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TO THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT,
THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND
THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

Equal opportunities for people with disabilities: A European Action Plan

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A crucial issue for the success of the European Year of People with Disabilities 2003 is whether it will produce sustainable results beyond 2003. The European Commission, together with all the partners involved in the Year, wants to build on its momentum and achievements while confronting new and acute challenges. This Communication aims to achieve a sustainable and operational approach to disability issues in the enlarged Europe. It will provide a reference point and framework for reinforcement of the disability dimension in all relevant EU policies, while supporting or stimulating policies at national level.

The present Communication accordingly outlines forward-looking EU initiatives aimed at the further inclusion of people with disabilities in an enlarged EU economy and society as a whole. Three operational objectives are central to the proposed approach: achieving full application of the Equal treatment in Employment and Occupation Directive (2000/78/EC), reinforcing mainstreaming of disability issues in relevant Community policies, and improving accessibility for all.

In particular, this Communication introduces a rolling multi-annual Action Plan with the time horizon of 2010. The goal of the Action Plan is to mainstream disability issues into relevant Community policies and develop concrete actions in crucial areas to enhance the integration of people with disabilities. As an instrument to support mainstreaming of disability issues in key EU policies, the Commission will publish a biennial report on the overall situation of people with disabilities in the enlarged EU, taking on board new developments in the Member States. At the same time, the Commission proposes to reinforce the involvement of stakeholders and key players in the policy dialogue in order to bring about far reaching and lasting changes within the economy and society as a whole.

As employment remains the most critical factor for social inclusion, the first phase of implementation of the EU Disability Action Plan - which is due to be developed in 2004 and 2005 - will focus on creating the conditions necessary to promote the employment of people with disabilities, while making the mainstream labour market more accessible to them across the enlarged Union. Accordingly, the first phase of this Action Plan will concentrate on four concrete employment-related priority actions:

- access to, and retention in, employment including the fight against discrimination;
- lifelong learning to support and increase employability, adaptability, personal development and active citizenship;
- new technologies to empower people with disabilities and therefore facilitate access to employment;
- accessibility to the public built environment to improve participation in the work place and integration into the economy and society.

The Commission biennial Report on the overall situation of people with disabilities in the enlarged Europe will be used as a basis for identifying new priorities to be addressed in the following phases of the Action Plan in the light of the impact of EU policies on the situation of people with disabilities.

2. THE POLICY CONTEXT

2.1. The overall EU approach: objectives and means

The EU's long-standing commitment towards its disabled citizens goes hand in hand with a new approach to disability: from seeing people with disabilities as the passive recipients of compensation, society has come to recognise their legitimate demands for equal rights and to realise that participation relates directly to insertion. Contributing to shaping society in a fully inclusive way is therefore the overall EU objective: in this respect, the fight against discrimination and the promotion of the participation of people with disabilities into economy and society play a fundamental role.

To fulfil these objectives the Commission is developing a coherent and integrated approach which makes use of a mix of instruments. In the context of rapid economic and social restructuring, the Commission is particularly committed to making full use of voluntary co-operation methods which provide for adequate participation of all stakeholders: Member States, social partners, civil society, etc. This is notably the case of the open method of co-ordination in the areas of employment, social inclusion and lifelong learning, which are crucial to people with disabilities and where common objectives can be translated into national policies and good practices spread.

- **Enhancing respect for diversity through individual rights**

Recognising and protecting the rights of people with disabilities is at the core of EU actions. Article 13 of the EC Treaty enables the Community to bring forward legislation aiming to combat discrimination, inter alia, on the grounds of disability. Action has already been launched through the EU Directive for equal treatment in employment and occupation¹ as well as through the EU Anti-Discrimination Programme in particular. For its part, the Charter of Fundamental Rights specifically protects the rights of disabled people and its suggested incorporation in the future EU Treaty is a key development. The Charter makes political, economic and civil rights indivisible from social rights. Its Articles 21 and 26 set out the rights of people with disabilities. Article 26 in particular recognises as a fundamental right "the right of persons with disabilities to benefit from measures designed to ensure their independence, social and occupational integration and participation in the life of the community".

- **Making the environment more accessible through elimination of barriers**

The EU also sees disability as a social construct. The EU social model of disability stresses the environmental barriers in society which prevent the full participation of people with disabilities in society. These barriers must be removed on the basis of the Commission communication of May 2000 "Towards a barrier free Europe for people with disabilities"² which has important implications for the way in which policies and law in relation to disability are now developed. Accessibility and mobility issues are now dealt with in the light of equal opportunities and the right to participate. In particular, it has become crucial to ensure the removal of technical and legal barriers to the effective participation of people with disabilities in the knowledge-based economy and society to empower them to tap the information society potential.

¹ Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000, OJ L 303 of 2 December 2000.

² COM(2000) 284 final of 12.5.2000.

- **Encouraging inclusion through employment: the European Employment Strategy, the structural funds and the modernisation of social protection**

Entry into employment is crucial for the integration of people with disabilities in the economy and society at large. Participating in the labour market allows people to earn a living and to participate more fully. It also gives individuals additional dignity and a greater degree of independence. The European Employment Strategy is contributing to a general shift in emphasis away from disability-specific programmes towards a more mainstreamed approach. Most Member States' active policies designed to combat massive unemployment have moved towards more personalised policies tailored to addressing the needs of individuals, including those of particularly vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities. The European Social Fund mainstream programmes and the Community initiative EQUAL, as the main financial tools through which the Community translates into action its aims as regards employment of people with disabilities, are financing a wide range of actions for the integration of disabled people into the labour market. Moreover, the Commission is seeking to secure continued and more extensive rights of residence for workers with disabilities as compared with other categories of EU migrant workers.

Modern social protection systems are essential to provide adequate support to disabled persons who are unable to get sufficient income from work, and to promote access to employment for those who are excluded from the labour market but have the capacity to earn their living. Thus greater attention is being paid to the provision of work-related benefit incentives to make work pay and to overcome the effects of 'benefit traps'. Such a shift from long-term dependency on passive welfare benefits to active labour market measures will, if adequately fitted to individual situations, have a positive effect on the economic situation of the beneficiaries as well as on their self-esteem. It may also improve the structure and quality of public expenditure and contribute to making it more sustainable in the medium-long term.

In this respect, the corporate sector plays an important role in promoting better integration, to the benefit of both the companies themselves and disabled employees and customers. Progressive integration strategies are now being developed, companies considering that costs incurred in adaptations to the workplace and to goods and services are by nature transitory. For its part, the Commission is keen to support efforts to make the strategic business case of disability recognised more widely.

