

Access to work: the role of vocational (re)habilitation

When it comes to the goal of full inclusion for people with disabilities, the most difficult and sensitive issue that remains to be resolved is the participation in working life and the right to work, as enshrined by Art. 27 of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UN-CRPD). Even in countries with recruitment quotas and penalties, people with disabilities face huge difficulties in finding a suitable working environment. In view of these circumstances, it seems unrealistic, discriminating and dangerous to demand the closing of all facilities currently supporting people with disabilities, who have no access to work in open labour market conditions. This is even more true when it comes to people with severe disabilities who need long term support.

Art. 27 UNCRPD should be read together with the general principles of the UN-CRPD stated in Art. 3 UNCRPD, which always have to be taken into consideration when interpreting the UN-CRPD's individual articles. Art. 3 (a) calls for "the respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one's own choices, and independence of persons". Therefore, people with disabilities should have all the rights listed in Art. 27 CRPD and must not be restricted in their right to choose between all the possibilities of participation in working life offered by an inclusive labour market.

People with disabilities need as many options as they can possibly get. Accordingly, Art. 24 UN-CRPD enshrines their right to education. Lifelong learning is the key to opening opportunities for everyone – and even more for people with disabilities. Additionally, Art. 26 UNCRPD states that there shall be "comprehensive habilitation and rehabilitation services and programmes, particularly in the areas of [...] employment [and] education" to enable them to attain and maintain full inclusion and participation in all aspects of life.

Vocational (re)habilitation – A contribution towards enabling freedom of choice

To safeguard that an individual can make his or her own choice, he or she must be enabled both to explore and recognize opportunities. People with disabilities often need person-centred and individual-tailored support for this.

That is why services of vocational (re)habilitation are crucial. Vocational (re)habilitation is a process which enables persons with health, functional, psychological, developmental and cognitive disabilities to overcome barriers to accessing, maintaining or returning to work and other meaningful occupation.

The wide range of options in the field of vocational (re)habilitation

People with disabilities, who due to the severity of their disabilities need particularly intensive support to perform in any kind of working process, or who primarily need a structured daily routine, are supported in **daycare centres**. These can be connected to or integrated in sheltered workshops, so that people who are able and willing to participate in working processes can transfer to the services of sheltered workshops.

People with disabilities can acquire skills in various vocational fields through measures of **vocational education**¹ that are strictly person-centred and individually tailored. The goal is to identify and nurture talents and show every person with disabilities his or her individual occupational options. In some countries vocational education takes place within the services of sheltered workshops, in others it is a separate service.

Sheltered workshops provide a range of services that help people with disabilities, who cannot (or cannot yet) engage in any kind of employment on the open labour market, to participate in working life. The services of sheltered workshops give them the opportunity to be trained in several vocational fields, both through vocational education and practical experiences. A supervised internship or an **integrated workplace** gives them the chance to see if they want, and are able to, work more independently.

Other options include the services of supported employment or working in an inclusive enterprise. Those measures can be and are already carried out on the basis of the services provided by sheltered workshops.

Supported employment stands for providing support to people with disabilities, or other disadvantaged groups, to help them obtain and maintain paid employment in the open labour market. In many countries, this service is provided primarily to people with disabilities who do not need support over a long period.

Inclusive enterprises are usually small businesses (sometimes founded by sheltered workshops). Here, people with disabilities, sometimes former sheltered workshops users, who feel ready to work under everyday conditions, are employed and work together with people without disabilities. The share of people with disabilities among the employees must be at least 30 per cent².

The above-mentioned measures have to work seamlessly hand in hand to create a permeable system. Every offer is an important component of the system of vocational (re)habilitation providing that each person with disabilities can decide freely, in a self-determined way.

There is a wide range of opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in working life. From daycare centre to job without any support, all together they create an inclusive labour market. To safeguard that every individual can find the appropriate offer for his or her status and every step of his or her development, the services of vocational rehabilitation are indispensable.

¹ Country-specific, this may also mean recognized vocational training

² According to EU-Legislation