

Zero Conference on January 23: major success with over 240 international decision-makers and experts on the subject of accessibility

Essl Foundation, World Future Council / Jakob von Uexkull and Bank Austria initiative established itself as comprehensive think tank on accessibility with first "international summit"

Vienna, 25.1.2012 – The "International Conference on Good Policies for Persons with Disabilities" brought NGO and foundation representatives, academics and disability rights activists together in Vienna. The main focus of the conference was on selected laws governing accessibility, inclusive education, supported decision-making and access to justice. The experts and persons with disabilities in attendance engaged in animated and high-level discussions on internationally exemplary aspects of eight previously selected Good Policies. Due to the strong interest, Zero Project initiators Martin Essl and Jakob von Uexkull consider their initial goal of raising international awareness for exemplary solutions and thus encouraging their adoption achieved.

"The overwhelming feedback not only from persons with disabilities indicates the enormous need for an independent and comprehensive platform of exchange – particularly at the international level. With the Zero Project, we intend to close this obvious gap in the long term", explains Martin Essl, founder of the Essl Foundation and CEO of bauMax AG.

"The World Future Council is designed to find and promote sustainable and future just laws and solutions addressing urgent global problems. In the area of disability policy we entered into the cooperation with the Zero Project, as this internationally unparalleled platform is aiming at generating real improvement for persons with disabilities", explains Jakob von Uexkull, founder of the so-called "Alternative Nobel Prize" and the World Future Council.

Accessibility summit - the best minds for a global challenge

The conference began with introductory comments by the honorary patron of the conference **H.R.H. Prince Ra'ad bin Zaid**, which were delivered by the Ambassador to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, His Excellency **Mr Makram Mustafa Queisi**. After the opening speeches by the initiators **Martin Essl** (Essl Foundation), **Jakob von Uexkull** (World Future Council) and **Fred Luks** (Director of Corporate Sustainability at Bank Austria), the European dimension of disability policy was discussed in the first keynote session. Under Chairmanship of **Miguel Ángel Cabra de Luna**, Co-chair of the European Consortium of Foundations and Human Rights and Disability and Member of the European Economic and Social Committee, **Johan ten Geuzendam**, Head of Unit for Rights of Persons with Disabilities of the European Commission, **Elisabeth Schroedter**, Member of the European Parliament who travelled to Vienna specifically for the Zero Conference, and **Ioannis Vardakastanis**, who as President of the European Disability Forum is Europe's "highest-ranking disability rights representative", discussed issues such as the European Disability Strategy, regulations of the Structural Funds and other challenges. Together they demanded that the fifth EU anti-discrimination directive, which is a particularly important step for the protection of rights for persons with disabilities, is finally adopted. In this regard, especially the German government was criticised for its obstructive stance in the European Council.

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The second, high-profile keynote session was centered entirely upon laws addressing anti-discrimination, accessibility and equality for persons with disabilities. Federal Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection **Rudolf Hundstorfer** introduced the Austrian Federal Disability Equality Act and, under the direction of **Prof. Lisa Waddington**, who holds the European Disability Form Chair in European Disability Law at Maastricht University, **Charles D. Siegal**, attorney and member of the Human Rights Committee of the International Law Association who joined the Zero Conference from the USA, **Antonio L. Martínez-Pujalte López**, Professor for Political and Legal Philosophy from Spain, and **Lord Colin Low**, Vice President of the Royal National Institute of Blind People and Member of the House of Lords, examined exemplary aspects for which the respective legislations were selected for discussion, as well as their continued weaknesses. The clear result of the discussion was that for example injunctive reliefs should be introduced in the Austrian law. They do exist already in the British and American equality legislation and achieved considerable progress for the rights of persons with disabilities.

In the afternoon, the eight selected policies were discussed intensively in parallel workshops. In addition to leading representatives from the implementing countries, prominent experts from Austria also took part, including **Helene Jarmer MP**, Disability Rights Spokesperson of the Greens, **Dr Franz-Josef Huainigg MP**, Disability Rights Spokesperson of the People's Party, **Dr Michael Landau**, President of Caritas Vienna, **Prof Dr Germain Weber**, President of Lebenshilfe Austria, **Albert Brandstätter**, Director of Lebenshilfe Austria, **Martin Schenk**, Deputy Director of Diakonie Austria, **Dr Erwin Buchinger**, Disability Ombudsman, **Dr Max Rubisch**, disability policy expert of the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, **Hon Prof Dr Georg Kathrein**, Director of the Civil Law Department of the Federal Ministry of Justice, **Barbara Schwarz**, responsible Member of the Provincial Government of Lower Austria, **Franz Wolfmayr**, President of EASPD, **Bernadette Feuerstein**, Board Member of Independent Living Austria, and many others.

The results from the perspective of the organisers

Due to the considerable number of participants and enormous resonance not only within, but also beyond, the community, the organisers consider their first goal of establishing a new and comprehensive platform of exchange and networking achieved.

"We are proud to have established with the Zero Conference an important international forum for discussing exemplary solutions for the most important areas in disability policy such as inclusive education and independent living. The positive reception was revealed by the quality of the discussions, but particularly by the numerous parliamentarians and disability rights activists who joined us from all over Europe and abroad. Our common objective must now be the concrete implementation of these solutions in as many countries as possible", states Ingrid Heindorf, Policy Officer for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of the World Future Council and co-author of the Zero Project Report.

After this successful start, the main focus of the organisers will be on the project's long-term development, in the scope of which its strengths will be expanded upon even further: "We are particularly delighted about the success of this innovative conference concept, which features exclusive discussions of exemplary solutions and their possibilities for implementation in order to learn from the best. As organisers, we received considerable encouragement from the conference participants and are already working on its continuation

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next year", says Dr Michael Fembek, Programme Manager of the Essl Foundation and co-author of the Zero Project Report.

The organisers

The Essl Foundation was established in March 2008. It has been endowed with adequate financial resources to ensure the long-term presentation of the annual Essl Social Prize and support of other social activities, to provide support to persons in need, and to raise public awareness about the need for such support.

The World Future Council established by Jakob von Uexkull consists of 50 respected personalities from politics, the business world, civil society, science and culture from all five continents. In close collaboration with civil society groups, members of parliament, governments, businesses and international organisations, the WFC researches future just policies and legislation, and advises political decision-makers in their implementation. The WFC is currently active in the areas of Future Justice, Climate and Energy, Sustainable Ecosystems, Sustainable Economies, Just Societies as well as Peace and Disarmament.

Bank Austria has been a member of UniCredit, one of the largest European bank groups, since 2005 and employs 10,900 people in 372 locations in Austria (including the subsidiaries of the UniCredit Group in Austria). In addition to sponsoring activities in the areas of culture, sustainability and sports, the bank's social contribution is reflected in its involvement with disadvantaged persons.

Further information

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