



The European Day of People
with Disabilities 2004



Horizontal and International Issues

The European Day of People with Disabilities 2004

Creating the conditions to promote the employment of People with Disabilities

Employment & social affairs



European Commission

The European Day of People with Disabilities 2004

Creating the conditions to promote the employment of People with Disabilities

*European Commission Conference,
in cooperation
With the European Disability Forum*

Employment & social affairs

Horizontal and International Issues

European Commission
Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal opportunities
Unit G3

Manuscript completed in February 2005

The conference and corresponding report were organised and financed by the European Commission, Directorate-General, Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, Direction G, Horizontal and International Issues, Unit G3, Integration of People with Disabilities.

The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the European Commission

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February 2005

This publication and a great deal of additional information is available on the Internet. It can be accessed through the Europa server (<http://europa.eu.int>)

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	ii
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Purpose of the Conference	1
1.2 This report of the conference	1
1.3 Background: Why Need for a Focus on the Conditions for Employment?	2
2 Opening Talks: The Importance of Employment – and of Equal Opportunities – to People with Disabilities	3
3 Thematic Areas Discussed at the Conference.....	6
3.1 Accessibility to the Built Environment as a Precondition for Participation in the Workplace as Well as in the Economy and Society	6
3.1.1. Major Points from Presentations.....	6
3.1.2. Participant Observations, Discussion and Conclusions	8
3.2 Access to Modern Technologies: Enhancing Employability through Employment.....	9
3.2.1. Major Points from Presentations.....	9
3.2.2. Participant Observations, Discussion and Conclusions	11
3.3 Lifelong Learning in Support of Employability and Adaptability	13
3.3.1. Major Points from Presentations.....	13
3.3.2. Participant Observations, Discussion and Conclusions	15
3.4 Closing Presentations: Looking Ahead.....	17
4 Summary of the Major Conclusions and Implications Emerging from the Conference.....	20
4.1 Major Conclusions and Implications	20
4.2 Achievement of the Conference Objectives	24
5 Concluding Reflections of the Rapporteur	25
Annexes.....	28

Executive Summary

As a concrete step to build upon and sustain the momentum created by the European Year of Disabilities in 2003, the European Commission decided to organise a new cycle of policy-oriented conferences on the occasion of the European Day of People with Disabilities, every 3 December, in close cooperation with disability organisations at the European Union (EU) level. These conferences aim to involve the key stakeholders, including policy-makers, people with disabilities, actors and experts in the field of disability, in order to help assess progress to date and to identify what needs to take place in order to promote equal opportunities and access to rights for all.

The first of these conferences, organised by the European Commission in cooperation with the European Disability Forum (EDF), was held in Brussels on 2-3 December 2004. The primary focus of this conference was on exploring the *conditions* to promote the employment of people with disabilities that were identified in the new Commission Action Plan¹. Following the conclusions of the European Year, action on these conditions is intended to provide a concrete meaning to mainstreaming.

The conference was opened by Mr Vladimír Špidla, the newly appointed Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, and Equal Opportunities. In his first public appearance, just 10 days after assuming his mandate, Commissioner Špidla emphasised his own commitment – and that of President Barroso and the Commission – to equal opportunities and to the rejection of discrimination.

There are many compelling reasons identified at the conference why it is important for the EU and its Member States to address the employment situation of people with disabilities. Employment is important in its own right, and also as a means to financial independence and social inclusion. *Disabled people represent a sizeable group, accounting for about 15 percent of the European population, or about 68 million people.*

Yet only 40 percent of disabled people are employed, compared to almost 65 percent of non-disabled people in the EU. Further, some 52 percent of disabled people are economically inactive, compared to only 28 percent of non-disabled people.² It has been estimated that raising the employment rate of disabled people to that of the general population could result in an increase of two to three percent in the overall EU employment rate. As participants at the conference indicated, statistics such as this suggest that it will be difficult for the EU to meet the

¹ *Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities in the EU*. Communication from the European Commission on establishing equal opportunities for people with disabilities: A European Action Plan (COM/2003/650), 2003.

² These and many of the other statistics cited are referred to in the Action Plan, *ibid*.

goals of the Lisbon agenda without addressing the employment situation of disabled Europeans.

It is becoming increasingly apparent, however, that in order to make it possible for more disabled people to be able to work, and to work at quality productive jobs, it is necessary to take a broad view of barriers that can limit access to employment, as well as other aspects of community life. In particular, it is necessary to pay attention to the *conditions* affecting the employment of people with disabilities, which go beyond characteristics of the workplace itself. And as participants repeatedly emphasised at the conference, it is essential to address *all* barriers and forms of discrimination that disabled people face.

The three conditions in the “chain of employment” that were at the core of the conference are:

- Accessibility to the Built Environment as a precondition for participation in the workplace as well as in the economy and society.
- Access to modern technologies: Enhancing employability through employment.
- Lifelong Learning in support of employability and adaptability.

The conference format provided for extensive participation by all the attendees along with the formal presentations. This resulted in the following overall conclusions:

1. The conference validated the focus on the *conditions* needed to make employment possible. Participants agreed upon the importance of employment to people with disabilities. But participants also *recognised and highlighted the need for more attention to discrimination in all aspects of life*.
2. As stated above, *there are some 68 million Europeans with disabilities, accounting for about 15 percent of the European population²*. The rate of disability is increasing, given the ageing society. Along with family members and many other people, such as the elderly, who also face accessibility restrictions, *this represents a sizeable group and a significant political force*.
3. *There is a need for more mainstreaming*. Participants acknowledged that there has been much progress in this respect, but they noted that its application is not consistent and is often lacking particularly with respect to major policy areas affecting all European citizens, such as the European Structural Funds. Panellists and participants emphasised that *mainstreaming needs to be real rather than token in nature*.
4. All the speakers, including EU officials, business representatives, and European Disability Forum (EDF) representatives, indicated their *strong agree-*

ment to the principle “nothing about us without us” and their commitment to work together in the future.

5. *There is a need for greater recognition of the diversity of disability and of its implications for accessibility.* In particular, there is a need for more attention to the needs of people with non-visible, cognitive, and mental or intellectual impairments, as well as those whose impairments may be variable and episodic rather than stable in nature.
6. *Design for All (DFA) offers great potential to make participation in employment and in society possible for people with disabilities.* If accessibility considerations are built in from the beginning, then these could involve very little, if any, extra cost. Despite its great potential, participants noted that DFA is still not happening consistently. Participants called for better education and training, in particular of architects, designers and information technology specialists, as well as mandatory standards and legislative requirements.
7. Participants agreed that the European Year of People with Disabilities was a success in setting the direction towards a more inclusive Europe for people with disabilities, and that this conference represented a good step in carrying forward and reinforcing the momentum started with the Year. But participants from all sectors said that it is now time to move from words to action. Overall there was a high degree of consensus about what needs to be done to improve the employment situation and inclusion of people with disabilities, with *many potential practical steps identified at the conference.*

These and many other observations and ideas identified at the conference are discussed in the body of this report.

