IDA
International
Disability Alliance

The CRPD at 20: The revolution of the ordinary

JOSÉ MARÍA VIERA

The CRPD at 20: The revolution of the ordinary

Twenty years after its adoption, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities still asks the most important and radical question any society can face: is the world you have built worthy of all the people who live in it? This anniversary is a moment of commemoration and a time for reflection, reckoning, gratitude, memory, and renewed imagination. We should reflect on what the CRPD has changed for persons with disabilities, what it still requires from States, and what it means today for our movement, our communities, our families and the future of human rights, given that the world has not yet fully understood or applied the Convention's full promise and power.

The CRPD can be understood as more than a treaty about disability or a framework for regulating society's response to human difference. It is a treaty about how we understand ourselves. It asks what kind of human being society had in mind when it built its schools, courts, homes, transport systems, workplaces, families, and communities. It asks whether the world was designed only for those who can walk, see, hear, speak, learn, decide, work and communicate in expected ways, or whether it can be transformed to welcome the full diversity of humanity. Perhaps this is why the Convention still feels so radical. It asks society not simply to repair the old structure, but to rebuild its foundations. The CRPD changed both our ideals and our ideas: our ideals of justice, equality and belonging, and our ideas about disability, personhood, autonomy, support and society itself.

Twenty years on, some may wonder whether the CRPD can still speak to the world now being born: a world of artificial intelligence and algorithmic judgment, of digital health & welfare systems, automated recruitment, assistive technologies and emerging forms of social control that could scarcely have been imagined when the Convention was negotiated. Yet this doubt misunderstands the nature of human rights law and the architecture of the CRPD.

Human rights treaties are not fragile instructions written for one passing age. They are living instruments of principle, carrying dignity, equality, autonomy, participation, non-discrimination, accessibility, integrity, support, freedom, community and accountability across time. The task of human rights is always to carry the inherent and inalienable claim of equal worth into the newest terrain of human experience. The CRPD does this with particular force because it begins from an open and evolving understanding of disability itself: not a fixed category trapped in diagnosis, charity or service systems, but a relationship between human diversity and the barriers society creates.

That is one of the Convention's great legal and moral insights. It knew, based on the experience of people with disabilities throughout history, that new worlds would create new exclusions; that new systems would produce new barriers; that new technologies would bring both liberation and danger. Whether the barrier is a guardianship order, an inaccessible school, an algorithm that excludes a disabled applicant, a welfare database that cannot recognise support needs or disability related extra costs, or a form of neurotechnology that blurs the boundary between assistance and control, the CRPD gives us the framework to assess whether or not society has yet built a system worthy of

the dignity, agency, equality and freedom of persons with disabilities. In other words, does our world encompass the full interdependent diversity of humanity as it truly is?

During the years of the CRPD negotiations, the world was forced to look into a mirror. What it saw was not only the exclusion of persons with disabilities. It saw its own moral character reflected back: the institutions that locked people away, the voices it had silenced, the families it had left unsupported, the bodies it had hidden, the minds it had controlled, the barriers it had treated as normal, and the lives it had allowed to disappear from public view. The CRPD was the moment when society had a choice. It could look away, repair the surface, and continue as before. Or it could recognise that the cracks were real and deep and decide to rebuild with something stronger and more beautiful, anchored in justice, truth, and humanity. The full realisation of the CRPD remains a continuing demand from people with disabilities, and it should be a permanent disturbance in the conscience of the world.

For me, the CRPD is the revolution of the ordinary. It is the golden repair of society's deepest fissures. It does not erase the harm that came before. It does not undo the lives diminished by institutions, segregation, poverty, forced treatment, denied education, silenced communication, family shame, inaccessible cities or laws that refused to recognise personhood. But it offers a way to rebuild from that harm: more honestly, more justly, more beautifully and more completely than before. That is the choice the CRPD still places before us.

