

EBU in Action Episode 13: persons with disabilities in humanitarian responses

Intro

[Music]

(Neven): hello dear listeners and welcome back to “EBU in Action”, the voice of blind and partially sighted Europeans. We are bringing you news, insights, stories, and updates from across our continent.

I'm Neven Milivojevic and I am joined once again by my wonderful co-host and friend, Paweł Masarczyk.

Hi Paweł, great to have you here. How are you doing? Are you already in a Christmas mood?

(Paweł): hello, Neven. Greetings everyone. Yes, I can't wait enough for Christmas to come, mostly because I'll be home with my family again and I'll have a bit of free time. But, yes, also, it's this time of the year when we definitely think about what good can be done in the world.

And I hope we will be able to spread a bit of that message today in the podcast despite a sort of a difficult topic, right?

(Neven): it is, it is. So today's episode will actually take us into a difficult and essential territory: humanitarian responses. And I would like to prepare our listeners; some of what we will hear today is deeply moving, but it's important that we actually talk about these stories.

We are living through very turbulent times. You know: conflicts, climate, disasters, displacement, and when crisis strike, persons with disabilities are often among those who are most affected. And yet, they have specific needs that are usually overlooked in the emergency responses.

So that's what we are going to explore more today.

(Paweł): yes, I actually said sort of difficult, but in fact, it is very difficult because when we approach the issue and the matter of humanitarian responses to crisis, we are thinking of military conflicts, we're thinking of climate change in various regions of the world where we already see the change affecting people.

And it is important and essential while drafting these humanitarian responses to bear in mind the specific needs of persons with disabilities who often are left behind without adequate support.

And we already touched upon this topic on the area from this podcast before. Namely last year, we heard from representatives of NAPD, which is the National Assembly of Persons with Disabilities in Ukraine who joined the 12th EBU General Assembly.

Though remotely, but they provided us with very moving, very insightful stories, describing the situation of blind and partially sighted Ukrainians, which doesn't only involve people who were already blind by the time the full-scale war rolled out, but also people who lost their side precisely due to this conflict.

One year on, we'll hear back from Larysa Baida, who will update us with her moving testimonial on the situation of persons with disabilities in Ukraine.

(Neven): Yes. And I remember this moment very vividly, hearing directly from our colleagues in Ukraine while their country was under attack.

That was really, really moving and it stayed with me. I am both eager and apprehensive to hear Larysa's update. Eager because I think that her resilience is impressive and inspires me, but also apprehensive because I know the reality she will be describing.

Now that we speak about Ukraine, we will also in this episode speak to Diana Stentoft, who is from the Danish Association of the Blind, and, of course, they are a member of the EBU. She will talk about their current engagement in helping visually impaired persons in Ukraine, but also, about other humanitarian projects they are involved in.

(Paweł): and since we approach this topic of humanitarian responses, in the phase of crisis we often speak of a process called disaster risk reduction; so all the measures we can take to mitigate the effects of risk or the risk itself before it happens. And to hear more about this, we'll speak to Talal Waheed from the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Very insightful and interesting panel of guests we have today on the show, so let's get straight into it.

(Neven): yes, exactly. And we will hear how humanitarian responses can truly include persons with disabilities from those on the front lines of this work. Yes, so let's dive in.

Focus segment: persons with disabilities in humanitarian responses

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(Neven): so, today's focus interviews will be on the theme of persons with disabilities in humanitarian responses. And to help us with this segment, we are inviting our colleague and dear friend from the EBU Paris Office, Nacho Lopez. Hello, Nacho, are you with us?

(Nacho): hello, Neven. How are you doing? I am doing fine and, of course, as Paweł said, ready for the Christmas period ahead of us. But, of course, I am also quite moved for the subject that we're going to cover today because, as you already mentioned in the introduction, it's a very sensitive one.

And it deserves a very careful and sensitive approach, honestly, because I had the chance, as we will be listening in a few moments, to talk to a lot of people for this episode and their testimonials were very touching, very touching to me, honestly.

(Neven): yes, well, let's start then Nacho with your first interviewee.

(Nacho): yes, we're speaking about Larysa Baida, from the National Assembly of Persons with Disabilities in Ukraine. As Paweł well said in the introduction, we had the chance to talk with representatives of NAPD back in our 12th General Assembly that was hosted last year in Lisbon, Portugal, February 2024.

