

Factsheet on the Awareness Raising on the Rights of Persons with Disability

“The worst thing about a disability is that people see it before they see you”- Easter Seals

At least 15% of the European population, more than 80 million people, live with one or more disabilities. They are often invisible to the others and may be in risk of facing important discriminations and challenges in everyday life. Awareness raising has a crucial role to play in overcoming negative, ill-informed attitudes. It is complementary to anti-discrimination legislation and necessary for the full realisation of human rights.



The Council of Europe protects and promotes the human rights for all. Persons with disabilities are entitled to have access to and enjoy the full range of human rights. These rights are safeguarded by the Council of Europe’s European Convention on Human Rights and the European Social Charter as well as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)¹ and other international human rights instruments.

The Council of Europe Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2017-2023 “Human rights: a reality for all” aims to achieve equality, dignity and equal opportunities for persons with disabilities. The Strategy identifies specific policies and actions to improve the equality of and access to rights by persons with disabilities over the coming years.

Side effects of lack of awareness raising in the field of rights of persons with disabilities are leading to negative perceptions of persons with disabilities, as well as to their discrimination and disabling environment.

■ Stereotypes

Stereotypes are generalised views or preconceived ideas, according to which individuals are categorised into particular groups (“physically disabled” or “mentally disabled”) and are arbitrarily assigned characteristics and roles determined and limited by their disability. Stereotypes are both descriptive, in that members of a certain group are perceived to have the same attributes regardless of individual differences, and prescriptive as they set the parameters for what societies deem acceptable behaviour. Stereotyping becomes problematic when it is used as a vehicle to degrade and discriminate persons with disabilities (for example characterised as being unable to decide by themselves or live normally in the society or suspected of being unproductive at work). Stereotypes generate negative attitudes disempowering persons with disabilities at school, at work and even sometimes within the family (family members having low expectations of their relatives with disabilities). Abolishing negative disability stereotypes is essential to achieving equality and empowering persons with disabilities.

¹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), available at: www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRPD/Pages/ConventionRightsPersonsWithDisabilities.aspx

■ **Disabling environment**

Disability is not determined by levels of pathologies, impairments, or functional limitations (purely medical approach to disability), but instead results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (the social approach to disability). A disabling environment is an environment which is not accommodating to persons with specific impairments, impeding them to be able to live in autonomy and to interact with the society. A disabling environment arises from the non-accessibility of information, transport, services or built environment and from discriminatory legislation and negative attitudes (linked to stereotypes). In order to tackle this issue, awareness raising on the rights of persons with disabilities together with the promotion of universal design plays a crucial role.

■ **Victims of violence, exploitation, abuse, inequalities and discrimination**

Often seen as vulnerable and sometimes treated as second-class citizens, persons with disabilities are much more likely to be victims of violence (including unintentional neglect), exploitation and abuse, especially in public institutions but not only, yet those cases are often overlooked and under-reported. More awareness raising is crucial to overcome this problem (for example law enforcement officers and magistrates should be properly trained to adequately handle cases of violence, exploitation and abuse of persons with disabilities).

Persons with disabilities often face exclusion and social and legal discriminations, directly arising from the negative stereotypes attached to them. The solution to these issues is to intensify awareness raising at the earliest stage, that is to say at school. Actions, such as maintaining children with disabilities in a parallel education system, aside from the rest of the society only further marginalize persons with disabilities. Education could and should be used to promote values such as equality and diversity and to empower and integrate children with disabilities. An inclusive educational system is an important step to change the mind-set of future adults toward persons with disabilities. More awareness raising is also needed to encourage employers to recruit persons with disabilities by stressing their abilities instead of their disabilities in order to favour their professional inclusion.

Awareness raising is key to ensuring the inclusion of persons with disabilities in society and our communities, as ignorance and stereotyping are one of the major causes of the marginalisation of persons with disabilities.