- **Fostering social integration and fighting against marginalisation: the European Social Inclusion Process**

Within the broad context of the Lisbon strategy, boosting equal opportunities for people with disabilities goes beyond integration through employment. In this respect, the new social inclusion process, which was initiated by the European Council of Nice on the basis of the open method of co-ordination, has the potential to help Member States to fight more effectively against the marginalisation of disabled people while ensuring that the most vulnerable are not excluded from access to basic rights, services and resources. Having examined the second round of National Action Plans for 2003-2005, the Commission is preparing a new Joint Report for adoption in the run up to the 2004 Spring Council. Moreover the Commission will be actively engaged within the Social Protection Committee in the establishment of appropriate indicators to measure progress towards eradication of poverty and social exclusion.

- **Empowering and enhancing structures in society which sustain participation: mainstreaming of the disability perspective into relevant sectors of policy**

Supporting citizens with disabilities to become an effective part of the economy and society as a whole means participation in the mainstream for everyone for whom this is possible and in every area where this is possible - rather than segregation into disability-specific arrangements. Mainstreaming requires well-informed policy-making and wide participation in the policy process to ensure that disabled people, and their diverse needs and experiences, are at the heart of policy-making each time it has an impact, directly or indirectly, on their lives.

It should be noted in particular that health care systems are now called to give a new importance to the objective of enabling older and/or disabled people to live active, healthy and independent lives further into old age. An emphasis on preventive strategies including healthier nutrition and physical and mental activity is needed, starting with the lifestyles of the young and the middle-aged. The Commission and the Council adopted a joint report on supporting national strategies for the future of health care and care for the elderly on 10 March 2003³ establishing the bases for further policy co-operation around three key objectives: accessibility for all, quality, and financial sustainability of health care systems. By spring 2004, the Commission will issue a Communication setting out proposals for further co-operation among Member States, which will be an opportunity to mainstream disability issues in this important area.

2.2. Facts and trends

Raising awareness on the contribution to society made by people with disabilities is an important aspect of the European Union approach. Questions of measurement are therefore crucial in this respect. The task is not easy. The definitions and the criteria for determining disability are currently laid down in national legislation and administrative practices and differ across the current Member States according to their perceptions of, and approaches to, disability. A comparative study commissioned by the European Commission⁴ illustrates the diversity of people with disabilities as well as the many alternative definitions of disability. This constitutes an obstacle to the collection of comparable and aggregated data and demonstrates that there is considerable scope for exchanges of information and policy learning in this area.

³ SOC 116.

⁴ Comparative Study of Definitions of Disability, Brunel University, 2003.

One possibility is to look at the results of the surveys which have been performed at EU level. Figures consolidated by the European Community Household Panel survey on the basis of self-declaration of disability appear to be quite consistent over the years. They show that 14.5 percent of the EU's working-age population (i.e. aged between 16 and 64) report some form of disability.⁵ This means that almost 15 percent of women (aged 16-64) and 14 percent of men (aged 16-64) report either a moderate or severe disability. For 14 Member States⁶, this amounts to approximately 26 million people of working age. In the 10 Candidate Countries, it is reported that 25 percent of the population⁷ experiences some form of disability. These figures clearly reveal that people with disabilities are not a minority. Therefore the issue of inclusion of people with disabilities is to be seen as an issue of concern to the whole of society and which requires the contribution of all.

These figures also highlight two important issues.—First, there is a correlation between ageing and disability. Today 63 percent of people with disabilities are older than 45 and the incidence of disability is likely to increase, since many people develop disabilities in later life. 20 percent of people aged between 60 and 64 have a severe disability; 17.1 percent report a moderate disability, while only 6.3 percent of those who report no disability belong to the age group 60-64⁸. Demographic trends indicate better health care for disabled adults alongside longer life expectancy. It is therefore clear that the number of people with disabilities in the European Union is increasing - and will continue to do so - as a consequence of the ageing of the population. All this points to the need to increase opportunities for all in the area of accessibility, using global solutions articulated notably on the principle of Design for All.

Secondly, figures reveal an important untapped potential for the development of economic growth. Only 42 percent of people with disabilities are employed, compared to almost 65 percent of non-disabled people, and as many as 52 percent of disabled people are economically inactive, compared to only 28 percent of non disabled people⁹. While disability remains a significant obstacle to inclusion through work, these figures illustrate the magnitude of the task. By eliminating barriers to the labour market, it will be possible to create opportunities.

⁵ "Disability and social participation in Europe", European Commission, Eurostat, theme 3 "Population and social conditions", 2001, ISBN 92-894-1577-0.

⁶ Sweden was not included in the analysis because no European Community Household Panel (ECHP) data on Sweden were available.

⁷ Candidate Countries Eurobarometer 2002.1: the social situation in countries applying for European Union membership (page 127).

⁸ See footnote 5.

⁹ Study on "The employment situation of people with disabilities in the EU", European Commission, Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs, 2001. Data source: European Household Panel, 1996.

2.3. Main EU achievements so far

- **Contributing to the elimination of discrimination using Article 13 of the Treaty**

On the basis of a Commission proposal, the Council adopted on 27 November 2000 the Directive 2000/78/EC¹⁰, "establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation". The Directive prohibits any discrimination, be it direct or indirect, on the grounds of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation. With regard to disability, this Directive recognises that the failure to provide reasonable accommodation in the workplace can constitute discrimination. In practical terms 'reasonable accommodation' includes measures to adapt the workplace to individual workers with a disability, for example by adapting premises and equipment, as well as patterns of working time etc., in order to facilitate their access to employment. Member States have until December 2003 to transpose the provisions of the Directive into national law. They also have the possibility of extending for a further three years the transposition of the Directive as regards its provisions on disability and age.

The Community action programme to combat discrimination (2001-2006)¹¹ aims to support the Member States in their fight against discrimination. It allows the Commission to finance a number of activities to combat discrimination on the ground of disability, such as network and partnership building, presidential conferences, national information days organised by Member States to raise awareness of developments in the disability field, campaigns, studies, etc., while seeking the maximum involvement of disabled persons themselves and of their representative organisations. The Programme also co-funds the running costs of several European-level NGOs representative of people with disabilities, such as the European Disability Forum (EDF), etc.

