

The European Observatory for Inclusive Employment and Sustainable Development Goals

Policy Recommendations

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1. Introduction

Access to work and employment plays a crucial role. It means not only economic independence; it is also about building one's self-worth and having a chance to contribute equally to society. A 2018 Eurofound study¹ found that persons with disabilities' feeling of being "left out of society" varies considerably depending on whether they are employed or not: people who have a job "far less often report feeling left out of society than long-term unemployed disabled respondents or those who are unable to work because of their disability".

This paper builds on the 2018-20 first phase of activity of the European Observatory for Inclusive Employment and Sustainable Development Goals ("the Observatory"). It started with a review of the existing international and European legislation. Looking at the Observatory national members organisational forms, business models and approach to employment of persons with disabilities, a comparative study was then prepared by the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research. Six case studies bring additional light on a specific practice of each of the six national member organisations. Arising from the outcomes of those preliminary deliverables, these policy recommendations reflect the views of European social economy organisations and companies employing persons with disabilities. For the purpose of this paper they are called work integration social enterprises employing persons with disabilities, or D-WISE.

D-WISE are organisations that act within the social economy sector and that "use the majority of their possible profits as a means for achieving their primary social objectives, rather than maximizing profits for their owners and shareholders"². It also details the current challenges faced by these organisations and companies and ultimately how public decisions can positively influence their operations, so they can continue offering economic opportunities to men and women with disabilities.

Based on the above explanations, the Observatory would like to put forward policy recommendations to national and European decision-makers in the following areas:

- **Heterogeneity among work integration social enterprises employing persons with disabilities and linkages with the social economy sector**
- **Employment forms of men and women with disabilities and transition to the open labour market**
- **Business models of D-WISE**
- **State aid**
- **Data and research relating to all forms and settings of work and employment experiences of men and women with disabilities**
- **The role of legislation in creating a conducive environment for D-WISE to fulfil their mission**
- **Impact and effects of Covid-19 pandemic on D-WISE**

¹ Eurofound, *The social and employment situation of people with disabilities*, 2018

² [Council Conclusions of 7 December 2015](#), *The promotion of the social economy as a key driver of economic and social development in Europe*

2. Heterogeneity among work integration social enterprises employing persons with disabilities and linkages with the social economy sector

Persons with disabilities have historically been excluded from the regular labour market. They were considered as unable to work and their “special needs” would be better met by either family or in separate medico-social environments. This has led to the creation of rehabilitation, occupational and sheltered work settings meant specifically for persons with disabilities. Intertwined with national culture and socio-historical developments, this nowadays results into a very diverse range of actors engaging with employment of persons with disabilities across the EU Member States.

Diversity among social economy and organisations employing persons with disabilities is seen along the below initially identified parameters³:

- Year of creation and history of each organisation and company
- Ownership: state-owned, private company, business division of an organisation of persons with disabilities (DPO)
- Profit goal: While for-profit organisations maximise profits for owners and shareholders, non-for-profit organisations in the social economy, according to the Council Conclusions from 7 December 2015 as mentioned above, “use the majority of their possible profits as a means for achieving their primary social objectives, rather than maximising profits for their owners and shareholders. Their activities rely primarily, but not exclusively, on limited profit distribution business models, whereby most of their surpluses are re-invested in further development of their activity”.
- Workforce: size ranging from a dozen to thousands of employees; composition mixing persons with and without disabilities, and various groups among persons with disabilities. This is often decided upon national disability and impairment definitions and administrative criteria
- National geographic distribution, economic sectors and activity fields that they engage in
- Forms of employment of persons with disabilities ranging from sheltered workshops to special employment centres, custom work companies, “work enclaves” or supported employment in mainstream companies
- Annual revenue
- Legislative framework: National legislative frameworks on the employment of persons with disabilities vary considerably across Europe.
- Financing: business models are based on a mix of market and non-market revenues and state aides take the forms of social public procurement schemes, direct grants or provision of fiscal incentives in the form of tax reliefs or reduced social security contributions to subsidise salary of workers with disabilities, workplace adaptation and provision of reasonable accommodation

