Understanding EU policies for people with disabilities

SUMMARY

Both the EU and its Member States have signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and use its definition of disability as a common reference at EU level; there is no other harmonised definition of disability in the EU.

Although a wide variety of statistical surveys is available in terms of questions asked and population surveyed, a complete statistical assessment of disability in the EU does not yet exist. However, the annual Eurostat statistics on income and living conditions survey reveals that, in Europe, the prevalence of disability is higher among female, older and less educated respondents. Studies also show that the pandemic has affected people with disabilities disproportionately more than others.

The EU combats all forms of discrimination alongside and in support of its Member States. To improve the situation of disabled people, it has introduced a series of initiatives, programmes and strategies over a number of decades. The European Parliament has been highly active in the bid to end all forms of discrimination against disabled people since the start of the 1980s.

In 1997, Article 13 of the Treaty establishing the European Community on the human right not to suffer from discrimination on grounds, in particular, of disability, paved the way for a genuine disability policy. The first step in this regard was the adoption of a 2001-2006 action programme to combat discrimination. Later, the 2010-2020 European disability strategy sought to enable disabled people to exercise their rights and participate fully in society and the economy.

A new 2021-2030 strategy, incorporating lessons learned from its predecessor, seeks to ensure that all persons with disabilities in the EU, regardless of their sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, age or sexual orientation: enjoy their human rights; have equal access to participation in society and the economy; can decide where, how and with whom they live; can move freely in the EU regardless of their support needs; and no longer experience discrimination.

This is an update of a briefing published in November 2021.
Disability in the European Union

Definition

Traditionally, there have been two main models of disability – a medical and a social one:

- The medical model focuses on the person’s medical condition – illness or injury – which is the direct cause of their disability and may have an impact on their quality of life;
- The social model focuses on the barriers created by society. Those may be physical or social restrictions preventing the development or use of the abilities – physical, social or professional – that each individual needs to thrive.

The two models view the interaction between the person’s health condition and the environment in which they live differently. The medical one focuses on the person; the social one on the barriers created by the environment. In 2001, the World Health Organization published a new model: the international classification of functioning, disability and health (ICF). Based on three basic dimensions – body, activity and participation – the ICF model integrates the medical dimension of the health condition while at the same time referring to the context in which the individual lives and the society to which they belong. In line with the ICF model, in 2006 the United Nations (UN) adopted a very broad definition of disability in its Convention for the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD): ‘Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’ (Article 1).

A 2004 study on the Definition of disability in Europe: A comparative analysis, carried out by Brunel University at the request of the European Commission, draws attention to the complexity of finding one single definition of disability at EU level: ‘Applying a common definition of disability to the many policies of the EU Member States would undermine them and cause them to be misdirected. The necessity of using a plurality of definitions to ensure relevance raises a problem of coherence in disability policy’. In the light of the difficulties encountered in adopting a common definition at EU level, when ratifying the UN CRDP, the EU recognised the UN’s definition of disability provided in this convention.

Statistics: Data collection and data availability

As the concept of disability is so multidimensional, many difficulties arise when having to identify people with disabilities in surveys. At EU level, Eurostat is the main data provider through the European Statistical System (ESS) – the partnership between the Commission (here Eurostat), the national statistical institutes and other national authorities that are responsible in each Member State for the development, production and dissemination of European statistics. Currently, Eurostat carries out two broad population-based surveys, which include a limited number of questions relating to disability:

- The European health interview survey (EHIS), which provides data on the level of functioning and activity limitation among the population, and information on the population’s health status, health determinants and healthcare use. Up to 2019, the survey was conducted every 5 years. As of 2019 it is conducted every 6 years;
- The EU statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC), which collects, once a year, data on long-standing activity limitation due to health problems (the Global Activity Limitation Instrument, GALI).

Other specific survey modules collect data relating to disability, among them:

- The ad hoc module of the 2011 labour force survey, which examined the labour-market situation of 15 to 64 year-old disabled people living in private homes compared with (same age range) people without disabilities also living in private
Understanding EU policies for people with disabilities

homes. In the survey, disabled people are those who claim to have difficulties in performing some basic activities such as seeing, hearing, walking or remembering;

- the 2012-2013 European survey on health and social integration (EHSIS) collected data on the barriers faced by people with a health problem or having difficulties in performing certain basic activities in their daily life. This dedicated module was discontinued owing to quality concerns.

