

The Belgian Disability Forum (BDF) is working on the Convention since the year 2003. Well, I have to say that it was before the time I joined its board and became its president.

At this time, it was some kind of a discovery. Not that disability was a human right issue. We were convinced about it. But we had never been thinking that writing a Convention about the human rights of persons with a disability was THE pass we had to follow in order to concretely improve the situation of people with a disability, in Belgium, within the European community, at the level of the Council of Europe and even worldwide...

In 2003, the Belgian Disability Forum was still a young organisation. A forum created by 10 DPO's in order to follow the development of international policy that could have an impact on the situation of persons with disabilities. We were sensing that we had to act at international level but we were still centred on our Belgian realities. Working on the UNCRPD did change our views, radically.

Everything started through the European Disability Forum (EDF) : during 3 years, every 6 month, the BDF did comment and propose amendments to the projects of text of the Convention EDF was debating in New-York. We had entered the process. After this, we followed 5 different phases.

The first phase was completely internal. With internal, I mean that it was restricted to the Belgian DPO's. It's a bit amazing to think back at this time : no one in our organizations had a concrete experience about what it means to work on a UNO Treaty. Only a few of us was in phase with the notion of 'paradigm shift'. Most of us were wondering if it would result in concrete gains for the person with a disability...

So the BDF did explain the goal and process to its member organizations. We did it through our e-letter and through meetings. Step by step, we came to be thinking in the way of the UNCRPD.

The second phase was directed to the governments. Let me insist on the 's' at the end of 'governments'. Indeed, since Belgium became a federal state, not less than 8 governments had to give their formal agreement in order to entitle the Federal government to sign the convention and then to ratify it.

For the BDF, it has been a period of intensive lobbying. We have been writing official letters, followed by e-mails and phone calls, we took every opportunity to talk to policy makers, civil servants, Members of the Parliaments... The advice councils of people with disability issued advices. In the mean time we continued to talk about the UNCRPD in every occasion, by presenting slide-shows about its content and about the UNO process in provinces, in cities, in schools and so on.

At the end, we were successful : Belgium did sign and then ratify both the convention and its additional protocol.

The third phase was the 'symbolic' one. We cannot underestimate the power of symbols in our society. During the lobbying phase we did insist on the fact that DPO's had to be present for the signature of the UNCRPD. At this time, the State Secretary decided to include the president of the Belgian Disability Forum and the vice-President of the National High Council for Persons with a Disability in the Belgian delegation present in New York for the signature.

It still goes on and, every year, we are included in the Belgian delegation to the Conference of the State Parties. The official Belgian communication is prepared through meeting and e-mail exchanges before the conference, under management of the Foreign Affairs department. Since we are part of the delegation, the advice councils of persons with disabilities are included in this preparation process.

I can tell you that, this year, during the Conference of the State Parties, many said that the communication of Belgium did 'stand out' because it was not only focused on what's fantastic in Belgium but also on what has to be improved. This is the result of being part of the process...

The fourth phase consists in building the bridge between symbol and concrete achievement. For sure, we would have liked to obtain immediate concrete achievements in the matters under the 33 first articles of the UNCRPD: an inclusive educational system, full accessibility and so on...

Unfortunately, it cannot be that fast. So, the BDF did concentrate its efforts on the achievement of article 33. Why? Because article 33 is the control panel of the implementation at national level.

So, the BDF did insist on the necessity of complete implementation of article 33 within the shortest period of time.

For what concerns article 33.1, related to the establishment of a coordination mechanism between 8 focal points, the BDF didn't have to interact with the government for its establishment. It went quite fast and covers the 8 levels of the federal state.

The coordination mechanism did write down the first national report in due time and even consulted the advice councils before sending it to Geneva.

Since then, we took the habit to invite the responsible of the coordination mechanism twice a year in a joint meeting of the bureaus of the BDF and of the National High Council of Persons with Disabilities.

