

Four principles for promoting the inclusion of people living with disabilities

One of the central pillars of the human-rights approach is recognizing that inequality and marginalization deprive people of their fundamental rights. To remedy the situation, people who have been divested of their rights must acquire the knowledge and skills to contribute in the process of change as leaders rather than beneficiaries. This means that they must fully participate in the process in question.

Promoting the inclusion of people living with disabilities can happen in different ways depending on the context, the type of disability, and the individuals you are working with. For instance, in Tunisia, Rawabet worked to include differently-abled people in the job market. This was a rich learning experience; not all of the associations involved in the initiative view the defense of rights of those living with disabilities as part of their mandate.

The following recommendations are drawn from the lessons that we learned from the Rawabet initiative in Tunisia whose success was due to close collaboration with people with disabilities.

Ensuring the inclusion of people with disabilities in society, in your organization, and in your activities is not so complicated! There is no magic recipe, but here are the four basic ingredients:

1 “Nothing for us without us” becomes “nothing without us”

We have to think about inclusion all the time and in every context. The causes that do not directly concern people with disabilities still matter to them as people. Yes! Sometimes we forget this and it’s important to be reminded. It is very simple. A woman or a young person can be interested in climate change; it affects them as human beings. The same is the case for people living with disabilities.

Think about people living with disabilities the next time that you organize an activity. They would be thrilled to contribute! All you need to do is make sure that one aspect of your strategic plan addresses the inclusion of differently-abled people, not as a target group, but rather as a group whose participation is encouraged. Be careful! Do not forget that people living with disabilities are full-fledged members of society and of the group. Sometimes people thoughtlessly group people living with disabilities together, which isolates them from the other participants. The whole purpose of inclusion is undermined when we do this!

Figure 1: We are all vegetables!

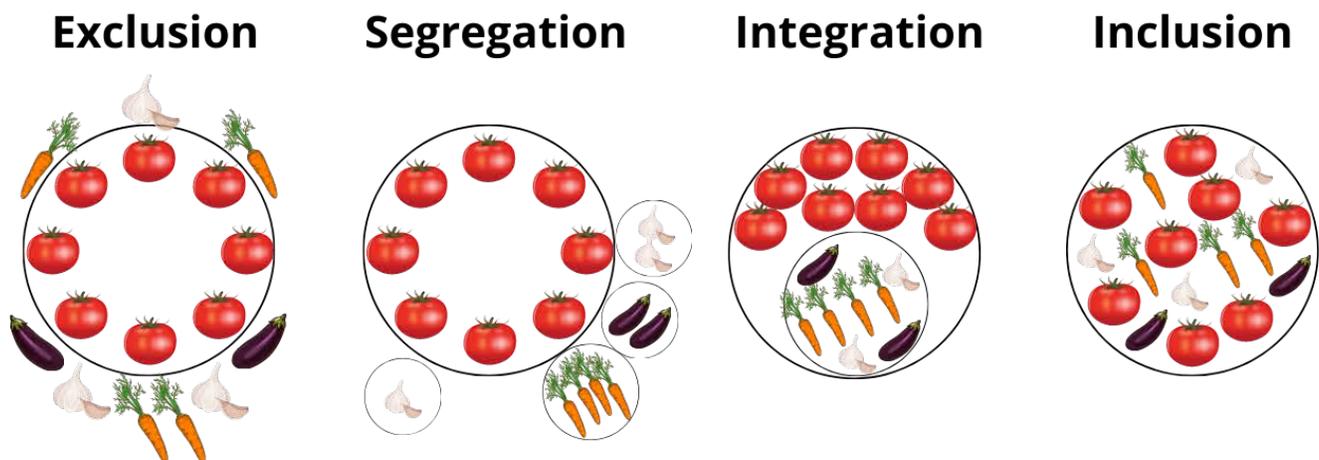


Illustration inspired by Tomates Felices

2 People living with disabilities are everywhere! Most disabilities are invisible but they are very present

We have the habit of thinking that everyone with a disability uses a wheelchair or walks with a white cane... This widespread myth is based on a misunderstanding in our society! The famous symbol that represents people with disabilities in most public places also feeds this misrepresentation.

In reality, 80% of disabilities are invisible...This means that we cannot detect them if no one talks about them.

It can be very delicate to ask someone whether they are living with a disability, so what should we do? The answer is very simple: we should employ the same techniques that we use when it comes to gender. All we have to do is add the question as part of our round-table introductions in every meeting we have that touches on the subject of disabilities. The answers you get might surprise you. Given that 10% of people in the world live are differently-abled, the chances that at least 1 in 10 participants in your activity are in this situation is high.

3 Equality is not equity

It is not enough to make sure that people with disabilities are present at our activities! We also have to ensure their full participation. While it would be impossible to list all of your options in a few lines, the golden rule is to remember that each person is unique. We are all equal, but that doesn't mean that we all have the same needs. On the contrary! Above all, it means that we are all equal in terms of rights and this is why we have to equip ourselves to encourage the participation of people with disabilities in a way that respects the specificity of individual situations.

We have established regulations to ensure the full participation of people with disabilities in our activities, most notably those concerned with accessibility, a term that describes the way that physical spaces and information are made available to differently-abled people. Accessibility requires, resources, means, and significant preparation and is, first and foremost, the role of the state.

