

PRESS RELEASE

Ombudswoman for persons with disabilities hosted the UN Special Rapporteur on Disability Mr. Shuaib Chalklen during his visit to Croatia from 29 April to 3 May 2013.

After meeting representatives of legislative and executive branches of the government in the Republic of Croatia, visiting two institutions for persons with disabilities currently undergoing transformation and meeting representatives of organisations and national umbrella organisations of persons with disabilities, the UN SR on disability shared his impressions on the state of human rights of persons with disabilities in the Republic of Croatia.

Some of the Special Rapporteur's impressions are that persons with disabilities in Croatia face similar challenges to those of persons with disabilities in the world, both in the developed as well as in less developed countries. Those common challenges primarily concern the lack of resources and awareness about the untapped potential of persons with disabilities as well as the prejudices of the society towards their different abilities. He mentioned the example of the Great Britain which has one of the world's strongest economies and yet, when faced with the economic crisis, it started cutting down on the rights of one of the most vulnerable groups in the society. Despite a more challenging economic situation in Croatia, it is the Special Rapporteur's impression that Croatian society is doing its utmost to shield persons with disabilities from these negative economic trends.

Mr. Chalklen finds the deinstitutionalization process to run well, while the areas of education and employment of persons with disabilities would require additional efforts of all stakeholders as well as the involvement of persons with disabilities in the decision-making processes. He is concerned with the situation of persons with autism but believes that the authorities will soon come up with a solution which will result in greater enjoyment of their rights to access to quality rehabilitation, health care, accommodation and adequate support for independent living in the community.

While talking to Croatian authorities, Mr. Chalklen pointed out that despite these areas which require additional efforts, Croatia remains an example of good practice in the field of the realization of the rights of persons with disabilities for the countries in the region.

As a positive example UN Special Rapporteur on disability emphasized the Disability ombudsman's office as an excellent model of protecting human rights of persons with disabilities.

He spoke about steps that should be taken to ensure the right to inclusive education in line with the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. He was especially impressed with the achievement of the Center for rehabilitation Zagreb on managing deinstitutionalization and will share this successful practice with other countries especially those in Eastern Europe.

Mr. Chalklen emphasized the need for a better coordination among government ministries and found their coordination in the area of disability policy insufficient.

He especially highlighted the area of awareness raising and the culture of human rights in general which he also found insufficient. It is his impression that it is not only the Croatian society as a whole that does not understand the notion of human rights but also organizations of persons with disabilities fail to understand that persons with disabilities are rights holders and that the government has the obligation to ensure those rights. In the case of not ensuring these rights, the government should be held accountable which he illustrated on the example of an African country where organizations of persons with disabilities sued the government and the court reached a decision in their favor thus forcing the government to ensure that voting stations are accessible to persons with disabilities which is a right guaranteed under the UN CRPD.

He found his experience as a person with disability using a wheelchair with the level of accessibility of the physical environment in the capital adding that his observation should not be used to undermine difficulties many persons with disabilities must still have with mobility.