

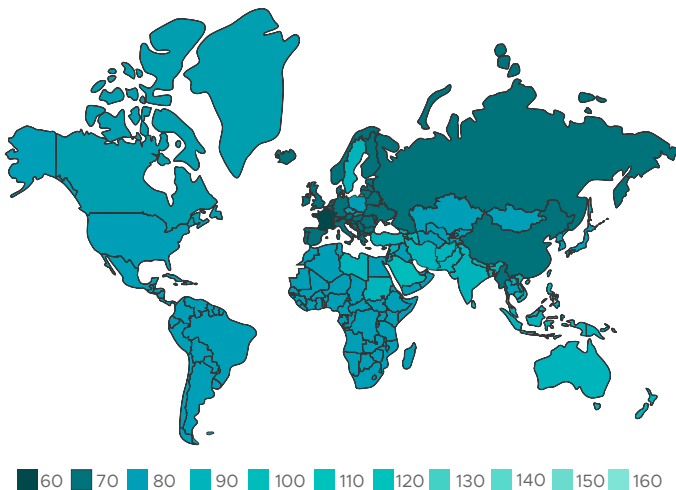


AUTISM:

2022 the year of inclusive education

According to the United Nations Assembly, April 2 marks World Autism Awareness Day, a condition of cognitive development characterized by generating a process of perception and social interaction in a different way. Although not all cases are diagnosed, information that has been collected on the autistic population is shown below.

Graphic 1: Prevalence of autism for every 10.000 boys and girls

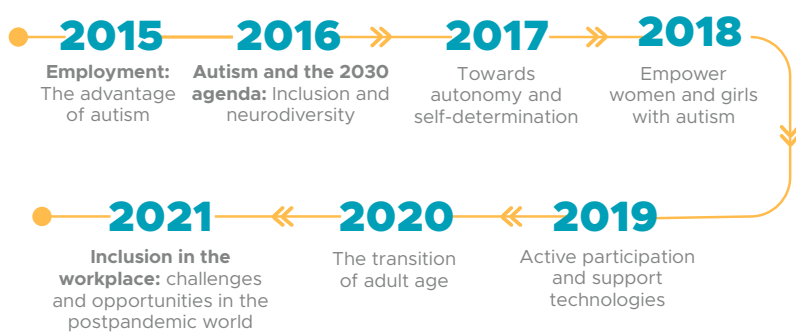


Source: World Population Review¹



In Colombia, it is estimated that around **85 of each 10.000 boys and girls are on the autistic spectrum!**

Since 2015, each of these days has a specific theme, as shown in the following timeline:



In 2022, the theme is related to **inclusive quality education for all**, which is immersed in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number four (4), aimed at guaranteeing inclusive, equitable, quality education and promoting learning opportunities throughout life.

It is important to guarantee the training of people with autism spectrum in all educational levels, as well as professional training for their insertion in the world of work (United Nations, 2022)²; this was the conclusion of last year's theme on "inclusion in the workplace" and which leads to the theme of the year 2022. Thus, inclusive education is essential to allow the development of the potential of people with autism spectrum, but it is evident that there are still many challenges for education to be inclusive for all people who have a different neurological development, also known as "neurodiverse people".

In accordance with this, the United Nations held a virtual conference³ where several experts, representatives of organizations and people with autism spectrum, gathered to discuss the challenges and postulates to improve inclusive education, as well as to present some initiatives from different places of origin.

This issues note summarizes some of the central points from the 2022 annual conference:

- Like nearly 90 % of students who were affected by the closure of educational centers due to the pandemic, **students with this condition were mostly affected** since they normally have less access to the internet, they had to change their routines (generating problems of anxiety), and experienced the interruption of the therapeutic services and supports that they usually had.
- In the classroom, it is crucial to keep in mind that there may be **students who have not been diagnosed** and therefore may live with this condition without any early or late intervention, which may cause them to experience emotional, sensory challenges and to have more difficulties in some educational processes. For this reason, training education professionals becomes important, so that they can be more receptive and have information to implement a more inclusive environment that takes into account the different cognitive developments of students.
- Although there has been talks about the need to invest in equipment, resources and facilities for inclusive education, experts affirm that in order to attend to this population, it is **necessary to raise awareness** about this condition, understanding first that one must see the value as a person and then recognize that this is a person with a specific condition in their cognitive development.
- Additionally, **not only teachers, directors, parents, but also other boys and girls who have a typical neurological development should be involved.** Various initiatives, such as the one implemented in the Philippines⁴, have included a program of interactive materials (songs, dances, cartoons) to teach both younger children and those in basic education about how to be more inclusive with their neurodiverse peers.
- Regarding the promulgation of laws and the implementation of public policies, the experts ask to take into account two things: **the difficult access to services**, as is the case of people with autism spectrum who live in rural areas, and **the active participation of people in this condition** in the decisions made for the regulation and implementation of programs aimed at inclusive education, because what may be correct for professionals and experts may not be correct for an autistic person.
- Historically, **the access of this population to higher education and subsequent insertion in the labor market is low**, for this reason it is necessary to create strategies to improve their inclusion in society. In Aalborg, Denmark⁵ an initiative emerged in which volunteers from the civil society are in charge of providing training on how to create an inclusive environment for neurodiverse people in local companies.

In this way, research in this area becomes a fundamental tool to allow effective strategies to be created, to enable the access of people with autism spectrum to each level of education, enabling their insertion in the different spheres of society. It represents a possibility to advance in the construction of a fairer and more inclusive society.

¹ World Population Review (2022). Autism rates by country [World Population Review]. Retrieved April 29, 2022: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/autism-rates-by-country>

² United Nations, (April 25, 2022). World Autism Awareness Day, April 2. [United Nations]. Available at: <https://www.un.org/es/observances/autism-day>

³ United Nations. (April 8, 2022). Inclusive Quality for All-World Autism Awareness Day [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xqT5gnwSw8>

⁴ <https://apdmphilippines.com/mainstream-inclusion-diversity-program/>
⁵ <https://specialisternefoundation.com/specialisterne/>

¹ The term autism spectrum is used because there is wide variation in the type and severity of symptoms that people experience.