Common characteristics nonetheless emerge among the organisations and companies featured in the Observatory project. They relate to their roots into social economy in the sense that they are situated on a continuum aiming to balance social goals and economic sustainability. On one side, each of these organisations’ and companies’ primary reason of existence is to create and develop meaningful job opportunities for persons with disabilities who have high support needs. This reflects a commitment to the labour integration of persons with disabilities. At the same time, they continuously seek new business opportunities to ensure increased turnover and the growth of added value for their organisations and their employees. And they operate with business efficiency and a high resource utilization through continued structural changes. In other words, to fulfil their social mission and achieve financial sustainability at the same time, D-WISE need to generate sufficient incomes, which

³ For more details, refer to: European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research, *Towards inclusive employment of persons with disabilities - A comparative study of six social economy organisations and companies in Europe*, June 2020.

they can then reinvest to finance their economic activities and compensate for additional costs that are not covered by public support. Profits are directly reinvested to deliver social results relating to the work integration of persons with disabilities.

Furthermore, D-WISE significantly contribute to the overall economy and are a key actor of the social economy. They bring a valuable contribution to society because they actually solve gaps in labour inclusion. For instance, 20% of the Spanish population with a disability is employed by a D-WISE. Their starting point was in providing economic opportunities for persons with disabilities, for whom there was not enough space made on the mainstream labour market. D-WISE now see themselves with a strong expertise and know-how in regards to employment of persons with various disabilities and work capacities. They have tested innovative solutions of labour inclusion and have identified the ones that actually bring tangible results. It is now time to share and make them known widely to mainstream employers and companies. In other words, D-WISE see their role gradually shifting. While more workers with disabilities directly join the open labour market, D-WISE nowadays support mostly workers with high support needs or who struggle the most to find employment. Also, they increasingly are in a better position to support the regular labour market in becoming more inclusive by supporting them in hiring persons with disabilities and in explaining what adaptation measures can be used on an everyday basis. This includes social economy enterprises and D-WISE situated in rural and remote areas, where persons with disabilities and their families live, too.

Policy recommendations:

- ⇒ Clearly acknowledge the valuable contributions of D-WISE to society and overall economy in the next European Action Plan for Social Economy. The EU should recognise D-WISE as valuable social economy actors and actively consult D-WISE on any legal and policy developments that impact social economy legislation. For instance, this could consist in establishing a platform or working group for continuous exchange with involved stakeholders.
- ⇒ Streamline D-WISE role and impact as social economy actors directly into the European Semester to balance economic and social aspects more carefully and include a specific section on the employment for persons with disabilities in the European Semester country reports.
- ⇒ Recognise the crucial role played by D-WISE in promoting employment for persons with disabilities in the next European Disability Strategy

3. Employment forms of men and women with disabilities and transition to the open labour market

Persons with disabilities are a very heterogeneous group, and their individual employment needs must be acknowledged and addressed if we are to ensure their successful and lasting work integration. Working men and women with disabilities have various different forms of skill-sets, work-related capacities, strengths, impairments, and needs, that range from a single workplace adaptation to day-to-day coaching and support. They also build their personal identity over family history, education and other informal social experiences. All persons with disabilities experience discrimination to some extent and subsequently respond to it differently in a mainstream environment. All of these ultimately impact individual career choices as well as professional pathways.

While highly debated nowadays and acknowledging where the sector is coming from, D-WISE have built their expertise and understanding into a history of providing economic opportunities to persons with disabilities. On this basis, they are deeply convinced that, by providing various alternative forms of employment to workers with disabilities, they respond to the various personal situations and evolving professional needs of each worker with a disability. And ultimately, they all offer actual employment opportunities to persons with disabilities. Similarly, they all also are aiming to offer transition opportunities to the regular labour market to their employees with disabilities. Mainstream companies and organisations have yet to propose inclusive work environments at a wider level. This

includes designed-for-all infrastructures, accessible workstations and information and communication systems, to an atmosphere free of stigma and discriminatory attitudes. Due to their personal and professional circumstances, workers with disabilities might experience different challenges in accessing or transitioning to the open labour market. Some of the Observatory members' experiences have shown that a flexible employment system between the regular labour market and alternative settings for employees with disabilities can often bring better results⁴ and can therefore share the below conclusions:

