



Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Belgian Disability Forum (BDF), I want to thank you for hearing us today.

The BDF brings together 18 disabled people's organisations. It was created in order to give an appropriate follow-up to international policies impacting the life of disabled persons. In total, the BDF represents more than 250.000 persons with disabilities and their families.

This submission was also concerted with the 4 advice councils existing at federal and regional levels in Belgium.

Throughout this short presentation, the expression 'BDF recommends' clearly means that all 22 structures involved agree with the proposal.

Progress has been made in the areas covered by recommendation Nr. 22 of the UPR First cycle. Nevertheless these steps were not sufficient to properly tackle the problems and ensure a real improvement in living conditions of disabled persons in Belgium.

General measures : problems related to mainstreaming

Disabled persons are still facing important obstacles in their participation in socio-economic and political life. The complexity of the Belgian federalism complicates matters.

For example, the federal state has no authority over how Communities manage education systems. Thus, a French-speaking child living in Flanders and attending a French speaking school in Brussels cannot benefit from the technical adaptations necessary to continue his/her schooling. Citizens are often lost in the institutional maze gradually created by the Belgian State. The institutional complexity therefore can lead to a loss of rights.

The BDF makes two general recommendations of :

1. Cross-cutting and coordination structures between federal and federated entities must be improved in order to facilitate data exchanges and to guarantee the quality and continuity of services to disabled persons. Each entity must work on the basis of the same definition of disability. This definition must be consistent with the CRPD.
2. Pursuant to the principle of 'handstreaming' put forward by the federal state, a systematic and structured consultation with disabled people and associations that represent them must be implemented. Advice structures of disabled persons must be created at all levels of federal, regional and Community authorities. These structures must receive the funding necessary for their operation. They have to be consulted at every stage of decision-making : reflection, decision and evaluation.



Education

Belgium was the first country to develop a specialized education. It helps to achieve good results in terms of overall training but constitutes a failure at the inclusion of disabled persons.

In its report, the BDF makes 7 recommendations in order to promote the development of inclusive education. I will point particularly the following two :

1. Sufficient resources, both human and financial, must be made available for planning and implementing an inclusive education policy. Necessary reasonable accommodations must be guaranteed to allow children with disabilities to follow the school curriculum of their choice. At the end of this one, children with disabilities must obtain a diploma.
2. Children with disabilities may not be maintained in a non-enrolment situation.

Employment

The development and harmonization of a real policy of vocational integration of disabled persons must be based on mechanisms that empower all stakeholders.

In what concerns employment in the public sector, the BDF regrets that employment quotas for disabled workers are not respected : the employment rate of disabled people has even decreased in federal administrations in 2014.

Regarding employment in the private sector, work disincentives remain excessive. By disincentives, we mean that, in some cases, a disabled worker receives a wage lower than the income he/she would enjoy living on disability benefits.

The BDF recommends to prioritize the following 2 actions :

1. To guarantee the respect of employment quotas in the public sector
2. To remove work disincentives in the private sector. Additionally, all actors of the labour market must be made aware of training, coaching and support of disabled workers.

Standard of living

Belgium is a country which offers high standards of living. Nevertheless, every citizen cannot reach these standards. This is particularly the case for many disabled persons. BDF presents 2 recommendations at this level :



1. Each disabled person must be guaranteed an adequate income above the poverty line. The integration allowance must cover disability-related extra costs, regardless of whether the disabled person is working or not.
2. It is necessary to increase and diversify the supply of living environment, so that all disabled person can choose one that fits their lifestyle choices : individual or community-based residence.

Accessibility to transport and public buildings

Accessibility is a key element for full participation in social life. It remains generally insufficient in Belgium. The BDF makes 2 recommendations about it :

1. Accessibility to public transports must be improved. This includes access to information based on individual needs.
2. Regulations have to be harmonised, including those relating to heritage preservation. Failure to comply with regulations must be duly sanctioned.

On behalf of the BDF, I thank you, Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen, for having listened attentively. I am at your disposal for any question.