

Short Briefing on the EU Disability Strategy

December 2022

The Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 was launched by the European Commission in 2021 with the aim to improve the condition of persons with disabilities in the EU over the next ten years, making sure that they can fully enjoy their rights, have equal opportunities and access to society and economy, can decide where, how and with whom they live and can move freely in the EU regardless of their support needs.

This briefing outlines the most relevant initiatives of the Strategy for organisations, associations and social enterprises working with persons with disabilities. EPR monitors the development of the individual initiatives and keeps members updated and engaged.

The current policy framework

The Disability Strategy belongs to a series of programmes aiming at achieving a Union of Equality where everyone is included regardless of gender, race, ethnic minorities or disability, as well as at mainstreaming equality in all EU policies. Examples of other equality strategies are the EU anti-racism Action Plan 2020-2025, the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and the Gender Equality Strategy.

The Disability Strategy is also linked to broader European and international policy frameworks. It is part of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the key current policy framework for employment and social policies in Europe. Moreover, it takes into account the consequences that the pandemic has had on persons with disabilities and it supports the achievement of fair and inclusive green and digital transitions, which are set to make the Union more sustainable, resilient, prosperous and fair for all.

At the international level, the Strategy is a key instrument to promote the implementation at both EU and national level of and compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, *see box 1*), to which the European Union together with all Member States is a party.

Learning from the previous Strategy

The Strategy builds on its predecessor, the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020, which aimed to promote a barrier-free Europe and full participation of people with disabilities in society and economy. The evaluation¹ showed that the Strategy contributed to improving the situation in some areas, especially accessibility with the adoption of the European Accessibility Act and the Web Accessibility Directive, and in mainstreaming disability in EU policies.

However, the evaluation reported that its impact on improving the education, training and levels of employment of people with disabilities, although overall positive, was not clearly measurable. The Strategy lacked benchmarks to measure the achievement of its objectives and a monitoring framework to evaluate its implementation. In addition to that, the evaluation pointed out the need for more and better data collection on people with disabilities across key action areas.

The Disability Strategy 2021-2030 takes stock of the successes and shortcomings of its predecessor, for example by developing a roadmap for implementation and making sure to have a sound monitoring mechanism.

¹ Commission (SWD(2020) 291 final): [Evaluation of the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020](#).



All types of disabilities included

The Strategy takes an intersectional approach towards disability. This means that it considers the diversity and wide spectrum of disability, which includes physical, mental, intellectual and sensory impairments, as well as age-related disabilities.

Besides that, this approach takes into account the intersection of identities (gender, ethnic, sexual and religious), the socioeconomic background and specificities of population groups such as women, migrants and ethnic minorities.

1. What is the UNCRPD?

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is one of the main international human rights treaties. Its purpose is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.

The UNCRPD covers all the aspects of the life of persons with disabilities for their full inclusion in society. Separate articles define the fundamental rights such as the right to live independently and be included in the community (Art. 19), the right to education (Art. 24), the right to health (Art. 25), the right to work and employment (Art. 27) and the right to an adequate standard of living and social protection (Art. 28).

The Convention has its own reporting and monitoring mechanism guided by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

As of 2022, the UNCRPD has 185 parties. The EU ratified it in 2006, setting minimum standards for rights of persons with disabilities. Since it is a legally binding treaty, both the EU and its Member States are obliged to implement it according to their respective competences. At EU level, it also means that all existing and future legislation must be in line with the UNCRPD.

The priorities of the Strategy

The Strategy has 7 priorities, which cover all aspects of life of people with disabilities:

1. **Accessibility** of good and services, built and virtual environments and transport;
2. **Enjoying EU rights**, including moving freely across Member States and supporting electoral participation of persons with disabilities;
3. **Decent quality of life and living independently**, with a focus on autonomy, community inclusion, access to the open labour market, inclusive VET and social protection;
4. **Equal access and non-discrimination** in justice, culture, sports, education, health and housing;
5. **Promoting the rights of persons with disabilities globally**, with the EU taking a more active role in international cooperation and external action, with special attention to children and persons with disabilities in conflict areas;
6. **Efficiently delivering the Strategy**, ensuring internal coordination actions within all EU institutions and agencies, compliance of European policymaking with the UNCRPD and stronger coordination and cooperation between EU institutions and Member States;
7. **Leading by example**, with the European Commission committing to becoming more inclusive in terms of human resources and buildings accessibility, while ensuring monitoring with new indicators and reinforcing data collection to address the gaps identified by the evaluation of the previous strategy.

These priorities will be brought into action through **7 flagship initiatives**: the introduction of a Disability Platform (2021), where the main EU actors working on disability can share expertise and monitor progress, the design of a new human resources strategy for the Commission, the launch of a European package on employment for persons with disabilities and the resource centre Accessible EU (2022), the introduction of a European disability card and the development of Guidance on Independent Living (2023), and a Framework for Social Services of Excellence to improve the quality of community-based services (2024).



