



European
Commission

EUROPEAN DAY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

28-29 NOVEMBER 2024



#EDPD2024
#EUDisabilityRights
#UnionOfEquality
#EUAccessCity

Social Europe



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 28 and 29 November 2024, the European Commission, in partnership with the European Disability Forum (EDF), hosted its annual conference in Brussels to celebrate the European Day of Persons with Disabilities (EDPD). This 2024 edition was marked by reflections on the **achievements of the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030**, discussions on the future steps to strengthen its implementation, and a focus on **independent living** and **inclusive and accessible cities**, while celebrating the **Access City Award's 15th anniversary**. The conference gathered over 450 policymakers, experts, civil society representatives, and persons with disabilities to discuss these key topics.

Several policy solutions and initiatives were discussed to remove barriers and ensure persons with disabilities fully access fundamental rights and freedoms in the EU. The conference provided an opportunity to exchange knowledge and ideas on how different stakeholders can work together towards implementing disability rights at EU level through the EU Disability Strategy and the next steps.

This report summarises the key messages and challenges highlighted during the European Day of Persons with Disabilities 2024 conference (EDPD2024) by the different speakers.

The European Day of Persons with Disabilities 2024 conference (EDPD2024) brought together policymakers, high-level experts, and civil society representatives from Member States to discuss persistent challenges faced by persons with disabilities across the EU. The first day of the conference focused on:

- **the future of the [EU's Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030](#)** to review the results achieved so far and discuss expectations for the years ahead.
- **advancing the right to independent living**, coinciding with the European Commission's recent adoption of the [Guidance on independent living and inclusion in the community of persons with disabilities in the context of EU funding](#). This guidance provides practical recommendations to Member States on the use of EU funding to accelerate the transition from institutional care to community-based services and independent living for persons with disabilities.

During the second day of the conference, the **15th anniversary of the [Access City Award \(ACA\)](#) was held**, and discussions centred around the significance of accessibility in urban spaces and the role of digitalization in shaping more inclusive cities. Past winner cities were also invited to share how the award transformed their cities and benefitted residents and visitors with disabilities and others. Additionally, there were discussions about the accessibility challenges persons with disabilities still face in their daily life and while traveling across Europe.

The **EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030** is the policy framework for the European Commission to implement the [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(UNCRPD\)](#). It put forward an **ambitious set of actions and flagship initiatives in various domains to do so**. The objective of this Strategy is to progress towards ensuring that all persons with disabilities in Europe enjoy their human rights and can participate on an equal basis with others in society and economy. Over the last couple of years, the **European Commission delivered on many actions** under the Strategy, including the [Disability Platform](#), the [Disability Employment Package](#), the European Commission's renewed [Human Resource strategy](#), [AccessibleEU](#), the [European Disability Card and the European Parking Card](#), and the [Guidance on independent living](#) among others. Participants of the conference expects the European Commission to:

- take stock of the progress made over the past four years, assessing the areas where challenges and barriers still exist and publish a progress report on the implementation of the Strategy;
- complete the remaining flagship initiative, a framework for Social Services of Excellence for persons with disabilities by 2025;
- ensure the implementation of the already launched initiatives to achieve tangible impact on the lives of persons with disabilities;
- come up with new actions and flagship initiatives until 2030 to close remaining equality gaps for persons with disabilities in Europe.

During the EDPD2024, the Access City Award 2025 ceremony took place with the participation of Helena Dalli, Commissioner for Equality. The following European cities were rewarded for their outstanding efforts to become more accessible and inclusive for persons with disabilities:

- First prize: **Vienna** (Austria)
- Second prize: **Nuremberg** (Germany)
- Third prize: **Cartagena** (Spain)
- Special Mention for Accessible Sport Infrastructure: **Nuremberg** (Germany)
- Special Mention for Role Model on Built Environment and Transport: **Borås** (Sweden).

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACA	Access City Award
AI	Artificial Intelligence
COP	Community of Practice
DG EMPL	Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
EASPD	European Association of Services Providers for Persons with Disabilities
EDC	European Disability Card
EDPD	European Day of Persons with Disabilities
EDF	European Disability Forum
EESC	European Economic and Social Committee
EP	European Parliament
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
EUD	European Union of the Deaf
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
MS	Member State
OPD	Organization of Persons with Disabilities
UN	United Nations
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

DAY 1 - OPENING SESSION



Speakers :

Welcoming by **Katarina Ivankovic-Knezevic**, Director for Social Rights and Inclusion, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission

Yannis Vardakastanis, President, European Disability Forum (EDF)

Ádám Kósa, Hungarian State Secretary in charge of Disability Policy, Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Katarina Ivankovic-Knezevic, Director for Social Rights and Inclusion at DG EMPL of the European Commission, warmly welcomed participants, and emphasized the importance of the annual EDPD conference as a platform for sharing ideas, concerns, and proposals for the future on the rights of persons with disabilities. Katarina Ivankovic-Knezevic reflected on several key achievements of the [EU's Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030](#). She applauded the [Disability Platform](#) as a flagship initiative, providing a valuable forum for exchanging ideas and implementing actions. The [Disability Employment Package](#) was another significant milestone, with nearly finalized guidelines aimed at improving employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. However, she emphasised that **the work is far from complete**, urging participants to help ensure these guide-lines reach local levels and lead to tangible increases in their employment rates.

