



4th European Parliament of Persons with Disabilities (EPPD)

Speech - **City** Brussels - **Country** Belgium - **Date** 06/12/2017

Honourable President of the European Parliament,

Honourable President of the European Disability Forum,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would first like to thank the organisers for inviting me to this important event as a member of the EU CRPD monitoring Framework.

The last European Parliament of Persons with Disabilities took place in 2012 following the ratification of the CRPD by the EU. That was the beginning of a promising yet demanding initiative to bring a human rights' convention to life.

The demanding nature of this process is particularly clear to me as an Irish citizen, as Ireland was the last EU Member State not to have ratified the Convention, which I very much regret. I am glad to hear however just this week that the Irish Minister charged with the disability issue has got agreement from the Irish government for ratification. Hopefully the required new Irish legislation will also follow. But despite these obstacles we must recognise the progress that has been made while acknowledging the gaps that remain and that we should now be better able to tackle given our experience to date in the implementation of the CRPD.

The CRPD Committee concluding observations to the EU provide important practical guidelines in this regard. A genuine engagement with the disability issue means translating words on a page into practical, observable and measurable initiatives, into ways in which the capacity of people with disabilities to participate on an equal basis in every aspect their lives is fully respected and realised.

The European Ombudsman is mainly a complaint-driven institution. The disability-related complaints cover a wide range of issues, such as the accessibility of EU buildings, health insurance claims made on behalf of children with disabilities, sign-language interpretation at EU funded events, and participation in EU recruitment competitions.

I also use my own-initiative power through my strategic work, which addresses systemic shortcomings in the EU institutions. The CRPD Committee's concluding observations have



inspired my strategic work on disabilities, as they highlight the gaps in the implementation of the CRPD by the EU institutions. I will give you some recent examples.

In 2016, following *the related Committee's* observation and the submission of complaints, I launched a strategic inquiry on **whether the treatment of persons with disabilities under the EU's Joint Sickness Insurance Scheme (JSIS) complies with the CRPD** .

Full reimbursement by the JSIS for medical expenses can be provided for a "serious illness". But for an illness to be regarded as 'serious' four criteria must be satisfied, including that of shortened life expectancy.

I have told President Juncker that this medical approach to disability is not aligned with the social model approach promoted by the CRPD. Many disabilities do not necessarily limit life expectancy yet still incur high costs for medicines and services essential to a full, effective, and equal participation in society.

Following the Commission's reply, my inquiry team met the Commission for further clarifications. I then launched a targeted consultation addressed to associations of EU staff members with disabilities - or whose family members have disabilities, as well as to the European Disability Forum.

Some suggestions to date include that the Commission should carry out an assessment to identify whether any provisions relevant to the JSIS need to be revised in view of the CRPD, that it should consider adopting a non-exhaustive list of reimbursable devices under the JSIS, and that it should establish regular contacts with the associations of EU staff members with disabilities to see the effects of the day-to-day application of the JSIS and of the social schemes for persons with disabilities. I invited all the contacted organisations to reply to the consultation by the end of January.

The CRPD Committee also expressed concerns *about the accessibility of EU institutions' websites* and in October 2016 we welcomed the adoption of the directive on the accessibility of public sector bodies' websites.

Although it does not apply to websites and mobile applications of EU institutions, the institutions are encouraged to comply with its accessibility requirements. In July 2017, I launched a strategic inquiry on the accessibility of the Commission's websites and online tools raising five main issues around training, information, accessibility statements and accessibility generally.

In October 2017, the Commission committed to a number of actions including a pilot project on selected pages of the inter-institutional portal europa.eu to provide easy-to-read formats and making accessibility courses mandatory for its web staff. It is also looking at an accessible mobile application to replace the JSIS online. I am now determining my next step in this inquiry.

As Ombudsman I have a duty to set a good example. An easy-to-read explanation of our



work is available on our website in 24 languages. An external service provider assessed and validated - in April 2017 - the conformity of our website with the Web Content Accessibility Guideline, compliance level AA. I have also recently decided to introduce mandatory training for my website staff. And you can now find a new accessibility page on our website including a feedback mechanism for users.

The end of the EU Disability Strategy marks a new beginning. Future actions, including a new Strategy, should build on our experience. A major challenge will be to address the CRPD Committee's recommendations but address them we must. Clarity, timeframes and monitoring will be essential.

I'm committed to my role in protecting, promoting, and monitoring the implementation of the CRPD at EU institutional level. I draw on the CRPD Committee's observations and my own experience but it is vital to learn from the experiences of others.

Just this week, I watched a programme on British television which tracked the efforts of ten people with disabilities to secure employment. I was particularly affected by one young woman with mobility issues caused by cerebral palsy as she tried to get a job in journalism. At one point in the programme we followed her as she did a challenging three hour commute from her home on public transport, and using a walking frame, in order to take up some temporary work experience... She refused to tell her colleagues of the pain she was in because she didn't want to be treated differently. If this Convention is truly to become real, young women like her and others need to have that fear removed.

I believe that this is a decisive moment as we now know where to direct our actions. It is an opportunity not to be missed, an opportunity to show that the EU can live up to the citizens' expectations and serve as leading example in the area of human rights' protection.

Thank you for your attention.