1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the Conference

The European Year of Disabilities 2003 represented the start of a process that contributed to reinforcing awareness of the rights of individuals with disabilities to inclusion and full participation in all sectors of society. The Year demonstrated that people with disabilities across Europe experience common problems, share common concerns, have similar needs and express a broad desire for a change of gear in achieving equality of opportunity and full access to their rights.

Participants at a conference in Rome in December 2003 to mark the conclusion of the Year thought that it was a success, but they cautioned that it should be viewed as: "A point of departure, not a conclusion." As one step in building upon and sustaining this momentum, the European Commission has decided to organise, in close cooperation with disability organisations at the EU level, a cycle of policy-oriented conferences to take place on the occasion of the European Day of Disabled People every December. These conferences are to involve the key stakeholders, including policy makers, people with disabilities, actors and experts in the field of disability, in order to help assess progress to date and to identify what needs to take place in order to promote equal opportunities and access to rights for all.

The first of these conferences, organised by the European Commission in cooperation with the European Disability Forum (EDF), was held in Brussels on 2-3 December 2004. The primary focus of this conference was on exploring the *conditions* necessary to promote the employment of people with disabilities.

This conference had three main objectives:

- To continue the momentum created by the European Year, and in particular to identify what needs to be done to promote and support the development of the mainstreaming of disability issues across a broad range of policies at all relevant levels.
- To identify considerations that could feed into the first edition of the European Commission Biennial Report on the overall situation of people with disabilities in the enlarged Europe, which will be presented for discussion at the 2005 European Day of People with Disabilities.
- To stimulate the sharing of good practices and networking across Member States.

1.2 This report of the conference

This report presents highlights of the presentations and discussions during the conference, and in particular identifies the major conclusions arising and implications for future directions and actions. It represents an independent report prepared by the conference Rapporteur, Burt Perrin.

The conference programme (see the Annex) provided extensive opportunities for interventions by all the participants at the conference. Comments by participants are as important as the formal presentations. This report makes no attempt to summarise all the presentations, the full text of which can be found in the annex to this report.

1.3 Background: Why Need for a Focus on the Conditions for Employment?

Employment arguably is the most critical issue facing disabled people across Europe. It is important in its own right for many people, as well as a means to increased financial independence, inclusion within all aspects of society, and overall quality of life. Disabled people have strongly indicated their interest in being able to work, but identify numerous barriers that too often serve to exclude them from the labour market and from employment. Despite the attention to date in the EU to the area of employment, there is no evidence that the situation has improved in relation to disabled people.

For example, the most recent statistics¹ available indicate that only 40 percent of disabled people are employed, compared to almost 65 percent of non-disabled people in the EU. Further, some 52 percent of disabled people are economically inactive, compared to only 28 percent of non-disabled people. This has little to do with the ability of disabled people to work, given that half of those whose level of disability is relatively light and does not hamper their daily activities nevertheless are inactive in the labour market.

There are many compelling reasons for addressing this situation, starting with the basic civil rights of disabled people to participate in society on the same basis as anyone else. Furthermore, *disabled people represent a sizeable proportion of the European Union population, accounting for about 68 million people, or 15 percent of the population.* Participants at the conference also observed that if one takes into account as well older people and others with reduced mobility, some 40 percent of the EU population are directly affected by barriers to access. In addition, family members are also greatly affected by the lack of access of disabled people to employment and to full inclusion in society.

¹ These and many of the other statistics cited are referred to in: *Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities in the EU*. Communication from the European Commission on establishing equal opportunities for people with disabilities: A European Action Plan (COM/2003/650), 2003.

Moreover, without increased action to address the barriers faced by disabled people, the situation is likely to become even worse. People are most likely to become disabled while already in the workforce. With a rapidly ageing population in Europe, the rates of disability are likely to increase.

Indeed, the Commission has estimated that raising the employment rate of people with disabilities to that of the general population would result in an increase of two to three percent of the overall EU employment rate. Thus improving employment rates for disabled people would contribute not only to the quality of life of individuals with disabilities and their families, but also to the social and economic objectives of the EU and its Member States.

It is becoming increasingly apparent, however, that in order to make it possible for more disabled people to be able to work, and to work at quality productive jobs, it is necessary to take a broad view of barriers that can limit access to employment, as well as to other aspects of community life. In particular, it is necessary to pay attention to the *conditions* affecting the employment of people with disabilities, which go beyond characteristics of the worksite itself.

Thus the major focus of this conference was on what is needed to create the *conditions* that are necessary in order for the employment of disabled people to be possible. While the format of the conference permitted discussion of a wide range of issues and considerations, discussion was organised around the following three conditions, which have been identified as priority areas for the European Commission Action Plan in its Communication on Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities in the EU:

- Accessibility to the built environment.
- Access to modern and appropriate technologies.
- Access to lifelong learning.

These conditions represent the main elements of the so-called “chain of employment”.

2 Opening Talks: The Importance of Employment – and of Equal Opportunities – to People with Disabilities

The conference was opened with presentations by *Mr Vladimír Špidla*, the newly appointed Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, and Equal Opportunities; *Mrs Lisa Pavan-Woolfe*, Director Horizontal & International Issues, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities; and by *Mr Yannis Vardakastanis*, President of the European Disability Forum.

All three speakers emphasised similar themes and set the stage for the discussions to follow throughout the conference. In his first public appearance, just 10 days after assuming his mandate, *Commissioner Špidla* emphasised his own commitment – and that of President Barroso and the Commission – to equal opportunities and to the rejection of discrimination. He cited the formation of the new Group of Commissioners charged with addressing these issues.

The Commissioner in his address emphasised the importance of an inclusive vision of Europe that embraces diversity, including all people with disabilities irrespective of the nature of their impairment, be it physical, sensory, or mental. He stressed the need for *quality* jobs, in order to provide for a true inclusive society, and indicated the importance of including disability considerations in *all* policies of the EU. He said that the inclusive vision of disability should be reflected in all policies, using all available tools starting with the European Social Fund.

The Commissioner also indicated that the Commission will present a Communication in 2005 regarding a European policy to counter *all* forms of discrimination. In this regard, he indicated that he has asked his services to carry out a feasibility study at the beginning of 2005, analysing what can be done to counter all forms of discrimination, taking into account the existing legal framework.

Mrs Lisa Pavan-Woolfe started by emphasising the importance of involving all stakeholders, and in particular people with disabilities, on the basis of “nothing about us without us”. She referred to the close cooperation of the Commission with EDF both with respect to the European Year and also in developing a future strategy that fully respects the needs and aspirations of people with disabilities.

She echoed the sentiments of many other attendees at the conference in describing the Year as a great success that has in turn triggered many subsequent actions to sustain that success. But she also acknowledged that disabled people still continue to face many barriers to employment and in being able to lead an independent life. She outlined some of the Commission initiatives in order to address these barriers.

She indicated that the European Employment Strategy represents the most important tool at the EU level to improve employment for all EU citizens, including people with disabilities. Member States are currently required to submit a National Action Plan every year in which they report on their activities on the ten employment guidelines of the strategy.