- **Promoting the rights of people with disabilities at the United Nations level and through EC development co-operation**

The Commission supports global efforts to secure the full and equal enjoyment of human rights for disabled persons, notably by means of a United Nations Convention to promote and protect the human rights of people with disabilities. Recognising that international human rights should be tailored to the circumstances faced by people with disabilities, this initiative is in line with the Community rights-based approach to disability. These have taken place on the basis of Article 13 of the EC Treaty, which enables the Community to take initiatives to combat discrimination on the grounds of disability. The Commission has taken a positive stance towards such an instrument and contributes actively to its development. In January 2003 it issued a Communication "Towards a United Nations legally binding instrument to promote and protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities"¹². This Communication sets out the European Commission's support for this instrument and explains why the European Community's active participation in its development is indispensable. In particular, the Commission has requested negotiating directives because a part of the Convention concerns anti-discrimination, which is a Community competence since the Amsterdam Treaty and Article 13. The European Parliament supports the Communication from the Commission and considers notably that the adoption of a thematic International Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities would enhance the visibility of the issue

¹⁰ Official Journal, L 303, 2.12.2000.

¹¹ Council Decision 2000/750/EC of 27 November 2000, OJ L 303 of 2 December 2000.

¹² COM(2003) 16 final of 24.1.2003.

of disability in the current human rights system and would accommodate the differences entailed by disability.

The European Commission is also encouraging EC delegations in developing countries to make further efforts to ensure that disability is tackled in the framework of development co-operation. A guidance note on this issue has been sent to all delegations.

- **Fostering free movement**

Important implications for the mobility of people with disabilities, and for their ability to take advantage of one of the founding freedoms of the Treaty arise from the free movement of persons. This freedom becomes even more relevant in an enlarged Union of 25 Member States and in the context of increasing globalisation of economies and of societies. The Commission has already committed itself to reviewing the current exemption of disability benefits from the exportability provisions of Regulation EEC 1408/71 with a view to reducing the number of such benefits that are currently not exportable.

- **Preparing for enlargement**

To join the Union, Candidate Countries must incorporate in their policies and practices the European Union social "acquis". In this respect, the situation with regard to people with disabilities was assessed in the 2001 and 2002 in the context of the Regular Reports. The European Year of People with Disabilities 2003 was opened to Candidate Countries, allowing them to take part in the Year's activities as far as possible. However, the need to acquire knowledge about the situation and identify overall needs of people with disabilities in the Acceding and Candidate countries remains vital. This will have major implications for the development of modern and effective disability strategies, notably as regards supply of support systems and community-based care services adapted to the specific circumstances of each country. The Commission has already launched a study to analyse the situation of people with disabilities in residential institutions in the EU Member States and Acceding and Candidate Countries that will also take Human Rights aspects into consideration. Moreover, the open method of co-ordination currently applicable in the European Employment Strategy as well as in the European Social Inclusion Process will support learning processes and allow for the development of appropriate approaches towards the achievement of the EU common goals.

The Commission and the European Disability Forum are also jointly engaged in a capacity-building project for disabled people's organisations in the Acceding and Candidate Countries, which is financed by the Phare programme. This is an important area of work that will greatly facilitate the enlargement process in relation to disability by improving understanding between the stakeholders at all levels. Establishing a dialogue with the different stakeholders to identify where the needs and possibilities for co-operation are, while encouraging the setting-up of partnerships between the candidate countries and EU counter-parts and projects will be an important part in taking forward the results of this project. Such a dialogue should build on what progress has been made to empower disabled people themselves to become involved in the policy decision making processes which impact on their lives. Finally, participation in Community action programmes provides a useful preparation for accession. In a number of fields, the Acceding and Candidate Countries have been invited since 2002 to participate in the EU programmes related to promoting employment; combating of social exclusion, fighting against discrimination; improving access to education and training, and promoting gender equality.

2.4. The impulse created by the European Year of People with Disabilities 2003

To strengthen its commitment and raise awareness of disability issues more generally, the EU decided to adopt 2003 as the European Year of People with Disabilities (EYPD). The concept developed by the Commission and the Member States for the European Year offered disabled people at national, regional and local level a unique opportunity to bring to the fore issues of concern to them and to contribute to focusing policy priorities and encouraging specific actions. The Year was set up as a people's campaign, built on a strong alliance of non-governmental organisations representative of people with disabilities, such as the European Disability Forum and disability organisations at national level; public administration commitment; social partners, corporate support and organisations of service providers. The EYPD thus has had the capacity to mobilise EU society as a whole. Special mention should be made of the significant commitment and support of the European Parliament, which notably organised an European Parliament of Disabled People; the Economic and Social Committee; the Committee of Regions and also of international organisations such as the Council of Europe etc.

The EYPD itself was designed as a very inclusive process and structured in a unique way so that disabled people themselves were able to input into defining the concept of the Year, and their organisations had a critical role in shaping the corresponding campaign at EU and national levels, through their involvement in national co-ordinating bodies, designing the key messages of the EYPD, choosing its logo and slogan, etc. Thousands of events have been held throughout the participating countries to promote the rights of people with disabilities and to raise awareness of the barriers they face daily in society. Actions took place simultaneously at European, national, regional and local level involving a great diversity of stakeholders: people with disabilities, their families and their representative organisations, non-disabled people, decision-makers at all levels, the social partners and relevant stakeholders from the public and private sector.

Through the many conferences and public debates which took place all over Europe and were often relayed by the press and featured on the Internet, the European Year offered a unique occasion for people with disabilities and disability organisations at all levels to promote the rights and full participation of people with disabilities in society and the economy. The debates launched have demonstrated that people with disabilities across the EU have many common concerns and above all, that these issues are of concern to society as a whole. This is notably the case as regards stigmatisation and social exclusion; the need for greater empowerment, mobility and accessibility; enhanced quality of life and appropriate care. The situation of children with disabilities, the multiple discrimination of women with disabilities¹³, the role of families in the management of disability and the specific situation of young disabled people were also highlighted.

In the framework of actions in favour of youth, the European Commission co-financed a conference organised by the Greek Presidency entitled "A barrier-free Europe for young people" bringing together 150 youths to discuss the themes of the White Paper on Youth (participation, information, voluntary work)¹⁴.

¹³ An important congress on "Women and Disability" took place in Valencia (SP) in 2003.

¹⁴ http://www.edf-feph.org/en/policy/y_pol.htm

It also appeared that the mass media play a very relevant role in overcoming stereotypes of disabled people. The Greek Presidency, in co-operation with the European Commission and organisations of people with disabilities, organised a European Year conference on this critical issue. As a result, a "European Declaration on Media and Disability" was approved in June 2003. The decision was also taken to establish a European network on media and disability to continue improving the image of disabled people in the media, the levels of employment, and access to the media.

