



# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AS LABOUR MARKET  
PARTICIPATION

DIVERSITY AND CHANGE IN THE LABOUR MARKET  
CAREERS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

September 2014

## INTRODUCTION

The paper analyses the labour market situation of persons with disabilities in nine European countries in light of the “right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others” as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD).

Despite the implementation of different national and regional policies aimed at increasing the participation of persons with disabilities in the labour market, overall the participation rate of persons with disabilities is significantly lower than for persons without disabilities. According to the latest EU data, there is still a 26 % difference in rates of employment for persons with and without disabilities across the EU. This is 30 points lower than the Europe 2020 target of 75 % employment for persons with disabilities. Furthermore, data shows that women with disabilities face higher unemployment rates, and age and disability type and severity also affect the extent of involvement of persons with disabilities in the labour market. This situation creates high health and social inequalities.

In recent years following the adoption of the UN CRPD, there has been little change. However, because of the economic crisis, more people with disabilities appear in unemployment statistics, although this was not consistent in all countries.

The paper analyses the employment prospects of women and men with disabilities with different ages and with different disabilities in nine European countries representing the four welfare systems analysed within the project DISCIT: conservative (Germany, Italy, Switzerland); liberal (UK, Ireland, Switzerland), Nordic (Norway, Sweden), and post-communist (Czech Republic, Serbia). The paper also brings together available figures on the labour market participation with data on the regulatory and redistributive measures that have so far structured the participation of persons with disabilities in the labour market, both in terms of access and of retention in employment.

The **disability policy systems** of the nine countries above can be further divided into three main sub-systems, which structure participation in the labour market:

- ***Social services sub-system***: provides persons with disabilities with services or employment programmes such as rehabilitation services, education and vocational training, assistive technologies, internships, integration procedures, personal assistance, etc. These programs are meant to interact with the open labour market and to train persons with disabilities and provide the skills and capacities, which are necessary to find and to keep a job. The main problem found was that, whilst these are effective for some persons with disabilities, others (namely those with severe intellectual disabilities) tend to be excluded from these benefits and are only able to work outside the “regular” labour market such as in sheltered employment. In addition, the implementation of this system has led countries to continue using a *medical model of disability*, putting the focus on the degree of impairment, separating, for instance, the “severely disabled” from the “mildly disabled”. Finally, despite the fact that in some countries sheltered workshops are supposed to be temporary, measures in order to facilitate integration in the ‘open’ labour market, most persons with disabilities end up remaining there for a considerable amount of time or for their entire work career, particularly persons with intellectual disabilities.
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- ***Social regulation sub-system***: involves regulatory measures targeting the public and private sectors in order to promote the employment of persons with disabilities. Mostly these measures include quotas and anti-discrimination legislation and obligate the employer to hire a pre-defined percentage of workers with disabilities or prohibit discrimination in recruitment, employment and training procedures. There are different requirements for the public or the private sector, in terms of percentage, exemptions for small companies or the possibility of paying a levy instead of meeting a specific quota. Financial incentives also fall into this category, such as tax relief, wage subsidies, or contributions towards the cost of reasonable adjustments.
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- ***Income maintenance measures***: typically used in Nordic countries with generous welfare policies. These measures include incapacity benefits, sickness benefits, or disability pensions for persons assessed to have very limited or no working capacity. In this regard, this sub-system also employs the same methods of assessing and classifying people with disabilities as the social services sub-system, which is based on the impairment. In some countries, notably the Nordic countries and in the UK and Ireland, these income maintenance measures are nevertheless becoming increasingly provisional, as there is a pressure to promote active engagement of persons with disabilities with the labour market.

Such policies need however to be carefully assessed to ensure their effectiveness and the prevention of poverty traps.

The ratification of the UN CRPD by the EU and the majority of its Member States arrived at a time when these sub-systems were well established. Member States have tended to use those existing structures to realize the aims of the UN CRPD instead of significantly rethinking them. However, one notable change in several disability policy systems is the introduction of non-discrimination legislation and the related notion of *reasonable accommodation*, which were introduced in most of the countries covered because of the adoption by the EU Employment Equality Directive. In addition further measures contained in article 27 of the UN CRPD such as ensuring trade union rights and promoting self-employment are generally not addressed (with the exception of Serbia).

Despite all policy interventions aimed at increasing the employment rates of persons with disabilities, the impact on the participation rate of persons with disabilities has been limited. Furthermore, some groups such as persons with mental health conditions or with intellectual disabilities face additional barriers to enter the labour market.

