The European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities is a non-profit European umbrella organization, established in 1996, and currently representing over 12,000 social and health support services for persons with disabilities. EASPD advocates for effective and high-quality disability-related services in the field of education, employment and individualised support, in line with the UN CRPD principles, which could bring benefits not only to persons with disabilities, but to society as a whole. EASPD is accredited to the Conference of States Parties to the CRPD.

Newsletter coordinator – Sabrina Ferraina, EASPD Policy Manager
Special contributions –
- Franz Wolfmayr, EASPD President (Foreword)
- Luk Zelderloo, EASPD Secretary General (Conclusion)
- Sabrina Ferraina, EASPD Policy Manager (Disability Care and support services in the 21st century)
- Carmen Arroyo de Sande, EASPD Development Manager (Research and innovation agenda)
- Nieves Tejada Castro, EASPD Communications Officer (Infographic)

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With the financial support of the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation “EaSI” (2014-2020)
Foreword – Franz Wolfmayr, President of EASPD

When we discussed about services for persons with disabilities in 1996, the year EASPD was founded, we mainly talked about care in homes and workshops. Persons who needed support had to take what was available, not what they wanted. Support in employment, education, early intervention, new forms of personal assistance, assisted living, etc. were only starting in some regions - developed by innovative people. Together with these committed service providers we decided to create new European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities: EASPD.

In 2016 we celebrate 20 years of work at transnational-European and worldwide level.

There are many reasons to be proud of what we have achieved. Today EASPD represents more than 12,000 organisations in 34 European countries. We stand for high quality services which can support persons with disabilities through their life - and in many cases also their families - to live a life like everybody else. The primary mission of EASPD is to promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities through effective and high quality service systems in Europe.

We know service provision has a complex history that we have to accept. In the last decades, in many cases services took control over the lifes of persons with disabilities. At that time this was done with the best intentions; often the legal frameworks did not allow another approach. Today we are convinced that quality services can only be achieved when they are person centered, community-based and delivered in coproduction with the users and all other relevant stakeholders. Service providers are in the process of change. EASPD is supporting the transition by developing concepts, promoting the exchange of good practices and lobbying for the needed policy, legal and financial frameworks.

I am proud to celebrate our 20th anniversary with a renewed commitment to develop the support services of tomorrow in co-production with all relevant stakeholders. This is our message: EASPD and its members want to be of support to persons with disabilities and we are taking this task very seriously.

On this significant occasion I would like to thank the founders of EASPD. In 1996 they did not know how important this network would become in 20 years for persons with disabilities, families, authorities and for society in general. I also thank all my colleagues in the EASPD structures for their heartwarming engagement in developing, designing and delivering support services in the disability sector.
EASPD organises its first conference in Dublin, Ireland
on 29th September 1999: “Partnership—the key to quality services”. Mary McAleese, President of Ireland, opens the conference: “The real measure of the success of society is how far we go to make it truly inclusive, to provide a place for everyone to acquire confidence and to blossom, and to give people with disabilities the opportunities to make their own contribution”.

1994 – A road trip to Portugal
For EASPD, everything started with a road trip of 5 people, a 2,500 km, 30 hour, all day, all night drive from northern Europe to attend a conference on the transition from education to employment for persons with disabilities in Portugal. Having only just recovered from the 30 hour drive—the various delegations began to talk about creating a European platform, which would help to structure our sector at European level.

1995 – First meeting with the European Commission
A small delegation meets a top representative of the EC who recommended the sector to “get organised”.

In 1995, Austria, Finland and Sweden join the EU

1996
The 3rd December 1996, European Commissioner of Employment and Social Affairs, Pádraig Flynn, officially launches EASPD in the presence of the European Disability Forum, Johan Weisman

The Founders
- Roger Acton
- Stefan Allgauer
- Frank Cuyt
- Marie-Claire Rens
- Jos Sterckx
- Brendan Sutton
- Jef Van Valkenborgh
- Martin Vanden Hende
- Hans Visser
- Luk Zelderloo

1996 – 1997 Marie-Claire Rens, of F.I.S.S.A.A.J in Belgium, is the first EASPD President

conference in Rome, Italy, February 2008, “Bringing the UN Convention home to Europe” on the EU and national legal frameworks to implement the convention and the Council of Europe Disability Action Plan.