The CRPD was not inevitable. It was made by people. It was made by persons with disabilities, OPDs, allies, families, advocates, diplomats and communities who refused to accept that exclusion was natural or permanent. It was made by those who believed that the ordinary things of life - going to school, choosing where to live, moving through the street, entering a workplace, voting, communicating, loving, worshipping, creating, making decisions, being part of a family and a community - should not be extraordinary privileges for persons with disabilities. This is the revolution of the ordinary.

The CRPD's deepest promise is not only that persons with disabilities should survive, receive services, or be protected from harm. Its promise is that we should belong in the everyday life of the world, and we should be expected everywhere. We should be expected in the ordinary places where human life happens: the classroom, the home, the bus, the market, the workplace, the court, the theatre, the polling station, the playground, the family table and the public square. That may sound simple. But for millions of persons with disabilities, it remains revolutionary.

It can also be helpful to take an historical perspective, looking backwards and forwards. When we speak of the CRPD's revolution, we are speaking about the dominant social ideas that have so often defined disabled people as less capable or worth less than others, and we cannot pretend that those ideas have disappeared. The social and human rights-based model of disability is far from fully understood, let alone fully applied. As we look to the future, we can remind ourselves that progress is often not linear, and across centuries, persons with disabilities have worked, loved, created, argued, petitioned, organised, survived, adapted and resisted the roles imposed upon them.

The past is not a simple story of passive suffering followed by modern enlightenment. It is a much longer and more complicated story of agency and struggle: of disabled people insisting on being believed, demanding support, defending their dignity, shaping culture, challenging authority, and claiming the ordinary fullness of life. The CRPD stands within a much deeper history of resistance, and it gives that resistance legal form, universal language and political force. But it also teaches us vigilance, as exclusion is always capable of returning in new clothes.

We know that nearly two decades after its adoption and near universal ratification, the Convention and its standards remain ahead of many laws, policies and practices across the world. Too many persons with disabilities are still denied legal capacity, excluded from education, left without support, institutionalised, ignored in emergencies, prevented from participating in public life, or consulted only symbolically. Too many societies have accepted partial inclusion when the CRPD calls for transformation.

Yet I remain hopeful because I have seen what persons with disabilities and OPDs can do. I have seen movements turn exclusion into knowledge, knowledge into advocacy, advocacy into law, and law into the possibility of a better life. The CRPD belongs to all of us. But it especially belongs to those who fought to make it possible, those who continue to defend its radical promise, and those who know that rights are never fully won until they are lived by all.

The reflections that follow are an attempt to understand the CRPD as a profound reimagining of the human person and of society itself. The Convention does not simply ask the world to make room for persons with disabilities. It asks the world to become worthy of the diversity of the people who live in it. That is the story of the CRPD. It is the story of our movement. And, in many ways, it has been the story of my life.

A treaty that reimagines what it is to be human

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is often described as an equality treaty. That is true, but it is far too small. To call the CRPD only an equality treaty is to see the doorway but miss the horizon beyond it. The CRPD is one of the most transformative human rights instruments of the modern era because it does something more ambitious than prohibit discrimination. It challenges the way societies have organised human difference itself. It asks whether bodies, minds, senses, ways of communicating, ways of moving, ways of learning, ways of needing support, and ways of being human will be welcomed as part of ordinary life, or whether they will be turned into reasons for exclusion, pity, control and lesser citizenship.

At its most radical, the CRPD asks a simple and unsettling question: what kind of society have we built if so many people can only enter it by being corrected, hidden, institutionalised, spoken for, pitied, treated, assessed, protected through control, or invited in as exceptions? The answer is not only that such a society is unequal, but the deeper answer is also that such a society has misunderstood what it means to be human.

The CRPD begins from a different framing, recognising that human beings vary in body, mind, senses, communication, mobility, cognition, emotion, and support needs. This

variation is not a defect in humanity. It is humanity itself. The Convention's revolutionary force lies, therefore, in its insistence that society must stop treating ordinary human variation as a reason for diminished personhood and a smaller, narrower life. The CRPD asks whether the world has been built in a way that makes equal participation possible. It moves beyond equality as sameness and insists on equality as inclusion, recognition, support and societal transformation. This is one of its most profound contributions to human rights law.

