

# G3ICT: SPECIAL REPORT ON ICT POLICIES

By Axel Leblois

Axel Leblois is the Founder and Executive Director of G3ict – the Global Initiative for Inclusive Technologies, an Advocacy Initiative launched in cooperation with UNDESA in December 2006 to promote the ICT accessibility provisions of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities with the participation of the IT industry, governments, disability advocacy organisations and United Nations agencies.

In the autumn of 2006, UN DESA and leading experts negotiating the final draft of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) anticipated how revolutionary many of its dispositions would be for a number of countries. Among these, definitions and obligations in matters of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) accessibility were particularly critical: virtually all aspects of society and the economy depend on ICT applications and services.

The Committee which drafted the UN CRPD set the stage by embedding in its article 9 a definition of accessibility requirements for States Parties which includes ICTs. As a result, every possible digital application and service such as web sites, computers, telephony, ATMs, television, voting machines and electronic kiosks, public displays and a number of consumer

devices with digital interfaces would need to be accessible. And while there was a great deal of anticipation regarding the adoption of the CRPD, future challenges to make the dispositions of article 9 a reality appeared daunting due to the complexity of information and communication technologies, the global nature of the ICT industry, the speed of innovation, the multiplicity of actors creating products and delivering services and the general lack of awareness of ICT accessibility issues.

## MEASURING UN CRPD IMPLEMENTATION PROGRESS AMONG STATES PARTIES

Seven years later, how can one assess how much progress was driven by the resounding success of the adoption of the CRPD by 158 signatories and 138 ratifying States Parties?

*«While it seemed an overwhelming task to tackle the global challenges of inaccessible ICTs, we firmly believe today that progress is possible and happening.»*

Axel Leblois, G3ict

In order to answer this question, measure progress and offer benchmarks for governments and disability advocates around the world, G3ICT, in partnership with Disabled People's International launched in 2010 the CRPD ICT Accessibility Progress Report. It collects 57 data points per country to measure the level of legislative and regulatory commitments made by States Parties, their capacity to implement and their actual results for persons with disabilities. In 2013, for its third edition, 76 countries participated representing 68 percent of the world population.

## THE UN CRPD HAS A MEASURABLE IMPACT ON THE LEGISLATIVE AGENDA OF STATES PARTIES

The key findings are very encouraging on one hand but reflect tremendous challenges on the other hand. The first piece of evidence is that the CRPD did in fact have a profound global legislative impact in promoting the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. For instance, 86 percent of countries report that they now have a constitutional article, law or regulation defining the rights of persons with disabilities, compared to a handful of countries prior to the adoption of the UN CRPD, while 68 percent have a designated focal point within government for matters relating to the CRPD and a framework for implementing and monitoring the CRPD. So it is very clear that the global reach of the CRPD in establishing a Rights-based approach for disability is a tremendous success.

## RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH SUPPORTS ACCESSIBILITY

Furthermore, the CRPD establishes the lack of reasonable accommodation as discrimination: few countries around the world had such a definition in their laws and regulations as recently as 2006. Reasonable accommodation (or 'reasonable adjustment' as defined in several countries) is an important foundation for disability advocates: it creates a direct link between the Rights-based approach of the UN CRPD and accessibility. It establishes the imperative for society to provide accessibility solutions for persons with disabilities. It is therefore extremely encouraging that 54.5 percent of the countries reported having such a definition in their laws and regulations in 2012, and 63 percent in 2013: a remarkable sea-change in the global legislative agenda in support of accessibility.

And while only a small number of countries had ICT accessibility on their legislative roadmaps prior to the CRPD, in 2012 36.4 percent of ratifying countries had adopted a definition of accessibility which includes ICTs or electronic media in their laws or regulations. This figure reached 50 percent in 2013, an extremely encouraging sign that policy makers around the world understand the necessity to make ICTs accessible to all.

## A LARGE PROPORTION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES MAY NOT BE ABLE TO MAKE A PHONE CALL

Those results establish that a large proportion of persons with disabilities around the world today may not be able to access television, make a phone call, access vital e-government resources, learn and work with web resources, retrieve cash from an ATM or enjoy accessible digital books, all essential services for everyone's life. Javed Abidi, Chair of Disabled People's international stated, when G3ict and DPI jointly published those results at the Conference of States Parties at the United Nations:

"This joint G3ict-DPI global survey clearly establishes the severe gaps in ICT accessibility that remain among States Parties and their lack of compliance with Article 9 of the UN CRPD. It also demonstrates the urgency for States Parties to involve Disabled Persons Organizations in policy making and monitoring."