- The focus should be on the person with a disability and how all involved actors can support him or her best to transition from seeking a job to having a stable and paying employment position. Rather than opposing sheltered and mainstream forms of employment, they could be seen as various options that a worker with a disability could get support from over his or her career pathways. This would enable to link better the evolving needs and abilities of individuals with disabilities to their respective professional developments. Ultimately this could be a rationale applicable to any person facing work related difficulties during one's working life.
- Persons with disabilities have specific needs linked to their impairments, personal life experiences and professional career. In order to accommodate these individual needs and situations⁵, public authorities should promote their inclusion in the labour market through various existing forms of employment, such as sheltered employment as well as mainstream companies hiring persons with disabilities. They should also promote more flexibility between the regular labour market and alternative settings for employees with disabilities, as this would support the worker with a disability to progressively engage with different job positions while also enabling mainstream employers to progressively include more persons with disabilities into their workforce.
- When a person with a disability joins the open labour market, they sometimes lose social protection rights and or experience worse working conditions. For instance, many persons with disabilities report difficulties to engage with the open labour market due to lack of flexibility of working conditions.

Policy recommendations:

- ⇒ In view of true work inclusion, labour laws and related programmes should allow and prompt the regular labour market to be more open and flexible to the evolving needs and heterogeneous working capacities of men and women with disabilities. This includes designing mechanisms allowing flexible means to transition between different forms of employment being it sheltered, supported or mainstream - so as to allow the various socio-economic social backgrounds of workers not to interfere with a sustainable work integration of persons with disabilities.
- ⇒ Many EU Member States are engaged in structural reforms of their social protection systems. This should include designing mechanisms and programmes allowing workers with disabilities not to lose social rights and work conditions when transitioning to the regular labour market. At the same time, sufficient levels of funding should be secured for workers with disabilities, regardless of where they are working, in order to create an appropriate working environment based on their abilities and needs.

⁴ For more details, refer to: The European Observatory for Inclusive Employment and Sustainable Development Goals, *Case study for the Netherlands/Cedris, Mobility of employment for persons with disabilities in between sheltered and open settings in the Dutch system*, 2020.

⁵ For more information, refer to the "right to return" from Sweden which provides safety net for both workers and companies in The European Observatory for Inclusive Employment and Sustainable Development Goals, *Case study for Sweden/Samhall: "Gradually upskilling workers with disabilities to join the Swedish open labour market: the Samhall method™"*, 2020

4. Business models of D-WISE

D-WISE have a business model based on a mix of market and non-market revenues. On the side of business incomes, D-WISE are positioned on a wide range of economic sectors and fields of activities. Many of them have been impacted by globalisation, technological progress and digitalisation in the past decades, as the whole European labour market has been. Entire labour-intensive sectors have been relocated to other countries and areas where labour is cheaper. The so-called low-qualified or “low added value” job opportunities have also drastically decreased in number. This poses serious challenges to D-WISE, as they often look for positions in these sectors matching the working capacities of some groups of persons with severe impairments or people in high support needs.

In the near future, this could however revert to some extent with the boom of both circular economy and digital transformation in the delocalisation of certain activities aiming to fight climate change effects and digitalise and green the economy. For this to happen, persons with disabilities should be able to access education, training and skills development programmes in these promising fields. This includes, among others, the fields of “renewable energy, energy efficiency, organic and conservation agriculture, adaptation projects intended to protect and restore ecosystems and biodiversity, social farming, upcycling and culture, sustainable tourism, green urban design, and infrastructure upgrading projects to accentuate physical resilience to climate-induced disasters” (ILO, 2018). Further, new jobs which require an increased e-literacy and digital skills are increasing through a technological evolution and workers with disabilities should be enabled to access high quality training to acquire those in order to tap into this sector as a source of employment. The general intention is to equip working men and women with disabilities with knowledge and skills to engage in these emerging green and digital jobs markets. Those are also sectors, in which social economy enterprises are predominantly present and where social innovation is striking. The link between D-WISE as social economic actors and other social economy actors engaged in green and digital markets, represent opportunities to seize for companies and organisations employing persons with disabilities.

Policy recommendations:

- ⇒ Include social provisions in legislation related to climate change and digital transformation to ensure the opening of work opportunities for persons with disabilities and persons with higher support needs
- ⇒ Promote funding to organisations and companies employing persons with disabilities and persons with higher support needs, in order to create employment opportunities especially linked to the green and digital economy.
- ⇒ Ensure that EU-level funds can be easily accessed to finance projects around education, training, lifelong learning, skills development and traineeship-to-employment programmes, in order to equip workers with disabilities with knowledge and competences that match the demand for green, digital and in-sourcing skills. EU-level funds should further take into consideration the specific abilities and needs of persons with disabilities that may require various adaptations to programmes, timeframes and more.