And there, we had the chance to listen to an update from our Ukrainian colleagues about the situation of blind and partially sighted Ukrainians by then. Almost two years after that, now we had the chance to listen how our Ukrainian friends are doing.

I have to say, as I already mentioned a few moments earlier, it was a very touching and very moving interview for me to do because of everything that Larysa described to us. Without further to add, I would like to introduce our audience to the testimonial of Larysa Baida, from the National Assembly of Persons with Disabilities of Ukraine.

Interview with Larysa Baida, from the National Assembly of Persons with Disabilities in Ukraine

(Nacho): Back in February 2024, you gave us an update on the operational status of NAPD, hit by the terrible war scenario that Ukraine is currently in, during our 12th General Assembly. You explained to us how you're using EBU's financial aid to repair damage in important infrastructure for persons with disabilities, as well as to help with the provision of health services.

Since then, have new challenges appeared in the day by day of your organisation?

(Larysa): the war in Ukraine continues, and of course, it brings ever-growing losses. People are dying, homes, medical facilities and schools are being destroyed, and the energy system is collapsing. The war also brings new challenges for people's lives in Ukraine. They're connected to access to medical services, employment, and how to send children to school when constant bombings and the lack of shelters fail to protect them from danger.

Infrastructure is being destroyed. Power outages have started again. There is no internet, no connection, and we are entering the winter. Naturally, this is hard and we have to think about how to survive and what will happen to people. These are certainly challenges.

Despite all the difficulties, we continue working, supporting persons with disabilities, coordinating the activities of the organisations that are members of the National Assembly of People with Disabilities of Ukraine, and seeking new partnerships so that people are not left without the necessary assistance.

(Nacho): I would like to know more about how NAPD operates as a key coordinator in trying to give a response to the delicate situation you're living. Under this context, how do you proceed to coordinate a proper humanitarian response with all the disability-related NGOs in your country?

(Larysa): the National Assembly of People with Disabilities of Ukraine is an umbrella organisation that unites organisations of people with various disabilities. It is important to know how to organise work, establish coordination, and provide professional assistance to people.

We cooperate with humanitarian organisations operating in Ukraine and see that one of the challenges remains the fact that disability issues are not always fully understood by humanitarian actors working in the country.

This is the greatest challenge. All people with disabilities are different. Yet, this is often overlooked. For example, when products or assistive technologies are being procured, there is often a stereotype that all persons with disabilities are the same. As a result, identical wheelchairs of one size or identical assistive devices are purchased. This creates barriers.

In addition, humanitarian actors do not always understand organisations of persons with disabilities or the very nature of disability. For example, what does a blind person need when a Shahed drone is flying or bombing occurs when they're disoriented and there is no shelter nearby?

How can they be taught not to panic, but to act correctly in such a situation? Or what about people with severe disabilities who remain without assistance from humanitarian organisations? This is a serious challenge during the war as it is not always possible to guarantee the safety of a person who has limited mobility and can barely move.

So, is there proper coordination among everyone? We believe that at present, it is still not at a sufficiently high level. There is still no unified vision of how to best assist people with different types of disabilities. One must constantly stay in Ukraine to understand the complexities of shaping and implementing humanitarian policy when the situation changes every day.

Most humanitarian actors hardly ever reach remote villages. There are questions of evacuation access to medical services and transportation for persons with disabilities living in remote areas. So, there are indeed many issues.

(Nacho): in our General Assembly, we had the chance to listen to Oleksandr, a veteran who underlined the need to have personalised rehabilitation services for people who've lost their sight completely or partially.

Despite the current context, how do rehabilitation services operate, maintain or even increase their work?

(Larysa): we have been talking about this for four years. Oleksandr has spoken on the issue. Olesya Perepechenko, who has the All-Ukrainian Organisation of Persons with Visual Disabilities, “Modern View”, conducts many camps for veterans and their families to help them reintegrate into daily life and learn basic everyday skills.

Is this program functioning at the state level? Unfortunately, no. All of this work is being done by civil society organisations, but the issue of rehabilitation for veterans and civilians who have lost their sight remains very relevant in Ukraine. We do not have a wide network of rehabilitation centers.

