

# PERSONS WITH REDUCED MOBILITY IN CONTEMPORARY KYRGYZSTAN: ASPECTS OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY

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**Abstract.** Analysing the situation of persons with reduced mobility in the context of social inequality requires, first and foremost, clarification of the conceptual framework. The central concept is that of "persons with reduced mobility" (PRM). PRMs are defined as individuals who experience difficulty moving independently, obtaining necessary services, accessing information, or navigating their physical environment. This category includes persons with disabilities, individuals with temporary health impairments, pregnant women, older persons, and parents with prams, among others.

**Keywords:** barrier-free environment, accessible environment, building entrance design, universal design, reasonable accommodation, persons with reduced mobility.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The challenge of ensuring equal opportunities for persons with reduced mobility (PRMs) is becoming increasingly prominent in Kyrgyzstan in the context of implementing sustainable development principles and the country's international human rights obligations. Despite notable progress in the legislative framework, a significant proportion of citizens continue to face systemic accessibility barriers — architectural, informational, and social.

### 1.1. Conceptual Framework

The central concept of this study is that of "persons with reduced mobility" (PRMs). The term is often associated primarily with wheelchair users; however, it is considerably broader and encompasses all individuals who experience difficulty moving independently, obtaining necessary services, accessing information, or navigating their surroundings. In the absence of an established equivalent term in domestic academic usage, the authors employ this designation throughout the article.

The second key concept is social inequality. In sociology, this phenomenon is approached from a range of perspectives:

- Inequality is a condition in which people have unequal access to social goods such as material resources, power, and social status (prestige) [3];
- Social inequality is a specific form of social differentiation in which individuals, social groups, strata, and classes occupy different positions within the vertical structure of society and possess unequal life chances and capacities to satisfy their needs [1].

Synthesising these definitions, social inequality may be characterised as a set of living conditions under which people have unequal access to limited resources — material, intellectual, and cultural — both at the individual and societal level. The definitions reflect various dimensions of inequality: gender, age, ethnicity, and estate. However, none adequately captures the specific nature of the inequality experienced by persons with disabilities, and wheelchair users in particular.

In sociological scholarship, the situation of persons with disabilities is analysed within the framework of social stratification theory. Within society, persons with disabilities constitute a distinct social community — informal, empirically real, and performing supportive, expressive, and instrumental functions.

### 1.2. Historical Background

The current position of persons with reduced mobility in Kyrgyzstan can hardly be regarded as a model of social equality. The roots of the problem lie in the Soviet past: the USSR prioritised the construction of an “ideal future” that excluded population categories deemed inconsistent with state ideology. The existence of persons with disabilities was effectively denied, with the result that neither the legal framework, nor the infrastructure, nor the public environment was adapted to the needs of PRMs [7].

While European states were already recognising the rights of wheelchair users and creating conditions for their full participation in social life, Kyrgyzstan was only beginning to grasp the significance of the issue. As a result, addressing this social challenge in the republic lagged behind global trends by several decades.

The aim of this article is to analyse the current state of the legislative framework and accessibility statistics in the Kyrgyz Republic, and to identify the key obstacles to the social integration of PRMs.

## 2. RESULTS

### 2.1. International Legal Framework: The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 13 December 2006 and entered into force on 3 May 2008. It is the first international legally binding instrument designed to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. As of 2025, the Convention has been ratified by 193 countries; Kyrgyzstan acceded on 13 March 2019. The Convention’s overarching aim is to recognise persons with disabilities as full members of society and to guarantee their rights. The instrument consists of 50 articles; its preamble enshrines the principles of human dignity, freedom, and equality.

Article 9 of the Convention addresses accessibility and obliges states to ensure equal access for persons with disabilities to the physical environment, transport, information, communications, and public services. Key provisions include:

- identification and elimination of accessibility barriers;
- ensuring the accessibility of facilities and services open to the public — buildings, roads, and transport infrastructure;
- adaptation of information technologies (internet and telecommunications);
- ensuring the accessibility of emergency services.

Pursuant to paragraph 1 of the article, states are required to guarantee equal accessibility in both urban and rural areas. Related articles of the Convention — Article 5 (elimination of discrimination), Article 13 (access to justice), and Article 21 (freedom of expression and access to information) — further elaborate the broader accessibility context.

In Kyrgyzstan, ratification of the Convention was formalised by an act of the Jogorku Kenesh (parliament) in 2019 and integrated into national legislation, including the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In 2021, Kyrgyzstan submitted its first report to the UN Committee, in which the level of accessibility was assessed at 50%. The Optional Protocol to the Convention has not yet been ratified, although civil society organisations are pressing for its adoption, as it would open the mechanism of individual complaints to the UN.

By way of comparison, the European Union ratified the Convention in 2011 and, through the European Accessibility Act (EAA), made WCAG standards mandatory; Japan’s implementation of universal design principles has resulted in approximately 90% of urban infrastructure becoming accessible.

