**LOW VISION Services, a Global Right**

**Setting the Standards in Europe**

**EBU Low Vision Conference**

**14-17 June 2018, Laško, Slovenia**

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**Presentation**

**EBU standards for low vision services in Europe:**

**From right to implementation**

**Low Vision in EBU**

It is estimated that there are 30 million blind and partially sighted people in geographical Europe, the vast majority of whom have low vision.

With the growing population of elderly, also the number of people with sight loss will increase in the next years.

EBU, founded in 1984, is the voice of blind and partially sighted people in Europe, protecting the rights and promoting the interests of both, blind and partially sighted in its 42 member countries.

Low vision is always presented together with blindness, but usually a bit in the shadow of blindness and underestimated also in our organisation. So commissions and working groups on low vision dedicated a lot of time and effort to their work of making the needs, problems and solutions of low vision visible and heard within EBU.

The Low vision movement exists from EBU’s very beginning. Already in 1986, a first meeting was held in Lunteren, The Netherlands, with which the low vision initiative was established.

At the EBU second General Assembly in Varna 1987, a sub-Commission on the needs of partially sighted people was set up under the commission on Rehabilitation. In his opening speech, the first chair Theo Walraven, clearly formulated the problems and needs of partially sighted people and how these differ from blind people´s needs.

In 1990, at the Third General Assembly (Lisbon, this sub- commission was promoted and given the status of an EBU Standing Commission. Low vision advocacy was here to stay!

Ever since Mr. Walraven, many committed and enthusiastic people, have contributed to the EBU low vision activities and development with their knowledge., time and energy: Berry den Brinker, Giuseppe Castronovo, Harry Geijskens, Alenka Bera-Gajšt, Krister Inde, Franz Buser, and many more, including our current EBU low vision project team and network. We are happy, to see that several of them are here with us at the conference!

Low Vision Activities

Initially low vision activists focused on developing a single legal definition of low vision or partial sight, its promotion and adoption throughout Europe. They also created principles on the accessibility of provisions for partially sighted people. The issue of the definition of low or reduced vision is important because access to services, aids and support largely depends on whether or not an individual falls into a certain category or definition which may vary from country to country.

Already then, efforts were made to implement a combined definition, that not only considers the medical aspects (medical definition), but also, and especially, the impact of sight loss on the basic daily skills of a person with partial sight (functional definition).

The EBU fourth General Assembly in 1991 adopted a list of nine parameters, relevant for an improved assessment of individual´s low vision needs: 1. Light adaptation; 2. Colour vision; 3. Fixation; 4. Glare sensitivity; 5. Low contrast sensitivity; 6. Magnification needed to read a newspaper print; 7. Night vision; 8. Visual acuity; 9. Visual field.

In the working period 1999-2003 the EBU Commission on the interests of Partially Sighted People produced the **EBU Policy Statement on Low Vision**, adopted at the EBU General Assembly 2003 in Athens. This still is a relevant document for the advocacy of the rights and interests of partially sighted people. Because it shifts to another direction, saying that organizations of blind and partially sighted should work towards **'A Society for All'**, a concept that was directly copied from the Swedish Organization of Visually Impaired (SRF). In 'A Society for All’, blind and partially sighted people should all be able to participate in society as equals with other people. Therefore, The Commission concluded, it was not very important to make sharp distinctions between blind, partially sighted and sighted people as all people with a visual impairment have to be supported in their efforts to take part in society.

The proposal to change the name of EBU to include the word ‘partially sighted’ was not supported by the General Assembly 2003, but as alternative **the strap line ´the voice of blind and partially sighted people in Europe´** was excepted and has been used in EBU ever since and is part of EBU´s logo.

**A plenary session on Low Vision** was held for the first time during the General Assembly 2007 in Antalya, Turkey, where the General Assembly committed to include low vision in national organisations’ activities, which was the aim of the session. Also, the EBU constitution was amended to include ´blind and partially sighted’ throughout the constitution to make low vision visible and show EBU´s commitment.

