

# perspectives

A Quarterly Viewletter

Vol 4 | Issue 3 | January 2026

Corporate-Community Coalitions: Scaling Inclusive Employment Practices

## The Role of Accessible Infrastructure in Expanding Workforce Participation

GUEST VIEW

India's economic aspirations depend on who can participate in its systems of work, commerce, and mobility. A significant share of the population continues to face everyday impediments while accessing transport networks, public buildings, and digital services. These conditions affect persons with disabilities, older citizens, people with temporary injuries, pregnant women, and caregivers travelling with children. When movement is restricted, access to employment narrows, productivity weakens, and markets lose active participants. Accessibility functions as economic infrastructure, enabling people to reach jobs, training centres, customers, and services independently.

National-level discussions renewed attention on the relationship between access and growth. These engagements brought economic evidence to support what lived experience has long demonstrated. A 2025 white paper by KPMG and Svayam, 'Does Accessibility Make Economic Sense?', quantified the scale of opportunity associated with accessible design across transport, tourism, sports, and digital systems. The analysis assigned a monetary value to exclusion, linking inaccessible environments to lost productive years, reduced labor participation, and diminished market activity. In sports tourism, accessible venues serve as a powerful catalyst, drawing diverse global visitors and generating substantial revenue, while on a larger scale, they pave the way for booming

medical and religious tourism sectors, supercharging India's economy and heightening international awareness of its inclusive prowess. For industry, this reframes accessibility as a measurable economic variable rather than a peripheral consideration. It provides a shared reference point for dialogue among businesses, planners, and policymakers, grounding inclusion debates in data rather than intent.

### Transport Systems as Gatekeepers of Employment

Hiring commitments alone cannot address this gap. When employees struggle to reach workplaces, training locations, or service points consistently, inclusion efforts lose traction. Accessibility at the infrastructure and

A 2025 white paper by KPMG and Svayam, 'Does Accessibility Make Economic Sense?', quantified the scale of opportunity associated with accessible design across transport, tourism, sports, and digital systems.

transport level creates conditions where participation sustains itself. Collaboration between industry, public systems, and community actors becomes essential in this process. These coalitions enable early identification of operational obstacles, testing of solutions in real settings, and expansion across networks rather than confinement to isolated sites. Early



**Sminu Jindal**

Chairperson, CII National Committee on Empowerment of Person with Disabilities & IBDN and Managing Director, Jindal Saw Limited

integration of accessibility reduces the financial and operational burden associated with retrofitting later.

Transport systems remain the most decisive factor in this equation. Railways, buses, footpaths, terminals, and ticketing platforms determine who can travel independently and reliably. Progress across India has been uneven. Several high-traffic railway stations now provide ramps, lifts, tactile pathways, and accessible toilets. Many stations serving smaller towns continue to lack basic provisions. Road transport reflects similar disparities, with limited deployment of low-floor buses and accessible depots beyond major cities. First- and last-mile connectivity frequently breaks down through uneven pavements, inaccessible feeder

services, and limited paratransit options. For workers in shift-based roles or those travelling long distances, these conditions often decide whether employment remains viable over time.

## The Economic Cost of Restricted Mobility

The economic implications of restricted mobility are substantial. The KPMG analysis estimates that nearly one-third of India's population experiences reduced mobility, a figure that expands when household dependence is considered. Workforce participation among persons with disabilities remains significantly lower than the national average, with sharper disparities among women. These patterns translate into millions of lost workdays and narrowed employment choices annually, particularly outside metropolitan centres. Employers face a reduced talent pool, higher attrition, and uneven attendance, outcomes that affect operational efficiency across sectors.

Industry holds a decisive role in accelerating the shift. Corporate - community coalitions function when accessibility is treated as shared infrastructure rather than isolated compliance

When accessibility is integrated at the planning and systems level, it creates multiplier effects across sectors. Improved access enables participation not only in employment but also in education, skill development, entrepreneurship, healthcare, and markets. As these pathways open, employment opportunities expand organically—benefiting individuals, employers, and the wider economy alike. Accessibility therefore functions as an enabler of opportunity, where integrating inclusive design unlocks interconnected routes to work, productivity, and economic resilience.