Another major achievement was the adoption of the Directives establishing [the European Disability Card and European Parking Card for persons with disabilities](#), serving as a **proof of disability status across all EU countries when accessing a wide range of services**. These cards will provide cardholders equal access to special conditions and preferential treatments offered to persons with disabilities anywhere in the EU. Another notable milestone was the publication of a [Guidance on independent living and inclusion in the community of persons with disabilities in the context of EU funding](#), which provides practical recommendations to Member States on the use of EU funding to accelerate the transition from institutional care to community-based services and independent living for persons with disabilities. Katarina Ivankovic-Knezevic described these initiatives as critical steps for persons with disabilities' empowerment.

and promoting their independent living and free movement across the EU. She also highlighted the success of the [AccessibleEU Centre](#) which has organized since 2021 over 200 events, published guides, and developed a digital library with best practices and references on accessibility. These efforts aim to support the application of accessibility rules and in particular the **European Accessibility Act**, which will come into force in June 2025, ensuring more accessible products and services are available across the market.

Looking ahead, Katarina Ivankovic-Knezevic mentioned the **pending Framework on Social Services**, which is being developed to improve service delivery for persons with disabilities and to enhance the attractiveness of jobs in this area including through upskilling and reskilling of service providers. This initiative aligns with upcoming priorities, including an Anti-Poverty Strategy and the issue of housing, and is expected to be completed in 2025. Last year was the first time the EU as a regional integration body presented a candidate to a United Nations Treaty body. The election of Inmaculada Placencia Porrero, senior expert at the European Commission, to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is a significant recognition of the EU's leadership in disability rights. Finally, Katarina Ivankovic-Knezevic thanked her colleagues and the Commission's partners, particularly the European Disability Forum, for their dedication and collaboration to advance the rights of persons with disabilities.

Ioannis Vardakastanis, President of the European Disability Forum (EDF), highlighted the challenges and opportunities faced by the disability movement in a **rapidly changing political and global landscape**. Ioannis Vardakastanis began by emphasizing the importance of the EDPD2024 amidst increasing uncertainties, such as the growing political forces in the European Parliament that challenge the EU's commitment to equality and social policies. In this context, **EDF is ready to collaborate with Commissioner Hadja Lahbib** to ensure that equality policies remain a priority. He noted, however, the shift in priorities within the new College of Commissioners, where the previously dedicated portfolio for equality has been merged with crisis management and preparedness.

Ioannis Vardakastanis called for the **establishment of new flagship initiatives under the EU Disability Strategy 2021-2030** over the next five years to address pressing issues, including **removing barriers to labour market participation** for persons with disabilities, **ending forced sterilization** of women and girls with disabilities, **preventing institutionalization**, and **promoting inclusive communities**. He underscored that the motto "nothing about us without us" is not merely a slogan but a fundamental right and a pathway to success, advocating for the meaningful involvement of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in shaping policies.

Ioannis Vardakastanis addressed the global dimension of disability advocacy, highlighting the disproportionate impact of the climate emergency on persons with disabilities, who are often the last to be informed or evacuated during natural disasters (e.g. recent wildfires and floods in Europe). Ioannis Vardakastanis expressed solidarity to persons with disabilities in conflict-affected regions, such as Ukraine, Palestine, and Lebanon, and called for the EU to continue its role in promoting inclusive development, peace, and humanitarian action. Ioannis Vardakastanis was optimistic about the potential for progress during the new mandate of the European Commission. However, he warned that without adequate resources and political will, there is a risk of stagnation or regression in disability rights. He concluded with a call for collective action to ensure a future where no one is left behind.

Ádám Kósa, State Secretary for Disability Policy, on behalf of the outgoing Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, outlined Hungary's approach to disability policy during its presidency of the EU. Ádám Kósa, speaking from his perspective as a person with a disability, emphasized the importance of the principle **«for, with, and by persons with disabilities» in all areas of life**. Reflecting on his work as a former MEP, he highlighted the significance of participating in decision-making processes and proving that politicians with disabilities can represent their constituents as effectively as anyone else.

Ádám Kósa noted the Hungarian government's commitment to disability rights, as demonstrated by the creation of a new state secretary for disability policy within the Ministry of Interior. A key priority for Hungary has been **ensuring that everyone, including persons with disabilities, has access to employment and the opportunity to live a decent life**. Recent initiatives include employment support programs, tax

benefits, and the [«You Are Valued!» program](#), which promotes the integration of persons with disabilities into the workforce and emphasizes their role as active consumers in the economy.