There are some individual programs. We work with families of veterans and civilians who have lost their sight, as well as with social workers and all structures involved in these issues. But we cannot say that the rehabilitation system for people who have lost their vision is at an adequate level. No, we cannot say that. Above all, there is a lack of a systemic approach.

On the legislative level, everything seems to be written down, but when it comes to the practical implementation, there are many problems

(Nacho): apart from EBU's modest financial support, do you receive support from other NGOs, foreign governments, the Ukrainian State or other international donors?

(Larysa): the National Assembly of People with Disabilities of Ukraine receives support from various organisations.

Today, this includes the European Disability Forum, Christian Blind Mission, UN Agencies, and other humanitarian organisations working in Ukraine.

We receive funds for institutional support and humanitarian aid, and we advocate for targeted assistance to people. We cooperate with communities and local authorities where we implement projects to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of assistance striving to reach every individual in need.

(Nacho): are there other key challenges you would like to share with the audience of our podcast by means of concluding words?

(Larysa): you know, Ukraine has been at war for many years. The war began in 2014 and entered a new full-scale phase in 2022. It seems to us that today, in one way or another, all countries are involved in this

war. We may have different attitudes towards these issues, but the greatest challenge for Ukraine is to endure this terrible war and win, to bring peace to our country and ensure people survive.

Because war destroys, it destroys our children, our youth, our economy, and our mental health. We already have a generation that we can call “children of war”, and this is terrifying. The war is simply devastating. Our country: enterprises, schools, and medical facilities are being destroyed. All of this will need to be rebuilt, and that will require enormous resources.

It is a huge challenge. We are thinking about recovery and believe that we'll be able to rebuild everything, but the most important thing is to end the war and achieve peace.

End of interview with Larysa Baida, from the National Assembly of Persons with Disabilities in Ukraine

(Neven): thank you so much, Larysa and Nacho, for giving us this interview. I'm astonished that this war against the Ukrainian people is really still going on. And I think it's so obvious to see that the importance of civil society and the organisations of persons with disabilities is so crucial in this kind of situations.

I don't know, Paweł, what's your reflection after listening to Larysa again?

(Paweł): I think a situation in which a country is at war is not one we hear about often. And this means that we are used to discussing issues concerning persons with disabilities or concretely persons who are blind or partially sighted.

We are used to talking about, more or less, the same issues like employment, like access to technology, education and so on. But what actually happens when you have a conflict, when all the structures you are accustomed to relying on suddenly are depleted or exploited to the maximal degree or simply not there or down.

And also other people are acquiring disabilities because of the war happening. And this is basically something we could experience here. It's horrifying. It's a different perspective, but it's horrifying. And I think voices like this are very important and I think they are a reminder to every nation.

And I think the tendencies are being very strong now in Europe especially to overlook the needs of persons with disabilities and excuse this with military defense spending. So, what is being said is: "We cannot support this or that disability program because we have to redirect this money to military spending".

And defense is important, of course. I'm not saying it's not, but then my question is: should anything happen, and well, let's hope it never does, but should anything happen, what will you offer to those who have fought for your country to defend it also? What kind of systems are there in place to make sure that should they not be able to serve the country in this classical sense anymore?

What is the back-up plan for them? How will you say "thank you" for their service and for the loss of their health?

Yes, this is a difficult question.

(Nacho): yes, it's very touching, Paweł and this relates quite to one of the testimonials that we listened in our General Assembly.

I have to say that it was very hard for me to listen to Larysa's testimonial and to see how things are going on in Ukraine because it's very moving and yes, it's very difficult.

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So, we can move on to our next interview because, precisely, speaking about Ukraine, we also had the chance to speak to Diana Stentoft, from the Danish Association of the Blind, EBU's Danish National Member.

The Danish Association of the Blind is quite involved in helping with providing a response for blind and partially sighted people in Ukraine. But they're also very committed to lobbying or advocating for this subject at the national level. And they're also quite involved in other projects internationally.

I'm pretty sure that you are going to be very pleased to listen from the commitments of the Danish Association of the Blind. So without further to add, I would like to introduce the interview with the little; well, I would not say little because it was quite long, but interesting and also very fruitful, the great exchange that I had with Diana Stentoft, from the Danish Association of the Blind.

Interview with Diana Stentoft, from the Danish Association of the Blind

(Nacho): the Danish Association of the Blind is currently engaged in several projects in the domain of helping blind and partially sighted people in the context of humanitarian responses.