The exceptional mobilisation of stakeholders throughout the Year demonstrated a broad desire for a change of gear in achieving equal opportunities and the EYPD has induced a new political impetus to promote the further integration of people with disabilities. Apart from the transposition of the EC Directive establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation, new policy developments have been announced and are currently taking place in the Member States. These do not only concern the updating of existing laws and the passing of new ones, but also promote new approaches, innovative methods and positive measures. Here are some examples:

- **France** is reviewing its 1975 laws on compensation and social coverage and will also take measures on access to certain services.
- **Spain** has designed a specific action plan for people with disabilities (2003-2007); a new national plan on accessibility (2004-2012); a plan on employment for people with disabilities. Spain will also adopt two new laws: one on equality of opportunities and non-discrimination and one on economic and inheritance rights of people with disabilities.
- **Germany** is implementing the new Act on the Equal Treatment of Disabled People at the same time as rolling out the implementation of earlier framework legislation.
- **Greece** is elaborating an action plan on social inclusion until 2006. Moreover, in the light of the Paralympic Games 2004 (Athens), the Government is undertaking a set of practical improvements and institutional reforms for people with disabilities.
- **Portugal** intends to present a new fundamental and general law on disability and chronic illness; a law on non-governmental organisations representing people with disabilities and people with chronic illnesses; a national action plan promoting accessibility (2004-2011).
- The **Netherlands** is developing an action plan on disability policies. A new law on equal treatment should come into force by the end of 2003.
- **Italy** is working on developing benefits for families with people with disabilities and trying to facilitate the assessment of disabilities for administrative purposes. The Italian Parliament is discussing a governmental bill on e-accessibility to websites as well a draft law on guardianship.
- **Finland** has adopted a brand new government plan and has produced a guide to help people with disabilities to recognise their own human rights and situations where discrimination occurs.

- **Sweden** has, according to its National Action Plan on Disability Policies, implemented guidelines of accessibility to national authorities, a national Programme for improving the responsive skills of public servants and elected representatives.
- **Ireland** will publish a new general bill on disability which will include provisions for independent needs assessment; a bill on education for people with disabilities has been published.
- The **UK** has put in place regulations to implement Directive EC/2000/78 and the final parts of the Disability Discrimination Act in October 2004. The UK plans to introduce a draft Bill this year to extend disability legislation further.
- **Luxembourg** has passed a new law in July 2003 concerning labour regulations applicable to people with disabilities and creating an income for severely disabled persons.
- **Austria** has issued a detailed report on the situation of people with disabilities and is preparing a new Act on the Equal Treatment of People with Disabilities.
- **Belgium** has recently adopted a law on anti-discrimination, which will be implemented namely through the Centre for Equal Opportunities and with the support of the federate bodies with territorial responsibilities for the integration of people with disabilities.
- **Denmark** produced an action plan on disability and secured a budget to create 800 to 1200 new accommodations for people with disabilities over the next two years to allow them to leave institutions.

In conclusion, the European Year has provided a stepping stone for Member States to give impulse to new policy developments towards achieving equal opportunities for people with disabilities, triggering a definitive shift towards more pro-active measures in favour of people with disabilities while laying the foundations on which future long-term action can be built. At EU level too, the European Year has acted as a lever to take forward a number of important policy initiatives in key areas related to removing barriers to integration. In particular, the Commission has set up a group of independent experts on the key issue of accessibility to the built environment, whose report has put forward a number of recommendations.

2.5. Strategic objectives for the future

The Commission's major goal in the years to come will be to boost equal opportunities for people with disabilities. In this way a lasting dynamic will be created for the full inclusion of people with disabilities into society while shaping the European social construct in such a way that it will provide real equality of opportunities.

Most actions in the field of disability are principally a matter of Member State responsibility and most effectively dealt with at national level. Therefore, the Commission's strategic goal is to be achieved by three complementary and mutually supportive operational objectives, making full use of the Commission's ability to act so as to maximise the EU contribution. These operational objectives are:

- **Achieving full application of the Equal Treatment in Employment and Occupation Directive and launching the debate on the future strategy to combat discrimination**

The Commission will monitor the transposition of the legislative provisions on discrimination in the Member States and in the acceding countries within the deadlines agreed by the Council. In particular, the Commission will pro-actively monitor the transposition, and ensure the proper application, of Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation so as to ensure that all victims of discrimination can benefit from its full protection. It is to be stressed that the effective implementation of this Directive is a core element in the Commission's overall approach to disability and a major challenge, given its innovative concepts. This Directive is set to become a major element in achieving equality of opportunities for people with disabilities. As such, the Directive will also challenge the misconception that disability is equal to inability or lack of ability, and over time, if applied properly, should therefore contribute towards removing the prejudice, fear and ignorance which surrounds disability.

The Commission intends to launch a public consultation (Green Paper) in Spring 2004 on the future strategy to combat discrimination. This paper will take stock of progress made in EU anti-discrimination policy and will raise issues regarding future policy development. It will also address the new challenges posed by the enlargement of the EU.

- **Successful mainstreaming of disability issues in relevant Community policies and existing processes**

Modern developments in disability policies show an increasing tendency towards mainstreaming to better incorporate the rights of people with disabilities and to promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities. The mainstreaming strategy implies the integration of the disability perspective into every stage of policy processes – from design and implementation to monitoring and evaluation – with a view to promoting equal opportunities for people with disabilities. In parallel to mainstreaming disability, persistent inequalities require the implementation of specific actions in favour of people with disabilities. Even if considerable progress has been made regarding the situation of people with disabilities, much remains to be done and renewed efforts are needed. As employment remains the primary and most effective way of creating lasting improvements for people with disabilities and of achieving their full social inclusion, special attention will be given to the mainstreaming of disability issues in employment related policies, especially in education and lifelong learning¹⁵, using all means through which the Commission has the possibility to act.

- **Improving "Accessibility for all"**

Mainstreaming should focus in particular on the area of accessibility and should be clearly linked with the principle of Design For All. Accessibility to goods, services and the built environment is a central issue for people with disabilities which is also of concern to all EU citizens. The Commission intends to promote the elaboration of European technical standards, standardisation documents and other more general guidelines giving technical expression to the concept of "Accessibility for all", which is crucial for the further integration of people with disabilities into the economy and society. It will also encourage efforts to raise awareness among standardisation stakeholders on the concept of "Accessibility for all" and the corresponding market opportunities.

¹⁵ Including education through sport, to which the 2004 European Year has been devoted.

In order to achieve the above operational objectives, the Commission will develop a rolling and multi-annual Action Plan. Based mainly upon mainstreaming within various EU policy areas, this Action Plan is defined with a time horizon of 2010. A progressive approach will allow sufficient time for challenging actions to be developed over the medium-term and to profit from initiatives taken within the Lisbon strategy.

