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Innovative aspects of Universal Design in Norway - A governmental approach

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Summary

The Norwegian policy on disability and accessibility has undergone tremendous change in the period since the last world war.

It started with an institutional focus on taking care of and activating people with disabilities. But they lived their lives mostly outside the community and were regarded as disabled people. The most recent change today is defining equality as a basic value, and provide a statutory basis that ensures that persons with reduced functionality have the right to the same opportunities in the community as everyone else, in keeping with their knowledge, interests, personal experiences and so on.

Our strategy represents an ambitious integration of accessibility thinking at different levels and into most sectors. A National Action Plan has set up integration as one of the main policy instruments. We include accessibility policy in the steering documents from the ministries. We use financial support for rebuilding or modernising kindergartens, schools, churches, local community and cultural houses, sports and recreation areas and local infrastructure to promote accessibility. Institutions at the national level are also directed to start revising their own regulations, guidelines and information policy.

Much of our policy in the Action Plan is to influence and ensure that the growing knowledge base will be used. Therefore we focus a great deal of activity in the Action Plan towards the ministries, regional and local authorities as well as organisations such as the national associations of architects, building constructors, estate agents. We want to introduce accessibility principles with their background, reasons and intentions so that universal design may indeed become an integral part of their department or working field. We often reach positive executive officers and leaders who are willing to try to bring the new perspectives into their own, already-established systems.

In our activities during the last ten years, we have based our thinking on the concept of Universal design. This line of thinking is emerging more and more internationally, and is reflected in The *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* from December 2006

Introduction

My comments here are based on my experience as an architect in Norwegian municipalities over a period of 20 years, and subsequently as an adviser at the Norwegian Ministry of the Environment.

I am now working with the coordination of the Norwegian Action plan for increased accessibility for persons with disabilities, which includes the perspective that this plan is a plan for universal design in key areas in the society.

I will speak about the Norwegian Government's policy to day, briefly how it has been brought up to today's level.

And I will try to convince you that our strategy is successful. I cannot state unequivocally that we have reached our goals, but we have – I presume much the same as all of you – a strong belief that our work is being applied in the right direction and is based on the right values.

The main content and my statements may be summarised in these points:

- 1) What is it all about?
- 2) Integration as a strategy
- 3) Information from sources you can trust

The first statement is basic:

What is it all about?

The Norwegian policy on disability and accessibility has undergone tremendous change in the period since the last world war.

It started with an institutional focus on taking care of and activating people with disabilities. This was a result of the building of a welfare state ("The Nordic model") and was in this connection a part of a humanist framework. The nation, with a growing national economy, could afford to build the necessary institutions and staff them. Practical and civilised; but disabled people lived their lives mostly outside the community and were regarded as disabled people.

Later on a more liberal humanistic movement emerged. According to the new doctrine, it was inhumane to keep disabled people in institutions. They needed to have natural connections with their families, schools and work; the community at large.

This was the beginning of a period based on personal help-care perspectives. Disabled people should have personal help through assistive, technical support and personal aid. But after a while, certain realities surfaced: the decisions relating to help definitions in the health and social care system were many and complicated; the level of needs was a topic of constant discussion; funds were provided to establish special assistive systems (assistive transport, change / rebuild dwellings), but they were expensive; and in the end, disabled people were still regarded as disabled and were

still confined to their houses - because the surroundings were not sufficiently accessible.

And what then is the latest step in the progression?

Recently, Norway has adopted a new Act relating to discrimination and accessibility for persons with reduced functionality. The act defines equality as a basic value, and provides a statutory basis that ensures that persons with reduced functionality have the right to the same opportunities in the community as everyone else, in keeping with their knowledge, interests, personal experiences and so on. The main line of thinking underlying this premise is not open to discussion in any connection. However, certain challenges remain: the challenge of reaching the goals for acceptable, accessible surroundings; the challenge of implementing this political understanding; and the challenge of spreading information about and gaining acceptance for the principles of universal design.

In Norway a national board has been established to provide the Government and national authorities with input on questions related to this field. The evolution of the names of this board illustrates the evolution in thinking that I have just explained. The board was launched in 1960 as *The Norwegian Council for Care of Disabled people*. In 1980 its name changed to *The Norwegian Council on Disability* and later to *The Norwegian State Council on Disability*. This year it was again changed to *The Norwegian Council on Equality for Disabled People*. And during this period, the responsibility for the overall policy has been moved from Ministry of Health and Social affairs to Ministry of Children and Equality.

My second statement:

Integration as a strategy

Our strategy represents an ambitious integration of accessibility thinking at different levels and into most sectors. I have worked with the Action Plan for increased accessibility for persons with disabilities since it was drawn up at the end of 2004. It is a governmental plan that encompasses activities based on the sectoral approach, and includes 15 of our 19 ministries. The sectoral approach means that each authority is responsible at all its levels (national, regional and local) for ensuring that national policy is implemented in the relevant connections.

We need to integrate both knowledge about and strategies for achieving accessibility through universal design. The Action Plan has identified integration as one of the main policy instruments. Integration facilitates the understanding of accessibility policy in those arenas where decisions are taken, solutions are to be developed and the work carried out.

