EPR Public Affairs Event 2021 – Resilience, creativity and co-production under COVID-19

Report

1st December 2021 10.00-12.45

Online, via Zoom

Welcome and Introduction

Laura Jones, EPR Secretary General, welcomed the 32 participants (23 or 72% female, 9 or 28% male), informed them about the main aims and structure of the EPR Public Affairs Event 2021 and encouraged all participants to get involved with questions to the speakers and panellists and/or comments in the chat.

Sabina Lobato, EPR Vice Chairperson & Director of Training, Employment, Operations and Transformation, Fundación ONCE, Spain, explained that this event is organised online due to the measures against COVID-19. On the backdrop of the pandemic, EPR launched a call for good practices for a study aiming to analyse how service providers working with people with a disability showed resilience, creativity, and co-production during COVID-19 and presenting the challenges they have faced as well common and programme-specific success factors. The winner of the 2021 EPR Prize is Fundación ONCE – Inserta Empleo (Spain), the runner-up GTB (Belgium). The other three applicants Cedar Foundation (Northern Ireland/UK9, Rehab Group (Ireland) and SIVA (Latvia) achieved very similar scores.

The study was drafted by Mathias Maucher, EPR Senior Project and Programme Officer. He had also collected the votes from the EPR members on the five promising practices submitted in order to award the EPR Prize 2021. The study was intended to showcase their responses and innovations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, disseminate key findings and insights and elaborate policy recommendations from the experience of EPR members and EPR's policy work.

Presentation of findings of the EPR study

Mathias presented the main content of the **Study "Service Provision for people with disabilities during COVID-19 - A short study of resilience, creativity and co-production"**. The thematic focus was on services, programmes, initiatives, or projects developed or adapted to the requirements of the COVID-19 pandemic which also are supporting resilience, creativity, and/or co-production. Next, Mathias presented an overview of the practices in the study from five different countries:

1. Fundación ONCE – Inserta Empleo, Spain was this year's EPR prize winner. **Training and employment services** **were adapted and provided remotely in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic**. Fundación ONCE and Inserta Empleo which had been immersed in a digitalisation process over a few years, took the situation as an opportunity to boost it and consolidate it, working on four different areas: Staff, training programmes, employment services and contact with and support of employers to find the best candidate with disabilities for opened positions while highlighting diversity as a source of competitive advantage.

2. GTB, Belgium [in cooperation with a university from Finland] developed **"Start To Can"**, a programme to ensure a better transition from school to work for young people with disabilities through the use of a user-designed webtool. The service is targeted to young people with disabilities (18 to 29 years) with health problems and/or at risk of neither being in employment, education, or training (NEETs). The "Start To Can" web tool is not limited by only focusing on the job target, but allows the young person, with disabilities and/or health problems, to reflect on the life domains: living, relationships, health, finances, learning, leisure, and work.

3. The **Cedar Foundation, Northern Ireland/UK** implemented **Inclusion Works – Finding Solutions in Challenging Times Main features**. The main target group of the service were adults with physical disabilities, acquired brain injury, autism and learning disability. The service was designed to support users in remote/online setups and to enable their engagement in training and social integration offers. It pursued three main objectives: Information and preparation of re-entry into face-to-face and group-based services after lockdown, addressing social isolation and anxieties, and building the users' resilience.

4. The **Rehab Group, Ireland** set up the **Best Practice Reference Group – COVID19 Framework**. The service was aimed at the staff and management. The group disseminated key info to each service and frontline staff through a repository of up-to-date information (including on infection control, preventive & protective measures/OSH, staff training & support), documents, guidance, and procedures compiled by a "coordination team". The visual aspect of the communications and Framework engaged more staff and ensured they were fully informed of the ever-changing environment, of changing guidance and support regarding the pandemic, ensuring we kept people as safe as possible.

5. SIVA (Social Integration State Agency), Latvia had submitted an application in which it presented how social mentoring has been rolled out by SIVA in Latvia and are the first experiences. The key features are similar to the practice shared by GTB. The service is aimed at vocational rehabilitation clients, in particular people with disabilities or at risk of social exclusion, people with mental health conditions and older workers. The services delivered included the attribution of a mentor, written feedbacks on the progress made in the studies, related issues and problems and their well-being as well as a range of support services. Service provision was done by means of digital communication tools and mobile phones.

