

**EDF Response to the
European Commission Green Paper
“Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity
between the generations”**
EDF 05/ – September 2005

"States should recognise the rights of organisations of persons with disabilities to represent persons with disabilities at national, regional and local levels. States should also recognise the advisory role of organisations of persons with disabilities in decision-making on disability matters."

Rule 18 of the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities

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INTRODUCTION

The European Disability Forum (EDF) is a European umbrella organisation representing the interests of 50 million disabled citizens in Europe. EDF membership includes national federations of organisations of disabled people in the 25 Member States as well as Norway and Iceland. EDF also includes a large number of European NGOs representing different types of disabilities. EDF's mission is to advance human rights of people with disabilities and to promote equal opportunities in the EU Institutions and the 25 Member States, in accordance with principles of non-discrimination.

Demographic change is one of the major challenges facing the European Union today. The European Disability Forum therefore welcomes the initiative of the European Commission to attempt to bring a comprehensive answer to this challenge.

It is crucial that such an important phenomenon should be approached from a multidisciplinary and global point of view, taking into account all the consequences it might have on all policy fields. Population ageing influences all fields of life and should therefore be reflected in all policies of the European Union.

The European Union needs to prepare today its society for an older population. This includes the need to understand that an older society is a society in which more and more people will have difficulties accessing basic goods and services, if we don't modify our environment accordingly. The percentage of disabled people among age groups increases with age, as people tend to acquire disabilities when getting older. Population ageing does not mean an increase in the number of older people, but mostly of the number of the very old, with the increase of life expectancy. The myth of long ever active lives cannot hide the fact that an increasing life time is always marked by reduced mobility, and sometimes a chronic illness, etc. This means that disability issues should be more than ever taken into consideration in the design, implementation and evaluation of all policies. A society more adapted to an older population is also a society more adapted to people with disabilities in general.

The more policies will be coordinated and the broader the access to goods and services will be, the more our societies will be prepared to the ageing of population.

The European Disability Forum has concrete actions and priorities to propose to achieve the objectives mentioned in the green paper.

EMPLOYMENT

Activation policies

The green paper insists on the importance of increasing employment participation to compensate for the expected drop in the working age population.

The European Union cannot increase the employment rates without 15% of the active population and their families. Disabled people are two to three times more unemployed than the general population. They are over-represented in low paid and temporary jobs. It is therefore to address the issue of the access to employment for people to disabilities, if the Union wants to make a difference in the average employment participation. It has been estimated that bringing the employment rates of disabled people up to the levels of the general population would mean an increase of between 2-3% in EU employment rates.

Although policies are defined at Member States level, the definition of common objectives on the reform of social protection systems, employment targets (e.g. raising the employment age, activating policies for employment) have a clear impact on people with disabilities at national level. That is why we call for the European Employment Committee and the Social Protection Committee to consider disability a horizontal issue, as it will not aim at a specific group of people, but help create a society better for all and allow all citizens to have the chance to contribute to productivity and growth, including older people often considered not productive enough and therefore excluded from the labour market.

This issue becomes even more critical, if we realise that over half of disabled people develop their disability during their working life, but as a result of inadequate policies, in most cases permanently leave the labour market. A holistic approach to find solutions for job retention, assessment, advice seeking and retraining to newly-disabled employees has to be defined, in particular through social dialogue. Part-time work options for example can be used when a newly disabled worker can no longer work full-time but still has the will and capacity to work! The more working environment, structures, working times, working schemes, will be flexible (adapted to the individual and its needs, and what he/she can bring), the better we'll adapt to demographic changes. This is also true for many older workers who might need some training to adapt to some changes, i.e. technological ones, but who are able on the other hand to bring a highly valuable know-how and experience.

Non-discrimination

The Green paper also insists on fighting against discrimination, as it can be the main reason for the most vulnerable groups of people being more excluded from the

labour market, and mentions women and ethnic minorities as examples of those groups. Disabled people are also a vulnerable group of importance in number, whose integration into the labour market is crucial to increase labour participation and productivity.

In this respect, awareness-raising campaigns and projects are needed to influence behaviours and tackle discrimination.

The European Commission must also pursue its efforts for adequate and complete transposition in the Member States of the framework legislation on equal treatment in employment. It is important that the Commission, in addition to the legal expert network, also seeks information from European organisations representing non discrimination groups for the national implementation of the Directive.

Work/ life balance

The green book recognises the need to find new ways of liberating the potential of young people and older citizens, but it means in general the potential of each individual to bring his/her own capacities into society. This potential can only be fostered and developed inside a society that provides access to goods and services, including education, training, etc. for all! The structures and conditions for the potential of people with disabilities to be able to be used have to be developed.