5. State aid

On the side of non-market revenues, state aid represents a substantive portion of the turnover of D-WISE. Continued provision of public support is of paramount importance. Currently this is framed by the legal provisions on exemptions for wage subsidies for employing workers with disabilities and compensating the additional costs of their employment by the EU rules on State aid and the General

Block Exemption Regulation (GBER)⁶, as well as the ones relating to social preferences in the 2014 Directive on public procurement⁷.

This public support is also a wise investment of tax payers' money: economically speaking it is less costly to fund employment opportunities of persons with disabilities, over providing unemployment or wider social protection benefits⁸. In other words, it is more costly for society as a whole not to employ persons with disabilities. This also leverages mainstream private companies' efforts in paying part of the salaries of workers with disabilities, which in turn positively fits into the overall economic activity. Finally, when discussing the business case of D-WISE, the overall costs of absorbing social value and/or general interests costs have not been calculated. This public support should therefore not be perceived as providing unfair competitive advantage or a burden for the State. This is instead a compensation for helping the employers to provide the workers with disabilities with the additional support and adjustments they need, which otherwise would imply a clear disadvantage for them.

Policy recommendations:

- ⇒ D-WISE can only provide employment opportunities to persons with disabilities with continued public support. European decision makers should reinforce the current exemptions granted for employment of persons with disabilities in the EU rules on State aid and GBER, as well as the social preferences allowed by the Public Procurement Directives⁹.
- ⇒ Promote the access for D-WISE to EU Structural and Investment Funds, particularly the European Social Fund+, and increase EU pre- and co-financing levels for programmes of social inclusion and employment for persons with disabilities.

6. Data and research relating to all forms and settings of work and employment experiences of men and women with disabilities

In the European Union (EU), only one in two persons with disabilities of between 20 and 64 years old are employed, compared to roughly 75% of persons without disabilities. Conversely the unemployment rate of persons with disabilities in the EU, aged 20-64, is 17.1 % compared to 10.2 % of persons without disabilities. Also, the EU activity rate of persons with disabilities (percentage of active persons in relation to the comparable total population) is only 61% compared to 82.3% of persons without disabilities (ANED, 2017). Yet these figures don't reflect the full extent of persons with disabilities' unequal access to the labour market: persons with disabilities living in institutional

⁶ For more information, refer to Articles 33 on aid for the employment of workers with disabilities in the form of wage subsidies and Article 34 on aid for compensating the additional costs of employing workers with disabilities in the [General Block Exemption Regulation](#).

⁷ For more information, refer to Articles 20 and 42 in the [Directive 2014/24/EU on public procurement and repealing Directive 2004/18/EC](#).

⁸ Commissioned by the ONCE foundation in 2013, the KPMG study "Present and Future of Special Employment Centres" found out that, "for each euro invested on CEEs by public administrations, CEEs (in terms of taxes and social contributions) paid back 1.42 euros". Further, in 2013, a Slovenian cost-benefit study concluded the following: "considering inputs from state-aids and outputs (taxes from the companies), data showed that in years of economic prosperity companies employing persons with disabilities paid more taxes than they were given state-aids." See [here](#): Soča Center for vocational rehabilitation, University Rehabilitation Institute, Republic of Slovenia, 2013: "Večletna analiza stroškov in koristi financiranja zaposlitvene rehabilitacije in zaposlovanja invalidov v invalidskih podjetjih in zaposlitvenih centrih" / "Multiannual Analysis Of Costs And Benefits Of Financing Vocational Rehabilitation And Employment Of Presons With Disabilities In Companies Employing Persons With Disabilities And In Employment Centers".

⁹ For more details, refer to the *Preserving state aid access to companies employing workers with disabilities - Joint statement by the European Disability Forum, the European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities, the European Platform for Rehabilitation and the European Union of Supported Employment*

care settings and people below 20 or above 64 years of age are simply not counted and moreover, in some countries many persons with disabilities may be declared as unable to work, and are thus not being registered in employment-related statistics. Workers with disabilities are overall over-represented in people experiencing under-employment: this includes poor-quality and part-time jobs, and some are even being paid below the minimum wage¹⁰.