The study reports the following **recommendations addressed to service providers, funders, and decision makers**:

1. Providers: In countries where this is not yet the case, the service providers should mainstream job and social mentoring programmes for persons with disabilities (PwD) into the "regular" service offer as the mentoring programmes have high success rates, i.e., they have significantly reduced the shares of services users who did not drop out and clearly helped to have high rates of return to service after time of lockdown.

2. Providers: Digital tools and platforms on employment, education and training and social protection need to have an inclusive user design.

3. Providers: Service providers need to maintain and/or extend their service offer to assist employers with inclusive job and workplace design, including in the context of an integrated and comprehensive disability management approach, based on support by the relevant funders. Inclusive workplaces, education, and vocational training should become the "new normal'.

4. Funding agencies: Training courses on the use of digital services and tools needs to be made available in sufficient numbers (and also funded), with the appropriate quality and tailored to specific needs for PwD, including young PwD, but also for service professionals.

5. Funding agencies: Service providers in the field of vocational rehabilitation, disability and mental health need the continued financial support by the relevant funders and the reassurance by them that they will not making cuts in post-COVID-times. This is mainly needed for (additional) frontline staff and to integrated new services into the range of "regular" services, e.g., a blend of remote/online support and face-to-face contact and engagement, to roll further out the co-production of services with their users – to make "Nothing about us without us" a reality – and to continue the shift towards inclusive education, training, and transitions from school to work.

6. Decision makers (policy; legislation): Service providers, being part of the social economy, including social enterprises, and offering training, support and/or employment to PwD, including Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISE), should be supported and promising practices further shared, particularly in terms of inclusive work environments, training and career developments and transitions to the mainstream labour market.

EPR Prize Winner 2021: Presentation of the practice

Virginia Carcedo, Deputy Director of Training, Employment and Transformation of Fundación ONCE & Secretary General of Inserta Empleo, Spain, gave an overview of the promising practice they had submitted, a comprehensive adaptation of the training and employment services in the context of COVID-19.

Just a week after the announcement of the first lockdown in Spain in March 2020, Fundación ONCE and Inserta Empleo, the specialised training and employment services, resumed most of their services to jobseekers with disabilities and employers. Services were adapted and provided remotely, either optimising and improving processes, or designing new ones, while

preserving quality and proximity to clients. Based on the existing tools, resources, and work procedures, Fundación ONCE and Inserta Empleo implemented a series of actions both internally and externally, aimed at enabling a fully remote quality service provision.

Focusing on four different areas – staff, training programmes, employment services, and contact with and support of employers – they pursued three main priorities: 1) Being present and available for their clients; 2) Meeting their clients' needs; 3) Meeting the requirements of the European Social Fund. Inserta Empleo has also set up a Training and Employment Portal (Portalento.es). Inserta Empleo has reinforced and increase the offer for e-learning and online training and tried to address problems of accessibility of their users. In the context of COVID they have set up three training programmes: 1) "Stay at Home"; 2) Empowerment of Women; 3) "Digital Transformation for Entrepreneurs". For the employment services, the focus was on a continued communication and exchange and the provision of remote guidance, coaching and mediation. Inserta Empleo also offered remote services for women who became victims of gender violence and addressed the fears of clients and families to get infected in order to avoid their risks of inactivity and not taking up job opportunities. Despite the adverse framework conditions, in 2020 Fundación ONCE and Inserta Empleo could support and help realise the employment of 7,706 job seekers with disabilities (81% of the results in 2019) and provided training to around 11,000 job seekers with disabilities (67% of the results in 2019).

Virginia also presented a number of insights and recommendations building on the learning and experiences of the last about one and a half years:
- Digitisation has come to stay.
- Digital transformation is an ongoing long-term project.
- There is a need for organisations, including social service providers, to be open to change, pay attention to the labour market trends, needs and future opportunities.
- Training of the service users and of the own staff is a game changer.

Following her presentation, Virginia was virtually awarded the **EPR Prize 2021**, celebrating excellence and promoting mutual learning.

