

Kristina Urbanc, Daniela Bratković, Natalija Lisak

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AS A VITAL SUPPORT FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITY IN CROATIA

The paper provides some information about the development of civil society associations for persons with disabilities in the post-war community in the process of social reconstruction. The Republic of Croatia, as a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities took over the role of improving the situation of persons with disabilities in society. However, the current crisis of Croatian society has particularly harmed people with disabilities and their families, as well as their position in society and their participation in everyday life. Beside the state's resources, which are more and more diminished, constant support for people with disabilities from NGOs is becoming a vital resource for their participation in everyday life. This paper presents the work of a few local NGOs engaged in disability activism in the context of a specific evolution of the civil society in Croatia.

Key words: post-war community, agency activism, human rights, Croatian experiences.

Kristina Urbanc, social worker, systemic family therapist, supervisor in psychosocial work; works as Full Professor at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Law, Department of Social Work and is chair of the Social Theory and Methods Unit, and holds an MA and a PhD in Social Pedagogy. Special research interests: users' perspective in social work practice, theory and research, social work with people with disabilities, professional competences and ethics in social work, helping theories. Teaching activities: Social casework; Creative Methods in Social Work; Social work from the users' perspective; Methods of supervision; Integrative social work; Field placement for 2nd and 5th year students. Contact: kristina.urbanc@pravo.hr.

Daniela Bratković, PhD, associate professor in the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Zagreb, Department of Inclusive Education and Rehabilitation. The main topic of interest: community based support and quality of life for people with intellectual disabilities. Contact: daniela.bratkovic@erf.hr.

Natalija Lisak, Master of sociology and philosophy, PhD in scientific branch Inclusive education and rehabilitation, is a postdoctoral fellow in the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Zagreb. The main topics of interest: rights of persons with disabilities, quality of family life, qualitative methodology – biography approach. Contact: natalija.lisak@erf.hr.

CIVILNODRUŽBENE ORGANIZACIJE KOT KLJUČNA PODPORA OSEBAM Z OVIRAMI NA HRVAŠKEM

Članek opisuje razvoj civilnodružbenih organizacij za osebe z ovirami v povojni skupnosti v procesu družbene rekonstrukcije. Republika Hrvaška je kot podpisnica konvencije Združenih narodov o pravicah oseb z ovirami prevzela nalogo izboljšanja okoliščin oseb z ovirami. Vendar pa je zdajšnja kriza, v kateri se je znašla tudi hrvaška družba, še zlasti prizadela ljudi z ovirami in njihove družine, njihov položaj v družbi in njihovo participacijo v usakdanjem življenju. Poleg državnih virov, ki so vedno bolj skopi, nevladne organizacije postajajo stalna ključna podpora ljudem z ovirami pri njihovi participaciji v usakdanjem življenju. Članek prikaže delo nevladnih organizacij na področju aktivizma ljudi z ovirami v kontekstu specifičnega razvoja civilne družbe na Hrvaškem.

Ključne besede: povojna skupnost, aktivizem služb, osebe z ovirami, človekove pravice, hrvaške izkušnje.

Kristina Urbanc, socialna delavka, terapevtka sistemske družinske terapije, supervizorka na področju psihosocialnega dela, je zaposlena kot redna profesorica na Univerzi v Zagrebu, na Katedri za socialno delo, in je vodja Oddelka za družbeno teorijo in metode. Magisterij in doktorat je opravila na področju socialne pedagogike. Njeni poglobitveni raziskovalni interesi so: uporabniška perspektiva v praksi socialnega dela, teorija in raziskovanje, socialno delo z ljudmi z ovirami, strokovne kompetence in etika v socialnem delu, teorije pomoči. Področja poučevanja: socialno delo s posameznikom, ustvarjalne metode v socialnem delu, socialno delo iz uporabniške perspektive, metode supervizije, integrativno socialno delo, praksa za študente 2. in 5. letnika. Kontakt: kristina.urbanc@pravo.hr.

