



Autism-Europe's World Autism Awareness Day 2023 Campaign

Manifesto

Building an inclusive society for autistic people

Autism-Europe (AE) is an international association representing autistic people and their families with 90 member organisations in 40 countries, including in 26 European Union (EU) member states. Autism is a complex lifelong developmental disability experienced differently by each individual. An estimated seven million people in Europe are autistic, given that prevalence rates estimate that at least one in 100 people are on the autism spectrum. Autistic people face many different barriers to their full inclusion into society throughout their lives.

This year, Autism-Europe will be celebrating its 40th anniversary under the campaign motto 'Building an inclusive society for autistic people'. The 2023 campaign, which is being carried out alongside our members, is an opportunity to reflect on the advances made so far for the autism community and the work that remains to improve the lives of autistic people and their families.

We would like to call on European, national and regional policymakers and other stakeholders to ensure the full enjoyment of the rights and needs of autistic people in Europe, according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The UNCRPD has been ratified by 45 out of the 46 member countries of the Council of Europe (CoE), including by all EU member states and by the European Union itself in 2010.

To implement the UNCRPD at EU level, the European Commission launched in March 2021 its second Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which will run until 2030. Autistic people's needs should be adequately addressed when implementing it in all areas, both at EU and Member States levels.

Understand autism and value autistic people

Understanding autism and its diversity is paramount to foster inclusion and access to adequate support for autistic people in society. It is also a necessary pre-requisite to ensure that autistic people are accepted and are valued for who they are. It means actively fighting the harmful prejudices and discrimination they experience in all spheres of life, and ensuring that they are not the target of bullying or unfair treatment. Increasing understanding of autism in society would contribute to removing significant barriers for autistic people, such as accessing diagnosis, education, timely supports and interventions, participating fully in the community, entering the open labour market or living independently with adequate support.

In order to foster better inclusion and participation for autistic people in society, intersectionality and biases about autism must be addressed. It would for example ensure that autistic girls, women, people of colour and other intersectional identities have better and more timely access to diagnosis and support. It is also important to recognise that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing the support needs of autistic people and it is important to adopt an individualised approach. Autism-Europe calls on European national and regional policymakers to support public awareness campaigns and systematic training on autism (including rights-based approach to autism) across all sectors, for all relevant stakeholders, with the active involvement of autistic people.

Empower autistic people

Autistic people have the right to make their own decisions and have the support to do so whenever needed, whether it is about making daily choices about their own life or helping shape society through their contribution to policy-making. Society should meet their need to have control over their lives, ambitions and achievements. Enjoying legal capacity – in line with article 12 of the UNCRPD – is one of the preconditions to do so. Autism-Europe calls for a change in legislation in countries that still put people under full guardianship. Substituted decision-making systems should be replaced by supported decision-making, using methods adapted to the communications needs of autistic people — such as augmentative or alternative communication modes – accompanied by appropriate safeguards.

Regardless of legal incapacitation, for many autistic people, election campaigns, information materials, voting procedures and voting ballots are not accessible because of their communication needs and learning difficulties, therefore they cannot adequately enjoy their right to vote. It is key that the EU and all its member states support the right to vote and stand for elections, notably by ensuring that the upcoming European and national elections are fully accessible to autistic people.

Guarantee the right support for autistic people throughout their life

Most autistic people still do not have their support needs met. Because of prejudices about their capacity to live independently and the dire lack of community-based support services, autistic people (and in particular those in need of a high level of support) are at high risk of institutionalisation. Lack of support, information and training to families on how to meet the specific and complex needs of autistic children can also contribute to institutionalisation. Consequently, across Europe, many autistic people remain locked away in large institutions or mental health hospitals where their rights are being denied. Alternatively, families alone are often the ones providing essential support to their autistic adult relatives, and therefore worry about the future once they can no longer provide this support.

However, autistic people can live included in their communities with appropriate support services. They should have access to different types and levels of support depending on their individual needs and strengths. They should also receive the appropriate level of support at different stages of their lives, including around diagnosis and key moments of transition in adulthood. It is important to approach support services on a case-by-case basis and involve autistic individuals and their families in developing personalised support plans. To make this a reality, coherent policies and funding are needed across Europe and at the EU-level to empower people on the autism spectrum to live independently and participate in the community.

Autism-Europe welcomes the European Commission's initiative for services of excellence pursuant with Article 19 of the UNCRPD on independent living and community-based services for people with disabilities. However, principles need to be translated into concrete action to improve the lives of autistic people. AE calls on the EU and its member states to adopt ambitious policies accompanied by sufficient funding to develop and sustain quality community-based services for people with disabilities, including people in need of a high level of support.

Ensure accessibility for autistic people across all sectors

Accessibility for autistic people translates to being able to participate fully in society and have equal access to opportunities and services. Accessibility involves creating an environment and communication style that is accommodating and sensitive to the unique needs and sensory processing differences of autistic people. It is essential to design spaces and services that are autism inclusive. It is therefore necessary to identify and eliminate obstacles and barriers to accessibility for autistic people pursuant with Article 9 of the UNCRPD.

To be fully included in society, autistic people may also need flexible adjustments and reasonable accommodation depending on their individual needs (e.g. from the use of ear defenders and indoor light adjustments to using devices to support communication). This requires promoting awareness of what reasonable accommodation for autistic people can mean through the adoption of specific guidelines across sectors.

Autism-Europe recommends further accessibility legislation for people with disabilities in all European countries to address the existing gaps in that regard. The European Accessibility Act (EAA) was an important step in the right direction. Yet, the EAA has serious shortcomings regarding what products and services have to be accessible in the EU. Autism-Europe encourages EU member states to continue adapting the transposed EAA as ambitiously as possible.

An important step towards full and harmonised accessibility for autistic people is also the rollout of the EU-wide European Disability Card. An EU Disability Card as an official document attesting to one's disability status is particularly relevant for people with invisible disabilities. Autism-Europe calls for the EU Disability Card to be based on binding legislation, preferably a Regulation to ensure a harmonised implementation across EU member states. The EU Disability Card should enable mutual recognition of disability status across the EU and apply to all areas of services and support already provided to national citizens with disabilities, ensuring freedom of movement across the EU.

Freedom from discrimination for autistic people

Autistic people and their families are still subject to widespread, constant and lifelong discrimination across all sectors, which hinder their access to education, employment, healthcare, and prevent their full inclusion in society. Sometimes, the discrimination they are subjected to due to their disability is compounded by other types of discrimination in relation to their gender, their ethnicity, or other forms of intersectionality. In line with article 5 of the UNCRPD, autistic people and their families need to be protected and given equal treatment under the law. Autism-Europe calls for adopting and implementing fully-fledged non-discrimination legislation across Europe.

Within the EU, this includes unblocking the antidiscrimination directive seeking to implement the principle of equal treatment outside the labour market, irrespective of age, disability, sexual orientation or religious belief, which aims at extending protection against discrimination through a horizontal approach. The initiative remains blocked by the Council of the European Union representing the member states since 2008 due to lack of unanimity. Echoing the the European Agency for Fundamental Rights, Autism-Europe calls on the EU member states to ensure that the EU offers comprehensive protection against discrimination in key areas by ending the current artificial hierarchy of grounds and unblocking the antidiscrimination directive.

Autism-Europe also calls on the EU and its member States to adopt a strategic and integrated European approach to address the needs of autistic people across Europe, and encourage Member States to adopt cross-sectoral national strategies or action plans, in line with the UNCRPD and international recommendations.



The information contained in this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or opinion of the European Commission.