

European Pillar of Social Rights: The contribution of sheltered workshops

About Access to Work Europe

Access to Work Europe is a cooperation of organisations of service providers throughout Europe representing the services of sheltered workshops. Access to Work Europe promotes the recognition of the value of work for people with disabilities and their right to work in compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

Employment possibilities of people with disabilities

This contribution wants to highlight the current situation with regards to employment for people with disabilities.

Not only since the financial crisis of 2008 and the current Corona pandemic, people with disabilities face huge barriers when it comes to employment. As long as the current system and the related competitive labour market excludes and leaves behind people whether with or without disabilities, this is not going to change.

The possible role of the European Pillar of Social Rights

The European Pillar of Social Rights could make a difference when it comes to support for people with disabilities to exercise their right to work enshrined in Article 27 United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD). We want to highlight the role of the principles 1, 4 and 17.

Principle 1

“Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.”

Principle 1 addresses an important aspect, when it comes to possibilities for people with disabilities in life and especially in working life. To safeguard that an individual can make his or her own choice, he or she must be enabled and supported both to explore and recognize opportunities. Many people with disabilities need person-centered and individual-tailored support to reach this goal.

Accordingly, Article 24 UNCRPD enshrines their right to education. Lifelong learning is the key to open up opportunities for everyone – and even more for people with disabilities. Article 26 UNCRPD states that there shall be “comprehensive habilitation and rehabilitation services and programmes, particularly in the areas of [...] employment [and] education” to enable people with disabilities to attain and maintain full inclusion and participation in all aspects of life.

Services of vocational (re)habilitation, such as sheltered workshops, supported employment, vocational training centers, etc. are important measures to achieve this. Vocational (re)habilitation is a process which enables persons with health, functional, psychological, developmental and cognitive disabilities to overcome barriers to access, maintain or return to work and other meaningful occupation.

Principle 4 Section 1

“Everyone has the right to timely and tailor-made assistance to improve employment or self-employment prospects. This includes the right to receive support for job search, training and re-qualification. Everyone has the right to transfer social protection and training entitlements during professional transitions.”

For most people, work means being part of a meaningful process that enables them to be productive and create value. However, the current economic system does not guarantee that everyone has access to work. The wide range of people with disabilities includes a huge group of people who, due to the severity of their health, functional, psychological, developmental and cognitive disabilities, need more support to exercise their right to work.

That is why the services of sheltered employment play such an important role. By offering work as well as providing tailor-made support and assistance services for over three million people with disabilities in Europe, sheltered workshops can improve and sometimes provide access to work in the first place.

Principle 17

“People with disabilities have the right to income support that ensures living in dignity, services that enable them to participate in the labour market and in society, and a work environment adapted to their needs.”

The term “people with disabilities” describes a very heterogenic group of people consisting of individuals with various needs. To safeguard that every person can find the appropriate offer for his or her current situation and every step of his or her development, as demanded in principles 1, 4 and 17, there has to be a wide range of support measures and services for people with disabilities. The services provided by sheltered workshops are an important part of this support system – especially for those with more severe disabilities. Every offer is an important component of the system of vocational support and rehabilitation. Each person with disabilities must have the possibility to make decisions in a freely and self-determined way.

Conclusion

The current Corona pandemic has a negative impact on employment opportunities in Europe. People with disabilities will most certainly be particularly affected by the rise in unemployment as their unemployment rate is already almost twice as high as that of the general population despite the policies implemented by the various European countries. The European Union must therefore now more than ever support the social structures and services that allow people with disabilities in their respective life situation to be supported in their efforts to access to work.

The implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights needs to play an important role by actively creating a framework that pushes and supports the EU member states to:

- sustain already existing social infrastructure such as sheltered workshops as a basis of a comprehensive and permeable system of support measures and services for people with disabilities.
- further develop the services for people with disabilities in compliance with the UNCRPD.

This is especially important regarding the impacts of the Corona pandemic for people with disabilities.