Hungary's presidency has been instrumental in the development of **Council Conclusions on the employment of persons with disabilities in the open labour market**, focusing on reasonable accommodation and rehabilitation. The broader Council Conclusions addressing the shortage of skilled workers are also relevant for persons with disabilities. Ádám Kósa also underscored the importance of **recognizing national sign languages as official EU languages**, advocating for initiatives such as a European Day of Sign Languages. With 29 sign languages across the EU, in addition to the 24 official languages, he supports the efforts of the European Union of the Deaf (EUD) to promote inclusivity in this area. On behalf of the outgoing Hungarian presidency, Ádám Kósa reaffirmed his country's commitment to advancing the rights and opportunities of persons with disabilities and **sharing experiences and best practices** within the wider European community.

PANEL 1: THE STRATEGY FOR THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES MAKING THE SECOND PHASE A SUCCESS



Moderator: **Humberto Insolera**, Executive Committee member, European Disability Forum

Speakers :

Lucie Davoine, Acting Head of Disability Unit, DG EMPL, European Commission

Karine Lalieux, Belgian Minister of Pensions and Social Integration, in charge of Persons with Disabilities, Poverty Reduction and Beliris

Catherine Naughton, Director of the European Disability Forum (EDF)

Christophe Lefèvre, President of the Permanent Group on Disability Rights, European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

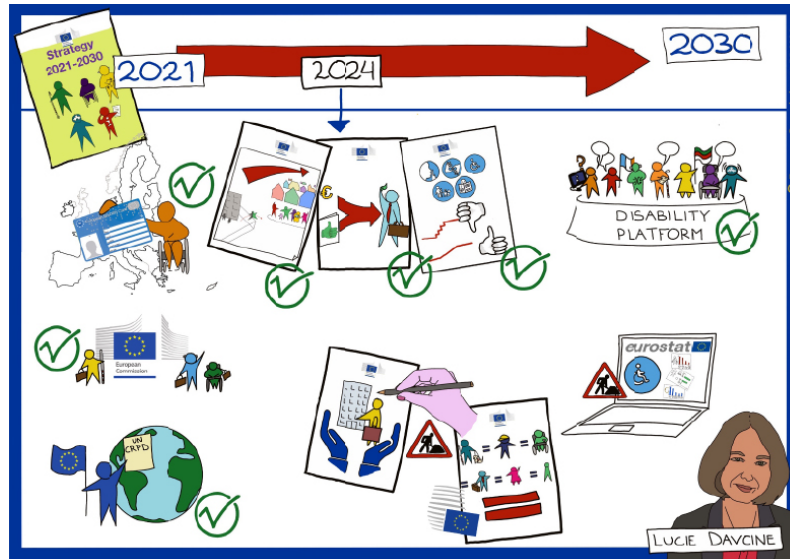
Lucie Davoine, Acting Head of Disability Unit, DG EMPL, European Commission, emphasised the **European Commission's ongoing commitment to promoting the rights of persons with disabilities** through its Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030. The strategy serves as a framework for ensuring that persons with disabilities can fully enjoy their rights on an equal basis with others, in line with the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(UNCRPD\)](#), the [Charter of Fundamental Rights](#), and the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#). It outlines 64 main actions, including seven flagship initiatives, for implementation by the Commission while also recommending actions for Member States.

As the strategy reaches its halfway point, the Commission has conducted an extensive consultation to evaluate progress, identify advancements, and recognize challenges. The **forthcoming progress report** will highlight successes, address shortcomings, and guide the next phase of implementation. The following achievements and challenges can be identified across the strategy:

- 1. Accessibility:** The Commission has continued to support Member States in the transposition of the European Accessibility Act (EAA), which will become applicable as of 28 June 2025, through informal transposition meetings with the national contact points. Work is under-way with the European Standardisation Organisation to revise the current accessibility standards at EU level and develop new ones, to facilitate the implementation of the EAA. AccessibleEU has continued supporting the implementation of accessibility rules through workshops, guidelines, etc.
- 2. EU Rights:** The Commission is advancing the implementation of the European Disability Card and the European Parking Card for persons with disabilities, focusing on both physical and digital formats. Delegated and implementing acts are being developed in consultation with civil society organizations.
- 3. Decent Quality of Life and Independent Living:** The Commission has published a guidance on independent living and inclusion in the community. Efforts are underway to develop the Framework for Social Services of Excellence for persons with disabilities, to accelerate the transition from institutional care to community-based services and independent living for persons with disabilities. Synergies with the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) Community of Practice (COP) on Social Inclusion, are being explored, to promote the use of ESF+ for the implementation of the Framework.
- 4. Employment:** The Disability Employment Package has been rolled out to address the persistent employment gap for persons with disabilities. While some Member States have set quantitative targets, further efforts are needed to increase participation, including engaging local stakeholders to adopt guidelines and practices.
- 5. External Actions:** The EU is strengthening its global role in supporting the implementation of the UNCRPD, promoting social inclusion in international relations and funding programs and supporting candidate countries on their disability and accessibility efforts.
- 6. Governance and efficient Delivery:** The Commission collaborates with EU institutions, Member States, and disability organizations through platforms like the Disability Platform, which facilitates policy discussions and EU-level initiatives.
- 7. Measuring Progress and awareness-raising:** Efforts have improved data collection and presentation, but further development of EU disability statistics is needed to support policymaking. Eurostat is working on expanding the online publication of disability statistics and addressing data limitations.

