Social protection plays a key role in realizing the rights of persons with disabilities of all ages: providing them with an adequate standard of living, a basic level of income security; thus reducing levels of poverty and vulnerability. Moreover, mainstream and/or specific social protection schemes concerning persons with disabilities can have a major role in promoting their independence and inclusion by meeting their specific needs and supporting their social participation in a non-discriminatory manner. These social protection measures may include poverty reduction schemes, cash transfer programmes, social and health insurance, public work programmes, housing programmes, disability pensions and mobility grants.

Social protection from a rights-based approach must accommodate the needs of persons with disabilities. Traditional disability-related social welfare schemes have mainly focused on poverty rather than taking into account specific challenges faced by persons with disabilities; particularly active participation in education, access to health and employment. Previous methods of addressing benefits for persons with disabilities have shown limited progress in overcoming the deeply-rooted social structures and practices that hinder opportunities for persons with disabilities. Consequently, social protection needs to move beyond traditional welfare approaches to intervention systems that promote active citizenship, social inclusion and community participation while avoiding paternalism and dependence.

The right of persons with disabilities to social protection is recognized by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and, more specifically, the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Article 28 of the CRPD in particular recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to an adequate standard of living and to social protection, ensuring the enjoyment of both rights without discrimination on the basis of ability. Therefore, States parties should take appropriate measures to ensure that they receive equal access to mainstream social protection programmes and services —including basic services, social security systems, poverty reduction programmes and housing programmes— but also specific programmes and services for disability-related needs and expenses.

Furthermore, the Social Protection Floors Recommendation (No. 202) recognizes the importance of national social protection floors to provide basic social security guarantees to all persons, including persons with disabilities, across the life cycle (with priority given to poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion). Recently, as a result of the global financial and economic crisis, some high-income countries have begun contracting out their social security systems. These measures, taken by the State, have a compound effect and disproportionately impact persons with disabilities. In contrast, many middle and low-income countries have begun strengthening their social protection systems and adopting a number of programmes and counter cyclical measures to reduce poverty, exclusion and inequality especially among vulnerable populations.