

Partnership Strategies for Action: NGO perspective

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When thinking of these strategies I think it's important that we keep in mind the stage that we are at – that is, of ensuring that there *is* a convention, rather than what that convention would look like. While details of what should be included, definitions and so on are still of course important to be discussed, when we're talking about strategies for action I think we need to keep the focus on advocacy *for* the convention.

When talking about taking things forward it can be useful about taking things forward it can be useful to think about it at a conceptual level as well as at a practical level. Regarding strategies, it is obviously important to have practical steps in place, but I think it is also worth mentioning that nay advocacy around disability issues, I believe, is enhanced by a rights based approach. This is something I promote in other areas as well – for instance in development we hope to see a move away from a welfare model of development to a rights based approach. I see this as also relevant to our discussion here and was pleased to hear in Charlotte's presentation that that is the approach adopted by the Commission in South Africa. The adoption of this approach can be seen as part of a strategy for disability issues to move from just being about care and welfare and need, to also being about rights; and this is important in our advocacy towards a convention.

But to come to some more practical issues of strategy. One area I see as needing more work is awareness-raising – not just about the rights of people with disabilities, but about the possible Convention. This was brought home to me on the weekend when I mentioned this workshop to some friends. They had not been aware that a Convention was even being talked about, and while they are not people who are working specifically in disability issues, they are human rights activists / NGO workers. If they aren't aware, then what is the likelihood of the general public having any idea at all? It is important that there is more awareness-raising that a) this convention is being discussed and is a possibility; b) why it's a good idea and the existing human rights conventions aren't sufficient; and then c) how people can get involved. The use of simple, clear language that sets out these arguments is needed in any documents produced to assist in this.

This dissemination of information can be done by people such as ourselves, but can also be done through expanded networks. Which brings me to another important strategy – that of networking. The rights of people with disabilities are seen in the full gamut of rights – civil and political, economic, cultural and social. It is also a topic that has relevance not just to the human rights community, but all areas of society. Therefore I would welcome a broadening of these networks. This can assist with raising awareness, but also with activism towards promoting the convention.

Disability groups are obviously key, as are other human rights NGOs and national human rights institutions, but I think there are others who can also be targeted and brought on board. Maybe I should mention at this point that it is a very positive step that NGOs as well as Commissions are included in a meeting such as this. This is the sort of collaboration that we are needing.

But broader civil society can also be brought into our efforts – whether that be educational institutions, faith-based groups or trade unions. All these could be valuable partners in taking this forward. For coordination and strength perhaps they could be loosely brought together with one focal point in each country.

Another key group is the media – supportive media coverage can go a long way in assisting our work. In a world with a short attention span and many competing issues, getting such attention can certainly be a challenge but one I think worth pursuing.

These expanded networks, as well as assisting with information dissemination and collaborative advocacy, can also offer mutual support and capacity-building. While people with disabilities and groups that work with them obviously have the understanding that is so valuable to this, many may not necessarily have experience in this sort of advocacy work and the capacity to be involved in this. Therefore other organization, perhaps broader human rights organizations, may be useful sounding boards for ideas or for training to build capacity.

In talking about this networking, I guess I have a couple of other points to make. One is regarding existing networks that can be accessed – there are lots of these as you know so I'll just mention a couple of relatively new ones that you may not know about. One is ESCR-Net which is for anyone involved in economic, social and cultural rights, which obviously includes the rights of people with disabilities. Their first meeting is in Thailand next week. Another such network is the Commonwealth Human Rights Network which is being developed for those working for human rights in Commonwealth countries, which includes many of the countries represented here.

One last thing in relation to networks is the importance of acknowledging the power of the internet. A website, as mentioned earlier in the workshop, could be a valuable tool for information dissemination and sharing, and a point to promote collaboration. Of course it must also be remembered that not everyone has access to this tool.

Before I finish I do want to mention one more thing, and that is what's happening at the national level. While this is an international convention and we need to work at an international level, it is of course our national governments that make up this international group – and therefore national governments are a key target for advocacy. This would also provide a good opportunity to conduct advocacy about what is occurring under national or state legislation. And talking of legislation it is important to remember the importance of mainstreaming here - that not only are specific policies / legislations for people with disabilities needed, but that the remainder of the laws also need to be sensitive to their rights. And all the discussion and noise created around such dialogues may prove to be very useful in increasing awareness of these issues and working towards our goal – that of a new international convention so that the rights of people with disabilities will be better protected and promoted.

Thank you.