Daniela Bratković je izredna profesorica na Univerzi v Zagrebu, Fakulteti za izobraževalne in rehabilitacijske vede. Njena poglobitvena raziskovalna interesa sta podpora v skupnosti in kakovost življenja ljudi z intelektualnimi ovirami. Kontakt: daniela.bratkovic@erf.hr.

Natalija Lisak, sociologinja in filozofinja, je doktorirala na znanstvenem področju inkluzivnega izobraževanja in rehabilitacije in je podoktorska raziskovalka na Fakulteti za izobraževalne in rehabilitacijske vede Univerze v Zagrebu. Njeni poglobitveni raziskovalni interesi so pravice oseb z ovirami, kakovost družinskega življenja in kvalitativna metodologija – biografski pristop. Kontakt: natalija.lisak@erf.hr.

Introduction

Croatia is located in Eastern Europe and until 1989 was a part of the communist bloc, although it was seen as a part of a 'softer' form of communism, compared to the Soviet regime. Centralized and bureaucratic systems existed in all aspects of everyday life and the state took over responsibility for social care, education, health etc (Puljiz 2005). During the 1990s, the context of promoting social change and development in a way of civil activism did not exist in Croatia and society held the state responsible for solving the problems within the community. In accordance with the latter, the civil society initiative and the process of its growth did not exist. What existed was the inherited socialist system in which all of the decisions and the accountability came from the 'top' (i.e. the 'top down' approach) (Bežovan *et al.* 2005, Kekez Koštro *et al.* 2012). The state was not in favour of empowering 'other subjects'. It took a long time for some basic prerequisites to be developed in order to initiate some cultural and professional changes in the direction of new concepts of providing services and engaging in human rights activism.

During the Croatian War of Independence (1991–1995) and in the middle of the refugee and emigration crisis, civil society organisations (mostly international) took an important role in helping the war victims and thus gained importance within society. At this time civil solidarity grew stronger. However, by the mid-1990s the civil solidarity started to fade and people began withdrawing from society, which in turn deepened the economic crisis, giving way to undemocratic rule, unsupported civil activity and the crises of the middle class where one is preoccupied with their own immediate problems and solidarity is reserved only for the family and those considered close. One can conclude that the growth of the civil society in Croatia was, for the most part, started by and determined by the war. The civil society managed to grow and sustain itself during the political and economic transition in spite of unfertile conditions and little understanding from the political elite in regards to these questions (Bežovan 1995, 2004).

Croatia, like many other countries with a large number of disabled persons of which most are at the low educational level, struggling to find employment and thus are exposed to poverty and social exclusion, needs development of the disability social policy. Like many other countries, Croatia has shown an operational gap between adopting the documents and laws with which the social policy towards the persons with disability would be regulated. Although the UN Convention on the rights of Persons with Disability was signed and ratified by Croatia it did not have a powerful influence as an instrument relevant to the successful implementation of those rights into the everyday life of a disabled person. The fulfilment of these rights depended often on interpretation and the good will of local authorities, resources and professionals. The role of NGOs was often to challenge the 'top down' approach in policy implementation and professional expertise and to raise the voice against violation of the rights of Persons with Disability. On the other hand, with the 'bottom up' approach the focus shifts from the political hierarchy to the formal and informal interaction, compromises and agreements between all the parties involved and thus results in the change of social policy towards the persons with disability. In this regard the role of the local NGOs¹, the most numerous form of Croatian civil society organisations, becomes very important as they act as 'the catalysts for development of the civil society' and as the 'administrators of the healthy society' (Bežovan 1995, 2004). This paper will further present the work of a few local NGOs engaged in disability activism in the context of the specific evolution of the civil society in Croatia.

¹ An Association is defined in Article 2.1. of the Croatian Law on Associations: 'An association for the purpose of this Law shall be any form of voluntary association of natural or legal persons which, in order to protect and promote issues of public or mutual interest, environmental, economic, humanitarian, informative, cultural, ethnic and national, educational, social, professional, sports, technical, health care, scientific and other interests and goals as well as their beliefs, and without the intention of gaining profit, submit themselves to the rules that regulate organizations and activities of that form of association.' Apart from the associations, the Croatian legal system differentiates between various trade unions, trusts, employers associations and religious communities.