For centuries, persons with disabilities have been placed at the edges of the social imagination. They have been treated as objects of charity, patients of medicine, burdens of family, inmates of institutions, recipients of welfare, symbols of tragedy, inspirational exceptions, or people whose lives must be managed by others. The CRPD breaks with that history. It says that persons with disabilities are subjects of rights, authors of their own lives, members of families and communities, participants in culture and politics, workers, learners, lovers, artists, parents, witnesses, decision-makers, creators and leaders.

Earlier human rights treaties established that every human being possesses inherent dignity and equal worth. They transformed the relationship between the person and the State. The person was no longer merely a subject of sovereign power, a member of a family, a labouring body for the economy, or a passive recipient of benevolence. The person became a rights-holder, and the State became a duty-bearer.

The CRPD keeps that inheritance but deepens it. It exposes a hidden assumption within much human rights thinking: that the rights-bearing person is too often imagined as physically mobile, verbally articulate, legally independent, cognitively normative, economically productive, and able to claim rights without extensive support. The CRPD says this is a fiction. The human person is embodied, relational, communicative, interdependent and situated in material environments. Rights are not exercised in the abstract. They are exercised through bodies, technologies, languages, relationships, transport systems, schools, courts, homes, digital platforms, and support services.

Accessibility, support and the meaning of freedom

Accessibility is often the entry point through which people think about disability, and it is sometimes treated as basic or technical: ramps, elevators, Braille, sign language interpretation, captions, accessible websites, tactile paving, Easy Read documents. These measures are essential, but their meaning is deeper. Accessibility is the material expression of equal belonging. It is the built form of the idea that persons with disabilities are expected and welcome in the world. It is a social message that says: this place, process, office, town, city or future was designed with you in mind – you belong here.

The Convention is equally radical in its treatment of support. Many societies have confused support with control. A person who needs assistance may be placed under guardianship, institutionalised, denied legal capacity, confined by family, managed by professionals, segregated in special services, or spoken for in the language of best

interests. The CRPD breaks this link and insists that the need for support does not diminish personhood. Support should enable agency and autonomy, not replace it.

This is the moral centre of Article 12 on equal recognition before the law and Article 19 on living independently and being included in the community. These articles reject one of the deepest hierarchies in law and culture: the belief that some people are too disabled to decide, too dependent to be free, too vulnerable to take risks, too difficult to include, or too different to belong. The CRPD answers that human beings do not become less human when they need support. A person may need interpretation to communicate, assistance to dress, support to make decisions, technology to move, plain language to understand, peer support to recover, personal assistance to live in the community, or trusted relationships to exercise choice. None of this negates autonomy. It reveals what autonomy really is: the power to shape one's life with the support required to do so.

This is a revolution against the myth of self-sufficiency. Many societies imagine freedom as independence from others. The CRPD offers a more truthful account. All people are interdependent. All people rely on infrastructure, language, care, public systems, recognition, law and social trust. Disability does not introduce dependence into human life; it makes visible the interdependence that was always there.

The Convention, therefore, transforms the meaning of care into support. It does not reject care, family or community. It rejects care that becomes custody. It rejects protection that becomes imprisonment. It rejects treatment that becomes coercion. It rejects family support that becomes substitute decision-making. It rejects service provision that becomes segregation. The CRPD's claim is not that people should be left alone in the name of independence. Its claim is that support must be organised around the person's will, preferences, dignity and participation.

Community as chosen belonging

This is why Article 19 is revolutionary - closing institutions and moving people and the services they receive into the community provides a theory of belonging. It says that a person is not included because they are merely placed somewhere. A person may live physically in a neighbourhood and still be socially excluded: unable to leave home, denied personal assistance, controlled by family, deprived of legal capacity, excluded from school, cut off from communication, or forced to accept services they did not choose.