Further, data on disability and specifically employment of persons with disabilities is a debated issue. Reflecting the shift from a medical to the human rights approach, statistical offices have progressively changed their definition of disability and corresponding methodologies. Also for employment data for instance, national definitions of who is ‘active’ or ‘inactive’ varies greatly across EU Member States and statistics must be interpreted cautiously. This results in a lack of consistency and comparability of data relating to work and employment of persons with disabilities across the EU Member States (CRPD Committee, 2015¹¹). Eurostat indicators for example do not capture the reality on the ground in a holistic manner (see e.g. also ANED report on European comparative data on Europe 2020 & People with disabilities¹²), while they are widely used by researchers, policy makers and other stakeholders. The existing research around work and employment of persons with disabilities is also not comprehensive and detailed enough. For instance, how transition to the open labour market actually takes place in the different existing settings in each country is not well documented. The business case of D-WISE and how providing public support to employ persons with disabilities is economically a return on investment for tax payers money has not been researched providing cross-country comparison. There is also an overall lack of data and human rights indicators and research relating to the specific situations of women with disabilities (Eurofound, 2018¹³). This applies to working women with disabilities, and how they balance private and professional lives. This gap hampers the ability of all stakeholders - public authorities, mainstream companies or social economy organisations employing persons with disabilities - in assessing progress and in providing evidence-based solutions with a demonstrated impact.

Policy recommendations:

- ⇒ Policy recommendation: fund EU level projects and research aiming to improve the understanding of D-WISE across EU Member States: this could cover, among other topics, their historical developments and origins, their chosen social goals and employment approaches to male and female workers with disabilities, their business models and economic choices, the policies and procedures to establish an inclusive internal governance, and their relationship to the overall social economy sector. More specifically, EU funding instruments should open up the space of an EU project or network.
- ⇒ Improve EU level indicators about work and employment of persons with disabilities in line with CRPD obligations: Eurostat should more systematically collect data in this sector and the Labour Force Survey should be run in all EU Member States to provide robust and comparable data.
- ⇒ Document the costs-benefits or “win-win business case” for society to provide public support to facilitate employment of workers with disabilities emphasizing comparison of experiences across EU Member States.

¹⁰ANED – Academic Network of European Disability Experts: *European comparative data on Europe 2020 & People with disabilities*, 2018, see chapter II.3 Activity Rate

¹¹Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: *Concluding observations on the initial report of the European Union*, 2 October 2015, see article 27 on work and employment

¹²ANED – Academic Network of European Disability Experts: *European comparative data on Europe 2020 & People with disabilities*, 2018.

¹³ Eurofound, *The social and employment situation of people with disabilities*, 2018

7. The role of legislation in creating a conducive environment for D-WISE to fulfil their mission

In 2010, the Organisation for the Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released a study on Sickness, Disability and Work. It showed that the design of disability related legislation and policies has more impact on the level of employment of persons with disabilities than economic growth¹⁴. Indeed, some national labour contexts do not support workers with disabilities into employment well, and even less toward the regular labour market. Job opportunities for persons with disabilities vary greatly between EU countries.

At international and European levels, many provisions spell out the various aspects relating to work and employment of men and women with disabilities¹⁵. Internationally, two key provisions reaffirm that access to work and employment is a fundamental right for persons with disabilities, as for any other people. They are CRPD Article 27 and the target 8.5 of the ‘Decent work and economic growth’ of the Agenda 2030.

At European level, Article 10 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU) stipulates that the EU should fight against discrimination on several grounds, including disability. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights reiterates that every citizen has right to employment (Article 15) and that persons with disabilities should “benefit from measures designed to ensure their occupational integration”. Adopted in 2017, the European Pillar of Social Rights even goes further stipulating that “people with disabilities have the right to income support that ensures living in dignity, services that enable them to participate in the labour market and in society, and a work environment adapted to their needs” (paragraph 17). Hard and soft legislation relating to work and employment of persons with disabilities have also been adopted, transposed into national legal frameworks and implemented in the past decades. In this context, it should also be referred to Council Directive 2000/78/EC establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation¹⁶.

While international, European and national legislation contain provisions reaffirming the right to work and employment of persons with disabilities, they keep facing continuous serious discrimination in accessing the labour market. Therefore, the EU legal and policy framework should facilitate the operations of D-WISE. For this, the Observatory calls for keeping employment of persons with disabilities as a high priority in the EU Disability Rights Strategy for 2021-30. Also, the existing provisions should be reinforced and new ones adopted to deliver actual change to persons with disabilities on the labour market. Besides, the D-WISE represent a high proportion of the European social economy actors and social enterprises. Including their considerations in the overall social economy discussion appears key to ensure their swift development (see also European Commission report on “Social enterprises and their ecosystems in Europe, 2020¹⁷).

