

RESEARCH PROJECT

HOW EQUAL ARE WE?

BANJA LUKA, JUNE 2008

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**PROJECT REALISATION SUPPORTED
BY:**

USA Embassy
U.S. Department of State
Federal Assistance Award
Office of Public Affairs*
Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

OPA US EMBASSY
SARAJEVO
OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

** This project was funded, in part, through this Grant Agreement. The opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed herein are those of the Author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of State.*

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Summary

Equal rights, equal access, equal opportunities – these concepts present an every day topic of conversation in our society, especially since the introduction of equality has become the hot topic on the modern world scene, to which our country and we equally strive for. There are numerous organisations fighting for the even more numerous „unequal“ groups of people; laws are being altered, as well as the composition of voting lists. Each day more and more non-governmental organisations are registered, sometimes, seemingly, only to contribute to an illusion that the society they are born in is open to the development of democracy.

The question is – do efforts of all these actors and the results of all these processes truly make us equal?

If you ask a person, doomed to spend the rest of their life in a wheelchair – this does not seem to be the case. If you take a discussion on the matter to the basics of human living – in a country where there is not a single petrol station with a toilet accessible to people in wheelchairs – can we really talk about equality?

The aim of this project is to address a problem which, perhaps, has not really been talked about in these, down-to-earth terms. The goal was to produce a comparison of the state of equality of living conditions of persons with disabilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and surrounding countries, as well as the EU, with an overview of the legislation concerning this segment of our population and the data from the ground which indicate a realised level of „equality of living conditions“ for all of us.

There are countless social issues that have been perfectly accounted for in the legislation of many countries, and, even though one cannot say that our country deviates to a great extent from this approach, practice shows that some laws are there exclusively to calm down our consciousness and to protect us from the judgement of those who walk through life more aware of the reality that surrounds them. In a country like ours, which is still fighting the consequences of the past war, the state of the matter becomes even more painful, as those who face their life in a daily fight with certain physical or mental challenges, some due exactly to the not so ancient unfortunate events, are, when compared

with the already difficult economic situation and other social development related issues, considered too expensive a burden for the society.

Despite this, we should stop trying to find excuses for our constant ignorance and hiding behind our not knowing. We should stop closing our eyes to what, in the end, makes a basis of human rights and dignity. We should finally understand that we cannot allow our fellow citizens to be deprived of basic social contents. Changes happen one step at a time – now is the perfect time to start taking them!

Introduction

This project is derived from a very personal experience, and, even though it is aimed at showing the existing situation in our country, when it comes to equal social inclusion of persons with disabilities, in a most unbiased way, I am afraid that these personal emotions will inevitably show everywhere in its structure. Perhaps at some other time, and in some other circumstances this would not be right, however, I think it cannot be left out here, because, if, in a down-to-earth view of our reality, we do not get moved to action by our emotions, I do not know what else might.

Everything started with a conversation with a best friend of mine from a life past, it seems, following which I started thinking about the topic more intensively. Ever since my family moved to this country some fifteen years ago, he was able to come for a visit, once an irreplaceable part of our daily lives, only once. And even this one time was terribly painful for all of us, as we were not able to provide him with appropriate accommodation and comfort, either in private or public sector. To add to the pain was the fact that his usage of the most basic facilities depended on five strong men, removing the standard-size doorframe, that we are all well familiar with, and other details I chose not to discuss here.

During the years that followed, I have made countless phone calls in vain hope that some day, one of the employees of at least one hotel/motel which keep appearing almost daily in the vicinity of our home, will give a positive answer to my question and say – yes, we can comfortably accommodate a person in a wheelchair. From hotels our inquiry moved to other public facilities – restaurants, petrol stations, banks, public institutions buildings, newly constructed housing and other buildings... not only in the vicinity of our home, but also in other parts of the country, and final results were devastating! If one adds to this an unbelievable deficit of employment opportunities (one could say that there aren't enough opportunities even for the luckier ones) for persons with physical or mental disabilities, one can only, disappointed, fall down on their knees and completely give up the fight.

Truth be told, I was on the verge of dropping everything and just settle with thinking – this country is terrible, nothing will ever change here. But, as I have said, this is about something personal, and, when it comes to personal at least, there is no backing down.

Instead of desperation I decided to take a different way – with this project and its findings I will try to bring this problem to the public eyes, hoping to be able to convince them to look at the world

around them from a different angle, at least for a while. Even if it takes years for us to catch up to other countries, where even up to 10% of newly constructed facilities have to meet the needs of the people with physical disabilities, even spreading the knowledge about the fact that every city should have at least one public restroom which meets their needs, that we should all have equal access to public authorities, jobs, hotels (in the end, can we truly talk about tourism development, if we are completely excluding some categories of potential guests); even a simple fact that people accepted this knowledge for a moment at least would mean a step forward. As I have said, changes happen one step at a time, and now would be the best time to start taking them.

What does domestic legislation say?

In Bosnia and Herzegovina there are numerous laws at the state, entity and canton level which, in their provisions, entirely or partially cover some issues of persons with disabilities, starting with definitions of various categories of disability, based both on the cause of disability, as well as the effect it has on working ability of a person living with a disability, then various benefits for different categories of disability, definitions of housing conditions, health and social insurance, pension and disability insurance, and all the way to education and working rights.

Considering the number and different nature of different categories of disability as defined by the law, with each carrying its own specifics, which would have to be considered separately, it would be impossible for all their aspects to be covered by such a small project as this one is, especially by someone with a lack of expertise in the area. As I said, this is about personal, about something I have some experience with, at least an indirect one, so I will write about a mobile, able to work paraplegic (i.e. a person with leg paralysis, that can move with no limitations with the help of a wheelchair), perfectly capable of taking care of themselves.

On the other hand, given the number of regulations in the area, which are mainly repetitive, I will, to show disparity of the prescribed and the realised, provide an overview of the most interesting parts of some laws.

Laws regulating construction land, planning and construction, urban planning and land usage

One has to admit that, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, at all of its administrative levels, regulations at least partly define some issues of persons with disabilities. Provisions of all laws regulating construction land, planning and construction, define, in addition to the more standard terms (accessibility, traffic conditions, fire protection, infrastructure, utilities, etc.) also the fulfilment of conditions necessary to meet the needs of people in wheelchairs. Planning and regulatory plans at all levels require planning and adoption of measures for protection of rights of people with limited physical capabilities, which, among other things, includes construction of roads, pavements, pedestrian walkways, squares, parking spots, garages, access to public facilities, in such a way that unlimited movement of persons with disability is provided. There is a specifically defined obligation that even in

the phase of preparation of construction projects, i.e. investment-technical documentation, measures to remove architectonic barriers to unlimited mobility of people with physical disabilities and their access to and the usage of facilities with several housing units, public institutions, service and economic institutions, etc. be included. They go even to a point that a planning permit has to contain recognition of realised defined obligations referring to meeting the needs of persons with limited physical abilities.

