

## Support services as key players in the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights

### EASPD report on the European Semester and the European Pillar of Social Rights

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## Introduction

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In the framework of its ongoing monitoring of the European Semester process, EASPD has organised a number of exchanges with its national members across Europe to discuss challenges, progress and recommendations to EU policy makers on social care systems.

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The analysis at country level was done within the guiding framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the reform of support services was monitored throughout the key moments of the European Semester process: the publication of the Country reports, the National Reform Programmes and the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs).

In 2018 the European Commission argued that Europe is in a favourable economic and social situation, therefore, calling for “European (...) to fix its roof while the sun is shining”. This has led the European Commission to promote “a more forward-looking approach and focus on building the basis for sustainable, inclusive and long-term growth”, rather than a stricter focus on fiscal matters and the legacy of the crisis.

EASPD particularly welcomes the strong reference to use the European Semester as a tool to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights, launched in November 2017 by the European institutions. The Pillar is a compass for how social rights can be effectively delivered for citizens and is built upon 20 key Principles included in 3 Chapters: “Equal opportunities and access to the labour market”, “Fair working conditions” and “Social protection and inclusion”, which take into account economic and social considerations, the wide diversity of the situations in Europe and the changing realities on the ground.

Of the Pillar’s 20 principles, the following are strictly linked to the provision of high quality social services for their implementation:

- Principle 1 – Education, training and life-long learning, by supporting all people to have access to such opportunities
- Principle 2 – Gender Equality, by providing care and support to enable parents, often women, the choice to work if they wish to.
- Principle 3 – Equal Opportunities, by helping all people to access employment, social protection, education and access to goods and services.
- Principle 4 – Active support to employment, by providing personalised, continuous and consistent support to help disadvantaged people onto the labour market.
- Principle 5 – Secure and adaptable employment
- Principle 9 – Work-life balance, by providing care services to those who need it
- Principle 10 – Childcare and support to children, by providing care services to those who need it, as well as additional support for disadvantaged people
- Principle 17 – Inclusion of people with disabilities, by providing services that enable people with disabilities to participate in society and in the labour market



- Principle 18 – Long-term care, by providing quality long-term care services to people who need it.
- Principle 19 – Housing and assistance for the homeless, by providing support services for homeless people
- Principle 20 – Access to essential services, by helping disadvantaged people to access essential services.

This report highlights the main concerns of support service providers in the disability field at national level and includes key recommendations on how the European Union can further address challenges and issues through the European Semester process and the European Pillar of Social Rights.

## 1. National reports and recommendations to the EU

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In each of the countries listed below the exchanges took place with national experts discussing about one or more issues of specific concern for support provision and according to the relevant Principle(s) of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

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### 1.1 Austria

*Principle 4 – Active support to employment, by providing personalised, continuous and consistent support to help disadvantaged people onto the labour market.*

#### What are the main issues of support services?

The federal state of Austria, with its nine regions that are in charge of planning and budgeting services, is a complex landscape for people with disabilities to navigate. The decentralisation of services means that entitlements for persons with disabilities differ. For example, in healthcare matters, conditions are set at the federal level, but decisions are made in the regions. In employment matters, people with disabilities fall under different mechanisms depending on whether they are assessed as able or unable to work. Employment is the most highly regulated at the federal level under the Federal Disability Employment Act. Personal assistance to students is also a federal competence, but assistance at schools and in the workplace are regional competences. Decentralisation also means that data collection is also uneven. A number of people with disabilities live in institutions, and there is a severe lack of data on their situation in terms of access to services and other matters.

Austria is experimenting with old and new models of integrating people with disabilities into mainstream society through provision of special services. The current system of mainstreamed vocational counselling is relatively new and is being developed.

#### Recommendations to EU policy makers

- Scattered competencies and regionalisation require a stronger need for coordination which would enable regions to develop their own path in response to local needs and prevent a coherent approach from emerging.
- The nine regions responsible for legislation and funding of social services have a different understanding of what community-based services mean. Some of them are now replacing bigger institutions by smaller ones (e.g. institutions of 120 persons are transformed into 4 institutions for 30 persons). These new forms of institutionalisation need a stronger exchange of experience and a clear regulation about the possible use of structural funds.



## 1.2 Bulgaria

*Principle 18 – Long-term care, by providing quality long-term care services to people who need it.*

### What are the main issues of support services?

Within the last years, social services in Bulgaria have been developed quite successfully, increasing both their number and scope. The process of deinstitutionalisation (DI) of services for children is being completed, while an action plan has been adopted and a deinstitutionalisation process of the services for adults has been initiated as well. During this year, a very intense work on the development and adoption of new laws with the participation of [NASO](#)<sup>1</sup> has been done, and namely, the Law on Social Services and the Law on People with Disabilities. They are both expected to be adopted by the end of this year.

