

Event Report

Coproducing employment initiatives for young persons with disabilities and mental health problems

On Tuesday 30st January the Taskforce **“Support Services of Tomorrow”** comprising of the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD), the European Disability Forum (EDF), COFACE Families-Europe, the European Network on Independent Living (ENIL), Inclusion Europe and Mental Health Europe (MHE) co-hosted the event **‘Co-producing employment initiatives for young persons with disabilities and mental health problems’** alongside **MEP Brando Benifei**. The event engaged MEPs, European Commission officials, social service providers, employers, persons with disabilities, as well as civil society, to share best practices and discuss how we can empower all stakeholders in the co-design, co-development and co-delivery of inclusive employment practices.

Opening Session



The event was opened **MEP Brando Benifei (S&D)** alongside **MEP Marian Harkin (ALDE)** and **Maria Nyman, Director of Mental Health Europe**.

Ms Nyman began by defining co-production as an inclusive working practice, based on the human rights based model, that includes all stakeholders in the design, development and delivery of a service, policy or activity. Ms Nyman continued by identifying the event’s goal to facilitate active and meaningful dialogue to help to foster inclusive employment initiatives for young persons with disabilities and mental health problems.

Mr Benifei followed Ms Nyman by stressing that we must rethink our current employment methods, using co-production as an important tool and work with EU structural funds to implement the UNCRPD. Mr Benifei also highlighted the importance of supporting the work of the Taskforce,



emphasising that, at the core of efforts to foster a truly inclusive society must be support services which empower people with disabilities to be in control of their lives.

Ms Harkin supported Mr Benifei's comments and praised the event for its role in bringing together key stakeholders to discuss how we can all be active partners in the delivery of inclusive employment opportunities. Ms Harkin also drew attention to the need for the human rights based approach to "underpin all policy making decisions" and the importance of implementing co-productive methodology into the policy making process.

"The path towards employment"-Testimonies

The event's first panel included testimonies of individuals who had both personal and professional experience of the accesses people with disabilities have to inclusive employment opportunities and was chaired by **MEP Marian Harkin**.

First, **Kamil Goungor** who participated in the European Voluntary Service (EVS) for six months in Ghent and Brussels shared his experience. Mr Goungor's participation in the EVS was made possible by the programme's ability to meet his support needs and fund his personal assistant, something that was a first for a EVS volunteer in Flanders.

Mr Goungor praised the EVS for providing a life-changing opportunity to live and work abroad as well as for the opportunities it has given him since his placement finished. Although EVS provided Mr Goungor with a number of opportunities he also identified several issues which challenges the initiatives' ability to be inclusive to all and be a path for further employment. These issues focused on the importance of ensuring that the support needs of people with disabilities are adequately met and funded and also highlighted the potential difficulties in finding suitable personal assistants for people with disabilities abroad. Notwithstanding his experience on national and European level, Mr. Goungor has not yet found a paid job since the end of his EVS.



Mr Goungor finished his testimony by:

- Recommending that persons with disabilities should be involved in every stage of the policy making process and the design of employment initiatives.
- Asserting that more should be done to encourage employers to create inclusive opportunities.
- Highlighted that there is still a general assumption that disabled people work on a voluntary basis
- Reassuring other persons with disabilities to not be afraid and to push themselves out of their comfort zone to make the most of possible employment initiatives open to them.
- Emphasised the difficulty of accessing social support across countries





As a parent of an adult with a disability and a Human Resource's Director the panel's next speaker, **Hortense Desvilles**, provided a unique point of view. With her understanding of the internal pressures of a company's human resources unit and her experiences as a parent, Ms Desvilles highlighted the importance of sharing the responsibility between all stakeholders when creating inclusive employment practices. Acknowledging that inclusive co-productive methods already occur in some examples of good practice Ms Desvilles said that: "We have to change the scale" and ensure that these methods are used throughout Europe.

Throughout her testimony Ms Desvilles pinpointed a number of important recommendations which can support all stakeholders to provide young people with disabilities with more inclusive employment opportunities. These recommendations included:

- Fostering stronger links between people with disabilities, their families, schools, social services and employers.
- Equipping young people with disabilities with the social skills they need to thrive in a working environment.
- Acknowledging that people with disabilities and their families are the specialists in their own support needs.

When speaking about how companies can increase their inclusivity Ms Desvilles recommended that they:

- Spread their response to external challenges, such as the digital revolution, through a holistic approach of coproduction involving all company departments (in particular IT and finance), to allow Human Resources departments to support the special needs of their employees better.
- Should become more flexible to better respond to the needs of persons with disabilities.
- Need to foster a human rights based approach and treat people as people, rather than a workforce.

Mr Benifei concluded the first panel with the message that we need to foster inclusion and that, looking forward, political institutions have to ensure accessibility and cohesion through co-productive methods. Failure to do so, Mr Benifei asserted, would leave policy-makers "always struggling to catch-up."

European Responses to include youth with disabilities: the need for Co-production

The second panel was moderated by **Ms Catherine Naughton, Director of EDF**. It explored current EU employment initiatives and the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) methodology as a good practice for getting people with mental health problems into employment.

Elodie Fazi, represented the European Commission as the Team Leader on youth employment to explore EU employment initiatives and policies and their use by people with disabilities. These initiatives include the Youth Guarantee and its financing programme, the Youth Employment



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Initiative. Commission statistics have found that around 35,000 young people with disabilities have been supported by the Youth Employment Initiative. Although this shows that the EU initiatives are helping to include people with disabilities in the labour market, 6.8% of young people with a disability are not in education, employment or training which shows that more needs to be done.

The second half of the panel included the testimonies of an **IPS worker, Cris Bergman**, and **IPS beneficiary** who together explained the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) methodology and its effectiveness for providing employment on the open labour market for people with mental health problems.

The IPS services works with young people with mental health problems to support their transition onto the labour market. The IPS methodology works with the person in a holistic way including through their health teams, employment services etc. Working in partnership and according to the preferences of the client and working in close connection with employers, IPS creates inclusive working practices which can aid the recovery process of young people with a mental health problem and facilitates their full and active inclusion in the labour market and society. The beneficiary of the service described how he found a job which he very much appreciates and which has been important for him in his recovery process. Factors for success included that the employer knew about the mental health problem from the outset and could make some adjustments to the work environment.

Conclusions

Mr Luk Zelderloo, Secretary General of EASPD, concluded the event by asserting that “co-production is the way forward” and that we must work together to find solutions. In the co-production of inclusive employment practices Mr Zelderloo stressed the need for accessibility, the funding of the correct support services and additional support for employers.

Mr Zelderloo highlighted the need for holistic approach in the creation of co-productive employment initiatives before ending the event with a call for European policy-makers and other stakeholders to:

- Make co-productive methods an integral part of the policy-making process.
- Ensure that the use of co-production is highlighted in the next European Disability Strategy.
- Review the accessibility of EU employment initiatives for people with disabilities and ensure that these initiatives focus on their abilities and strengths.
- Reach out to the business world and help to mainstream co-productive methods into their employment practices.
- Use the Social Scoreboard within the European Semester to ensure that inclusive employment opportunities are on the agenda of European policy-makers.