Digital systems introduce further exclusion. Ticketing portals, mobile applications, and information kiosks often lack compatibility with assistive technologies or intuitive navigation for users with visual, cognitive, or dexterity-related limitations. Real-time

information on service disruptions or accessibility features rarely appears in usable formats, limiting independent trip planning. These shortcomings affect punctuality, job retention, and training attendance, reinforcing disadvantage even where employment opportunities exist. As services migrate online, digital accessibility becomes inseparable from physical mobility.

Targeted interventions demonstrate that these challenges can be addressed effectively. Access audits of transport infrastructure, combined with operational changes and staff training, have produced immediate improvements in usability and ridership. Predictable, inclusive transport systems expand participation without requiring parallel support structures. Workers travel with greater confidence, training attendance stabilises, and employers benefit from consistent workforce engagement.

## Corporate-Community Coalitions and Scaled Participation

Industry holds a decisive role in accelerating this shift. Corporate - community coalitions function when accessibility is treated as shared infrastructure rather than isolated compliance. Businesses contribute scale, investment capacity, and execution discipline. Community organisations provide user insight and continuous feedback. Public agencies enable alignment across standards and networks. This collaboration moves accessibility from intention to implementation and provides continuity beyond individual projects or leadership transitions.

Access determines participation long before hiring decisions are made. Treating infrastructure and transport as shared economic assets will decide how widely opportunity spreads in the years ahead.

*Views expressed are personal.*

### MY VIEW

## A Commitment For Change



Sunil Misra  
CEO  
CII Foundation

“As India moves towards Viksit Bharat, it is important to accelerate inclusive growth. When government, corporates, communities, and civil society come together, inclusion moves from intent to impact. Corporate-community coalitions enable businesses to tap local potential, create dignified livelihoods and build resilient ecosystems. At CII Foundation, we see these partnerships as critical to scaling inclusive employment practices that are imperative for India's inclusive development.”

# Corporate–Community Coalitions: Scaling Employment Inclusion for People with Disabilities

GUEST VIEW

After 25 years working at the intersection of digital accessibility, employment, and inclusion, disability inclusion does not fail because of lack of intent. It fails because we try to solve a systems problem with isolated efforts.

Most organizations genuinely want to hire people with disabilities. Many run pilots, partner with a single NGO, or announce inclusive hiring goals. Yet the disability employment gap remains stubbornly wide. The reason is simple and uncomfortable.

Inclusive employment for people with disabilities cannot scale inside corporate walls alone. It requires coalitions that bring together employers, disability organizations, accessibility experts, skilling partners, and policy actors into a shared operating system.

Having founded BarrierBreak, a global leader in digital accessibility with a workforce which includes people with disabilities at the core, I believe it is possible to scale inclusion of people with disabilities in the workforce. But the way we are doing it needs to change!

## Inclusion Begins with Culture, But it Endures Through Systems and Processes

Building an inclusive culture cannot succeed in one direction alone. It must be driven top down through leadership commitment, policies, and accountability, and built bottom up designing everyday work so people experience inclusion, not just hear about it.

It starts by listening to those closest to the barriers. Employees, especially people with disabilities, need safe ways to share what is not working in tools, processes, or culture, and see action follows that feedback.

Next, equip managers and teams. Day-to-day inclusion lives with hiring managers, team leads, and peers. Practical training on accessibility, accommodations, and inclusive collaboration matters far more than broad awareness sessions.

Embed inclusion into routines and processes. Make accessibility and inclusion part of team checklists, sprint planning, procurement reviews, and performance conversations. When inclusion shows up in everyday workflows, it stops feeling optional.

When both move together, inclusion shifts from intent to practice and becomes part of how organizations truly operate.

## Building Talent Pipelines

Disability hiring efforts often begin with disability organizations because they offer an immediate, trusted pathway to reach candidates and demonstrate intent. We see skill-to-hire programs that organizations partner with disability NGOs to deliver.

Accessibility cannot live as a policy document. It must live in procurement decisions, software configurations, and everyday management practices.

While this approach is a natural starting point, it can unintentionally frame disability inclusion as a separate or specialized stream rather than part of mainstream hiring. Disability organizations play a critical role in outreach and support, but they represent only a part of the available talent pool. Many people with disabilities are already in mainstream education, employment, and professional networks and may not be connected to these organizations at all.

To truly advance inclusion, disability must be normalized within all hiring channels. I truly see this as the way forward to build community coalition. It starts with all hiring channel partners also starting at sourcing talent. When you as an organization start asking for this talent pool, you raise awareness and then organizations can also benefit from the partners working with other organizations.



