

RECOMMENDATIONS TO MAKE FREE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES A REALITY IN SOUTH EAST EUROPE

Though our assessment shows poor development of policies allowing the implementation of an unbreakable chain of movement, there are good initiatives taking place throughout the region but they need to be scaled up to effect wider changes. Disability anti-discrimination legislation was just passed in Serbia and this provides an incentive for other countries in the region to adopt similar legal frameworks. With the EU accession and poverty reduction on the agenda in all countries in South East Europe, the governments have the mandate to implement reforms within the framework of decentralisation. On a government level, Albania and Croatia have adopted national disability strategies and both Serbia and Montenegro are in the process of formulating their own. In Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia ministries are beginning to introduce European standards into national legislation and to express support for and resolve to do it. On the local level, many development initiatives are being implemented under the framework of EU pre-accession programmes, which include investment in reconstruction and building and the development of infrastructure. On a European level, disabled people's organisations and their allies, particularly EDF, are advocating to mainstream disability in the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) currently being elaborated.

The current context of policy reforms and infrastructure development creates a unique opportunity for policy-makers and civil society to work together to implement the unbreakable chain of movement. The free movement of people with disabilities as a human right must be on the agenda of all decision makers and DPOs have a great responsibility to ensure it is there. Yet, duty bearers and professionals responsible for the built environment must ensure that DPOs and members of the disability community are actively consulted during planning, implementation and monitoring phases leveraging their first-hand expertise on the most effective and relevant ways to implement the unbreakable chain of movement.

Priority areas in South East Europe: legal frameworks, services and participation of all actors including people with disabilities in decision-making

As shown throughout the report, there is a need to emphasize the enforcement of legislation and standards in the region. Despite efforts to reform policies and adopt new legislation, if it is not implemented it will do nothing to change the situation for people with disabilities. Civil society must make strong efforts to act as a watchdog force to monitor implementation demanding enforcement and punitive measures for non-compliance.

Still, none of the links of the chain of movement will be effective without the **development of proper support services**, particularly personal assistance and good quality assistive devices to allow greater personal mobility. The personal assistance service being piloted in Serbia (see Good Practice 2) is an excellent example of how individualised service provision is feasible, especially when considering the added benefits on the lives of people with disabilities involved in the program. These types of services must be supported by states as a first step in guaranteeing the free movement of people with disabilities.

It is clear from the report that the unbreakable chain of movement is only being implemented sporadically throughout the region, generally initiated by DPOs on a grass-roots level. When the links of the chain are implemented, they are done so only partially, removing only some barriers in selected parts of the built environment without making widespread changes to implement the holistic thinking that is needed in planning and construction. Changes are being made on the ground that indicate innovative thinking such as in Tuzla, BiH where all public buses purchased are low-floor thanks to lobbying efforts of local DPOs (see Good Practice 11); the adoption of a new regulation that all new residential buildings must be accessible in Dobojo, BiH (Good Practice 7) and the training of women with disabilities to drive adapted cars in the UN Administered Province of Kosovo (see Good Practice 13). It must be stressed that **the holistic nature of the unbreakable chain of movement must be considered during the planning and implementation** processes from personal assistance to accessible housing to low floor buses. If all of the links of the chain are not engaged, communities

will jeopardize the reform process aimed at free movement of people with disabilities and there is a great risk that people with disabilities will still remain excluded and discriminated against.

In order to implement the unbreakable chain of movement in practice, **training on Universal Design or Design-for-All must be introduced** in the region both at the faculty level as well as for professionals involved in construction and planning. This is possible to implement as is the case in Novi Sad, Serbia where Universal Design is included in the formal curriculum in the Department of Architecture (see Good Practice 23).

Additionally, this assessment clearly points to the importance of participatory planning to ensure that adaptations being carried out suit the needs of people with disabilities and the barriers that still persist are properly identified. This can be easily solved by **consulting with DPOs and people with disabilities** from the beginning of the planning process. This was carried out with success in Albania where DPOs and national authorities worked together to develop a national disability strategy (see Good Practice 22) and also with the Students with Disabilities in Serbia who served as consultants for the reconstruction of streets in Belgrade (see Good Practice 24). This is particularly important for local development projects where there is a real opportunity to work in partnership to implement proper accessibility standards.