The Commission also aims to lead by example by promoting diversity and inclusion in its workforce and ensuring workplace accessibility, as part of the renewed Human Resources Strategy.

Despite progress, continued efforts and collaboration with stakeholders are needed to fully achieve the strategy's objectives.



Karine Lalieux, Belgian Minister of Pensions and Social Integration, in charge of Persons with Disabilities, Poverty Reduction and Beliris, emphasized the importance of continuing the implementation of the European Disability Strategy 2021-2030 and highlighted the Belgian Presidency's focus on disability as a priority issue. The Belgian Presidency developed [La Hulpe Declaration](#), which was signed by 25 EU Member States, the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee, and social partners. This declaration calls for an ambitious second phase of the strategy. A high-level conference was organized in March 2024 to discuss the future of the strategy, bringing together the European Disability Platform, civil society, Member States, and European institutions to emphasize the strategy's role in implementing the UNCRPD.

The discussions at the conference stressed the **need for the European Commission to define an ambitious second phase of the strategy**. While progress has been made, significant gaps remain in guaranteeing the rights of persons with disabilities, particularly in employment. Minister Lalieux mentioned much-needed inclusive measures to address employment gaps, especially for women and young people with disabilities. All stakeholders, including the private and public sectors and social partners, must be involved in creating policies that integrate the needs of persons with disabilities. Data collection and analysis must also improve to provide detailed insights, such as disaggregation by gender, type of disability, and activity.

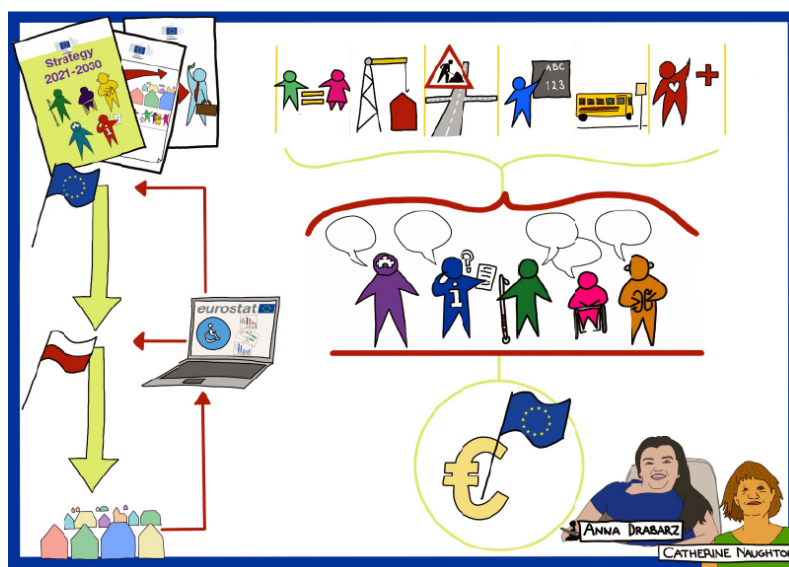
Promoting accessibility within the single market was another major theme, with discussions on ensuring goods and services are accessible to persons with disabilities. Additionally, **the implementation of existing legislative** (e.g. European Disability Card, Accessibility Act) **and non-legislative initiatives**, and **collaboration between Member States** through **experience-sharing and peer reviews** are of key importance. Belgium plans to propose a peer review for 2025 to strengthen these efforts. Mainstreaming disability in all EU policies and programs is identified as essential and must be prioritized in the multiannual financial framework and the Council's work. The Belgian Presidency proposed concrete measures to support this integration and called on future presidencies to build on these initiatives. Karine Lalieux concluded that the recently renewed European institutions should reflect on these recommendations and continue advancing the ambitions of the strategy.



Catherine Naughton, Director of the European Disability Forum (EDF), read out a statement on behalf of Anna Drabarz (Polish Disability Forum). There are some important achievements of the first phase of the European Disability Strategy (2021–2024), however, many challenges persist. A new momentum is needed for the second phase. Strengthening the institutional framework is vital, requiring **horizontal and vertical coordination, clear accountability, and resource allocation**. Mainstreaming disability in all EU policies demands tools like impact assessments, cross-sectoral coordination, and better data collection. Structured dialogue and capacity building for organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) must be prioritized to improve civil society engagement.

Catherine Naughton underscored that flagship initiatives, while ambitious, have **yet to address systemic discrimination and structural barriers**. For example, the EDC is an important tool that promotes freedom of movement, but if facilities are inaccessible, persons with disabilities will not be able to enjoy the corresponding service. In the experiences of Anna Drabarz, Poland's national strategy has a clear vision, but lacks ambition and execution and this **gap between policy and implementation** is the main problem. Catherine Naughton pointed out the employment gap for persons with disabilities, highlighting wasted talent and denied dignity. Further challenges in the area of deinstitutionalisation include that while there are over 1 million persons with disabilities in segregating institutional care, funding mechanisms often reinforce these existing structures, instead of transforming them. The **need for transformative governance is critical**, requiring alignment with human rights obligations and improved support systems.