Community inclusion, in the CRPD sense, means chosen belonging. It means the ability to decide where and with whom to live. It means access to support services that make participation possible. It means ordinary community services and facilities being available on an equal basis. It means that the community itself must change. This is a crucial distinction. The opposite of institutionalisation is not abandonment in the community. The opposite of institutionalisation is supported, chosen, accessible and equal participation in community life.

The CRPD also changes how we understand the definition of 'institutions' where people with disabilities are deprived of liberty and independent life. They are not places of care

or protection, but settings that inherently and inevitably produce human rights violations, in addition to the violation of arbitrary deprivation of liberty. An institution is not simply a large building with locked gates. It is a social arrangement that removes choice, imposes routine, segregates people, concentrates authority in staff or professionals, and separates people from ordinary life. Institutionalisation can appear in psychiatric hospitals, residential care homes, orphanages, group homes, social care facilities, segregated schools, long-stay hospitals, emergency shelters, or other settings where the person is confined, segregated and denied agency. The name of the service does not determine whether it is inclusive. The social relations it creates do.

Social repair and reinvention are also vital for Article 11 and Article 32, including in post-conflict reconstruction, humanitarian action and development. A society can rebuild after war and still reconstruct exclusion. It can build new schools that children with disabilities cannot enter. It can rebuild hospitals that deaf people cannot navigate. It can create reparations schemes that ignore disability-specific harms. It can open shelters that persons with disabilities cannot reach. It can rebuild institutions under the false promise of care. It can hold truth commissions where persons with intellectual, psychosocial or other disabilities cannot testify. It can celebrate peace while leaving persons with disabilities outside the public imagination of the nation.

The CRPD says that such reconstruction is unfinished. A society has not truly rebuilt if persons with disabilities remain hidden, segregated, institutionalised, dependent on patronage, excluded from public space, or absent from the institutions where the future is being decided. This is where the Convention's revolutionary potential becomes clearest, as a treaty which interrogates the moral design of society. It asks whether our structures and systems are built around a narrow, idealised human being, or around the real diversity of human life. It asks whether difference will be organised through hierarchy or equality, charity or rights, custody or support, segregation or co-presence, silence or voice, inaccessible systems or universal design.

The mirror and the work of cultural repair

When the CRPD was being negotiated, the world entered an unusual moment of self-awareness and reckoning. Societies had to look at themselves openly: at the systems they had built, the people they had hidden, the voices they had replaced, the families they had left unsupported, the laws that had denied agency, the schools that had separated children, and the ordinary places of life from which persons with disabilities had been quietly excluded. The CRPD negotiation and national debates on ratification were not only a legal process for government officials, it was a participatory moment of societal self-examination. It asked what kind of human being society had imagined when it designed the world.

But complacency can all-too-easily creep in and States may believe that all the work has been done because the Convention has been signed, because a report has been submitted, because a ministry has been made responsible, or because disability has been mentioned in a development plan. The language of rights can become familiar enough to lose its force, dulled by repetition. Societies can persuade themselves that their moral self-doubts have already been answered. This is why OPDs remain

indispensable. Their role is not only to participate in consultations or monitor implementation in a technical sense. Their deeper role is to keep holding the mirror up to society. OPDs are the keepers of the Convention's unfinished truth.

Awareness-raising is sometimes treated as one of the softer obligations of the Convention, as if it were mainly about public campaigns, posters, media messages or training sessions. But Article 8 is far more ambitious. It recognises that exclusion does not live only in laws and budgets. It lives in habits, jokes, fears, silences, professional assumptions, family expectations, school cultures, media images, religious interpretations, charity narratives, medical authority and the ordinary common sense of society. Article 8 therefore asks States to transform the social imagination. It asks them to challenge the stories through which persons with disabilities have been made pitiable, dangerous, incapable, inspirational, burdensome, childlike, dependent or invisible.

