



Ádám Kósa: My disability does not hinder me, society does

- 80 million disabled people in the EU
- 1 in 4 families includes someone with disabilities
- unemployment among disabled 2-3 times higher than among able bodied
- disabled people are 50% less likely to go into higher education

Around 16% of EU citizens suffer some kind of disability. Poor accessibility to services and limited mobility mean that they often lack chances and society as a whole is the loser. But some do make it. In spite of being deaf, Ádám Kósa worked as a lawyer and became the first deaf MEP. Now he is trying to open the way for others. The author of a report on the EU's disability strategy, he spoke to us ahead of its discussion in the Employment Committee 25 May.

Who is concerned by your report?

My report is about the 80 million disabled people who live in the EU. It's the biggest minority there is. Their major problem is accessibility to services: schooling, employment, health services. It's a huge problem for society as a whole.

What concretely and realistically can be done?

The Commission has a 10-year disability strategy. My report builds on this strategy, adding some comments and new ideas. Three examples:

First, we should see disabled people through a human rights lens, rather than pitying them for their disabilities. We have formal instruments, like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Disabled and the EU Fundamental Rights Charter. But attitude towards the disabled is the most important thing.

Second: accessibility. Why is accessibility a problem for people with disabilities? Me, I can't hear. But it is society that hinders me. I do not feel disabled myself. It's not you or I who are disabled, it's society. It's the structures that are hindering us. If the systems were accessible, then we would have access.

Third: employment. If employers really had inclusive work practices for disabled people, the workplace would become an equal work place for all citizens. And that's something I encourage in the report. In all fields, from education for children to the elderly, it concerns all of us.

What improvements do you want to see within the next 10 years?

The most important aspect is to achieve higher employment levels for people with disabilities. In Western Europe roughly 40% of disabled people have gainful employment. In Eastern Europe we are talking about 10-15%. Both are low, but 10% is abysmal. I want to see that vastly improved. This is in the disability strategy, but it's also a core tenet of the EU 2020-strategy that 75% people throughout the EU are in employment. The only way to achieve this target is to include disabled people.

Where in the EU, or EP, can disabled people share their concerns, worries and problems and voice their ideas and solutions?

My report suggests the creation of a disability committee to look specifically at disabled people's concerns.

The European Parliament does have a Disability Intergroup (informal cross-party grouping of MEPs) and there is the Petitions Committee. In the Commission there is a Unit for Disability. National organisations exist for people with disabilities. But it is challenging; the message of disabled citizens can be lost in this big machine.

You chair the Intergroup on disabilities. What are its aims, how does it work, and what are its achievements?

The Disability Intergroup is the oldest in the EP, it has been going for at least 30 years. It is also the largest, with more than 100 MEP members.

The aim is primarily information exchange between MEPs, but we have also met with the Council and the Commission eight times over the past two years to discuss issues including women with disabilities, employment, etc. We are supported practically by the European Disability Forum, the largest European NGO in the sector, which gives us a strong alliance with civil society.

We have achieved full representation from the EU institutions. Council and Commission always attend these meetings. That is important. We have also gained a stronger voice on the EU stage and made more MEPs aware of disability issues.

Mr Kósa signed his interview, which was interpreted into English.