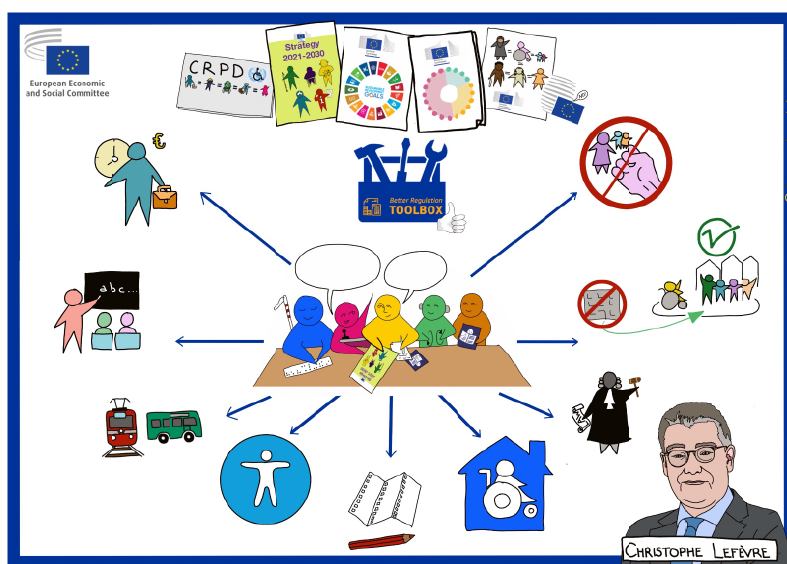
The success of the European Disability Strategy will be judged by its impact on people's lives, with an emphasis on ensuring EU funding drives genuine transformation. Catherine Naughton and Anna Drabarz called for **tangible actions over symbolic gestures**, stressing that the next phase must deliver real, measurable changes for persons with disabilities.



Christophe Lefèvre, President of the EESC Permanent Study Group on Disability Rights, highlighted some key points that should be considered in the coming years. He emphasized the importance of mainstreaming disability equality across all EU policies and the need for binding measures to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. He stressed that the next phase of the strategy must align with the UNCRPD, the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), and the European Pillar of Social Rights (especially Principle 17). Concerns about the [Convention of 13 January 2000 on the International Protection of Adults](#) (HCHH 2000 Protection of Adults Convention), which may conflict with the UNCRPD on issues like forced treatment, must be addressed with input from disability organizations.

Discrimination against persons with disabilities should be tackled comprehensively, including **the adoption of the long-delayed horizontal directive on equal treatment**. A **Disability Rights Guarantee**, similar to the [Youth Guarantee](#), should **provide support for employment, education, and training**. Specific initiatives addressing women and girls with disabilities are needed, focusing on violence prevention and reproductive health rights. The transition from institutional care to community-based living is essential, requiring clear definitions and guidelines. **Housing policies should integrate disability dimensions to ensure accessibility and affordability**.

AccessibleEU is recognized as a significant achievement, but it could evolve into an EU Agency to **monitor accessibility legislation**. Voting rights for persons with disabilities must be guaranteed in all Member States (in 14 Member States, persons with disabilities do not have full voting right), while access to justice requires reasonable accommodations and training for professionals. Employment initiatives should focus on both **increasing employment rates and ensuring quality jobs**. Inclusive education must be prioritized, with training for teachers in mainstream settings and reasonable accommodations for children with disabilities. The Council of the EU should appoint a disability coordinator and consider establishing a working group on disability. Social partners and civil society organizations are key to implementing the strategy. The **EESC is committed to supporting the next phase of the strategy** and working with the Commission and disability movement to achieve full participation for persons with disabilities.



SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

How can we crack systematic discrimination and improve employment opportunities for persons with disabilities?

Lucie Davoine emphasised that implementation is key, supported by clear guidelines set in the Disability Employment Package. Regional authorities and the Disability Platform will continue their efforts in this regard. **Christophe Lefèvre** added that involving persons with disabilities is essential, for example through having them to assess software or infrastructure projects. The **Belgian Federal Ministry** plans to use peer reviews more effectively for disability policies to facilitate the exchange of experiences among Member States.

Will the EU commit to addressing hearing loss as a societal issue?

Lucie Davoine explained that the different types of disabilities, including hearing loss, are addressed throughout each initiative put forward in the Strategy.

What is being done to ensure technology benefits persons with disabilities and mitigates risks, especially with AI?

Lucie Davoine said that AI related inclusion and ethical concerns are part of the Strategy. Assistive technology has been highlighted as an important issue in the strategy, and the Commission launched a survey among Disability Platform members on this issue. **Sara Janssens**, from the Belgian Federal Ministry, mentioned that the Belgian Presidency conference proposed actions regarding AI and digitalization for persons with disabilities.