The examples of successful disability activism in Croatia

The Association for Self-Advocacy

In 2013, the Association for Self-Advocacy² (hereinafter ASA) celebrated ten years of successful national and international self-advocated activism. ASA was founded in 2003 in Zagreb, Croatia. This was the first self-advocacy agency in Croatia and the region which was run by people with intellectual disabilities (ID) with help from their assistants. By the establishment of ASA, for the first time in Croatia, the door opened to the process of gaining subjectivity and legitimisation of this population in relation to other persons and groups in society. To gain subjectivity means in fact that these people are no longer objects of representation by other groups (parents, guardians, specialist), but rather express and represent their views by themselves. The legitimacy has to do with the question by whom the advocacy should be represented. From the very beginning, ASA has strived to represent the interests of the broadest population of persons with ID, not just those of its members.

The mission and the aim of this association is to promote equal rights and possibilities for people with ID and, thus help to improve their quality of life. ASA's activities are directed towards helping persons with ID develop competences and to feel empowered in self-advocating, to fight for their human rights, to ignite the public awareness, to influence public policy to improve the social position of persons with ID, but, also, to help promote and develop the self-advocacy movement in Croatia and the region. In its advocacy to promote and protects the rights of people with ID, ASA uses all relevant legal and democratic methods and instruments to achieve its aims. ASA initiated the establishment of the Croatian Self-Advocating Network which, presently, gathers 13 Self-advocating groups from across Croatia. It has become the only association in Croatia to regularly publish easy-to-read brochures and distribute them to self-advocates all over the country (The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, UN Convention on the rights of people with Disabilities).

The unfavourable socio-political context and the discrimination towards persons with ID in Croatia has been a focal point of ASA's various organised Public Awareness Campaigns. Through campaigning, ASA wishes to draw attention to the legal framework in Croatia, which balances on a thin line between a nominal compliance with the antidiscrimination minimum and an everyday virtual impossibility of realisation of basic human rights for the majority of persons with ID.

ASA has been an active member of many international organisations, including Inclusion Europe and the European Coalition for Community Living, with which they have had a successful collaboration over the years. On several occasions, ASA representatives held presentations at the United Nations in Geneva and New York, on behalf of the members of Inclusion Europe, Inclusion International and International Disability Alliances. The latter represents persons with ID. They are also prominent members of the European Platform of Self-Advocates³ – EPSA (part of Inclusion Europe), which is made up of organisations of self-advocates from different countries in Europe. ASA's President is a Board Member of Inclusion Europe as well as the EPSA Executive. Out of ASA's numerous projects and public campaigns, one can distinguish the following examples of activities that had a significant impact and contribution (as outlined in Association for Self-Advocacy 2013):

- In 2004, ASA published the Brochure entitled *Life stories* (a compilation of self-advocates life stories).
- In the film project *Living proof: The Right to Live in the Community* (2005) members of ASA and one assistant completed a training video on activism (it uses video and other technology to fight for human rights.) The film has been shown repeatedly on national TV networks, at a number of international seminars and in the United Nations, on the occasion of the

² Their web page: www.samozastupanje.hr.

³ Their website: <http://www.inclusion-europe.org/EP SA>.

ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Members of ASA held more than 50 presentations of the film in schools, welfare centers, documentary and alternative film festivals, conferences, round tables and even in the Croatian Parliament.