Some regulations (e.g. Sarajevo canton) provide even more detail on the construction conditions, i.e. they require that cities and municipalities ensure that investors financing construction of a housing facility, i.e. housing-business facility with 20 and more housing units, provide at least one apartment such that it meets the needs of persons in wheelchairs, and that such apartments be offered for sale.

The requirement in the Republic of Srpska is for facilities with several housing units, constructions or parts of constructions publicly used or used to provide services, to be planned and constructed in a way which will enable persons with disabilities unlimited access, mobility, working conditions and stay, where removing architectonic barriers is considered as providing persons with disabilities an opportunity to independently and safely access the facilities and use both the facility as a whole or its parts. In addition to this approach to planning being requested in newly constructed facilities, the Law requires that any barriers to free access and mobility of persons with limited physical abilities be removed in buildings which were approved for construction before the Law on Planning and Construction became effective, in the period of two years from the moment the Law was adopted.

In reading all these regulations, once can notice that some define even financial penalties for investors, should they fail to adjust constructions to the persons in wheelchairs, in accordance with prescribed planning-technical conditions. However, one look at our reality shows that practice is far from theory. Even though it can be noticed that during the past two-three years some bigger municipalities adjusted access to pedestrian surfaces (mainly at road crossings), there are still too few buildings constructed with appropriate ramps and other conditions that meet the needs of persons in wheelchairs. There are also very few existing institutions, which have enabled unlimited access to persons with disabilities.

There are even some paradox cases in which, even though a law clearly defines that appropriate conditions to meet the needs of invalids have to be fulfilled, the same law defines that a warrant for removal of architectonic barriers is issued by an administrative body responsible for issuing

construction permits, only after a person with reduced physical abilities or their custodian or association requests that this be done. This can be interpreted as another way out for constructors, i.e. as an excuse that, unless there is a request for barrier removal submitted for every individual project, they are not really obliged to do so. Also, most local laws which regulate planning and construction mainly talk about “measures to protect the rights of persons with physical disabilities”, and ask for their implementation, however, they do not specify the measures which have to be taken¹.

As long as things are not openly and very clearly defined, and as long as penalties equal only a price of a half or two square metres of housing, business or other-purpose facility, as long as prescribed regulations are not strictly and fully implemented, and as long as this process is not led by the public administration, it will be difficult to get private sector to introduce the necessary changes.

Decree on planning standards, planning-technical conditions and norms to prevent any barriers to persons with physical disabilities

In early 2004, BiH Federation Government published a Decree on planning standards, planning-technical conditions and norms to prevent any barriers to persons with reduced physical abilities, with an implementation deadline of five years (until late February 2009). The goal was to reconcile the local legislation with regulations valid in countries that are far ahead of us in dealing with issues concerning people with disabilities. The Decree is, when it comes to theory, truly all-inclusive. It includes an obligation to provide persons with disabilities with access in the planning process itself (it is linked to the Law on Construction, as well as the Law on planning and usage of construction land of BiH Federation), as well as construction and reconstruction, in order to meet the needs of persons with permanent or lasting disability, i.e. of persons both requiring aid in moving and those not requiring any assistance. The Decree also states standards/dimensions for spaces in which wheelchairs can be used, for construction of ramps, staircases, lifts, appropriate toilet facilities, phone booths, signalisation, electrical installations, work surfaces, etc. It also requires the needs of people with disabilities in public transportation to be met, i.e. it advises that access to bus/tram stops, parking spots for the disabled, to housing and public facilities, pavements and other public surfaces be provided.

¹ It has to be said that some individual levels of government adopted certain additional regulations, which define these measures more closely, such as the Decree on planning standards, planning-technical conditions and norms to prevent any barriers to persons with any physical disabilities (in FBiH), and that there were some attempts by certain non-governmental organisations/associations of the disabled to attract public attention by publishing certain minimum standards which should be implemented in construction, however, the situation on the ground shows a very small degree of their implementation.

However, even though the deadline for implementation of the Decree is approaching, the situation on the ground shows that the level of its implementation is very low. A fact is that in most municipalities of BiH Federation its application has not started yet, whereas in others things haven't moved far from the beginning.

Law on professional rehabilitation, training and employment of persons with disabilities

One of the most common stereotypes of present time is that, when disability is concerned, persons, who live with a certain form of disability, are not capable of working. A reason for some of this perhaps lies in a frequently abused right to early retirement due to disabilities, as a solution for overcoming the increasing age limit for a full pension entitlement in our and other countries².

One of the most astonishing facts is an estimate that between 80% and 90% of persons with disabilities (who could and want to work) are unemployed worldwide. In some of the more developed countries, this figure is somewhere between 70% and 80%. It has already been said that there are several types of disability, and that this project will focus on paraplegics capable of working.

In reading through numerous legal regulations of our country I was surprised to see (e.g. Republic of Srpska) how professional rehabilitation and training of persons with disabilities is resolved in a most wonderful way in legal terms (one of the surprises that came out is that the Law defines that they are *entitled to* employment, as I assumed this right was equally granted to all citizens capable of working, but this is a topic for another discussion). Namely, depending on the type and level of disability, persons with a disability are entitled to (financed) professional rehabilitation, at their or a request of their caretakers, in general or specially adjusted educational facilities. In this sense, professional rehabilitation is defined as determination of remaining work and general capabilities, professional informing, counselling and estimation of professional abilities, labour market analysis, employment opportunities, estimation of opportunities for implementation, and development of

² Unfortunately, due to frequent abuses and visible corruption in our health care system (as is confirmed by a Transparency International report), persons who are really struggling with some more severe forms of disability are too often required to fight rigorous checks caused by others, as well as the stereotypical „write-off“ from social life just because they are considered an unnecessary burden to society. Based on some form of disability, early retirement is granted to 20% (in the RS) to 35% (FBiH) of the whole number of retirees, which is above the European average. Multiple sources explain this too high a percentage of retirements due to disability with corruption in the health-care system, so it is necessary to provide more rigid checks of both retirees, exercising their right based on disability, and medical commission members. In addition to this, it is necessary to regularly check one's work abilities, to determine whether someone falls into a category of professional disability (when certain steps can be taken for persons to change their professions and get a new job) or a general working disability category.

professional training programmes, career changes, as well as programmes aimed at maintenance and development of work and social skills and capabilities until employment is secured. It also includes provision of information and counselling on learning and working technologies, individual and group learning programmes for improvement of work-social inclusion, proposals on implementation of various learning techniques, professional learning, planning, motivation development, technical assistance, result monitoring, as well as provision of information and support in finding financing resources. Depending on the cause of their disability (whether they have suffered an injury at work, or are war invalids or developed their disability in some other way), they are entitled to various other rights.