Independent living and community-based services

Priority number three on decent quality of life stresses that quality, accessible, affordable and inclusive person-centred community-based services are required in order to achieve independent living. Within those, it highlights personal assistance, medical care, mental health and social work. It is important that the Strategy recognises that the community-based services currently available are insufficient to ensure that no one lives in segregated settings and there is a need for investment in the social sector, recruitment and retention of professionals.

To enable independent living and ensure decent quality of life, the Strategy also calls for services to make the most out of the opportunities offered by the digital and green transformations, including ICT tools, robotics and Artificial Intelligence, to design remote and tailored services. This would contribute to investments in the digital skills of persons with disabilities and the removal of accessibility barriers to such technologies.

Inclusive education and VET

The Strategy calls for more supported learning in inclusive mainstream settings, pointing out that special schools are still common and do not always facilitate access to the mainstream education system and the open labour market. EU funds such as Erasmus+, the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the Renovation Wave can be used by Member States to increase accessibility of schools and support national reforms for inclusive education (see box 2).

The Strategy highlights also the need for inclusive and accessible VET and targets for the participation of persons with disability in skills development to keep young adults active and facilitate transition to the open labour market. This will also help to achieve the target of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action

Plan to have at least 60% of adults in training every year by 2030².

The Disability Employment Package

A key flagship initiative of the Strategy is the Disability Employment Package. The aim is to improve the situation of persons with disabilities in the labour market, given that currently only 50.8% of persons with disabilities of working age in the EU are employed.

The Package contains actions that are more detailed compared to the previous Strategy in order to be more effective. It has 6 areas of action, each with specific deliverables to be achieved by 2024:

1. Strengthening capacities of employment services through a guidance to improve the accessibility and the inclusiveness of employment services;
2. Promoting hiring perspectives through affirmative action and combating stereotypes by a catalogue of good practices;
3. Ensuring reasonable accommodation at work;
4. Retaining persons with disabilities in employment and preventing risks of acquiring disabilities;
5. Securing vocational rehabilitation schemes in case of accidents or frequent disease;
6. Exploring quality jobs in sheltered employment and pathways to the open labour market through a study that looks into alternative employment models.

The initiative supports the application of Art. 27 of the UNCRPD that recognises the right of persons with disabilities to employment. Furthermore, the European Commission aims to help Member States to set targets for the employment of persons with disabilities and develop national policies involving them in the fair green and digital transition.

² https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en



The role of service providers

The Strategy states that persons with disabilities have the right to services that create the right conditions for them to participate in the labour market and in society. However, it recognises that the quality of the services provided varies significantly across and within Member States.

Moreover, the sector has to address chronic workforce shortages and challenging working conditions, which have worsened since the beginning of the pandemic. To tackle these challenges, the Strategy includes a flagship initiative on developing a Framework for Social Services of Excellence for persons with disabilities, to be delivered in 2024. The purpose is to improve community-based service delivery and to increase the attractiveness of jobs in the sector, also by encouraging the upskilling and reskilling of social workers.

As mentioned above, community-based services play a key role to support deinstitutionalisation. In order to foster the transition from institutional care to community-based settings, the EU provides funding for Member States in order to fill regional gaps and support service providers in ensuring quality services (See box 2).

The monitoring framework

Learning from the shortcomings of the previous Strategy, the European Commission introduced in 2021 a monitoring framework to better follow and evaluate the progress of the various actions of the Strategy. Thanks to this system available [online](#), everyone can check the progress of each flagship initiative and single action according to the timeline of the Strategy.

The progress of Member States in implementing the Strategy is based on more effective collection of statistical data, which was another issue of the 2010-2020 Strategy. The data gathered will provide information about the situation of persons with disabilities in Member States, as well as on national policies and practices. These data will contribute both to the

reporting on the implementation of the UNCRPD and to the mid-term report of the Disability Strategy, according to which the Commission will decide whether to fine-tune some actions to improve results.

2. EU funds for the Strategy

Members States are encouraged to use EU funds to implement the Strategy and the UNCRPD at national level. Available funding include ESF+, the European Regional Development Fund, Erasmus+ and the Just Transition Fund. Through them, the EU aims to support socio-economic inclusion of persons with disabilities, inclusive education and healthcare, access to services and deinstitutionalization at national level.

For most of these funds, Member States have to meet “enabling conditions”, which are set to create the right environment for investment. One of these conditions is a national framework for the implementation of the UNCRPD, which includes the criteria of accessibility.

Additional funding opportunities can be provided by NextGenerationEU and the Recovery and Resilience Facility. Member States can also access the Technical Support Instrument to get technical expertise. The European Commission is also working to promoting a disability-inclusive perspective also in other programmes such as Horizon Europe and Invest EU.

For more information

Consult the official document of the EU Disability Strategy on the European Commission’s website [here](#). Consult the official document of the UNCRPD [here](#).



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