

Meeting Report Conference

The Opportunities and Challenges of Rehabilitation and Employability of People with Disabilities in Latvia and Europe

17 June 2016, The Main Building of the Saeima, Red Room, Jēkaba iela 11, Riga

Summary

Over 70 people met in the Parliament in Riga at the Latvian national awareness raising event on employment of people with disabilities. The event, co-organised with EPR member SIVA and the Parliament Committee for Employment and Social Affairs, saw key stakeholders present their challenges, actions and recommendations to support the employment of people with disabilities. Speakers included representatives of people with disabilities, employers and the state. EPR Lithuanian member VRC presented their work and Laura Jones presented EPR, recommendations from the Platform and key tools to support employment of people with disabilities. The event was well-received and successfully brought the topic of employment of people with disabilities higher up the Latvian political agenda, including the supported employment model.

Full Report



ilonAija Barča, *Chairperson of the Social and Employment Matters Committee of the Saeima* opened the meeting and welcomed participants. She outlined the relevant laws in Latvia, the improvements that have occurred for people with disabilities since of the ratification of the UN Convention in Latvia, but added that there is still room for improvement and that this is one of the reasons behind the conference. There is a new labour law under discussion in the Saeima into which the discussions will also feed. Karina Korna, *Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Welfare* spoke of the need to dismiss stereotypes of people

with disabilities, and that people with disabilities are no more unique than people without; we can complement one another and all must be considered as full members of society. She also stressed the importance of enabling children with disabilities to reach their potential, particularly through inclusive education. Although in recent years employment of people with disabilities has risen, more can be done to ensure inclusive employment and labour market.

Ilona Jurševska, *Director of the Social Integration State Agency* thanked the Committee and the European Platform for Rehabilitation (EPR) for the possibility to organise the event. She introduced the work of the agency, which provides a wide range of services, from occupational therapy to medical rehabilitation. A video giving a tour of SIVA's facilities and work was shown. Gunta Anča, *Chairperson, Latvian Umbrella Body for Disability Organisations SUSTENTO, Member of the European Economic and Social Committee and Vice-president of the European Disability Forum* presented key statistics showing the lower levels of employment of people with disabilities, and made the point that what people with and without look for and need in employment are the same.

Ms Anča outlined some barriers to employment of people with disabilities. These included the lack of inclusive education, architectural inaccessibility and the lack of knowledge of the needs of people with disabilities and their different needs depending on the specific disability. Her proposals included employment quotas and subsidies for employers, supported employment and ensuring fast provision of rehabilitation services when a disability is acquired or discovered, to ensure maximum capacity of the person can be ensured.

Laura Jones, *Secretary General of EPR* explained how EPR builds capacity of its members for excellence in service provision. The organisations in membership work together and with experts to improve service quality and one focus area is employment of people with disabilities. It is essential for service providers to develop good relationships with employers through creative means. She gave information about the www.re-integrate.eu project that provides resources to employers to retain staff and insodoing save human

and financial resources. She explained that mainstreamed services supporting people with disabilities also support those without. She listed a number of analytical papers on employment to be found on www.epr.eu.

Pēteris Leiškalns, *representative of the Employers' Confederation of Latvia* talked about the challenges they see in employing people with disabilities. He mentioned the cost of workplace adjustment, the lack of subsidies to compensate for lower productivity. He stated that the Latvian system for sick leave puts a high burden on employers of people with disabilities and that the redundancy law is too inflexible. Even if a whole department is closed and all made redundant, it is not possible to make a person with a disability redundant. The chair said that the committee would take into account the considerations he expressed in the revision of the labour law.

Imants Lipskis, *Head of the Labour Market Policy Department, Ministry of Welfare* gave an overview of activities for promotion of employment of people with disabilities carried out by the department. He talked of the need to combat stereotypes and prejudices, the need for tailor-made training and better career planning. He also spoke of the importance of using EU structural funds to support employment of people with disabilities, and work on prevention of job loss. A pilot project will be started to support people over 50 to remain in work. He also explained that the department was ready to support organisations employing people with disabilities, such as social enterprises.