It was interesting to learn that the Law anticipates an inevitable increase in the number of employees with disabilities in the total number of employees in public authorities, legal and other public bodies, local self-administration, public services, institutions and funds, and companies owned by the Republic of Srpska (starting from at least one person with a disability employed for every 49 other employees as of late 2005, to at least one disabled person employed for every 16 other employees by late 2009), with employees having to be provided with appropriate working conditions (facilities, equipment, etc.). These institutions are also required to purchase 20% of their products and services, which are being also provided by companies employing persons with disabilities, from such companies under valid market terms.

Employers obliged to employ persons with disabilities, who do not meet their quota, are obliged to pay a special contribution on a monthly basis to the Fund for professional rehabilitation and employment of persons with disabilities, which was established in accordance with this Law, which equals 0.2% of paid out monthly gross salaries of all employees. These funds are then used to implement a development strategy aimed at improving professional rehabilitation and employment of persons with disability, providing financial incentives, as well as financing and co-financing employers, all to increase the level of employment of persons with disabilities.

Employers who are not obliged to implement the provision, are entitled to certain incentives and benefits in employing disabled persons. Companies employing the disabled (this refers to companies in which the number of disabled employees comprises more than 50% of all employees), such as tax and customs benefits, financial incentives such as one-off payouts, means for adjustment of work places and work conditions, debt financing in more favourable terms for purchase of equipment, tools, and alike things necessary for employment of the disabled, means to finance a part of a disabled persons' assistant during work, or for compensating for a limited ability of an employee. Any means

exempt from customs and tax obligations can be used by such companies only for expansion of the company's capacity, foundation of new companies for professional development and employment of persons with disabilities, opening of new vacancies, introduction of new technologies, improvement of living standard of the disabled, support to invalids' associations at entity level, etc.

All this sounds really great, however, if we return to the basic problem, i.e. access to public educational, service and labour institutions, it does not have grounds for implementation, as an obligation to pay a fee for not employing a sufficient number of persons with disabilities obviously does not present a financial stimulant big enough to make a difference.

All the things we are not thinking about

Every day we seem to repeatedly confirm that a part of our human nature is our 'incapability' to think about some aspects of life until something happens that disturbs our daily routine. So, usually we are not thinking about how precious our health is until someone close to us (ourselves even) gets ill. Only then, and even in this case only for a short while, while this period of intense fight with a medical problem is going on, do we see the world a little differently. We cannot even imagine that until that very moment, we were preoccupied with insignificant people and events; that we have, probably, spent more time on getting someone else to like us rather than taking care of our being satisfied with ourselves. It is in moments like that that we start saying how health is the most important thing in life, how we will change completely, and rid ourselves of the burden caused by the stress inevitably related to the modern living.

Well, when we get to feel a little better, we start thinking about getting back into some forms of social life. Perhaps we find an idea of going to the movies, to see the latest Indiana Jones film attractive. As countless times before, we nag a little because the seats in the theatre are very commercially tight together, making even the thinnest among us being unable to sit restlessly through the couple of hours of fun presented by our hero. We are thinking perhaps how the air could be fresher, rather than smelling like slightly burnt pop corn and butter, but we don't even start to think about a fact that to some of us, our neighbour, our friend, our fellow citizen, are not even enabled to nag with us, as, even to get to the front row of the movie theatre, it takes them a struggle with a barrier composed of a few steps at the entrance to the movie complex. This alone would be considered but a single barrier, if they are lucky and live right next door to the theatre; who among us has ever thought that someone from another part of the city is not able to get even to the front entrance steps, as there is not a single form of public transportation accessible to persons living their lives in wheelchairs (I am not including taxi transportation here, as persons with disabilities, who are most often a segment of the population which is unemployed, and kept by others, don't really have access to this form of transportation).

Until it happens that we sprain our ankle in the gym (when we are still considered the 'more lucky' ones, as we will only be having a hard time walking for a limited period of time), we don't even get to think about a fact that x-ray facilities in the medical facility closest to us are located on the second floor of a lift-less building, and that, even though we are struggling to walk with a couple of too large

crutches (as one of our legs is completely swollen and out of use), nobody is coming to help. We are not thinking about a fact that we have to climb a few stairs to get to the closest pharmacy and that, except for a curious child staring at us, wondering what might have happened, people tend not to look in our eyes, probably because they would feel obliged (for their consciousness if nothing else) to assist us. And, we are only using crutches. Can you imagine someone in a wheelchair – how awkward do we feel then (if we happen to be the ones evading eye contact with a person seated in it). We are a little upset as it is only then that we see that doctors' offices may not be distributed in the most logical way and we curse at those who invented the stairs but failed to socialise with those who invented lifts. We are a little ashamed, as we are not sure of how the person entrapped in the wheelchair might react at that moment even if we offered help, so we might think it best to quickly rush off from the spot. Maybe at this moment we are running away from the idea that, God forbid, one day it might be us in the wheelchair (and, truth be told, all of us, rightly, are terrified of feeling helpless).

We are not thinking about how each day, when we leave our house for work, or to go to a restaurant, or to pay for a summer holiday, while a person in a wheelchair does not have equal access to the same business facilities, restaurants, or tourist agencies and destinations (not even talking about transportation to such destinations) we are discriminating against persons with disabilities, and are thus breaching their basic human rights.

We are not thinking about how providing access to buildings translates into provision of equal terms for everyone, and that, as obligatory elements of *accessibility* in other countries one thinks about elements to overcome height differences, elements to access independent living, and elements to enable public transportation access. Our daily lives are not comprised of words such as a ramp at a degree of up to 5%, at least 90 cm wide, with a rest place every 6 meters of its length, with a hard, non-sliding surface, handrails made out of a non-sliding material, placed at an appropriate height, lifts with a door at least 90cm wide, low-placed switchboard, vertically or diagonally placed movable or static platform, entrances with wide enough doors (at least 90 cm), doorstep not higher than 2 cm, appropriate markings, windshields, corridors more than 150 cm wide, doors with accessible handles, electric installations at appropriate levels, toilets with doors at least 90 cm wide, which open to the right side, toilet bowls 45 to 50 cm high, handles at appropriate levels, enough distance between front toilet bowl edge and the wall (at least 65 cm), accessible ramps on beaches and swimming pools, phones and ATMs placed at appropriate counters, as well as counters in public institutions, which need to be adjusted to persons in wheelchairs, etc.

We are not thinking about a fact that persons with disabilities are entitled to fully participate in economic and social life of our country. When we talk about human rights, such as the right to free movement, the right to goods and services, the right to vote, etc., we are not thinking that these rights are not equally available to persons with disabilities. We are somehow used to thinking about disability in terms of a social burden, which needs to be taken care of with some social benefits, to remove our need to think about them as fully equal citizens of our society. Instead of making up ways in which to provide for them in a way so that it is not necessary for them to leave their homes (which leads on to no need for us to adjust our surroundings to them), we should rather try to find ways to enable them access to all social spheres. This is because, even though, unfortunately, there are many people who are irreversibly dependable on others, persons with disabilities are no different than us – they can and have the right to take care of themselves and use all benefits that a society can offer, just like us. It is up to us to give them an opportunity to do so.

