



Awareness raising on social inclusion of people with disabilities



Children, youth and working age people with disabilities in the EU face considerably higher risk of poverty and social exclusion compared to the general population. The public at large however is often unaware of the complexities of the problems faced by this vulnerable group. An EU supported project in Bulgaria provides a best practice example of how to provoke public discourse and raise awareness of the challenges faced by people with disabilities and the need to enhance their social inclusion at all levels of society.

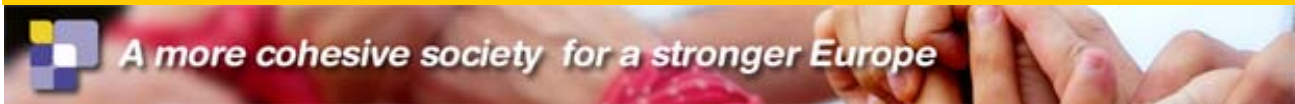
The problems of people with disabilities are perpetuated through a vicious circle they are caught into, marked by lower education levels, unemployment, and subsequently, further exclusion from society. The degrees of the problem, as well as the responses to it, vary from one country to another but it is recognised as a priority for the Union as a whole. The EU has committed itself to overcoming discrimination and increasing the integration of people with disabilities.

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Lessons learnt from attempts to tackle the issue have proven that it can be successfully addressed only within the general framework of social protection and inclusion policies. “The problems of people with disabilities should not be seen as largely medical and thus marginal for the society at large,” says Walter Wolf of the European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, “They should rather be viewed and addressed as questions relevant for the society as a whole and tackled only by fully integrating people with disabilities into it.”

■ The situation in Bulgaria

This approach has been adopted by the Awareness Raising Project on Problems of People with Disabilities in Bulgaria, financed by the Community Action Programme to Combat Social Exclusion and led by the Bulgarian National Council of People with Disabilities. The project, started in December 2004, is a resounding success. It gathered together all six members of the National Council of People with Disabilities (1).



"This project is one of the rare cases where consensus is reached and one actor in a particular Member State speaks in a coherent voice on behalf of all concerned. The fact that the partners in the project do not compete with each other but coordinate their actions is a big success as such," says Mr Wolf, coordinating the project on the part of the European Commission. Indeed, all the project partners worked as a very well coordinated mechanism targeting a wide range of stakeholders, including national, regional and local level decision makers, NGOs, the media, the public at large and the people with disabilities themselves, to create a greater awareness regarding the social inclusion of people with disabilities in the country.

Five campaigns were carried out in Sofia and the four Bulgarian regions with the highest level of unemployment where the difficulties faced by people with disabilities are the most pronounced – North-Eastern, North-Central, North-Western, and South-Eastern. They comprised a number of seminars on topics related to social exclusion of people with disabilities, particularly education and employment practices; the development and distribution of pamphlets and CDs, the production and distribution of the information brochure *The Bulgarian Legislation in the field of People with Disabilities* and the News Bulletin *Adoption of the Successful European Practices for Popularizing of the Problems of People with Disabilities*, the postproduction of three TV short movies, as well as press campaigns at national and regional level.

■ A positive momentum

According to Mr. Wolf, "the campaigns created a positive momentum. The conferences and other awareness-raising activities were very well-organised with the government, press, NGOs and other stakeholders present." The general public's response to these well-coordinated actions was positive too. The media was very involved. Through the coverage of the national and local media, the Bulgarian public was introduced not only to the issues of people of disabilities in a

national context, but to the larger framework of the European Union's Social Inclusion policies.

Following the large-scale Conference organised in May 2005, there was a considerable increase of the general public's awareness of the issues. The major media in the country started to discuss issues related to the social inclusion of children, youth and working-age disabled into mainstream schools, universities and the labour market, respectively.

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"Reports related to the everyday life of the disabled started to appear more and more in the national and local media," reports Ms. Milva Karadjova of Media PR, a partner in the project team. "Regional seminars proved another excellent tool for communicating the key messages of the project," continues Ms. Karadjova. "On the one hand, they provoked a lot of interest from the local media on the importance of policies for integrating people with disabilities. On the other hand, they introduced the target audiences at regional and local levels to the latest best practices at EU level in the field of social inclusion of vulnerable groups, as well as the relevant European laws on integration of disabled people."





■ Beyond Bulgaria, a lesson for the whole of the EU

"It was a very useful exercise to highlight the social approach of the European Union," comments Walter Wolf. Moreover, the Bulgarian experience demonstrated the value added of the National Awareness Raising Projects, financed as part of the European Union's Community Action Programme to Combat Social Exclusion. It enhanced the awareness of stakeholders and the general public thus increasing participation and mobilisation of actors. Moreover, it created lasting partnerships among relevant stakeholders including authorities, the media, people with disabilities, and organisations representing them.

This project emphasised the fact that given the multidimensional profile of poverty and social exclusion, effective responses have to be coordinated across a range of different policy areas and actors at local, regional, national and EU levels. It paved the way for a better acknowledgment of the concerns and aspirations of the disabled in Bulgaria and their contribution to the public discourse and decision-making process. It called for a joint constructive reflection upon these issues and concrete acts at Community and Member State levels.

(1) Members of the National Council of People with Disabilities include the Bulgarian Blind People Union, the Bulgarian Deaf People Union, the Bulgarian Association for People with Intellectual Difficulties, the National Disabled People Cooperation Union, the Bulgarian Disables Union, and the National Center for Social Rehabilitation. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, PR Media Ltd., (a full-service communications agency specialised in social marketing), and the Joint Society Foundation (an NGO aimed at providing services for people with disabilities) were partners in the project

21 June 2007

Project information

Name of the initiative: Adoption of EU successful practices for awareness raising on problems of people with disabilities

Activity: Awareness-raising project

Lead organisation: National Council of Organization of and for People with Disabilities (Bulgaria)

Countries: Bulgaria

Scope: National

SPSI Priority theme: inclusion of most vulnerable groups

Year: 2004 – 2005

EU funding: €32,000.00

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