

High-level exchange – Disability inclusion in EU external action

On 26 April 2021, the [European Disability Forum](#) (EDF) and [International Disability and Development Consortium](#) (IDDC) organised a high-level exchange on EU International Cooperation and Humanitarian Action, which was hosted and moderated by [MEP Radka Maxová](#) on behalf of the European Parliament Disability Intergroup.

Abstract

The aim of the exchange was to inform Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) about policy developments and priorities on disability inclusion in EU International Cooperation and Humanitarian Action, and how these policies can be effectively implemented. Speakers included the European Commissioners for Equality and for Crisis Management, the Deputy Director General of DG INTPA, the EU Special Representative on Human Rights, the OHCHR Representative for Europe, and leaders of disability leaders from Europe, Africa and Pacific regions. The discussion focused on the new EU Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its CRPD-compliant implementation in EU external action. It highlighted specific and mainstream approaches, linkages with the EU Gender Action Plan, the EU Human Rights and Democracy Action Plan, the upcoming EU Strategy with Africa, the EU ECHO humanitarian disability guidance note, and synergies with tools, resources and processes that exist outside Europe. **MEPs will be sent summary information, guidance and support, to ensure that the positive momentum continues, and that existing gaps continue to be closed.**

The exchange

Equality - core EU value

[Helena Dalli](#) (EU Commissioner for Equality) made the opening remarks, emphasising the importance of equality to the EU and its commitment to the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (CRPD) and the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs). She highlighted the CRPD human rights approach and how this is embraced by the EU's external action policies. She then introduced the new [EU Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (2021 to 2030) and emphasised how it takes the diversity of disability into account, addresses multiple barriers faced by many people – including women and children – and strengthens the EU's role as a global partner in working towards disability inclusion. She highlighted the importance of using the [OECD-DAC disability marker](#), and the areas that needed the most work; these include the ability to track progress, accessing inclusive basic services, social protection, inclusive education, assistive technologies, information, justice and legal identity, institutionalised care,

segregation, lack of job opportunities, and discrimination. Commissioner Dalli also underlined the importance of involvement of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs/DPOs) in structured dialogue when shaping policy, and she finished by stating that the EU needs to be an example in making the built and information environments more accessible, embracing technology and providing reasonable accommodation and implementing universal design.

DPOs must be consulted

We then heard from [Yannis Vardakastanis](#) (**President, European Disability Forum**), who congratulated these positive commitments, including EU delegations supporting the advancement of disability rights, accessibility and consultation, and the use of the [Washington Group short set of questions](#) in updating the rights-based approach toolbox. He then highlighted areas that need clarifying – participation, monitoring, action and implementation plans, global leadership, data collection, and funding. Vardakastanis emphasised that for the new EU disability rights strategy to be effective, it must be mainstreamed internally and externally, and that DPOs must be consulted. Nothing about us, without us!

Stepping up promotion of rights of persons with disabilities in EU global action

The next speaker, **EU Special Representative for Human Rights** [Eamon Gilmore](#), spoke about the impact of COVID-19, which is deepening existing inequalities and causing the human rights of persons with disabilities to often be disregarded and outright violated. He said that a true human rights-based approach to disability is still far from being a reality, and how every crisis exposes these gaps. However, he assured us that as party to the CRPD the EU remains committed to promoting the inclusion of persons with disabilities in society, and also in its external action. He highlighted how the EU's commitment is reflected in the [Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy](#) (2020-2024), and the importance of advancing the non-discrimination agenda, including for persons with disabilities. Using this action plan, Gilmore said, the EU can assist in preventing and removing barriers to infrastructure, transport, information, communication technologies, and ensuring inclusive services such as quality education, distance learning, healthcare, and justice. He also stressed the goal of harnessing new assistive technology and artificial intelligence to improve disability inclusion.

EU delegations and member State embassies indispensable

Addressing implementation of these strategies and plans, Gilmore stated that EU delegations and Member State embassies are indispensable and that the right human rights toolbox, and funding available through it, needs to be used proactively and in a joined-up manner. He tied up his segment stating that as we emerge from COVID-19 we must not forget to build back better for everyone, with human rights at the front and centre.

EU working together with Africa

[Idriss Maiga](#) (**President, Africa Disability Forum**) then took the floor, describing increased cooperation between the African Disability Forum and the EU since 2010.

He stated that the EU framework will be important in the process of the African Union ratifying the CRPD, and that a disability-inclusive new [EU Strategy with Africa](#) is vital. However, DPOs have often been left out of policy development and implementation, and should be consulted from the very beginning of all actions. He pointed out that while the African Union is an important partner, its communication with DPOs and West Africa needs to be strengthened. He recognised that the partnership with the EU will be important to ensuring that his organisation can be heard and can speak for themselves to contribute to a better world for all.

New tools in EU development policy

[Martin Seychell](#) (Deputy Director-General of the EU Directorate-General for International Partnerships, DG INTPA) began by reminding us that progress that is being made. The EU consensus 2017 was the first time that persons with disabilities were mentioned in overarching development policy. The new European Disability Rights Strategy brings more detail, introducing Universal Design and Reasonable Accommodation as tools to ensure that external programs funded by the EU are more accessible. He talked about intersecting and compounding discriminations, emphasising that we must stop seeing people as blocks of homogenous groups and recognise the diversity among us. The [EU Gender Action Plan](#) is one strategy which pays attention to these intersection discriminations. He also cited the EU Strategy with Africa, stressing the use of the human rights guidelines as an important compass for staff in the field and how it protects the rights of Persons with disabilities. He finished by bringing in other priority areas of external cooperation – the [European Green Deal](#), climate change, and energy – and how a human-centred approach should mean that everyone should benefit from the jobs and trainings generated in these fields.