In 2008, EASPD and its partners organise an international conference in Vienna to present two important projects: “Quality of Life” and “European Care Certificate”

2008

In 2010, EASPD formally sets up the Interest Group on Independent Living

conference in Lisbon, Portugal, on November 2007: “Walking with families” on the need to develop personalised services together with families.

2009
In 2009, Vladimir Špidla EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities officially sets up the Expert Group on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care. EASPD and several European NGOs become part of this group. In September they present a report on a Global Financial Crisis 2007-2009 hits Europe affecting the entire EU.

conference in Helsinki, Finland, June 2010, “What about me? Including the most excluded” on improving the quality of life of people with profound disabilities.


2010
conference in Linz, Austria, 30 june to 1 July 2011, “Old, so what? Independent living for seniors with disabilities”

In December 2011, EASPD together with Eurodisco-nia, Workability Europe, EPR, Solidar, FEANTSA, CEDAG, Caritas (joins later) and Red Cross (joins later) launch Social Services Europe.

2011

2012
Publication of the booklet “User’s involvement in social services”

2013
- First meeting in Paris of the PUSH EUROPE NETWORK on housing
- Publication of the Roadmap on Deinstitutionalisation

2012 European Year for Active Ageing
EASPD Policy seminar in Brussels “You cared for me, I care for you: solidarity between generations and abilities”.
In 2001, the first EASPD big EU-funded project is approved by the Commission: LABOr (European knowledge centre on training and employment of people with learning disabilities).

In 2001, EASPD becomes member of the platform of European NGOs Social Platform and ECAS (Euro Citizen Advice Service) and signs cooperation agreements with IASSID and Inclusion Europe.

In 2004, EASPD formally establishes the Standing Committee on Education and the Policy Impact.

In 2004, biggest enlargement of the EU The new EU members: Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

In 2013, EASPD Annual conference in Thessaloniki, Greece, on Volunteering in the disability sector and a second conference in Istanbul on Employment. The Institute for Social Services of Austria wins the Employment for All” award.

In 2014, EASPD establishes the Interest Group on Early Intervention and IG on Arts & Culture. In 2015 EASPD becomes member of EDF, signs a cooperation agreement with Zero Project.

In 2015 EASPD establishes the Interest Group on Early Intervention and IG on Arts & Culture. In 2015 EASPD becomes member of EDF, signs a cooperation agreement with Zero Project.
2. Disability care and support services in the 21st century – Sabrina Ferraina, Policy Manager

20 years since its birth and 10 years after the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), EASPD is taking stock of the situation to define how support services could best meet the needs and wishes of persons with disabilities in the coming years.

With the Convention the human rights approach set the scene in the disability sector, yet the transposition of its principles in society appears challenging with many unanswered questions. The Convention shed light on the type of support we should provide to meet the needs and wishes of persons with disabilities. It is now widely and rightfully accepted that support should be brought to people within their communities and that efforts should be made by society to make the socio-cultural and physical environment more inclusive for all.

How does EASPD see the future of support?

Access to quality support and care services is essential for many persons with disabilities to participate in employment, education and to be able to live independently in the community. Quality support does not only respond to individual needs and preferences. Availability, Accessibility, Affordability and Adequacy of services – the so called “4As criteria” - are equally important to implement and deliver a range of services, meeting the needs and preferences of all people in need of support, whilst also allowing full control over their individual life.

The development of stable and sustainable support services can not take place without strong legal and financial frameworks. Central to this is the responsibility of public authorities to ensure that sufficient public funding is directed towards the financing of services – either directly or indirectly – to ensure both their high quality and their continuity. Over the past few years, the cuts to public funding for social services in most, if not all countries in Europe, have significantly hindered innovation on more enabling forms of support and care. This has often led to social services being compelled to adapt their support schemes in order to welcome more users with lower budgets, thus placing additional pressure on the quality of the service. This trend must definitively be reversed. At the same time services understood that structural changes cannot take place without fully taking on board the voice of those they are meant to support. Users should be involved in the development of support schemes alongside those that are funding, delivering and implementing the service.