- In the framework of a project in 2007, implemented jointly with Inclusion Europe, they gathered self-advocates' groups from five cities and organised two training sessions for them in Zagreb. During the sessions, an easy-to-understand questionnaire was drafted and self-advocates were taught interviewing skills. Self-advocates then proceeded to interview other colleagues in their cities on how they view their own rights and the support in the community. The obtained results clearly show that the greatest number of complaints relates to the impossibility of employment, education, adequate community-based support and money management, as well as legal incapacitation. The report was presented before members of the European Parliament and delegates of the Commission in Brussels and in Zagreb. The report was also presented in 2008 in Vienna, at the meeting of the EU and Croatian parliamentary committees working on the chapter of social policy during the accession process.
- One of the ASA's 2008 activities that deserves to be highlighted most is the organisation of courses for self-advocates on the recently adopted Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- ASA, in cooperation with the Association for Promoting Inclusion, Center for Human Rights and the UNDP publicly promoted the declaration for the Convention implementation through the 'Self-Advocates Promoting the Convention' project framework. Furthermore, in cooperation with the American Association 'Narativ', ASA recorded videos in which activists would tell their stories in a method known as storytelling. In terms of international cooperation and influence, ASA has established connections with about a dozen human rights associations and has competed for the United Nations first NGO report on the human rights situation in Croatia: the Universal Periodic Review. The report outlines the problems of institutionalisation, legal incapacitation, impossibility of education and employment, the inaccurate translation of and a general lack of compliance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In 2010, the project of extending the self-advocates' network to ten or more cities in Croatia was successfully realised. Self-advocates' second activist engagement this year focused on the preparation and public promotion of the report on the status and situation of persons with ID in Croatia, produced by the Human Rights Watch. It should also be mentioned that ASA contributed to the creation of the European Declaration on the Health of Children and Young People with Intellectual Disabilities and their Families. The Declaration was signed at the 2010 World Health Organisation's Conference. Furthermore, an ASA member attended the WHO Convention on behalf of EPSA.
- Throughout 2011, ASA concentrated their efforts on raising awareness of the necessity of providing easy-to-access information to persons with ID and launched an easy-to-read magazine called *Glas zastupnika (Voice of Self-Advocates)*. ASA also joined as a partner to the *Pathways 2 project*, implemented by Inclusion Europe. *Pathways 2* was created in order to help include persons with ID in adult education. *Pathways 1*, which preceded this new edition of the project, focused on the development of European standards for easy-to-read information for persons with intellectual disabilities, as well as guidelines for teachers in life-long learning programs on how to make their curriculum accessible to persons with ID. Upon joining the *Pathways 2 project*, ASA undertook the translation of these resources into the Croatian language, prepared for the production of easy-to-read material and for the implementation of courses in accordance with the Inclusion Europe standards. ASA organised the first conference of the Croatian self-advocates entitled '*You and I, we are same.*'. The key speakers at the conference were self-advocates from the Croatian self-advocacy network. They publicly outlined the problems they encounter on a daily basis and emphasised the need to change the (pre)dominant attitudes towards persons with intellectual disabilities. During the conference, self-advocates had the opportunity to speak directly to decision-makers regarding

the futility of their struggle to enjoy certain basic human rights. Finally, self-advocates wrote a press release for the general public urging for the implementation of and compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. ASA also took part in the establishment of Platform 112. The platform was conceived as an alliance of civil society organisations, formed in order to monitor the protection of human rights and the rule of law in Croatia, especially in view of the completed negotiations for Croatian accession to the European Union. In order to lobby for the right to a life in the community, as described in Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, at the beginning of 2011 ASA's urged for the creation of the Coalition for Community Living, made up of seven associations of persons with disabilities and the Center for Human Rights. The Association for Self-Advocacy is responsible for the Coalition's first project: Community for All. The project targets decision-makers on a national and regional level and emphasises the need to develop community-based support services that will help include persons with disabilities in all realms of life on the same bases as the rest of the citizens.

- In August 2012, at the Europe in Action conference held in Brussels, European self-advocates elected the (actual) president of the Association for Self-Advocacy as the new president of the European Platform of Self-Advocates and vice-president of Inclusion Europe. Towards the end of 2012, one of the greatest achievements of the Association was made. In partnership with a few other civil society organisations and the ombudsman for persons with disabilities, the Association was directly involved in the ratification of the new Law on the Electoral Register, giving the right to vote to persons with complete legal incapacitation. Thus, Croatia has become one of ten European countries where the right to vote is not conditioned by a person's legal capacity, and has therefore fulfilled part of the requirements stated in Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- 2013 was characterised by ASA's participation in the debate against the investment of EU funding into the renovation and building of residential institutions for persons with disabilities. During the same year, education for the self-activists and a public campaign that concerned voting rights for people with intellectual disabilities that were formerly precluded from doing so, was conducted. Hence, the TV advert under the banner 'Our Voice, Our Strength' was frequently broadcast during the pre-election period. Furthermore, ASA organised and hosted the second European self-advocates' conference '*Hear Our Voices: Citizens Above All!*' The conference was their contribution to the celebration of the year 2013 as the European year of citizens. The first part of the conference focused on the problem of including persons with ID into democratic processes in the community. The second part of the conference was made up of workshops led by self-advocates and dealing with topics such as legal capacity, the right to live in the community, violence against persons with disabilities and the right to a family.

