



Sasha Audzevich, centre, plans to tour the world on his handcycle, to raise awareness about inclusion of people with disabilities.

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## Removing barriers for those living with disabilities

In the Belarus office of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), there was a mirror around two metres high. Most people could not use it. "Now you understand how people in wheelchairs, like me, usually feel with mirrors hanging at the usual height," explains Aliaksandr Audzevich, who prefers to be called Sasha. A former participant of the UNDP-UNV Talent Programme for Young Professionals with Disabilities, he served as an Inclusion Officer in the UNDP Belarus Hub, in Minsk.

“ My main goal at UNDP was to remove barriers to employment for persons with disabilities and to educate employers on how to create accessible and inclusive working environments. --Sasha Audzevich

He describes how, in Belarus, only about 20 per cent of persons with disabilities work. In order to improve that figure, Sasha has been striving to remove barriers to inclusion, both physical such as promoting the use of accessible toilets and desks, and ramps, and cultural. "You must change the minds of your colleagues, because, of course, sometimes they do not know anyone with disabilities, and they do not understand."

He lost the use of his legs in a motorbike accident, at age 26. "I am from a small city, Lida, and I had never seen a wheelchair before, only on TV," he says. But soon, he became an advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities. He won a contest on a TV show, and the prize allowed him to build an [accessible beach](#) in his hometown. "There is a lake that was my favourite place before, and I was no longer able to go there. Now, it is available for everyone."

More recently, Sasha created [Inclusive Barista](#), a project to train and employ people with visible and invisible disabilities as baristas. There are three Inclusive Barista coffee shops in Belarus, with 12 employees, 10 of them with disabilities. He also created a [Youtube mini-series](#) featuring persons with disabilities, in which the hero is a character with Down Syndrome.

After his one year assignment at UNDP, he is more interested than ever in learning about disabilities, but on an international level. He plans to tour the world on his handcycle, to raise awareness about this issue. His idea is to stay with persons with disabilities, as well as to visit UNDP offices around the world. "I want to make an inclusive map of the world," he says. He did a personal trip by handcycle from Belarus to Portugal in 2016, but this time his main goal will be "to raise disability awareness worldwide".

The COVID-19 pandemic has delayed his plans, but Sasha is willing to start as soon as possible. Although there have been more than 55,000 cases recorded in Belarus and more than 300 deaths, he is not overly worried about the effect the crisis may have on persons with disabilities.

“ Unfortunately, many people with disabilities in the Commonwealth of Independent States already stay at home most of the time, so life will not change so much for them," he says.

Not being able to leave their houses or develop their full potential are the types of discrimination that Sasha combats in his projects, like his recent UNDP assignment or his future world trip. "Inclusion is our future!" he says. And he contributes to making this future a reality all over the world.

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