The provision of person-centred services, based on the human rights approach, has brought along another essential requirement: the importance of a well skilled and performant workforce in social services. The health and social services sector is one of the biggest job creators in Europe today. Social services, as a whole, directly employ over 10 million professionals in Europe, with 1.4 million new jobs created between 2008 and 2015. This trend will continue as the demand for care and support services is also increasing given the ageing population, changing family patterns and other societal challenges. Despite this and the high levels of unemployment in Europe, the recruitment and retention of staff has become a problem for many employers in the sector. Professionals often have to work with belowaverage wages and under deteriorating working conditions that put them at a higher risk of burnout or of changing jobs. The sector is therefore finding it increasingly difficult to attract dedicated professionals into the sector, in particular young people and men. EASPD therefore works significantly on addressing this lack of attractiveness through policies and activities which provide adequate financial and legal frameworks, enabling decent wages and working conditions, as well as training opportunities and career paths for people working in the sector. One of EASPD’s priorities for the sector to gain more recognition is therefore lobbying for the set up of social dialogue structures at EU level where some of these challenges (career paths, ethical recruitment, health and safety, training opportunities, etc) can be commonly discussed and negotiated between Employers and Trade Unions at European level. Participation in European Social Dialogue would enable a stronger voice for the sector on European legislation.

The much needed and awaited changes in disability service provision require investment in infrastructures and in human capital ensuring a qualified and skilled workforce.

The current inclination to promote the marketisation of social services represents a concern, but also a challenge to prove that quality criteria over cost factors within efficient schemes can be of benefit to users, their families and society as a whole; both on the short term and in the long-run. EASPD has good arguments to demonstrate this and will continue to raise these issues in all policy debates, whilst exploring the different levels of funding opportunities. Public expenditures and private forms of financing can be used complementary as long as the former provide stability and continuity and the latter support more urgent and specific project needs (physical infrastructure, training of staff, etc.). For this relationship to take the form of a stable and healthy cooperation, the general interest motivation of quality social service provision should always be recognised as an essential factor to the provision of support and care.

Within a context of increasingly fast-paced environments, characterised by the digitalisation of day-to-day
life, the development of assistive technology devices, the increase and the complexity of support schemes and the evolving role of the sector’s professionals, it is hard not to feel lost in the system. That's why the development of "disability case managers" should help services’ beneficiaries to better interact with the different stakeholders throughout the different phases of life, handling and seizing the opportunities available by promoting and activating choice and control over their life. The disability case manager should support the individual and his/her social network to better understand and access both mainstream and individualised services, available funding streams and life opportunities through education, employment, etc.

In the coming years, support services will have to work hard to meet the needs, wishes and quality of life outcomes for people. The assessment within EASPD’s structures has brought us to understand that there can be no inclusion without the involvement of all segments of society. Support and needs have to be matched regardless of a disability label and that is why society as a whole is the main interlocutor or the “new client” of support and care service providers. Insofar as the overall objective is to have access to high quality support services for all people on an equal basis, it will be important to provide mainstream services with the knowledge and expertise of support and care services for persons with disabilities.

Further and structural cooperation between the two is therefore a key step to achieve this end. It is also important that this cooperation focuses on services provided from the very early stages of life of individuals with early childhood intervention services and throughout the lifespan following a lifecycle approach. For many of the debates presented above, the co-production methodology should be at the forefront of expected changes needed to realise a truly inclusive society for all its citizens.

EASPD is ready to take this challenge and work consistently on the implementation of co-production in its services and structure. For this we need to establish strong alliances with all those that can help and train us. We are available to launch and carry on the debate.

3. How should we support people in the future? Co-production

In the disability field co-production is an inclusive working practice between experts by experience (users), organisations being of support, public authorities and, if relevant, families and other stakeholders. The ultimate goal is the delivery of a service, policy or activity that is responsive to the individual’s needs and preferences, in line with the “nothing about us, without us” principle of the UN CRPD.

» Through co-production all stakeholders are empowered and are empowering as they are continuously involved in the design, development and delivery of the service, policy or activity.