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The main issues are related to the **low standards and insufficient funding of the current services** as well as the need of improving the quality of social services in general. There is a great shortage of services for personal support and home assistance. In addition, one of the greatest issues corresponds to the very low salaries of the staff of social services. Due to a series of specific characteristics of the wage funding of social service employees, which forms part of the common funding standards of social services, as well as the lack of an increase in the last years, the majority of the staff, regardless of their position and education, receives the minimum wage set in Bulgaria or a salary close to it, which is 510 BGN (around 260 EUR) per month at the moment. Because of this, many employees leave the social services sector and move to other sectors, such as the education sector, where the salaries are higher. This problem is well-known in Bulgaria and it has been brought up by many interested parties, however, the state has not managed to solve it yet. Hence, there is a great risk that the social services are left without sufficient workforce.

Another issue is represented by the **lack of intermediary services and job opportunities for persons with disabilities** resulting in an increase of the unemployment rate for them. Moreover, there is still a lack of measures, decisions and activities stimulating and motivating employers to hire persons with disabilities.

### What are the main investment needs of support services?

- There is a pressing need to develop human resources within the social service sector.
- The funding standards for the maintenance and development of social services should be increased, including for training and qualification of the staff, in order to improve the quality of support services and be able to meet the principles of support of the UNCRPD.

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<sup>1</sup> National Alliance for Social Responsibility (NASO)



## Recommendations to EU policy makers

- The EU should work towards adopting minimum standards and requirements to be fulfilled in terms of quality of life for the workforce of social services as well as for the quality of life outcomes of the beneficiaries of the services. Besides guidelines on these types of standards, funding should be provided to support the implementation of new service development.
- Support national policy makers to adopt effective texts of new legislation as soon as possible, in order to put into practice and adequately address the current issues.

### 1.3 Finland

*Principle 1 - Education, training and life-long learning, by supporting all people to have access to such opportunities*

#### What are the main issues of support services?

##### Education

The Finnish welfare system follows the Nordic model where most services are funded and provided publicly, and this can be seen also in disability services. Disability services are the responsibility of local authorities, although part of the funding comes from central government in the form of central grants and a small share from service users. While the focus of disability policy is to promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities in mainstream education, social and health care and not on the provision of special care, however, in practice, receiving all these services may be complicated, depending on the municipality, as different municipalities have different procedures and criteria for services.

By law everyone has compulsory education for 9 years so people with disabilities have access to school. Mainstreaming and inclusion are on paper and by law in much better stage as when looking at the practice. Practicalities are still segregating. When children have more severe behavioural issues, the solution might be school at home which is, in terms of learning, a very bad solution. In some regions, children with severe disabilities have to move to segregated settings in order to go to school; at the moment, around 100 children with intellectual disabilities are still living in institutional settings and are getting education there.

In the schools the future of pupils with disability is not planned carefully. There are not enough vocational training possibilities and mainstream vocational schools have severe problems with inclusion.

After school people often end up working in sheltered workshops, with little lifelong learning opportunities.

## Recommendations to EU policy makers

- There are some good initiatives to share knowledge, but they are not widespread enough.



- More information about special needs of children with disabilities should be provided to the teachers.
- Attitudes don't change as people don't feel comfortable yet in mainstream schools, more investment in training programmes for all should be pursued.
- Reviews of the implementation of law and policy and measures to improve this should be carried out.

*Principle 17 – Inclusion of people with disabilities, by providing services that enable people with disabilities to participate in society and in the labour market*

### **What are the main issues of support services?**

Very few persons with intellectual disabilities are working in the open labour market with a full salary position. In Finland there is a system in which people with disabilities working in the open labour market are included in special social schemes and they are thus getting only allowances, not a salary.

The main issues hindering access to employment are:

- High unemployment rate in society;
- Complicated administration systems which act as barriers for persons with disabilities (e.g. to combine social benefits with salaries, rules of transport services, etc.);
- Changes in society, from industrial to service orientation, are not adapting fully to persons with support needs;
- Attitudes not embedding a human rights approach.

### **Recommendations to EU policy makers**

- There is some support for employers to hire disadvantaged groups, but access to support and subsidiaries should be simplified as there are still very burdensome procedures
- The number and availability of job coaches should be increased
- Support systems should be more flexible and accessible
- Benefit traps should be identified and overcome with incentives to be placed in the open labour market.

