

Disabled people and museums in the Western Balkans



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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LIST OF PARTICIPATING MUSEUMS

Museum of Republic Srpska, Banja Luka

National Museum of Serbia, Belgrade

National Museum of Montenegro, Cetinje

The Gjakova Museum, Gjakova

City Museum, Novi Sad

Museum of Kosovo, Pristina

National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo

Historic Museum, Shkodra

The National Museum of Macedonia, Skopje

National Museum of Albanian History, Tirana

Zenica Museum, Zenica

Museums are for people

Museums exist for people. They can be a vibrant force in society; a place for discussion, debate and deliberation. They can be welcoming, warm and inclusive.

They can celebrate diversity and shape our views of the past, present and the future. But museums can also be places that keep people out. They can be exclusive, elitist, biased and proponents of single, narrow views.

Opening museums to new audiences requires commitment to change. Museums need to see themselves from a different perspective, they need to listen, they need to share. This can be difficult and it can challenge deeply held views and established ways of working; but the benefits can be huge. This is particularly true when museums are reaching out to people that feel excluded or experience discrimination. Opening the doors and letting people in is like a breath of fresh air, and it will bring change!



"In through the front door", the main entrance to the Museum of Republic Srpska, Banja Luka

Why disabled people and museums?

In 2006, the Council of Europe issued a "Disability Action Plan" aimed at improving the quality of life of people with disabilities in Europe. This document highlighted the levels of discrimination that disabled people face in their everyday life, and included references to access to culture and heritage. It states that "people with disabilities must be able to participate in cultural life like everybody else" and says that people who organise culture should have an understanding about disability.

In the Balkans disabled people experience high levels of discrimination and are often marginalised from society.

A recent European Union (EU) project revealed that disabled people are often excluded from economic progress and are frequently denied basic human rights, such as access to education and culture. They remain objects of charity. Many museums do not welcome disabled people and in fact create barriers to their ability to enjoy their own heritage and culture.



*Do we want people to come in?
Barriers to access can begin right at
the beginning of the visit.*

The Stavros Niarchos Disability and Access Projects

In 2007, **Cultural Heritage without Borders (CHwB)** began a three year partnership with the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. The aims of this partnership were,

- To help museums to have a greater understanding of the needs of disabled visitors and implement necessary changes and improvements in the environment and in attitude.
- To ensure that access is strategically developed across all museum activity.
- To assist museums to develop accessible exhibitions and activities.
- To develop specific projects to encourage disabled children and adults to visit and participate in cultural life.
- To support staff development and improve partnerships with local organisations for disabled people, schools and other NGO's.

Museums belonging to the CHwB Regional Museum Network began working together through a series of workshops which explored the background to developing partnerships with disabled people and to reduce the barriers within their organizations. All the work is grounded in a "social model approach".



Disability Equality Training workshop

"I never thought about disabled people before, not in this way. It is a subject that unites all of us, wherever we are"

-Workshop participant

"There are many common problems in all museums and we can learn a lot through talking about that and exchanging experiences."

-Workshop participant

The Social Model of Disability: from pathology to policy

In the past society has viewed disabled people through their "medical condition". This means that there is "something wrong with them". The medical model keeps disabled people as passive and also makes them "the problem".

In contrast, the social model sees the barriers that society has created that keep disabled people out, and works towards removing them. This means that museums and other cultural organizations need to change themselves to become more accessible. It empowers museums to open themselves up to new audiences and to take away barriers to participation. These barriers might be in the building, the exhibitions, the public programmes, the attitudes of the staff or the way disabled people are represented or viewed.

| The Medical Model | The Social Model |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| The individual person is disabled | The environment disabled people |
| Museums ask "what is wrong with you?" | Museums ask "where are the barriers here?" |
| Museums get irrelevant information | Museums act on useful information to become accessible |

Social model table (developed by Michèle Taylor)

Getting the basics right

Sometimes simple changes can make a huge difference. Heavy doors and steps are difficult for many visitors; elderly people, parents with pushchairs, and small people. Some of the museums decided to start with these basic areas and make it easier for visitors to get in!

Some of the things the children said:

“I didn’t know our town had so many beautiful things!”

“I am very happy today”



Portable ramps at Novi Sad City Museum, Serbia

The power of touch and sound

People love to touch things and it is one of the ways that we learn about and experience our environment. Museums have a long tradition of putting things behind glass cases, but more and more they are realizing that all visitors want to touch.

For people with low vision introducing touch opens up a whole new experience; the display becomes alive and accessible. The same can be said for sound, whether this is a narrative or a way of creating ambience, things come alive. Sensory access is a creative way of working towards equality.

“Museums are so often boring with nothing to touch. We all want to touch! I think this is good for everyone”

-Visually impaired adviser

“It is better to talk to disabled people themselves. Sometimes, large organizations get it wrong; they don't always know what's best”

-Museum work



Traditional Albanian crafts, Gjakova Museum, Kosovo



Young deaf adults storyboarding films at the National Museum of Macedonia, Skopje (funded by the Swedish Institute)



”Touching Belgrade” The gallery of frescoes, National Museum of Serbia, Belgrade



Tactile replicas at Zenica Museum Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Engaging with people

For some museums, the Niarchos projects offered an opportunity to work directly with disabled people. In Banja Luka a long standing partnership with disabled children was given a whole new lease of life through the provision of equipment for their pottery and craft activities. Using the rich collection, local children have become regular "artists in residence" at the museum!

"Making things is a lot of fun"
- Workshop participant

"The museum has some pretty things. I like to make pretty things too"
- Workshop participant



*Children in a pottery workshop,
Museum of Republica Srpska, Banja
Luka*

The museums involved in this project have learnt a lot about themselves and about disabled people. Below are some of the things they said.

“This project was great opportunity for us to confirm our beliefs that what we are trying to do is good, for disabled people, for our museum and for wider community. Also, we have developed good team work, communication and cooperation with different institutions and specialized individuals.”

“Other institutions similar to us are interested to learn about this example. We are ready to give this support!”

“The project contributes to changing the attitude and the awareness about equal treatment to visitors, regardless of their difference, as well learning about aspects of creating museum space without obstacles. We think that this project will contribute to speed up of the process of integration of people with special needs in the community and erasing the prejudices which still exist.”

“The museum is quite changed: we have a legend for permanent settings with Braille letters; we have replicas of some tactile exhibits. It's visually different in exhibitions.”

“Some people think that projects need to have millions of Euros to be important. This project has shown that is not true. We have made a real difference and attitudes in our museum have changed.”

REFERENCES

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Zenica City Museum, Novi Sad City Museum, Gjakova Museum

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”We shall never forget but we cannot stay forever on the battlefield”



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