## SOLUTIONS EXIST AND CAN BE IMPLEMENTED

Yet, as the Zero Project demonstrates very well, solutions exist to make most ICT applications and services and digital media accessible. For instance, accessible television and relay services for the deaf are well established, digital books for the blind now belong to mainstream standards with ePUB3, mobile phones operating systems and apps are bringing innovative and powerful solutions for persons with disabilities and technologies for accessible ATMs or accessible web sites are well defined. Similarly, Universal Design principles are adopted by mainstream ICT industry leaders.

So, how to best promote the implementation of proven available solutions?

**FOCUSED MULTI-STAKEHOLDER COOPERATION IS AN ESSENTIAL SUCCESS FACTOR**

Successful implementation of ICT accessibility programs and policies relies on a few critical factors:

- 1. Lack of awareness and understanding of accessibility issues is the biggest obstacle in advancing programs to promote ICT accessibility.** The best way to overcome this obstacle is to involve disabled persons' organisations in policy and program development and monitoring. Far better results are obtained by countries or companies involving DPOs in their decision-making in matters of accessibility. Yet, in 2013, only 13% of States Parties had implemented a systematic mechanism to involve DPOs in the drafting, design, implementation and evaluation of laws/policies in the field of digital accessibility.
- 2. Each ICT accessibility domain calls for different policies, programs and groups of stakeholders to cooperate.** Mobile telephony, for instance, can be best promoted with mobile service providers while accessible television requires the collaboration of broadcasters. In addition, each sector operates under a different business model. And while promoting accessible ICTs for Special Education in schools may be predominantly a public sector endeavour, deploying accessible ATMs is obviously a task implemented by banks. Similarly at government level, different administrations cover different aspects of ICT accessibility. This me-

ans that solutions can best be developed by sectorial-focused multi-stakeholder initiatives.

- 3. Defining agreed-upon roadmaps and milestones in making progress with appropriate metrics and monitoring tools is essential.** In 2014 G3ict, jointly with the ITU, will be releasing model policies for mobile accessibility, TV accessibility, web accessibility for e-government and public procurement rules to promote ICT accessibility as well as a model policy developed jointly with UNESCO on implementing Inclusive ICTs for Education. They all include steps to define and monitor roadmaps based upon best practices observed in various countries.

Back in December of 2006, the notion of launching a global multi-stakeholder initiative among industry, disabled persons' organisations and the public sector to address those challenges took shape, facilitated by UNDESA. G3ict, the Global Initiative for Inclusive ICTs, was launched a week prior to the vote of the General Assembly. While it seemed an overwhelming task to tackle the global challenges of inaccessible ICTs, we firmly believe today that progress is possible and happening: political support in most countries is strong, ICT industry leaders are supportive, innovation brings new affordable solutions every day and the Disability movement is increasingly involved. The Zero Project contributes in an excellent way to fostering this momentum by celebrating and documenting successes.

**ICT ACCESSIBILITY GAPS REMAIN CONSIDERABLE**

While most advocates can rejoice that such legislative advances are made, gaps in implementation, however, are considerable. The 2013 CRPD ICT Accessibility Progress Report shows that there are few countries with basic appropriate levels of ICT or digital media accessibility.

Are there any dispositions among country laws, regulations and government-supported programmes promoting digital accessibility, the use of ATs or provisions from reasonable accommodations in the following areas of ICT?	No disposition	Minimum implementation	Partial implementation	Substantial implementation	Full implementation
Copyright Exceptions	83%	7%	7%	3%	0%
ATM or Kiosks	68%	19%	10%	0%	3%
Fixed-line Telephony	62%	14%	15%	7%	1%
Wireless Telephony	61%	18%	11%	4%	4%
Public Building Displays	62%	25%	9%	3%	1%
Digital Talking Books	62%	16%	18%	3%	1%
Transportation Public Address Systems and Services	57%	24%	13%	6%	0%
Websites	51%	30%	12%	7%	0%
Television	28%	50%	16%	6%	0%

Source: CRPD ICT Accessibility Progress Report - G3ict and DPI 2013 - [http://g3ict.org/resource\\_center/CRPD\\_2013\\_ICT\\_Accessibility\\_Progress](http://g3ict.org/resource_center/CRPD_2013_ICT_Accessibility_Progress)

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Some organisations from Austria are contributing more than their time and networks: We are extremely grateful for the financial supported granted by Bank Austria. The Austria Ministry of International Affairs has supported the Zero Project enormously by arranging Side Events to the UN Conferences in Geneva and New York, and there we were in the excellent hands of Christian Strohal and Johannes Strasser (Geneva), and Julia Thallinger and Nadia Kalb (New York).

*We are really looking forward to the cooperation with University of Economics of Vienna, to Vice-Rector Michael Meyer, who arranged for a team of students to evaluate the success of the Zero Project's first years.*

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Verbavoice, on of the Innovative Practices 2014, has taken care of all the technical issues of the Zero Project Conference 2014, including captioning, and they did a great job.