How can the gender perspective and forced sterilization of women with disabilities be addressed?

Christophe Lefèvre highlighted that more efforts are needed to tackle harmful practices like forced sterilization.

How can we ensure the EU Disability Strategy adapts to current crises and includes marginalized groups?

Lucie Davoine acknowledged that crises like the cost-of-living crisis disproportionately impact persons with disabilities, and the upcoming EU Anti-Poverty Strategy can drive progress in this area.

PANEL 2: THE RIGHT TO INDEPENDENT LIVING



Moderator: **Lucie Davoine**, Acting Head of Disability Unit, DG EMPL, European Commission

Speakers :

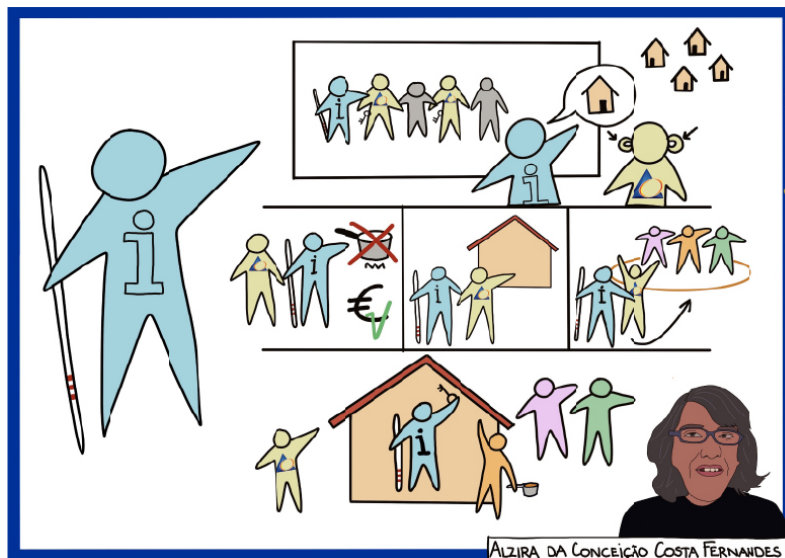
Alzira da Conceição Costa Fernandes, Inclusion Europe

Alexandra Lopes, University of Porto, UPORTO

John Patrick Clarke, Vice-President, European Disability Forum (EDF)

Kirsi Konola, **President**, European Association of Services Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD)

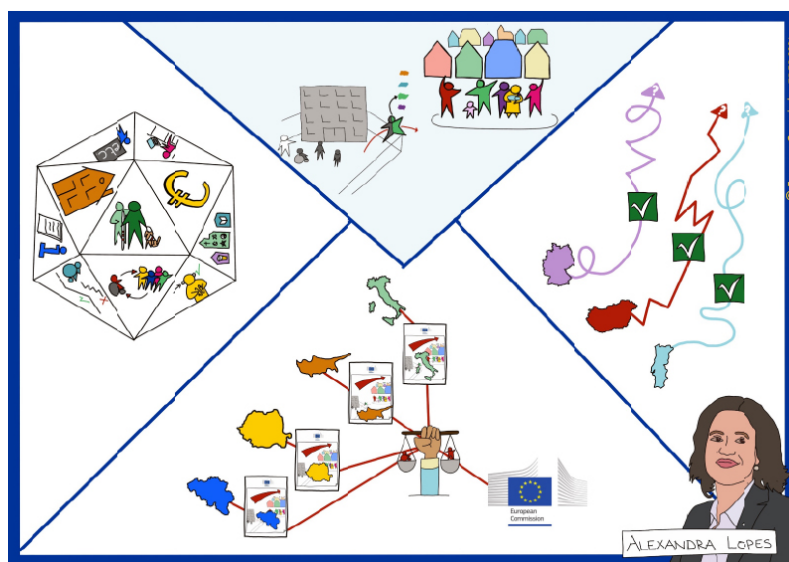
Alzira da Conceição Costa Fernandes, from Portugal, shared her **personal journey from institutional care to independent living**, showing the impact of tailored community support on the lives of persons with disabilities. Her desire for independence led her to transition living on her own in 2012. She emphasized the importance of **personal choice and control in achieving a dignified and independent life**, urging policymakers to prioritize these principles in future initiatives. Her testimony highlighted the challenges and opportunities associated with transitioning to independent living, including **accessible housing, social networks, and employment opportunities**. Ms. Fernandes called for greater awareness of the lived experiences of persons with disabilities to inform policy development and encouraged others to pursue their dreams of independence and self-integration into their communities.