Could you please give us an overview of your commitments in this area?

(Diana): yes, at the Danish Association of the Blind, we have been engaged in collaborating with partners around the world for many years in supporting building the capacity of organisations of the blind.

And one of the realizations that we've come to is that in many of these countries also face quite a quite difficult humanitarian crisis from time to time. It can be due to war conflicts, climate change, natural disasters, et cetera. And actually, it's really important for all organisations to be prepared.

So for many years, we have wished to be better at supporting building the capacity for organisations of the blind to handle these crises.

So currently, we are engaged in two countries. We are working together with the Uganda National Association of the Blind in supporting them building capacity at local branches that are in an area where there are also many refugees.

Uganda is one of the countries in the world that has the largest proportion of refugees coming in from neighbouring countries. So, to enable an organisation of the blind to actually welcome and support people with visual impairment who had to flee their own country is very meaningful and also essential because, when we look at the big humanitarian actors, they do not necessarily know a lot about visual impairment.

So, for them, also to be able to handle visual impairment, to lay out the services in a refugee camp in a way that can be accessed by persons with visual impairment is quite important. And the only persons there to assist that process would actually be the National Organisation of the Blind and the local branches.

So, that's one thing where, among other things, we've supported initiatives that means that children, refugee children can now go to school in that district of Uganda.

The other area is a little closer to home, and very upsetting, is in Ukraine. And as we all know, a major situation is there in Ukraine, with lots of people being displaced, driven away from the homes, from the schools.

And obviously, that has also put organisations of the blind in Ukraine in a very desperate need of support, so that they can support the people with visual impairment who basically have lost everything.

So there, we are working together with three different organisations. And currently, we are applying actually to receive further funds to be able to support both the humanitarian day-by-day support. So, if you have to flee, can you flee to somewhere within the organisation? It's a very sort of important question: "Where do I go?", "Where would I go?", "Where someone would have some understanding of what it means to be blind?"

So that's one question. But also, unfortunately, the war actually means that lots of people lose their sight. So, we are also engaged in supporting camps for people who are losing their sight as a direct result of what is going on in Ukraine at the moment.

(Nacho): I would like to stay one moment on that point about Ukraine, because as part of your process of helping visually impaired people in Ukraine, you are actually quite active when it comes to monitoring the use of your financial aid to Ukrainian associations of blind and partially sighted people. Could you tell us more about the state of this matter in this subject?

How's your financial contribution being spent in Ukraine by those organisations?

(Diana): yes, and this is actually a really good question because what happened in the Danish Association of the Blind is that when the war broke out in Ukraine, almost four years ago now, or three and a half years ago, our National Board decided to allocate funds directly aimed at humanitarian interventions in Ukraine or elsewhere in the world.

It's not a huge amount of funding, but it is significant, so it would enable us to do something. And our next kind of challenge was then how do we establish contact with trustworthy organisations within Ukraine and how can we ensure that the funds that we have will actually be directed towards blind and partially sighted persons and not just anyone because obviously, when our National Board allocated the funds, it came with a condition that it should be supporting specifically blind and partially sighted persons within Ukraine.

And that challenge was difficult to handle because there are so many organisations and very good, it is so many organisations who wish to do work, to support people in Ukraine, but actually not that many organisations that have a focus on visually impaired persons and who have the knowledge and expertise to specifically support visually impaired persons. So that was one thing.

The other thing is that within Ukraine, there are organisations of the blind and partially sighted, actually some very nice organisations, but obviously because of the war, there have also been setbacks in terms of capacity. They faced completely new struggles, so this was also a question of establishing a contact, building a contact with them and finding out how much capacity they have to do the work.

So, basically what we did, instead of just giving the money to more or less random projects, if you like, or one of their projects, we have spent quite a bit of time trying to build real partnerships where we get to know the organisations, where we get to understand which are their competencies, what kind of expertise do they have.

And this also with the view that one thing is the funding that we have available that is allocated out of our own resources. But if we can document solid partnerships, we would also be in a position to apply for funding from elsewhere. And in that, actually, be able to support the organisations in a much better way.

So, what we have done is we have invited organisations of the blind to a meeting that took place earlier this year in Poland. And we also invited the Norwegian Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted together with the World Blind Union to join that meeting because they also had some funding possibilities.