In 2014, ASA has cooperated with the Ombudswoman for Persons with Disabilities of the Republic of Croatia in creating a proposal for the introduction of the institute of 'Supported Decision Making', as an alternative to the traditional institute of 'Guardianship' to Croatia's new Family Act. At the international level, ASA's representative participated in research on the condition of fundamental rights of persons with IDs and the issue of mental health problems in the 27 EU member states. The research was led by the Fundamental Rights Agency's Research Committee.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that, with the aim of getting subjective insight into the perspective of self-advocates, qualitative participatory research was conducted. ASA's 23 active members took part in the research (Bratković, Zelić 2010). The research provided insight into the experiences and the views of self-advocates with regard to their personal perception about activism, how they represent themselves in everyday community life, how they experience the life in the community and what kind of problems they face and in which way they help and support others who would like to self-advocate. The research confirmed that self-advocates are confident in their role of promoting self-advocacy, that they are ready for positive experiences

and effective results of their activities. However, the research also pointed to the barriers that the self-activists face and their evident intention for further promoting and strengthening the self-advocacy movement.

The possibility to 'speak in their own words' is the key force of self-advocacy for people with intellectual disabilities. However, with an aim for a more active struggle for their dignity, respect and a valuable social role, personal and mutual empowerment became another driving force of (their) self-actualization. The support given in the process of self-determination serves as the foundation and the stimulus in reaching a higher level of self-advocating. Furthermore, an important facet of their activism is in advocating and supporting the rights of other persons with intellectual disabilities, and especially those who are less fortunate. In advocating their rights, special emphasis is placed on being able to have different opportunities to choose from and to be more involved in the decision making processes which affect their everyday lives and their future. Subsequently, they are now able to intertwine their self-advocating skills with the opportunities given within the community, albeit through living with their families or through the process of deinstitutionalisation (e.g. through social inclusion, housing, employment, marriage). This further emphasises the fact that negative discriminatory experiences from their former special institutional 'treatments' were not the way forward. Thus, further growth and strengthening of the self-advocating movement on a domestic as well as an international level is their future plan. In spite of many prejudices, they are a living proof that with adequate community support, many persons with intellectual disabilities are able to reach their potential and achieve even greater success in the fight for their rights and against discrimination.

The Association for the promotion of quality education of youth with disabilities „Imagine'

'Imagine' was founded in 2005 in Zagreb, and operates across the whole of Croatia.⁴ Their mission is to support young people with disabilities to get integrated into the education system with the necessary technical and material support. The University of Zagreb (2014), with more than 65 000 students has about 330 students registered as students with disabilities, which makes it about 5 per every thousand. Beside the institutional help provided by the university, constant support of NGOs is a vital resource for students with disabilities and for those who need to be encouraged to go on with their education. This makes the importance of NGOs in disability activism vital in enhancing equal opportunities in education.

'Imagine' is a member of the Association of Community ICM in Croatia, also a member of the European Youth and Counseling Agency – ERYICA and the Croatian Association of Youth and Students with Disabilities – SUMSI through which it is involved in the work of the European Disability Forum. The association was founded on the following aims:

- encouraging young people with disabilities to participate in the education system,
- providing youths information and counseling,
- informing and advising people with disabilities,
- involving young people in activities related to active participation in society, mobility, employment, education, social protection, health care, culture and sport and leisure,
- including persons with disabilities in activities related to life in the community; family, education, health care, social welfare and pension systems, housing, mobility and
- accessibility, vocational rehabilitation, employment and work, and also raising awareness through participation in cultural, political and public life, recreation, leisure and sport,
- providing assistance to young people with disabilities in everyday life,
- collaborating with teachers and educational institutions,
- developing international cooperation,
- improving quality of life and education for young people with disabilities in Croatia.