Runner up to the prize winner: Presentation of the practice

Nele Hulselmans and Patrick Ruppol, staff members at GTB, Belgium, [presented](#) "Start To Can"*,* a programme to enable a better transition from school to work for young people with disabilities through the use of a user designed webtool. "Start To Can" is a solution focused web tool for a blended approach to improve the employability of young people that takes into account clients' dreams by also reflecting on a number of life domains, such as living, relationships, health, finances, learning, leisure, and work. Patrick presented the reasons behind developing the tool, Nele explained it main contents and functioning.

The GTB colleagues highlighted key challenges GTB and their services have faced and are still facing due to COVID-19:
- Maintaining personal relations and contacts
- Giving young PwD perspective and motivation
- Mental health and wellbeing of young PwD
- Providing access to jobs and the related support services online

They explained that, not least thanks to the "Start To Can" webtool, mediation from school to work was facilitated through
- more resilient coaches, implying additional training and supervision;
- tools to stay in contact;
- features creating hope and perspective;
- the support offered to improve the employability and transitions from school and vocational training to the labour market/jobs;
- its support of existing networks.

Exchange with the winner and runner up:
Challenges and success factors of their promising practice

In this session, Laura Jones together with Virginia Carcedo, Nele Hulselmans and Patrick Ruppol had a closer look into the main challenges encountered and how they could be addressed and overcome by the management of the organisation, the staff, the users or the funding agencies. They also shed more light on the success factors of the promising practices. Their exchange is reported on below in bullet-point style.

Question 1 by Laura: Apart from funders allowing the service providers to adapt their services online, in what other dimensions did you have to make changes?

Answers by Virginia:
- Funders allowing service providers to extend their grants to cover access to digital resources (e.g., to buy a computer, to install internet connection) and to design new services (e.g., online access to public employment service and social insurance institutions);

- Shifting to training with employers online and to making agreements with companies online, but always keeping the focus on the needs of the PwD;
- Supporting staff to improve their competences (i.e., mainly digital skills) for teleworking;
- Shifting to a more user-friendly design in order to make support services better accessible for PwD.

Question 2 by Laura: What were the conditions you had that allowed you to innovate with the "Start To Can" webtool during the restrictions created by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Answers by Patrick and Nele:
- A non-hierarchical organisational structure with a focus on "making things happen that work for the service users and staff" made it easier to develop the tool.
- Constant communication with the users and the partner GTB works with (e.g., Public Employment Service; employers) helped improving the tool, the service quality, and the outcomes

Questions 3 and 4 by Laura: What were the mistakes and challenges your organisation and/or service made? Which lessons were learnt during the adaptation of the services?

Answers by Virginia, highlighting some of the internal and external challenges Inserta Empleo faced:
- Importance to engage with own staff from a very early stage and on a regular basis and to give them the web-based tools to address the new challenges of remote work and online training and support services
- Need for a cultural and organisational transformation of the organisation as a precondition to successfully manage a digital transformation of the service provision and of work in an online setting
- Need to make partnerships with public authorities to develop and adapt activities and services
- Insight that organisations have more flexibility that they traditionally think, e.g., now proven with the partial shift to teleworking and online services, both hardly imaginable before the COVID-19 pandemic

Answers by Nele and Patrick:
- When developing web-based tools, the staff of service providers need to understand and accept that the users are the ones who decide which type of personal data they want to show, e.g., to the job coach. It is not a top-down process. This is also important in view of the respect of data protection rules and requirements.
- In the case of the "Start To Can" webtool, the young PwD needs to give permission to the job coach to see her/his profile.
- Initially and wrongly, the online tool itself became much to much the focus of attention. Only when taking back a step, the focus could be shifted to the innovative conceptual approach of blended learning and to the question how to best provide a solution-oriented support of job coaches in a trust-based interaction with the young PwD.

Panel debate: Lessons learnt – What could policy makers and funders do to promote the quality of social services and to ensure the resilience of their providers?

In the panel discussion with stakeholders, Laura Jones investigated with the found panellists what policy makers and funders could or should do to help improving the quality of the services and the resilience of their providers. Their exchange is again summarised in bullet-point style.

Panellists: 1) Gunta Anca, EDF General Secretary; 2) Michael Backhaus, Human Resources Manager at Mariaberg, Germany; 3) Thomas Bignal, Head of Policy, EASPD and representing the "Coordinated Action on Social Services in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic"; 4) Monika Chaba, Policy Officer (coordinating issues related on social services), DG EMPL, European Commission

Question 1 by Laura: What struck you in particular about the practices presented and/or covered by the study?