Mrs Pavan-Woolfe also briefly described the *Commission Communication: Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities: A European Action Plan*². The plan gives top priority to the mainstreaming of disability issues in all relevant policy areas. This Communication, adopted in 2003, provides for biennial reports

² See Note 1 for the reference to this document.

starting in 2005, with a rolling multi-annual action plan to enhance the integration of people with disabilities up to 2010.

Mr Yannis Vardakastanis thanked the Commissioner and acknowledged his commitment to disability, going back to his activities in his own country, and noted his interest in a disability-specific initiative expressed to the European Parliament. He also noted President Barroso's commitment to develop further legislation on non discrimination. He indicated EDF's commitment to working together with the Commissioner and his services.

He agreed that the Disability Action Plan and the EU Employment Directive represent important tools, indicating that effective transposition of the Directive will be very important. He called for an inclusive vision of the EU, with mainstreaming of disability issues in *all* its policies. For example, he said that disability must be included as part of the Commission's new social policy agenda as well as the Lisbon strategy, e.g. given that full employment within Europe cannot happen if most of Europe's disabled people are excluded. In addition, he specifically highlighted the European Structural Funds, saying that non discrimination and inclusion of disabled people by means of strict accessibility guidelines should represent a basic condition of funding.

He provided a definition of mainstreaming, saying that it requires a proactive approach, an assessment of policies and measures from the point of view of disabled people to be done in cooperation with disabled people, and accompanied by specific actions aimed at people with disabilities as needed. He indicated the need for greater involvement of disabled people in the preparation and monitoring of the national action plans on employment.

Rapporteur's Observations

Perhaps the most striking thing emerging from the opening talks was the strong level of agreement, with a commitment to working together and affirmation of the principle: "nothing about us without us". All speakers emphasised the importance of employment in its own right and also as a means to combat poverty and social exclusion. They also highlighted the need for *quality* employment: "not just any job, but the right job".

There was also agreement, as the Commissioner said explicitly, that the EU needs to do more, with more action required, including *real* mainstreaming across all policy areas of the EU so that it can live up to its inclusive vision. There was agreement that social exclusion goes beyond employment, and that there is a need for action to counter *all* forms of discrimination. In this regard, the Commissioner pointed to the significance of the new name of the Directorate General, with *equal opportunities* added to the existing mandate of employment and social affairs.

All the introductory speakers noted that disabled people form a very heterogeneous group, with a diverse range of needs. This was a theme that was to be repeated throughout the conference, with many implications for policies and approaches to accessibility.

3 Thematic Areas Discussed at the Conference

3.1 Accessibility to the Built Environment as a Precondition for Participation in the Workplace as Well as in the Economy and Society

3.1.1. Major Points from Presentations

In her introduction, the session chair Mrs Wallis Goelen, head of the Unit for the Integration of People with Disabilities, indicated that accessibility issues represent one of the priority areas emerging from the European Year and are at the core of the social model of disability, which recognises that it is the environment that is disabling – not the people. She described accessibility as a European-wide integrated challenge, requiring action falling under the responsibilities of the Member States as well as within the EU.

The first speaker, *Mr Bas Treffers*, Vice President of EDF, started his talk with a personal example, indicating how difficult it can be trying to find accessible toilets in many of the major centres in Europe. This represents just one of the daily frustrations faced by many disabled people and of the chain of inaccessible premises of all forms that hinders the possibility of disabled people to participate equally in society, including in employment. He added:

“We put so much time and energy into simply trying to negotiate around the obstacles we face around us that it diminishes our energy and ability to access the mainstream labour market.”

Mr Treffers recognised the Equal Treatment in Employment Directive as “a welcome first step” that has at least raised awareness, given that previously most Member States had no understanding of the concept of reasonable accommodation. He acknowledged the Directive as the first piece of anti discrimination legislation that enables people with disabilities to defend their rights. He also recognised the recently revised EU Directives on Public Procurement as another good example. But he indicated that much more still needs to be done, such as extending non-discrimination legislation to all areas of life and making accessibility requirements mandatory for funding programmes such as the European Structural Funds.

He also emphasised the importance of Design for All (DFA), and said that Accessibility for All needs to be dealt with as an inclusive process. He said that if

DFA were included in everyday design and construction practice, the cost of reasonable accommodation would be minimal.

In his vivid presentation, *Mr Jesús Hernández*, Director of Accessibility of the Fundación ONCE, Spain indicated that in order to make employment possible, as well as participation in all other areas of life, it is essential to provide for an accessible environment – from the person’s home to the workplace. He emphasised that:

“We have to think of accessibility as a chain. And all of the links of this chain have to be accessible. If only one link of this chain is not accessible, the chain is broken. So, the whole chain doesn't work.”

The links in the chain that he identified as all being essential for employment include: the home, the urban area, transport, the work centre, and the workplace. He touched upon some of the common problems and then identified solutions, providing visual illustrations of good design in all these settings that can provide for accessibility.

Mrs Isabella Menichini, from the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, described accessibility as:

“A basic condition in order to realize processes of integration in the educational system, in the labour market – in order to make access to services a real achieved right and not just a theoretical one.”

She indicated that Italy has been one of the first Member States to build in specific commitments for equal treatment in employment. The directive contains a provision concerning reasonable accommodation for disabled persons, which requires employers to take measures, where needed to enable a person with disability to have access to participate in or advance in employment.

Mrs Menichini made reference to some of the steps and tools that can be used to facilitate accommodation. For example, she referred to the concept of targeted or focused employment. This involves assessing the potential skill and abilities of a worker with disabilities, as well as an analysis of the workplace, in order to arrive at the most appropriate job for an individual and identifying necessary forms of support and positive action, where applicable.

She also mentioned some other steps being tried in Italy to support accessibility at the workplace, such as:

- Two funds, a regional and a national fund, to assist with costs of workplace modification and special devices.
- Administrative approaches to assist in coordination across different jurisdictions and institutions, such as a national Commission involving central government and regions, professional associations and representatives of organisations of people with disabilities.

- Training of designers, architects, and other responsible professionals.

In summary, the Italian experience, while still in its early stages, can be viewed as an emerging good practice of how one country is planning to put the EU Employment Directive into effect.

3.1.2. Participant Observations, Discussion and Conclusions

The conference format provided an opportunity for participants to add their own insights on what they feel needs to be done, and in some cases to engage in discussion and debate with the panellists and other participants.

Participants expressed strong support for viewing accessibility as an inclusive process that needs to be recognised as a basic human right and to be guaranteed to everyone. DFA was strongly supported as a major means of making this happen as a matter of course, with little or no extra cost.

As one person pointed out: “Barriers are in people’s heads.” Participants identified the need for greater awareness of the importance of the built environment and the need for DFA. They highlighted the need for more education and training, starting with schoolchildren, but also with professional groups such as designers and architects who need to understand, internalise, and to apply DFA in all their work. There was support for the creation of a body of some form to collect and to share good practices. Participants said that there are some, but not enough networks for sharing information, expertise, and good practices across Europe.