4 Their website: <http://www.zamisli.hr/index.php/kontakt>.

Imagine is carrying out a program; *Center for support for students with disabilities*, offering students with disabilities adapted transport services on a regular basis in order to attend their classes, alteration of literature, personal assistance for students with disabilities and typewriting for students with hearing impairment. Also through the program, information on counselling for youths with disabilities, advice and help was offered not just to a population of students with disabilities, but in general to youth with disabilities. In 2005 Imagine began the adaptation of literature for blind and visually impaired students. The International Day of Persons with Disabilities was marked on 3rd December 2005 and an accessible movie screening was provided for blind people. This was an important step in adjusting the program of drama and the arts for the blind called 'I listen, therefore I see'.

Since 2011 Imagine has performed motivational workshops for senior high school pupils with disabilities, encouraging them to enroll into universities. In the same year Imagine started with workshops for youths with disabilities in order to help them prepare for the university entrance exams. In 2012 a new activity was launched, called Orientation Week for Freshmen with Disabilities in Zagreb. The aim of the orientation workshop was to prepare newcomers – students with disabilities – for a new academic year, introducing them to everyday student life, helping them in orientation within the campus, classrooms, schedules and expectations.

The qualitative research on support for students with disabilities (Jermen, Urbanc 2012) shows that basic support is needed in mobility, class attendance, introducing faculty staff to students and their needs during study, providing help during the learning process, support during exams, information and technical support for realisation of students rights. The importance of personal assistance⁵ provided by Imagine is recognised as being very useful, according to the research participants. Students with visual impairment were commenting on the need for further cooperation between NGOs and institutions, referring to the tensions among different service providers:

- There's more than enough work for all of them (NGOs' services and institutional services), I don't know why they can't stand each other...
- They should agree upon some things...otherwise, it happens that one notebook was scanned twice, its costs are doubled...
- The aim is to improve life and education quality for students with disability, not personal promotion...

Their recommendations for improving the quality of education for students with disabilities refer to stability and predictability of financial support for NGOs:

- It means, not depending on projects and whether it is going to be approved or not...
- Our transport service (Imagine) works till 4 p.m. And we have lectures till 6 or even 8; because of the lack of money it is not covered for the whole day.
- To have more stable and predictable financial support for NGOs..instead of making a big deal out of it during election campaigns (statements of students – participants in the research, Jermen, Urbanc 2012).

The Republic of Croatia, as a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Hrvatski Sabor 2007) took over the role of improving the situation of persons with disabilities in society and so, among other things, made a commitment to admit the right of persons with disabilities to education and to ensure an inclusive education system and lifelong learning. In accordance with the above, Croatia committed to inclusion for people with disabilities into the regular education system, to provide access in general tertiary education, vocational training and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others, and to provide reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities. However, in practice, Croatian universities and their staff lack the knowledge of how to approach the students with disabilities.

⁵ A personal assistant is a trained person, who is helping students with disabilities in attending classes and performing tasks which could not be performed independently.

It is commonly believed that the disabled students should be freed from an obligation which in turn shows that there is not much foresight and initiative to find an alternative approach to the issue (Ombudsman for Persons with Disabilities 2011).

In order to enable all potential students with a disability to become a part of the higher education system and to provide them with appropriate support, in 2007 the University of Zagreb established an Office for students with disability, as a referral center where students can get all needed information and direct help. Some of the defined tasks of the Office are: informing students and teachers; international cooperation, creating a database about students with disabilities; activities for increasing accessibility, meeting the specific needs of students with disabilities for attending lectures and learning (transport, adjustment of literature, translation to sign language, personal assistance...). From 2010–2013 Tempus project Education for Equal Opportunities at Croatian Universities has been underway. The aim of the project, led by the Office, *was the* equalising of opportunities in higher education for students with disabilities in the Republic of Croatia and the enhancement of support for students with disabilities in Croatian Universities. It also aimed to initiate the creation of national standards and guidelines for the development of accessibility of higher education for students with disabilities and ensure the accessibility, sustainability and quality of a system of support equalisation. (*Cf.* Eduquality 2014.)