Answers by Gunta, Michael, Monika and Thomas
- Gunta: Importance and positive impact of trust of service users towards service providers.
- Michael: Impressed by the speed in which social care services could adopt and upgrade (digital, technical and communication) skills of their staff, but also by capacity of the users to adapt to new conditions and requirements in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Monika: Impressed by high level of competence, agility, and resilience of workforce.
- Thomas: Impressed by high level of agility of service providers to respond to new needs (of their staff and users), but also of public authorities. Social service providers thus need to be supported to be able to develop in a way to be more agile and resilient.

Question 2 by Laura: What are your reflections on the outcome of the study, on the success factors, on the recommendations?

Answers by Gunta, Michael, Monika and Thomas
- Thomas: More attention given by social service providers to the higher speed needed to roll out the digitalisation transformation and to set up partnerships with public authorities which allow to get financial support for the related investments
- Monika: The outcomes of the EPR Study confirm that the [European Voluntary Quality Framework for Social Services](#) – and its different categories, including, e.g., service quality or human resources – is still relevant.
- Michael: There are still a huge number of challenges when it comes to the digitalisation of services and of their providers and how such a re-organisation of key importance to improve the effective service delivery and resilience of social service providers in the years to come can best be organised which are confirmed by the EPR Study. It can thus be a source of mutual learning as one sees that you share the same problems and issues other service providers, their staff and their users are also confronted with.

- Gunta: She welcomed the efforts made by the staff of many service providers to shift to a user-based design and recognised that many service providers had been proactive to ensure a co-production of their services for PwD even in a context of remote delivery of support and training services.

Question 3 by Laura: What challenges remain for service providers? Do you see new needs?

Answers by Gunta, Michael and Thomas
- Michael pointed out four points: 1) One key remaining challenge is how to get sufficient funding of new online tools and services, including for their development (for which service contracts need to be made or costly IT experts – who were anyway much solicited during the COVID-19 pandemic – directly employed) and for rolling them out for daily use. What is thus needed, in particular in order to digitalise support and training services to better address the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, is sufficient and sustainable funding for these new services, the technical infrastructure for them to operate and the training of staff and users. In the social services area, the development of appropriate online tools for use in support and training services had often to be done in addition to the regular work – implying a higher workload for staff over a longer period – and with no or only insufficient levels of funding. 2) Another important challenge is to get sufficient knowledge about and to respect data protection rules for all online tools and services (both for data generated by and/or shared by staff and by users). 3) A third challenge reported on by a number of EPR members Michael highlighted was that a considerable number of service users due to insufficient financial means did not have the necessary hardware and/or could not afford the software to access remotely provided services. Many service users had to ask service providers or public authorities for financial support or donations in kind to overcome their social exclusion. 4) Linked to point 3), he referred to information shared by colleagues in Greece where are a number of service providers did not receive the reimbursement of the costs the providers had incurred for the provision of online services for PwD when users were not allowed to show up in services as a consequence of the COVID-restrictions in place. This meant considerable risks for the budgets of many providers.
- Thomas agreed with the points raised by Michael. He stated that the social services sector in general was not too well prepared for situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This "deficit" implies the need to develop protocols or procedures to improve the preparedness of the sector. He highlighted that the "medical model" of service provision and top-down approaches used by the professionals quickly became again predominant during the crises. Thomas thus pointed to a risk that the disability sector doesn't move back to the social and human rights model. He underlined that it will be important in the future to guarantee human and social rights also in future crises.
- Gunta shared Thomas' views and demands. She underlined the risk that in the COVID-19 context – with all restrictions for the public life and interactive face-to-face service provision put in place – professionals had made (or had to make) too many decisions for PwD which in turn limited their personal freedom, e.g., in day care centres.
- Laura closed this round of the panel by recalling the need to find in comparable future crisis situations a better balance between the compliance with safety rules to control

and reduce the infections on the one hand and the broadly agreed aims to guarantee a high quality of life for PwD and to realise beneficial personal contacts on the other.

Question 4 by Laura: What is the European Commission currently doing or planning in terms of the quality of social care services and their innovation?

