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THE EU DISABILITY STRATEGY 2010-2020

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1. Introduction

Back in 2003 and as a result of the European Year of People with Disabilities, the European Commission adopted a long-term EU Disability Strategy 2003 – 2010 with a main and overall theme called 'Independent Living of People with Disabilities'. As a follow-up on this strategy, the European Commission adopted on the 15 November 2010 a new strategy with the overall objective being to break down the barriers that prevent people with disabilities from participating in society on an equal basis. This new Strategy covers the period 2010-2020 and will determine the main policy developments in the disability sector in the years to come. Its impact will almost certainly relate to services to people with disabilities, and it is therefore essential for social service providers to understand its background, and to be aware of what type of measures and actions are foreseen by the Commission. In addition to a general explanation and clarification of the EU Disability Strategy 2010-2020, this paper intends to highlight the particular consequences and opportunities for service providers. The last page of the paper contains a list of links to relevant documents which allows the reader to verify some statements or to obtain more detailed information.

2. Background: the EU Disability Strategy 2003-2010

The new EU Disability Strategy is built upon the results and lessons learnt from the EU Disability Strategy 2003-2010. The main goal of the latter was to integrate disability issues in all EU policies and as such achieve mainstreaming at policy level. Although disability issues require action at all levels of governance, the Strategy focused on the measures taken by the Commission at EU level, aiming to coordinate the activities of the various Commission services. The 2003-2010 strategy was based on three pillars (mainstreaming of EU policies, accessibility and legislation against discrimination) and were concretised in 'action plans' with the following policy priorities: in 2008-2009 the DAP focused on accessibility, in 2006-2007 on active inclusion and in 2003-2005 on employment.

An external evaluation concluded that the Disability Strategy made a positive contribution to promoting equal opportunities by serving as a useful reference point for relevant actors. Nevertheless, the study noted the following weaknesses:

- the situation of people with disabilities in the labour market does not reveal much progress in terms of increased employment rates and reduced inactivity rates;
- limited progress has been made in the area of lifelong learning;
- few disability mainstreaming activities had a national dimension.

In addition to these remarks, the evaluation also pinpointed other weaknesses such as a lack of indicators and insufficient involvement of the Member States.

In light of these elements, the College of Commissioners took the decision to radically change the logic of the new EU Disability Strategy 2010 - 2020:

- Indeed, rather than focusing on the integration of the disability issues in all EU policies, the Disability Strategy put emphasis on the respect of the rights of people with disabilities and, more specifically, on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.
- At the same time, as the former Action Plan favoured actions taken at the EU level, the new Strategy took a stand for better involvement of all the Member States. Consequently, most of the actions described in the Strategy will be implemented at the national level and the main role of the European Commission will shift from implementer to coordinator.

Also new is the strong link of the EU Disability Strategy to the overall EU 2020 Strategy, using the argument that full economic and social participation of people with disabilities is essential if the Europe 2020 strategy is to succeed in creating smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

3. The EU Disability Strategy (2010-2020)

3.1. The rationale and the objectives

The EU Disability Strategy is set up on the basis of three observations which all indicate that disability is a significant phenomenon with serious implications that need to be tackled:

- One in six people in the European Union has a disability that ranges from mild to severe, leaving around 80 million people who are often prevented from taking part fully in society.
- The rate of poverty for people with disabilities is 70% higher than average people, mainly due to limited access to employment.
- Over a third of people aged over 75 have disabilities that restrict them to some extent, and over 20% are considerably restricted.

In order to tackle these issues and break down the barriers that prevent people with disabilities from participating in society on an equal basis, the Strategy focuses on 2 main objectives:

- Empower people with disabilities so that they can enjoy their full rights and benefit from fully participating in society and the European economy.
- Align EU policies with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities¹, which the European Union formally ratified on 23 December 2010.

¹ See EPR analysis Paper : It is your Business: An Analysis paper on the implications of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and its Optional Protocol for Service Provider“

3.2. Approach and actions

The Commission has identified eight main areas for action through which barriers to participation of people with disabilities can be eliminated: Accessibility, Participation, Equality, Employment, Education and training, Social protection, Health, and External Action. For each area, the Strategy formulates some action lines, primarily to be performed at the national level. A 'Commission Staff Document' that complements the EU Disability Strategy 2010-2020, contains a list of concrete actions that constitutes an initial implementation plan for the period 2010 – 2015.

