

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

WORKING BREAKFAST CEMOFPSC

Improving the social integration of disabled people in Middle East through Accessibility: Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt

Year II: Awareness about the access of Middle Eastern countries to the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Madrid, December 18th, 2012.
Shukran Restaurant at Casa Árabe.

In the framework of the International Day for the Persons with Disabilities (PwD) that took place this December and as part of the awareness actions of the Convenio “Improving the social integration of disabled people in Middle East through accessibility: Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt”, co-financed by the AECID, CEMOFPSC organized a breakfast meeting in the restaurant Shukran of Casa Árabe in Madrid on December 18th. With the title “the access of Middle Eastern countries to the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.” it intended to delve into the complexity of the enforcement of laws, especially in the Arab world, in the field of universal accessibility to remove barriers faced by people with disabilities.

Each of the experts present in the meeting presented their organizations' efforts to implement the needed actions in order to meet the aforementioned international convention, the main problems encountered and the solutions adopted in each specific context.

Among those present gathered at this breakfast meeting, representatives of three leading organizations that work with people with disabilities (PWDs) in the Middle East, Georges Xanthopoulos, Director of Mobility programs, Accessibility and Employment of the Arcenciel organization from Lebanon, Annie Medzhagopian Abu Hanna, Executive Director of the Al Hussein Society for the Habilitation/Rehabilitation of the Physically Challenged from Jordan, accompanied by Muhammad Jarrar of the same organization, and Ibrahim Makram, Director of Development Sector of the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services of Egypt, with representatives of Spanish and international press, as well as Raquel Garcia Merino, Head of NGOs Service Department of the AECID, Pilar Ruiz of the NGO Department of AECID, Marco Rotunno, Head of Mission of the FPSC in Jordan, Enric Roig, Project Coordinator of the FPSC in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt, Macarena Cotelo, Project Manager of the FSPC and Jumana Trad, president of the READI who served as moderator.

In the case of Lebanon, the effort has been done mainly by the civil society actors; they have been the ones to promote the participation of the different administrations. However, the ratification of the UN convention by its parliament has not yet achieved. A committee of experts was created in order to set the legislative framework of development of the implementation of the accessibility standards in public buildings as included in the law 220. More than 10 years has been necessary to be able to achieve it, due to the situation of political instability in Lebanon. Currently, awareness

campaigns at all levels, with professionals and organizations, are being promoted so that all accessibility standards will be taken into account while constructing or adapting buildings.

In Syria, six months ago it was possible to track the activities related to the convenio but the current situation of widespread conflict and the consequent uncertainty that has extended into the whole country is hampering the work. Furthermore, it would also be advisable to focus future activities in the context of planning the reconstruction of the country taking into account the large number of disabled people that war will cause.

Jordan was the first Arab country to sign and ratify the United Nations Convention thanks to the participation of the King as "Chief Chamberlain" in the Committee established for this purpose; actually the main difference with the Lebanese experience resides at the level of the institutional effort. But, the main challenge that Jordan has to face is to be able to change attitudes and legislation prior to the adoption of the UN Convention; actually they are focusing on charity rather than rights.

For its future implementation, it has created a High Council which is responsible for establishing policies, consolidating efforts and promoting awareness campaigns in society.

For that purpose it has developed a National Strategic Plan for 2007-2015 with public, private actors and NGOs. It is expected that for the elections in January 2013, public polling centers for the disabled people will be available, etc..

Egypt signed the convention in 2008 but it could not translate it into appropriate legislation. According to government estimates, Egypt has a population of at least 7 million people with disabilities. After a massive awareness campaign run by the civil society, the Ministry of Social Affairs drafted a new law, which was not convenient, and thus the civil society developed its own draft. The revolution and then the current transition situation discontinued that process; in fact currently the Egyptian parliament is dissolved. On the other hand, some positive changes can be found in the mindset of ordinary people in terms of perception of people with disabilities, they are currently considered as heroes and fighters.

In addition, following the revolution, many new disabled people are now political activists who believe that their situation must be taken more into account, to the point that in the drafting of the new constitution one of the committee members managed to change *in extremis* one of the articles which focus on the situation of people with disabilities and he was able to re-draft it in order to be more centered on human rights basis. The CEOSS organization has also an ambitious public awareness plan in all legal matters covered by the Convention of PwD, including graphic material, and books published in Braille.

Finally, the meeting concluded with the presentation of the news on the website opened by the Convenio; <http://www.accessibilityfprpwd.org> a useful coordination tool between the organizations involved, but also a tool open to other organizations in the Arab world and the rest of the world.