The successive steps of this Action Plan will be defined and supported by a biennial report examining the overall situation of people with disabilities. The Commission commits itself to producing this document on a biennial basis in order to report specifically, and at regular intervals, on the overall situation of people with disabilities in the enlarged Europe. The report will seek to provide a tool for all those to be involved in the policy decision-making process to increase their knowledge and awareness of the situation of people with disabilities. In particular, this will lead to better determination of progress, identification of perspectives for the coming years and examination of possible avenues for future policy development in the light of the impact of EU policies on the situation of people with disabilities. The Report will therefore be used as a basis for identifying new priorities to be addressed in the next phases of the Action Plan.

3. THE EU DISABILITY ACTION PLAN

3.1. The rationale

This rolling and multi-annual Disability Action Plan will allow for the planning, implementation and follow-up of priority actions which can contribute significantly to meeting the opportunities and challenges signalled above as regards economic and social integration, equal access and effective participation. Priority actions will therefore be complementary to each other so as to enable a coherent set of activities to be developed at EU, and national or decentralised level.

The first phase of this Action Plan will start at the end of the EYPD and will last two years, over 2004 and 2005. It will concentrate on creating the conditions necessary to promote the employment of people with disabilities while delivering empowerment in this regard. By creating such conditions and strengthening the rights-based approach, the results arising from implementation of this first phase will reinforce and complement Directive 2000/78/EC on equal treatment in employment and occupation. Therefore priority actions will address the various stages of the so-called "employment chain" to make the right to work equally accessible to people with disabilities.

The Commission has identified the priority areas of intervention for the first phase of this Action Plan, which are grouped under the following four complementary pillars:

- Access to, and remaining in, employment.
- Lifelong learning in support of employability, adaptability, personal development and active citizenship of people with disabilities.
- Using the potential of new technologies, which play a crucial role in ensuring equal opportunities and mobility in the economy, in empowering people with disabilities.

- Accessibility to the public built environment, which is a pre-condition for participation in the workplace and mobility in the economy and society.

The following sections contain a set of intended actions to address the outstanding challenges and new needs for improving the employment rate and the better integration of people with disabilities into the economy and into society. The list of actions is a non-exhaustive illustration of the potential of the Action Plan. It should ensure full transparency concerning the priorities and activities for 2004-2005.

3.2. The first phase of the EU Disability Action Plan: 2004-2005

3.2.1. Access to, and remaining in, employment

The impact of Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation will be very great. It will require major changes to existing rules in some Member States. It has huge implications for employers - public and private - and their employment practices towards people with disabilities, in view of the provisions on "reasonable accommodation". It is therefore important that the key players - policy-makers, government officials, non-governmental organisations, employees, and employers - are made aware of their new rights and responsibilities. The sensitisation of political and public opinion is therefore central to ensuring the success of the Directive, and in June 2003 the Commission launched a high profile information campaign in all Member States to inform employers and employees of their new rights in the workplace.

Under the auspices of the EYPD, in June 2003 the Ministers of Social Affairs and Employment adopted a resolution on promoting the employment and social integration of people with disabilities¹⁶. The resolution calls on Member States, the Commission and the social partners¹⁷ to continue efforts to remove barriers to the integration and participation of people with disabilities in the labour market, by enforcing equal treatment measures and improving integration and participation at all levels of the educational and training system.

¹⁶ Council Resolution 2003/C 175/01 of 15 July 2003. OJ C 175 of 24.7.2003.

¹⁷ In the joint Declaration they issued as a contribution for the European Year of People with Disabilities, the European inter-professional Social Partners affirmed their commitment to giving impetus to the perception of the occupational integration of people with disabilities as a shared interest by both enterprises and employees.

The successful implementation of the Lisbon agenda calls for the employment policies of Member States to foster, in a balanced manner, three complementary and mutually supportive objectives of full employment, quality and productivity at work, and social cohesion and inclusion. All these objectives are clearly relevant for the integration of people with disabilities into the labour market. In fact, one of the overarching objectives is the concept of an inclusive labour market that demands the effective integration of disabled persons and all people at a disadvantage.

In addition, the guidelines for Member States' employment policies¹⁸ in the revised European Employment Strategy (EES) provide, on the priority for action 7, for the promotion of the integration of, and the combating of discrimination against, people at disadvantage in the labour market, such as people with disabilities. In particular, policies will aim to achieve by 2010 a significant reduction in each Member State in the unemployment gaps for people at a disadvantage, according to national definitions. Given the clear link between issues of concern to people with disabilities and the achievement of the three objectives of the "new" EES, it will be a top priority of this Action Plan to mainstream disability into employment policy across the board. Accordingly, people with disabilities will also be supported under further priorities, notably activation/prevention and labour supply. Member States are called on to explore the labour force potential of people with disabilities, taking into account the specific situation of women with disabilities and of persons with intellectual disabilities.

Moreover, the European Social Fund mainstream programmes and the Community initiative EQUAL, as the main financial tools through which the Community translates into action its aims as regards employment of people with disabilities, finance a wide range of actions for the integration of disabled people into the labour market and test innovative approaches on specific aspects of the integration into the labour market. In the framework of EQUAL's thematic activities, five European Thematic Groups corresponding to its horizontal priorities have been created: Employability, Entrepreneurship, Adaptability, Equal Opportunities and Asylum Seekers. A particular focus has been given by the Employability Thematic Group which has created a Working Group on Disability.

Nonetheless special needs do exist, and will always exist, for some people with disabilities and the Commission acknowledges that these needs must be met including, when necessary, through disability-specific labour market policies. Such efforts have also been made by the Commission in the context of Community competition policy. A Regulation on State Aid in Employment was adopted in November 2002¹⁹, under which Member States may from now on grant aid for the creation of new jobs and for the recruitment of disabled workers without having to seek the prior authorisation of the Commission. From now on, Member States may assume up to 60 percent of one year's wage cost and social security payments should a company recruit a disabled worker, and aid can also be granted to compensate for reduced productivity as well as for adaptation of premises and special assistance.

¹⁸ Council Decision 2003/578/EC on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States of 22 July 2003. OJ L 197 of 5.8.2003.

¹⁹ Commission Regulation (EC) 2204/2002 in OJ L 337, page 3, published on 13 December 2002.