■ **Changing mentalities regarding persons with disabilities**

When we see someone using a wheelchair, a guide dog or a prosthetic limb, we focus more on differences and disability than on our shared ground, such as our shared social identity, political status, our abilities, our aspirations, and our dreams. Therefore strong and well-targeted awareness raising campaigns are needed to change the way we see persons with disabilities. To this aim, involving key stakeholders (including persons with disabilities) in the development of strategies from the bottom up is likely to be more successful than seeking to impose “solutions” from the top down.

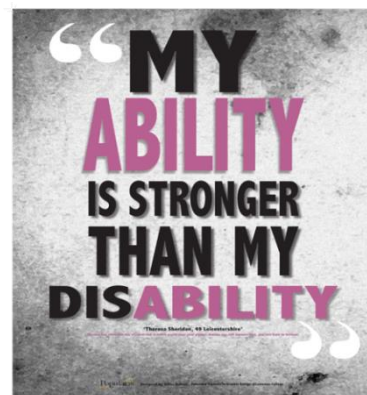
■ Key to inclusion, equality, dignity, independent living, freedom of choice and full and active participation

Awareness raising is an important factor in achieving the full integration of persons with disabilities in the society. For many years, persons with disabilities have been invisible to and set aside from and by the society. Because of the ignorance, the stereotypes and the blindness of the society toward them, social, legal and environmental barriers to their integration and participation have arisen, leading to their disempowerment and marginalisation. Creating a more inclusive and supporting society thus first requires a change of mentality toward persons with disabilities. This is why the awareness raising is so important and is highlighted as one of the priority areas of the Disability Strategy of the Council of Europe.

■ Towards positive change

The annual observance of the International Day of Disabled Persons (on the 3rd of December) was proclaimed in 1992, by the United Nations General Assembly resolution 47/3. It aims to promote the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities in all spheres of society and development, and to increase awareness of the situation of persons with disabilities in every aspect of political, social, economic and cultural life. However, it is still important to recall that it is easier to remove legal or physical barriers than to tackle our false beliefs, assumptions and stereotypes. We need to further pursue our efforts to overcome the current challenges such as:

- the lack of awareness of positive and realistic images of persons with disabilities in all sectors;
- the insufficient use of persons with disabilities in promoting a realistic and positive perception of the persons based on real-life experiences;
- the lack of targeted, long-term and systemic awareness-raising inclusion campaigns, especially for children at the earliest age.



Tools and activities of the Council of Europe regarding awareness raising

To achieve its goals of equality, independent living, full inclusion in the society and equal enjoyment of human rights for persons with disabilities, the Council of Europe supports awareness raising in the field of disability through:

■ The Council of Europe Disability Strategy

The Council of Europe Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2017-2023 "Human rights: a reality for all" aims at supporting and contributing to member States' efforts, both at national and local levels, to implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

■ Study on Awareness Raising on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The Council of Europe study on Awareness Raising for Persons with Disabilities can be a valuable guide for the member States, providing them with practical tools, including a sample of good practices and

explanations on awareness raising strategies. The study touches upon a great variety of questions linked to awareness raising, including the socio-historical roots of the misunderstanding and stereotypes about disability. It also describes the scope of exclusion of persons with disabilities in different aspects of the society such as employment, due to society's ignorance and stereotypes, and outlines different approaches on how to improve the efficiency of awareness raising.

■ **Study on Accessibility of Information, Technologies and Communication for Persons with Disabilities**

Accessibility is closely linked to awareness raising. The society has to be made aware of the challenges faced by persons with disabilities and, the public authorities need to promote the principles of accessibility and universal design in all the sectors of the society to ensure the full participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities. Pursuant to Article 2 of UNCRPD, "term 'universal design' means the design of products, environments, programs and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design". The promotion of universal design is crucial to avoid marginalisation and segregation of persons with disabilities and must therefore be integrated in the awareness raising campaigns.

