

## **Inclusive action in an international setting: a universal value and individual commitment. The 'Bridges in Amman' Project**

Silvia Maggiolini\*, Elena Zanfroni\*<sup>^</sup>

### **Abstract**

The dissemination of inclusive educational principles, practices, and methods on an international scale constitutes a vital academic and pedagogical discourse, highlighting a universal commitment to cultivating educational environments that are equitable, accessible, and responsive to all learners' diverse needs. The "Bridges in Amman" project exemplifies the global movement towards inclusive education, focusing on the integration of Iraqi Christian asylum seekers in Jordan, notably in its capital, Amman. Spearheaded by Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in collaboration with HABibi VALtiberina Association and the Gemelli Medical Center, the initiative underscores the commitment to developing inclusive education, with particular attention to people in vulnerable situations. Inclusivity in education transcends the mere acknowledgment of diversity; it necessitates the adoption of practices, principles, and methods that ensure all individuals, irrespective of their backgrounds or circumstances, have access to quality education. This is crucial for groups like Iraqi Christians in Jordan, who face unique challenges due to displacement and the need for cultural and social integration.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, community empowerment, teacher training, "Bridges in Amman" Project, good practices.

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### **1. The Inclusive Perspective in the International Context**

The inclusive dimension and the educational and training practices it entails are increasingly widespread topics of research and investigation internationally, not only for the need to promote ethical values and principles (see International

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\* Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore.

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Classification of Functioning Disability and Health, WHO 2001; Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UN 2006) that call for respect for differences and diversity, but also for the increasingly urgent need to share good pedagogical work practices. This is evidenced by the fact that teachers, and more generally those working in school contexts, increasingly feel the need to reflect and acquire appropriate strategies for identifying and understanding problematic situations, whether these are formalized with a disability certification or not. This aspect is also confirmed by the preliminary survey conducted with the direct recipients of the proposed course, aimed at understanding in more detail possible work orientations in managing complex groups of students of any age group. Indeed, this dimension can only be understood and realized within what is now thought of in terms of an authentic “collective enterprise”, as defined in the expression used by Booth and Ainscow in the well-known Index for Inclusion (2014). In fact, we are fully convinced that the effectiveness and sustainability of inclusive processes derive, today more than ever, from a widespread sense of commitment, which becomes a systematic and structural element within all the institutions involved in the person's life journey. The responsibility and concrete engagement of every actor in the social network are indispensable elements for shaping an inclusive project that can be authentic and sustainable. Every interlocutor in the educational process becomes, in fact, a privileged observer who, from their perspective, is able to intercept the needs of children and adults involved in the educational action and, subsequently, to envision and design responses aimed at removing or reducing as much as possible obstacles and building bridges that allow everyone to express their uniqueness. While considering the cultural differences and the historical and normative routes that have influenced and characterized the promotion of inclusive logics in each country, it is fully believed that the effectiveness and sustainability of these now derive, more than ever, from a widespread sense of collective responsibility, understood as a systematic and structural element within all institutions involved in the life path of the person. In this sense, while the Italian context can certainly boast a regulatory apparatus rooted in time and a consolidated tradition of inclusive school and social studies and practices, it is also necessary to consider the attention and commitment that many countries, even in territories known for the delicate balances that characterize their political and institutional framework, have devoted to achieving such objectives. In this regard, it seems appropriate to consider how Jordan, the territory in which the educational programme that is the subject of this contribution took place, ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) on 1 May 2008, preceding Italy, recognised as a leading country in the implementation of the inclusive process and which adopted this Convention in 2009. Jordan has

therefore long since initiated a paradigm shift in the recognition of the rights of persons with disabilities with the enactment of this legislation: a product that has culminated in thorough and thorough legislative reviews and extensive technical consultations with stakeholders in the field, ranging from individuals, organisations and families, to workers, advocates and those actively involved in disability issues

The evidence of recent years amply conveys the idea that inclusion is not, in fact, a process to be circumscribed within well-defined boundaries, but on the contrary a work perspective that necessitates openness also to apparently unusual spaces which can instead assume, if carefully identified and designed, a crucial educational role, thus becoming an effective sounding board to consolidate the same principles and values that are at its base.

The dissemination of principles, practices and methods for inclusive education in international contexts is, in sum, a central issue in the academic and pedagogical landscape, underscoring the global commitment to promoting educational environments that are equitable, accessible and responsive to the diverse needs of all learners, even and especially where conditions of dual vulnerability emerge. This scholarly exploration seeks to illuminate the intrinsic value of promoting inclusive education across diverse cultural, social and political terrains, arguing that such efforts are not only fundamental to achieving educational equity, but also instrumental in cultivating more inclusive and just societies.