The DISCIT project will further explore, for example through life course interviews, how people's labour market participation has been influenced by policy interventions over the course of their lives and how these experiences can lead to new policy recommendations.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite a new policy framework resulting from the adoption of the UN CRPD, or the EU Equality Employment Directive and the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 at European Union level, existing policy approaches and activities have been either confirmed or strengthened instead of developing new policies. In some countries, there has also been a strong emphasis on activation policies, which aimed at encouraging participation in employment through increasing conditionality on income maintenance measures, though with little results. Therefore, there is an immense scope for developing innovative policy ideas.

Furthermore, there has not been, until now, a consistent evaluation of the impact of the policies that have been developed in the different countries.

There is also a need of comparable and public data across the EU concerning persons with disabilities and their participation in the labour market, taking into account cross-cutting themes, such as gender, age, disability, modality of contract (full/part-time, temporary/permanent work), as well as the sectors in which persons with disabilities are employed.

Under-developed policies and programmes, which are described in the UN CRPD such as self-employment, career advancement, continuous training, labour and trade union rights, should be further investigated and developed.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

After providing a state-of-the-art on the labour market participation of men and women with disabilities and on employment disability policies at different levels of governance (international, European and national), the DISCIT project conducted a number of life-course interviews with persons with disabilities in order to highlight changes over time. This task has been accomplished in collaboration with Disabled People's Organisations to combine their knowledge with the achieved by the researchers.

The nine teams/countries involved (Germany, Italy, UK, Ireland, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Czech Republic and Serbia) conducted interviews with people from three different generations: men and women born in the 1950s, 1970s and 1990s, with visual impairments, intellectual and developmental impairments, psychosocial difficulties or with reduced mobility.

The life-course interviews explored whether key conditions (facilitators and barriers) for persons with disabilities in their participation in the labour market have changed during the life course of the interviewee by looking at their trajectories, transitions and turning points (i.e. critical junctures in their life).

The life course interviews will be complemented by reviewing existing studies and documents, re-analysing existing statistical data and conducting a small number of interviews with other relevant informants (e.g. staff in organisations delivering services, stakeholder organisations, etc.).

## PROJECT IDENTITY

**PROJECT NAME** Making Persons with Disabilities Full Citizens - New Knowledge for an Inclusive and Sustainable European Social Model (DISCIT)

**COORDINATOR** HiOA - NOVA Norwegian Social Research  
Oslo, Norway, [www.hioa.no/nova](http://www.hioa.no/nova)

**CONSORTIUM** ARCO PIN University of Florence - PIN SCRL - Action Research for CO-Development  
Florence, Italy

Charles University Prague - Universita Karlova v - Faculty of Education  
Prague, Czech Republic

European Disability Forum - EDF  
Brussels, Belgium

Mental Disability Rights Initiative of Serbia - MDRI-S  
Beograd, Serbia

National University of Ireland - NUI Galway - Centre for Disability Law and Policy  
Galway, Ireland

Swiss Paraplegic Research - SPF - Disability Policy Unit  
Nottwil, Switzerland

University of Cologne - UCO - International Research Unit Disability Studies  
Cologne, Germany

University of York - UOY - Social Policy Research Unit  
York, United Kingdom

Uppsala University - UU - Department of Sociology  
Uppsala, Sweden

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**FUNDING SCHEME**

FP7 Framework Programme for Research of the European Union  
Collaborative research project, Activity 3 – Major trends in society and their implications

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**DURATION**

February 2013 – January 2016 (36 months)

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**BUDGET**

EU contribution: € 2,463,304

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**WEBSITE**

[www.discit.eu](http://www.discit.eu)

For more information

Bjørn Hvinden, Scientific Coordinator, HiOA - NOVA,  
bjorn.hvinden@nova.hioa.no

Alejandro Moledo del Rio, European Disability Forum,  
alejandro.moledo@edf-feph.org

Roy Sainsbury, University of York - UOY - Social Policy Research Unit,  
roy.sainsbury@york.ac.uk

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**FURTHER READING** *Working Paper ‘Diversity and change of the employment prospects of persons with disabilities – the impact of redistributive and regulatory provisions in a multilevel framework’, January 2014*

*Working Paper ‘Diversity and change in the labour market careers of persons with disabilities - findings based on life course interviews’, available November 2014*