Alexandra Lopes, Assistant Professor at the University of Porto emphasized that independent living is rooted in self-determination and equal choices for all individuals. This concept reflects a societal vision that requires systemic organization and change. Although progress has been slow and fragmented across Europe, she acknowledged some positive steps and encouraged analysis and reflection on initiatives to guide future developments. Her presentation outlined three key ideas:

- 1. Independent Living is Multidimensional:** Independent living encompasses various aspects of life, including personal assistance, accessible housing, accessible and inclusive environments, fair labour market opportunities, and income protection. European countries often address these aspects in isolation, which can hinder comprehensive pathways to independent living. The challenge is to integrate these dimensions.
- 2. Life is Lived in Context:** Expectations and needs vary across countries, regions, communities, and individuals. While there are universal rights and freedoms, policies must balance local conditions with fundamental rights. Achieving this requires understanding local contexts and implementing measures that foster change.
- 3. Systemic Change is Incremental and Context-Dependent:** Social systems evolve slowly, influenced by historical development. Replicating successful practices requires understanding the conditions that enabled them. Policymakers should focus on improving learning processes and tools to adapt promising practices effectively.

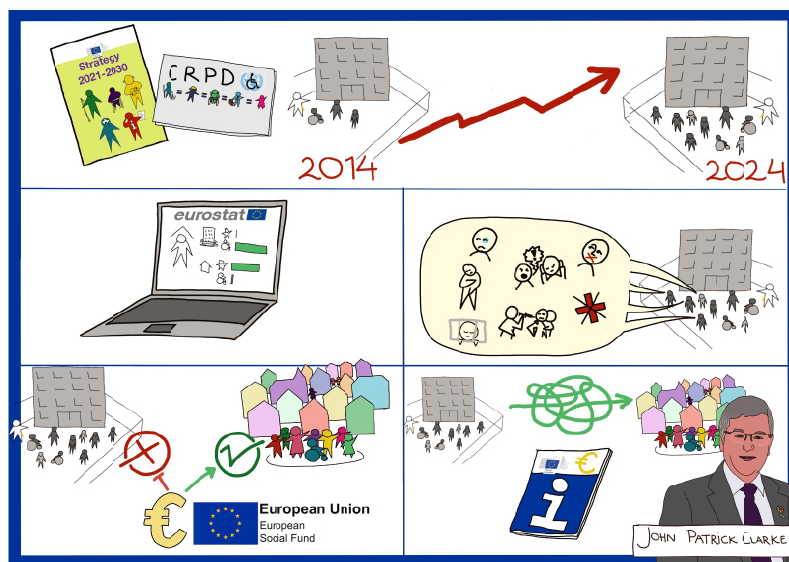
Alexandra Lopes highlighted the importance of clear goals in implementing policies for independent living while being mindful of unintended consequences. She concluded by reaffirming that independent living is ultimately about self-determination.



John Patrick Clarke, Vice-President, European Disability Forum highlighted the urgency to transition from institutional to community-based services, as an estimated 1.5 million people in the EU are still living in institutions. These settings deprive individuals of choice, control, and fundamental rights. Despite being state party to the UNCRPD, many EU Member States have failed to progress with deinstitutionalization, with some even seeing increases in institutionalized children and adults over the past decade. Key issues and recommendations from the intervention include:

1. **Barriers to Progress:** Lack of accurate EU-level data on institutionalized individuals, limited monitoring and transparency on de-institutionalization efforts and over-reliance on out-dated institutional care.
2. **EU Guidance on Independent Living and Inclusion in the Community:** It is commendable but non-binding, future EU regulations should embed obligations to follow this guidance, particularly in the next Multiannual Financial Framework.
3. **Strategies for Transition:** A dedicated EU strategy for transitioning from institutional to community-based living should be developed, ensuring coherence across simultaneous actions. Better monitoring of the transitions out of institutions across the Member States and research into human rights violations within institutions to raise awareness and drive change.
4. **Funding and Support:** EU funding should be allocated to community-based disability support services, personal assistance, and accessible housing adaptations, and support to family carers when informal care is chosen. Use EU funds to buffer the «cost of transition» as institutions are phased out and community-based systems are scaled up.
5. **Policymakers must act urgently** to reverse rising (re)institutionalization trends and make institutions a thing of the past in the EU.

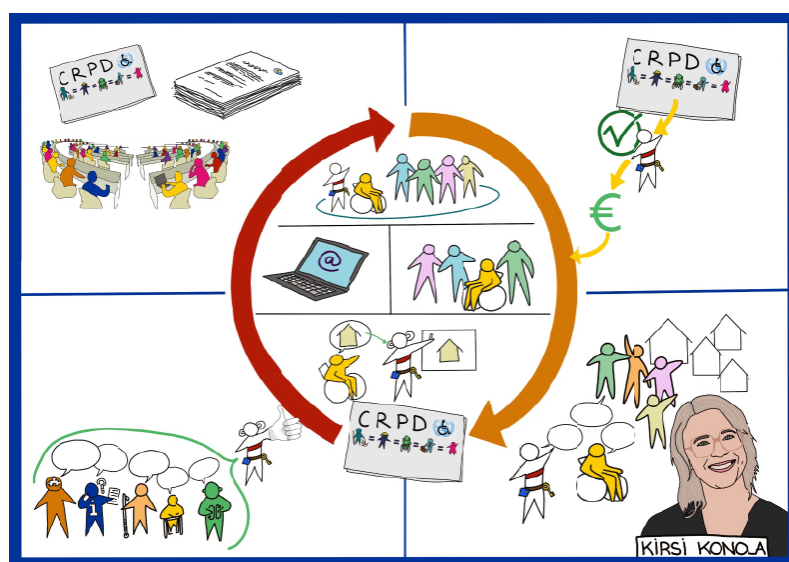
John Patrick Clarke concluded by urging immediate prioritization of these actions to uphold the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities.



