

Europe's Way out of the Crisis: The Disability Rights Perspective
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Rights and Social Inclusion or Cuts and Social Exclusion
John Evans OBE

Introduction

We are currently living through an unprecedented time. How things have changed over the last 4 years since 2007. It seemed like then we were going through the dawning of a new age when the UN CRPD was launched at the UN in 2007. It felt like finally we had an international legal instrument which recognised our absolute rights as full citizens. It was a breath of fresh air. We had waited a long time to have such a legal capacity with the potential of enabling us to realise all our rights like nondisabled people. However, the utopia was not to last as we were brought to the brink of an incalculable economic banking disaster. Four years later we are now paying the price of this.

The European Commission should be applauded for choosing the impact the austerity measures are having on disabled people in Europe as a central theme of this conference. It is essential now that we address this situation and have a constructive debate looking for a way forward together.

It is unfortunate that disabled people seem to be disproportionately experiencing the brunt of the savage cuts being made to their benefits, frontline services and funding for our organisations. Economic recessions usually follow certain cycles and it is clear from recent events that we are not through the worst yet as these effects could get worse.

What is clear is that we need to find solutions fast before the situation gets any worse and our hope is that this debate can initiate this.

Background

Since the crisis began EDF and my organisation ENIL have been receiving many complaints and requests for support from concerned members struggling to maintain their quality of life and rights. I can assure you disabled people are right now terrified of what is happening and what might happen next.

No countries are exempt from austerity measures, even those who have been seen as leaders in services and legislation for disabled people. The UK was once seen as one of the pioneers in independent living and now we find ourselves struggling to maintain what we have built up over the last 30 years.

In many countries disability organisations have been uniting to protest and challenge the cuts that are being made nationally. We in ENIL have been very active and have devised a Resolution on the impact of the crisis for the European Parliament. EDF has been working hard collecting information which has been coming in from many EU Member States. In June 2011 EDF established its EU Observatory to monitor the crisis focusing on what specific measures were being taken at national levels. It has focused on the direct effect on the social inclusion of disabled people and the violation of the UN CRPD.

Complaints of the situation have been received from Sweden, the Netherlands, UK, Belgium, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Ireland and Greece. From the basis of these responses received by the survey, my presentation will cover the main areas affected by the crisis which include the social, economic and political participation of disabled people in the community.

Economic effects.

Disabled people already experience numerous barriers to social and economic participation and employment is particularly problematic. The

crisis has worsened the situation. Unemployment rates have increased dramatically and the average percentage of disabled people in the workforce is less than half compared to non-disabled workers. It goes without saying that this lack of employment leads to further poverty and social exclusion for many disabled people. In some countries over 70 per cent of disabled people are on benefits.

Employment plays a crucial role not only for financial security, but also for providing status, a sense of community belonging and participation. In the UK alone 400,000 disabled people will lose out on work support through the reform of the employment support allowance. Many countries expressed their concerns on the lack of working opportunities for disabled people.

The worst consequence of the crisis is being seen in welfare systems. Welfare reforms and cuts in public expenditure have been indiscriminate and drastic. When introducing new pension and social protection systems, Governments must be aware of the fact that the majority of disabled people already live below the poverty threshold. Therefore any further reduction in income would increase more hardship.

Several studies have proved that poverty rates have increased at least 50% for the disability community population. This is a very sensitive and important fact to consider, when trying to apply the targets for poverty reduction in the EU 2020 Strategy.

In Belgium over 550,000 people are still waiting for their personal assistance budgets. It is said that in the Netherlands by 2014 117,000 people will lose their personal assistance budgets. In the UK the Independent Living Fund is also being targeted for closure in 2015. This will have devastating effects for supporting disabled people and severely limit the possibilities to fully participate in society. It seems like Governments are now only looking at budgets and cost-cutting and not the long-term impact the cuts will have on the quality of life and wellbeing of disabled people in the future.

Social Participation

As a result of the crisis there are particular concerns about access to services, mobility and social relations getting worse, as often social and public services are not always that accessible for disabled people already in many countries. Availability and access to services to enable independent living in the community and to actively participate are crucial for an inclusive society.

Deinstitutionalization

Cut backs in public expenditure could seriously deteriorate the possibilities for the development of independent living and community based services. This could mean that it could reverse the positive trends towards deinstitutionalization which has advanced considerably in Europe over recent years through the work of a number of European disability NGOs. This development is already being seen in Greece and Poland and not far off in many other countries. Institutionalisation is again a real threat!

Health and Well-Being

We are also witnessing how the crisis is affecting social and health services which are key factors in disabled people's lives. A recent EU study by FRA (Fundamental Rights Agency) revealed the findings that people with intellectual disabilities and mental health issues had much more difficulty accessing medical services than others. These are real serious issues for the health and well-being of disabled people.