Participants also called for a broader view of accessibility that goes beyond just physical adaptations and that can accommodate the needs of all types of disabled people, such as people with intellectual disabilities or with brain injuries. Attitudes can represent just as great a barrier as physical obstacles. In addition to addressing physical barriers, other forms of accommodations that might be needed could include: the provision of personal supports, modifications to the way that work tasks are organised and scheduled, changes in signage, and other “soft” forms of accommodation.

Many participants said that it is important to recognise the advances that *have* been made. But they observed that these are still hit-and-miss at present and that DFA needs to be a requirement in *all* cases. Disability representatives in particular emphasised the need for mandatory legislation. Participants indicated the lack of uniform harmonised standards across Europe.

There was also discussion during this session about the potential of self employment, to enable some people to overcome some of the accessibility challenges in

regular employment settings. Some people felt that there should be greater support to enable disabled people to set up their own small businesses.

Others however, while acknowledging that self employment can be an option for some people, expressed caution about promoting this as a solution to the employment problems of disabled people. One concern was that self employment could even further isolate people who are already cut off from much contact with others. Another concern was that self employment should not be seen as an alternative to the obligation of employers to employ people with disabilities.

While it was acknowledged that some Member States make available initial support for new businesses, participants pointed to many barriers to the self employment of disabled people. Participants suggested that many disabled people have expertise that can assist in the design of accessible environments of all forms, including at the workplace. But they say that there is limited interest by employers and public administrations, in paying disability experts. Indeed, some participants suggested that the cumbersome way in which public procurement contracts are awarded within the Commission makes this very difficult, and in effect discriminates against the hiring of individual experts.

3.2 Access to Modern Technologies: Enhancing Employability through Employment

3.2.1. Major Points from Presentations

The second session of the conference, chaired by *Mrs Susan Scott-Parker*, CEO Employer's Forum on Disability, United Kingdom dealt with the role that technology can play in enabling individuals to work in ways that could be difficult or impossible otherwise. The first speaker was *Mrs Imma Placencia Porrero*, from the Information Society Directorate General.

Mrs Placencia spoke about the work the Commission has been stimulating in the area of Information Society Technology (ICT), or eAccessibility. She defined eAccessibility as addressing how new technologies and services can be used to overcome barriers, to compensate or restore individual functions, and to increase participation of people with disabilities and older people. She referred to two approaches when dealing with technologies: assistive technology (AT) and Design for All (DFA). In both cases, the technologies need to be personalised so that individuals can use them at their convenience, in a seamless way.

Mrs Placencia referred to the status of activities in this area that the Commission had promised during the European Year. She indicated that these promises have mainly been fulfilled, with most of the targets met. For example, these activities have involved dialogue with different technology industry sectors. Various incentives and supports have been developed, including DFA and Accessible Technol-

ogy awards, a DFA curriculum, standards, and identification of eAccessibility requirements in public procurement.

She also indicated that a Community research fund for research to support eAccessibility has been created with a budget of 29 million Euros. She said that a Call for Proposals is currently in progress, with areas eligible for funding including large-scale demonstrations, targeted research for people with cognitive disabilities, and coordinated actions. She made reference to the website where more information can be found about the Call for proposals as well as research in the area currently in progress.

Mr Rodolfo Cattani, Chair of the EDF Universal Access Committee, Italy indicated that he was speaking from the perspective of users. He observed that technology represents a double-edged sword:

“New technologies provide great opportunities for disabled people, but also, if not designed well, can lead to the creation of more and greater barriers.”

Mr Cattani indicated that: “An important percentage of the population in Europe is excluded from the ICT revolution.” He presented some examples of this, such as: lack of accessibility to the emergency number 112 in many countries; digital television; multi-media; incompatibility of some software with assistive technologies; incompatibility of national standards; difficulties for users with visual or cognitive impairments to access, understand and navigate websites; and others. He said that a necessary starting point is the fundamental right of access for *all* people. Otherwise, the result is the exclusion of disabled people from the labour market and from other areas of society. He said that given the discrimination so frequently experienced in so many different modalities, European policy needs to make non discrimination a top priority.

He also identified a variety of solutions to the problems that he mentioned, involving standardisation, certification and legislation, and public procurement. He pointed to examples of good practices in other jurisdictions such as in Canada, the US, and Japan. As in the US and Canada, he said that the EU should have legislation so that public money cannot be spent unless accessibility is taken into account. In keeping with the remarks of many other panellists and participants at the conference, he described DFA as “the most clever and cost effective solution that we know.”

He said that it is absolutely essential that disability organisations are actively involved in the standards development process and in government funded research and development. This is necessary to make sure that these are relevant for disabled users. He concluded his remarks by saying that we now have the possibility to go forward and to address the issue with facts and not just with words.

Prof Dr.-Ing. Christian Bühler, Institute Director, Forschungsinstitut Technologie-Behindertenhilfe, Germany spoke about the potential of technology to empower people. He indicated that technology has the potential not just to serve as a tool for doing things, but to facilitate self determination and decision making and to improve quality of life. He emphasised that:

“We have to be aware that we have the human being in the centre. Technology should be the servant, not vice versa.”

Professor Bühler showed pictures of dozens of examples of technology that can assist many people with various aspects of daily life. These examples included: smart environments, memory supports, robotic aids enabling independent living, various forms of ICT devices, a means for blind people to identify their clothes in a cupboard, and many others.

He referred to the Association for the Advancement of Assistive Devices in Europe (AAATE) as a useful example of a useful European-wide network, and also to the DFA:AT European Awards. These awards are intended to stimulate interest and advancement on the industry as well as the user side, to demonstrate what can be done. He emphasised that while it has already been mentioned, it is important to say again how vital it is that the user is involved (“they know what they need”), including both individuals and national and EU disability organisations.

3.2.2. Participant Observations, Discussion and Conclusions

In the discussion that followed, participants expanded upon many of the points made by the panellists and also added other considerations that they felt relevant. Participants acknowledged the *potential* of new technologies to assist disabled people and acknowledged that significant progress in this area has been made. But they said that future progress is still unclear, with significant dangers of new technologies being developed that will leave disabled people further behind. A number of participants claimed that the experience to date has been that guidelines that are not obligatory do not lead to effective take up and implementation by the ICT industry.

Given this, participants indicated the need for legislative requirements so that accessibility of new technologies to disabled people would be mandatory rather than optional. They also indicated the need for more standardisation and harmonisation across Europe. Public procurement was identified as a key instrument, with some people noting that existing legislation permits this. Again, the involvement of users in the development of new technologies was highlighted as critical: “The industry will only get it right if they talk to users.”

Participants also raised some ethical issues with respect to technology. One concern expressed was the danger of replacing human care that some people now

receive with technology. This could lead to still further isolation for at least some people.

Where funding is limited, whose needs will get addressed, and which individuals will be able to obtain the equipment and services that they require in order to live a more independent life? How will decisions such as these be made? Participants observed that given the rapid pace of new technology and its increasing importance to employment and to everyday life, some 40 percent of the European population risks exclusion unless accessibility considerations are built in as a matter of course.

