

PRE-CONFERENCE SYMPOSIUM
**DISABILITY STUDIES IN POSTSOCIALIST
COUNTRIES AND IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

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Disability Policy in Croatia

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This presentation focuses on disability policy, exactly on broader social policy, political and cultural context in accordance to disability in the Republic of Croatia. It presents living conditions of people with disabilities in Croatia, with specific focus on people with intellectual disability.

In Croatia disability has been recognize as a human rights issue and also became part of social policy and politics through adoption of the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007.

The ratification of the Convention affected any subsequent legislation framework in the field of anti-discrimination as well as national strategies focused on rights of people with disabilities (Croatian Government (2007). National Strategy for Equalization of Rights of People with Disabilities from 2007 till 2015).

Many recent studies have shown that in the Republic of Croatia people with disabilities still face various types of barriers in the field of: early intervention support, access to regular pre-school and education systems, access to labour market and income maintenance, the right to independent living and family life instead of institutional care.

In the Republic of Croatia **the historical and political context** which have shaped the current support system for people with disabilities as well as the theory and practice of the social work profession, was developed by the Soviet state policy. This is the reason why people with intellectual disabilities were considered as unable to enter paid employment and were put under the state institutional care.

Scholarship on disability in Croatia has been developed in 1960's when High school for Defectology was established, as well as High School for Social Work.

Based on medical model approach to rehabilitation (Lisak, 2013), disability policy has been based on rehabilitation and social care for people with physical, visual, hearing and intellectual impairments. The special rehabilitation programs as well as centres were established across the country, where children and people with disabilities were placed to live. The biggest institutions were for people with mental and intellectual impairments, physical, visual and hearing impairments, children with chronic diseases as well as for children with poor family environment who have had some minor difficulties. In the discursive representations of disabled body are those of physically and war induced disabilities.

Based on academic knowledge in the field of disability, the changes from medical to social model of disability have been started from 1990's. The certain changes in providing support for persons with intellectual disabilities started in the last thirty years through the implementation of new programs and new profile of experts engaged in support for educational inclusion. Six years ago, University of Zagreb, Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences started with doctoral degree program "Prevention Sciences and Disability Studies".

Since the 1990s when state socialism collapsed and Croatia became independent state until today, the focus of the governmental policy is to develop community based public services for vulnerable population such as children and people with disabilities and their families (Lisak, 2013). Nevertheless, the process is slow and negatively influenced by the current economic crisis.

Organized support for people with intellectual disabilities is focused on community based support and family-centred approach. The aim is to integrate persons with disabilities into the local communities and to support the employment of people in the local area.

The process of transformation of institutions started in 2011 and can be recognized through establishment of the day centres and services and the community based supported housing which started to operate by the newly established nongovernmental organisations (NGO's).

The non-governmental organizations have an important role in this respect. Main changes in the quality of support for people with disabilities in Croatia were connected with so call process of NGO-ization"(Zaviršek, 2007).

NGO's have become very active in different daily activities for persons with disabilities. One of the NGO that have an important role in this respect is the Association for Promoting Inclusion and the Self Advocacy Association established in the Republic of Croatia in the late 1990ies and in the early 2000ies. The Association for Promoting Inclusion supports the development of a society in which people with intellectual disabilities have equal opportunities, their contributions are valued, and their human rights are respected.

Based on these circumstances a certain number of persons with intellectual disability get the possibility to fight for their rights and to live independently in the community.

To conclude:

Nevertheless, **the recent findings (Lisak, 2013) have shown** that there is still a gap between formal legislation and its implementation.

The present situation is shaped by the legacy of the socialist tradition within the political system as well as the importance of the family and the family support system. There is a great importance of the family support network which have significant role in achieving the quality of life of people with disabilities and families in the country. Christian values and the impact of the Catholic Church organizations plays an important role, as well.

The discriminative experiences include the lack of early intervention support for the disabled children, the lack of life-long support and a certain level of discrimination experienced by the health, social welfare and educational professionals. Some families reported also about discrimination from the Catholic Church organizations that refused to enrol the disabled child into the kindergartens run by the church. The findings emphasize the role of the Catholic Church in empowering families but also show its discriminative sites which is based on the historic exclusion of the disabled from the church ceremonies. The Church was given charity to the poor and the disabled, but has kept very rigid rules against the principles of diversity despite its normative principle of acceptance of every human being.

From social work perspective it is very important to make the transparency and availability of information about guaranteed rights and the existed support of the social welfare system; to

raise awareness of acceptance of every person and respect for diversity in order to prevent rejection and exclusion of children with intellectual disabilities through institutionalization; to empower professionals for appropriate correspondence with parents of children with intellectual disability and respect of parents' perspective; to organize systematic support for social inclusion; to supervise professionals at the work place; to improve the quality of social service on local and regional levels; to organize systematic support for independent living in the community through organized housing and multidisciplinary team work and raising community awareness of children with disabilities and their families through social action.

This presentation used contemporary ideas to reflect on situation of persons with disabilities and their families in the Croatian society which considers society responsible for creating disability through physical, psychical and social barriers. This contemporary approach respects the right of self-determination, self-representation and respect of persons with disabilities and their families and advocates for change and development of support system in community according to the UN Convention and the European Union strategies in this area.