*Principle 18 – Long-term care, by providing quality long-term care services to people who need it.*

### **What are the main issues of support services?**

People and the families don't have enough control over the services they receive and/or they need. One great barrier in Finland is represented by public procurement procedures which tend to assign contracts to for-profit organisations which are less rooted in the community and do not guarantee the same quality standards as non-profit organisations.



Services are still often institutionalised and even services in the community are not always supporting inclusion in society. Protective thinking and too many regulations are leading to the creation of smaller size institutions. Also, the approach within support settings is often institutional due to lack of human rights approach in line with the UNCRPD.

### Recommendations to EU policy makers

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- Increase and promote capacity building for people with disabilities and their families.
- More education is needed on the values and implementation of rights for persons with disabilities.
- Different forms of collaboration, including co-production and co-design should be implemented in social services.
- Freedom of choice promoting participation should be increased.

### 1.4 Greece

*Principle 1 - Education, training and life-long learning, by supporting all people to have access to such opportunities*

*Principle 17 – Inclusion of people with disabilities, by providing services that enable people with disabilities to participate in society and in the labour market*

#### What are the main issues of support services?

In Greece disability is often addressed as a taboo by both family members and society as a whole and there is a general lack of appropriate knowledge and expertise on different types of disabilities in order to plan and deliver appropriate and individualised support.

There is a lack of a comprehensive and holistic approach towards disability which prevents solutions.

The provision of support services in Greece is still determined by a very strong charity focus that hinders the transition towards the human rights approach of the UNCRPD.

The lack of funding hampers sustainability, long-term planning and overall results in cutbacks in the workforce while reducing the quality of services provided and thus the quality of life of the beneficiaries. Issues related to funding are also determined by delays in payments and by the reduction in disability benefits received by users following a reconsideration to a lower degree of their disability according to the social benefits scheme. The decrease in funding clearly creates a major gap in identifying and meeting the needs of individuals who should be given access to support systems to participate to society.

In terms of employment and social benefits, legislation was changed in order to prevent the loss of social benefits whenever persons with disabilities enter into employment; however, social benefits still



act as a barrier for the activation of people and overall benefits are used for survival needs and do not facilitate social inclusion due to lack of appropriate and accessible support services.

### Recommendations to EU policy makers

- There needs to be a stronger focus on persons with disabilities' rights where the provision of support is to be delivered by recognized professionals
- The geography of Greece, characterized by many inaccessible and remote rural areas, impose a need to create new support services which are currently inexistent in those areas

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*Principle 18 – Long-term care, by providing quality long-term care services to people who need it.*

### What are the main issues of support services?

The inclusion of children with disabilities into education is made difficult by the general lack of support in special educational needs which is not only absent, but also financially not made available. As a consequence, families wishing to integrate their children into their school system will have to face a substantial financial burden, moreover, professionals-special educational needs teachers who provide in-school support do not work within agreed quality frameworks.

Given the importance of carrying out inclusion strategies from the earliest stages of life, not only early childhood intervention services are needed, but also education plans to bring pupils with disabilities into the education system.

### Recommendations to EU policy makers

- Stigmatisation of disability is still very high in Greece, therefore awareness raising programmes are needed at all levels.
- The education system needs to be equipped with properly trained teachers for students with special education needs.
- The educational programmes should be designed to incorporate skills and competences usable in the labour market; however ad hoc legislation should be adopted to facilitate access and retention in work environments via adequate support systems.
- The development of social enterprises and the inclusion of persons with these disabilities within these models is not possible as legal frameworks are not sufficiently developed in this regard.

## 1.5 Romania

*Principle 1 - Education, training and life-long learning, by supporting all people to have access to such opportunities*



### What are the main issues of support services?

The right to inclusive education although officially recognised by the Constitution of Romania and the Education Act<sup>2</sup>, is not fully achieved in Romania. There are currently important barriers for the admission of students with disabilities in mainstream schools in Romania.

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### What are the main investment needs of support services?

- **High rates of students with disabilities enrolled in special schools or not attending any form of education.** According to the statistics provided by the Centre of Inclusive Education in Romania<sup>3</sup>, there are around 60 000 children with disabilities of school age. The official statistics report 12 000 students with disabilities as enrolled in special schools while field research shows that this figure is three times higher – around 31 500 students. Around 17 900 children of school age are not enrolled in any form of education.
- **Lack of adapted and flexible educational programmes to fit the needs of all learners:** the mainstream educational system is predominately focused on competitiveness with grades being the base of admission in secondary schools, high schools and universities. The evaluation systems are focused on performance and results/grade and not on social and educational inclusion.
- **Lack of sufficient training and resources for teachers in mainstream schools to support the needs of all learners.** In Romania, although the compulsory educational system is free of charge, additional support tools which may be needed for persons with disabilities are often paid by parents.
- **Attitudinal issues** from some educational staff which discourage the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools or the enrolment of children with severe disabilities in special schools.