Once again, participants identified DFA as critical. With accessibility considerations taken into account from the beginning, this could provide for usability for disabled people at hardly any – or no - cost. Participants also observed that more attention to DFA and to usability considerations would benefit not only people with disabilities but also the entire population, in being able to use many new technologies. As they indicated, many people find accessing the Internet daunting. They noted that more attention to diverse user requirements and to what would make access and effective use easier would benefit *everyone*.

There was some discussion about why it is so difficult to get the DFA concept accepted, in spite of its potential to produce useful and cost-effective solutions. Lack of knowledge and attitudinal barriers seems to be part of the problem. They observed that many designers and ICT industry people are unaware of the potential of DFA and further that many ordinary people, politicians and decision makers are not aware of problems that disabled people are facing with ICT and how easily many of these problems could be averted if DFA were a basic requirement. Participants suggested that there is a need for both carrot and stick approaches, including incentives, training and support to encourage the ICT industry to embrace DFA, as well as legislative requirements making it mandatory that they do so.

One participant observed that *design* for all at the beginning is not sufficient as there is also a need for “maintenance and upgrading for all” on an ongoing basis. This requires the owners and users of technology to take into account accessibility considerations in new developments. Otherwise even appropriate technology could quickly become obsolete and unusable for many people.

Again, during this session, a number of participants indicated that it is essential that new technologies address the needs of people with *different* types of disabilities, including cognitive disabilities. Some other participants pointed to some promising steps in this direction.

3.3 Lifelong Learning in Support of Employability and Adaptability

3.3.1. Major Points from Presentations

Mrs Liz Tillett, Head of Disability Presentation and External Relations, Department for Work and Pensions, UK opened the session by citing research pointing to:

“The increasing evidence that those disabled people who are integrated into mainstream education throughout their youth are most likely to develop the general and vocational key competencies necessary to succeed later in the labour market.”

She said that equipping people with disabilities with all available knowledge and competencies is a key element for improving access to employment, combating exclusion and improving social cohesion.

Mrs Helen Kerrison, Director Corporate Responsibility for Manpower Inc., Belgium started her talk by indicating that lifelong learning is about employability and adaptability. She said that there is not one right way to go about doing this. For example, she cited three different approaches used by different wings of her own company, Manpower: specific targeted programmes; adapting mainstream training approaches; and, e-learning.

She also indicated that lifelong learning is for everyone, including individuals with or without a disability seeking new jobs or progressing within employment as well as the business itself as an organisation. She emphasised that “lifelong learning is what a *company* needs to go through to understand the needs of its diverse employees.” She said that the business mindset needs to shift from “why ever would we employ a person with a disability” to “why ever wouldn’t we employ a people with a disability?”

Mrs Kerrison mentioned “Business & Disability: A European Network” that has grown out of the European Year. It consists of six founding member companies, along with EDF. It is committed to encouraging more businesses across Europe to hire people with disabilities, focusing on three main areas: accessibility, e-Accessibility, and employment, through partnerships, sharing of good practices, and concrete actions now under way in twelve Member States. In the future, they hope to be able to reach out to a greater number of businesses across Europe.

In his presentation, *Mr Ronald De Leij*, Head Strategic Policy Development of AWWN, Netherlands said that lifelong learning was not about staying in school, but about gaining new opportunities, about taking new challenging positions, about meeting new people in new situations. He said that there is a need to provide the disabled individual with the necessary tools – information, budget and

know how in order to break the vicious cycle to get into the employment market. He also indicated that lifelong learning is needed for *everyone*, for businesses as much as for individuals. For example, in speaking of his own organisation, the Netherlands Employer's Association (AWVN), he said that: "They need lifelong learning themselves, they're human beings."

His organisation disseminates good practices to businesses in the Netherlands in order to promote the full participation of disabled people. He acknowledged, however, that it often is difficult to gain interest, due to three main obstacles:

- An overwhelming tendency to look at **disability** first – among professionals, employers, future colleagues and people with disabilities themselves.
- Historical practice, keeping people with disabilities isolated and outside the regular workplace.
- Discrepancy between "common sense" and private practice – "do it there but not here".

He proposed three main solutions to overcome these obstacles:

- Stress abilities, look at people with disabilities not as a group, but as unique individuals, just like anyone else.
- ◆ Take away risks perceived by many employers and colleagues:
 - The risk of not knowing what to do if anything happens.
 - The risk of discontinuity.
 - The risk of higher costs and lower output.
 - The risk of inflexibility.

Mr De Leij said that there should be "no more discussion" – about general issues such as why people with disabilities should be included in employment and society. Instead he said we should focus on bridging the gap between common sense and private practice, on addressing the real and practical problems that need to be faced.

Mr Stig Langvad, President of the Danish Council of Organisations of Disabled People and member of the EDF Board, started his presentation by saying that we should recognise that there *are* many disabled people, but not nearly enough, in the labour market. He highlighted the importance of lifelong learning:

"Lifelong learning is a needed strategy. I really salute the Commission and the Parliament for taking up this approach, because through lifelong learning we can increase the number of people with disabilities within the labour market."

He emphasised that *all* people have the potential to do useful work in the labour market, not just those who are wheelchair users or who are blind. He

said that this includes individuals with developmental or social disabilities, those with brain damage, “really anyone potentially”.

Mr Langvad discussed some of the major challenges that leave disabled people marginalised in relation to access to education and lifelong learning, as well as in relation to access to the labour market. Too often, he indicated, lifelong learning is available, if at all, only in segregated settings. He said that there is a need to decrease the marginalisation by developing strategies to increase access of people with disabilities to quality education of all forms, starting at the elementary level and continuing through life until old age retirement. He emphasised that this would not only benefit disabled individuals but also employers who require employees with the right qualifications and skills to fit into the company and to contribute to its bottom line.

He said that access to learning activities should be a basic right, regardless of actual labour market status. He noted once again that access to appropriate education and lifelong learning is critical to employability. Yet he observed that the Employment Framework Directive “strangely does not prohibit discrimination in relation to equal access to lifelong learning and education.”

3.3.2. Participant Observations, Discussion and Conclusions

The above presentations stimulated considerable discussion that started with the specific issue of access to learning opportunities and then broadened to related matters. Participants agreed about the importance of education and training throughout one’s life. But they noted that access is still problematic for many disabled people. For example, it was observed that there is no requirement for vocational training to be adapted to people with severe mental disabilities. Yet the Employment Directive, as important as it is, does not seem to help in this regard, and education of all forms needs to be recognised as a fundamental right.

One of the participants from the Commission acknowledged this concern. She indicated that they are preparing a working paper that deals with the mainstreaming approach that is exploring how guidelines within the Employment Directive could be used by Member States to facilitate access of people with disabilities to lifelong learning.

Some of the participants expressed frustration with the lack of sufficient practical steps being undertaken. One question was directed at the business representatives, asking about the proportion of disabled people within their own workforce. This led to a discussion about the lack of good statistics about the actual employment status of disabled people and why this is important. A number of participants said that it is very important to have better statistics in this area that indicates not just the total percentage of disabled people in the workforce, but also

identifies the types and quality of jobs that they have. It was suggested that if disabled employees are not recorded, they are too often forgotten.