Answers by Monika:
- In the pandemic context, the European Commission (EC) has supported service providers with different EU funds. It has deployed the Coronavirus Investment Initiative in the form of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). It can be used for the immediate recovery of the social services sector, but also for long-term investments into the social services infrastructure and to support the digital transition. Monika also referred to other EU funds for social service providers, such as REACT-EU and ESF+. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the EC has aimed to handle the rules of these programmes in an agile manner or to temporarily adapt them where needed.
- The EC is supporting access to quality services which, in principle, is a competence of the EU MS. This implies that the EC works with the Open Method of Coordination and that is uses guidance, recommendations, or mutual learning instruments. The quality of social services is also addressed in the framework of the European Semester – here with a focus on the continuity and the sustainability of the service provision. The first key instrument used by the EC is the European Voluntary Quality Framework for Social Services (adopted in 2010 by the EU Member States; its guiding principles are also taken up by the European Pillar of Social Rights, proclaimed in 2017), the second the Commission Recommendation on Active Inclusion (endorsed in 2008) and the third the Social Investment Package (issued in 2013).
- The EC regularly organises mutual learning activities with the relevant ministries of EU Member States, e.g., in 2021 with Belgium on social activation services.
- The EC also engages with EU-level civil society organisations to improve its evidence basis with information from the grassroot level. In this context, Monika pointed to the value of building up partnerships: 1) This is, e.g., facilitated by the ESF+. The EC has recently launched a call for expressions of interest for a European Community of Practice on Partnerships. 2) Taking up a recommendation from the Coordinated Action on Social Services made in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the EC will financially support and launch the Social Services Helpdesk Project (expected to start in early 2022). 3) The EC has also launched a call for Social Innovation Competence Centres to be rolled out on national level to pull relevant national stakeholders together.

Question 5 by Laura: What more could be done at European level, also reflecting on how EU funds have been or could be used by the social services sector in the COVID-19 pandemic?

Answers by Thomas:
- Thomas welcomed that the EC recognises key structural deficits in the social services sector, such as underfunding, staff shortages and staff training needs.
- Another positive development for him are different initiatives on care, either already ongoing or shortly to be launched, e.g., the European Care Strategy in Q3/2022.

- Social service providers deplore the negative effects of not having defined a "social earmarking" of the Recovery and Resilience Fund. This led to a situation where the large majority of EU Members States have not put enough weight on investments in the social services sector in the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRP).
- There is a need to better support the social economy by means of enabling national and EU-level regulatory frameworks. The social services sector hopes that progress can be made here in the framework of the forthcoming Social Economy Action Plan.
- Thomas underlined the need for public authorities to support community engagement and policies which facilitate the reaching out to service users, disabled persons organisations and social service providers as they are in daily contact with their users.

Discussion groups & feedback via Mentimeter

Participants were split into three break-out rooms to address the following two questions:
- *What topic raised today did you most relate to in terms of challenges for service provision?*
- *Which recommendations do you have in view of a improved co-production of services, conditions to facilitate innovation in service delivery or a better resilience of social services?*

In addition to the recommendations elaborated upon in the break-out rooms, Laura launched a Mentimeter survey to collect from the participants written recommendations to improve the resilience, co-production, and innovation of social services. The following answers were collected:
1) Be more agile and use technology to engage users and pilot innovative projects;
2) Sharing innovation and promoting mutual learning;
3) Make the most of digital tools to develop a co-production approach;
4) Ensure that co-production is embedded in innovation work;
5) Organisations should examine their organisational structure and culture to ensure it can be flexible;
6) Social service providers should do a self-assessment of their resilience and improve it;
7) Universal design for environment, the accessibility of buildings and in a digital environment;
8) Funding from EU, national and regional level should support the agility and flexibility of the service delivery;
9) Get vaccinated as soon as possible!

Results of the evaluation of the meeting

The participants who filled in the evaluation form gave an average score of 4.4/5 when answering to the question if their expectations were met by the webinar and of 4.3/5 when replying to the question if they acquired relevant information and knowledge. The facilitator was rated on average with 4.7 points out of 5 (with 5 meaning "very good"), the interaction during the seminar and its format with 4.1/5 and the overall organisation with 4.2/5.