Statistics

There are about 650 million people with disabilities in the world, which makes about 10% of the world population, i.e. the world's largest minority. About 80% of them live in countries with extremely low income, most in poverty and with no access to basic social services.

Persons with a disability or a suffering from a chronic disease make about 17% of Europe's population. Unemployment rate for people with more severe types of disability in Europe is three times that of other people, whereas in some countries this rate goes as high up as 80%.

One of the most common reasons used to explain why persons with disabilities are not employed is that people feel that such persons cannot work. A third of questioned employers in the United States believe that persons with disabilities cannot perform their work tasks efficiently. One of the most common reasons for not employing invalids is a fear of potentially too expensive workspace adjustments (even though in 73% of cases there was no need for a special room adjustment, and, even if some changes were necessary, they did not cost much).

World Bank experts believe that reduction of poverty will not affect the poor in a desired way, if persons with disabilities are excluded from economic development. They go as far as to say that preliminary estimates show a loss of about 5-7% in gross national income due to disabilities (be it because persons with disabilities cannot actively participate in the labour market, or because of the disability treatment expenses).

Some research studies in the more developed countries show that a self-employment rate in people with disabilities is higher than a self-employment rate with people without them and that persons with disabilities are more likely to start their own small business.

How does Bosnia and Herzegovina fit into all this?

One of the surveys conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the past several years showed that only 6.6% of the population was considered disabled in accordance with the criteria for early retirement due to disability (in most countries, such pensions are granted only to those with a degree of disability higher than 60%). If one considers the number of invalids of all categories, their

unemployment rate as well as limited public resources to support them, reality hits in even harder. Perhaps, instead on focusing on defining various disability categories, and constantly repeating how over-burdened public budgets are in terms of social benefits provision, we would be better if authorities focused less on supporting disabled by paying for their needs, and more on creating better conditions for their employment (at least those capable of working). Access to work places to persons with disabilities, their educational and professional rehabilitation opportunities, presents a foundation for this.

How are our municipalities doing?

It has been stated that, at least in the legislation, persons with disabilities are getting more attention. Republic of Srpska even founded a Fund for professional rehabilitation, training and employment of persons with disabilities in the Republic of Srpska, used to finance various incentives for companies hiring the disabled. The aim of this is to empower this target group to take care of themselves, to live as independent a life as possible, and to show less dependence on various, insufficient social financial pay-outs.

According to the Fund's report, there are only six companies with more than a half of employees being disabled (which helps them to fulfil criteria to obtain certain benefits and financial incentives). However, even though the Law on professional rehabilitation, training and employment of the disabled in the Republic of Srpska requires an increase in the number of the disabled employed with public institutions, local self-administrations, public services, etc., looking at the reality does not come out as encouraging.

Municipalities as large enough, and, simultaneously, as small enough units of local administration and self-administration, are interesting in the examination of our reality for several reasons. On the one hand, they fall into a category of public employers, obliged to increase the number of disabled employees in accordance with the Law on professional rehabilitation, training and employment of the disabled. On the other, they provide such a wide range of public services, so that each and every citizen of our country is inevitably going to enter them at least once.

To remind, municipalities often accommodate public registers that issue birth and wedding certificates, certificates of citizenships, offices where our requests to get a construction permit are processed and approved, where various utility fees and administrative duties and local taxes are

defined, just like the educational conditions for our children. They accommodate offices where we register our companies, keep realty records, certify/notarise various documents, where planning and construction of our environment is conducted, where decisions on financing non-governmental organisations are made, and where numerous legal services are provided, newly born registered as well as those who pass away, etc. Even to provide a power of attorney to someone to perform any of the stated activities or obtain a piece of paper on our behalf, we have to prepare the wording in one of their offices. In brief, some of the most important life decisions, on all aspects of our social life, are made in the municipalities.

In addition to this, municipalities also (at least those that are large or medium sized) offer a bigger number of employment opportunities to the observed segment of our population, firstly because, to provide most of the stated services, one does not have to leave their work place.

This project, i.e. its questionnaire, included 102 municipalities from various parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, of various sizes both in terms of the number of their citizens and territory, and in terms of their available budgets. Since persons living their lives in wheelchairs are already greatly adjusted to different conditions in our society that continuously work against them (starting from inaccessible roads to narrow corridors), we have insisted on having two basic prerequisites fulfilled: physical access to a municipal building, as well as availability of a toilet accessible to persons with disabilities (even in this we were satisfied with the most basic things – wide enough entrance doors, as well as the existence of a toilet bowl, with enough room for it to be approached in a wheelchair).

When everything stated (and everything not said) is considered, we get to a devastating fact that in only 62.7% out of the total number of interviewed municipalities, there is access to municipal buildings suitable for use by persons with a disability (in other words, this means that in almost 40% of tested municipalities people in wheelchairs have no access to any of the previously listed services!). For the purpose of this research, access was considered in case an appropriate ramp for persons in wheelchairs existed, as well as access to offices on the ground floor (usually this referred to newly constructed 'counter' halls in municipalities). We defined as accessible also those municipalities with one or two steps at the entrance, which could be overcome with the aid of a municipal employee (a service that, according to those answering our questions, is always readily available).

Even though in the past couple of years we have been able to see some small progress, in terms of ramp installations at the entrance to various public institutions, there are still too many of those

completely inaccessible (an interesting example is shown in our precious Austro-Hungarian heritage in terms of fascinating buildings used for their needs by the highest level state institutions, which are completely inaccessible to persons with disabilities – not only are they not able to enter such building; they seem to also be discouraged from even attempting to actively participate in the political life of our community, as, even if they won enough votes to bring them to the highest level of our public administration, they would not be able to go to work and represent the voice of citizens that elected them).

Table 1

Total number of tested municipalities				102
Items	Access*	Toilet**	Both access and toilet	Neither
	64	26	26	33
% of a total number of tested municipalities	62.7%	25.5%	25.5%	32.4%

* In 5 municipalities people in wheelchair can access a part of offices on the ground floor

** Existence of an accessible toilet is confirmed exclusively by the municipal staff, based on a few given simple indicators: door width of at least 70cm (as wheelchairs are at least 60 wide); existence of a toilet bowl, with enough space for a person in a wheelchair to reach it, etc.

A step further in our conversation with municipal employees was to check whether there is a toilet in the municipal building accessible to persons in wheelchairs. As we have already said, we asked that only the most basic prerequisites be met, however, in judging whether there are any employment opportunities for the disabled, we considered this to be an important condition. If we see that only 25.5% of such significant public service institutions provide only the very basics for employment of persons in wheelchairs (even though they are obliged by the law to hire persons with disabilities³), how can we even start asking questions on the state in private sector and production capacities.

