



Permanent Group on Disability Rights

REPORT

Fact finding mission to the Netherlands: Disability -inclusive civil protection schemes and disaster risk reduction

9-10 December 2024

PARTICIPANTS:

EESC Members: Marie Pierre LE BRETON (GR I), Christophe LEFEVRE (GR II), Tudorel TUPILUȘI (GR III)

EESC Secretariat: Valeria ATZORI

European Disability Forum: Gordon RATTRAY, Programme Coordinator on International Cooperation

Monday, 9th December

Meeting with representatives of organisations representing persons with disabilities:

- Wouter Bolier, policy officer at Ieder(in) - the Dutch Disability Platform and member of EDF
- Thijs Hardick; policy officer at Ieder(in) - the Dutch Disability Platform and member of EDF
- Susan Oldemenger; English and Dutch to Dutch sign language interpreter for Wouter Bolier
- Marcel Bobeldijk; Stichting Hoornmij.NVVS, the Dutch national organisation of hard-of-hearing persons and member of EFHOH
- Albert van der Ee; Oogvereniging, the Dutch national organisation of blind persons and member of EBU

Ieder(in) is the Dutch umbrella organisation of persons with disabilities, with 230-member organisation. and representing over 2 million persons with disabilities. They are the official counterpart of the public authorities on disability and are in contact, according to the topic, with several ministries.

In 2019, together with 9 member organisations of Ieder(in) representing different subgroups of persons with a communication disability, they formed the so called **112-Alliance**. They presented a position paper with their **demands for an accessible 112 number** to representatives from the Ministry of Justice and Safety and the National Police, who are responsible for 112. They also shared their personal and lived experiences about not being able to reach 112 during an emergency.

That was the start of a fruitful cooperation between the 112-Alliance and the government. On behalf of the 112-Alliance and based on the joint position paper, the Dutch Disability Platform engaged and worked together with government officials. Their involvement included:

- giving feedback on the development of a **E-SMS system** in 2021, which was first tested with their members organisation to be sure the language used was understandable.: They also provided input for the government's communication and information campaign on E-SMS. As a result, each person, after prior signing up, can now send a text (e-SMS) to 112. This represents is a very good backup option for when other options don't work.
- inclusive design process for the **112NL-app**. They informed the app developers about the accessibility requirements which needed to be ensured, provided feedback on the first prototypes, run user tests and gave input for the government's information and communication campaign. The 112NL-app, officially launched in January 2022, currently sends information to 112 about the venue from when the user is connecting and the caller. The app also includes a **Real Time Text (RTT) chat function**, so that persons with (communicative) disabilities can contact 112 in written via text. The 112-operator can respond with text and/or audio (voice). An automatic translator is available in the RTT chat function, which can be useful for people not speaking Dutch or English. As future development, the 112NL-app might be able to support also the sharing of pictures.
- They also provided input and feedback in the development of an **e-learning training** for 112-operators. In this e-learning, 112-operators learnt the basics of accessible, and inclusive communication to reach persons with disabilities

The current relation with government official is good: they meet twice a year and this is valued as the occasion to get to know and understand the respective constraints and challenges. As a result of the 112 Alliance initiative, 112 is now accessible to persons with hearing and speaking impairments and disabilities.

Beside the e-SMS and 112NL-app, persons who are deaf or hard-of-hearing or who have a speech impairment can use a **Total Conversation relay service (app)**. Through Total Conversation you can use, video, text and audio simultaneously, and choose the preferred modality. People can also reach a telecom video relay service, where deaf persons can call 112 through a Dutch sign language interpreter. However, unlike using Real Time Text with 112, the sign language video relay service is only open between 07.00 and 22.00, not 24/7. Total Conversation telecom relay service is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, who hasn't decided for 24/7 opening hours for the sign language telecom video relay service yet. They are still advocating for the availability of Dutch Sign Language 24/7, together with the Dutch National Association of the Deaf.

