

A new dynamic for autism
Side event to the CRPD's 21st session

Raising awareness and developing understanding of autism
(Olivier Zimmermann – Autisme Genève)

Esteemed members of the committee, ladies and gentlemen,

As a person with autism and committee member of a local autism NGO, Autisme Genève, I've chosen to do a short assessment of awareness-raising (article 8 of the CRPD), one of the organization's objectives. It will focus on my home country, Switzerland, but similar situations likely occur elsewhere.

Awareness-raising is made more difficult with the few figures on persons with autism living in Switzerland. Although the existing ones and relevant world data indicate that socioeconomic inclusion is still far off. Their plight and their families' go unnoticed for the most part. There are also still widespread erroneous ideas, even among some health professionals, that almost all, or even all, persons with autism are mentally deficient, emotionless, unsociable, male, etc. Under the circumstances, raising awareness appears more important than ever.

Even since Switzerland's ratification of the CRPD in 2014, raising-awareness is still by far done by NGOs, except for a few local landmarks with the campaign Light it up Blue, on World Autism Awareness Day, on April 2. In fact, in 2015, the federal government decided not to plan a national strategy on autism, unlike other topics. In October 2018, it chose to at least target some school and health professionals. Cantons have pertinent competencies but are more or less as unwilling to take responsibility. For instance, in my canton of Geneva, there's currently no autism strategy.

The work of NGOs, such as Autism Switzerland and its member organizations as well as more recently A-cube, can only go so far, which is why the authorities needs to get more involved. State awareness-raising campaigns exist on different topics but except for a controversial 2009 one, none on disability seems to have left an easy-to-find trace.

Awareness must be raised on the:

- questionable social norms
- problematic invalidity insurance practices
- disproportionate importance of institutionalized schools
- lack of good medical practices
- higher rate of discrimination
- unclear federal responsibility
- particularities of autism
- hurdles, among which complicated access to appropriate health services
- need for greater inclusion
- higher costs in case of improper action
- unfair burden carried by the NGOs
- successful approaches
- people with autism contributions to society
- lack of political discourse

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**In conclusion, the Swiss state is failing in its duty to uphold article 8 of the CRPD,
awareness-raising.**

References

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