So, we all came together in Poland and had a very nice and productive discussion about what are the challenges organisations and people face in Ukraine, what would it make sense to do. And since then, we've actually met with them first, once in Denmark, and then one more meeting in Poland, to start creating more solid ground that hopefully will lead to a partnership that is not just a one-off but actually could be a partnership for the next years.

Because one thing is that Ukraine is currently in a war situation, lots of blind and partially sighted persons are losing their livelihood, losing their

schools, losing their jobs. And very tragically, lots of people are lost generally. A lot of people are grieving also.

But the other thing is that hopefully the day will come when the war will be finished and there will be a lot of rebuilding and a lot of reestablishment of a solid system that can support blind and partially sighted persons.

So, this is a long way, and this will hopefully lead to a partnership that can last for a long time.

(Nacho): apart from using your own funding, your association is also very committed to raise awareness of this subject at a national level.

Recently, through your umbrella Organisation of People with Disabilities in Denmark, you were able to lobby for extra support to this kind of initiatives from your country's Foreign Affairs Ministry.

How far have your awareness-raising campaigns gotten? Did you get any results?

(Diana): Well, Denmark has been, as many European countries, very committed to supporting Ukraine in various ways. And I know in Denmark, in general, there's quite an awareness that the war is one situation and a lot of things and a lot of infrastructure is now being damaged.

And there will be a very prolonged rebuilding process afterwards. And so, there has been a focus in the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs on these matters. And it has been very necessary to keep reminding the Ministry that a lot of people are living in Ukraine already with various disabilities, but also that the war itself and the conflict and the struggles that people are facing will inevitably lead to even more people getting a disability.

So, actually, there is a need to work specifically with issues of disability. And so, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs have, as part of the programs supporting Ukraine, set up a particular fund that we can now apply to that specifically wishes to support organisations of persons with disability within Ukraine, but also specifically wish to support the collaboration between organisations, so as to make sure and to support that within Ukraine, there'll be a strong disability lobby and a strong disability movement.

Because there are so many issues that need to be addressed and where persons with disabilities would definitely be the need to have a voice, if you like. So currently, we have that possibility to apply to that fund and, and hopefully we'll be successful.

And hopefully, we can use some of the resources there to support the blind and partially sighted within Ukraine, and I would say within Ukraine, but actually also neighbouring countries to Ukraine if that possibility arises.

(Nacho): I would like to come back to your international dimension of humanitarian responses because, as you said earlier on in the interview, in the first question; not only you're very committed in Europe, but you're also engaged in helping with humanitarian responses outside the continent most precisely in the case of Uganda that you mentioned.

Could you tell us more about that particular initiative? Apart from what you said earlier on, are there any particular aspects that you would like to underline?

(Diana): generally speaking, there are so many things going on in the world right now that can upset national infrastructures and upset, also, fragile systems that are now being put in place in countries to support blind and partially sighted persons.

To give one example, in many parts of the world, it's now necessary to change the way we use grow crops because of climate change. So, if an area is receiving more rain or less rain or whatever, then it might be necessary to change. Now there are many very big programs that are put in place to train the population to make sure that people can make that transition.

The question is: where do blind and partially sighted fit into these programs? The same thing applies to creating jobs that are more environmentally friendly and so on. So, at the moment, there are huge initiatives in many countries where you can say if blind and partially sighted are to be part, it actually requires that the organisations of the blind have the knowledge, the resources, the capacity to engage.

And the same goes when disaster strikes. If a natural disaster hits quite often, you know, it is completely unclear in the national response how blind and partially sighted people should be accounted for, be supported, and so on. So what we have realised is that supporting national organisations of the blind in being able to engage in these difficult

matters in these humanitarian situations of crisis is extremely important because otherwise we are simply being left out.

And, for example, as part of the whole climate change and the whole global collaboration, all countries are now developing plans as to how to handle natural disasters, what to do if they need to evacuate populations and things like that. Very few of these countries include considerations about accessible information, how to support, how to make sure blind and partially sighted, and persons with disability in general are included.

So, we need strong organisations, in every country, of blind and partially sighted who can actually engage. And so, this is one of the areas where you can just say the world has really changed over the past years and will continue to change. And one of, the sort of concerns and one of the areas where we would like to do more in the Danish Association of the Blind is really to support that organisations of the blind all over the world are able to engage with these difficult times that obviously we are facing.

