

# Interview with His Excellency Pekka Haavisto

Foreign Minister of Finland\*



*HE Pekka Haavisto is the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland. He was a Member of Parliament in 1983–95 and was returned to Parliament in 2007. He served as Minister of Development and the Environment in 1995–99, and as Minister for International Development in 2013–14. In 1993–95 and 2018–19, he was Party Leader of the Greens in Finland. He has also served several years as a member of the Helsinki City Council. He stood as a candidate in the presidential election in Finland in 2012 and in 2018.*

*He has gained wide experience of various areas of foreign policy, for example while chairing the UN Environment Programme Task Forces on environmental impacts of war in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, Liberia, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Sudan. He has also worked as the EU Special Representative for Sudan and Darfur, Special Adviser for the UN (ASG) in the Darfur peace process, and Special Representative to the Minister for Foreign Affairs in African crises. In addition, he has served in several positions of trust, including President of the Board of the European Institute of Peace in 2016–19, Chair of the Board of the Finnish Federation of Settlement Houses in 2014–19, and Chair of WWF Finland's Board of Trustees.*

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***Among the numerous victims of armed conflicts, what explains Finland's specific focus on persons with disabilities and why do humanitarian actors and States need to focus more on this issue?***

When we look at people in the most vulnerable situations during conflicts and natural catastrophes – and even in normal situations – it's very often persons with disabilities, for obvious reasons. During war and other crises, this vulnerability is exacerbated. It becomes, for example, much more difficult to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to the services they need, including services specific to the crisis scenario. In my work, I have visited many refugee camps where the most basic necessities crucial to health and well-being, such as sanitation and shower facilities, are not planned to be accessible for people with disabilities. With some quite minor changes in the infrastructure, we could offer better living conditions for persons with disabilities in these scenarios, and it's sad that often we have yet to make those adjustments.

Since the 1980s and 1990s, Finland has had very active domestic movements of persons with disabilities working to improve their own lives and their surroundings. This has really informed our own perspective as a country. It is crucial to remember that persons with disabilities themselves are the best experts on what they need. Far too often, we see situations where we speak over the heads of persons with disabilities – sometimes even physically – or talk about persons with disabilities without their participation or inclusion. Part of Finland's philosophy, particularly in times of crisis and conflict where people are in vulnerable situations, is to make sure we communicate with and listen to the needs of persons with disabilities.

***What is Finland's philosophy on disability inclusion? How do you include persons with disabilities and their rights?***

Our philosophy in Finland has always been to strive for complete inclusion. One clear example of such inclusion is that we avoid developing separate schools for children with disabilities, instead including them in the same classrooms as their peers without disabilities. To achieve that, we proactively plan the school buildings, playgrounds and other facilities to ensure they are accessible for persons with disabilities, and we invest in the capacity of teachers and education systems to be inclusive to persons with disabilities.

To continue with the schools example: in many places, there are special schools for persons with disabilities. This is, of course, better than having no schools or educational facilities at all for those children, but it isn't an *inclusive*

approach. An inclusive approach ensures that all facilities as well as education systems can accommodate, include and be accessible to persons with and without disabilities.

Similarly, in some countries, there are even particular parts of cities designed specifically for people in wheelchairs or with other types of disabilities. Instead, in our view, we should make the whole infrastructure, the entire city planning, public transit system and vehicles, as well as services, information and communication, available and accessible for persons with disabilities. This doesn't only include persons on wheelchairs, of course – that is just one example. Persons with all kinds of disabilities should be taken into account to ensure an approach based on disability inclusion.

This work is more challenging when you talk about situations of crisis and conflict. In Finland as a whole, and also within the Foreign Ministry specifically, our attitude has been to take the organizations of persons with disabilities on board with our policy and decision-making. This is an important step. In the 1990s, the Finnish Foreign Ministry worked with activists with disabilities to establish a foundation – Abilis-säätiö, or the Abilis Foundation.<sup>1</sup> Abilis, which receives support from the Foreign Ministry, is a development-focused organization that was established by persons with disabilities themselves to help other persons with disabilities in developing countries and in situations of crisis.

I have travelled with these activists to various countries, where we have encountered a belief that persons with disabilities may not be able to work or to earn their own income and livelihood – a belief that is then often proved wrong. For example, I travelled with Abilis to Cambodia, where we saw projects where persons with disabilities had established companies and were the main breadwinners for their immediate and extended families and helped support their communities. Through work like this, Abilis and its partners are helping to fundamentally change the whole idea that persons with disabilities are just cornered somewhere in the house, not contributing. Instead, they are at times actively earning a livelihood to support their whole family. This type of change can and should be made everywhere in the world.