In the field of **public warning systems**, the Ministry of Justice and Safety is the one responsible for crisis communication and early warning systems in the Netherlands. In 2012, they developed a public warning system based on a cell broadcast alarm system called **NL-Alert**. NL-Alert warns and informs citizens about disasters and impending hazards through text messages to mobile phones. Such messages give information about the threat, recommended actions and where to find more information. When NL-Alert was first launched, accessibility of information was not provided. As a result, for some people, NL-Alert messages were inaccessible and/or not easy to understand or use. In **2021**, the Dutch Government decided to develop a **new NL-Alert app** to provide every citizen with relevant information about catastrophic events. Ieder(in) managed to play a key role in the development of the new NL-Alert app. They stressed the urgency to involve persons with disabilities in the whole process, following the principles of universal design. Universal design is a process which enables a product, service or environment to be used by as many people as possible. For the development of the new NL-Alert app, the ministry of Justice and Safety discussed accessibility requirements with Ieder(in) in the first stages of the app development process. Then the NL-Alert app developers interviewed persons with auditive, visual or cognitive disabilities, persons with limited hand functions and persons with low literacy skills, to get a better understanding about their needs. Largely based on these inputs, a first prototype of the app was developed. In the next phases, two additional rounds of testing and consultation with persons with disabilities and low literacy skills were done. This inclusive approach resulted in full accessibility of NL-Alert app, officially released in January 2024. Ieder(in) was also involved and gave input to the government's information and communication campaign about the app, which included videos in Dutch Sign Language.

Despite these successful practices, they draw attention to the fact that there are an estimated 4.5 million people not reachable by digital means in the NL. For this reason, they are against the public authorities' idea to phase out the existing **non -digital audio siren public warning system**, whose maintenance is deemed too costly. They believe both the app and the siren alarm should co-exist for an optimal coverage of the population.

Despite the good results achieved, representatives of Ieder(in) highlighted how **there is no structured and overarching involvement of Organisations representing Persons with Disabilities (OPDs)** in the development of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) policies in the NL. The accessible 112 and NL-Alert app have been mostly the result of personal initiatives and progressive development of personal contacts with specific people working in relevant ministries. This takes a lot of time to develop and can easily get lost if people leave their position.

Visit of the Eetcafé Zizo

Due to a last-minute cancellation by the Human Rights Institute, the Delegation visited this café, which was opened in 1993 and was the first café in the NL to employ people with disabilities. Most of them have a psychosocial disability. Their vision is to think in terms of possibilities instead of limitations.

Meeting with National Police, Public Safety Answering Point PSAP (112)

- Erica in 't Veld, Advisor 112/ senior business analyst PSAP facilities/ trail runner innovation

The representative of PSAP gave a detailed presentation on the functioning of the **112 number**. In a first stage, the person calling reaches the general answering point. Operators then sort the calls according to the type of emergency to the police, fire department or ambulance. On average, they receive 3;7 million call a year, a majority of them is for the police or ambulance. The so-called 1st stage PSAP is filtering calls (up to 40% is actually improper use of the number); they will also call the 2nd stage PSAP and carry out crisis filtering at peak load (storm, New Year's Eve, etc.).

Persons with disabilities can reach 112 via the 112 NL app, **Total Conversation App or E-SMS system**. The **Total Conversation App** uses real time text and provides sign language interpretation, but only 7am to 10pm. This limitation, according to the info they received from the relevant Ministry, is due mainly to the shortage of sign language interpreters, but also lack of resources. After the above-mentioned hours, only RTT can be used. This app is not free, an annual fee has to be paid and a medical prescription is needed. However, if you can provide a proof of disability, the health insurance system will reimburse the fee. It is mostly targeting people with hearing impairments. They receive around 600 calls per year.

The EESC delegation was also shown a real time simulation of a call to 112 involving a person with disability.

Meeting with Deltares

- Annegien Tijssen, Senior Climate Adaptation and Disaster Risk Management Specialist

This applied knowledge institute is a non-profit organisation and a foundation and plays an advisory role to the Dutch government on water and climate adaptation. At international level they carry out consultancy work on water, subsoil and climate and they are currently focusing their work on the delta area and on how to keep it safe from flood risks, energy transition and resilient infrastructure. They are trying to mainstream inclusiveness as a cross cutting theme through these areas. They are currently not carrying out any disability related activity in the Netherlands, but in the past, they cooperated with International Organisation for Migration (IOM) on a project aiming to make refugees' camps in Nigeria accessible to persons with disabilities. They felt there was a lack of disaggregated data on disability and on how persons with disabilities are impacted by climate emergencies. In their opinion, specific earmarked funding targeting persons with disabilities in DRR would be useful, but they recognized the generalised lack of awareness on disability so that the disability dimension is mostly not even taken into account in the programmes.

