

It's time to move the battle from the street into the courtroom

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I am happy to be with you today - through this prerecorded message - to celebrate your achievements. From my few trips to your country some 15 years ago, I still remember the devastating effects of the civil war on the infrastructure and on the situation of disabled people. Compared to that, I understand you have come a long way. Yet, there's still more to go. Not only in your country, in all countries. Because we are still second class citizens everywhere.

Throughout history, people with disabilities, individually and collectively, have tried different ways to improve their situation, There are three main categories:

The Medical Model of disability says, you have difficulties because there is something wrong with you. Improvements in your situation are expected to come from the medical professions and from charity. In the Medical Model, disabled people beg and appeal.

The Social Model of disability says, you have difficulties because there is something wrong with society. Society puts obstacles in our way that hinder us from becoming full and equal citizens. Improvements in our situation are expected to come from Universal Design, from building a society for all. In the Social Model, disabled people appeal, petition, and demonstrate in the streets for the elimination of obstacles in society.

In most countries, our organizations have been begging, pleading and appealing to politicians and the media. Often, this has worked and we got some breadcrumbs from the table. But, often, it has not empowered us, has not earned us respect. Instead, politicians and the media often play on voters' charitable instincts depicting us as the "weakest of the weak", as deplorable, unfortunate beings who depend on the taxpayer's charity. Often, pleading and petitioning has earned us pity.

The rights-based approach is the most recent and most dignified approach. We are not begging, pleading and appealing anymore. We have national and international laws to protect our rights. Some of the international ones are the European Human Rights Convention of 1949 and the recent United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

But respect and power do not come from having laws on paper. Respect and power come from using laws in court.

Most of our organizations still have not realized that we now have the tools for power, that we need to learn how to use these tools. That's why the Independent Living Institute started the "Disability Rights Defenders Network". Let us all join the network and help develop and strengthen the network. Through the network, we learn from one another how to use the laws we already have for changing society to the better for everyone. "Disability Rights Defenders Network" was the name. You will easily find it on the net. See you there!