What of those providing other services?

One of the motives to check the situation in leisure-tourist-service capacities was stated at the very beginning. If we, as individuals, are not able to adjust our own homes (if we are lucky enough to own one, given the general housing situation in our country) to the needs of those close to us, who may

³ Naturally, the law includes any type of disability, however, one cannot neglect a fact that the category of people in wheelchairs are fully deprived of employment opportunities in 75% of municipalities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. If one adds to this a fact that one interviewee stated, as an „excuse“ for the lack of access to the municipality, that in the whole municipality there is only one person in a wheelchair (by which he denies his own existence, as a municipality is there to service all its citizens), the situation is disastrous.

not live with us all the time, one inevitably starts thinking about public capacities that could be used for their temporary accommodation.

The goal was to determine how ready our hotels were to accommodate persons with special needs. We interviewed 66 hotels/motels all over Bosnia and Herzegovina. As was the case with municipalities, we only asked for the most basic prerequisites for accommodation of persons in wheelchairs to be met, such as accessibility and a large enough bathroom. Given that hotels literally live of providing accommodation (unlike municipalities which can survive even if they fail to service all their citizens), we found the fact that the situation in hotels is much worse, an unpleasant surprise. Namely, only 31.8% of tested hotels provided access to persons in wheelchairs. We defined access also as access to ground floor services in hotels (restaurants, ground floor rooms, etc.). Even worse is a fact that, as with municipalities, access to a hotel does not necessarily imply that there is an appropriate accommodation available. According to the words of only 22.7% interviewees, there is a full access to persons in wheelchairs to hotel accommodation (even with minimum requirements).

On the one hand, this means that the world's largest minority is completely excluded from the tourist potential of our country that we keep boosting about. On the other, this means that only about 20% of hotels present a potential employment opportunity for persons in wheelchairs, which is devastating, especially if one considers that hotels, especially the smaller ones, offer only a limited number of jobs.

Table 2

Total number of tested hotels				66
Items	Access*	Toilet**	Both access and toilet	Neither
	21	15	15	45
% of a total number of tested hotels	31.8%	22.7%	22.7%	68.2%

* One hotel has removed its doorsteps in the ground floors, and wide enough doors were built in; a couple other hotels have one or two rooms available on the ground floor (however, they also have a couple or three steps at the entrance to the hotel, so hotel staff's assistance in entering is required).

** Existence of an accessible toilet is confirmed exclusively by the hotel staff, based on a few given simple indicators: door width of at least 70cm (as wheelchairs are at least 60 wide); existence of a toilet bowl, with enough space for a person in a wheelchair to reach it, etc. We did not insist on all other prerequisites being fulfilled

Well, if they are unable to stay in our country without major difficulties, one inevitably has to consider a question of transit through the country (and, with it, partly at least, the purpose of great road construction projects, such as corridor Vc). Even though some of the oil and oil derivatives trade companies, in their country of origin, have to provide access to their services to the people in wheelchairs, here in our country (where such companies are known to have a great territorial coverage) they are still able to avoid such a duty. The situation is no different when it comes to the 'original' Bosnia and Herzegovina's petrol stations. Namely, until this very day, after countless phone calls, we have been unable to identify one single petrol station with a toilet that could be used by a person in a wheelchair. This comes as the oddest of facts in a country where petrol stations keep appearing one next to the other! We spread our inquiry to restaurants, libraries, banks, post offices, etc., with no encouraging signs.

If the situation is such today, just before the deadlines for implementation of certain laws and their provisions aimed at closely defining conditions that have to be met to provide free access to persons in wheelchairs to all aspects of social life, can we really hope for a major turnaround in the months to follow? Obviously, anything can be put down on a piece of paper, however, reality expects much, much more effort from all of us.

Paraplegics' associations in Bosnia and Herzegovina

In almost all municipalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina there is some form of an association of persons with disabilities. There are also numerous active associations of paraplegics, trying to solve at least the most obvious problems faced by their members in their direct surroundings.

Conversations with representatives of such associations showed that they really had no other solution but to form an association, as they considered that they would be able to achieve at least something only with their joint voices, when it comes to the basic needs of people with disabilities. In most cases, associations are based on volunteerism of its members, who often do not have appropriate work conditions. Even though there are some luckier ones, who get assistance from municipalities, cantonal authorities, certain relevant ministries and some international organisations for the implementation of some of their ideas and projects, there are a lot more of those who may have, at some point, received a one-off assistance from their municipalities, and who are mainly left without any support of their closest authorities. Our experience in the work with municipalities throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that, when it comes to their work with non-governmental organisations in

general, and, in this, associations of persons with disabilities, municipalities prefer to adopt items in their budgets to finance, say, phone expenses of an association, or potentially provide office space for them to be able to meet, rather than to finance (at least in part) specific projects aimed at enriching the lives of this segment of society. There are numerous efforts from associations and several international organisations active in the country aimed at having the municipal and cantonal authorities change this approach and, instead, define clear criteria for various applicable projects, which would help to improve the quality of life of all members of society.

Considering everything, a fact showing that a large number of members of these associations are unemployed (in some places, only about 3% of persons with disabilities are employed, some of them even running their own business) doesn't come as a surprise. However, our not so distant past shows that another form of discrimination is being developed – the authorities are treating war invalids and civil victims of the war differently than those who suffered their disabilities at work or in some other circumstances.

What is encouraging to a certain extent is that associations country-wide are co-operating with each other, both directly and through their umbrella entity organisations. There are numerous initiatives to have their voice and recommendations heard in all aspects of social life. However, our reality shows that they are not always heard. Despite numerous agreements with authorities at different levels that organisations of persons with disabilities will be engaged in all plans of social life, starting with removal of barriers and ensuring free access to all institutions, education and rehabilitation, solving their housing and other issues, this form of co-operation has not really come to life fully just yet. Namely, there are several cases in which access ramps are placed without prior consultations with their future users, so they end up being completely useless, due to the slope degree that cannot be overcome by a person in a wheelchair.

It is certain that, even with the best of will and full financial support, we will not be able to solve the problems faced by the persons with disabilities unless we consult this target group in the planning of the solutions. In the end, there are so many things that we do not think of, and that would never even cross our minds, things that mean everything to those who depend on their wheelchairs.

Rights of persons with disabilities in other countries

A fact is that the more developed countries, and even the neighbouring countries, are far ahead of Bosnia and Herzegovina when it comes to defining and guaranteeing various rights to persons with disabilities. These rights include various compensations for disabilities, assistance in provision of orthopaedic aids (still a great problem for some of our individuals), appropriate medical treatment and physical therapy both in appropriate therapeutic centres and in one's home, certain benefits in traffic and public transportation, discounts in usage of public services, memberships, benefits in customs, tax and administrative fees payment, etc.