Although those surveys are a useful source of information, they do not cover the entire population with disabilities. Moreover, they do not gather information on people living in collective households or institutions (in particular elderly people and disabled children) or on children living in a private home (the EU-SILC survey starts from the age of 16). As announced in its strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030 (see below), the European Commission is introducing GALI to harmonise disability data collection. Currently, GALI is recognised as a good proxy measure for disability. It is also considered relatively easy to include in any EU social surveys, in order to monitor the situation of people with disabilities in different domains affecting their quality of life, regularly, with the help of statistical data. In addition to EU-SILC and EHSIS surveys, such social surveys include the labour force survey, the adult education survey, the household budget survey, the time use survey and the ICT survey.

Adding GALI to all those surveys will offer the possibility to collect information on the gap between persons with and without disabilities in key areas such as employment, education, poverty and social exclusion, living conditions, health, and use of new communication technologies. This disability variable will be accompanied by detailed information on the type of disability, with the inclusion of a short set of questions proposed by the UN Washington Group on Disability Statistics in a 3-year EU-SILC module on health from 2022 on. As regards the collection of data about children with disabilities, an adapted GALI variable in the EU-SILC module on children was also created, to be conducted every 3 years. On the basis of data extracted from the European quality of life survey (EQLS) and the European working conditions survey (EWCS), Eurofound studies access to and quality of social services for people with disabilities and chronic diseases, in specific relation to how this affects such people's employment and labour market integration.

Disability is not a marginal phenomenon in the EU. According to the EU statistics on income and living conditions survey, in 2021 one quarter of the EU-27 population aged 16 and over (25.2 %) reported some or severe long-standing limitations in their usual activities due to health: 17.6 % reported some long-standing limitations and 7.6 % reported severe long-standing limitations. Women were more likely than men to report long-standing limitations – either some or severe – in all EU Member States (respectively 27.5 % and 22.8 %).

People in higher age groups tend to report some or severe long-standing limitations more than those in lower age groups, and the gender heath gap increases with age. The prevalence of self-reported long-standing limitations is highest amongst people with a low income, and decreases progressively as income increases. In the EU-27, 32.9 % of the population in the first income quintile group (the 20 % of the population with the lowest income) reported long-standing limitations in 2021 compared with 16.8 % of the population in the fifth income quintile group (the 20 % of the population with the highest income). In the same way, the prevalence of self-reported long-standing limitations is lowest amongst people having completed tertiary education (15.7 %) compared with people having completed, at most, lower secondary education (36.7 %). The health gap between educational attainment levels is also visible in all Member States.

Remaining barriers

People with disabilities still face significant barriers to accessing education, employment, healthcare, sport and culture, and to participating in the EU's political life. In 2018, 19.9 % of 18 to 24 year-olds with activity limitation within the EU were early leavers from education and training compared with 9.9 % of their peers without activity limitation. At EU level, the disability employment gap still stood at 23.0 % in 2021 (Eurostat). According to a 2021 Eurofound study,
despite recent progress, labour market participation remains a challenge for people with disabilities. Moreover, women with disabilities, young people with disabilities and people with high support needs are more likely to be discriminated against and excluded from the labour market (ANED, 2017).

According to a 2022 Eurobarometer survey on Sport and physical activity, having a disability or illness is the third most frequently mentioned reason for not practising sport more regularly (14 % of respondents). Those who left education by the age of 15 (26 %), older people (26 % of those aged 55 or over) and women (16 %) are more likely to say that they have an illness or disability. In the 2015 public consultation on the European Accessibility Act, when asked which goods and services should be given priority in relation to accessibility for persons with disabilities and the elderly, respondents (organisations and citizens) ranked culture and/or leisure as key (respectively 8 % and 6 %). EU citizens with disabilities face similar difficulties when participating in elections.

People with disabilities also face additional barriers to exercising their voting rights, for example, in terms of insufficient accessibility. A 2019 European Economic and Social Committee opinion stated that an estimated 800 000 EU citizens from 16 Member States may have been deprived of the right to participate in the European Parliament elections because their national rules and organisational arrangements did not take their specific needs sufficiently into account.3

In short, compared with people who do not have activity limitation (aged 16 and over), those who do face a higher risk of poverty or social exclusion (29 % versus 19 % in 2020).

Finally yet importantly, in a 2019 Eurobarometer survey on Discrimination in the EU, over half of the respondents with disabilities (52 %) said that they had felt discriminated against or harassed at some point in the past 12 months.