» Co-production is one of the ways that allows users to be in control of their lives, while taking ownership and expressing choice through active and meaningful partnerships.

In line with several European Disabled People’s Organisations, EASPD proposes three main elements for co-production in the disability field:

1. Co-production promotes shifting the balance of power and responsibility solely from professional support services and authorities. It also establishes that all stakeholders are integral to the policy, service or activity, developed in equal partnership with persons with support needs as the drivers. Co-production goes beyond consultation; all partners in a co-production process collectively seek to identify and overcome barriers towards full implementation of the co-production principle.

2. Co-production recognises that every individual with support needs should be fully, structurally, meaningfully and in an ongoing manner involved at all stages in the design, development and delivery of the relevant service, policy or activity. It requires all stakeholders to acknowledge and recognise the expertise, desires, will and preferences of the person with support needs. Mechanisms must be put in place to ensure that people are provided with the right level of independent support, which empowers persons with disabilities to make fully informed decisions on how to engage in a co-productive process.

3. Co-production is an innovative working practice ensuring that all stakeholders actively rethink and reassess how they are currently operating. Shared dialogue, jointly agreed outcomes, fully inclusive environments and reasonable accommodations must become an essential part of their work structures.

1 See Common Definition of Co-production between EASPD, EDF, Inclusion Europe, ENIL, MHE and COFACE Families Europe
4. The main priorities of disability support and care services in the future

Inclusive living

While moving away from outdated models of care based on a medical approach to disability, the provision of long term and/or intense care is undergoing a process of deinstitutionalisation, accompanied by the set-up of community-based living solutions. Living independently whilst being included in the community requires the delivery of individualised support that ensures full control of the individual over his life. The “how” and “where” support can be delivered should now respond to criteria of inclusion and human rights enjoyment.

In the huge transformation of support systems ahead, one of the first big steps to take is to ensure staff providing support are ready and prepared. Qualified professionals that are aware of human rights principles can push forward the deinstitutionalisation process and work with authorities and funders towards the set-up of new services meeting the wishes and needs of the users. For more information see EASPD’s Roadmap on deinstitutionalisation “Making community-based services a reality”.

Across Europe support services are currently facing similar challenges in addressing employment related issues. The role of service providers is key in delivering training and support to both employers and current or future employees. By sharing our expertise with all stakeholders we are confident in building stronger, sustainable and effective solutions addressing employment issues for persons with different support needs.

Employment

The labour force participation rate of persons with disabilities is significantly lower than when compared to the population as a whole; with unemployment often occurring over significantly long periods of time. Support services are increasingly focusing on how to bridge the gap and create inclusive labour markets. For this to happen, a twin-track approach proves to be a worthy investment for the future. Support measures should tackle both employers and (current or future) employees, so as to understand the specific needs and address them creating a winwin situation for both the individual and the employer.

The implementation of the holistic approach following the STAR Recommendations, based on Stakeholders cooperation, Targeted action, Availability of Support and Research will be pursued to accomplish greater inclusion in the labour market. For more information see EASPD’s Employment Declaration.

Education

The recent adoption of the United Nations General Comment on the Right to Inclusive Education and the reform of the European Education & Training 2020 highlight the importance and growing concern over inclusive learning environments that allow all learners to gain skills – both social and intellectual – to become active citizens, fulling participating in society. A strong leadership from member states and European institutions must provide the legislative framework to encourage local and community actors to shift their attitude and approach towards an inclusive settings. Such incentives include:

- a shift of economic support from segregated to mainstream education providers;
- teacher and staff training to raise awareness and understanding of the concepts and advantages of inclusive education and universal design;
- a reform of the education system based on more flexible curricula leading to more flexible certifications adapted to the needs of each individual.

For more information see EASPD’ Declaration on Education: “Towards more inclusive learning environments in Europe”.

Mr Jim Crowe, EASPD Vice-President and Chair of the Standing Committee on Employment

Mrs Bernadette Grosjeux, EASPD Treasurer and Chair of the EASPD Standing Committee on Education

Mrs Andrea Moraru, EASPD Vice-President and Chair of the Standing Committee on Inclusive Living

The possibility of living in the community while receiving adequate and individualised support represents one of the big achievements for many; yet a neglected possibility for many more. The commitment of support services should be aimed at raising awareness in society and engaging in a continuous dialogue with all relevant stakeholders – including users as the main interlocutors – to make this a possibility for all.