In addition to that, countries clearly define all institutions/buildings that have to provide appropriate access to persons with disabilities, starting with housing buildings (not only those containing more than 20 apartment, as is the case in our country), shopping centres, petrol stations, post offices (even those with less than three counters), banks, farmers' markets, buildings of any bodies of local, regional and state administration, health centres, hospitals, hospices, kindergartens, schools, universities, theatres, airports, public transportation stops, sports halls, entertainment centres, religious facilities, squares, etc.

In more organised systems there is more room for better-organised paraplegics associations. While in Bosnia and Herzegovina such associations are numerous, formed by few individuals, mainly out of the need for the voice of the closest family members to be heard, in the surrounding countries such organisations are getting more and more professional, with clearly defined activities, and very specific forms of assistance offered to their members. They are often carriers of special social programmes, aimed at meeting specific needs of people with disabilities, at enabling them to fully participate in normal lives of their communities; they offer various sports and recreational activities, assistance in education, provision of orthopaedic aids, transportation of the disabled in adjusted vehicles, etc. They act as a very active partner to the authorities, and participate in definition of laws concerning the disabled, as well as standards necessary to adjust the lives and their surrounding to the people with special needs.

One of the issues that European Union is paying a special attention to, when it comes to social security in its member states, is a full realisation of all social rights, equal opportunities, employment, professional development and education, migration opportunities, etc. When it comes to social

inclusion of the disabled, there is a special attention paid to their medical rehabilitation and equal life in the society, which includes removal of any barriers, psychological, educational, family, cultural, work, financial and architectonic. At the highest state level of its member states there are over 200 special social programs, directly aimed at meeting the needs of their members. Organisations of people with disabilities are enabled to actively apply for means in various European programmes, aimed at helping their citizens to exercise their rights.

Aiming to increase its general employment rate, encourage the development of entrepreneurship, flexibility of both individuals and companies, and to even-out the employment opportunities for all categories of its population, the EU is paying a special attention to the development of employment opportunities for people with disabilities and their active inclusion in the labour market. A basis for all this are professional rehabilitation and education, adjustability and accessibility of work places, existence of appropriate skills in people with disabilities, as well as appropriate support of authorities in realisation of all these rights. Member states offer various informative programmes for professional counselling, work protection, certain forms of financial stimulation for employment of the disabled, low interest loans for purchase of equipment and aid in self-employment, co-financing of various entrepreneurial initiatives, financial assistance in reconstruction of work facilities, equipment, etc., so that they can be properly used by persons with disabilities.

In addition to this, persons with disabilities are granted several other work rights, such as being transferred to another, more appropriate position, short work hours, partial disability income, certain benefits and professional rehabilitation. In order to provide conditions for an easier independent life, they are also granted certain benefits in apartment rental; they are sometimes provided certain state-owned apartment at reduced rent charge, as well as low-interest housing loans. Similarly, purchase and readjustment of automobiles to meet the needs of the disabled, are sorted.

UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities

The UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities has been discussed a lot in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country still far from its implementation, in the past few months. The discussion was followed by a petition, organised in several cities of our county, for Bosnia and Herzegovina to sign and adopt the Convention, and about 13,000 signatures were collected. Even though the campaign was not widely reported in the media, it is certain that there are only a few potentially not willing to provide their signature in support of persons with disabilities and their fight to be granted full civil rights.

However, very few of us are familiar with the essence of the Convention, a document invaluable for such an important segment of our society.

On December 13, 2006, the UN General Assembly adopted a Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, which has (as of May 2008) been signed by 129 countries, including all our neighbouring countries. Even though there are numerous documents world-wide addressing the rights of people with disabilities, the Convention presents a step forward in that, beside being a document that, more clearly than ever before, defines basic human rights and provides guidelines on how to meet the needs of persons with disabilities, it also becomes a legally binding document in signatory countries, implying an additional weight and degree of seriousness and importance in its implementation, which has not been the case so far with any other document of similar nature.

The purpose of the Convention is to promote, ensure protection and full enjoyment of all human rights and basic human freedoms to all persons with disabilities, and to promote the respect for their dignity. Signatory countries are expected to respect all human rights and to actively remove any opportunities for their potential breaching. This means that they have to amend all legal provisions which are not aligned with the Convention, change or put out of effect all and any laws which allow for discrimination at any level. They are expected to closely co-operate with persons with disabilities, starting from the very development and preparation of legislation and policies, which will enable a full implementation of the Convention.

Also, authorities in signatory countries are obliged to provide and respect all human rights and freedoms in public and private sectors, i.e. prevent any form of discrimination based on a person's

disability. To ensure this they are obliged to prepare and adopt several legislative, financial, political, social, budget, educational and other measures. This includes certain administrative, programme and other steps to meet the needs of persons with disabilities. It is necessary to implement and provide full support to all research and development programmes (including development of appropriate goods and services), enable persons with disabilities access to sources of information and relevant technologies, services and institutions, and, within public sector itself, enable professional training for persons with disabilities.

The Convention is considered both a development and instrument to enable realisation of basic human rights. It provides for a complete turnaround in the way persons with disabilities are treated. Namely, the Convention does not view persons with disabilities as a “social case”, i.e. an issue that needs to be solved from medical assistance and social protection point of view anymore. Rather, they are considered “subjects” with rights, perfectly capable to, based on all available information and services exercise their rights and decide on their lives and active participation in a society they live in. The Convention clearly states that persons with disabilities can no longer be considered and looked at as a burden to society, but rather as active members of the society that can greatly contribute to the development of its society. They have to be enabled to fight for their rights and exercise them equally as other members of the society.

One of the principles, that the Convention is based upon, and that presents a prerequisite for equal opportunities, is accessibility. Among other things, this implies access to legislation, independent life and equal participation in the work and life of a community, access to information and communication means, education, health institutions, housing and rehabilitation facilities, work places and employment opportunities, access to adequate living standard and social protection, participation in political and other aspects of social life, such as cultural, recreational and sports activities, etc.

Persons in wheelchairs often face difficulties in getting a job not because they are in a wheelchair, but because there are several obstacles existing in our surroundings, that they are not able to overcome at the moment, such as inaccessible public transportation and stairs, which prevent them from active inclusion in working society.

Some of the rights which are guaranteed to persons with disabilities in the Convention, are equal treatment in front of the law, without any discrimination, the right to living, freedom and safety, protection from violence and abuse, the right for respect of physical and mental integrity of persons, the

right to freedom of movement and nationality, to equal rights in a society, freedom of expression, the right to privacy, home and family, education, medical protection, employment, adequate living standard, participation in political and public life, and participation the community's cultural life.