People with disabilities should receive equal treatment at work and this includes equality regarding health and safety at work. People with disabilities are therefore covered by the European occupational health and safety legislation. The legislation should be applied to facilitate the employment of people with disabilities. At EU level, Directive 89/654/EEC²⁰ provides, at points 20 and 15 of annexes I and II respectively, that "workplaces must be accommodated to take account, where required, of the needs of disabled workers. This provision applies in particular to the doors, passageways, staircases, showers, washbasins, lavatories and workstations used or occupied directly by disabled workers". In addition in respect of "workplaces which have been subject, after 31 December 1992, to modifications, extensions and/or renovations, the employer must take the measures necessary to ensure that such modifications, extensions or renovations conform to the minimum levels corresponding to those described in the Annex I" (Article 5 of Directive 89/654/CEE).

The framework Directive 89/391/EEC²¹, provides, in Article 8 for the obligation for the employer to take, while carrying out their assessment of the risks, appropriate measures for first aid, fire prevention and evacuation of workers. At the same time, Directive 89/654/EEC contains in Annexes I and II, minimum provisions with regard to corridors and emergency exits as well as measures for the detection and prevention of fire.

In the light of these considerations the Commission will:

Anti-discrimination policy:

- Support awareness-raising on Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation.

The revised European Employment strategy (EES):

- Closely monitor the implementation of the revised EES by the Member States and encourage them notably to foster better access to active labour market measures for people with disabilities; to improve the offer of personal assistance and guidance when necessary; to intensify the fight against discrimination on the labour market; to avoid benefit traps; to promote the barrier-free use of new information and communication technologies and to improve the quality of learning, vocational training and access to employment.
- In this context, within the European Statistical System, the Commission will encourage further development of national statistical systems where required, in order to allow for better monitoring of disability issues in the EES paying special attention to gender-specific data.
- Publish a working paper on the implementation of the EES with respect to disabled persons. For each employment guideline, attention will be drawn to the relevance for disabled persons and good practices in this field will be indicated.

²⁰ Council Directive (EC) 89/654 of 30 November 1989 concerning the minimum safety and health requirements for the workplace (first individual directive in the meaning of Article 16 (1) of Directive 89/391/EEC), OJ L 393 of 30.12.1989.

²¹ Council Directive (CE) 89/391 of 12 June 1989 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work. OJ L 183 of 29.6.1989.

This paper will also aim at contributing to the reflections on disability mainstreaming within the Member States in the framework of the Employment Strategy.

The European Social Fund:

- Encourage Member States to take into consideration the needs of people with disabilities in the activities funded by the European Social Fund mainstream programmes and the Community initiative EQUAL.
- Encourage the dissemination of good practice and innovative measures on employment/training policies for people with disabilities notably under the ESF, the EQUAL Community initiative and in the framework of the Peer Review on employment policy, etc.

Social dialogue:

- Deepen the dialogue with the social partners at European level on their contribution to equal opportunities for people with disabilities in the labour market; in particular, encourage the social partners to ensure the concrete application of the recommendations made in their declaration of 20 January 2003, "Promoting equal opportunities and access to employment for people with disabilities", and support initiatives within the sectoral social dialogue, such as the voluntary agreement on employment of people with disabilities foreseen in the commerce sector.

Corporate Social responsibility:

- Continue to promote awareness and dissemination of Corporate Social Responsibility approaches and experiences aiming at employing disabled people as proposed in the Commission Communication on Corporate Social Responsibility²².

Mainstreaming in Health and Safety:

- Ensure that the needs of people with disabilities are taken into account in the relevant EU initiatives on health and safety.

3.2.2. Lifelong learning

Equipping people with disabilities with all available knowledge and competencies is a key element for improving access to employment, combating exclusion and improving social cohesion. This goes from basic education to other forms of lifelong learning opportunities: the Joint Inclusion Report 2001 pointed to the increasing evidence that those disabled people who are integrated into mainstream education throughout their youth are most likely to develop the general and vocational key competencies necessary to succeed later in the labour market. In particular, access to mainstream lifelong learning opportunities in the EU is still clearly insufficient notably as regards disadvantaged groups, including people with disabilities.

²² COM(2002) 347.

One way to overcome barriers to education, training and lifelong learning for people with disabilities can be the use of modern information and communication technologies (ICT) for eLearning.²³ The Commission proposal for an eLearning programme²⁴ therefore makes specific reference to the needs of people with disabilities. Moreover, the Commission's Action Plan on language learning and linguistic diversity²⁵ proposes to collect and disseminate information about good practice in the teaching of foreign languages to learners with special needs. The EU Action Plan on skills and mobility²⁶ points out that Member States should intensify support for integrating young people at a disadvantage, particularly those with disabilities and those with learning difficulties, into their education and training systems. Under the auspices of the European Year of People with Disabilities, the Education Council has adopted a resolution on equal opportunities for pupils and students with disabilities in education and training²⁷.

In the light of these considerations the Commission will:

EU Education, training and youth policies and programmes:

- In the context of the implementation of the work programme on the objectives of education and training systems²⁸, continue to give high priority to promoting the exchange of good practice and the identification of factors of success (or failure) in relation to the integration of people with disabilities in education and training.
- Give specific attention within the design and implementation of the future eLearning action programme (2004 – 2006) to the special needs that people with disabilities – like other vulnerable groups – might have in order to develop e-Learning for all citizens allowing for full participation in the knowledge-based society.
- The PLOTEUS information system on lifelong learning opportunities in Europe will extend information for people with disabilities including special funding opportunities in Member States.
- Support the free choice of better training and learning offers by more specialised lifelong guidance and counselling and career guidance services for opening up non-traditional labour market opportunities and all non-work related learning opportunities for people with disabilities.
- Give special attention to projects involving people with disabilities in the current Socrates, Leonardo and YOUTH programmes, making an evaluation of the impact of the second generation of programmes on lifelong learning opportunities for people with disabilities in Member States, disseminate their results and take into account the needs of people with disabilities in the design of the future generation

²³ Please see: <http://www.elearningeuropa.info/>

²⁴ Proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council adopting a multi-annual programme (2004-2006) for the effective integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Education and Training systems in Europe (eLearning Programme), COM(2002) 751 final, 19.12.2002.

²⁵ COM(2003) 449 final of 24.7.2003: Commission Communication promoting Language Learning and Diversity – An Action Plan 2004 -2006.

²⁶ COM(2002) 72 final on the "Commission's Action Plan on skills and mobility".

²⁷ Council Resolution of 5 May 2003. OJ C 134 of 7.6.2003.

²⁸ COM(2001) 501 final of 7 September 2001.

of education and training programmes.

- Monitor the e-accessibility of websites and media produces for lifelong learning at European level and in European programmes.