Figure 1 – People with disability at higher risk of poverty or social exclusion, 2020 (% of population aged 16 and over)

Issues in the spotlight: Learning from crisis

Crises, including pandemics, conflicts, natural disasters and economic shocks are associated with a range of factors that can exacerbate the difficulties faced by people with disabilities.

The pandemic and people with disabilities

The strict confinement measures imposed to contain the pandemic had a particularly negative impact on people with disabilities and the pandemic has affected them disproportionately, as:

- they have faced unique challenges since its outbreak;
- their access to general and specific health services has been reduced;
- their exposure to the risk of revenue loss has increased dramatically;
- governments’ efforts to contain the pandemic have had a strongly negative impact on their already limited social life.

Since the pandemic began, people with disabilities have faced greater difficulties, such as barriers to accessing public health information, barriers to implementing basic hygiene measures such as handwashing, inability to wear masks due to health risks, inaccessibility of telehealth tools, difficulty in enactig social distancing, difficulty in touching things for the purpose of obtaining information or getting physical support, etc. In addition to these difficulties relating to their disability, people with disabilities are more likely to be older, poorer, to suffer from comorbidities, and to be female, compared with the rest of the population. Unfortunately, older age, poverty and comorbidities are associated with a higher risk of severe outcomes from COVID-19. For example, according to the UK Office for National Statistics, the risk of death from COVID-19 in England between 24 January and 30 November 2020 was 3.1 times higher for men with disabilities and 3.5 times higher for women with disabilities than for men and women without disabilities.

People with intellectual disabilities living in residential, medical or care facilities or even in their own homes have been at higher risk of death from COVID-19 than people without such disabilities. Isolation, uncertainty and fear of the pandemic have generally affected the mental health of many people, but more notably so of those with mental impairments. People with physical impairments have also been disproportionately at risk of mental health disorders.

The pandemic has affected people with disabilities disproportionately also in economic terms, compounding the economic hardships many of them were already experiencing prior to its outbreak. Traditionally, people with disabilities face persistently lower rates of employment and earn significantly lower wages compared to their peers without disabilities. In addition to the increased health risk associated with the pandemic and increased risk of exposure in many in-person workplaces, people with disabilities have been confronted with wage loss, job loss and long-term unemployment. School closures have also led to the exclusion of many young people with disabilities, since educational materials are not in accessible formats and access to assistive technology, including the internet, is a challenge.

A 2021 UN report on the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls with disabilities found that they have had greater difficulty in accessing sexual and reproductive health information, goods and services. Moreover, they have faced an increased risk of gender-based violence and encountered numerous obstacles in accessing support services and police or justice mechanisms. They have, more often than others, been cut off from health services and lost access to the labour market or education, among others. Last but not least, the pandemic has increased the barriers for people with disabilities in terms of social inclusion (equal access to goods, services, health, labour market and political, social and physical spaces, etc.).
War on Ukraine

People with disabilities in Ukraine were already extremely vulnerable prior to the Russian invasion. During armed conflicts, the needs and vulnerabilities of people with disabilities are amplified, as is the risk of discrimination towards them. Ukraine is no exception: the mass displacement and chaos triggered by the conflict have raised serious concerns about violations of human rights inside and outside the country, in particular of those of vulnerable people such as women, children, LGBTI people, Roma and persons with disabilities. In April 2022, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) warned that 2.7 million persons with disabilities in Ukraine were at risk of being abandoned in their homes or in residential care, with 'no access to life-sustaining medications, oxygen supplies, food, water, sanitation, support for daily living and other basic facilities'. June 2022 estimates show that more than 143,000 people with disabilities have been displaced since the outbreak of the war.

In addition, the conflict has exposed people with disabilities to a disproportionate risk of death or injury and hampered their access to emergency information. Persons with disabilities often have no way to reach shelters or safe places, and because of mass displacement they have been disconnected from their support networks. The UN Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine, 1 February to 31 July 2022, pointed to lack of 'access to bomb shelters, evacuation trains, necessary medication and adequate housing suited to their needs’ for people with disabilities. Another UN report, published in June 2022, stressed that Ukrainian children 'with visual, hearing, developmental or intellectual disabilities' are at higher risk of danger because 'they may not have learned about or understood what was happening' or were removed from or abandoned in their institutions without appropriate support.