Even though it insists on strict implementation of its provisions, the Convention recognises the fact that a large number of countries are faced with very limited resources, however, it also indicates that scarce resources cannot be used as an excuse to delay the implementation of the Convention. As a solution, various ideas on setting appropriate priorities in accordance with reasonable, unbiased criteria and proportional financing of various needs of a society are offered. It also suggests that a country with limited resources focuses on implementation of low-cost programmes that nevertheless contribute greatly to the implementation of rights of persons with disabilities (consulting organisations of persons with disabilities has proven very important here), and to try to solve the problems of the most endangered categories of population first. Some issues could easily be resolved with good planning alone, without major investments. It reminds that, in solving of these issues, there can be no discrimination of any kind and that there are numerous international resources, which support such initiatives. No country can evade providing at least a minimum of rights granted by the Convention. Given the fact that in many countries this has not been the case so far, the Convention defines as obligatory inclusion of persons with disabilities in all phases of its implementation.

Clearly, the authorities not even in the richest of countries can on their own ensure equality of persons with disabilities with the rest of the population. It is necessary for all players in a society to be included, each for their area of expertise.

A frightening fact is that, until the Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities was prepared, adopted and signed, even two thirds of UN country members have not had appropriate legal support for the people with disabilities, despite the fact that they make about 10% of the world population.

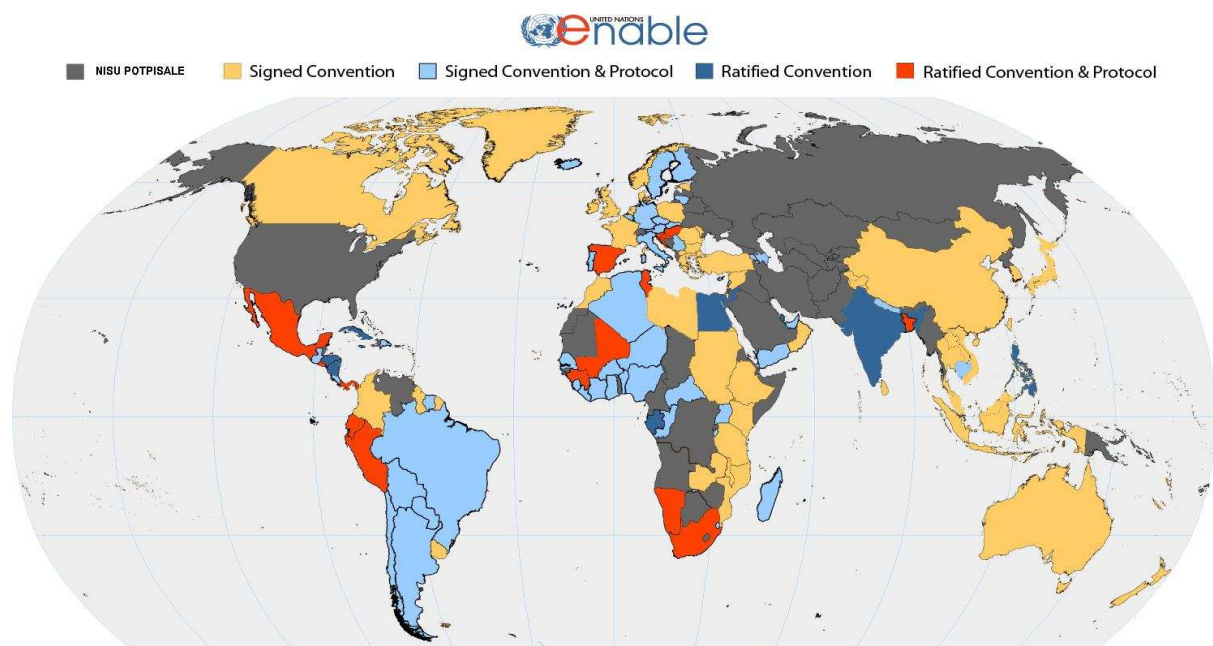
In all this, we should not forget that the Convention is aimed at “ensuring that persons with disabilities are granted equal human rights as everybody else in the societies they live in... It does not guarantee any “new” human rights.”

A fact is that, until now, 129 countries have signed the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, out of which 71 signed the optional Protocol to the Convention (enabling individuals

and groups to seek help from the Committee for enabling rights to persons with disabilities, once they have tried all domestic resources and procedures). The Convention has been ratified in 26 countries, with the Protocol being ratified in 16 signatory countries.

Our surrounding countries are among those that have signed the Convention, however, Bosnia and Herzegovina is not one of them (see image 1: overview of Convention and/or Protocol signatory countries).

Image 1: Overview of countries that have (or have not) signed the UN Convention and/or Protocol on the rights of persons with disabilities⁴



Considering the low level of implementation of basic human rights that should also be enjoyed by the persons with disabilities in our country, it is necessary to get our elected authorities to, with us, join those ahead of us, and, finally, both on paper and in reality, start implementing what they were voted for. Until we effectively confirm our readiness for changes, there is no effect from repeated verbal solidarity with persons with disabilities, and no grounds for our efforts to become an equal member of the world society.

According to the writings of media, and the statements of representatives of associations of persons with disabilities, the goal is to have the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina sign the UN

⁴ Source: <http://www.un.org>

Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities by December 3 – International day of persons with disabilities. It is up to us to use the time ahead to constantly pose questions, insist and lobby to realise this goal and to help our fellow citizens with disabilities to get their right to dignity, equal opportunities and equal status in our society. Without this, we truly cannot talk about equality.

Conclusion – where from here?

As is the case with many other crucial issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina, status of persons with disabilities and their full, equal inclusion in our society is a very complex issue that cannot be solved overnight. A fact is that it takes even more economically and socially developed countries a lot of effort to try to enable their full social inclusion. It is also a fact that it is much easier to cover things in paperwork, point a finger to the legislation and claim how much has been resolved, and how there will be more time for practice and building real opportunities when we are all better off one day, than to really act.

If we were even allowed to think in this way, one would inevitably get to a question of indicators which might show that we are all better off and that the time has come for people with special needs to be taken care off. Then, someone would probably think about a rulebook to write on this, which would have to be adopted at some point, and then somehow, somewhere, at some point perhaps even implemented. That things in our country are not as they are in the better-off countries is not hard to confirm. However, we cannot deny a fact that our country has been developing and growing, too. That this is so is confirmed by an increasing number of new housing and business facilities in all large and medium sized cities in the country. This indicates that there is money for investment, so we cannot keep pointing fingers to our general poverty (perhaps we should really start thinking in terms of the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities guidelines – that poverty is not a good enough excuse to not solve this social issue). A bigger question might be whether there is the will to amend numerous laws and provisions so that they truly guarantee all rights to the disabled, or at least the will to get what has already been adopted “on behalf of the people” transformed into reality.

When it comes to an all-inclusive approach to dealing with this issue, it is not necessary for us to invent things (given our scarce resources). It makes a lot more sense to check the practice of countries that show leading examples in this field, and that were not so far ahead of us only a few years back. As an example, I decided to use our former sister-country Slovenia, which is basing its policy on protection of the rights of the disabled for the period from 2007 to 2013 on the foundation of the policy on protection of the rights of the disabled of the European Union. Since we, too, are fighting to become a member of the great European family one day, it is certain that we will not be able to escape our obligation to align our local legislation and practice with that of the EU.