Access to education and lifelong learning programmes in mainstream schools and other educational facilities are still far from being the reality for many pupils and learners with disabilities. This is often due to a shortage of qualified staff, a lack of appropriate accessible buildings, facilities/equipment and widespread and persistent prejudice about the skills and potential of persons with disabilities.

Mr Mrs Andreia Moraru, EASPD Vice-President and Chair of the Standing Committee on Inclusive Living

Mrs Bernadette Grosjeux, EASPD Treasurer and Chair of the EASPD Standing Committee on Education
Early childhood intervention

The aim of Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services is to support families and significant caregivers as mediators for their children’s acquisition of competences within natural environments, enabling children and their families to meaningfully participate and support their development during their daily routines. In this way, children can maximise their development, achieve their potential and also build strong and enduring relationships with key people in their lives.

ECI programmes need to be designed with the understanding that all learning occurs in the context of healthy relationships between infants and children and those who live with and love them. The inclusion and support of children from the youngest age in their family and community is essential for them to be able to participate in society, be included at school, enter the open labour market, and enjoy the full range of their human rights on an equal basis with others.

Mrs Vasilka Dimoska, Chair of the EASPD Interest Group on Early Childhood Intervention

European Legislation

EASPD’s lobby work aims at ensuring that EU policies and activities positively influence the development of high quality support services for persons with disabilities and decent working conditions for professionals in the sector. There are three main policy areas which affect these developments:

» EU law (such as the working time directive) and mechanisms (European Social Dialogue) in the area of employment and social policy must help to unlock the job creation potential of the social services sector through decent working conditions and training opportunities for professionals, an attribute so necessary for the development of high quality support in the future.

» EU policy must also improve access to funding for social services aiming to innovate and improve the quality of support for persons with disabilities. The EU establishes laws on issues such as public procurement and state aid; areas which are particularly important for the funding of support in many EU countries. The European Structural and Investment Funds are also an important contributor to innovation in the quality of services and in staff training for many social service providers in Europe. Although currently underused, the European Fund for Strategic Investment could also contribute towards investment in quality social services, if provided with the right framework.

» The European Semester affects national economic and fiscal policies which regiment the funding for social services and the development of labour market, education and care policies. EASPD aims at ensuring that the Semester contributes positively to the development of high quality support services for persons with disabilities in Europe.

European Union policies have an impact on the lives of persons with disability and their support services. Our involvement at European as well as at national level is crucial to have an impact on EU policies such as Public Procurement, the European Semester mechanism and the European Pillar of Social Rights. It will be crucial to keep on investing in capacity building and awareness raising to make the sector’s voices stronger than ever.

Mrs Kirsi Konola, Chair of the EASPD Policy Impact Group
Quality support and care services are only possible through well-trained professionals. There are over 10 million professionals in social services today. In many countries, the sector is finding it increasingly difficult to attract well-trained professionals, despite the significant and growing demand for such professionals. To ensure that the sector has sufficient staffing to support services, it is necessary to increase the attractiveness of the sector through decent wages, working conditions and career paths. It will be necessary to work towards providing data and information on these trends, including recommendations to policy-makers.

ICT-enabled services are considered as a key means through which to increase the participation in society of persons with disabilities and improving their quality of life. The use of Assistive Technology (AT) and Person Centred Technology (PCT) enhance people’s independence and safety making them less dependent on carers. However, whereas it is clear that PCT improves the independence and quality of life of end-users, producers of such technology (industry) are often working too far away from the end-users which is consequently diminishing or slowing down the potential of assistive technologies.

The enjoyment and fulfilment of the right to participate in cultural life requires an enabling environment and a legal framework that offers a solid basis for the protection of rights related to cultural activities and services. Civil society organisations, support services and cultural associations play an important role in facilitating access to culture for vulnerable groups, but there is a need to reach out to other cultural and art actors and operators to make progress on the implementation of Article 30 of the UN CRPD (Participation in cultural life, recreation leisure and sport). Services should be supporting access to art work and culture by addressing barriers such as the lack of accessible formats in artistic and cultural activities, materials and places for performances and services. They should also support artistic and cultural careers by improving education and training for persons with disabilities on Arts and Culture while ensuring that laws protecting intellectual property rights do not constitute an unreasonable or discriminatory barrier to access cultural materials.