Non-government organisation Inclusion Europe reported that before the war, around 261,000 persons in Ukraine had disability status due to intellectual and psychosocial disorders. The sirens, explosions and alarms, in addition to the bombing and shelling, have caused them stress, depression and anxiety, in some cases exacerbating their chronic disease. Moreover, Inclusion Europe points to the difficulty for such people in accessing medical services, psychological assistance and psychiatric care, and to the fact that autistic people cannot stay in overcrowded bomb shelters. Similarly, the World Economic Forum stresses that people with disabilities are facing a 'crisis within a crisis' not only because civilian infrastructures, including hospitals and residential care facilities, are under shelling but also because people who are in wheelchairs or are visually or otherwise impaired are facing unprecedented challenges in trying to escape the hostilities.

Climate change

Europe is now facing war on the continent, a related cost of living crisis and the encroaching impacts of climate change all at once, and all linked with risks of increased difficulties for people with disabilities. In April 2021, the UN published an Analytical study on the promotion and protection of the rights of persons with disabilities in the context of climate change. The study observed that 'persons with disabilities are disproportionately affected by climate change', as climate crisis is exacerbating existing health and health inequalities, revealing the lack of disability-inclusive procedures in the event of climate disasters, and reducing equal access to adequate housing.

Similarly, during the 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP 26), the International Disability Alliance published an advocacy paper for Disability Inclusive Climate Action and people with disabilities finally gained official status as a caucus recognised by the UN secretariat. This year, COP27 was decisive for the inclusion of people with disabilities. The number of people with disabilities participating increased compared with earlier conferences, as did the number of events addressing disability organised by governments, UN agencies and other stakeholders. For the first time, the COP27 overarching decision as well as the action plan for climate empowerment included references to people with disabilities.
EU legal framework

Over time, the EU has paid increasingly close attention to the situation of disabled people. The question of what would be the right legal basis for introducing a genuine EU disability policy has also become increasingly important.

The rights of persons with disabilities have been enshrined in the EU Treaties since 1997. Article 19 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (ex-Article 13 of the Treaty establishing the European Community) stipulates that 'in defining and implementing its policies and activities, the Union shall aim to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation'. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, adopted in 2000, prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability (Article 21) and recognises the right of persons with disabilities to independence, social and occupational integration and participation in the life of the community (Article 26). The Treaty of Lisbon, which came into effect in 2009, attributes to the Charter the same legal value as the Treaties.

Adopted in 2006, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was the first international legally binding instrument to set minimum standards for the rights of persons with disabilities, and the first human rights convention to which the EU became a party. By ratifying the UN CRPD in December 2010, the EU associated itself with efforts agreed at international level to guarantee the fundamental rights of people with disabilities. By 2018, all EU Member States had also ratified the convention, committing, alongside the EU, to complying with the obligations under the convention and to setting up the mechanisms for its implementation and coordination.

European policies

The Commission has supported the development of a European disability policy through a succession of action programmes since 1974. As an additional step, in May 2001 the European Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs called on the European Council to dedicate the year 2003 to disabled people. Accordingly, in 2003, the Commission launched a European action plan on equal opportunities for people with disabilities for the 2003-2010 period. While significant steps were taken to improve the lives of persons with disabilities in the EU during that period, some stakeholders questioned the adequacy of the existing EU-level policy and regulatory frameworks to properly address the needs of people with disabilities.

Building on the results of the action plan, a European disability strategy 2010-2020 was adopted in November 2010, at a time when the process for the ratification by the EU of the UN CRPD was already under way (see above). The strategy was conceived as a policy framework through which the EU would deliver its commitments under the UN CRPD, in line with the respective competences provided for in the Treaties. It also complemented the EU 2020 strategy and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU. It aimed to make it possible for disabled people to enjoy their rights in full and to participate in society and the economy on an equal level with others. To achieve these objectives, the strategy identified eight key areas of action: accessibility; participation; equality; employment; education and training; social protection; health; and external action. The strategy also included four instruments to implement the above objectives: awareness raising; financial support; statistics; and data collection and monitoring mechanisms as required by the UN CRPD. From 2010 to 2020, several initiatives were launched to implement the strategy.

