



Human rights: A Reality for All

Conference launching the Council of Europe Disability Strategy 2017-2023

Speech by Marja Ruotanen Director, Human Dignity and Equality Council of Europe

Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to join **Minister Zeta Emilianidou** and to welcome you to this important event. I would like to thank the Cypriot authorities for hosting and co-organising this Conference.

“Human Rights: A Reality for All” – the title of this conference – was inspired by our belief that all persons, of all abilities, **should have access to and enjoy the full range of human rights**. This reflects the shift of focus at the Council of Europe: **from disability to ability**.

This vision runs through the **new Council of Europe Disability Strategy**, the result of our collective work. **We own it together – all of us**. And we can be proud of having put together a focused, pragmatic, all-inclusive document that will guide our work towards the achievement of full rights for persons with disabilities. We are here today because, in the words of the indomitable **Helen Keller**¹, **“alone we can do so little; together we can do so much”**.

Throughout our work and activities at the Council of Europe, our aim is not just to set standards and uphold the human rights of persons with disabilities, but also **to empower persons with disabilities to bring down barriers** and allow, for example, better access to study, to work, to make use of skills and talents, to compete in sports, to create and share art, and to make a difference in each other’s lives.

The new Disability Strategy aims to **support and complement the member States' efforts to build a barrier-free Europe** where persons with disabilities can enjoy their fundamental rights.

The Strategy seeks **to invigorate ambition with pragmatism**: identifying meaningful shared goals to which all Council of Europe member States can and should aspire, and setting out the concrete actions we need to undertake to get us there.

¹ Helen Adams Keller (June 27, 1880 – June 1, 1968) was an American author, political activist, and lecturer. She was the first deaf-blind person to earn a bachelor of arts degree.

The Strategy has **five rights based priority areas**. They are **anchored in the European Convention on Human Rights** and other Council of Europe standards. Each of them is also **connected to corresponding Articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**, aiming at its implementation in practice.

They include:

1. Equality and non-discrimination (Article 5 CRPD)
2. Awareness raising (Article 8 CRPD)
3. Accessibility (Article 9 UNCRPD)
4. Equal Recognition before the law (Article 12 CRPD)
5. Freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse (Article 16 CRPD)

The member States have already agreed to these goals by ratifying the UNCRPD. Unlike the UNCRPD, the new Council of Europe Disability Strategy **does not create legal obligations** for member States. Such **legal obligations are clearly set out in the United Nations Convention** which we all aspire to implement in practice.

The priority areas also **aim to bring focus to the future Council of Europe work related to disability rights in order to achieve tangible results** during the period covered by the Strategy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The implementation of the Strategy will be based on a **“twin-track” approach**. One track comprises **specific projects, campaigns, trainings, and activities organised at the national and local levels** by national stakeholders in our member States where the Council of Europe can provide support and input such as exchanges of good practices, studies² and research.

The second track consists of **mainstreaming disability related issues in all the work and activities of the Council of Europe itself**.

It is very important to underline that it is after all, the **governments of member States who will drive the implementation of the Strategy in close co-operation with persons with disabilities**, represented by their organisations, and all other relevant stakeholders which contributed to the preparation of the Strategy. These include National Human Rights Institutions, Equality Bodies, Ombudsman Institutions, service providers and civil society.

To assess progress with the implementation of the Strategy, the **Ad hoc Committee of Experts on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities will prepare biennial reports for the attention of the Committee of Ministers** of the Council of Europe. We all agree on the importance of monitoring

² The five studies that the Council of Europe is developing on each of the priority themes are an example of the kind of support we can provide to you. Two of them are available for you to take home from the conference.

closely implementation – it will allow both the Council of Europe and the member States to measure progress, identify gaps and take necessary action to achieve the targeted goals of the Strategy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to thank you **all** for being here to help us turn this document into a reality.

This conference will forge the way forward. It will set the pace of our work to build a disability-inclusive development agenda towards 2023 and beyond towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 and “ensuring that no one is left behind”. Of course, this cannot be achieved alone. **It is necessary to have effective international co-operation**; mobilisation of individual, national and local efforts; and grassroots actions in order to become more effective in ensuring the human rights of persons with disabilities.

When we are moved by music of **Itzhak Perlman**³, let us also be reminded of his credo: **"I have a very simple philosophy. One has to separate the abilities from the disabilities. The fact I cannot walk, that I need crutches or a scooter or whatever it is, has nothing to do with my playing the violin."**

Together, we can change perceptions. Together, we can find the way on how to give every single person the opportunity to make the most out of his or her **Abilities**. We need to. Europe and the world needs to.

So let me conclude by wishing us all very fruitful discussions with the many distinguished panellists present today. I am sure, the implementation of the Council of Europe Disability Strategy – Human Rights: A reality for all - is off to a good start!

Thank you!

³ Itzhak Perlman (born August 31, 1945) is an Israeli-American violinist, conductor, and pedagogue. Perlman contracted polio at age four. He made a good recovery, learning to walk with crutches. Today, he uses crutches or an electric Amigo scooter for mobility and plays the violin while seated.