In that sense, Article 8 is the Convention's obligation of cultural repair. It insists that the CRPD must enter the family, the classroom, the newsroom, the workplace, the clinic, the court, the street, the parliament and the private moral world where prejudice is formed before it becomes policy. The Convention's promise depends on this permanent vigilance. The mirror must be raised again and again.

The politics of knowledge

The CRPD also transforms the politics of knowledge. Human rights law often speaks about participation, but the CRPD gives participation a specific political form: persons with disabilities must be closely consulted and actively involved through their representative organisations (organisations of persons with disabilities). This is epistemic justice. It recognises that people who have been excluded from law, policy, institutions and public life possess knowledge that those systems lack.

OPDs are therefore knowledge holders and experts. They know where exclusion is built into ordinary life. They know which persons are missing from official data, which services are inaccessible, which families are unsupported, which institutions hide abuse, which schools exclude children, which courts silence testimony, which reconstruction plans rebuild barriers, and which public narratives reduce persons with disabilities to pity or inspiration. The CRPD recognises that this knowledge must shape law and policy.

This principle is also a challenge to paternalism. Persons with disabilities have long been spoken about by doctors, charities, families, service providers, governments, religious institutions, humanitarian agencies, development actors and large NGOs that have profited from their perceived dependence. The CRPD reverses the direction of authority. It does not deny the value of professional expertise or family support, but it refuses to treat them as substitutes for the voice and agency of persons with disabilities themselves.

The CRPD is therefore radical in both substance and method. It demands different outcomes and different authorship. It asks who defines the problem, who designs the solution, who controls the resources, who evaluates success, and who speaks in the name of persons with disabilities.

Family, education, culture and the fullness of life

The Convention's treatment of family is equally transformative. It neither rejects the family nor romanticises it. Across many cultures, families are the primary source of love, identity, language, care, continuity and belonging. They may also be sites of control, shame, violence, confinement, forced treatment, denial of sexuality or gender identity, denial of education and substituted decision-making. The CRPD holds both truths.

It affirms the right of persons with disabilities to home, family, marriage, parenthood, fertility and relationships. It also insists that the person with a disability remains the rights-holder. The family may support the person, but it does not absorb the person. Love does not erase legal agency. Care does not justify control. Family obligation does not excuse the State from providing support. Protection does not permit segregation. This refutes the false choice between individualism and family. It allows for interdependence, kinship and community, while insisting that the person's will, preferences, dignity and autonomy remain central.

Similarly, Article 24 is about education but also about the formation of society. Children do not only learn subjects in school. They learn who belongs together. Segregated education teaches children that some people are naturally separate. Inclusive education teaches that human diversity is part of ordinary social life. It creates shared childhood, mutual recognition and future citizenship. The CRPD's vision of inclusive education is therefore deeply connected to awareness-raising and cultural transformation. It asks whether the next generation will grow up expecting difference, communicating across difference, and building institutions around difference. A segregated school system does more than disadvantage children with disabilities. It trains society in exclusion.

The same is true of work, culture, sport and political participation. The CRPD recognises that human beings seek more than survival. They seek contribution, creativity, pleasure, recognition, love, memory, play, beauty and public voice. Article 30 on cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport is sometimes treated as secondary, but it expresses one of the Convention's most humanising insights: an inclusive society is not one in which persons with disabilities merely receive services. It is one in which they can sing, dance, compete, worship, write, perform, travel, celebrate, mourn, create and take part in the cultural and artistic life of the community.

From disappearance to presence to belonging

Oppression and marginalisation often begin with a shrinking of social imagination. Persons with disabilities have too often been allowed to appear in public only as recipients of help, objects of pity, medical cases or heroic exceptions. The CRPD insists that they appear as full human beings in the ordinary and extraordinary life of society, in the mundane and the profound.