Nevertheless, this potential has not yet been taken into consideration in the relevant policies. It will be impossible to reach the revised Lisbon objectives without adequate employment policies, which take into consideration the realities of the job market. For example, the fact that most disabilities have been acquired during the working life means that there is a need for adapting the working life and employment structures towards more flexibility and adaptability.

Working structures also need to be adapted to support families when they must support a dependent person. Parental leave for example, should be adaptable to individual situations. Families as a whole should be supported, financially but also in information and services.

SOCIAL INCLUSION

Empirical evidence suggests that older and disabled people are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion.

There is, for example, a clear correlation between the severity of the impairment and the degree of poverty and exclusion experienced by an individual disabled person.

Older disabled people, whose impairments are of a degenerative nature, are at extreme risk.

Older and disabled people living in Institutions do not always encounter dire financial poverty, however they do experience extreme social exclusion; their opportunities to participate in mainstream society are practically non-existent and their participation in decisions affecting their life quality on a daily basis are limited to the extreme. Alternatives to institutionalisation should be developed to encourage independent living with adequate services.

Geographic location can be a decisive issue in relation to social exclusion. The experiences of older people and disabled people in rural communities are very often different from those in urban areas. There are huge disparities between regions in service provision and its quality. Service networks have to be developed towards a better geographical coverage of territories.

BETTER INTEGRATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Disabled children are one of the most vulnerable groups in society and therefore at a very high risk of exclusion. Moreover it is crucial that the fight against exclusion of disabled people foresees measures targeted at its youngest group, but also at parents of children with disabilities, if we want to achieve a truly inclusive society. We cannot achieve the aim stated in the green paper to better integrate young people without first addressing the issue of children and their specific situation.

The integration of young people is also very important, especially for young disabled people, who face the same problems as all young people do, for example in access to the labour market, but also some specific ones linked to their disability.

It is crucial that all children and young people should have access to mainstream education, to ensure equal access to the job market on the one hand, but also to tackle discrimination by desegregating education, and avoiding that children with disabilities should be from the beginning on put aside and educated in specialised institution. The lack of diversity in school audiences has as a consequence a lack of awareness and knowledge of disability issues among the population, and thus a lack of understanding.

CIVIL DIALOGUE AND SOCIAL DIALOGUE

The involvement of organisations of disabled people in the design, the implementation and the evaluation of policies is nowadays still piecemeal. The European Commission should make stronger recommendations and guidelines on

consultation of organisations at national level, in order also to ensure greater impact and effectiveness of national policies and action plans.

In the field of employment, emphasis should be put on the implementation of the Employment Equality Directive (2000/78/EC).

EDF also believes that social dialogue is the best instrument to develop job retention policies. We think that the European Commission should encourage the European social partners to start discussions for the development of a framework agreement on job retention for people with disabilities and chronic illnesses.

The lack of disabled people in employment means a lack of representation of workers and employers with disabilities, and as a consequence the lack of understanding and inclusion of disability issues in social dialogue.

STRUCTURAL FUNDS

The Structural Funds should complement and support the European Commission Action Programme on Non-Discrimination to promote, full and effective implementation of the Employment Equality Directive.

The Structural Funds programme should raise awareness among decision makers and train employers and representative organisations of disabled persons about the principle and practice of reasonable accommodation.

Furthermore, much more effort is needed to ensure the Structural Funds give full and equal access for disabled persons to mainstream vocational training schemes.

Positive actions measures should be supported by the Structural Funds to give disabled people a chance to access the labour market in view of the discrimination and disadvantage disabled persons continuously face.

The Structural Funds should systematically ensure the principle of design-for-all and disability access is recognised as a requirement for infrastructural development projects, developments in the built environment, public transport and information communication technologies. This means concretely that newly built items should not constitute more barriers for people with disabilities, including older people, who would otherwise be increasingly excluded from a number of services, buildings, etc.

CONCLUSION

EDF urges the European Commission to put the emphasis on the following issues when elaborating its plan to address demographic change:

- Focus activation policies on allowing all people to participate in the productive system according to their capacities, which includes part-time work and adaptation of the workplace to older or disabled workers
- Fight discrimination in all its forms, by appropriate training, awareness-raising and legislation
- Promote a real work/life balance that allows choice while ensuring security
- Ensure accessibility, in particular in the allocation of the structural funds, to allow all people, disregarding age and disability, to benefit from the money spent by the European Union.