There was also debate about the obligation of employers to provide reasonable accommodation and how this is being interpreted. Some participants questioned why accommodations are only required to be “reasonable”, rather than “adequate” or “necessary”. One participant pointed to the ISO9000 quality guidelines as a model where there is an obligation, such as with respect to mainstream safety at work, that what is done be proper and sufficient.³

Participants, including representatives of both the disability and business communities, suggested that employers need to do more than talk and to actually hire disabled employees. It was suggested that governments as employers should be hiring more disabled people themselves, and hiring them in quality jobs.

Some participants observed that a number of employers say that they would be interested in hiring people with disabilities, but that they are not receiving applications. But others also observed that some disabled people say that that no companies are interested in hiring them. This led to a discussion about the nature of the problem, and how it could be addressed.

In response to this observation, Mr Langvad indicated that:

“People with disabilities are not to the best extent possible applying for jobs. I can understand why they don’t do it. People have been told, since they were born, that they are disadvantaged. Difficulties in getting this and that. You are used to meeting these barriers. You have to work a lot with the persons with disabilities.”

On the other hand, Mrs Tillett said that many employers do not think innovatively enough about what people with disabilities *can* do. Mr De Leij agreed, saying that:

“Employers might learn to put forward to the public, to the audience, in advertisements, vacancies in a different way than they have done so far. We are asking for people who fit the specific hole in the organisation. You have to be one inch long and wide. And if you are a bit smaller or longer, you wouldn’t fit in the vacancy.”

³ The Rapporteur observes that experiences in other jurisdictions may be instructive, which suggest that how concepts such as reasonable accommodation are defined and interpreted can be crucial. For example, recent rulings in the United States with respect to interpretation of the Americans with Disabilities Act have made it very difficult for a disabled person to win a ruling with respect to reasonable accommodation. Canada, in contrast, has stringent accommodation guidelines that have withstood scrutiny by its Supreme Court and that require accommodation to the point of “undue hardship” rather than “reasonable”, to emphasise the higher onus to provide needed accommodations.

There was general agreement that some disabled people may not have the needed skills at first, and may require lifelong learning in order to develop these and be able to fulfil the needs of the job market. But there was also agreement that too often, employers think in overly narrow terms about the range of jobs that disabled people can do. They are often unaware of the small things that can be done to enable somebody with an impairment to undertake a much wider range of jobs.

As participants agreed, one of the benefits of lifelong learning is that it can help match employees to the right jobs, benefiting both the individual and the employer. Mr De Leij said that employers should look at the right competencies and the willingness and ability to learn, rather than expecting to bring in someone who is perfect at performing just one task. In this way, employers can learn to adjust jobs to people, and recognise the potential of lifelong learning to help.

While there was just time for limited discussion about how interested employers and disabled job seekers could find one another, it was noted that one of the objectives of the Business and Disability Organisation which Mrs Kerrison had mentioned earlier is assisting in connecting interested companies with disability organisations.

There was also some debate about the strengths and limitations of mandatory quotas that oblige employers to hire disabled people. While there was some sentiment in favour of quotas, another perspective was that these do little with respect to the quality of jobs, which is vitally important.

In summing up the discussion, the Chair, Mrs Tillett, made the following points:

- The importance of lifelong learning for businesses as well as for disabled individuals.
- It is time to stop the overall discussion and to take action to bridge the gaps that have been identified.
- There is frequently a mismatch between the individual and the jobs available that lifelong learning has the potential to address, that it can aid in the acquisition of needed social skills as well as formal skills in education.
- The importance of tackling discrimination that disabled people still face in seeking employment, and exploring how lifelong learning can be included in some way within the parameters of the EU Employment Directive.

3.4 Closing Presentations: Looking Ahead

There were three short closing presentations that largely reinforced the themes arising throughout the conference and identified some implications for the future.

Professor Michel Mercier, Professor at the Faculty of Psychology FUNDP, Belgium provided an overall synthesis of what he saw as the key points arising from the thematic sessions. He started by highlighting the importance of respect for fundamental rights and values, referring to the principles set out in the Madrid declaration: non discrimination, positive actions at an individual level, and inclusion and participation in society. He said that the conference highlighted the need to respect the dignity of the individual as well as the competencies that individuals *do* have, respect for diversity and the need to respond to the needs of *all* vulnerable people, and to provide for equal opportunity in the employment market.

He highlighted Design for All as a main theme, indicating that this means accessibility for everyone on a non discriminatory basis, and accessibility for everything, for all aspects of life. Moreover, he said that DFA implies a global approach to people, addressing all needs that individuals have, physical and psychological.

He said that changes are needed at various levels, including:

- More extensive mainstreaming of disability, including within global European policies and initiatives.
- Legislative changes.
- Administrative changes
- More opportunities for lifelong learning.
- More appropriate technologies.
- Training and awareness of the key actors.
- More networks to facilitate the sharing of good practices and experiences of people working on common issues.

Professor Mercier highlighted the need to involve all social actors, and in particular the involvement of people with disabilities at all levels of decision-making. He said that there should be nothing about us without us. And there should be nothing for us, without the others, including at the level of political action.

Mrs Thérèse Kempeneers, Secretary of EDF, spoke about how disability considerations must fit into the mainstream agenda of the EU and its Member States. She wondered how the EU could expect to construct a strong and united Europe without the active participation of 68 million of its citizens, 15 percent of its overall population, as well as their families. She said that the economic advancement of Europe, the objective of the Lisbon strategy, will be impossible to achieve without providing for the participation of disabled people who currently are excluded from employment. Despite this, she found no mention at all of disability in the Kok report “Facing the Challenge”.

She welcomed the attention to mainstreaming, but she said that it also has to be part of the agenda of the European employment ministers and of Parliament.

Similarly, she said that disability should form part of the new social policy agenda which needs to go beyond employment to consider the needs of those most vulnerable, including people with disabilities living in institutions.

Similarly, she noted that the European Structural Funds can play an important role in facilitating the social inclusion of disabled people, including access to the employment market, and that this should not be used to create still new barriers. She said that as a matter of fundamental human rights, accessibility for disabled people should be a condition of access to the Fund.

Mrs Kempeneers identified a number of other challenges faced by disabled people, including discrimination in every aspect of life such as access to education. Picking up from the numerous other comments throughout the conference, she said that it is necessary to consider people with intellectual disabilities, who were not represented at this conference, and what forms of accessibility they require. She hoped that in 2005 greater efforts would be made to enable people with intellectual disabilities to participate more actively.

She repeated again the importance of the theme of this international and European day: “nothing about us without us”, and called for a true dialogue. She welcomed the statements by President Barroso and Commissioner Špidla, indicating their commitment to the fight against the discrimination faced by disabled people, and noted with approval Mr Barroso’s creation of the new working group of Commissioners charged with addressing discrimination and the promotion of human rights. She repeated EDF’s desire to be involved in all these processes, right from the beginning. She hoped that this European Day could serve as more than a celebration, but also as a means of leading to the steps necessary to produce real, sustainable change.