This paper focuses on the areas of health, education and training, employment and participation as they are most directly of interest to service providers in the disability sector.

3.2.1. Employment

The rate of employment for people with disabilities is only around 50%. In order to improve this situation, the Strategy highlights the need to recognise the right of people with disabilities to work, including the right to have the opportunity to earn a living via a job in an open, inclusive and accessible labour market.

To this end, at the EU level the Commission will notably:

- Exploit the full potential of the Europe 2020 Strategy and its Agenda for new skills and jobs, by providing Member States with analysis, political guidance, information exchange and other support.
- Involve Social Partners to develop models of good practice on reasonable accommodation and good quality jobs for people with disabilities.
- Involve Public Employment Services to inform them on positive measures to carry out at the national level.

At the MS level, several key actions are foreseen:

- Raise awareness with respect to the employment situation of women and men with disabilities.
- Exchange of information and mutual learning regarding the movement of people with disabilities from sheltered work to open labour market by notably identifying and promoting effective support structures in Member States (transport, supported employment,...).
- Examine national Active Labour Markets Policies (ALMPS) and publish compendium of good practice.
- Make use of the European Social Fund to support the integration of PWD in the labour market.

3.2.2. Education and training

In the 16-19 age group the rate of non-participation in education is 37% for considerably restricted people, and 25% for those restricted to some extent, against 17% for those not restricted.

To tackle this situation, the Strategy proposes a number of EU actions:

- Increase knowledge on education levels and opportunities of people with disabilities through the support of the work of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE) in facilitating the collection, processing and transfer of EU level and country specific information.
- Increase the mobility of people with disabilities by enhancing their participation in the Lifelong Learning Programme and the Youth in Action Programme.

At the national level, the College of Commissioners will:

- Support national efforts by means of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020), which aims at removing legal and organisational barriers for people with disabilities to general education and lifelong learning systems.

- Provide timely support for inclusive education and lifelong learning systems, and early identification of special needs.
- Provide adequate training and support for professionals working at all levels of education and report on participation rates and outcomes.

3.2.3. Health

People with disabilities may have limited access to health services, leading to health inequalities unrelated to their disabilities. In reaction to this situation, the new Strategy promotes the right for PWD to have equal access to healthcare, including preventive healthcare and specific affordable quality health and rehabilitation services.

To this end, the Commission will notably support at the national level:

- Policy developments to improve equal access to healthcare by developing indicators to monitor quality and accessibility of healthcare services for people with disabilities involving the service users' perspective.
- Policy developments to improve quality of healthcare and rehabilitation by promoting the training of health professionals through the ESF and supporting research on healthcare provision to people with disabilities through health work programmes in FP7 (Seventh Framework Programme) and FP8 (the next Framework Programme).
- The provision of adequate rehabilitation services and the development of early intervention and needs assessment services.

3.2.4. Participation

There are still many obstacles preventing people with disabilities from fully exercising their fundamental rights and limiting their participation in society on an equal basis with others.

To cope with this issue, the Commission will notably:

- Promote the transition from institutional to community-based care by using Structural Funds and the Rural Development Fund to support the development of community-based services.

- Develop and disseminate a quality framework for community-based services which will be based upon the European quality for Social Services of General Interest which was launched by the Social Protection Committee on October 2010.
- Promote the exchange of good practices among Member States in the Disability High level group on the personal assistance funding scheme.

3.3. Implementation of the Strategy

In order to implement the actions set out in the EU Disability Strategy, four different instruments are foreseen:

3.3.1. Awareness-raising

The Commission will support and supplement national public awareness campaigns on the capabilities and contributions of people with disabilities and promote exchange of good practices in the Disability High Level Group (DHLG).

3.3.2. Financial support

The Commission will optimise the use of EU funding instruments such as the Structural Funds for accessibility and non-discrimination and increase visibility of disability-relevant funding possibilities in post-2013 programmes.

3.3.3. Statistics and data collection and monitoring

The College of Commissioners will supplement the collection of periodic disability-related statistics with a view to monitoring the situation of persons with disabilities. In regards to this, the Commission will notably:

- Make use of several EU social surveys such as the European Health Interview Survey.
- Develop a set of indicators to monitor the situation of people with disabilities in connection with key Europe 2020 targets (education, employment and poverty reduction).
- Set up a web-based tool giving an overview of the practical measures and legislation used to implement the UN Convention.

