

Report from fieldwork at the 2nd Zero Project Conference in Vienna, Austria (February 18-19, 2013)

International Conference on Employment Rights – Innovative Policies and Innovative Practices for Persons with Disabilities

by Daniel N. Pateisky

My trip to Vienna, with the Graduate School's support, in the month of February this year brought me to attend the 2nd *Zero Project* Conference. This project was initiated in 2011 – founded by the Austrian *Essl Foundation* – with the goal of realising the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Its initiators aim to bring together expert practitioners, politicians, entrepreneurs and researchers from around the globe, so that they can exchange experiences and jointly foster further progress in disabled persons' Human Rights.

In addition to collecting the international data in an encyclopaedic online platform, the yearly *Zero Project Report* is published, listing the results close to one hundred (as of today) individual countries have reached in the CRPD's implementation, according to a set of social indicators reflecting employment and social policies. This year's focus lies on employment measures and practices in particular, wherefore many examples of successful strategies on a governmental, corporate and NGO level were presented in the course of the gathering in Vienna.

My aim in attending this event as a means of acquiring empirical research data was twofold:

Firstly, the conference setting itself was to be investigated for the interactive structures among all participants, the access each local and international organisation as well as NGOs partaking in its proceedings, and the voice they were respectively granted within the conference's proceedings, were inspected from a participant's perspective. Thereby, the situation of disabled and non-disabled persons' interaction within the setting could be assessed, and conclusions for the interpretation and reading of other venues drawn.

Building on my theoretical investigation regarding the interaction of transnational actors and their networks, the insight provided by this specific setting has made explicit a number of issues reflecting the balance of power in these circumstances – who is and who is not 'heard', respectively; which parties and legal bodies influence global developments most decidedly; which organisations are granted permanent representative status; etc.

Secondly, and more importantly, I had arranged for opportunities to conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews with experts in the field, as the respective interviewees all gathered in Vienna to partake in and review the multinational approach being collectively reformulated, as individual projects on labour market

inclusion of persons with disabilities (PwDs) were presented. This has been the pre-test phase for the questionnaire underlying the research process throughout – and it has proven a feasible tool, calling for only minor changes in form through tightening and some minor clarification in its phrasing.

The interviewees I spoke with are representatives of transnational organisations dealing with PwD's rights (*International Labour Organisation; European Economic and Social Committee*), as well as of strongly issue-focussed groups providing PwDs with specific support in reaching employment (*Specialisterne*) and connecting disabled persons' organisations worldwide (*Disabled People's International*) – that is the only body encompassing all DPOs, independent of their respective cause. Apart from gaining information concerning their views on the present developments in disability and PwD's employment rights, and the discourse surrounding it, many topics of additional importance to my present research could be elicited.

Overarching areas of overlap among interviewees with regard to language-related changes that have come hand in hand with the UN convention included the perceived 'harmonisation' linguistic form has undergone and produced a temporary consensus over official terminology; the importance of national legal systems' respective linguistic form was underlined as a hindrance, or an opportunity for the introduction of new terms at times; linguistic conflicts within DPO work – as it takes place among very heterogeneous speaker groups – were made topic as well, and can become barriers to joint representation; also, communicative barriers in a broader sense, accessibility of information and the international terminology's relative detachment from the general public's jargon were illuminated by the experts interviewed.

I can therefore conclude that this experience has allowed me to understand much more clearly the direction my further investigations will be directed in. It has also brought to light a number of key points I need to take into account in my empirical research – my other interviewees are to be picked in light of their proximity to the persons on the 'ground level', i.e. the PwDs represented on a national scale, communicating in languages other than the world's most common *Linguae Francae* and more experienced in particular translational issues with CRPD terminology (as a few examples have been pointed out in the interviews conducted thus far).