## **2. Inclusion in the socio-political complexity of Jordan: some challenging data**

Proceeding in order and availing of the support offered by the most recent statistical data on education and disability, it becomes opportune to share some useful data to understand the specificity of a country, Jordan, characterised by the presence of levels of complexity also related to the particular geopolitical situation.

The Statistics Department underscores that, as of 2019, approximately 2.4 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 reside in Jordan. Data from the 2015 General Population and Housing Census reveal that 11% of Jordan's population aged 5 and older, equating to about 264,000 individuals, live with disabilities (Humanity & Inclusion, 2022). More in details, data collected from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Development indicate that during the 2018/2019 academic year, merely 1.9% of the 1.4 million children registered in primary education, equating to 27.694 students, were identified as children with disabilities. Furthermore, the Department of Statistics in 2019

verifies that a significant 79% of school-aged individuals with disabilities are not participating in any educational programs. However, according to UNICEF Report *Jordan, Country Report on out-of-school children*, “*there is little reliable data available about the needs and challenges of children with disabilities in the school system. The Strategy notes that the strategic priority area of inclusive education should be supported by solid administrative and survey data, with the aim of developing a concrete roadmap, accessible infrastructure, prepared teachers and a public that is aware of children’s rights to inclusive education*”. In addition to a reality that is already beset by many challenges in the area of accessibility of the education system, one must also add the complexity arising from the presence of refugees from various territorial contexts, for some of whom, as in the case of Iraqis, the status of political asylum seeker is not recognised, resulting in a lack of access to certain basic rights, such as healthcare and education. In fact, Jordan’s lack of formal adherence to the 1951 Geneva Convention results in the absence of specific refugee legislation within the country, leading to the criteria for refugee status being subject to fluctuating governmental policies. Furthermore, the process for attaining refugee status is significantly influenced by the applicant’s nationality, indicating a lack of a uniform procedure for handling refugee cases across different national backgrounds, despite ongoing advocacy by various entities. (ARCS, *Fleeing Secretarianism, Civil Wars and Religious Persecution*, April 2023).

As of December 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) records indicate that 62,132 Iraqi asylum seekers have been officially registered in Jordan. This statistic represents 8.4 percent of the total non-Jordanian demographic documented by UNHCR, positioning Iraqis as the second most numerous group of non-Jordanian residents in the country, following Syrian refugees. However, it is plausible to conjecture that the genuine figure of Iraqi nationals residing in Jordan may diverge from the reported number. A significant factor contributing to this discrepancy is the voluntary nature of the UNHCR registration process, which offers international protection to those who choose to register as asylum seekers in Jordan.

Within this framework marked by multiple challenges and levels of complexity, the ‘Bridges to Amman’ project is developed, as part of the Third Mission actions promoted by the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in the year of celebration of the centenary of its foundation. Meeting places for the inclusion of Iraqi Christians in Jordan: an integrated system of medical and socio-educational services for minors and their families”, financed by the Service for Charitable Interventions in favour of the Third World of the Italian Episcopal Conference. The latter aims to promote the inclusion of Iraqi Christian asylum seekers in Jordan and their families by acting on the

development of the inclusive dimension of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem's schools and the informal school and the creation of an integrated system of socio-educational and medical services in the urban area of Amman.

### **3. The “Bridges in Amman” Project: from conceptual design to implementation**

The “Bridges in Amman” project, fostered by the synergistic collaboration between the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, the HABibi VALTiberina Association (HAVA), and other institutional partners such as the Gemelli Medical Center, embodies an innovative response to the emerging needs for inclusion and support of Iraqi Christians in Jordan.

The promoters of this project represent nodes of an educational network woven in a complex territory, a crossroads of different cultures, religions and languages. In particular, Habibi is a non-governmental organisation of the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), which has been working in the Middle East for over a decade. It is now very active in Jordan with projects targeting refugees and the most vulnerable, with a special focus on the needs of women, children and people with disabilities, with the aim of supporting their social and economic integration. Gemelli Medical Center is a Benefit Company whose Mission is to respond to the needs of people with fragility. It works, in collaboration with the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, to promote the social diffusion of complex and delicate issues and to identify new scientifically valid and ethically respectful models of human dignity and the value of life.

