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 ICT applications and services. 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? 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 recently as 2010 established 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.

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 PERIODS 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 services, 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: “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
The Zero Project would not have been possible without the broad and continuous support of many individuals and organizations in the last three years. The Zero Project team would like to point out some of them: Javed Abidi, Chair of Disabled People’s International (DPI), together with his network of grassroots organizations, were most helpful in expanding the network to experts in more than 130 countries. Other organizations that opened their networks to use Light for the World (many thanks to Rupert Roniger and Johannes Trimmel), Christoffe Blind Mission, RIADIS from Latin America, AOPD from Arab countries, the European Foundation Centre and its network of foundations (with an extraordinary contribution this year by Fundacion ONCE from Spain), the Design for All-network, Handicap International, Trust for the Americas and many more.

With the Essl Foundation being based in Austria, the cooperation with the Austrian NGOs and DPOs is most important for the Zero Project, and we are especially grateful for the trust and support that we get from atempe (Klaus Candussi and Walburga Friedrich), Behindertenrat Erwin Buhfinger, Bundessozialamt, Career Moves, Caritas, Diakonie (thanks especially to Katharina Meichenbichler), Erste Foundation, HILGemeinschaft der Blinden und Sehgeschwachen, KOBV, ÖAR (thanks to Christine Meierschitz), OZIV, Selbstbestimmte Leben (Independent Living) and Seraphisches Liebeswerk der Kapuziner. We are happy and proud that Albert Brandstätter, chair of Lebenshilfe Österreich, will take the system of the Zero Project one step further in 2014 and use it for their own purpose of measuring inclusion.

Some organisations from Austria are contributing more than their time and networks: We are extremely grateful for the financial support 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 were in the excellent hands of Christian Strohal and Johannes Strasser (Geneva), and Julia Thallinger and Nadja Kalb (New York).

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

The Austrian Minister of Social Affairs, Rudolf Hundstorfer, supported the Zero Project right from its beginnings and was present at the first Zero Project Conferences. Max Rubisch from the Ministry is one of our most valuable advisors. The Fachhochschule St. Pölten supports us with a team of five students in the research and during the Zero Project Conference. We are grateful to another long-term supporter, Monika Vysovzil. Ashoka Austria, chaired by Marie Ringler, is our main advisor in the field of social entrepreneurship and social innovation, and how to develop the Innovative Practice-approach still further every year.

There some persons who have not only become formal visitors to the Zero Project, but people that we can contact any time when questions have to be answered and decisions have to be made. Susan Scott Parker (Business Disability Forum), Barbara Murray (ILO) and Anna Lawson (University of Leeds; ANED) belong to that group.

With this years focus on accessibility we are very proud to have build strong relationships with a team of experts, like Axel Lebljos and Martin Gould, to Mukhtar al Shibany and Betty Dion from GAATES and Jose Batanero and Amal Kharbachi from the ITU. In Austria, we were very happy that VCÖ supported us very well in the field of transport and accessibility.

The Zero Project Conference is dependent on special assistance to make it a success. We are most thankful to Caroline Casey from Kanchi (Ireland) and her energy as a moderator. The Stavros Niarchos Foundation supported us by bringing extraordinary examples of accessible art to Vienna, and the Kunsthistorische Museum generously invited everyone to a Farewell Cocktail in their extraordinary premises. The United Nations Organization of Vienna (UNOV), was an excellent host, thanks to Lars Larsen and Linto Thanikkel.

Verbavo, one 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.