Policy recommendations:

- ⇒ Pursue the efforts initiated under the European Disability Strategy 2010-20 and ensure that employment and work integration of persons with disabilities remains a high priority in the upcoming EU Disability Rights Strategy for 2021-2030.

¹⁴ Organisation for the Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Sickness, Disability and Work: Breaking the Barriers*, 2010.

¹⁵ For more details, refer to the European Observatory for Inclusive Employment and Sustainable Development Goals, *International Legislation Overview – Access to work and employment of persons with disabilities in international human rights and labour standards*, 2019. And European Observatory for Inclusive Employment and Sustainable Development Goals, *Context and Relevance of the EU Regulatory Framework to Employment and Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities*, 2019.

¹⁶ [Council Directive 2000/78/EC](#) of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation

¹⁷ European Commission, *Comparative synthesis report on “Social enterprises and their ecosystems in Europe”*, January 2020.

- ⇒ Mainstream employment of persons with disabilities in other key EU instruments such as the European Semester, upcoming Action Plan for the implementation of the Pillar for Social Rights to be adopted by the European Commission in 2021, and the European Action Plan for the Social Economy.
- ⇒ Pro-actively include the considerations of D-WISE and other Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISE) into the social economy related policy development.

8. Impact and effects of Covid-19 pandemic on D-WISE

In February 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic caused global social and economic disruption across Europe. It has disproportionately impacted persons with disabilities and their families. The ensuing economic crisis is likely to reinforce the difficulties faced by workers with disabilities in accessing the world of work. They will struggle even more in finding and retaining employment opportunities, mainly due to misconceptions about their work capacities and their alleged lack of adaptability. Social economy organisations and companies employing them have also felt a strong impact on their operations.

Initial data is available from Spain and Sweden. The Spanish Public Employment Service compiled data relating to employment contracts during the health crisis. For persons with disabilities: compared to 2019, the number of contracts has dropped by 58.1% in the second quarter of 2020.¹⁸ In Sweden, Samhall had about 8,000 employees on sick leave and/or staying at home in the first week of the national restriction recommendations for companies, partly because the government allowed financial compensation from the first day of sick leave (instead of the second day as usually). This impacted Samhall operations tremendously lacking workforce and leading to organisational planning difficulties.

At this point in time, the Observatory members can already share some considerations in this respect. Right after each country took lockdown measures, D-WISE firstly faced confusion and uncertainty as many economic operators did. Sets of measures were nonetheless rapidly thought of and adapted along the following lines of action:

- 1) **Informing staff with disabilities on how to react to the Covid-19 pandemic:** This consisted in relaying to staff with and without disabilities the safety and health and measures adopted by public authorities (Ilunion (Spain) and APF Entreprises (France)). Samhall (Sweden) also rapidly adapted the work environment to ensure workers' safety, as many other Observer members and companies did. Cedris (Netherlands) opened a FAQ section on its website to answer questions asked by both workers with disabilities and its clients employing persons with disabilities¹⁹. Groep Maatwerk (Belgium/Flanders) even produced educational videos that were then distributed on social media (via YouTube) on how to stay safe during the Covid-19 pandemic²⁰. It is worth noting that the immediate questions from workers with disabilities were not about jobs and employment, but rather oriented towards fears and anxiety facing the health crisis and on how to use the leisure time suddenly at their disposal.
- 2) **Adapting the work and re-organising production lines, transportation and support services:** Initially, many companies and services shut down totally or partially depending on the sectors. For instance, the automotive industry and airports stopped their operations in Sweden. Samhall employees working at the sites could simply not work anymore. Also, many social and support services, which are essential to persons with disabilities' everyday life such as day care facilities or education services, stopped being delivered. Companies and service providers faced several difficulties. One of them was the lack of personal protective equipment, which was prioritised for hospital and health staff, over social service providers and companies. Production lines or

¹⁸ Further information can be found on the PES website: <https://www.sepe.es/HomeSepe/que-es-el-sepe/estadisticas/contratos/estadisticas-nuevas.html>

¹⁹ See here: <https://cedris.nl/veelgestelde-vragen-over-corona/>

²⁰ See here: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2Znl_-3ahxoPXXYuql8aPQ/videos

transportation systems also had to be re-organised to include the necessary health and safety measures. Teleworking and teleassistance was also put in place rapidly to keep delivering key support services to persons and workers with disabilities, who needed it the most.

