

Strengthening disabled peoples' organisations (DPOs)

The two following project examples demonstrate how the disability sector can be strengthened in two very different geographical areas: Africa and the Balkans.

Area: Eastern Europe and Africa

Sector: Support to non state actors

Phase of PCM illustrated: Identification and Formulation

Degree of relevance: Degree 3 – Disability highly relevant projects

Implementer: NGO

General context

Supporting persons with disabilities and enhancing their participation in policy making and development cooperation programmes is essential for achieving more inclusive societies. Handicap International (HI) has been supporting Disabled Peoples' Organisations (DPOs) for two decades, in more than forty countries. As part of its work to support DPOs, HI implemented the SAPESH project in Madagascar from 2000 to 2005 with the support of EIDHR and French Ministry of Foreign affairs. From 2003- 2008, HI has been implementing a similar project in South East Europe (www.share-see.org), co-funded by the US State Department, DFID and EIDHR. Both projects focus on strengthening self-advocacy capacities of persons with disabilities and their organisations.

In Madagascar: a movement to structure

In Madagascar, the challenge was to establish organisations representing persons with disabilities at local level and to create a national representative body of people with disabilities that could be acknowledged as counterpart by the Malagasy government. The few existing organisations of people with disabilities did not have the capacity to effectively participate in policy making and its members predominantly came from the capital. As a result of the capacity building process initiated by HI, more than twenty local disability organisations have been established who form the national Committee of organisations of people with disabilities (COPH). This body has achieved to build up internal democratic structures and represents the needs and claims of different groups of people with disabilities. The Committee was also successful in lobbying the government to pass the first legislation on rights of people with disabilities and some of the related by-laws.

In South East Europe: a movement to enhance and revitalise

The situation of disabled people's organisations was different in South East Europe as a disability movement existed already during the socialistic era. Built like trade unions, the movement was organised according to types of

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impairment or status (blind, deaf, paraplegic,...). Their main role was to channel some of the benefits granted by the Yugoslavian legislation. These organisations were not oriented towards inclusion but rather protection and faced difficulties to play adequate role in the socio-economic transition. At the same time, new disability organisations emerged whose advocacy approach differed from those unions by promoting inclusion for people with disabilities.

The aim of the project initiated by HI together with four local DPOs in Bosnia Herzegovina, Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo, was to enhance the movement and to develop its capacities for active participation in social policy reforms. In Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, the complexity of the political situation represented a strong obstacle for structuring the disability movement as activists were confronted with irresponsive authorities. In Albania, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro however, as government were more stable, discussions and negotiations were possible. These differences demonstrate that civil society building is directly related to state responsiveness, especially for excluded groups. The successes in fostering political debates encouraged the disability movement in the South East Europe to invest in overcoming some of their divisions and in some countries to renew the national DPO councils with the support of the European Disability Forum.

Challenges in supporting DPOs

In Balkans as in Madagascar, the difficulties of self-advocacy movement reflect low level of educational attainment of persons with disabilities due to their exclusion from the education system. Additionally in the Balkans, impairment based social protection policies has brought very strong division within the movement, as each group would try to retain and increase most of their previous benefits without taking into consideration key challenges faced by most persons with disabilities.

DPOs: more and more part of the debate

In the Balkans as in Madagascar, during the five year project period, DPOs gained a relatively significant political space and managed to put disability as a key topic of social reform on the political agenda in most of the countries. Supporting the disability movement and DPOs as key partners constitutes a big challenge but also represents a key condition for inclusive development and the successful implementation of the UNCRPD.

Lessons learnt and how this is an example for disability inclusion

- The support of disability stakeholders is one of the pre-conditions for inclusive development

This text has been adapted from a report by Alexandre Cote from Handicap International

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