- **European Day of Persons with Disabilities.** On 3 December each year, the Commission, together with the European Disability Forum, organises a conference to mark the European Day of Persons with Disabilities. The conference brings together decision-makers, people with and without disabilities, academic experts, the media and other stakeholders. They take part in the EU’s efforts to highlight the issue of disability in accordance with the strategy.
- **European disability card.** In February 2016, a European disability card scheme was launched as a pilot project in eight Member States, to address the issue of lack of mutual recognition in disability status among Member States and to ensure equal access to benefits across borders for people with disabilities mainly in the areas of culture, leisure, sport and transport. According to the 2021 study assessing the implementation of the pilot action on the EU disability card and associated benefits, the initiative proved to be effective.

- **Disabled students' mobility.** The Erasmus+ programme promotes the mobility of disabled students through youth mobility projects.

- **Accessibility.** After 4 years of discussions, the European Accessibility Act was adopted in 2019 and had to be transposed into national legislation by 28 June 2022. Goods and services, including public services and assistive devices, must now be accessible to people with disabilities. Even if the provisions on the built environment are not binding, the Member States are encouraged to align their diverging requirements as much as possible. Persons with disabilities should encounter fewer obstacles when accessing transport, education or the labour market. The Web Accessibility Directive complements the European Accessibility Act by including provisions to make sure that people with disabilities have better access to public service websites and mobile apps. The inclusion of accessibility provisions in the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, the new European Electronic Communications Code, the 'Marrakesh' Directive, and the reaffirmation of mandatory accessibility requirements for projects financed through EU funds are also fostering accessibility in the EU.

- **Access City Awards.** To encourage cities to improve accessibility, the Commission grants an annual award to cities that invest in guaranteeing that their citizens have equal access to fundamental rights and, regardless of their age, mobility or ability, equal access to the resources these cities offer. Now in its 13th year, the 2023 Access City Award was won by Skellefteå in Sweden (1st prize); Córdoba in Spain (2nd prize); and Ljubljana in Slovenia (3rd prize).

- **Access to transport for disabled people.** Legislation on the rights of passengers with reduced mobility has evolved significantly with the revision of the 2014 Commission Regulation on the technical specifications for interoperability relating to accessibility of the Union's rail system, the adoption in 2010 of the Waterborne Passenger Rights Regulation and in 2011 of the Bus and Coach Passenger Rights Regulation, and the recast of the Rail Passengers' Rights Regulation in 2021.

In 2019, the European Commission launched an evaluation of the 2010-2020 European disability strategy to assess its implementation. The report mentions the inclusion of disability issues in European legislation and policy, notably in the areas of accessibility and passengers' rights, as some of the strategy's main achievements. The strategy also helped mainstream disability issues at EU institutional level through the European Pillar of Social Rights (Principles 3 and 17) and the European Semester. Nevertheless, the evaluation underlines many shortcomings, such as the lack of a comprehensive set of indicators, the absence of a framework to monitor the implementation of the strategy or the non-existence of binding links between the strategy and EU funding. On 20 October 2020, the European Commission announced in its 2021 work programme that it would publish a new EU disability strategy, which should address the shortcomings of its predecessor. Accordingly, on 3 March 2021 the Commission adopted its 2021-2030 strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities, which seeks to make progress on ensuring that all persons with disabilities in the EU, regardless of their sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, age or sexual orientation:

- enjoy their human rights;
- have equal opportunities and equal access to participate in society and the economy;
- are able to decide where, how and with whom they live;
- move freely in the EU regardless of their support needs;
- no longer experience discrimination.
Based on the lessons drawn from the previous strategy, the new one takes account of the diversity of disability comprising long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments (in line with Article 1 of the UN CRPD), which are often invisible. Addressing the risks of multiple disadvantages faced by women, children, older persons, refugees with disabilities and those with socioeconomic difficulties, the strategy promotes an intersectional perspective in line with the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and sustainable development goals (SDGs). The strategy announces several practical initiatives.

- On 15 December 2021, the European Commission launched its Disability Platform. The objective of the platform is to facilitate cooperation between the Commission and Member States on implementation of the new strategy. This includes the preparation of policy and legislative proposals relevant to disability, and representatives from Member States, non-governmental organisations and the European Commission working together to advance the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

- A package of measures on the integration of people with disabilities into the labour market was published on 20 September 2022. This disability employment package should help Member States ensure that people with disabilities enjoy social inclusion and economic autonomy through their employment. On 18 November 2022, COREPER endorsed the conclusions of the Czech Presidency of the EU Council regarding the inclusion of people with disabilities in the labour market, calling on Member States to implement the guidelines contained in the package.

- ‘AccessibleEU’, a European resource centre to be created by the end of 2022, should provide a framework for cooperation between national authorities responsible for implementing accessibility standards and laws, with the aim of sharing best practice and improving the coherence and implementation of legislation across the EU.