Local accessibility planning is a critical process for implementing necessary changes to the environment that facilitate the free movement of people with disabilities including community members, local authorities, people with disabilities, builders, architects, urban planners, investors and representatives of both the public and private sectors. Round tables and conferences on accessibility such as Access 2006 with all relevant actors do take place but real participatory planning is not a reality yet in the region. Participation is the first step towards the **creation of a shared vision** and the development of strategies to address the concerns of people with disabilities. It is a mutually beneficial relationship

Participatory planning is a key issue in the region despite the fact that most DPOs in the region already have links with ministries and local authorities through their advocacy work. However, the **dialogue and cooperation** with other stakeholders dealing with the built environment is still weak and people with disabilities are not yet viewed as a resource in which they can participate as partners, advisors and monitors in the change process.

Accompanying all of these steps in the process is the need to have strong **awareness raising** on key issues and we see many good examples in the region such as in Macedonia where DPOs campaigned to change the law on construction (see Good Practice 18). These advocacy efforts need to continue and be stepped up so that the general public is more aware of disability issues while the key stakeholders begin to better understand what is at stake.

Throughout the report, the priorities for the region have been cited and the changes needed on a national and local level have been outlined. However, it is important to stress that these changes are feasible as they are being carried out by different actors throughout the region. The reforms needed are not complicated or excessively costly but they can make large impacts on the lives of people with disabilities.

Concrete steps for going forward:

Widespread reforms needed to implement the chain of movement:

- Strong emphasis should be put on the development of adequate support services, particularly personal assistance, assistive devices provision, and Sign language interpreter services to facilitate the free movement of people with disabilities within the community;
- All planning related to urban plans, infrastructure, thoroughfare and outdoor spaces must take accessibility standards into account;
- All new buildings and spaces must be accessible respecting all accessibility standards;
- More rigorous inspection overlooking the construction of new buildings;
- Plans and budgets set for the adaptation of existing public buildings (prioritising public service buildings) making both the exterior and interiors fully accessible;
- Public transportation to be made accessible whenever new means of transport are acquired;
- More regular and flexible door-to-door transportation services available for people who are not able to use accessible public transport.

Some concrete initiatives that can be undertaken at the local level:

- Registries established for people in communities needing accessible housing;
- "Trader's Convention" to be drafted and signed by shopkeepers and businesses owners to make their facilities accessible;
- Services in place and available for accessibility auditing and consultations on adapting one's home;
- Services in place and available for adapting cars for the people with disabilities and training people to drive;
- Lobbying for local transportation procurement to include accessible buses;
- Lobbying for the inclusion of Universal Design when the plans for a new public building are being drawn up;
- Advocating for barrier-free planning when urban plans are put on public debate;
- Lobbying for accessibility during reconstruction or renovation of a public building;
- Establishing an independent local accessibility commission that includes people with disabilities that can help to monitor compliance to accessibility standards and existing legislation. This kind of body can also lobby for the inclusion of other standards on accessibility in planning, design and construction.

Large-scale initiatives needed to accompany the implementation of the unbreakable chain of movement:

- Strong awareness raising carried out within the community on free movement as a human rights issue as well as more targeted awareness raising for professionals and local authorities responsible for the built environment on their duty to implement the unbreakable chain of movement;
- The development of a civil society watchdog force to monitor the implementation of accessibility standards and to alert the public and the responsible authorities when there is a lack of compliance;
- The establishment of adequate legal frameworks with the proper tools to ensure implementation of laws and standards;
- The adoption of Universal Design/Design-for-All as the standard for building and planning and the formal inclusion of these principles in education and training of professionals through awareness raising and dissemination of clear information on these standards;
- Building alliances and networks between the disability community and those responsible for the built environment including the transportation sector involving both local authorities and professionals;
- The duty bearers need to meet to be more consistent in their responsibility to enforce sanctions, especially in case of non-compliance with the existing standards;
- Alongside stronger enforcement of legislation, government measures must be introduced to curb corruption in the building sector so that private investors and builders are held accountable;
- Participatory planning needs to become a common practice in the region especially on the local level involving all actors for a diversity of competencies and reflecting a wide array of needs.

With the current climate of change in the region, the free movement of people with disabilities as a human right issue must be on the agenda of all decision makers. Building the unbreakable chain of movement is a matter of multi-stakeholder cooperation and thorough planning. As most of the research in this report shows, developing proper support services and removing barriers are not such a costly investment if well planned and integrated in all relevant strategies and policies. With the rising level of awareness and the upcoming international convention on the rights of people with disabilities, there is no valid excuse to avoid strong commitments to realisation of these key rights and conditions for the full participation of people with disabilities.