3.3.4. Mechanisms required by the UN Convention

As the implementation of the EU Disability Strategy and the UN Convention on the Right of People with Disabilities are intimately interconnected, the implementation mechanisms set out in UNCRPD must also be carried out in order to attain the objectives identified in the Strategy. These implementation mechanisms can be summarized in two parts:

- The implementation of both the Convention and the Strategy will be regularly discussed in the framework of the DHLG.
- A monitoring framework which is still to be determined including one or more independent mechanisms which will be established to promote, protect and monitor the implementation of the UN Convention.

3.4. Monitoring and evaluation of the Strategy

By the end of 2013, the Commission will report on progress achieved through this Strategy, covering implementation of actions, national progress and the EU report to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Commission will establish disability-related indicators linked to the EU 2020 targets for education, employment and poverty reduction. A further report is programmed for 2016.

Another way to monitor the implementation is the proposal from the European Disability Forum to transform the current Disability High Level Group into a stronger, empowered body, which could take the form of a European Disability Committee, to ensure coordination in the delivery of the UNCRPD and the EU Disability Strategy. This proposal is actually under review by the European Commission and the Member States. EPR and EASPD have jointly issued a letter to Member States, the European Commission and EDF to request that service providers should still be structurally involved in the work of this European Disability Committee, as they have the expertise and knowledge needed to make sure that barriers still present in society are demolished.

Finally, the Commission will establish a web-based tool giving an overview of the practical measures and legislation being used by MS and the EU to implement the

UNCRPD. Moreover, the Commission aims to develop in the coming years, depending on the availability of data, a framework of output and outcome indicators for the disability strategy policy evaluation. A concerted effort will be made to assess the causality between outputs and outcomes as far as possible so as to make recommendations.

4. The point of view of Social Service Providers

When we look at the EU Disability Strategy 2010-2020 from the perspective of Service Providers, two positive comments can be made:

- Such clear and long-term Strategy is an important step towards ensuring that across the European Union people with disabilities can live as equal citizens.
- The need for community-based services in order to meet the everyday needs of people with disabilities is explicitly recognised by the European Commission. Indeed, one of the key actions described under “participation” specifically invites Member States to achieve the transition from institutional to community-based care. The use of Structural Funds in this respect is also recommended, as well as the dissemination of a quality framework between MS based on the Quality Framework for SSGI developed in close collaboration with the European Platform for Rehabilitation (EPR).

On the other hand, the Strategy can be also considered as a missed opportunity for the sector of social and rehabilitation services. Indeed:

- The Strategy does not fully reflect the need for adequate high quality support services for people with disabilities to enable them to achieve the equality for people with disabilities. In this regard, a specific section about social and rehabilitation services should have been identified in the Strategy, as is done in the UN Convention on Right of People with Disabilities.
- The Commission has not taken the opportunity to express their commitment to tackle discrimination against informal and family carers and to improve the working conditions of professional carers.

- The Commission has not developed a strategy on how to tackle the consequences of the financial crisis for people with disabilities and social care services, since unsophisticated austerity measures across Europe significantly endanger the provision of social services and consequently lower the quality of life of people with disabilities considerably.

LINKS:

UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES:
http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_overview/co_operation/healthcare/cross-border_healthcare_en.htm

EUROPEAN DISABILITY STRATEGY 2010-2020 – A RENEWED COMMITMENT TO A BARRIER-FREE EUROPE:
<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:0636:FIN:EN:PDF>

EUROPEAN DISABILITY STRATEGY 2010-2020 – INITIAL PLAN TO IMPLEMENT THE EUROPEAN DISABILITY STRATEGY 2010-2020 – LIST OF ACTIONS 2010-2015:
<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=SEC:2010:1324:FIN:EN:PDF>

EPR ANALYSIS PAPER: IT IS YOUR BUSINESS: AN ANALYSIS PAPER ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES (UNCRC) AND ITS OPTIONAL PROTOCOL FOR SERVICE PROVIDER
<http://www.epr.eu/index.php/activities/public-affairs/54-services-to-members>