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The Policy context of the European
Commission Interest in the Disability Data*

THE POLICY CONTEXT OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION INTEREST IN DISABILITY DATA

1. The EU policy context

Following the United Nations Standard Rules on Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, the European Commission adopted in 1996 a new strategy, which is set out in its Communication on "Equality of Opportunity for People with Disabilities - A New Community Disability Strategy". The latter was politically endorsed in a Resolution of the Council of Ministers in December 1996. Reflecting the New Policy Framework advocated by the UN Standard Rules, this strategy stresses the need for a renewed approach focusing upon the identification and removal of the various barriers preventing disabled people from achieving equality of opportunity and full participation in all aspects of social life.

Since primary responsibility for action rests with the Member States, the Community Disability Strategy aims to bring as much added value to the process of reflection and change in establishing better co-operation between Member States. Key features of the Community strategy are fostering the effectiveness of Member States disability policies by promoting the exchange of good practice, improving the collection and use of comparative information on disability issues across Europe, in order to identify effective policy solutions.

More recently, on 28 June 2000, the European Commission adopted a new Social Policy Agenda which will run up to the year 2005. The Agenda sets out to modernise the European social model, promote more and better jobs and convert the political commitments made by the European Heads of State at the Lisbon and Feira European Councils into concrete action. Within the Agenda, disability issues are not considered as an afterthought but are framed within generic policies such as employment, non discrimination and social inclusion.

2. The EU open method of co-ordination

The implementation of the Social Agenda relies on several policy instruments, but in particular focuses on what is called "the open method of co-ordination". The latter is founded on commonly defined objectives, which are based on shared values among the Member States and cover issues which are felt to be of common concern for employment and social policy.

The open method of co-ordination includes a number of elements which are important for its success:

- These objectives are transparent and are, therefore, open to public scrutiny and criticism.
- A number of appropriate ways to measure progress towards the desired outcomes are defined either in terms of quantitative or qualitative indicators.

- As the focus is on outcomes at the EU level, the definition of the means and conditions under which programmes and policies are implemented is left to individual Member States, which are responsible for their own employment and social policies.
- Peer pressure through annual examination and comparative review is used to steer the course of policy and enhance the effectiveness of action.

This method establishes thus a balance between EU Union level co-ordination in the definition of common objectives and outcomes and Member State responsibilities in deciding the detailed content of policy.

The method is also based on the following key principles:

- Subsidiarity : the definition of the means and conditions under which programmes and policies are implemented is left to individual Member States.
- Convergence : commonly agreed employment objectives are pursued through concerted action, where each Member State contributes to raising the EU average performance. For example, this principle has been made more concrete by the Lisbon European Council in March 2000, where full employment was adopted as an overriding goal of the Union, together with the objectives of raising the overall employment rate in the EU from 62% to 70% by 2010 and the employment rate of women from 52¼% to over 60%.
- Management by objectives.
- Country monitoring.
- An integrated approach : the process does not involve only Ministries of Employment and Social Affairs, but commits national governments as a whole as well as a wide range of other interested parties.

3. Towards more convergence of policies for people with disabilities in the European Union

In the area of disability policy, the implementation of the open method of co-ordination has considerable appeal for a number of reasons :

- It focuses on the outcomes or overall status of disability, as affected by the full range of policies and programmes, both general in nature and disability specific. Starting from a focus on the ultimate intended outcome of all disability policies - improved living conditions of people with disabilities - may help to move away from the present approach which tends to start from the perspective of specific activities or programmes.
- It serves as a mechanism which can be used to identify differences across Member States. It provides a basis for discussion about the need for policy changes and

which direction they should move in among the Member States and the European Union, associations of people with disabilities, and other key stakeholder groups.

- It can be used to provide an overview of the status of people with disabilities in Europe. It can be used for describing the social and economic conditions of people with disabilities in general terms and provide a basis for tracking changes over time.
- It can potentially serve as a "report card" on how people with disabilities are faring in society, taking into account the efforts of different levels of government and of others. In this sense, it may be able to provide a broad measure of accountability with respect to the impact of disability policy.

4. In search for appropriate EU benchmarks and indicators for disability policies

The development of benchmarks and indicators is central to the process of the open method of co-ordination. They should provide the means by which Member States and the Community can set targets in the disability area, assess and compare performance and revise their policies and practices in the light of wide-ranging experience. The availability of valid and reliable data on people with disabilities is thus a basic prerequisite for progress.

While some key baseline disability data are available in many Member States, for example on the proportion of disabled individuals in the population, economic activity and inactivity, as well as employment and unemployment rates, comparability currently is hampered by differences in definitions, methods of collection and a lack of contextual information. It is even more difficult to make cross national comparisons since no two Member States use the same definitions, policies, output measures and indicators of success. Moreover, in their present form most of the data available do not lend themselves fully to setting targets and comparing performance among Member States.

There is notably a lack of symmetry in Member States survey approaches to identifying respondents as having disabilities. This results in significantly different definitions of disability and subgroup counts across the surveys. The lack of symmetry is problematic on a number of fronts, not the least of which is the perceived validity of apparently differing survey results concerning persons with disabilities/activity limitations.

Another major limitation of most surveys to be addressed is their lack of timeliness. Release of data are not done until years following the actual data collection and analyses may take even longer.

In addition, surveys, even when they can be compared among Member States, such as the European Household Community Panel, while they provide an array of information on people with disabilities, relatively few variables are provided that permit comparisons of barriers faced by people with and without disabilities (e.g., discrimination; barriers arising from social security measures, limited training, family

pressures, etc.). There is also little information on attitudes, which do have a bearing on the status of people with disabilities.

Therefore, current information available may serve to reinforce a social welfare perspective rather than pinpoint those areas that need to be addressed to bring other meaningful social change. There can be drawbacks to over-reliance on quantitative performance or indicators : these "objective" data are only as good as the assumptions underlying them, and they can be misleading - or worse.

Finally, it is important to recognise that statistical surveys produce raw data only. In order to be usable as part of a policy process, analysis and interpretation is required. This necessitates the development of a framework of some form of consensus, preferably in advance, where major stakeholders are involved. Indicator comparisons which are used to rate the comparative effectiveness of programs in different Member States inevitably may result in attacks on the method, rather than exploration of what should be done differently or better. Thus the use of comparative ratings can be counter-productive in nature, resulting in an adversarial, rather than a collaborative consensus-building process.