We include accessibility policy in the steering documents from the ministries. Government authorities are thereby forced to take this policy into account when making their own strategies or action plans for their own tasks. Or they must include accessibility perspectives in their input to other authorities, companies or persons. This includes fulfilling regulations or criteria in efforts connected to financial support, permission under building regulations and more. Further examples are financial

support through the Norwegian State Housing bank to municipalities for building or modernising kindergartens, schools, churches and others; from national football pool funds to local community and cultural houses, sports arenas and recreation areas and from the *National Road Authority* for local infrastructure as pedestrian and bicycle roads and areas, public transport terminals or public transport information systems.

Institutions at the national level have also been directed to start revising their own regulations, guidelines and information policy. This maximises their influence on the results; for example the *Directorate of Public Construction and Property* is responsible for buildings owned by the Government used by national education institutions, offices, hospitals etc., and there are lots of others who want to hire out buildings to national entities and who normally use national guidelines in their own activities because such guidelines are regarded as representing good quality. Many such examples are based on the fact that both Norwegian and international standards have been developed as a basis for guidelines or as a supplement.

My third statement:

Information from sources you can trust

Very much of our policy in the Action Plan is to influence and ensure that the growing knowledge base will be used. Therefore we focus a great deal of activity in the Action Plan towards central partners such as the ministries as well as regional and local authorities, institutions for higher education, professional organisations etc. Both the ministries and other authorities have responsibility for major fields of specialisation and a host of organisations that include individuals with different experience of or attitudes toward persons with disabilities. One great challenge is therefore to introduce accessibility principles with their background, reasons and intentions in a manner that leaders, advisers and professionals can understand, and that helps them to feel that this is something that may indeed be an integral part of their department or working field.

It is therefore important to follow up steering documents and signals with motivating lectures and activities and also with funding that can serve as a supplement to the ordinary budget, even at the ministerial level. The Ministry of the Environment has a certain budget connected to the Action Plan, and supports both other ministries, authorities at various levels, companies and individuals with projects. But naturally, some of the ministries have funds on their sectoral budgets too.

One of the strategic most important reasons for this is not simply to put money into the project for the sake of the project, but to strengthen our message to people whose positions require them to decide when and how to implement and start activities, often “on top” of their primary tasks or what they normally have regarded as such.

In this manner we often reach positive executive officers and leaders who are willing to apply new perspectives. Important in both cases is that these people have to bring the new perspectives into their own and already established systems and prioritisation processes.

This is one of the reasons why the Ministry of the Environment is coordinating the Action Plan. This came about some years before 2004, when the Ministry of Health and Social affairs was seeking to lift the policy for accessibility for persons with disabilities to a higher dimension on the municipal level. It was important then to “move out of” the medical and social health care system, which is strong at the municipal level but has also been characterised by traditional thinking when it comes to what is possible to integrate, include or change relating to the policy of disabled people.

The Ministry of the Environment was new in this arena, but, convinced of the potential, decided to implement the policy for better accessibility as a component under the municipal planning system. In this way both regional and local planning authorities were taught and motivated to understand the intentions of accessibility as a goal that could be obtained by those they normally communicated with, and not some “strangers” from another ministry.

I like to say that this is where we in Norway have enlarged our strategy. The authorities and the specialists meet, chart out a course, exchange experience, and carry out information activities at their normal professional meeting places, often as a part of another occasion or as specialised incidents.

We have an information programme, *Universal design in the building sector*, which cooperates with for example the national associations of architects, building constructors, estate agents, enabling them to transform information to be suitable for their members. We have contacts with other organisations for professionals in municipal planning and road construction that on their own produce information leaflets, guidelines and provide practical courses.

We have focused special efforts on a municipal programme which encompasses 16 municipalities. These municipalities have established their motivation and outlined activities in decisions taken by their municipal councils and mayors. But they use working groups and internal communication to achieve results among the employees at different levels and in different municipal sectors. Reports from these activities are available on the Internet, and serve as inspiration to other municipalities.

Three fourths ($\frac{3}{4}$) of our 19 counties have recently responded positively in a survey of whether they would like to participate in a programme like the municipal programme. This is after a challenging invitation from us to take part, where the reality is that only some few of them can actually participate. But the response shows that today a challenging letter is a very good start to stimulating innovative thinking and activities, also at the regional level. This is a good example of implementation as a strategy.

Conclusion

I started by calling your attention to the basic values in our policy today: equal status and respect for persons with disabilities so that they can take part in the community, in a home situation, education, work, travel, on their own premises, by realising their

skills and so on, in so far as possible without any obstacles in the information society and in the public surroundings.

To achieve this, we have based our thinking on the concept of Universal design during the last ten years. This line of thinking is emerging internationally, and is reflected in the definition used in The *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* from December 2006 (that now is in a ratification process in most countries).

To provide more information in connection with this, we have produced a thematic report called *Universal design – clarification of the concept*. For broad information of our basic application, we have translated the report to some languages, also Spanish with the title *Diseño universal – definición de conceptos*.

We are very grateful to our host here, the *CEAPAT centre (National Reference Centre in Spain for Accessibility, Design for all and Assistive Products)* for help in the translation process.

And as I have understood, the report was one of the reasons for the invitation to the ministry to this conference. I would therefore like to express my appreciation for the invitation, and hope we can develop this policy and concept further in different connections.

Thank you for your attention.