



**Welcome address
to the participants of the IVB seminar
on the UN Disability Rights Convention
in Dushanbe (Tajikistan)
from 14th to 16th November**

The 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is a great human rights document. It can also be an effective tool in the crippled hands of disabled people. It is about free personality development, self-determined participation in all areas of life, comprehensive accessibility; shortly, it is about the full and equal effectiveness of universal human rights for women and men, children and old people with the most diverse impairments too.

Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear friends,

The International Association of Disability Associations of Post-Soviet Countries (IVB) elected me as their patron in Berlin in 2015. That is a great honor for me. Unfortunately, primarily due to health reasons, I was not able to do much good in this role so far. And unfortunately, for the same reasons, I cannot personally attend your important seminar. But I am pleased that we have been able to send to you a small ABiD delegation - consisting of Uwe Hoppe, my deputy, André Nowak, our treasurer and Frank Viohl, our branch manager. Please, allow me to send you a greeting in which I would like to briefly recall a few important points.

People with disabilities are still subjects of stigmatization and discrimination worldwide. This begins with being "hidden" by their families or "kept" in large dormitories without any individual retreat. In some countries, they are almost automatically excluded from all business, so that you can, for example, not even be able to exercise universal suffrage. In other cases, for these people it is nearly impossible to find job opportunities. Even in highly developed countries, it is difficult for them to have a self-determined life, to live with the help of assistants in a barrier-free home, to start a family, to enjoy sports and leisure activities, etc., etc.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities confirms our right to shape our lives in the midst of society as self-determined as any other member of the community. We are a part of the society. In the middle. No "fringe group". Disability is not a flaw that needs to be "repaired", but a part of our personality. Disability is not a medical problem. We can live with it. If the disability-related disadvantages are compensated, we can even develop our abilities not only for personal well-being but also in the interests of society as a whole.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities finally lifts disability policy from the medical, nursing and social care sector to the level of claims of human rights. We are not supplicants to whom alms are "mercifully" granted. We have the same rights - and of course the same duties - as all other social groups and sectors of the society.

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Meanwhile, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has been signed and ratified in the most countries around the world. E.g., in Germany it has been applicable national law since March 2009. Not all problems are solved that way. But now we - the people with disabilities and our self-advocacy organizations - have a new, effective tool in hand to demand our rights. For decades, there have been schools for the disabled people in Germany, workshops for the disabled and facilities for disabled people. At first glance, they appear to be good. But they are special facilities. They separate us from the society and sort us out of the society. Although this is now identified as a problem, we still have great difficulty to overcome this segregation ideology today. Therefore, our advice to you is to not to establish this selective institutionalization. The UN Disability Rights Convention focuses on inclusion, not selection and exclusion. It is about avoiding special solutions and finding general, usable ways for all people. E. g. we achieved this in public transport. Meanwhile, low-floor buses and low-floor trams are commonplace. This is the only way for wheelchair users to use it. But everyone else - especially small children and older people - like to use this convenient entry-level opportunity too. Only 30 years ago, our demand for a public transport that could be used by everyone was regarded as a utopia. We had to fight energetically and reduce many prejudices. Thus, it shows how important and socially useful strong self-advocacy organizations are. If you use our experience in this area, will you be able to switch to fully accessible mobility in half the time? That would be great!

Unfortunately, the convention is in Tajikistan - as far as I know - not yet valid. I hope very much and I am confident that your seminar will help to make the perspective of human rights in your country the starting point for political, administrative and interpersonal action. Comprehensive accessibility is a prerequisite for the self-determined participation for many people with disabilities. But it also creates more comfort for all other citizens. The concept of personal assistance also enables severely disabled women and men to lead a self-determined life. At the same time it creates many jobs. If politics and social behavior follow the benefit-for-all principle, then this is a win-win situation.

Unfortunately, I cannot participate in the concrete discussions of your seminar. Therefore, I have to confine myself with this greeting to general remarks.

However, I confidently hope that you will see a significant increase in knowledge, which will lead to positive outcomes and practical changes in favor of people with disabilities in Tajikistan and the other participating countries. The members of the ABiD delegation will gladly and enthusiastically contribute our experience to your debate.

I wish you great success and remain with wistful but optimistic wishes,
Yours,

Dr. Ilja Seifert

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