Workforce development

Mr James Churchill, Chair of the Interest Group on Workforce Development & Human Resources

It is well known that a well trained workforce is one of the most valuable assets in the push for better services; a common foundation for training in all care services across Europe – based on UNCRPD principles – is therefore much needed. The research of the EASPD European Observatory on Human Resources demonstrates that some Member States are able to create and keep a high quality social care workforce valued by society. Our current challenge is how to spread this best practice to all Member States. We are on the case!

Mr Steve Barnard, Co-chair of the EASPD Interest Group on Person Centred Technology

The technological revolution continues as does the economic recession, especially in relation to people requiring their support of social and health care, which includes many people with disabilities. It is continually necessary and of huge benefit to the quality of people’s lives to ensure that technological solutions are available, funded and monitored. The future looks bright.

Mr Eoin Nash, Chair of the EASPD Interest Group on Cultural Participation

In Europe there is a need to further promote inclusion in the Arts and Cultural sectors by enhancing accessibility to cultural settings, ensuring arts education within a lifelong learning framework, professionalising art workshops and recognising the talent and the rights of artists with disabilities.

Person-centred technology

ICT-enabled services are considered as a key means through which to increase the participation in society of persons with disabilities and improving their quality of life. The use of Assistive Technology (AT) and Person Centred Technology (PCT) enhance people’s independence and safety making them less dependent on carers. However, whereas it is clear that PCT improves the independence and quality of life of end-users, producers of such technology (industry) are often working too far away from the end-users which is consequently diminishing or slowing down the potential of assistive technologies.

Amongst the key priorities of this field is the need to:

- Bridge the gap between industry and end-users and reduce the digital divide.
- Make and promote a wider use of mainstream technology also in the care and support sector through e.g. projects, activities, awareness-raising campaigns, etc.
- Work towards the accessibility and affordability of ICT and AT solutions in order to reach out to more and more persons in need.

Cultural participation

Mr Eoin Nash, Chair of the EASPD Interest Group on Cultural Participation

In Europe there is a need to further promote inclusion in the Arts and Cultural sectors by enhancing accessibility to cultural settings, ensuring arts education within a lifelong learning framework, professionalising art workshops and recognising the talent and the rights of artists with disabilities.
5. EASPD’s research and innovation agenda – Carmen Arroyo de Sande, Development Manager

EASPD is at the forefront of major changes needed in the disability support services sector. Investment in development, research & innovation is essential to ensure state of the art support. There is however no single intervention that will trigger or ensure innovation in the support services sector. Innovation needs to be adapted as well as adopted in an integrated way, making use of adequate working methods and bringing together all key actors involved.

WHAT

» **User-driven innovation** which originates from creative thinking and design-enabled innovation; a central element to co-production processes.

» **Key organisational strategies for embedding innovation**: structures and governance arrangements, skills and leadership developments, improved knowledge management, inter-functional and inter-organisational coordination and collaboration and development of an innovation infrastructure.

» **Assistive technology development** which plays an important role in the promotion of autonomy, self-development, independence and in increasing participation in society.

» **Quality assurance systems** are structural elements of good governance and quality delivery responsive to real needs and choices of the users.

» **Changing modes of actions**: consistent impact & evaluation methods, strong & sustainable cooperation among all stakeholders and the promotion and exploitation of innovation are key activities to generate practical knowledge on how to face the ‘transition costs’.

HOW

The development of innovative ideas requires efficient and effective methodologies. As we have done during the past years, EASPD will continue developing the capacity of the organisation and its members to gather data, design, manage and implement needs-based and impact-oriented projects.

WITH WHOM

In the planning, implementation and assessment of research & innovation, EASPD will continue to be faithful to its “Reaching Out” philosophy. It is our main concern to establish meaningful and participative dialogue to promote debates and exchange. We are always and constantly developing cooperation with our **members, partners and key stakeholders, academia and the scientific community** to bring innovation in service provision to the next level!

