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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject:	Advancing disability rights in the EU: challenges, progress and future directions
	- <i>Exchange of views</i>

Delegations will find attached a Presidency steering note on the above subject, with a view to the exchange of views at the Council (EPSCO) on 17 October 2025.

Advancing disability rights in the EU: challenges, progress, and future directions

Introduction

The European Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, equality, and respect for fundamental rights. At a time when these values are increasingly questioned and contested in many parts of the world, the European Union remains a steadfast advocate for inclusion, equality, and the protection of human rights.

Promoting non-discrimination and equal opportunities for all—including for persons with disabilities—is not only integral to sustaining our core values but is also essential for fostering inclusive growth and strengthening the long-term competitiveness and resilience of our economy. An inclusive society benefits everyone and contributes to a more innovative, cohesive, and productive Union. This being so, fully realising the potential of persons with disabilities is not only a moral responsibility but also a social and economic imperative.

In light of these considerations, it remains essential to advance the rights of persons with disabilities across all policy areas and to ensure the effective implementation of the EU's commitments as set out below.

Context

The **Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030** provides a comprehensive policy framework to advance the rights of persons with disabilities. Adopted in 2021, the Strategy supports the full implementation of the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)**, to which the EU and all Member States are parties. It reflects the principles set out in the **European Pillar of Social Rights**, particularly Principle 3 (equal opportunities) and Principle 17 (inclusion of persons with disabilities).

Several flagship initiatives have been launched at the EU level under the Strategy, including:

- The **European Disability Card Directive**, which aims to promote the freedom of movement of persons with disabilities by granting equal access to special conditions and preferential treatment offered to persons with disabilities across the EU;
- The **Disability Platform**, providing a forum for cooperation and the exchange of best practice between Member States, civil society and EU institutions in the field of disability;
- **AccessibleEU**, a resource centre facilitating the sharing of information and examples of good practice on accessibility across sectors; and
- **Guidance on independent living and inclusion in the community of persons with disabilities in the context of EU funding**, including recommendations for improvements in community-based support and deinstitutionalisation.

Challenges

While these efforts constitute significant progress, key barriers persist. Persons with disabilities across the European Union continue to encounter structural and widespread barriers and discrimination across various spheres of life — including education, employment, access to services, and independent living. Self-reported experiences of discrimination have increased over the past five years in several Member States (Eurobarometer¹). In parallel, the number of persons with disabilities residing in institutional settings has not decreased significantly or has in some cases even increased over the past decade (Eurofound²), signalling persistent barriers to the realisation of inclusive and accessible community-based support systems. Legal barriers persist for some persons with disabilities who are often restricted in or deprived of their legal capacity. Despite progress achieved, ensuring effective access to information, products and services remains a challenge. Restrictions to legal capacity, as well as limited accessibility, are barriers for the participation of persons with disabilities in the democratic process.

Moreover, persons with disabilities remain significantly underrepresented in the labour market: the disability employment gap reached 24 percentage points in 2024 with approximately 51% of persons with disabilities aged 20-64 being employed compared to 75% of persons without disabilities (Social Scoreboard). In addition, persons with disabilities continue to face a considerably higher risk of poverty or social exclusion compared to persons without disabilities (Eurostat, EU-SILC).

¹ Special Eurobarometer 535 April-May 2023 Discrimination in the European Union, [Discrimination in the European Union - December 2023 - - Eurobarometer survey](#)

² Eurofound (2024), Paths towards independent living and social inclusion in Europe, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

Besides persistent challenges in practice, gaps also remain in EU anti-discrimination legislation, including on the grounds of disability. The ongoing negotiations on the proposed **Horizontal Equal Treatment Directive**, presented in 2008, continue to be hindered by the challenge of meeting the unanimity requirement.

Objective of the exchange of views

These challenges underscore the need for strengthened policy implementation and reforms at EU and national level, as well as for continuous dialogue at the political level. This is especially important at the present time, as 2025 marks the midpoint in the implementation of the Strategy. Now is the right moment to assess progress and accelerate action.

Ministers are therefore invited to take stock of progress made during the first half (2021-2025) of the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030, to identify progress and remaining barriers, and to discuss possible actions for advancing the rights of persons with disabilities. These insights should serve as input for the second half of the Strategy, supporting continued efforts to advance the work in this important policy area at both EU and national levels.

Against this background, Ministers are invited to respond to the following questions:

1. *In your view, what are the most important measures and policy tools to further promote the rights of persons with disabilities? In which areas do challenges remain most pressing?*
2. *What should be the key priorities for the second half (2025–2030) of the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities? How can the Strategy more effectively support national reforms and the implementation of disability-related legislation and policies?*
