

## **Sheltered Workshops in the Corona crisis**

The coronavirus has changed the health, economic and social situation in Europe. Even once the health crisis has eased, the economic situation will take time to recover. People with disabilities have always had less opportunities to work on the open labour market – meaning less opportunities to participate in social and working life. This situation will presumably deteriorate in times of economic recession, causing suffering to many people with disabilities.

This has been dramatically illustrated in sheltered workshops all over Europe during the months of crisis. Sheltered workshops across Europe continue to be affected in various ways by the coronavirus, the associated protective measures and the emerging economic, social and health effects.

People with disabilities have simply been banned for month from their workplaces provided by sheltered workshops, whether they belong to a risk group or not – or the sheltered workshops and their staff were forced to make adjustments to the workplace without sufficient administrative help and funding in order to minimize the risk of infection.

At the beginning of the crisis, sheltered workshops and their workers and users were forgotten. In many countries, they were put into the same group as elderly people, without differentiation. This is an expression of the still prevalent prejudice that all people with disabilities belong to a vulnerable group. For some of them, due to chronic diseases, immune deficiencies and pre-existing conditions, an infection with the virus is more likely to have a severe course. This has to be taken seriously, but at the same time, each person must be treated individually.

Overall, many workshop users were treated unequally compared to employees without disabilities in terms of their rights of self-determination and their right to work.

These circumstances confronted both the people with disabilities and the sheltered workshops with new and often difficult challenges, which had to be addressed with flexibility and creativity. The central task of sheltered workshops was to continue to provide support, working opportunities and vocational education for workshop users, to give them daily structure and to continue to enable them to live as independently as possible.

People with disabilities who had to stay home often suffered from the loss of their work as well as social isolation and loneliness, which went hand in hand with drastic changes in their everyday lives. Some of them – especially people with psychological disabilities – became even more isolated and withdrawn. Rehabilitation became increasingly difficult as they retreated from professional assistance, due to the lack of regular personal on-site contact.

The significance of work for people with disabilities – as for most people – has become increasingly apparent: on the one hand being part of a meaningful process that enables them to be productive and create value and on the other hand gives them a day-to-day structure, social contacts and rehabilitation.

These opportunities offered by sheltered workshops are in grave danger. The economic crisis will also hit sheltered workshops. Even if they are largely funded – which is not the case in every European country – they will have to cope with substantial losses and their main purpose, to provide work opportunities for people with disabilities, is at risk.

## **Learning from the crisis**

The coronavirus crisis has highlighted the wide range of support and participation services provided by sheltered workshops, which are at the same time employers who must exist in the market with their products and services. Both are integral components of their performance, which must be safeguarded – also and not least in times of crisis.

Due to infection protection, the civil rights of all European citizens are being restricted to a certain extent. With regard to people with disabilities, however, the balance between protection and freedom has led to a much more drastic situation. While people without disabilities have now regained many freedoms, people with disabilities are still restricted in many areas of life and are often subjected to (legal) restrictions, as opposed to recommendations.

The crisis has shown that workshop users are particularly affected. Gaps in the regulations and legal uncertainties have led to unequal treatment of workshop users compared to employees without disabilities. This is contrary to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

To prevent such situations in the future, people with disabilities must be informed and involved in every development regarding their working environment. Representatives of sheltered workshops must also be involved into decision making from the beginning, even before the next pandemic strikes.

More than ever, sheltered workshops need strong and stable organisational and financial structures that enable flexibility and creative solutions at the same time. Those kinds of structures are necessary in order to cope with difficult and complex challenges that arise out of times of crisis.

Not least, the value of work for people with disabilities must be recognised. The people who will very probably be hit hardest by an economic recession must not be forgotten. They, like all people, have a right to work.