

Speech of Mr Josef NEUMANN

Member of the State Parliament of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany
Member of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council
of Europe

Conference on Including People with Disabilities in Disaster
Preparedness and Response

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Empowerment of People with Disabilities in Disaster Management

Human rights have their home where people experience disasters

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

in the scope of my report on *“Promoting equal opportunities for people with disabilities and their participation at local and regional levels”* for the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe I examined the living conditions of people with disabilities in Europe and I described the different standards of living. The report also presents several best practice examples of how to include people with disabilities successfully in different kinds of social life.

Those examples should not mislead us, though. There is still a huge demand to implement and strengthen the rights of people with disabilities – despite the long-standing commitment of the Council of Europe and its committees and despite the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) which is in force for several years now.

My report explains that it is the awareness for the rights of people with disabilities which is commonly missing in Europe. This lacking awareness, in turn, represents the biggest obstacle for those people’s participation in society.

Therefore, I highly welcome this conference which is dedicated to the issue of “Including People with Disabilities in Disaster Preparedness and Response”. The right to integrity and protection of life is non-negotiable.

It is estimated that 15% of all Europeans have some kind of disability. These people live in segregation; they often reside in closed facilities. Their active participation in social processes is hindered by the structures prevailing in many European societies.

It is about time to change this situation. This is also what my report stresses.

The UN CRPD represents a major step in the fight for the full enjoyment of human rights by people with disabilities. It emphasizes that discussions about people with disabilities need to be held in the context of human rights, and not in the context of medical arguments. The UN CRPD is based on the 'social model of disability', which highlights that persons with disabilities enjoy the same rights as those without disabilities; that it is the environment that is disabling and not the impairment per se. Hence, disabilities are the result of the dynamic interaction between persons and the social, physical and attitudinal barriers they face.

In order to foster this approach, in order to escape societal segregation, we need to create and reinforce an inclusive structure of society in all areas – disaster preparedness and response included.

The reality of an inclusive society – a society for all – is determined locally. That means: Inclusion needs to be accepted and taken seriously also within crises management.

There are two sides to social inclusion in this respect:

On the one hand, people with disabilities need to be actively involved in planning, shaping and implementation phases of disaster management. They need to be acknowledged as experts acting in their own cause, just in line with their general motto "Nothing about us without us". That is actually what the concept of empowerment stands for. Empowerment (or the right to participate) can be established in different ways. For instance, fire brigades, the police, the Red Cross, agencies for technical relief and other organisations should allow also people with disabilities to join voluntary work, in case they want to.

On the other hand, people in charge of disaster management (the specialized experts of disaster management) need to be appropriately trained and educated. Knowledge is the key to change people's views. Social inclusion implies a wider accumulation of knowledge about disabilities, also for the majority society.

However, it is not only knowledge about disabilities as such which is essential in this respect; it is also knowledge about the people and their behaviour within crisis situations. For instance, emergency forces and rescue workers need to know that different people behave differently in crisis situations. People with disabilities often go immediately to the scene of event (so the scene of the disaster), instead of staying away from it. People in charge of disaster management need to be aware of such facts; they need to take them into account when doing their job.

So how can we accomplish these two objectives? What do we need to do?

On the one hand, people with disabilities need to be allowed, even encouraged, to participate. The acknowledgment of them as experts acting in their own cause needs to become part of the solution. Some kind of practical “manual” could be a first idea in this respect – a “manual” which explains approaches of participation and may simultaneously serve as a source of information for those people involved in disaster management.

On the other hand, the issue of disability must become part of inter alia fire fighters’, policemen’s and medical practitioners’ curricula. Mainstreaming the issue is of utmost importance. National laws and regulations need to be adjusted as to adopting the approach that all people who work within disaster management either on a voluntary or full-time basis need to deal with the issue of disability.

Ladies and gentlemen,

it needs to become natural to give thought to the question of how to take care of different kinds of people in crisis situations. I do not only refer to people with disabilities at this point, but also to the elderly, to children, to pregnant women etc. – so to all people that might be hindered by the environment in some way.

In order to achieve the mentioned objectives we need to make adjustments within both training and participation programmes. Concrete action plans are required, just as concrete measures are required.

An inclusive approach includes, for example, also the adjustment of security standards. The planning and the implementation of such standards need to be tailored to the specific form of a disability. People with a hearing impairment rely on other fire-protection measures than people with a visual impairment.

Accessibility plays an important role as well, especially with regard to the construction of quarters and neighbourhoods. A barrier-free area is not only crucial for people with disabilities, but also for the elderly or families with children. An inclusive, barrier-free construction thus creates space – space which is extremely important in case of, for instance, a fire.

In general, the demographic change poses additional challenges to existing systems, since the number of people who require specific measures increases steadily. It is now time to act!

In my home country, in Germany, the federal government started dealing with this issue as well. In the present coalition agreement there is a chapter on “Civil defense and defense of critical infrastructures”. In this chapter the Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance is strengthened and instructed to tackle issues like inter alia the demographic change and relating consequences from the angle of disaster relief. The German government is aware of the social change we experience and therefore pursues the idea of an inclusive society. Organisations involved in disaster management should do the same.

For me, social inclusion constitutes a major step in solving the challenge we are discussing here today. An inclusive society, a society for all, creates opportunities and prospects for each and every one! We should not only realise this in an emergency; we need to realise this now.

However, inclusion does not only serve as a means to an end; the term inclusion carries a huge value itself. Inclusion implies respect for human rights.

Human rights have a home and their home is where people reside, live, work, grow old etc. – hence, their home is also where people experience disasters. The protection of and respect for human rights is particularly important in times of crises. They show whether human dignity is protected in quarters and neighbourhoods on the spot or not.

Empowering people with disabilities to participate within disaster management needs to be regarded as an approach of protecting human rights. In order to achieve this, it requires above all the will to establish and strengthen an inclusive structure of society. “Those who want inclusion will search for a way to achieve it; those who oppose it will only search for arguments.”

Thank you for your attention.