And I would say, so that's clear, we are also trying to find out how we will have to engage in a Danish context because climate crisis, natural disasters, that hits anywhere in the world. So, it goes for European countries, for African countries, for American countries, and so on. It is not discriminating.

Although I would say that in some parts of the world it's already going on and it really affects a lot of persons with visual impairment.

(Nacho): And finally, one quick question ahead of the new year coming: is there any particular wish you would like to share with our audience? Are there any special priorities in your agenda that you would like to underline?

(Diana): well, that's a big question. Obviously, I wish well for everyone in the year to come and for a more peaceful world ahead. But I would say, if I had to wish something for us, as a community of blind and partially sighted persons, it is that our voices will be heard. Because that really is necessary if we are to continue to be part, but also if we, if we are to be able to cope in a decent way, even when the world is changing.

So, I really wish far more voices to be heard far and wide.

(Nacho): many thanks, Diana Stentoft from Denmark, President of EBU's Danish Member, the Danish Association of the Blind. It was a pleasure having you here at the microphone of "EBU in Action".

(Diana): thank you.

End of interview with Diana Stentoft, from the Danish Association of the Blind

(Paweł): another interview, another perspective, this time from the side of somebody who is helping deliver this humanitarian help.

What resonated with me very well was that need to organise resilient networks of targeted help. So how do we make sure that the funds you have reserved for providing the help actually end up where they are supposed to? This is so important and this requires enormous amounts of research I can only imagine.

It's great that it's being done. Hopefully, the help is delivered where it needs to be. And also the importance of accessible information in situations of crisis, distributing information in an accessible format, making sure that it reaches as many people who might be affected as possible.

We have seen this during the COVID-19 pandemic, that it was actually difficult sometimes to obtain the information on a state level, but also from private companies organising any kind of support services. This was definitely a problem. So, it's good that it's being addressed.

One question I would like to see addressed in the future in terms of organisations of persons with disabilities or of persons who are blind and partially sighted when they organise humanitarian help is how can the persons themselves, blind people, partially sighted people, be a part of providing this help?

What can we do precisely to support our friends in the countries where this help is needed? Because we have some experience of living with a disability, we don't have the local experience in the local context. But some of the issues might be similar and there might be some expertise required, which we possess because we live with it every day.

Neven, do you know many examples of persons who are blind and partially sighted, maybe in Sweden, maybe elsewhere, who provide humanitarian help?

(Neven): well, we generally work with the capacity-building of so-called ODPs, organisations of persons with disabilities. But there are, in some occasions, also, work with humanitarian health.

I know that we have, actually, one blind person working in a Swedish authority for crisis management and so on. But in general, I do believe that you are correct in your assessment on this. And I also think that it's very impressive the work our Danish friends do in Ukraine, specifically where it is really very important now that we also work with humanitarian help, which in a way, compared to the capacity building of organisations, has to be parallel at this point.

There are some examples. I mean, I know for instance here in Sweden, we work in some countries in Africa and also in Nicaragua, but they're generally not humanitarian, that's basically capacity building and strengthening the organisations so they can work rights-based, because that's what we have kind of prioritised. But when crisis like this are active, like in Ukraine, we need to be, and we do sometimes act also more in a humanitarian capacity.

[Music]

Nacho, you have also talked to a gentleman called Talal Waheed. Could you tell us a little more and introduce that interview for us, please?

(Nacho): yes, sure Neven. As you said a few moments ago, I had the chance to talk with Talal Waheed from the UN Office of Disaster Risk Reduction.

As we have already listened from Diana a few moments ago, not only we wanted to cover the European aspect through the current situation in Ukraine, but we also felt that it's very important to take a look at what's going on in other parts in the world.

As you said, Neven, in Sweden, you are currently working in terms of capacity building in areas such as Nicaragua, as you mentioned. Also, in Africa, if I'm not mistaken. Yes, overall, it was a very nice chat that I had with Talal because it allowed me to have a better insight on the current work that his UN Office is currently doing. So without further to add, I would like to introduce our dear audience to our final interviewee of today, Talal Waheed, from the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Interview with Talal Waheed, from the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction

(Nacho): First of all, an introductory question: could you give us an insight into the role of your agency, the United Nations Office for Disaster

Risk Reduction? How does its work liaise with that of other UN agencies?