- A Commission proposal on a European disability card, following the 2016 pilot project mentioned above, should be presented by the end of 2023. On 14 September 2022, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a new legislative initiative on the creation of a European disability card in her State of the Union address.

- With a view to ensuring that people with disabilities fully enjoy their rights as European citizens, the Commission will publish guidelines in 2023 on their participation in the electoral process – as candidates and voters.

- The Commission will submit recommendations by 2023 aimed at ensuring that people with disabilities are no longer excluded and can ‘live independently and choose where and with whom they want to live’.

- A framework for the provision of social services for people with disabilities will be presented by 2024.

- A monitoring framework was published on 25 May 2022, and disability indicators are to be developed by 2023.

Finally, at institutional level, the Commission is promising to renew its human resources strategy to promote diversity and the integration of people with disabilities.

**European Parliament**

Since the start of the 1980s, Parliament has given priority to combating all forms of discrimination against disabled people. On the strength of the work done by the Disability Intergroup, Members of the European Parliament have adopted a number of decisions on the integration of disabled people and the acknowledgement and protection of their rights, calling on the Member States and the Commission to develop norms and regulations in the interest of disabled people.
Disability Intergroup

The Disability Intergroup of the European Parliament (with the European Disability Forum acting as its secretariat) is an informal grouping of Members of the European Parliament who are interested in promoting disability-related policy. Established in 1980, it is one of the oldest and largest intergroups in the Parliament (77 MEPs for the 2019-2024 term). The Disability Intergroup has been a key player in advocating and advancing the rights of persons with disabilities in the EU. The 2019-2024 term provides the opportunity for the intergroup to maintain its instrumental position in the adoption of legislation favourable to persons with disabilities.

Since 2022, the intergroup publishes a newsletter every 2 months, highlighting the work of its members on disability. In its last edition (September /October 2022 – Issue 4), the publication mentioned the war on Ukraine and the adoption of the intergroup's work plan for 2022 to 2024.

Resolutions, recommendations and reports

In its 1996 resolution on the rights of disabled people, Parliament called on the Member States to include a clause on non-discrimination on grounds of disability when revising the Treaty on European Union, to enact a new legal basis for social programmes, to introduce non-discrimination measures and to treat disability rights as a civil rights issue. It also called on the Commission to present a new action programme on equalisation of opportunities for disabled people, and to carry out censuses in all Member States to improve statistics on the causes or extent of disabilities. Moreover, it called on the EU institutions and Member States to review their access and employment policies.

In March 1998, Parliament advocated the introduction of a European parking card for disabled people, to be valid throughout the EU. Parliament called repeatedly for the introduction of strategies, legislative initiatives and policies to guarantee non-discrimination and equal opportunities for disabled women. In its 2011 resolution on the European disability strategy, Parliament pleaded for people with disabilities to be involved in all measures and decisions that affect them, and regretted the strategy's lack of an integrated gender perspective.

In December 2013, Parliament adopted a resolution on disabled women, in which it recalled that they were disadvantaged in a number of ways. They had trouble gaining access to adequate housing, healthcare, public transport, education, vocational training and employment, were victims of inequality in access to credit, and rarely participated in decision-making processes.

In 2016, Parliament adopted a resolution on the implementation of the UN CRPD, with special regard to the UN's concluding observations on the state of implementation of obligations under the UN CRPD. The resolution prompted EU institutions to ensure that all existing and future legislation fully adheres to the CRPD's recommendations.

In 2017, Parliament adopted an own-initiative resolution on the implementation of the European disability strategy. The underlying report stresses, in particular, the need to mainstream equality, gender and non-discrimination, as well as the rights of children with disabilities, into all areas of a future strategy; it also urges the Commission and the Member States to reach out to the most vulnerable, such as the homeless.

On 2 March 2020, following the statement in plenary on 17 December 2019 by Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli, on the follow-up to the European disability strategy 2010-2020, the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL) tabled a motion for a resolution urging the Commission to deepen its commitment to the rights of persons with disabilities through a comprehensive, long-term, post-2020 EU disability strategy, so that all persons with disabilities and their families could fully enjoy their human rights. According to Members, the new disability strategy should include ambitious, clear targets and implementation periods. It should reflect the diversity of persons with disabilities and mainstream the rights of children with disabilities. An adequate budget for the strategy's implementation and a well-resourced monitoring mechanism are key.
Persons with disabilities and their representative organisations should also be involved in the strategy's preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Disaggregated, comparable data collection should facilitate proper monitoring.