This is why we must understand the CRPD as much more than equality law. It articulates a theory of social repair after damage that has marked societies across history. It identifies the many ways persons with disabilities have been made to disappear: through inaccessible environments, legal incapacity, segregated education, institutional living, forced treatment, family control, economic exclusion, communication barriers, political

disenfranchisement, cultural invisibility and charity-based systems. It then sets out the conditions for reappearance: accessibility, legal capacity, support, inclusive education, community living, health without discrimination, decent work, social protection, political participation, cultural life and OPD leadership.

The revolutionary potential of the CRPD lies in this movement from disappearance to presence, from irrelevance to centrality. It says persons with disabilities must be expected everywhere - in schools, as heads of families, in parliaments, in courts, at peace tables, in workplaces, in theatres and sports grounds, in emergencies, in reconstruction plans, in public budgets. Also expected in the telling of national memory and expected in the future fabric of social and political life. This invites a profound reorientation and reorganisation of the social world itself, in expectation and belonging.

Of course, the CRPD can often be implemented in ways that do not reflect the full power, promise and poetry of the ideas behind it. It can be reduced to token consultations, accessibility checklists, service delivery projects, compliance language, or formalistic equality provisions that leave deeper structures intact. States can ratify it while maintaining institutions. Donors can cite it while funding segregated services. Governments can celebrate inclusion of one group while denying legal capacity to another. Agencies can consult OPDs without listening to them. Schools can speak of inclusion while excluding children with high support requirements or placing them in segregated classes. Health systems can speak of care while practicing coercion under the lie of necessity. Reconstruction plans can mention disability while rebuilding inaccessible societies.

This is why the radical spirit of the CRPD must be defended. The Convention is not fulfilled when persons with disabilities are added to existing systems. It is fulfilled when those systems are transformed by their presence and leadership. It does not ask merely for a place at the edge of the table. It asks who built the table, who can reach it, who sets the agenda, whose language is used, whose knowledge counts, whose support is funded, and whether the meeting should have been organised differently in the first place.

The CRPD is therefore a treaty of redesign. It requires the redesign of law, institutions, buildings, services, budgets, families, schools, courts, humanitarian systems, labour markets, political processes and cultural imagination. It also requires the redesign of moral common sense. It asks societies to stop seeing support as dependency, accessibility as charity, institutionalisation as care, incapacity as natural, segregation as inevitable, and disabled life as lesser.

Perhaps the Convention’s deepest proposition is this: disability reveals the limits of societies built around too narrow an idea of what it means to be human. It challenges every society to ask whether it is organised for all, or only for a narrow range of understanding of independence, productivity, bodily control, cognitive conformity and communicative sameness. It exposes the violence hidden in political choices that have been made to look natural: stairs, forms, guardianship orders, inaccessible classrooms, institutional budgets, segregated services, medical assumptions, family shame and public silence.

For the past 20 years, the CRPD has offered a different future, even if States have not always followed through. A society shaped by the CRPD would be one where support is available without domination; where difference does not become hierarchy; where legal capacity is not withdrawn because someone communicates, decides or lives differently; where children learn together; where no person is forced to live in an institution because the community was not prepared to include them; where families are supported without being made substitutes for rights; where accessibility is built in because everyone is expected; where OPDs are recognised as co-authors of law and policy; where persons with disabilities participate in the fullness of human life with all its joy and sadness, triumphs and challenges, and society itself becomes richer, wiser and more human because of it.

That is the revolutionary promise of the CRPD. It does not merely ask society to include persons with disabilities in the world as it is. It asks society to become worthy of the diversity of the people who live in it. It asks us to build a world where no one has to disappear in order to be cared for, surrender their voice in order to be protected, become exceptional in order to be valued, or stand at the doorway waiting to be invited into the human family. It asks us to build a world where every person is expected. It asks us to build belonging. And that is what we will do: together we will build belonging, by and for persons with disabilities.

Jose María Viera

Executive Director, International Disability Alliance