Good will is not enough

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There is a general agreement that the built environment, transport systems, information and communication tools, products and services – in short everyday life has to be designed in a way that allows for the maximum number of people to participate in society. Nobody should be excluded or discriminated against because of a lack of professionalism, creativity or good will from providers and severe sanctions must be imposed whenever and however deliberate exclusion or discrimination takes place.

However, "Good will is not enough" and very often the reason for bad solutions in the implementation of accessibility for all is a lack of knowledge. Other reasons can be found in limited resources, varying priorities, multiannual planning, or others that may oblige decision makers to choose between a range of possibilities.

On the other hand, applying accessibility in the sense of the Design for All approach to new projects is certainly easier than adapting, modifying or renovating what already exists. Redesigning existing infrastructure, services or other facilities meant for public use is a challenge that calls for intensive exchange, negotiation and planning.

This is also true for the design of emergency or evacuation plans and it seems still very hard to conciliate the right to full inclusion of people with disabilities or reduced mobility with the challenge for evacuation in case of disasters.

Real Design for All thinking is based on a global approach and not just on a one-dimensional solution to one particular problem. Therefore Design for All is based on teamwork, user orientation and on a working method designed to avoid mistakes and loss of opportunities.

The success of emergency plans depends on their connection or connectivity with all their single elements. This refers to the idea of a "service chain" based on the idea of avoiding "isolated" accessibility solutions and on a holistic way of thinking.

Other problems may result from designing initiatives in a way that takes certain target groups into consideration, whereas others are forgotten or even disadvantaged. The worst scenario would be an initiative taken with the best intentions ending up with accusations of direct or indirect discrimination.

It is a reality that missing resources may necessitate restricted choices or limited priorities. However such limitations or priorities should not impact on future adaptations. The identification of the priorities should be based on user-centred design and identifying priorities with all the stakeholders involved in order to make sure that the most urgent demands are covered.

A promising Design for All approach is always built on solid partnerships between all the stakeholders and a well-balanced representation of all those who will benefit, exert influence on or be influenced by the project. The aim of this approach is to create a cooperative development process in which all partners feel engaged as co-owners of the solutions agreed.

The choice of stakeholders to get involved can be a tricky question especially when one group is too dominant or one important key player is missing. This usually happens when the design process is not holistic enough and does not include the necessary consultation i.e. with the people that should install it or maintain it. It is also usual to forget user groups which might be disadvantaged by the solution delivered.

Solutions that are not based on the Design for All approach, risk ending up in not really being effective and so needing further adaptations. This will not only have a negative influence on the appreciation of the competence of the decision maker, but it will in the end be more expensive.