In a resolution of 18 June 2020, Parliament again called for a more ambitious post-2020 European disability strategy. It called on the Commission to include a review of the strategy every 3 years with a clearly defined role for the EU CRPD framework and to systematically and actively involve persons with disabilities and their representative organisations (at EU and national levels) in the reviews. Furthermore, it asked the Commission to ensure that the post-2020 strategy promoted guaranteed access to: employment, vocational and professional training, inclusive education, affordable quality healthcare services, digital services, and fair pay. Parliament also recommended that the EU structurally integrate the new European disability strategy within the European Semester process.

In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, on 8 July 2020 Parliament adopted a resolution on the rights of persons with intellectual disabilities and their families in the COVID-19 crisis. In it, Parliament voiced deep concern about the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 crisis on persons with intellectual disabilities and persons with other mental health problems and their families, creating an additional burden for family members caring for them, many of whom are women. The resolution underlined that investing in the gradual transition from institutional care to community-based services for persons with intellectual disabilities should be a priority. Lockdown had been a serious problem, not only for persons with intellectual disabilities, but also for every person with a mental illness, as isolation could aggravate the problems.

Reflecting its concern about inequalities on the labour market for persons with disabilities, Parliament adopted a resolution on 11 March 2021 on the implementation of Council Directive 2000/78/EC establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation in the light of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The resolution called on the EU institutions and Member States to reaffirm their commitment to achieving inclusive equality for people with disabilities and to step up their efforts to create an accessible and non-discriminatory labour market for them. They called for a rapid revision of the Employment Equality Directive to bring it into line with the provisions of the UN CRPD.

On 7 October 2021, Members adopted by a large majority a resolution on the protection of persons with disabilities in the EU, based on the petitions submitted by citizens and received by the European Parliament’s Committee on Petitions (PETI). The debates were an opportunity for MEPs to denounce the lack of inclusiveness of European societies but also within the European institutions, including the Parliament.

In order to ensure that the future AccessibleEU centre in support of accessibility policies in the EU single market has real added value, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on 4 October 2022 stressing the need to increase overall knowledge on accessibility and the number of qualified accessibility experts. Members also called on the Commission to ensure that the centre is provided with the necessary funding and staffing.

**MAIN REFERENCES**


ENDNOTES

1 The ‘GALI’ question measures the proportion of people who claim to have been, ‘for at least the past six months,... limited because of a health problem in activities people usually do’.

2 This set comprises questions on six core functional domains: seeing, hearing, walking, cognition, self-care, and communication.

3 People with disabilities may also be easily disenfranchised. The European Court of Human Rights has recently issued several judgments on the electoral rights of disabled persons (e.g. Toplak and Mrak v. Slovenia; Strøbye v. Denmark, Caamaño Valle v. Spain).


5 The year 2003 was named ‘European Year of People with Disabilities’ (EYPD) to highlight and raise public awareness of the situation faced by disabled people. To this end, the EU set aside a budget of €12 million to stimulate initiatives and launched an action plan on Equal opportunities for people with disabilities: a European Action Plan (2004-2010). It sought to ensure that disability issues were incorporated into all EU policies that may affect the lives of disabled people. The EYPD sought, in particular, to raise awareness of the rights of people with disabilities to protection against discrimination; to foster reflection on and discussion of the measures needed to promote equal opportunities for disabled people in Europe; to develop experience exchanges on good practices and effective strategies devised at local, national and European level; to improve communication on disability; to increase the attention paid to the rights of disabled children and young people to equality in education, etc. Among the main actions taken that year, of particular importance are the i) introduction of the ‘Get on Board’ specific information and promotion campaign, for which a campaign bus travelled throughout the EU providing disabled people and disability organisations with a means of promoting their activities; ii) highly visible media; and iii) the creation of a company participation programme to ensure that businesses promote employment and training opportunities for disabled people.

6 This directive implements the Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who are Blind, Visually Impaired, or Otherwise Print-Disabled, which aims to facilitate access to print works in formats adapted for persons who are blind, visually impaired or otherwise print-disabled. The Marrakesh Treaty, to which the EU is party, is an international copyright treaty administered by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO).

7 These conclusions should be formally approved by EU ministers at the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO) on 8 December 2022.

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