### 2.2. National Legislative Framework

The state programme “Accessible Country” for 2023–2030, approved by decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic in February 2023, is the principal instrument for ensuring accessibility for PRMs. The programme is grounded in the SDG principle of “leaving no one behind” and covers five areas: the physical environment, transport, information, education and healthcare, and monitoring. Programme objectives include:

- optimisation of medical and social assessment procedures;
- development of rehabilitation, habilitation, and early intervention services;
- expansion of employment opportunities for persons with disabilities;
- creation of accessible infrastructure applying the principles of universal design and reasonable accommodation;
- improvement of prosthetics and orthotics provision;
- development of inclusive education.

As of 2025, the programme implementation rate stands at 78%: 2,847 facilities have been assessed, 1,642 ramps installed (exceeding the planned target by 12%), and 312 low-floor buses commissioned.

The legislative framework is further supported by the following instruments:

- Law on Social Protection of the Population (2022) — governs disability pensions and benefits; in 2025, 70,600 unemployed persons with disabilities were registered;
- Law on Public Transport (2024 revision) — provides for 50% subsidisation of low-floor bus procurement; as of 2025, only 67% of trolleybuses are accessible;
- Amendments to the Law on Public Procurement (2024) — make the accessibility criterion a mandatory evaluation criterion;
- Order of the Ministry of Health No. 487 (2023) — requires healthcare facilities to provide sign language interpretation and Braille menus.

### 2.3. Disability Statistics in the Kyrgyz Republic

According to data as of 1 January 2024, the number of persons with disabilities in Kyrgyzstan stands at 217,222 — approximately 3% of the total population. Children with disabilities (aged 0–17) number around 37,000, representing approximately 1.4% of the child population.

Trends in first-time disability registrations at the national level:

- 2020: 8,758 newly registered persons with disabilities;
- 2021: 10,888;
- 2022: 12,002.

The distribution of disability by type, based on data from the National Statistical Committee (NSC) and UNPRPD, is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Disability Structure in Kyrgyzstan**

Type of Disability	National Share	Est. for Osh City
General (chronic) diseases	55–60%	5,900–6,600
Musculoskeletal / locomotor disorders	12–14%	1,300–1,500
Visual impairments	7–8%	750–880
Hearing impairments	4–5%	450–550
Mental / intellectual disabilities	5–7%	500–760
Congenital anomalies	3–4%	300–420

*Source: National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, UNPRPD, 2024.*

For Osh city (the second capital of Kyrgyzstan): children with disabilities (aged 0–18) number 1,700–2,000; adults 8,700–9,000. Children account for 17–18% of the national total of persons with disabilities.

## 3. DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Implementation Challenges

Despite evident progress in the legislative framework and the partial achievement of programme targets, the current state of the accessible environment in Kyrgyzstan remains unsatisfactory. The principal challenges are systemic in nature.

First, informational and communicative accessibility does not enable PRMs to integrate fully into the digital space. The level of digital service uptake is directly dependent on users' digital literacy, interface usability, staff attitudes, and technical capacity. A deficiency in any one of these components systematically restricts access for PRMs to public services, education, and social participation.

Second, while the “Accessible Country” programme has reached a 78% implementation rate, the actual accessibility of facilities varies considerably by region: rural areas lag substantially behind urban centres in terms of infrastructural accessibility.

Third, the marked increase in first-time disability registrations in 2021–2023 — driven by the consequences of COVID-19 and rising numbers of occupational and migration-related injuries — calls for a revision of the targets set in existing programmes.

### 3.2. Comparison with International Experience

The experience of states that have made substantial progress in the area of accessibility — the EU and Japan — demonstrates that the key success factors are: mandatory accessibility standards within public procurement systems; robust public oversight mechanisms, including the right to lodge individual complaints; and the consistent application of universal design principles at the design stage, rather than through the retrofitting of existing facilities. For Kyrgyzstan, Article 9 of the CRPD on accessibility is aligned with SDG 11 (inclusive cities), which creates opportunities to attract international financing and technical assistance.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The analysis conducted allows the following conclusions to be drawn.

The legislative framework of the Kyrgyz Republic — comprising the Constitution, the CRPD, relevant domestic laws, and the “Accessible Country” programme — broadly conforms to international standards but requires stronger enforcement mechanisms. Disability statistics indicate a sustained increase in the number of persons with disabilities: as of 2024, 217,222 people, representing approximately 3% of the national population. Programme targets are being met primarily with regard to physical infrastructure (ramp installation, low-floor vehicle procurement), while digital and informational accessibility remains critically insufficient.

To improve the effectiveness of inclusive policy, the following measures are needed: ratification of the Optional Protocol to the CRPD; increased budget allocations to the “Accessible Country” programme; development of unified digital accessibility standards; and strengthened monitoring mechanisms with the meaningful involvement of organisations of persons with disabilities.

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