In her closing address Mrs Odile Quintin, the Director General of Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of the European Commission, said that she would continue where Mrs Kempeneers left off. She said that this European Day has reinforced the reality that 15 percent, a substantial portion of the European population, have disabilities. She noted that with many older workers developing disabilities, it is important that they are able to maintain their potential to continue to contribute to a strong Europe.

She emphasised that demographic changes mean that Europe needs to reform its social and employment policies to permit the participation of a larger number of people in economic and social life. She said that people with disabilities clearly fit within the Europe of the future, with Europe’s potential to grow, and with the objective of the Lisbon strategy: “more and better jobs”. But she acknowledged the need for social protection for those who are not able to enter into or to return to employment.

Mrs Quintin noted that this European Day was organised together with the disability community. She indicated the importance of continuing to work in partnership with the people concerned, as well as with the other social actors, to avoid the traditional paternalistic top-down approach to disability.

She referred again to the commitment of Commissioner Špidla earlier in the conference to undertake a feasibility study in 2005 to assess the feasibility of additional steps that can be taken with respect to all forms of discrimination. She pointed out the significance of adding the words “equal opportunity” to the name of the Directorate General. She reinforced the Commission’s commitment to follow up on the progress that has been made in the Commission EU Action Plan and on the Employment Directive. As an example, she indicated that the Commission has initiated action with the Court of Justice against six Member States for failing to transpose the Employment Directive.

In concluding, she took note of Mrs Kempeneers’ statements about the need to put employment, equal opportunities and social cohesion at the core of the European social agenda. The integration of people with disabilities into society is clearly a key part of this. She thanked the participants for their feedback on the progress made on the Commission EU Action Plan, and looked forward to ongoing feedback and progress in the integration of people with disabilities into society.

4 Summary of the Major Conclusions and Implications Emerging from the Conference

4.1 Major Conclusions and Implications

The following is a summary of what appeared to the Rapporteur as the major conclusions and implications that were identified during the presentations and discussions at the conference.

1. The conference validated the focus on the *conditions* needed to make employment possible. It is clear that barriers to employment cannot be viewed narrowly, just in terms of what takes place at the workplace. If any one element is missing, such as the availability of appropriate education or transport or access to regular community services, then employment is not possible. There is still limited recognition of this reality.

Participants agreed upon the importance of employment to people with disabilities. And as Commissioner Špidla and many others indicated, the goal must be not just more jobs, but more *quality* jobs. But participants also emphasised that employment represents just *one* aspect of social inclusion. Both disability representatives and EU officials, including Commissioner Špidla, *recognised the need for more attention to discrimination in all aspects of life,*

including the needs of disabled people who are not in the labour market, such as those living in institutions. Participants pointed out that while education and lifelong learning are vital to employability, these are not apparently included within the framework of the European Employment Directive.

This represents one of the strongest messages emerging from the conference. Representatives of the disability community repeatedly highlighted the need for more effective legislation addressing discrimination in *all* aspects of life, and not just with respect to employment.

2. *There are some 68 million Europeans with disabilities, accounting for about 15 percent of the European population.* The rate of disability is increasing, given the ageing society. Accessibility restrictions frequently limit the mobility and full participation of many other people (e.g. older people, pregnant women) as well. Especially when one considers family members who are also affected by the disability of their loved ones, *this represents a sizeable group and a significant political force.*

Raising the employment rate of people with disabilities to that of non-disabled people could add two to three percent to the overall EU employment rate. It will be more difficult for the EU to achieve its broad economic and social objectives without addressing barriers keeping people with disabilities from being full participants in society.

3. *There is a need for more mainstreaming.* All participants agreed upon its importance. There was recognition that since the European Year, there has been more interest and activity in mainstreaming. But participants noted that this has not always been consistent or given the necessary priority. Too often mainstreaming seems to be viewed as an option rather than as a basic requirement. Disability representatives said that disability considerations need to be included in *all* policy areas, up to and including major EU policy directions such as the Lisbon strategy and the European social policy agenda.

Panellists and participants emphasised that *mainstreaming needs to be real rather token in nature.* For this to happen, it needs to be mandatory rather than optional and there is a need for the basic tools, commitment, people, and resources so that it *really* happens, and in a way that *really* leads to the inclusion of people with disabilities in employment and in society. There is also a need for direct involvement and ongoing monitoring by disability organisations.

The European Structural Funds were cited as a primary example. Many of the speakers and participants argued that full accessibility should be a basic precondition for funding under this programme, pointing out that this is clearly

an area within EU competence. Similarly, participants argued that accessibility should be a basic requirement in all public procurement.

There was recognition that *all* social actors need to be engaged if mainstreaming is to work. Perhaps one of the limitations of this conference that was noted by some of the participants was that not enough social partners were present, despite the invitations they had received. In particular, many who need to understand disability considerations and to engage with the disability community if mainstreaming truly is going to happen need to be present at future gatherings of this sort.

4. All the speakers, including EU officials, business representatives, and EDF representatives indicated their *strong agreement to the principle “nothing about us without us”*. There were constant references throughout the conference about the necessity of involving people with disabilities in decisions about matters that will affect them. Some of the speakers observed that technological adaptations and policies developed without the direct involvement of disabled users would be unlikely to be appropriate, and could very well create other, unintended problems.

Disability representatives emphasised that their involvement needs to be *real*. As suggested above, there is still room for increased involvement of people with disabilities and mainstreaming. They also expressed their interest in being part of all policy discussions that can concern them, including top-level EU deliberations such as the follow up to the Lisbon agenda.

5. There is a need for *greater recognition of the diversity of disability and of its implications for accessibility*. People with disabilities are not all the same. In particular, there is a need for more attention to the needs of people with invisible, cognitive, and mental or intellectual impairments, as well as those whose impairments that may be variable and episodic rather than stable in nature.

The types of accommodations and accessibility requirements that may be required go far beyond mere physical access. Yet this is often not recognised.

6. *Design for All (DFA)*, for example with respect to the built environment and technology, *offers great potential to make participation in employment and in society possible for people with disabilities*. If accessibility considerations are built in from the beginning, then these could involve very little if any extra cost. At the same time, more attention to how technology is actually used can benefit almost *everyone*, disabled or not.

It was noted that technology holds considerable potential to in effect make disability disappear in many cases. However, participants also warned of the

danger of technology being used to replace human contact and thereby further isolating people with disabilities. And given the rapid pace of technological development, the danger of the digital divide becoming worse is almost inevitable without DFA.

Despite the strong potential of DFA to make such a difference with minimal costs, it still is not happening consistently. In part, this is due to the lack of awareness among designers and developers and architects and other professionals, and also among politicians, administrators and the general public, of the barriers faced by people with disabilities and of the potential of DFA to eliminate these. Participants agreed that more awareness raising could help in this regard. But representatives of the disability community emphasised the need for mandatory standards and legislation, saying that if compliance is left on a voluntary basis, it will only happen to a limited extent.