This is an occasion to know about the evolution of the process and to improve the relationship between us. I do think it is very important to have a regular relationship with the coordination mechanism in order

to improve the mainstreaming of disability and to insist on the importance to involve the persons with disabilities or their organisations in the political process from the very beginning and at every stage of the decision making.

For what concerns article 33.2, the process has been a bit more chaotic. For more than one year after ratification we had no signs that anything was in progress.

I have to admit that we were a bit upset about this inactivity because promotion, protection and monitoring of the implementation are the main levers we, as DPO's, need to have in order to make sure that the UNCRPD will be implemented in Belgium...

So the BDF and National High Council for Persons with Disabilities took the initiative to prepare a nota on how to settle an independent mechanism : who would be part of it, according to which principles will it function and so on. This nota was made official as an advice from the National High Council for Persons with Disabilities to the federal government.

By doing so, we did put the pressure on the government and reminded that DPO'S had to be involved in this process as it is the heart of the UNCRPD. Well, later on, it did move and the National High Council for Persons with Disabilities was formally consulted at the next steps.

The official proposal was a bit too non-negotiable according to our expectations. But, at least, we

succeeded to improve the composition of its accompanying committee : the National High Council obtained the Presidency and the advice councils of persons with disabilities form the biggest group within the Committee with 10 seats on 24.

With **the fifth phase**, we are more into the reality of life of the persons with disabilities. As I said, Belgium did write down its official report on the implementation of the UNCRPD. Now, as you can tell, it sounds quite positive : it shows in which fields the legislation is improving the situation of persons with disabilities.

But, it's a bit too nice a report (I guess it must be the same for every country...). So the BDF decided to write down its own alternative report. The goal is to give a picture of the reality that people with disabilities are facing in their day to day life, in Belgium, right now.

It is a very heavy process for a small structure like the BDF (we just have one staff worker).

We wanted this alternative report to be :

- Representative : the BDF regroups 18 DPO's covering the different communities and regions and representing fairly all the disability situations. We did extend the partnership to the existing advice councils at national and regional levels. By doing so, we were adding their expertise and knowledge. So, about representativity, it's quite OK
- Participative : we decided to work on basis of a participative process. A questionnaire was issued

for each of the 33 first articles of the UNCRPD. These questionnaires were built on basis of the questionnaire from UNO and on the questionnaire from IDA. All the participating organisations had a delay to send back their input to the secretariat. Then the secretariat prepared a synthetic sheet for each article. Each of these sheets were discussed and amended during a meeting of the accompaniment committee. It took about 8 meetings. Then, the secretariat worked on the redaction of the text, article by article. Again, the articles were discussed in accompaniment committee (about 8 meetings). Then we worked out 21 recommendations for the UNCRPD Expert Committee. And finally, we shaped it the best possible way on basis of the recommendations from EDF and IDA officers.

That's where we are, now. The next steps are 'technical' : lay-out and translation in Dutch and English of the whole document. Translation into Spanish, German and easy to read of the 'recommendations' and their explanations. Production of video capsules in sign languages and of audio documents.

All of it must be done for February the 15th as the reports from Belgium will be analysed in April by the Committee of experts of the UNCRPD.

Now as a conclusion, I would like to insist on several 'positive side effects' of the action we made around the UNCRPD:

- First of all : UNCRPD became the structure on which the BDF and National High Council are working on a day to day basis
- Second : the governments understood that they have to work more with the advice councils of Persons with Disabilities. Even in Flanders where there is no advice council, our intensive insistence through a voluntary platform called NOZO came to a positive result : an advice council should be created before the end of this year
- Third : the member organizations of the BDF and the advice councils have now a common document showing the reality about living with a disability in Belgium and a list of 21 recommendations they share in common
- Four: we all learned to work together, following a common goal

This last one may be the most important one... Oh, by the way, the official saying of Belgium is 'l'Union fait la force' : 'Union creates strength'. We did reinvent it, in some way...