Shilpi Kapoor

Founder & CEO  
BarrierBreak

But remember, normalizing hiring means ensuring career pages, job portals, assessments, employee referrals, campuses, and lateral hiring processes are accessible by default. When inclusion is built into mainstream sourcing, candidates do not have to self-select into “special” pipelines to be considered.

Going beyond disability organizations also reduces stigma. It signals that people with disabilities are part of the core workforce, not a separate category.

## Integrating People with Disabilities into the Workforce by Designing Inclusive Touchpoints

Employer readiness is non-negotiable. I always tell people co-create inclusive touchpoints with the people who it is for. As organizations work with building inclusive systems and processes, it starts with onboarding.

Onboarding is equally critical. Clear documentation, accessible digital tools, early accommodation conversations, and manager readiness all determine whether a hire succeeds. Inclusion does not end at offer letter acceptance. Career progression, performance management, and leadership pathways matter just as much.

Organizations must invest in building internal capability while working with coalitions. This includes training recruiters and managers, budgeting for accommodations without bureaucratic friction, and embedding accessibility into HR technology and digital workflows.

Accessibility cannot live as a policy document. It must live in procurement decisions, software configurations, and everyday management practices. In a world where most organizations are tech driven, ensuring your websites, digital assets are inclusive is critical. Accessibility is a journey, it isn't a one-time fix.

With the Rights for Persons with Disabilities Act, accessibility should no longer be an afterthought. Accessibility is a journey.

I know it all feels daunting, but this where identifying people who can support you in this journey matters. Identify your partners. The one advise I give every corporate is the day you start treating this as "special", you will be able to make the right policy and process decisions. Provide for

reasonable accommodation, have a strategy and a plan to build accessibility into your organization, but remember it is about people.

### Common Failure Modes to Avoid

Coalitions fail when they are treated as short-term projects, when funding is fragile, or when power remains unbalanced. Charity framing, quota-driven hiring, and compliance - only approaches erode trust quickly. So does excluding people with disabilities from leadership roles within the coalition itself.

Inclusion that is not embedded eventually collapses under operational pressure.

Scaling disability inclusion does not mean forcing one model everywhere. Disabilities vary. Industries vary. Regions vary. Coalitions that scale successfully establish shared principles and frameworks while allowing local adaptation.

Technology plays an important role here. Shared accessibility standards, common training modules, and interoperable tools reduce duplication

while preserving flexibility. Scale should amplify impact, not flatten lived experience.

### Measuring What Actually Matters

Counting hires is easy. Measuring inclusion is harder. Mature coalitions move beyond headcount to track retention, role mobility, accommodation turnaround times, and employee experience for people with disabilities.

Disability inclusion at scale is not about exceptional effort by a few committed individuals. It is about shared responsibility, shared expertise, and sustained collaboration.

After decades in this field, I no longer believe the central question is "How do we hire more people with disabilities?" The better question is "What systems are excluding them, and who needs to work together to dismantle those systems?"

Disability Inclusion needs to be intentional till it becomes your culture. Inclusion starts with you.

*Views expressed are personal.*



## Sustainable Development Goal 10

### Reduce Inequality Within and Among Countries

Inequality threatens long-term social and economic development, harms poverty reduction and destroys people's sense of fulfillment and self-worth.

Reports of discrimination are on the rise worldwide, affecting urban residents, women, persons with disabilities, the poorest and those with lower education levels most severely. Discrimination remains a pervasive, systemic issue tied to social identity and status. Globally, 1 in 5 people report experiencing discrimination on grounds prohibited by international law within the past year, with rates highest in Least Developed Countries, averaging 24.3%.

Youth (15–29 years) more often report discrimination based on migration status, ethnicity and sexual orientation, while older adults (60+ years) encounter age, disability and health-related discrimination.

Inequality threatens long-term social and economic development, harms poverty reduction and destroys people's sense of fulfillment and self-worth. This, in turn, can breed crime, disease and environmental degradation.

We cannot achieve sustainable development and make the planet better for all if people are excluded from the chance for a better life.

#### Goal 10 Targets

10.1 By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average.

10.2 By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status.

10.3 Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard.

10.4 Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality.

10.5 Improve the regulation and monitoring of global financial markets and institutions and strengthen the implementation of such regulations.