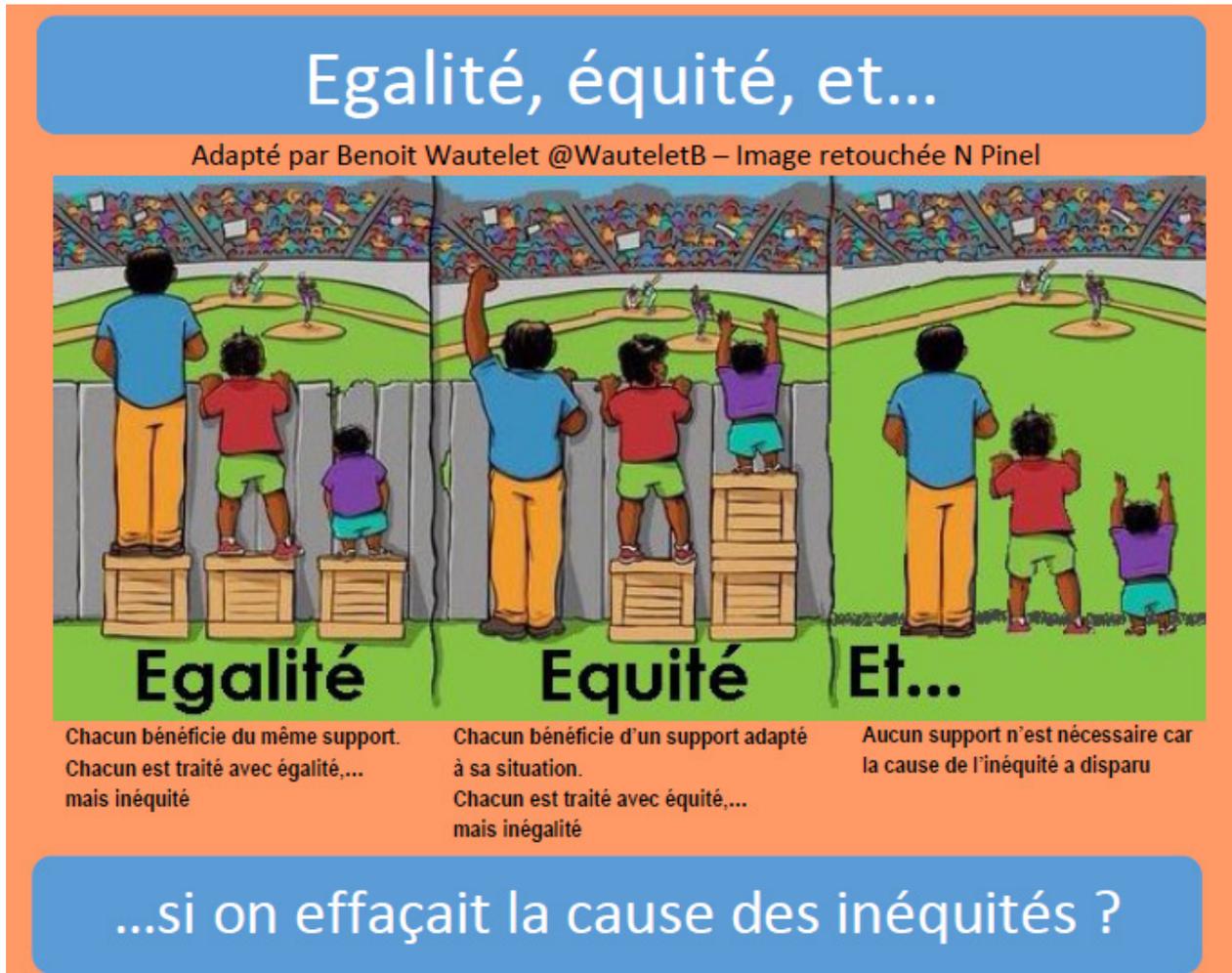
When it comes to the average person, there is an alternative whenever we encounter a lack of accessibility: reasonable accommodation, which, as its name suggests, is reasonable!

For example, if we consider a simple meeting, here is a non-exhaustive list of the accommodations we might foresee in our plan:

- For a person living with a motor impairment (which one? Say, someone who uses a wheelchair!): make sure that the building is accessible and that it has accessible washrooms. In the room where the activity takes place, make enough space to allow for the person or people to be able to move around so that they are not forced to stay in one place all day.
- For someone with a visual impairment: **description** is important. Describe the room (size, shape, location of all participants), describe the contents of images (if you are using visual supports). Don't worry if you haven't arranged for braille translation when you use paper documents; instead, just send the document by email. New reader technology will allow people who are visually impaired to access the material (be aware, though, that Word documents are preferable as not all readers read PDFs or other document formats).
- For people who are hard of hearing, Deaf, or deafened: what air is to sound, light is to the image! Sign language is fundamental, but so is lighting in the spaces we use. In order to read lips and hear you, the hard of hearing or Deaf person needs to face the person who is speaking. If the person turns around, it is as though they have pressed the "mute" button. And one more thing: there is no need to scream! Facial expressions matter too; just speak at an ordinary pace!
- For people with cognitive disabilities: these folks understand at their own rhythm...Do not forget that they are there. Address them directly and use simple words.

There are other disabilities that we did not mention here and other recommendations we have to give, but as we explained above, it is impossible to list them all! What should you do if you are facing a situation that is not covered in the points above? The answer is in the next section.

Figure 2:...what if we erased the cause of inequity?



4 When in doubt, ask!

When someone is open about their disability, you can openly ask them the question! Without asking what they “suffer” from, you can simply ask them “do you have any requests or needs that, if met, would facilitate your participation in this activity?” “What can we do to facilitate your participation?”.

The person you are speaking to will decide whether they want to communicate this information with you. If ever you feel that they have not told you everything, don't rush them. At the opportune moment, ask them again: "We want to ensure that you benefit from optimal participation conditions. If ever you feel that is not the case, we are here to make the necessary accommodations"...There is no need to write down these exact phrases; the idea is that we ask rather than thinking for someone else; people living with disabilities are the experts in these situations and they know what they need!

Figure 3: Making the "handicapped" compatible

RENDRE le "HANDICAPÉ" COMPATIBLE...