Tuesday, 10 December 2024

Meeting with representatives from public authorities

Venue: ZZIN, Koningin Julianaplein 10, 2595 AA Den Haag

- Menno Boon – Senior Policy Officer, Ministry of Justice and Security, DG Police and Security Regions,
- Martijn Vugteveen – Policy Officer, Ministry of Justice and Security, DG Police and Security Regions,
- Svenja Westerduin – Senior Communications Advisor, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism,

In their presentation, they explained how the 112 service is accessible to persons with disabilities. 112 number can be reached in multiple ways:

- Call to 112 with a landline or a mobile phone
- Emergency-SMS (E-SMS) for disabled end-users: this requires a one-time registration via a text to 112. After registration one can contact the PSAP at any given time. The Operator reads the text and

texts back. This is not the preferred option according to them, because the user has to wait for the operator to answer, but can be useful for people who don't have a smart phone.

- The Tolkcontact-app (Total conversation) for disabled end-users: 112 is available for sign-language from 7 a.m. until 10 p.m. via KPN Teletolk. it is targeted to the disabled end-users, mainly deaf and hearing-impaired. Questions from the operator appear on screen and the user can answer by pressing numbers, typing and/or verbally or in sign language through sign language interpreter. Downside: the app is not free (proof of disability has to be provided to the health insurance to cover the cost) and sign language interpretation is not available 24/7.
- The 112NL-app: it is a Smartphone app to communicate with the emergency services. Chat takes place through Real Time Text (RTT); Translation in chat is available. Operator decides whether or not to chat. It is available for all, but is particularly aimed at disabled end-users

On **Risk and crisis communication**: their aim is to reach everyone and quickly, but this represents admittedly a big challenge.

The tools used to communicate include:

- NL-alert app
- sign language interpreters during press conferences
- Use of pictures and icons
- Use of simple language,
- intermediaries to reach people from specific groups (trying to build a network);
- Multi language
- Research
- Call to action in sign language - denkvooruit.nl

At local level, there risk crisis communication is carried out by municipalities and the 25 safety regions. Municipalities are also responsible for shelters and accessibility. In practical terms, there is no monitoring of the accessibility of shelters.

Looking to the future, their priorities are to:

- make the Tolkcontact app accessible in sign language 24h/7
- monitor the various existing apps to avoid excessive proliferation and ensure coherence
- develop Native real time text directly through the phone without the necessity to install an app (planned for 2025)
- Explore the potential of AI
- develop a structured mechanisms for consultation of DPOs

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The delegation observed that:

- The 112NL app and NL Alert App represent a success and a good practice. These are initiatives that can be built on and replicated elsewhere. However, they originated from personal and ad hoc initiatives started by the Disability community, not in the context of a structured consultation mechanism as per CRPD obligation.
- The various dimensions of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) are dealt with by various ministries, which were given the impression to be working in silos rather than in synergy.
- There is no structured and overarching involvement and consultation of Organisations representing Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) in the development of DRR plans and strategies in the NL.
- Information and communications on DRR are still not accessible to all persons with disabilities during emergencies, therefore the safety and well-being of persons with disabilities during emergencies are not guaranteed, especially at local level.
- There seems to be a generalised lack of awareness and knowledge about the legal requirements the NL has assumed being State Party to the UN CRPD and to the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, meaning to protect persons with disabilities in situation of risk. Such lack of awareness includes notions like accessibility and universal design and is worryingly widespread among crucial actors like public official, web developers and the whole of society.
- There is a lack of disaggregated data by disability national information systems related to DRR.

The EESC delegation therefore recommends the following:

- All communication measures, including emergency numbers and hotlines, should be fully accessible and persons with disabilities should be able to effectively reach emergency services at all times.
- Public authorities should take measures to ensure that DRR plans and strategies at the federal, regional and municipal levels are drafted in close consultation with persons with disabilities, through their representative organizations, and explicitly addressing their specific requirements in all situations of risk. Their leadership capacity should be reinforced and include also specific sub-groups like women with disabilities.
- Persons with disabilities should be prioritized in national DRR policies and there should be coherence between DRR and climate adaptation policies, where both refer consistently to disability inclusion.
- In DRR plans and strategies, a Rights-based approach to disability should be adopted. They should not be indicated as "vulnerable group" but rather as key stakeholders and contributors. disabilities.
- Accessibility (universal design and reasonable accommodation) should be ensured for the physical environment, risk information, communication and services.
- A specific national budget should be allocated to disability inclusive civil protection.
- It is urgently needed to collect disaggregated data by disability in national information systems related to DRR, as basis for any evidence-based policy and measure to be adopted in this field.