### Recommendations to EU policy makers

- The national legislation should be adapted to include concrete measures and actions plans for the full implementation of inclusive education.
- The right of persons of disabilities to inclusive education should be based on guaranteeing equal opportunities. Educational curricula, programmes and evaluation mechanisms should be based on the premise that each person is unique and may have specific needs and should foster opportunities for formal and non-formal education.
- Schools should accommodate individuals living in their communities, including those with disabilities. Additional support tools/mechanisms to aid their full inclusion in the educational programmes should be provided free of charge to all learners.

<sup>2</sup> <https://legestart.ro/legea-educatiei-actualizata/>

<sup>3</sup> [http://educatieincludiva.info/scrisoare\\_deschisa](http://educatieincludiva.info/scrisoare_deschisa)



- Access for adults with disabilities to life-long learning educational programmes should be guaranteed and further developed. There are currently very few opportunities for adult persons with disabilities to access educational programmes which could better prepare them to acquire the skills they need to access the labour market.
- Better life-long training of educational staff at all levels (teachers, support teachers, managers) is essential to ensure positive attitudinal changes towards the full inclusion of students with disabilities and proper educational measures to meet the needs of all learners.
- Students with disabilities and their parents should be actively involved in the educational processes together with the educational staff.

## 1.6 Spain and Portugal<sup>4</sup>

*Principle 18 – Long-term care, by providing quality long-term care services to people who need it.*

### What are the main issues of support services?

The landscape of support service delivery is facing multiple challenges due to the change of paradigm brought by the UNCRPD. Uncertainty regarding implementation strategies is high in local governments policy decisions, but even more for support service providers. Support service providers have to address changing socioeconomic environments strongly requesting more conceptual answers and internal organisational transformations. Many decision-makers within support service providers - whose core business is still based on care in special institutions for closely defined client groups - fear “transitional costs” when shifting their operational profile towards integrated and inclusive community-based services. Thus, they find themselves ‘stuck in the middle’ between established routines and requested but untaken innovative steps for inclusion and integration of their activities in local service systems.

Challenges for the sector can be summed up in the following subcategories

- Demographic challenges regarding not only ageing, but also the promotion of personal autonomy. This requires not only cooperation but also coordination across sectors (e.g. health services and support for early intervention and prevention).
- De-institutionalisation as a challenge concerning the change and redirection of how resources are designed, assigned and used as public funding is still widely used in segregating type of

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<sup>4</sup> The messages provided below were discussed during a cross-border regional provider forum organised by EASPD, hence the themes addressed were those of common interest to both Spain and Portugal, in particular for what concerns their respective border regions.



settings. The needed shift of power from the providers to the individuals still needs to be fully understood and implemented.

- Infrastructure: there is a lack of capacity to transform existing infrastructure and, as a result, institutions are often the only available option.
- There is a need for soft loans for public investment in support services.
- General awareness raising at all levels to introduce the concept of individual autonomy in all policies, strategic planning aimed at autonomy of the users and individualisation of the support, information about the UNCRPD values.
- Coordination and cooperation between the different competency levels (local/regional/national/European) and amongst different subnational entities in the same country.
- More public-private cooperation but paying attention to privatization trends affecting the quality of services.
- Training and capacity building to adopt innovation providing a space for support services to train and re-train themselves. Many organisations are still operating under difficult financial conditions which allow them only to focus on a survival model which makes thinking ahead in terms of innovation very difficult.

### What are the main investment needs of support services?

- The profile of users is changing as the profile of Europe's population ages, including person with disabilities themselves. **Support services initially designed for persons with disabilities are now being delivered to the elderly.** Both groups face common challenges and require joint approaches and solutions to develop truly community-based services.
- Community development implies a **close cooperation of support providers with local and regional authorities.** Local and regional authorities in the EU face the challenge to incorporate new approaches coming from UNCRPD in their administrative and territorial structures across many regional/local policy areas. This requires policies coordination for accessibility of the built environment and the development of effective case-management and systematic planning of regional/local service systems. The coordination and cooperation is even more urgent in cross border areas. And if this has to be done in rural or sparsely populated areas, specific measures need to be taken in order to ensure the adequacy and efficiency of the service delivery system.

### Recommendations to EU policy makers

- Special attention in the development of policies should be paid to rural and sparsely populated areas.