Opportunities for engagement of MEPs in these processes

We then heard a [recorded message from MEP Ádám Kósa](#), who stated that the EU-Africa strategy should pay attention to the most marginalised people, calling for the mainstreaming of their rights across all financial instruments and making inclusive education available. He highlighted key EU departments and committees (such as the [Directorate General for External Policies](#), the [Committee on Development](#), the [Committee on Budgetary Control](#), and of course, the [Disability Intergroup](#)) and he also emphasised that the European Disability Rights Strategy will reinforce the EU's role in advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities through cooperation, humanitarian action and dialogue with the international community. He ended on the note that there is much work to be done, and that the implementation of the new strategy will need to be monitored.

The theme of the meeting then switched, from discussing policy that already exists to identifying HOW that policy can and should be effectively implemented.

Policy implementation – operational guidance, data disaggregation, training and mainstreaming

To take us forward in this direction was [Janez Lenarčič \(EU Commissioner for Crisis Management\)](#). Lenarčič mentioned the disproportionate impact on persons with disabilities of the ongoing COVID pandemic, how it is disrupting healthcare, limiting access to education, and compounding an existing food crisis. He stated that the EU is committed to making humanitarian aid accessible, and then discussed the various policies and tools that are being used and/or developed. These include the [operational guidance for ECHO staff and partners](#) and the [IASC disability humanitarian guidelines](#), the [European human rights implementation plan](#), strengthening of reporting requirements in funding proposals, and the use of the [Washington short set of questions](#). The Commissioner also highlighted that EU commitment to capacity building of staff and partners on disability inclusion includes mainstream humanitarian partners (disability inclusion should not be solely a responsibility for specialised disability rights organisations) while building on the expertise and involvement of disabled persons organisations.

Supporting EU delegations in inclusive policy implementation

DDG Martin Seychell then took the floor again, discussing inclusion in EU international partnerships. He emphasised that DG INTPA is taking the rights-based approach, implementing Universal Design and mainstreaming equality in new programs and actively supporting [EU delegations](#) to include these principles in the new programming. Seychell continued, pointing out that INTPA is now updating its rights-based toolbox with improved guidance on the rights of persons with disabilities, and has engaged more technical expertise to support disability inclusion in its operations. The [OECD-DAC disability marker](#) will help identify projects or sectors where more attention is required, and the training of staff and raising awareness of colleagues at every level remains a priority. He finished by asking MEPs for continued vigilance and support in assessing legislation and reports and in meetings with external partners.

EU should lead by example and collaborate at international level

Birgit Van Hout (OHCHR Regional Representative for Europe) then detailed suggestions for a rights-based implementation of the European Disability Strategy – she mentioned that there are opportunities to leverage synergies with the [UN Disability Inclusion Strategy](#) and the [OHCHR human rights strategy](#). She also mentioned that EU delegations should reach out to existing UN field presences, and that a robust monitoring framework and data collection system would be needed for the EU Disability Rights Strategy to be implemented. In relation to monitoring, Van Hout reminded us of the already existing [OHCHR SDG-CRPD resource package](#), with indicators and policy paper guidelines, and the potential for the EU to ensure that a mid-term review of its disability rights strategy is done in harmony with the next CRPD committee EU review. She encouraged the EU to lead by example, and also made the point that a human-rights based approach is as much about the process as it is the results; about applying the principles of transparency, inclusion, participation, accountability, and non-discrimination in practice.

A question was then raised about whether there was a roadmap or action plan for the implementation of the new strategy. Seychell answered that there is no current action plan, but disability is an integral part of the human rights action plan.

Possibility for a new dawn, but still barriers to remove

Our final panellist was [Setareki Seru Macanawai](#) (CEO Pacific Disability Forum), speaking at almost midnight, thousands of kilometres away in Fiji. He remarked that the European Disability Rights Strategy has potential for big impact in the furthest corners of the globe, and called on the EU to take this opportunity for global leadership. However, he highlighted concerns that European funding was difficult for civil society organisations to access directly because there are complicated ‘hoops to jump through’, and emphasised how critical it is to have inclusion of DPOs, especially in topics that are currently of huge concern in the Pacific such as climate change and disaster risk reduction (DRR). Macanawai finished positively, saying he hopes that the dawning of his new day there in Fiji, and these new EU policies, herald the dawning of a new inclusive future.

Donors must facilitate DPO participation through accessible financing

Idriss Maiga reinforced his Pacific colleague’s message about funding of DPOs. He thanked the EU for all of their programs but highlighted that DPOs are often put in competition with large non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that have more experience and resources. He asked the EU to take this into account, to ensure that people with disabilities are involved in decisions about finances, in line with “nothing about us without us”.

To remove inequalities, disability must be mainstreamed into programming

We then heard a [short video message from INTPA Commissioner Jutta Urpilainen](#), who further emphasised the need to mainstream disability into programming, removing inequalities using the Human Rights Action Plan, the EU Gender Action Plan and the European Disability Strategy.

[Blandine Bouniol](#) (representing the International Disability and Development Consortium, IDDC) wrapped up the meeting with a summary of the main points from the perspective of civil society organisations and stated that momentum needed to be kept going by the European Parliament, especially in the upcoming public hearings on inequalities in May.