Abilis is one of the forerunners of this kind of thinking in many developing countries.

***The 2016 Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action talks in its second principle about the importance of the participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations in the design and implementation of humanitarian work.<sup>2</sup> Finland's 2022 Global Disability Summit commitments likewise aim to promote meaningful engagement and participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations. Do you think that persons with disabilities and their organizations are being heard and recognized by States, donors and humanitarian organizations?***

1 See the Abilis Foundation website, available at: [www.abilis.fi/?lang=en](http://www.abilis.fi/?lang=en).

2 Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action, 2016, available at: <http://humanitariananddisabilitycharter.org/the-charter/>.

Well, that is a good question. In the case of Finland, our last meeting with civil society organizations was in September 2022, and in that meeting we discussed the role of Finland in the UN Human Rights Council, what line we are taking there, and what our initiatives are. Civil society organizations run by persons with disabilities participate in those consultations with civil society, and they raise the issues that Finland could propose and support in our work at the UN Human Rights Council. All these ideas, suggestions and proposals are very welcome. We have also included persons with disabilities in the official delegations of the Finnish Foreign Ministry. This is also something we want to show and make visible, in the hopes that others will emulate it: we have persons with disabilities on board and they are participants in our delegations.

Resource-wise, the Foreign Ministry has been supporting the work of organizations of persons with disabilities and ensuring their visibility. Some of the most exciting experiences, as I said earlier, have been during country visits, where persons who themselves have a disability are coming to the forefront and running the development projects or taking part in similar activities. It is a massive encouragement for local persons with disabilities, who can see that this is the way to work – that this is something that you can expect from your own society and from your own government.

So far, we have been trying to be a model society in this sense. But of course, when I'm talking about it now, it all sounds very nice and easy. In reality it is not, and plenty of challenges remain. The hard work that persons with disabilities themselves and the civil society organizations have been doing and all the fights to get where we are now need to be appreciated and praised. But we continue to be reminded that we could do better and that their participation could and should be better than what we see today.

***Finland appears today as a champion for disability-inclusive policies, strategies and programmes with the aim of influencing its partners. What has your experience been when negotiating with other States on the subject of persons with disabilities?***

Well, first, it may be helpful to talk a bit about how Finland's own thinking developed in this area. A particularly important moment came in 1983, when the late disability rights activist Kalle Könkkölä became a member of the Finnish Parliament. But despite Mr Könkkölä's election to the Parliament, the actual Parliament building in Finland was itself not accessible, as it was not possible to pass through the building or into Parliament's main hall while using a wheelchair. So we had to change the architecture of the main Parliament building to provide the necessary accommodation for persons with disabilities. I believe this was an eye-opener for many people, perhaps most of all just by having activists from the movement of persons with disabilities serving in Parliament and themselves raising these issues. That was something that triggered our own thinking and very much improved our own understanding of the situation.

When we raise this issue outside of Finland, I think that often the biggest surprise for many other governments is that we are talking and working together

with persons with disabilities, rather than over their heads or on their behalf. Equally, we don't propose solutions for them, but let them propose what they want, inviting them to be an active part of these processes.

This is, of course, largely a question of mindset and how much you are ready to listen. I believe that is the main difference. I have met many of my colleagues, all around the world, who understand that this topic is important, but to give the voice and the role to persons with disabilities is something that we in Finland have learned to do. Of course, we can always do better, and that is something that we underline in all circumstances.

Many persons with disabilities state that, even in the simplest situations such as when they are on an airplane, the people around them would ask the person sitting *next to* them, "How is this person feeling?" or "What can I do and how can I help or provide support?" – asking the person *next to* them, not the persons with disabilities themselves. And they say, "Hey, I am here. I am sitting here. You can ask me directly." This is the experience of many persons with disabilities in their everyday lives, and it is extrapolated across many sectors. If we can change this, it would already make a big difference.

***In 2022, following the Global Disability Summit,<sup>3</sup> the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland committed to "promot[ing] rights and meaningful inclusion of persons with disabilities in every stage of the peace processes and peacebuilding".<sup>4</sup> To what extent can persons with disabilities contribute to peace processes?***

I believe this question speaks to an even wider topic: how civil society can be part of the peace process. Very often, we think that it is enough that the peace processes involve those who have held arms, those who fought as parties to a particular conflict. In prioritizing them, we very often overlook civil society organizations, people in refugee camps or the diaspora. Inclusive peace processes can contribute to more sustainable peace. This is also something that we have been trying to address in Finland.