- Promote the use of flexible legal frameworks allowing for transition, adaptation and testing, leading to innovation in services.
- Bringing closer together higher education institutions, service providers and local/regional authorities to accelerate innovation in support services.
- Bring local authorities together and improve cooperation between them.
- Development of one stop services at local level to improve coordination and cooperation.

## 1.7 Slovakia

*Principle 17 – Inclusion of people with disabilities, by providing services that enable people with disabilities to participate in society and in the labour market*

### What are the main issues of support services?

Employment support in Slovakia is provided through the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (Labour Office), the state administration body. The Labour Office is the largest intermediary body of the European Social Fund (ESF). National projects funded by ESF are mostly focused on passive policies instead of activating measures. Only few resources are used to finance public employment services and little to nothing is used to fund training.

There is generally a lack of an integrated approach to tackle unemployment and each target group is dealt with in a separate way with little individualised type of support.

Ten years-ago there was a successful project of developing NGO Agencies of Supported employment services, however, the financing was stopped by the government assuming the Labour Office is providing this service and disregarding the know-how and expertise built by the NGOs.

### Recommendations to EU policy makers

- Long-term unemployment is difficult to solve due to inappropriate links between the education system and the labour market, regional differences or inadequate infrastructure. Effective synergies between these sectors should be sought and implemented.
- Promote the implementation of supported employment to facilitate access to the open labour market for persons with disabilities.

*Principle 18 – Long-term care, by providing quality long-term care services to people who need it.*

Despite all the declared support to the process of deinstitutionalisation in Slovakia (via legislative frameworks and strategic documents) the first quarter of 2018 shows that the process has practically not started yet. There seems to be no clear vision on how to effectively implement the process and the latest Amendment to the Social Services Act has brought about many significant changes in funding



of social services that have actually led to strengthened support of institutional services against community-based and ambulatory services.

### Recommendations to EU policy makers

- To allow effective individualised support, funding of support services should be centred on the individual and directed into community-based services.
- There is a need for a shift of thinking to de facto allow the development of community-based care services, rather than investing into institutional and segregating type of settings. Funding instruments should be tailored to the former and not the latter.
- Awareness-raising and technical expertise is needed at all levels to implement deinstitutionalisation strategies under a holistic approach.
- It is essential to promote a shift of resources to fully support the deinstitutionalisation process which is currently mainly financed via projects funded through the European Structural and Investment Funds.
- More investments into social housing, where reasonable accommodation can be provided, should be pursued.
- There is a need to establish closer cooperation across sectors to better support persons with disabilities and their families (e.g. with health care system, educational system, employment system, social insurance system etc.).



## Conclusions

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With its new strategy 2018-2021 - Commit! Delivering the support services of Tomorrow - EASPD is seeking the active engagement of all actors in society to ensure the rights set out in the UNCRPD become a reality for persons with disabilities:

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- support services should be built around the needs of the individual and developed, managed and monitored in a co-produced way
- authorities should remain responsible for the provision of adequate funding to ensure the support delivered is of a quantity and quality accessible and is effective in promoting equality of opportunity for all persons with disabilities.

The research and the exchanges with the EASPD members show that the provision of support services indicates big differences not only across countries in Europe, but even between different regions in the same country. Overall, the transition and the development of community-based care services faces many obstacles with concrete risks of re-institutionalisation and fragmentation of society.

Full inclusion means being active citizens in all fields of life: social, family and love life, exercise self-determination, have the right to an adequate income, to make decisions, to accessible and affordable transportation and to accessibility where needed. Only when adequate, accessible, affordable and adaptable support systems will be provided will these rights be fully enjoyed.

The delivery of high quality and innovative support systems requires a focus on quality of life and process indicators, considering the development and provision of support services as an investment and not as a cost. Many organisations are still operating under difficult financial conditions which allow them only to focus on a survival model, making the thinking ahead towards innovation in service provision very difficult. New support models should be jointly defined by support providers, users and authorities and implementation and delivery should equally take into consideration all relevant actors.

EASPD will continue to monitor closely all developments concerning social care reforms and innovation in the disability field through the European Semester process with particular focus on the European Pillar of Social Rights implementation, seeking active cooperation with its members and the EU institutions.



## EASPD

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[EASPD](#) (European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities) is a European NGO network representing over 15.000 social and health support provider organisations across Europe and across disabilities, working towards the promotion of equal opportunities for persons with disabilities through effective and high-quality service systems.

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EASPD bases the development of social services on the human rights framework provided by the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (UNCRPD). EASPD is accredited to the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the UNCRPD has become the core of EASPD's policy strategy.

## Contacts

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