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# Bringing the Marginalised into the Mainstream: A Community Leader's Story

Psychosocial disabilities are often unseen and deeply misunderstood, mainly due to a lack of awareness about them. For women living with psychosocial disabilities, this invisibility is intensified by poverty, gender discrimination, and cultural stigma. The result is often neglect, violence, and exclusion from community life altogether. It is within this complex and challenging reality that Sumitra Gagrai, a grassroots woman leader and recipient of the CII Woman Exemplar Award in the Health category in 2020, has emerged as a quiet yet powerful force for inclusion.

Born into the indigenous Ho tribe, Sumitra's own life was shaped by displacement, illness, and loss. For over a decade, she worked in West Singhbhum district in Jharkhand, one of India's most deprived regions, to build a community-based health and mental health care model that places dignity, acceptance, and inclusion at its core. Through her work with Ekjut, a pioneering rural health organisation, Sumitra and her team have reached thousands of women, addressing maternal and neonatal health while also confronting one of the most neglected dimensions of public health: psychosocial disability.

Starting from her own lived experiences of illness, loss, and marginalisation, Sumitra has helped shape one of Jharkhand's first community-led rural mental health models.

## Disability at the Margins

West Singhbhum is home to several tribal communities, including the Ho, Munda, Oraon, and Santhal tribes. The district records some of the country's worst health indicators—high levels of malnutrition, maternal and neonatal mortality, and limited access to formal education and healthcare. Within this fragile ecosystem, mental health conditions are widespread yet rarely acknowledged.

For women, the consequences are especially severe. Behaviours associated with mental illness are often interpreted through the lens of superstition, and women labelled as "witches" are subjected to humiliation, torture and ostracism. Disability here is not only medical: it is social, cultural, and structural.



Sumitra's understanding of this reality is deeply personal. As a young woman, she lost her younger sister, who was mentally disturbed, to suicide. Poverty, stigma and neglect became barriers in her treatment. This loss became a turning point for Sumitra.

## Health Beyond Clinical Care

Sumitra joined Ekjut at the age of 17 as a field supervisor, initially working on maternal and neonatal health programs. Her work led to significant improvements in maternal and infant health outcomes across 70 villages. As Sumitra's work deepened, so did her understanding of health as a social construct. She witnessed how domestic violence, food insecurity and social isolation exacerbated mental distress and undermine women's health and agency.

Recognising this gap, Sumitra and her colleagues expanded their approach. Rather than relying on institutional care, which was largely inaccessible in rural Jharkhand, they began to build a community-based model of mental health care, grounded in dialogue, counselling, and local leadership.





## An Inclusive Community-Based Model for Psychosocial Disability

At the heart of this model are Yuva Sathis, tribal youth trained as barefoot health and mental health counsellors. Sumitra played a key role in identifying, training, and mentoring 30 young men and women across villages in Khuntipani block. These youth are equipped to identify signs of mental distress, provide long-term counselling, and engage families and communities in conversations about mental health.

This approach deliberately moves away from stigma and institutionalisation. Persons living with psychosocial disabilities are supported within their families and communities, rather than being isolated or hidden away. Counselling is complemented by community sensitisation workshops that challenge myths around witchcraft and possession, reframing mental

illness as a health condition that deserves care and compassion.

Where medical intervention is required, individuals are connected to psychiatrists through tele-counselling. Importantly, this is done alongside ongoing social support, ensuring continuity of care. In less than a year, this model built mental health awareness across 24 villages, supporting over 80 individuals living with mental illness and 160 caregivers. The majority of those reached are women who would otherwise have been at high risk of violence or exclusion.

## Inclusion Through Dignity and Belonging

What distinguishes Sumitra's work is its grounding in the principles of inclusion, dignity, and belonging. Her model recognises that disability is not only about impairment but about the barriers society places in the way of individuals. Through adolescent groups and youth

forums, she has also ensured that conversations around mental health begin early, creating safer and more informed communities.

Starting from her own lived experiences of illness, loss, and marginalisation, Sumitra has helped shape one of Jharkhand's first community-led rural mental health models. Yuva Sathis now stand as local champions of care and inclusion, challenging deeply entrenched beliefs and practices.

In the villages of West Singhbhum, Sumitra is not just addressing illness; she is restoring dignity, rewriting narratives and building a culture which is inclusive and where care replaces fear. Her work stands as a powerful example of what inclusive health systems can look like when they are shaped by lived experience and community trust.



To know more about CII Foundation's initiatives write to  
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Published by The CII Foundation