The idea was born out of a request for support from local communities living in a country that, throughout its history, has transformed into an obligatory layover for the mass departure of countless refugees from its borders, and is globally recognized as one of the top five countries for accommodating a significant number of asylum seekers from areas of crisis. Therefore, the objective of ‘Bridges to Amman’ is to contribute to the inclusion of Iraqi Christian asylum seekers in Jordan and in Amman in particular. Jordan, particularly its capital Amman, has been and continues to be one of the main transit destinations for Iraqi Christians (especially those belonging to the Chaldean Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church). The project starts from this observation, choosing to promote pathways and tools dedicated to them precisely while they are in this phase of transit and reinvention. For these reasons, the project focuses on the presence of Iraqi Christians within Amman, with special attention to the family environment and the education of new generations. Moreover, focusing on the

Amman area offers significant opportunities to multiply the beneficial effects and positive impacts of the project, as Iraqi Christians reside almost exclusively in this urban area.

Specifically, the commitment of the Catholic University is focused on the coordination and implementation of training courses on Inclusive Education issues, addressed to Iraqi and Jordanian teachers, counsellors and families.

This biennial initiative, started in April 2021, aimed to solidify an ecosystem of medical, socio-educational, and training services, addressing the challenges of inclusion through a holistic and interdisciplinary approach.

Central to this endeavor is the establishment of the “Casa Sacro Cuore”, a multipurpose center for children and families in the area of Jabal Amman, designed to offer a safe and welcoming space where minors and adults can access medical, educational, and psychological support. Alongside this initiative, the project emphasizes teacher and counselor training on inclusive educational strategies, aiming to promote a school environment capable of effectively meeting the needs of all students, regardless of their personal, cultural, or social conditions.

Particular focus is given to medical and psychological screening, entrusted to the expertise of the Gemelli Medical Center, to early identify special needs of students and intervene with adequate personalized support plans. The educational effort also extends to Jordanian teachers through a dedicated pathway to acquiring skills in inclusive education, thus promoting a pedagogical culture that transcends national boundaries and values diversity as an asset.

In particular, the working group focused on strengthening and expanding the project initiated by the Jordan School Office of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem in cooperation with Habibi in 2018, in response to the educational emergency affecting many Iraqi children who cannot attend Jordanian schools, thus remaining without an education at full school age. The informal school for Iraqi children is part of the 25 Jordanian schools of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem; it is located in the Hashmi Shamali district of Amman, a particularly poor area with a high concentration of Iraqi refugees. In particular, the need reported by Habibi related to the strengthening of educational and pedagogical standards, the improvement of the infrastructure and tools available and the training of teachers.

The “Bridges in Amman” project situates itself within an international context where the demand for inclusive educational practices is increasingly urgent, highlighting the necessity for collective action and shared commitment among various social actors. The collaboration between academic institutions, non-governmental organizations, and local partners becomes crucial for implementing effective interventions that guarantee the right to education and

health for the most vulnerable communities. Through a detailed analysis of needs and available resources, the project has defined specific goals and activities, aiming to establish a replicable model of inclusive intervention that can serve as a reference for other realities facing similar challenges. This approach is based on an integrated vision of inclusion, considering the person in their entirety and interacting with the different dimensions of their life, offering concrete responses to educational, social, and health needs.

The challenge of the “Bridges in Amman” project lies in its ability to transform difficulties and barriers into opportunities for growth and development, promoting inclusion as a fundamental value and universal right. International collaboration and the active involvement of local communities are key elements for the initiative's success, which aspires to leave a tangible mark on the path towards a more inclusive society, respectful of diversity.

It can therefore be considered that this project exemplifies how educational and training action, integrated with medical and socio-educational support services, can effectively contribute to the realization of an inclusive society. By placing the individual at the center of its efforts, the initiative not only addresses immediate needs but also lays the groundwork for long-term societal transformation. As we move forward, it is imperative to carry forward the lessons learned from such initiatives, recognizing that the journey towards inclusivity is a continuous process that requires unwavering dedication, innovation, and collaboration.

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## 5. Empowering communities: toward a sustainable future for inclusive education

The “Bridges in Amman” project, as detailed throughout this scholarly exploration, serves not merely as a case study in educational intervention but as a beacon for inclusive education's potential in international contexts. This initiative has underscored the indispensability of inclusive practices, tailored to accommodate the diverse needs of displaced populations, thereby illuminating a path for similar endeavors globally. Reflecting on the project's achievements reveals a multifaceted approach that synergizes medical, educational, and psychological support, ensuring a holistic model of inclusion that transcends traditional educational paradigms.

Inclusive education emerges from the “Bridges in Amman” experience as a global imperative, advocating for the universal adoption of practices that acknowledge and support the varied needs of all learners. The project's outcomes suggest that the methodologies and insights garnered can serve as a scalable model for other educational contexts, especially those grappling with the integration of vulnerable or displaced populations. This scalability entails not only the replication of specific strategies but also their thoughtful adaptation to meet different cultural, socio-economic, and political landscapes. Overcoming cultural and linguistic barriers is not just a crucial step but a foundational one in ensuring the success of inclusive educational practices. These barriers often represent the most persistent and challenging obstacles to educational reform, particularly in regions with rich and diverse historical and cultural backgrounds. The successful implementation of inclusive practices necessitates a deep understanding of these factors, as they can significantly influence both the perception and effectiveness of educational interventions.