■ **Seminar on the Awareness Raising for Persons with Disabilities (Copenhagen 13-14 December 2017)**

The Council of Europe and the Danish Ministry for Children and Social Affairs organised a seminar in Copenhagen to discuss awareness raising for persons with disabilities. Held in the framework of the Danish Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, the seminar brought together government authorities, persons with disabilities and their representatives, service providers, non-governmental organisations and independent experts and private sector and media representatives. The objective of the seminar was to support member States in their efforts to build partnerships and co-operation with media and civil society organisations dealing with the rights of persons with disabilities, persons with disabilities themselves, the private sector and other stakeholders to effectively raise awareness and counter prejudice and negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities.

■ **Checklist on the awareness raising for persons with disabilities**

The checklist on the awareness raising is found in the Council of Europe Study on Awareness Raising on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities². It includes a set of criteria (in the form of questions) that member States need to take into account to evaluate their awareness raising policies. This tool therefore, helps public authorities to assess the quality of their awareness raising campaigns and to understand where further improvements are needed. The criteria cover a wide range of questions such as "do awareness-raising strategies involve the participation of persons with disabilities?", "are persons with disabilities well informed of their rights?", or "have you defined specific strategic and operational objectives and are those objectives SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, result-oriented and time-bound)?"

² Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/final-study-awareness-raising/168072b421>

■ The Council of Europe standards and publications:

Committee of Ministers

- Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)8 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on achieving full participation through Universal Design promotes the generalisation of Universal Design which is “a strategy for making environments, products, communication, information technology and services accessible to and usable by everyone – particularly people with disabilities – to the greatest extent possible.”
- Recommendation CM/Rec (2012)6 on the protection and promotion of the rights of women and girls with disabilities asks member States to adopt the appropriate legislative measures and conduct other positive actions likely to encourage the participation of women and girls with disabilities in all areas of life. Noting that women and girls with disabilities may suffer multiple discrimination, the proposed measures cover areas such as education and training; employment and economic situation; health care; access to social protection; sexual and reproductive rights, motherhood and family life; access to justice and protection from violence and abuse; participation in culture, sport, leisure and tourism and raising awareness and changing attitudes
- Both Council of Europe Council of Europe Disability Action Plan 2006-2015 and Council of Europe Disability Strategy 2017-2023 - Human Rights: A Reality for All include a priority area on the awareness raising for persons with disabilities.

Parliamentary Assembly

- PACE Recommendation 1592 (2003): Towards full social inclusion of persons with disabilities embraces the “new vision” of disability set out in the declaration adopted by the participants at the European Congress on Disability in Madrid (March 2002) in preparation for the European Year of People with Disabilities 2003. It states that the provision of support and assistance, although essential to improving the quality of life of people with disabilities, is not enough. Guaranteeing access to equal political, social, economic and cultural rights should be a common political objective for the next decade. Equal status, inclusion, full citizenship, and the right to choose should be further promoted and implemented.
- PACE Resolution 2155(2017): The political rights of persons with disabilities: a democratic issue. It expresses concern about the fact that persons with disabilities face multiple challenges when trying to exercise their political rights. The Resolution advocates the adoption of concrete measure to facilitate access to voting and participation in elections for persons with disabilities and calls upon political parties to contribute to raising awareness of the importance of inclusion and participation of all, without discrimination, in political life.

Reports and Studies

- Achieving full participation through Universal Design. This report encourages member States to promote full participation of persons with disabilities in community life by ensuring access to all areas of society, including the built environment, transport, products and goods, information, public service, education, employment and health care, and implementing Universal Design.