- 3) **Engaging discussion with responsible public authorities and Trade Unions:** Quite rapidly, temporary unemployment benefits were adopted and took over wage payments and social security contributions of employees with disabilities (APF Entreprises (France); Cedris (Netherlands); Groep Maatwerk (Belgium/Flanders); Ilunion (Spain); Samhall (Sweden)). All D-WISE members of the Observatory also engaged into discussion with their respective Ministries. They shared their emerging concerns over workers with disabilities' safety at work and financial difficulties due to disappearance of services/operations. In Spain, Ilunion took part to the dialogue on social economy to guarantee to continuity of operations of Special Employment Centres (Centros Especiales de Empleo - CEEs). Groep Maatwerk contributed to the elaboration of the "Flemish plan for custom work companies" and deployed with trade unions a "sector protocol", which included an overview of measures to support their members in implementing a safe working environment (Belgium). Besides, Ilunion (Spain) engaged into discussions between the CEEs, their clients-companies and the trade unions to quickly find out how to practically implement the health and safety measures in the special employment centres (CEEs).
- 4) **Disappearance and creation of economic opportunities:** Some companies and organisations, which the Observatory members provide services to and/or place workers with disabilities in, are directly impacted by the crisis and its consequent GDP decrease. Some of the Observatory members for example had to implement "temporary unemployment" measures for their employees, which allowed the workers to still receive 70% of their salary through an income allowance of the government, as well as a temporary unemployment fee from their employer (Groep Maatwerk (Belgium/Flanders). But economic opportunities have also either increased in terms of work quantity or opened up and been ceased by D-WISE. For instance:
 - Ilunion (Spain) provides laundry for the uniforms of health/hospital staff and has continued to do so over the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. This has been a massive influx of work because the medical professionals were required to change their equipment more often. Ilunion also had to adapt its internal processes to ensure that its staff stays safe amid washing potentially infected material. This was also true of some Ilunion hotels being medicalised and hosting Covid-19 infected patients. Very successfully, Ilunion has adapted to the rapidly emerging demands.
 - Similarly, Samhall has seen its cleaning contracts increasing and thousands of new jobs were temporarily created in this sector.
 - APF Enterprises (France), Cedris (Netherlands), Groep Maatwerk (Belgium/Flanders) and Samhall (Sweden) now produce personal protective equipment such as masks or clothes, safety garments and hygiene products. This is a new sector that has seen immediate growth for each of the three organisations.

Overall, this proves the resilience and agility of D-WISE to respond to urgent emerging needs in a health crisis context. This also demonstrates that workers with disabilities can adapt rapidly to new job tasks as well as to new work settings and processes, when supported adequately. Longer term reflections are now around adapting to the new economic trends, and better understanding the Covid-19 health related risks for some groups of persons with disabilities.

In a recent paper, EASPD has identified gaps in public authorities support such as: "no guarantees on covering current costs to keep the services running; Threat of funding cuts as the services are no longer fully in line with the service contracts; Postponement of funding opportunities, which could lead to financial gaps; Little support to ensure frontline care and support staff have access to the basic personal protective equipment they need (masks, etc)"²¹. Other barriers faced by D-WISE are linked

²¹ European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD), EASPD Snapshot Report: Impact of COVID-19 on Disability Services in Europe, 2020.

to the “failure of many public authorities to include the not-for-profit social service providers in the economic measures they are providing to other businesses”²². Finally, access to EU and national funding to cover non-foreseen costs and/or additional expenses due to the Covid-19 pandemic is a strong concern for D-WISE.

Despite this rather grim picture of the situation, “the good news is that we already know what works. Fundamentally, we need social justice, effective inclusion, equality of opportunities and decent work.”²³ The key lies into ensuring continuous employment of men and women with disabilities during the likely to come economic crisis resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, the Observatory members believes that the crisis could act as a catalyst to reinforce the social economy sector and its specific approach balancing social goals, economic dimension and participatory governance. D-WISE and other WISE target one the most disadvantaged part of the working population. The EU should reinforce their capacities to cope with the effects of the health and economic crises.