The EBU Steering group on Low Vision (2007–2011) produced a **Paper on low vision in Europe** and set the basis for a survey on the status of low vision services in Europe. This was further developed by **the project group of the EBU Low Vision Network (2011–2015) and** circulated amongst the 44 EBU member organisations in 2013. With 37 countries, we had a response of 84%.The survey results showed that:

1. In one third of countries there are no dedicated low vision services available
2. The quality of services may differ significantly between countries.
3. Conditions to access services differ from country to country.
4. One half of national organisations don’t cooperate with low vision service providers in their country. 65% of national organisations do not have a monitoring function over the quality of low vision services.
5. More than half of European countries do not have guidelines or standards for low vision services.
6. In some EBU countries persons with low vision cannot become members of their national organisations and this means that in more than 20% of countries, the needs, rights and interests of low vision people are not represented at all.

So, the survey results show quite a serious situation: Many people with low vision are excluded from the support and services they need and have a right to.

That situation urgently calls for action. The right forlow vision rehabilitation services is based on article 26 of the UNCRPD (adopted in by the UN2008): ”Habilitation and rehabilitation”, in the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, says that “State Parties shall take effective and appropriate measures, including through peer support, to enable persons with disabilities to attain and maintain their maximum independence, full physical, mental, social and vocational ability, and full inclusion and participation in all aspects.

To that end, States Parties shall organize, strengthen and extend comprehensive habilitation and rehabilitation services and programmes, particularly in the areas of health, employment, education and social services.”

On the basis of the survey outcome, the UNCRPD, good practices and three decades of low vision work in EBU, with the support of two optometrists, **the EBU Minimum Standards for Low Vision Services in Europe was** published in **2014**. Ten key elements for the implementation of dedicated low vision services. With this publication, EBU urges its members to adopt and implement these standards as a guideline to insure that people with low vision receive the support they need and are entitled to.

To guide member organisations in the implementation process, the Low Vision Project group produced the **EBU toolkit in 2015/2016**. The toolkit with examples and references may be found useful when undertaking action nationally to promote and lobby for establishing high level low vision services that are available and accessible to everyone with sight loss in need of support.

The **EBU Low vision Video ´Impact & Action´** was produced 2016/17 as a toolfor awareness raising and promotion of dedicated low vision services. The video includes many interesting testimonies by Europeans with different types of low vision, regarding the importance of accessibility, rehabilitation and raising awareness, including a call to action. We are proud to share the video at this conference.

In that same period, WHO was developing standards for vision rehabilitation, and the EBU Low Vision Project group was able to contribute to this drafting process with our EBU standards for low vision and participated in the WHO ICC conference in Rome in 2016. Mr. Amore will tell you more about this later today.

Our EBU Low Vision Project group and network was actively involved in the European project PRO4VIP (Procurement for Visually Impaired People). In 2016 we organised for this project **three EBU Low Vision focus group meetings** (in Cyprus, the Netherlands and Slovenia) In each expert group about 20 people with low vision participated to analyse and define the unmet needs of people with low vision in terms of assistive devices.

It is great that finally, after many years of activities, strategies and documents, the opportunity to hold the first EBU Low Vision Conference! And take the next step. It is important to meet face to face and work together with people who share the commitment of implementing the right to low vision services. In Europe.

It is our strong wish that the EBU standards for low vision services are implemented.

And that national organisations adhere to EBU´s objectives, principles, and commitment to working equally for blind and partially sighted people of both genders and all ages.

That EBU members include low vision in their policies, strategies and activities to protect the rights and promote the interests of both blind and partially sighted people.

In compliance with the UNCRPD every person with low vision is entitled to comprehensive low vision services. We are sure that this conference can also be a big step towards making this possible

We therefore count on you to undertake action after this conference. Let’s make sure that no one with sight loss is excluded from the support they need and are entitled to!

Birgitta Blokland and

Barbara Krejči Piry

EBU low vision team



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