Research:

- Disseminate and make full use of research carried out under the Socrates and the Leonardo programmes and within the 6th Framework Research Programme (6FP) with regard to priority 7 "Citizens and Governance in a knowledge-based society" that provides for valuable contributions to the debate on social inclusion and active citizenship in the knowledge society including people with disabilities.

3.2.3. *Using the potential of new technologies*

Within accessibility related activities under the e-Europe 2002 action plan²⁹, some important results have been achieved and have to be followed-up. The Web Accessibility Initiative – Web content accessibility guidelines (W3C/WAI/WCAG-V1.0)³⁰ for public Websites have been adopted by the Member States as proposed by the Commission³¹. The Council adopted a resolution on e-accessibility in December 2002³².

A more effective co-ordination of policies at European level to avoid "info-exclusion", through benchmarking and exchange of good practice between Member States, has also been achieved and relevant legislation and standards to ensure conformity with accessibility principles have been reviewed. A Network of National Centres of Excellence (EdeAN) in Design-for-All (DfA) has been created and Design-for-All Standards, guidelines and support material for accessibility of information technology products are available, in particular to improve the employability and social inclusion of people with disabilities. It is, however, obvious that further improvement of accessibility of Websites and their related public services and applications is essential for inclusion in society. Monitoring the progress of accessibility based on a common methodology in order to obtain comparable data will be a key issue in the future activities.

The efforts in "eEurope 2005- An Information society for all"³³ will be directed towards ensuring participation and equal access by people with disabilities and other groups at a disadvantage to mainstream developments in the areas of modern online public services, e-government, e-learning, e-health and creating a dynamic and accessible e-business environment. As enabler for these aims the eEurope 2005 initiative addresses the widespread availability of broadband access at competitive prices and a secure information infrastructure.

²⁹ "Council Resolution on the e-Europe Action Plan 2002, Feira, June 2000.

³⁰ <http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10/>

³¹ Communication COM(2001) 529 final; supported by the Council and the European Parliament as reflected in their resolutions (CR 7087/02, 20.3.2002 and EPR P5_TA (002) 0325, 13.6.2002; Council Resolution of 25.3.2002 on the eEurope Action Plan 2002: accessibility of public Websites and their content, OJ C 86, 10.4.2002, p. 2.

³² Commission staff working paper: Delivering e-accessibility. Improving disabled people's access to Information Society. SEC(2002) 1039 and Council Resolution "e-accessibility – improving the access of people with disabilities to the Knowledge Based Society", 14680/02, OJ C 39, 18.2.2003, p. 3.

³³ eEurope 2005: An information society for all, Action Plan May 2002 COM(2002) 263, adopted by Sevilla European Council, 21-22 June 2002.

Developments in technology - particularly information and communication technology - offer central opportunities in enabling people with disabilities to overcome functional limitations and thus enhance their prospects for participation in society. However, people with disabilities can also face additional barriers. The proposed actions are aimed at equalising opportunities by empowering people with disabilities, i.e. to harness the information society and new technologies for the benefit of all.

In the light of the above considerations the Commission will:

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT):

- Establish an international dialogue on accessibility concerns and guidelines, in particular in the field of ICT, and hold workshops with the EU and industry to explore accessibility policy and legislative measures based on existing legislation in the area of ICT products and services (awareness, licensing, procurement, guidelines, standards, requirements etc).

eEurope 2005 Action Plan:

- Address accessibility as a horizontal matter in eEurope 2005. Awareness raising and support activities will be developed: a toolkit to facilitate the inclusion of accessibility requirements for Information and Communication Technologies in public procurement calls, accessibility in public e-services, accessibility as an e-skill.

Design For All, Assistive Technologies and standards on e-accessibility:

- Produce recommendations for the development and use of a European Curriculum on "Design for All" for Information Society professionals, in particular designers and engineers. The Commission will specifically support the EdeAN network of excellence in Design for All.
- In addition, further efforts will be undertaken with a view to promoting e-accessibility standardisation, including Design for All and assistive technologies.
- Issue awards in "Innovation in Design for All and Assistive Technologies".
- Establish a dialogue with producers of Assistive Technology and encourage the creation of a number of Assistive Technology Industry Associations that would allow for a more structured and coherent dialogue on a European level.

Reporting:

- Issue a Web accessibility report on follow up and implementation of the WAI guidelines in public web sites and will continue work to achieve a common European methodology for evaluation of accessible web sites in order to obtain comparable data based on the W3C/WAI guidelines.

Research:

- Devote 30 million Euro to a call for projects within 6th Research Framework Programme³⁴ related to accessibility in the area of Barrier free technologies and empowering technologies in order to increase the autonomy of older persons and people with disabilities ensuring equal access and full participation in the Information Society³⁵.
- Support the work and results of the group Inclusive Communication INCOM on accessibility for people with disabilities to electronic communications services leading to a report with short and long term targets.

3.2.4. Accessibility to the public built environment

Specific advantages are obtained when the design and construction of buildings follows the principle of universal design (design-for-all)³⁶. Notably, better and effective access to the workplace will empower workers with disabilities to sustain their access to the labour market and enable them to make a valuable contribution to the economy and to society.

Moreover, including accessibility at the initial planning stage is cost-effective and amply rewarded by the resulting economic advantages. A fully accessible building is flexible, sustainable -i.e. it can adapt to changing needs throughout its occupants' lives -and therefore may fetch greater market value than one that is not. Furthermore, accessibility helps cut costs entailed by the still large number of fall injuries and fatalities linked to poorly accessible environments, notably at the workplace.

Accessible leisure and cultural facilities also have great relevance to improved quality of life and better participation in the social and cultural world as is recognised by the Council in its Resolutions of 6 May 2003³⁷ on accessibility of cultural infrastructure and cultural activities for people with disabilities; and of 21 May 2002³⁸ on the future of European tourism, in which the Commission, the Member States and other stakeholders are exhorted to strengthen efforts to facilitate accessibility to tourist sites for people with disabilities.

Finally, the Commission "White Paper on European Transport Policy for 2010: a time to decide"³⁹ recognises that accessible public transport is an integral part of accessibility in the wider sense. The Commission will therefore promote increased use of accessible public transport, which is an important contribution to the ability to work.

³⁴ Decision No 1513/2002/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27.6.2002 concerning the sixth framework programme of the European Community for research, technological development and demonstration activities, contributing to the creation of the European Research Area and to innovation (2002 - 2006), OJ L 232, 29.8.2002, p. 1.

³⁵ IST workprogramme 2003-2004, www.cordis.lu

³⁶ Council of Europe Resolution of 15.2.2001 on the introduction of the principles of universal design into the curricula of all occupations working on the built environment.

³⁷ OJ C 134, 7 June 2003.