7. Participants agreed that the European Year of People with Disabilities was a success in setting the direction towards a more inclusive Europe for people with disabilities, and that this conference represented a good step in carrying forward and reinforcing the momentum started with the Year. But participants from all sectors said that it is now time to move from words to action. EU officials indicated that the preparation of biennial status reports on the overall situation of people with disabilities in the enlarged Europe, to be prepared in conjunction with the European disability community, would provide a public means of identifying ongoing progress and what still will need to be done.

Overall there was a high degree of consensus about what is required to improve the employment situation and inclusion of people with disabilities, with *many potential practical steps identified at the conference*. Following are some highlights of what was suggested:

- More efforts to address the lack of awareness of the barriers faced by people with disabilities and of the potential of DFA to facilitate much greater accessibility, including education and training starting with young schoolchildren but also targeted towards such professional groups as architects, ICT designers and manufacturers. Participants cautioned, however, that activities designed to change attitudes should not be a substitute for action.
- The creation and availability of supports for employers as well as for individuals.
- “How-to” guides and toolkits, e.g. practical steps and ideas about how to accommodate individuals with varying forms of impairments, how to facilitate the use of DFA criteria in public procurement.
- More harmonisation and common standards across Europe.
- Better articulation of the meaning of “reasonable accommodation” to ensure that it results in fact in *necessary* accommodations, along with practi-

cal guidelines and supports to employers, rehabilitation workers, and employees with disabilities to assist in this process.

- Better transposition of the Employment Directive across the Member States.
- A requirement that mainstreaming, as discussed above, be mandatory in *all* policy areas, including the application of DFA in all applicable areas.
- Support of networks and the creation of tangible mechanisms to provide for a more systematic approach to the identification and sharing of experiences and good practices.

4.2 Achievement of the Conference Objectives

As Section 1.1 indicated, this conference had three main objectives. In the view of the Rapporteur, these objectives were largely achieved. These can be summarised as follows.

Building upon the momentum from the European Year of People with Disabilities

As Professor Mercier indicated in his closing remarks, the discussion during the course of the conference followed in the spirit of the European Year and the Madrid Declaration. The conference provided an opportunity to identify many of the achievements that have occurred since the end of the Year – as well as areas where further action is required.

There was strong consensus among all the participants at the conference about areas where action is required, and a willingness among the partners to work together. There is also a commitment, such as through the biennial reports on the overall situation of people with disabilities in Europe, to review future progress and what else will need to be done. The first such report will be prepared in time for the 2005 European Day of People with Disabilities.

Identifying ideas that can feed into the first European Commission biennial report on the overall situation of people with disabilities in the enlarged Europe

Presentations by many of the panellists, as well as numerous interventions by participants, provided considerable information, about accomplishments as well as remaining challenges that can be taken into consideration in the preparation of the biennial report. These ideas are discussed throughout this report, with the major points summarised in Section 4.1 above.

Stimulating the exchange of good practices

The conference provided an opportunity for the identification of numerous good practices (to give but one example, illustrations of good technical design) through the formal presentations and discussions, as well as informally among participants during the social events.

In addition, participants identified steps that could help facilitate the identification and sharing of good practices on an ongoing basis in the future.

5 Concluding Reflections of the Rapporteur

The overall tone of the conference was very positive and upbeat. Participants acknowledged many recent positive developments, such as: the momentum from the European Year that was largely viewed as a success, increasing awareness about disability and at least some of the barriers that people with disabilities face, improved mainstreaming in at least some areas, significant progress in the area of eInclusion, the availability of new technologies that can enable at least some disabled people to overcome their impairment, advances in a number of areas (e.g. low floor buses), and the existence of the EU Employment Directive.

There was a strong spirit of cooperation throughout the conference. For example, all speakers emphasised their strong agreement with the principle of “nothing about us without us”, and EDF representatives indicated their willingness to work closely with the European Commission. There was also a remarkable degree of consensus, for example with Commission officials as well as other stakeholders agreeing with most of the observations and recommendations of the disability representatives.

The existence of a new Commission, a new Commissioner, and a new Parliament also provides opportunities for potential new directions. EDF representatives publicly acknowledged the commitment of President Barroso and Commissioner Špidla to combating discrimination and to support increased quality in employment and the inclusion of people with disabilities within society. They noted Mr Špidla’s interest in further measures to combat discrimination faced by people with disabilities in all aspects of life.

Yet it was clear from the conference that the picture is far from completely rosy. For example, people with disabilities still face many barriers to employment and to inclusion in society. Too often mainstreaming is still more a matter of words than reality. Design for All represents a major potential to provide for the elimination of barriers at little or even at no cost. But it still happens too rarely.

Many new technologies hold promise to greatly improve the lives of many people with disabilities and to make their impairments largely irrelevant. But they

are no panacea. Depending upon the direction taken, there is a danger of new technology further isolating people with disabilities and increasing the digital divide.

Also, the Employment Directive needs to be fully and appropriately transposed and implemented so that there will be a real difference to people where they live. The Directive does not appear to require action with respect to many of the conditions identified at the conference, such as greater accessibility to the built environment (other than the reference to 'reasonable accommodation') and to lifelong learning, that nevertheless are critical to employment as well as to social inclusion.

While the disability community noted with considerable interest the support for disability expressed by the new Commission and the new Commissioner, they also indicated that they want to see words followed by action, noting that they have been disappointed many times before.

Thus this conference demonstrated a belief among participants that things are moving in the right direction, with the potential to do considerably more. It provided many ideas about what can be done – as well as the strong will among the major players to work together cooperatively.

But there is much that still needs to be done. As Ronald De Leij put it, there should be no more discussion about what needs to be done. Instead, there is a need to provide solutions to the problems and barriers that we know about. As Yannis Vardakastanis stated:

“68 million disabled people in Europe and their families want the EU to pass from words to deeds. That means from words to legislation, from words to full implementation of the directives, from words to effective policies to promote inclusion of people with disabilities in the labour market, from words to structured involvement of disabled people.”

Commissioner Špidla indicated his agreement, saying that:

“The European Union can and must do more ... to counter all forms of discrimination, ... to provide for the equality of opportunity, ... to incorporate an inclusive vision of disability within all its policies,” and to use the tools at its disposal “to contribute to an actual change in mentality and in practice.”

He outlined some of the steps that the European Commission is undertaking to support further progress along these and other lines.

This conference provided a variety of ideas on the way forward, in order to be able to continue to build upon the momentum created by the European Year of

People with Disabilities in 2003 towards the full inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects of European society.

Annexes

Conference Programme
Participant list
Key speeches and presentations
Web links on disability information

European Commission documents

- Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Equal opportunities for people with disabilities: A European Action Plan, Brussels, 30.10.2003 (COM(2003) 650 final)
- 2010: A Europe Accessible for All, Report from the Group of Experts set up by the European Commission, October 2003

European Disability Forum documents

- EDF Response to the European Commission consultation on disability mainstreaming in the European Employment Strategy, May 2004
- EDF Response To the European Commission Paper “A new partnership for cohesion : Convergence, Competitiveness, Cooperation, May 2004