Policy recommendations:

- ⇒ Collect data and support research aiming to understand how the Covid-19 pandemic impact D-WISE and the right to work of men and women with disabilities, taking a gender-sensitive and intersectional approach
- ⇒ Facilitate D-WISE actions aiming to ensure protection from Covid-19 for its workers through disability-inclusive occupational safety and health measures, as well as to create and implement alternative working arrangements or reviewing onsite working arrangements such as teleworking, flexible working hours, paid leave and transportation to work places, or any other appropriate measures
- ⇒ Ensure that non-discrimination on the basis of disability and work integration of persons with disabilities remain a requirement for EU funding allocation, in particular for the current initiatives taken to support employment retention and promotion
- ⇒ Raise awareness of all employers that the talents of persons with disabilities can be used in these times as well and that workers with disabilities can actually be “co-creators of COVID-19 responses”²⁴
- ⇒ In line with EU international obligations, mainstream disability and work integration of persons with disabilities in all EU plans, measures and funds resulting from the Covid-19 health and economic crises such as in the European Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative (CRII and CRII+), the new REACT-EU plan and the Solidarity Fund
- ⇒ Ensure that the MFF, as well as European Structural and Investment Funds as well as the ‘Next Generation EU’ provide sufficient funding and investments to support continuous operations of D-WISE and facilitate access to work and employment for persons with disabilities
- ⇒ Ensure that Member States allow a flexible use of the existing EU funds to meet the real needs of D-WISE such as the ESF to answer the immediate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis
- ⇒ National authorities considering relaxing requirements or extending deadlines during the COVID-19 crisis regarding the compliance with the minimum rate of workers with disabilities. [In Spain, for a CEE to be certified as such, and to be eligible for subsidies, at least 70% of the staff must be pwd, what is periodically monitored. During the COVID crisis this percentage has been sometimes difficult to maintain on a monthly basis, so in some cases, such as in Madrid, the CEEs will only have to prove the required rate by Dec 31]
- ⇒ During times of crises such as the current one, national authorities should consider offering more flexibility on requirements of minimum amounts of workers with disabilities required

²² Ibid

²³ International Labour Organisation (ILO), No one left behind, not now, not ever Persons with disabilities in the COVID-19 response, 2020.

²⁴ International Labour Organisation (ILO), Policy Brief: COVID-19 and the World of Work, 2020.

in specific working environments in order to receive subsidies. Many persons with disabilities are considered risk patients, which made it difficult for companies to maintain the minimum amount of workers with disabilities in its workforce in order to be eligible for subsidies by authorities.

- ⇒ Allow the use of EU funding to:
 - Ensure the continuous professional development of workers with disabilities throughout the crisis and support them acquire skills for post-crisis work, for instance through training and skills acquisition programmes for workers with disabilities.
 - Provide additional support to those workers with disabilities who are likely to be more impacted by the pandemic and crisis, such as persons with psychosocial disabilities or in high support needs.
- ⇒ Finance social services and related staff to ensure that persons with disabilities can continue exercising their right to work true throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.
- ⇒ Ensure continuous dialogue with all stakeholders such as social economy organisations, D-WISE, service providers organisations and organisations of persons with disabilities to understand the evolving needs of the actors throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

9. About the Observatory

Created in 2018, the European Observatory for Inclusive Employment and Sustainable Development Goals aims to build an EU partnership gathering European D-WISE. The Observatory objectives are to provide a more granular understanding of how these organisations and companies contribute to tackle lack of employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. It is also about identifying the challenges and opportunities that they currently face in a rapidly changing work environment.

Members include:

National member organisations from Spain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden and Slovenia	
European network partners	
Observer organisations	

In its first phase of actions over 2018-20, the Observatory analysed how these organisations and companies provide work and employment opportunities to men and women with disabilities and effectively include them into the labour market and society in Europe. This resulted in the following set of deliverables:

- International legislation overview - Access to work and employment of persons with disabilities in international human rights and labour standards, October 2019
- European legislation overview - Context and Relevance of the EU Regulatory Framework to Employment and Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities, June 2019
- Towards inclusive employment of persons with disabilities - A comparative study of six social economy organisations and companies in Europe, June 2020, by the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research
- Six case studies presenting a specific practice for each of the six national members of the Observatory
- The above listed policy recommendations