(Talal): Thank you so much, first of all, Nacho, for having me on the podcast. And a big hello to the listeners and viewers. The United Nations Office for a Disaster Risk Reduction, we are UN agency mandated on reducing the risk of disasters across the world and mandated to monitor implementation of Sendai Framework for disaster risk reduction worldwide.

We have partnerships with other UN agencies in collaboration with whom we implement a number of actions that focus on the prevention of new risks and the reduction of existing risks and making sure that the resilience-building process is carried on.

(Nacho): you're your agency's current Program Management Officer, as well as its Global Disability Advisor. In general, could you tell us how the different regions of the world are progressing in disability inclusion in the context of disaster risk reduction?

(Talal): sure. So, in terms of the program management, we have multiple programs that criss-cross around disability inclusion work. So, a little bit of knowledge on the disability work that we take twin track approach and we try to mainstream disability into existing sectoral topics across the board.

And we also have dedicated actions on disability inclusion in some parts of the world. So, naturally, few regions are ahead in something and the others are learning. So, it's a mixed kind of natural situation that we have. So, for instance, in some regions we do have very strong policy frameworks.

And the implementation modalities and the arrangements in place, their learning being organised on disability inclusion and disaster risk reduction. And in few we have, especially in the low-income countries with increased risk of disasters, we have very limited participation of persons with disabilities reflected.

There are some data availability-related issues and the persistent challenges, challenges around not including persons with disabilities and their organisations.

(Nacho): precisely, I would like to come back to that last point that you reflected on, Talal. Of course, conceiving disaster risk reduction

strategies for people with disabilities requires considering their feedback too.

Are there any good practices in that sense that you would like to share with us? Are you also in permanent touch with political authorities for that purpose?

(Talal): absolutely, the entire work of the UNDRR actually goes hand-in-hand with the local, national and subnational authorities in the countries, and we rely entirely on the Member States.

So, in that regard, the specific governmental departments working on disability inclusion are also on board and the organisations of persons with disabilities also do close partnerships. I have a number of examples that I can share, but I have a list of just two for our time today.

One is that UNDRR organises multiple regional and global platforms over the years to convene and crosscheck and actually, as we say, keep track of the Sendai Framework for disasters reductions implementation. And in that convening process, we have multiple stakeholders where disability stakeholders are one of the most important ones.

So, over the years, we have ensured that the platforms that we organise, which are regional in their nature, and every two to three years we have a global platform. So, ensuring physical and digital accessibility of the platforms. But at the same time, the processes and the outcome documents and the proceedings of the platforms also have very strong voices representation and co-designing element alongside OPDs and disability stakeholder groups.

So that's, that's one good practice that we have picked up a few years ago, and we are trying to strengthen it in every platform.

And the second thing I wanted to share, on a very community level. So, in Baguio City, Philippines, we have currently an ongoing project that is funded by the Global Disability Fund and UNDRR is implementing that in collaboration with the government of Philippines.

And where we are looking at making multi hazard early warning systems disability-inclusive. And there too, we have very strong consultations with organisations of persons with disabilities. And they're part of our implementation modality where we collaborate with them, on action-to-action basis, where they sit with us and advise us on how best to

implement these actions, on city level as well as moving on to the national level.

(Nacho): and then, a final question, precisely, I would like to come back to the subject you just mentioned: organisations of persons with disabilities: OPDs. What should OPDs' role be in the conception of disaster risk reduction strategies?

(Talal): that's a great question, Nacho, thanks for that.

I believe organisations of persons with disabilities are learning with the passage of time, and this growth is continuous I think on both ends.

The UN is also learning how to operate and how to find solutions, but I think there is a strong need for OPDs to do more in becoming visible in the disaster risk reduction area of work. And advocating more strongly on the implementation of the Sendai Framework for disaster risk reduction and the implementation of Article 11 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities UNCRPD.

I would also say that behind these actions that are disability-specific, within disaster risk reduction and climate action, there is a need for more relentless advocacy. There is a need for more capacity development on how, especially on the technical part of disaster risk reduction, and the relevant areas under climate action and disaster risk reduction.