The first step in this, as all documents of the modern world on this issue indicate, is to realise that the issue of persons with disabilities is not a medical issue alone, but rather a basic human rights issue. Only when we realise this, will we be able to start thinking about the goals we should achieve in providing equal rights to people with disabilities and people without them. The following goals are stated as basic in the European Union's policy on protection of rights of the disabled:

1. Goal: Increase society's awareness of persons with disabilities, their contribution to the development of the society, their rights, dignity and needs

The purpose here is to remove any barriers to equal participation of persons with disabilities in all aspects of social life. It is necessary to inform the public on employment opportunities for the disabled, their independent life, education, public administration, and to make the disabled aware of their rights and access to information, opportunities and obligations in the society and life in general. Also, it is necessary to encourage best practice implementation, and to raise awareness on the matter, through inclusion of all relevant actors – representatives of authorities, associations of persons with disabilities, media, health institution and general social community.

2. GOAL: All persons with disabilities are entitled to fully, without any discrimination, choose where and how they will live, to be fully included in the social life of their community, and to participate in it

This, primarily, refers to enabling the disabled to live as independent a life as possible, so that they can, whenever possible, rely less and less upon institutions. Also, it implies a possibility to develop through various programmes of a community – inclusion of the non-governmental sector, consultation through the definition of construction standards, aid project development, employment in the society, etc.

3. GOAL: Persons with disabilities are to be provided with free access to construction land, and construction facilities, public transportation, information and communication means

Implementation of this goal assumes consistent implementation of the laws on planning and construction on construction land, as well as the implementation of provisions guaranteeing to the disabled the right to public transportation, access to information and communication means, all public services, and alike.

4. GOAL: Based on equal opportunities and without any discrimination provide an all-inclusive educational system at all levels, as well as life-long learning opportunities

Education presents a basis for provision of a full social inclusion and independence of all people, including those with disabilities, so it is necessary to enable all, equally, access to pre-school, primary, secondary, pre- and post-graduate educational facilities and studies.

5. GOAL: Persons with disabilities are to be ensured free access to job opportunities and employment without any discrimination in their working environment

Work, i.e. employment, is a key factor for social inclusion, economic independence, independent life and a greater dignity of the persons with disabilities. European directive on general framework on equal employment opportunities forbids discrimination based on disabilities. It also defines efficient practical steps to adjust work places to persons with disabilities, starting from adjustment of workspaces, to equipment, work hours, job division, professional development, etc.

The goal is to increase participation of the disabled in the working population and, thus, reduce the level of social transfers, to enable the disabled to, in accordance with their capabilities and abilities, develop skills, get employed, keep their position, get promoted or to completely change their careers. At the same time, the goal is to develop living and working conditions that will help to reduce the risk of injury, and to provide appropriate support, services, adjustments, access and other technical solutions, which will enable the disabled to perform their task in the most efficient and effective way.

6. GOAL: Persons with disabilities have to be provided an appropriate living standard, financial aid and social security

Persons with disabilities have to be provided an appropriate living standard, keeping in mind that their basic living costs are, due to special requirements caused by their disability, higher. It is necessary to fully inform them on all aspects of public support and benefits, available services, compensations, and to enable them to participate in different social programmes, especially if they are not able to work. The EU legislation goes one step further in this and tries to provide appropriate compensation also to the people taking care of the disabled.

7. GOAL: Persons with disabilities need to be provided with appropriate medical protection

Even though here we might bring up that the health protection system in our country in general is very bad, we cannot deny the fact that persons with disabilities need to be provided with a special protection, necessary rehabilitation, orthopaedic aids, etc.

8. GOAL: Enable persons with disabilities to participate in cultural events, and to have equal access to institutions of culture

In addition to general (physical) access to institutions and monuments of culture, we have to make sure that persons with disabilities are consulted in preparation of cultural events and construction of institutions as it is only in this way that we can ensure their full, equal participation in this segment of our social lives.

9. GOAL: Enable persons with disabilities to participate in sports and recreational activities

It is a matter of general knowledge that our national representation in Para-handball members were recognised as heroes only after returning to this country with a golden medal. Prior to that most of us never even knew that the country has a representation in the sport, and that these people were using their own scarce resources to finance this passion of theirs. When they returned from the competition as winners, we held a few speeches for them, posed for a couple of photos on front pages of our newspapers, we perhaps even provided for a one-off donation, and – forgot they existed again.

In addition to helping to increase the level of their social inclusion, exercising, games and sports activities also have a great rehabilitation effect. In view of all that, it is necessary to provide appropriate access to sports fields, toilet facilities, transportation means, etc.

10. GOAL: Enable persons with disabilities equal participation in religious and spiritual life of their community

I don't think an explanation of the importance of this is even necessary here.

11. GOAL: Encourage and support the work of associations of persons with disabilities

Raising awareness of general public, and the segment of the population comprised of persons with disabilities themselves, is nearly impossible without active associations of the disabled, as it is only

them that can truly speak about the problems they are faced with in their everyday lives. The purpose of such associations is to determine, represent and meet the needs of persons with disabilities, to represent their interest, warn of the principle of non-discrimination of the disabled, to encourage persons with disabilities to get involved in their community's life, to raise awareness of the status of the disabled in our society, to participate in prevention and removal of barriers to an active life of the disabled, etc. It is necessary to develop and use public sources (for example, Slovenia uses a part of the money from concessions for lottery games to finance associations of the disabled and other aid organisations, through special social programmes) to finance organisations which will provide appropriate support to their members and, in time, grow to be the segments of our society which will be able to finance themselves independently, through various projects implemented by their members.

12. GOAL: To reveal and prevent violence and discrimination of persons with disabilities

Given their particularly vulnerable position, one cannot neglect this aspect of protection of persons with disabilities.

It is obvious that there are numerous, extremely important aspects of full, equal inclusion of persons with disabilities in a life of a community. I am even a little frightened to see everything that needs to be accounted for, and everything that needs to be changed. However, even small steps will inevitably take us to a goal, then the second and the third one and...

Perhaps we should start with the basics – asking questions and requesting answers from all public institutions and facilities offering public services about their accessibility to persons in wheelchairs. At the same time, we should insist on their fully implementing legally already defined obligations, requesting that conditions for full social inclusion of the disabled to be fulfilled. Perhaps, once we realise this, we can go on further to accomplish the goals stated above and, perhaps again, some day we can set our own, unique goal in providing equal status to all citizens of our country.

In the end, it would be really nice to at least once lead with something good... Therefore, let us not be lazy... At least once a day, let's ask someone a question – can this be used by a person in a wheelchair... With some hope and a lot of patience, perhaps, some day, someone will finally get to say – YES.

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My best friend's life experience