The Association of Physically Disabled in Zagreb

The Association of Physically Disabled in Zagreb⁶ (hereinafter the Association) was founded in 1977, as a non-governmental organisation involved in social and humanitarian work. It has 525 members who, for the last 30 years, have been continuously working on the improvement of the quality of living for persons with paraplegia in the greater Zagreb region. Financing of the Association's activities is not systematically solved. A smaller part of overhead costs for the Association's regular activities is covered from municipal funds and membership fees, while most of its activities are financed through other sources, such as grants, donations, gifts and the like. Their mission is raising the social awareness of rights, needs of persons with disabilities and advocating a model for their participation on equal terms in the development of their community. The following programs are conducted on a regular basis:

- Special support program for persons with disability intended to resolve problems in welfare, rehabilitation, acquisition of orthopedic equipment etc.
- Professional rehabilitation program for young members (training in computer and accountancy skills, etc.).
- Projects for removing (architectural) barriers in public and housing facilities.
- Workshops on the improvement of quality of living for persons with a disability (meetings, lectures, actions in the local community etc.).
- Cultural programs (exhibitions, poetry recitals, concerts etc.).
- Assistance at Home project (providing help to persons with a graver disability and elders).

In cooperation with the Ministry of Science, 19 rooms in the Student dormitory 'Cvjetno naselje' in Zagreb were adapted to the needs of students with a disability. The Project lasted for two years and was concluded with an opening ceremony on the 21st of September 1998, a total of EUR 236,000 was invested.

In cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Sport, an elevator was installed and the associated adjustments were made in the 'Eugen Kvaternik' elementary school in Velika Gorica, a little town near Zagreb, to allow children with disabilities to attend regular education programs in an integrated environment. The Project lasted for a year and was completed with an opening ceremony on November the 6th 1999, a total of EUR 75000 was invested. Similar projects were implemented in 2001 in two elementary schools.

⁶ Their website: www.dti.hr.

Apart from its long term activism in raising social awareness for the rights of the disabled, the Association became known as the creator and organizer of the Festival of Equal Opportunities (F=M), taking place in Zagreb since 2002. Today, the Festival represents one of the main urban events advocating for the right of persons with disability. Every May, for the last 12 years, in Zagreb the Festival of Equal Opportunities has taken place – it is a two day public event featuring urban culture performed by persons with disabilities. The Program includes some 80 acts performed by over 900 people from Croatia and abroad. The organising team consists of approximately 20 experts and 130 targeted volunteers – students from a dozen Faculties of Zagreb University. In preparation for their work, student volunteers attend training on disability. Volunteering at the Festival they acquire precious experiences by working in teams and communicating with persons having various physical or sensual impairments, as well as those with decreased mental capacities. A Visual Art program encompasses an urban group exhibition featuring 60 authors of various artistic expressions and painting techniques bound together by physical disability as a common denominator.

Conclusion

A specific historical and social activity of the NGOs in offering support to the persons with disability is a social resource which needs to be treasured for several reasons:

- Encouraging self-activism of persons with disability and also activism within the community in general.
- Promoting advocacy for a better quality of life for persons with disability through supporting their convergence to everyday life experiences and by initiating the social actions and changes in which the opinions and needs of the disabled and their families are acknowledged.
- Future NGOs activism should be specifically directed towards the development of disabled persons' potential for the purpose of their empowerment as actors in the public decision making process. One can argue that, during the process of creating a public policy for the disabled, the associations that represent their rights and disabled persons themselves are to be involved in all the stages of the process i.e. from the definition of the issues through to formulating the best approach, to further choosing the policy option that is to be followed and to the implementation and monitoring of the same (Petak 2012).