Inese Kalvāne, *Director of the State Employment Agency* presented the support services for people with disabilities provided by the Agency. She spoke of the need to see more broadly than a job towards dignified employment relations. Subsidised training and employment programmes are in place, the agency supports over 200 workplace adaptations and there is a plan to develop an electronic database of people with disabilities' skill profiles to facilitate their job finding. She mentioned that there will be an ESF-funded training programme for employers about the benefits and challenges of employing people with disabilities. A professional competence determination services will also be developed with

SIVA and a call for tender will come out providing entering services.

Laura Jones gave a presentation on how employment of people with disabilities is for the benefit of Europe. She highlighted the importance of facilitating employment of people with disabilities from a rights and inclusion perspective and how all peoples' potential must be realised. She highlighted the value of a diverse workforce in terms of innovation, customer service, market reach and reputation. She explained work-process redesign which creates positions for people with disabilities by taking tasks from others, who are then free to focus on their core work. She introduced the Recovery approach to mental health, which supports people with psycho-social disabilities on a journey to better life-quality outcomes and resilience.

Irina Rulle, *representative of NGO Saule* talked about the challenges of Employability for people with intellectual disabilities. She mentioned she was sceptical about quotes, as often this only benefits people with a higher level of education, and others do not receive the necessary support to take up employment. She promoted the Supported Employment approach; calling for national legislation addressing it. and how in past years the organisation was able to fund the programmes for many people through the ESF. She called for more support from municipalities regarding service provision for persons with intellectual disabilities. The chairperson said that she saw a need for actions to be taken relating to supported employment.

Edgars Vorslovs, *President of Latvian Association of the Deaf* explained that since the ratification of the CRPD there was a move away from the medical model of disability and that access to sign language interpretation improved, but that more interpreters needed to be trained. The Association experienced that the state employment agency did not provide adequate training for people with hearing impairments, and that they were willing to work together to improve this.

Natalja Markovskaja, Valakupiai Rehabilitation Centre presented vocational rehabilitation in Lithuania: ensuring system operation and quality. She stressed the importance of taking a universal design perspective, and not focus on disability, in ensuring accessibility for all of services and products. Ensuring a building's accessibility for a person in a wheelchair also benefits a mum with a buggy, for example. In their vocational training they prioritise relationships with employers and focus on workplace requirements in terms of environmental adjustments needed and skills development. She explained the EQUASS system, which enhances the social services sector through training, recognition, certification and consultancy in the field of quality. VRC runs EQUASS in Lithuania.



During the round table discussion participants highlighted the intrinsic value of work for all people, and the importance of empowering all to be able to share their talents with society. The necessity of seeing all people as equal should be the starting point of discussions and actions. It was stressed that in the right position, a person even with more severe intellectual disability can be highly productive. Representatives of students in Riga proposed that students with disabilities be heard in such discussions and suggested more scholarships for such students.

The chair concluded the meeting thanking the speakers and participants and highlighting that the information and recommendations would be considered in the development of the new labour law.



After lunch, participants left for the Social Integration State Agency in Jūrmala. At SIVA they saw musical performances from groups set up for people who use SIVA's services and went on a tour of the premises, with an overview of the facilities. The tour ended with a reception, where Ilona Jurševska and Laura Jones expressed appreciation for the opportunity to co-organise the event and good cooperation which ensured a very successful day.

The discussion was live-streamed on the Saeima webpage www.saeima.lv and recorded for reference. A short video summary in Latvian is available here:

<http://saeima.lv/lv/galleries/video/5347>

More information about the event can be found here:

<http://saeima.lv/lv/aktualitates/saeimas-zinas/24961-saeima-diskute-par-darba-tirgus-pieejamibu-cilvekiem-ar-invaliditati> and a number of the presentations can be found on the EPR website.