- Access for People with Disabilities to Culture, Tourism, Sports and Leisure Activities: Towards Meaningful and Enriching Participation. This report addresses the access of persons with disabilities to cultural rights.
- Social inclusion of children and young people with disabilities. This report concerns the situation of children and young persons with disabilities and highlights the challenges to be taken up and the political decisions required to remove the systemic barriers and counter the negative attitudes and social exclusion.
- Enhancing rights and inclusion of ageing people with disabilities and older people with disabilities: a European perspective. This report is part presents the situation of two related groups, namely ageing people with disabilities and older people with disabilities.
- A study on Awareness Raising on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This study aims to suggest current and useful good practices to policy makers and practitioners in the area of raising awareness and sensitising a wide range of stakeholders.
- A study on Accessibility of Information, Technologies and Communication for Persons with Disabilities. This study aims to highlight and expand information, evidence, data and good practice in the area of accessibility and to provide concrete suggestions to guide implementation.

Efficient awareness raising and good practices promoted by the Council of Europe

■ Tips for an efficient awareness raising campaign

How should we proceed to efficiently raise awareness? The study on Awareness Raising for Persons with Disabilities gives us some indicators. First, we need to carry out numerous and diverse campaigns such as video campaigns, on-line hashtags, posters, testimonies, workshops, awareness raising activities etc. in different social settings such as for example at the workplace, in schools, in public, with the media and engage with all relevant stakeholders.

Awareness raising strategies are driven by two complementary axes. The ‘push principle’ takes a top-down approach, telling people what they must do and the negative consequences of failure to comply. Of course, people generally do not like being told what to do. They may change their behaviour temporarily just to abide by the new requirement, but they are not intrinsically motivated to do so, and may not be convinced that it is necessary. The message may need to be continually repeated if change is to be sustained. Conversely, the ‘pull principle’ takes a bottom-up approach, involving persons with disabilities and other stakeholders with roles to play from the outset to co-create and co-produce the measures to be taken in order to achieve a shared goal. People will be convinced to act because they themselves have created the strategies, making them much more sustainable and effective.



The participation of persons with disabilities themselves is of course an essential element. One of the best ways to promote tolerance and inclusion is to encourage the participation of persons with disabilities to mainstream activities (change things on the ground).

■ **The success of an awareness raising campaign greatly depends on:**

- the intrinsic quality of its content and design
- the proactive attitude of the national authorities (actively committed to bring improvements)
- the involvement of persons with disabilities themselves (“nothing about us without us”) and of all the other relevant stakeholders (the media can be particularly influential)
- the conviction that the modification called for by the campaign will bring a positive change to/in the society in a whole.

■ **Good practices**

The Council of Europe encourages the member States to exchange good practices in each of its field of competence, including the rights of persons with disabilities. Examples of good practices in this field can be found in the studies and publications of the Council of Europe (e.g. publication “Achieving full participation through Universal Design³”).

Denmark: The Youth Foundation in Denmark helps young persons with autism to develop life and employment skills and allows them to integrate into the workplace. A programme called “Ready to Start” (www.klartilstart.dk) works with local authorities and provides young persons with autism with an opportunity to join an internship. The local authority funds the internship, providing 2000 euros per month, which also covers the cost of a support worker. This means that 85% of young persons with autism who join such an internship retain their employment after a year. Supermarkets for instance traditionally have a high turnover of staff and are now increasingly employing persons with autism. There is no quick fix for the challenge of increasing the number of persons with autism in the workplace. Many potential employees with a disability want to work, but have no previous experience which disadvantages them. The integral part of “Ready to Start” programme is a scheme where a mentor (external to the business) trains the employee in certain skills and tasks and measures on a quarterly basis how their effectiveness is progressing. Afterwards the employer pays a salary, which reflects the effectiveness of the employee concerned. There are currently 75 adults on the scheme and 49 of those are in regular employment.

Slovenia: In June 2012, the Draga Center (www.center-db.si), in co-operation with the Municipality of Ljubljana, opened a restaurant called Druga Violina where persons with mental disabilities are employed and at the same time receive care and guidance. This permits persons with mental disabilities to be autonomous and promotes their inclusion. It also sends a strong message to the rest of the society - showing that opportunities exist for those so-called “hard to employ”.

³ Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/16805a2a1e>