The process of 'NGO-isation' (Zaviršek 2007) points to the sudden existence of a vast number of non-governmental organisations through which the necessary social changes are carried out, but, at some point, they become the only 'responsible' carriers and actors of social change. In this context, one could challenge the role of a democratically elected government and its responsibility to initiate and support the social changes within society. Referring on the tensions among different service providers (between different NGOs or NGOs and institutions) there is a need for better coordination among all relevant social actors in order to address all important disability issues on the national political agenda, by including the perspective of persons with disability (Lisak 2013). It requires all stakeholders to be willing to have a debate and dialogue, to be ready to respect the experience of others and to be open for user participation and evaluation.

References

- Association for Self-Advocacy (2013). *10 years of the Association for Self-Advocacy* (Publication). Zagreb: Association for Self-Advocacy.
- Bežovan, G., Zrinščak, S., Vugec, M. (2005), *Civilno društvo u procesu stjecanja povjerenja u Hrvatskoj i izgradnje partnerstva s državom i drugim dionicima*. Zagreb: CERANEO.
- Bežovan, G. (1995), *Neprofitne organizacije i kombinirani model socijalne politike*. *Revija za socijalnu politiku*, 2: 195–214.
- (2004), *Civilno društvo*. Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Globus.

- Bratković, D., Zelić, M. (2010), Samozastupanje osoba s intelektualnim teškoćama. In: Leutar, Z. (ed.), *Zbornik radova međunarodne znanstvene konferencije »Socijalni rad i borba protiv siromaštva i socijalne isključenosti – profesionalna usmjerenost zaštiti i promicanju ljudskih prava«*, Sveučilište u Mostaru, 20.–23. 10. 2010. Zagreb: Zaklada Marija De Mattias (451–474).
- Eduquality (2014). Available at: <http://www.eduquality-hr.com> (10. 9. 2014).
- Hrvatski Sabor (2007), Zakon o potvrđivanju Konvencije o pravima osoba s invaliditetom i Fakultativnog protokola uz Konvenciju o pravima osoba s invaliditetom, NN MU 06/07.
- Jermen, B., Urbanc, K. (2012), Reconceptualising the idea of participation of students with disabilities in higher education system. IPSA (RC 32) 2013 Conference 'Europeanization of public administration and policy: sharing values, norms and practices', April 4–7, 2013. Dubrovnik: CAAS.
- Kekez Koštro, A., Urbanc, K., Salaj, I. (2012), Implementacija javnih politika kao operativno upravljanje: analiza transformacije implementacije hrvatske politike prema osobama s invaliditetom. *Anali hrvatskog politološkog društva*, 9: 413–439.
- Lisak, N. (2013), *Perspektiva roditelja kao doprinos konceptualizaciji kvalitete života obitelji i razvoju podrške zajednice u Hrvatskoj*. Zagreb: Edukacijsko-rehabilitacijski fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu (doctoral thesis).
- Living proof: The Right to Live in the Community* (2005). Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xv-c3oE_PM8 (20. 9. 2014).
- Ombudsman for Persons with Disabilities (2011). Available at: <http://www.posi.hr>. (20. 9. 2014).
- Petak, Z. (2012), Economic federalism in socialist Yugoslavia. *Croatian Political Science Review*, 49: 212–227.
- Puljiz, V. (2005), Socijalna politika: definicije i područja. Povijest socijalne politike. Obiteljska politika. In: Puljiz, V. (ed.), *Socijalna politika. Povijest, sustavi, pojmovnik*. Zagreb: Pravni fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu (1–198, 317–352).
- United Nations (2006), *Convention on the rights of people with disabilities*. General Assembly of United Nations. New York: United Nations.
- University of Zagreb (2014), Office for Students with Disabilities. Available at: <http://www.unizg.hr/uredssi> (20. 9. 2014).
- Zavrišek, D. (2007), Pathologized ethnicities and meanignful internationalism. In: Zavrišek, D. (ed.), *Ethnicity in Eastern Europe: a challenge for social work education*. Ljubljana: Fakulteta za socialno delo (7–18).