

Equal citizenship is not the same as inclusion  
Welcome speech at the General Assembly European Disability Forum  
Amsterdam, 12-03-2016

Good morning,

On behalf of leder(in) I warmly welcome you to this conference included in your General Assembly. leder(in) is the umbrella organization of persons with a physical disability, learning disability or chronic disease. Two hundred and fifty organizations, both national and local, are affiliated with us. This makes leder(in) the largest network for people with disabilities in the Netherlands. My name is Sander Hilberink, and I have the pleasure to be board member of this dynamic organization. We recently reinstated our membership of EDF, and we are happy to be part again of this European Network.

leder(in) refers in Dutch to Everybody in. As such, an inclusive society is in our genes. We are committed to a society in which everyone can participate, in which everybody is seen, and in which being different is normal. Today's society has to adjust to meet the needs of those with a disability or chronic condition who should be able to rely on tailored care and support. The civic society is shaped by diversity.

I would like to invite you to follow me for a couple of minutes. To share a personal note. Thus far we all strived for inclusion. But somehow, inclusion does not feel comfortable. Like a one-way ticket. A top-down approach. It semantically suggests that people with disabilities or chronic conditions are eagerly waiting for the moment that they may enter an already existing world. But this is not what we do, what we want! We strive for equal citizenship, for acknowledgement. In my view this is the very core of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This convention ensures equal rights, which is equal citizenship, which is the ultimate acknowledgement of accepting differences. For this reason I would like to challenge all persons and organizations gathered here today to rethink the essence of our goals. And in my personal view this isn't the strive for being included, no, it is guaranteeing equal civil rights for people with all sorts of disabilities and chronic conditions, providing everyone the opportunities to develop and grow. I think, we ultimately want, no, demand, the diverse society.

You gathered here today in The Netherlands. As in the Nordic countries, the Netherlands also saw important reforms such as deinstitutionalization and decentralization. Long-term care and support is no longer the sole responsibility of the national government, but it is splintered in different acts that give local governments and health insurance companies maximal discretion. Huge changes in systems are always difficult to implement, which sometimes hampers equal access to long-term care and support services. For individual citizens such reforms may cause uncertainty, the rise of unmet needs and affect the personal way of living. The nearby ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities provides an excellent framework to lend a helping hand to implement the system changes. It secures the quality of the reforms, and helps to translate the civil rights into common practices.

Looking at the program, that is exactly what we are doing today. We take the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as starting point, and focus on the practical implications for local governments. First, three different speakers present their views on the building of local inclusive (or diverse) communities from an international or national civil rights perspective. After that, several speakers shall address their local experiences with the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I hope it will be an inspiring conference for all participants. Thank you.

Sander Hilberink,  
Board leder(in)