For instance, we have the diaspora from many countries affected by conflicts living in Finland. In these peace processes, we always come back to the diaspora community in Finland and encourage them to see themselves as having certain responsibilities regarding the peace in their countries of origin – and then we strive to support them in taking on a positive role in supporting those peace processes. Many of these diasporas, when they see the policy of inclusion of persons with disability in Finland and are also engaged in those sectors in Finland, develop their own excellent ideas on how to improve the situations of persons with disabilities in their countries of origin, and on the kinds of development cooperation projects that are needed.

In this sense, we do not only send our resources elsewhere, but also try to transmit our philosophy and attitudes regarding the inclusion of persons with

3 Oslo, 16–17 February 2022.

4 2022 Global Disability Summit Commitments, available at: [www.globaldisabilitysummit.org/commitments](http://www.globaldisabilitysummit.org/commitments).

disabilities, which have been changing over time. In general, this is a very important component of the peace process that we are happy to support: the development of a society that supports the human rights of each and every person, including women, girls, and persons with disabilities.

The change in attitude is very important. During this government term, we have established a Peace Mediation Centre in our Foreign Ministry, trying to be more active in supporting the peace process and national dialogues. The topic of persons with disabilities is definitely one component that we are trying to bring to the peace processes we are supporting.

***In view of all of the above, what are in your opinion the prospects for the coming decade when it comes to disability inclusion in humanitarian action? How do you see investment in persons with disabilities in humanitarian action and by humanitarian actors and donors evolving in the coming year? At a personal level, when it comes to inclusion of persons with disabilities in contexts of armed conflict, what does your ideal world look like?***

First, on the question of where things are heading towards, we always hope to mobilize donors that are much larger than Finland. Finland is a very committed donor, but a relatively small one. I notice from time to time that the inclusion of persons with disabilities may not be part of the whole support or development programmes of larger donors. It is therefore important to raise this topic among those larger donors, who certainly have influence.

On that note, I know that often, recipients of funding disapprove of or discourage earmarking of donated money. This is the line of Finland as well. However, we have successfully used earmarking a few times, particularly for the benefit of persons with disabilities. Often, at first, those receiving the earmarked funds are not happy, but at the end of the day, their usual response is that they learned something new when they had to concentrate on how to manage the issues of persons with disabilities in situations of crisis or conflict and had clear funding to do so.

I'll tell a relevant story. Many years ago, I visited different parts of a post-conflict country. Part of that trip included visiting the country's schools, after which we met with the minister of education and asked about the schooling of children with disabilities. The response we received was that they couldn't focus on educational resources for children with disabilities, because even many children without disabilities were not in school or receiving the educational resources they needed. We challenged that, and stated that children with disabilities need the schooling even more than their counterparts without disabilities, because the social barriers they face make it harder for them to survive, and thus they need all the support they can get. At the end of the day, we decided to support the school system in that country – but we also earmarked a portion of the development cooperation funds to be invested into projects to develop the schools with accessibility in mind, to make them accessible to children with disabilities. In the years since, I have learned that this project was successful and was able to help many children with disabilities to go to school. I believe this is a

clear demonstration of the role donors can play in the future, and I hope this kind of targeted donor support will become more common.

In humanitarian funding the question is of course a bit more complex and we are committed to increasing flexible funding. At the same time, we must ensure that all our humanitarian funding contributes to strengthening disability-inclusive humanitarian action.

If we are looking into the future, I believe the most important issue is that of inclusion. I have been discussing this with various governments of conflict-affected and post-conflict countries, as well as with many victims of war, both civilians and soldiers/fighters with disabilities. Often, in these situations, the path they have chosen as the most “rational” and perhaps most readily achievable is to isolate these persons with disabilities into their own compounds or neighbourhoods in the city. Under this type of plan, only those portions of the city are designed to be accessible, where the persons with disabilities are able to move about without obstacles. Furthermore, this kind of segregation of persons with disabilities goes against their right to live in the community equally with others. In Finland, we counter this idea. We say that States should build the entire city and transportation systems in a way that is available and accessible to persons with disabilities, and that States should apply the same inclusive principles elsewhere, including in schools.