³⁸ OJ C 135, 6 June 2002.

³⁹ COM(2001) 370 final.

In the light of these considerations and taking into account the recommendations made by the Group of independent experts on accessibility to the built environment, set up by the Commission under the auspices of the European Year of People with Disabilities, the Commission will:

Accessibility to the built environment:

- Promote the principle of Design for All in all relevant Community policies on accessibility to the built environment.
- Consider the development of adequate European standards in all areas related to the built environment, including planning, design, construction and use of buildings, and safety evacuation procedures for people with disabilities.
- Promote better education in accessibility issues in schools, and by the development of accessibility courses for building professionals such as architects.
- Promote the exchange of information and dissemination of best practice on accessibility issues between towns.

Legislation:

- Review the essential requirements laid down in Directive 89/106/EEC on Construction Products to include provisions on accessibility for all and in particular, will consider a proposal to develop a 7th essential requirement on accessibility to make the Directive more effective and more precise about the needs of users with different disadvantages.

Mainstreaming:

- Promote the inclusion of accessibility provisions in public procurement policies, and in the allocation of Structural Funds at national and regional levels.

Studies:

- Take follow up action on the study on Harmonised Criteria for Good Accessibility of Tourist Sites and infrastructures for people with disabilities, and consider the most appropriate measures for making tourist facilities accessible to people with disabilities throughout the European Union.
- Consider the results of the study of Urban Transport for people with reduced mobility with the intention of identifying barriers to accessibility that exist in urban transport systems.

Research:

- Under the framework of the 6th Community Research Programme, the Commission will:
 - initiate a study aimed at producing a detailed decision-support tool for use in the evaluation of building design, on the universal design, or 'design-for-all' principle, which will take account of the needs of people with disabilities in

- the built environment, notably as regards the work-place;
- issue new calls for research proposals: to finance research networks to analyse accessibility issues in a broad sense (including the financial barriers to participation for people with disabilities) and initiate a project to develop indicators to measure accessibility to the built environment.

4. MONITORING AND STRUCTURES FOR FOLLOW-UP

4.1. Improve executive capacity

4.1.1. Reinforcing Commission structures

The Commission Disability Inter-Services Group will be tasked with pushing forward the Action Plan process and monitoring the mainstreaming activities of the various Commission departments. It will also contribute to the elaboration of tools for mainstreaming disability issues, in particular for operational implementation and evaluation, including the training of Commission policy desk officers, etc. The Inter-Services Group will report progress to the Group of Commissioners on Equal Opportunities.

4.1.2. Strengthening co-operation with Member States

The EU Disability High Level Group, which is an expert group chaired by the Commission and gathering Member States governmental disability experts, will be given a mandate in line with the impetus of the present Communication. The Group will be tasked to support the development of synergies among disability policies at EU level, and will discuss the regular disability Report. With this objective in mind, this Group of High Level experts should exchange information, allow for the exchange and possible transfer of ideas and good practices, namely in the field of mainstreaming disability issues, and gain experience of disability issues in the new Member States.

4.1.3. Maximising co-operation with other international organisations or agencies

Key actors in this regard include the United Nations, including the International Labour Organisation and the World Health Organisation, the Council of Europe, the OECD, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, the European Standard Organisations (CEN, CENELEC, ETSI), the European Special Needs Education Agency, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. Co-operation with these organisations will be reinforced in order to build mutually rewarding relationships and to benefit from their expertise and their think-tank work. On the United Nations Convention, the full involvement of the Community, together with the Member States, in the negotiations of the Convention would confirm the EU efforts with regard to disability at international level.

4.2. Strengthening governance

4.2.1. Deepening co-operation with NGOs

Existing forms of Commission-NGO co-operation and partnership, such as with the European Disability Forum, will be the basis for enhancing dialogue on policies, improving mutual information and developing co-operation.

The Commission also proposes that the High Level Group holds meetings at least once a year, with the representatives of people with disabilities such as the European Disability Forum, as well as with the representatives of the other various stakeholders involved in the field of disability such as the Platform of European Social NGOs, the representatives of families of people with disabilities, the European Women's Lobby, the European Association of Service Providers and the European Platform for Rehabilitation. Such an exchange of views between the High Level Group and civil society can only but increase the EU ability to understand and take into consideration the varying circumstances of people with disabilities.

4.2.2. Inviting social partners to make a full contribution to promoting equality for disabled people

It is particularly necessary to improve the participation of people with disabilities in employment by promoting the implementation of the success factors established in the Declaration of the social partners for the European Year of People with Disabilities; and to assess the impact of their framework agreements on people with disabilities with the objective of including more people with disabilities in their organisations, and thereby increasing the representation of people with disabilities.

4.2.3. Reporting to the institutions and bodies of the EU

The Commission will encourage inter-institutional co-operation amongst EU institutions and bodies in order to facilitate and enhance the integration of a disability perspective in all relevant Community policies. In particular, the Commission will deepen its dialogue with the European Parliament Committee on Employment and Social Affairs as well as with the EP Disability Intergroup, which both play an important role in raising issues of concern to people with disabilities.

4.3. The EU report on the situation of people with disabilities

4.3.1. A biennial report on the overall situation of people with disabilities in the enlarged European Union

The Commission Disability Report will draw specific attention to efforts of Community policies to promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities and will collect disability-targeted contributions from Member States presenting what they have achieved, namely as regards the integration of a disability perspective in all relevant national policies. These contributions could notably build upon National Action Plans for employment and social inclusion. Particular attention will be dedicated to better identifying the situation, trends and policy issues relating to disability in the new Member States. The Commission will compile these public reports every two years and following a structure established with Member States and representatives of people with disabilities. The Commission hopes to publish the first such report on 3 December 2005, for the European Day of People with Disabilities.

4.3.2. Developing context indicators, collecting data and research

Assessing the effectiveness of disability policies is hampered by a lack of data and quantitative and qualitative evaluation of outcomes. This makes it vital to develop context indicators, which are comparable across Member States. Maximum use should also be made of sources and structures of the European Statistical System, in particular through development of harmonised survey modules, to acquire the internationally comparable statistical information needed for monitoring progress towards the objectives set. More efforts should be made at EU and national level to develop indicators and improve the collection of comparable data.

The European Commission also promotes research activities primarily with a view to addressing gaps in knowledge and to increasing multidisciplinary approaches in the area of disability.

4.3.3. Evaluating the EU Action Plan

The EU Disability Action Plan has been defined with the time horizon of 2010. The Commission intends to proceed with a first evaluation of its results at mid point in the year following its first two editions, that is, in 2008.