In the UK and Spain the crisis has had negative effects on the health conditions of disabled people psychologically, causing more anxiety disorders, stress and depression. In an extreme example 2 disabled people recently committed suicide in the UK. I can honestly say that this last year has been very depressing witnessing the hardships disabled people have been exposed to. It is important during such traumatic times we are able to have escape mechanisms to protect our health.

Six Major Trends from the Survey

1.Reassessment

A worrying development has emerged around the reassessment of disability status. This has been through a dangerous distortion of the reality in order to recover millions of Euros from many EU countries. Unfortunately, this has been supported by the media who have portrayed disabled people as scroungers, not wanting to work, cheating and people abusing the system to claim disability benefit. The media has been blatant in the UK in this respect.

In countries like Belgium, Greece, Italy and the UK it is perceived that there are too many disabled people claiming benefits. The State's way of dealing with the situation is to reassess disability status in the hope that this might lead to lower levels of support needs and therefore decreasing budgets.

In Sweden reassessment has resulted in the decrease in the number of hours of support people are granted. In Italy a new Law assessing the needs of disabled students must be made in the presence of a doctor and requests made through the internet. This is incredible, as it seems after years of fighting to develop a social model of disability, we are now facing the threat of returning to the medical model full of restrictions and barriers.

The development of these stereotypes is a dangerous phenomenon as it will only increase social exclusion with the concrete risk of further poverty.

2. Cuts in Disability Allowances

Universal cuts have been made to disability benefits, allowances and other special benefits for disabled people in nearly every EU Member State. It is a sad consequence when public expenditure cuts are being made disabled people are often easy targets.

3. Increased Taxation

The third tendency has seen several national recovery plans involving increased taxation. This again aggravates the heavy economic burden for disabled people and their families already trying to meet the high cost of disability in order to maintain a reasonable standard of life. Fewer resources means it is more difficult to participate in the social, economic and political life.

4. Reduction in Local Authority Budgets

Cuts in Disability services have been universal throughout Europe over this last year or so. Local authority budgets have been reduced significantly. In the UK each local authority has had a 25% cut for the next 4 years. This means that frontline services which are the support systems for disabled people are being reduced despite challenges from national and local organisations. In many countries local public funding to disability organisations has been reduced substantially, which again could make more disabled people unemployed as these organisations can often employ numerous disabled people.

5. Review of Funding Resources for Disabled People's Organisations

Many countries have seen the funding resources for disabled people's organisations being reduced significantly. In Ireland a major national cross disability organisation funded by the government was ended. This organisation was doing valuable advocacy work both nationally and at a European level with EDF.

The capacity to participate in the policy making process for organisations has been diminished. In Slovenia there has been a review of the funding procedures without any consultation with disabled people's organisations. This resulted in the reduction of the financing capacity to support disabled people in the community.

6. Austerity Measures being made without Consultation with Disabled People's Organisations

This detrimental development is in violation of the UN CRPD. Article 33 of the CRPD recognises the obligation to consult representative disabled people's organisations when measures are taken which affect their rights. The absence of consultation and dialogue between public authorities and their organisations has resulted in a negative impact on the lives of millions of disabled people.

In Conclusion.

Many European disability NGOs are very concerned that EU funding will not be reduced like it has in many different countries. Otherwise this will further diminish the support disabled people could receive from these organisations both nationally and a European level.

It seems evident to me that a combination of the EU legislative framework and more concrete implementation of the UN CRPD could go a long way in helping to address the situation by highlighting to Member States their legal obligations. I think it is also important that we work together with other Social NGO Networks during the crisis in order to support innovative change. The European Commission has an important role here.

Recommendations

It is true that in the EU we need a strong legal framework that protects disabled people from discrimination. We also need an effective legal apparatus enabling disabled people to fully participate in social, economic and political aspects of the societies. In order to achieve this EDF calls for

1. Awareness raising of the needs of disabled people to ensure appropriate portrayal of disabled people in the media and other relevant stakeholders to avoid social stigmatization.

2. Freedom of movement for disabled people to have the right to live independently and be included in society. Social protection reforms must support this. Personal assistance and other community support systems should not be undermined by the austerity measures.
3. The right to work and employment must be protected. Measures for full inclusion should include reasonable accommodation and innovative work schemes.
4. Education for disabled people to be respected in all reforms. Mainstream education should be priority and not be reduced through cuts.
5. Access to health services for all disabled people.
6. High quality social services should remain a precondition for respecting the human rights of disabled people.
7. Family life should be respected through appropriate policies.
8. Adequate living standards and social protection should be maintained to avoid social exclusion, reduction in income and poverty.
9. Appropriate statistics and data are collected to assess properly the situation of disabled people in Europe.
Organisations representing disabled people should be consulted of any actions that could have an impact on their rights.

I finish by calling upon all EU Institutions, the Commission and the Parliament and the Council of Europe to support us in alleviating this situation.