trained 50 persons with disabilities as peer supporters through a tailored programme developed in collaboration with FRC.

The initiative was initially launched in Damascus and later expanded to Aleppo and Latakia. Peer supporters conducted sessions focusing on psychosocial well-being, self-confidence, independent living skills, and community reintegration. These sessions took place in rehabilitation centres, community spaces, and home-based settings.

The peer support programme followed a structured Standard Operating Procedure (SOP). Monthly meetings were facilitated by the Inclusion Officer, with participants being referred by the Rehabilitation Team based on specific challenges, such as lack of motivation, low confidence, or identified skill gaps. Peer supporters received referral notes outlining each participant's goals and adapted the sessions accordingly.

Sessions began with introductions and goal-setting, followed by demonstrations, sharing of experiences, and active participation. Each session concluded with a summary, including next steps and the collection of client feedback. Progress was tracked through session records and regular updates to the Rehabilitation Team.



Peer supporters in Aleppo share experiences and support one another, fostering learning and inclusion.

Successes

The peer support initiative had a measurable impact on psychosocial resilience, social inclusion, and the empowerment of participants. Many participants reported increased confidence, stronger self-advocacy skills, and an improved ability to engage in community life. The model proved particularly effective in contexts where formal mental health and psychosocial services were limited or inaccessible. Peer supporters became visible role models and local change agents, fostering more inclusive attitudes within their communities.

As the first initiative of its kind in Syria, the peer support model was both innovative and replicable. Its integration into a broader multidisciplinary rehabilitation programme enabled stronger synergy with physiotherapy, nursing, and medical services. Activities included community awareness-raising and close collaboration with the families of persons with disabilities.

In 2025, peer support sessions were expanded to include persons with visual impairments. SARC has also facilitated the recruitment of persons with disabilities as staff members and volunteers, further strengthening inclusion and sustainability.

One peer supporter described the impact of the programme:

"Before the training, I lived in a very restricted environment and could not move around much. Life opened up for me after SARC's support and the peer support training. Now I can move around in the community quite freely. This is the best thing that has happened to me. Life has changed not only for me, as I now have the skills to change other people's lives for the better. It is very motivational when you can support others. Now I look forward to the future, where there is always something new to learn and explore!"

— Female peer supporter, Damascus

Challenges and Difficulties

The initiative faced several challenges, including initial scepticism about peer-led approaches, logistical difficulties in organising group sessions in insecure areas, and the need for ongoing facilitator support. Liquidity constraints also made it difficult to hold regular peer support meetings. Ensuring the emotional well-being of peer supporters required sustained attention and structured support.

Key Lessons

- Peer-led models are highly effective in promoting mental well-being, reducing social isolation, and strengthening resilience.
- Structured Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) enhance effectiveness, consistency, and documentation, while supporting quality assurance.
- Comprehensive training, participatory selection processes, and continuous supervision are essential to ensure quality and long-term sustainability.
- Co-creating session content based on local realities and lived experiences increases relevance and impact.
- Engaging families and communities strengthens inclusion outcomes and reinforces positive social change.
- Peer support is most effective when integrated into multidisciplinary rehabilitation services.
- Providing peer supporters with mental health and self-care resources helps safeguard their well-being.
- Promoting the visibility of peer leaders challenges stigma and supports wider community acceptance.
- Regular reflection, feedback mechanisms, and safeguarding measures are critical to adapting to participants' needs and ensuring safe practice.

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Photos: Finnish Red Cross



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