I would just give one example: disaster risk reduction financing. How does that work? How it operates and how people with disabilities and OPDs can become part of it? This is a technical area where we need to really build more capacity, anticipate reaction to prevent the impact of disasters that may be coming in the future.

That's also one area, contingency planning crisis modifiers, the mechanisms that minimise the impact of disasters. I think these are the areas where we have to develop more capacity so that the organisations that are willing to work with OPDs are able to find the right partnerships with the right skillset that are able to implement the demanding projects that are assigned to us.

(Nacho): very interesting. So, thank you very much, Talal Waheed, for responding to the questions at "EBU in Action", Global Disability Advisor at the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. It was a great pleasure to have you here at the microphone of "EBU in Action".

(Talal): thank you so much. It was a pleasure to be with you.

End of interview with Talal Waheed, from the UN Officer for Disaster Risk Reduction

(Neven): well, really great insight into these questions.

And we completely agree with Talal that this is something we probably need to work with more focus in Europe. I believe that our member organisations really have to work with these issues more actively basically from two perspectives.

One is, of course, the advocacy work, to influence the policies and inclusion of persons with blindness and visual impairment. But the other perspective is also that we need to work with education, I think what our National Members need to work with their members, to educate them in these matters.

So, I don't know, Paweł. Do you have any ideas what our EBU Members, how they could approach these subjects more?

(Paweł): I think the individual members could exercise more pressure on the governments of the countries to seek in which regard this help could be provided on a global scale.

So it's not just up to a very well-organised, but nevertheless, a loose collection of different organisations to organise it and scramble their funds and scramble the donors and campaign and campaign and campaign until the energy runs out.

But also that they're supported and also that the information is delivered at the right time to the right people and the funds and the help that is needed in the training and the capacity building that we already mentioned, that we are considered at every step along the way.

(Neven): what about you, Nacho? Do you have any reflections after listening to Talal?

(Nacho): I think that an important thing to do, and this is something, of course, that we have discussed many times in many subjects, it's the importance of sharing good practices. Because in that sense, I think that networking can help you to know how to better tackle certain situations that might happen in your country or region of the world.

But, of course, you also have to know, and as we have already underlined earlier on in this episode, it's very important to learn how we can best optimise capacity building in organisations. But, of course,

sharing good practices, it's also very important so we can all get to learn from each other and learn how we can best tackle this kind of situations.

(Neven): Well, very wise words from you, Nacho. And thank you so much, Nacho. It was really very interesting interviews you have done for the podcast. So, a great “thank you” to you. And also, well, we wish you a great holiday also coming up.

(Nacho): yes, thank you very much, Neven. As always, it was a pleasure. I hope that you enjoyed listening to the testimonials of the people we have listened to today and allow me to wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

(Neven): thank you, Nacho. So Paweł, we are closing to the wrap-up of this episode. Do you have any last reflections on this very, in a way heavy, but extremely important and significant subject we have had in this episode?

(Paweł): I think I wish to conclude this episode by wishing you all safe times.

I know they are difficult and we don't know how the situation in the world will develop and there are many challenges and threats to be conquered, but I really hope that this holiday season and moving forward, we all stay safe.

(Neven): Good. Thank you so much, Paweł, for all your contributions this year, and I wish you a great winter holidays and I see you next year.

(Paweł): see you and take care to all our listeners. Thank you for being with us this year.

(Neven): thank you. So, my conclusion of today's subject is that we all have to think about people who are in need. We have to specifically maybe think about our friends in Ukraine, but also everybody who, globally, do not have the same prerequisites for being independent as we might have in some countries, especially in Europe.

So, solidarity and empathy, I think is a good theme for the season coming up.

[Music]

And with these words, I would like to say that, well, we shouldn't forget, of course, that we have a very great sound master working in The Netherlands for us named Emiel Cornelisse. So, for you, Emiel, a

heartfelt “Thank you” for this invaluable work you do behind the scenes and making this episode possible.

And also to all our listeners, if you enjoyed our episode today, please subscribe in your podcast platform for “EBU in Action”. And you can, of course also, give us some marks. You can also ask us questions and all that information, you will find them in the show notes. And with this, I would like to thank you all for listening to “EBU in Action” and wishing you all a fantastic holiday season.

So, all the best. Bye-bye from us.

(Voiceover: “EBU in Action” is co-funded by the European Union).

END OF EPISODE