In settings marked by complex socio-cultural dynamics, historical tensions and cultural diversities can deeply influence educational practices. For example, historical disparities in access to education can lead to entrenched attitudes towards education reforms. These attitudes can manifest as resistance or skepticism towards inclusive practices, which are often seen as foreign or imposed solutions that do not align with local values or experiences. Moreover, linguistic diversity poses a specific challenge. In regions where multiple languages are spoken, the need for educational materials and programs to be available in all local languages is not just a matter of accessibility but also of respect and equity. The development of such materials must be sensitive to the linguistic nuances that can affect comprehension and engagement.

Policy recommendations emanating from this project underscore the necessity for legislative and financial support for inclusive education. Governments and educational authorities are encouraged to adopt policies that

facilitate inclusivity, provide adequate funding for teacher training in inclusive practices, and develop accessible educational resources. Such policy frameworks can significantly enhance the capacity of educational institutions to implement inclusive education, ensuring that all students, regardless of their backgrounds or needs, have access to quality education.

Future research directions inspired by the “Bridges in Amman” project should aim to assess the long-term impacts of such inclusive educational interventions on participants’ academic achievements and life trajectories. Empirical studies could provide the evidence needed to advocate for the expansion of similar initiatives, offering insights into best practices and potential areas for improvement. Furthermore, research could explore the effectiveness of different inclusive strategies in varying cultural and educational settings, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how inclusivity can be best achieved globally.

The call for global collaboration stands as a pivotal conclusion to this exploration. It emphasizes the collective responsibility of educational institutions, NGOs, government bodies, and communities worldwide to share knowledge, resources, and best practices in the pursuit of inclusive education. Such collaboration is essential in fostering a global educational landscape where inclusivity is not merely an ideal but a realized norm. The journey towards achieving comprehensive inclusivity in education, as exemplified by the “Bridges in Amman” project, requires unwavering dedication, innovation, and a commitment to collective action. By embracing these principles, the global educational community can ensure that all learners are afforded the opportunities and support necessary to thrive in an increasingly diverse and complex world.

## **6. Beyond the ‘Bridges in Amman’ project. From experience to sustainable futures for all**

Bridging the gap between academic research, governmental and non-governmental entities, and local communities emerges as a pivotal strategy for addressing complex challenges in today’s interconnected world. The “Bridges in Amman” project serves as a possible model of how such collaborative networks can effectively foster inclusive educational practices and contribute to more equitable and resilient societies. This collaborative approach not only improves the effectiveness of inclusive education initiatives, but can also contribute to the broader goals of social justice and equity, i.e. those principles that guide third mission projects, to which the academic system must necessarily turn its gaze.

This initiative, spearheaded by the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in collaboration with Habibi VAltiberina Association and the Gemelli Medical Center, underscores the critical importance of inclusivity in education, particularly for vulnerable populations such as Iraqi Christian asylum seekers in Jordan. At the same time, the experience presented in this contribution highlights the need to broaden the national horizons of pedagogical research in the field of the right to accessibility and education for all, exploring the reality of highly complex territories with diverse social, cultural and religious backgrounds, which testify to the need to recognise and enhance possible responses to universal human rights.

The project's emphasis on teacher and counsellor training further demonstrates the critical role of competence development in achieving sustainable inclusive educational practices. By providing educators with the knowledge and approaches necessary to support diverse learning needs, the initiative promotes a pedagogical culture that values diversity as an asset and is prepared to meet the challenges of an increasingly diverse student population. This focus on professional development is essential to support and adapt inclusive educational models in other contexts, emphasising the importance of knowledge exchange and cross-border collaboration.

In the face of such complex challenges, it is crucial for initiatives like the 'Bridges in Amman' to set realistic, sustainable, and achievable goals. The intricacy of the context often means that not all inclusive proposals can be immediately implemented. Therefore, gradual and carefully measured steps must be taken to ensure the feasibility and effectiveness of educational reforms. Tailoring initiatives to fit the specific cultural, social, and political nuances of the region is essential for fostering genuine inclusivity and achieving long-term success.

Therefore, it must be emphasised that at a time of great criticality and major global transformations, the university, and with it knowledge and education, cannot but play a central role within civil society and the public decision-making context. A greater dose of responsibility is required of the university system, as well as of political institutions.

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