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If I can dream it I can do it – Luk Zelderloo, Secretary General of EASPD

It was December 3rd 1996; I still remember a cold and windy day here in Brussels. After 2 years of carefully exploring and discussing issues we had the first formal EASPD General Assembly. Colleagues from Ireland, Belgium, the Netherlands and Austria agreed to give it a try. Afterwards we had a meeting with Mr Pádraig Flynn, European Commissioner for DG5 (later DG Employment and Social affairs). Mr Flynn officially launched EASPD, the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities. An interesting little detail was the presence at this first official meeting of Mr J. Wezeman, president of the very young European Disability Forum as observer. It announced in a way an intense process of trust building and future cooperation with disabled people’s organisations at European level.

As we moved office last summer, I had to restructure our archive and found back my 20 year old opening speech from the first EASPD General Assembly. It really was a “back to the future” experience. In my 20 year old opening speech I stressed the need for a shift from an “offer” to “demand” driven service provision; I stressed the importance of professional and managerial capacity building and last but not least I called for networking across sectors, leaving our social sector bubble. I also challenged the fact that we as service providers were not recognised as key stakeholders by the European institutions, not at Council of Europe level nor at the level of the European Union.

20 years later it seems fair to say that we have made a huge step forward.

EASPD is now a well-respected player working closely together with the European institutions and the United Nations. EASPD contributes to the work of the Committee of experts on the rights of persons with disabilities set up by the Council of Europe and has a permanent seat in the High Level Group on Disability of the European Union. We have excellent relations with the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and so many other bodies and structures. We’re a recognised partner at United Nationals level too.

The sometimes rather difficult relation with EDF and other DPOs in the past has turned into a relation of mutual respect and cooperation. Together with DPOs, EASPD is now an active promoter of co-production and stakeholder cooperation. EASPD also contributes significantly to the implementation of the UNCRPD, especially with regard to living in the community, inclusive education and employment. Moreover, we’re reaching out to different actors in society such as other public services, employers, universities, schools and local authorities. Indeed, building a more inclusive society is a shared responsibility. A few weeks ago a top level senior civil servant of the European Commission made my day stating that we’re seen as a bridge builder.

Ambitious and optimistic as we were those days about European cooperation, my speech ended by affirming that we will not only contribute to higher quality of services and inclusion of persons with disabilities, but also want to take part in the development of a social yet more united Europe. Indeed I still feel the thrill, the enthusiasm, the commitment of this very first GA... we would make a difference in Europe...I hope we did.

Today our sector is going through turbulent developments. Allow me to list the most important challenges for tomorrow. We’re recovering slowly from an economic crisis that came close to breaking the backbone of services in many countries. We have to cope with a huge increase in demand due to demographic change - including ageing - and other societal developments. Services should become increasingly an integral part of vibrant and lively communities, the expertise and know-how built last century should be brought into the community. Shortages in the workforce and the (re) training of staff are worrying. Can we convince the next generations that our sector is an interesting and worthwhile place to work? A shift in systems to fund services is observed; the famous triangle - authorities, providers, users - is put upside down. Moreover, authorities withdraw slowly from taking full responsibility for the provision of the much needed support provision. Last but not least the journey towards co-produced services we started has to become a common practice across the European continent.

Ten years from now the social services sector might look quite different from what we know now.

All this happens in an atmosphere of rising nationalism and decreasing “belief” in Europe. 70 years of peace in the EU is obviously not convincing enough for many politicians and opinion leaders. A clearly higher quality of life and increased human rights enjoyment for all thanks to European cooperation also seem to be an ignorable little side effect. But as said already, in EASPD I can still feel the thrill; every day we work towards a more inclusive and social Europe.

What can we learn from all this for tomorrow? For me the most important lesson is that if committed individuals join forces the sky is the limit. The most important barrier is not the system or the legal framework... it is our imagination. So let’s keep on dreaming about an inclusive and socially strong Europe, about co-production and human rights and about reaching out and leaving our silos. And equally important...let’s keep on searching for passionate individuals willing to embark on a journey before knowing where they will end up.

If we can dream it we can do it.