Kirsi Konola, President, European Association of Services Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) described the **complexity of implementing deinstitutionalisation**, which can be defined as a process of developing a **range of high-quality, individualised services, based in the community**, including prevention, eliminating the need for institutional care. For that, a **holistic approach** is needed to:

1. Adopt clear and facilitating frameworks.
2. Reorientate resources and provide effective and sustainable funding.
3. Ensure well-trained and adequate workforce.

There are several important aspects to consider during the transformation of services, including taking **a human-rights based approach** as a starting point, combining formal and informal support systems, **using technology** in a well-managed way, or **designing services in co-production with persons with disabilities**. Kirsi Konola discussed the **challenges of building a skilled workforce** to support independent living. Providing support to individuals with high support needs and sharing experiences about innovative approaches to service delivery would need more attention. She also called for greater **investment in training programs** and resources to ensure the long-term sustainability of inclusive practices.



SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

How can public administrations carry out personalized, co-produced projects for persons with disabilities? Can independent living become a European priority, especially given the economic and demographic challenges?

Aleksandra Lopes highlighted in her answer that a social investment approach is essential, but care must be taken not to reduce individuals' worth to their employment potential. Independent living should not solely focus on economic drivers but encompass full participation rights. Kirsi Konola added that transitioning requires comprehensive and holistic planning to ensure support services are adequately resourced and effective.

Despite accessibility policies, housing challenges persist. How can these be addressed in the context of increasing housing crises?

John Patrick Clarke answered that though housing policies are largely a national matter, EU guidance can help. The current moment presents an opportunity to address accessibility gaps. Aleksandra Lopes added that housing issues require flexible, person-centred public policies rather than «one-size-fits-all» approaches.

How can we ensure that practices labelled as «independent living» truly adhere to its principles and involve persons with disabilities?

John Patrick Clarke mentioned that the recent EU guidance is non-binding but turning it into a legal document could strengthen its implementation.

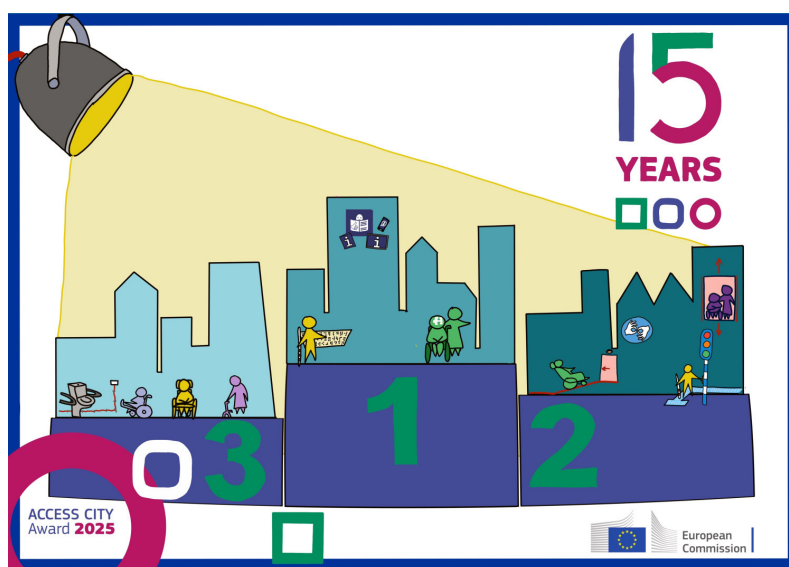
With an aging population, are current policies sufficient to prevent a «social tsunami»?

Panellists agreed that there is an urgent need for ambitious social targets and strategies that integrate the human rights model of disability more effectively.

DAY 2 – 2025 ACCESS CITY AWARD CEREMONY



On the second day of the EDPD2024 conference, the ceremony for the 2025 Access City Award (ACA) took place, which recognises and celebrates cities' actions to become more accessible and inclusive to persons with disabilities. The 15th ACA ceremony was hosted by Helena Dalli, European Commissioner for Equality, and the representatives of 15 previous ACA winner cities. For the 15th edition of the award, 57 applications were received from European cities – the highest number in the past decade. The national juries preselected up to three applications per Member State to reach the EU Jury level, who were narrowed down to four finalists. Accessibility is a prerequisite for persons with disabilities to fully enjoy their rights and freedoms on an equal basis with others.



ACA 2025 WINNERS

First prize: Vienna (Austria)

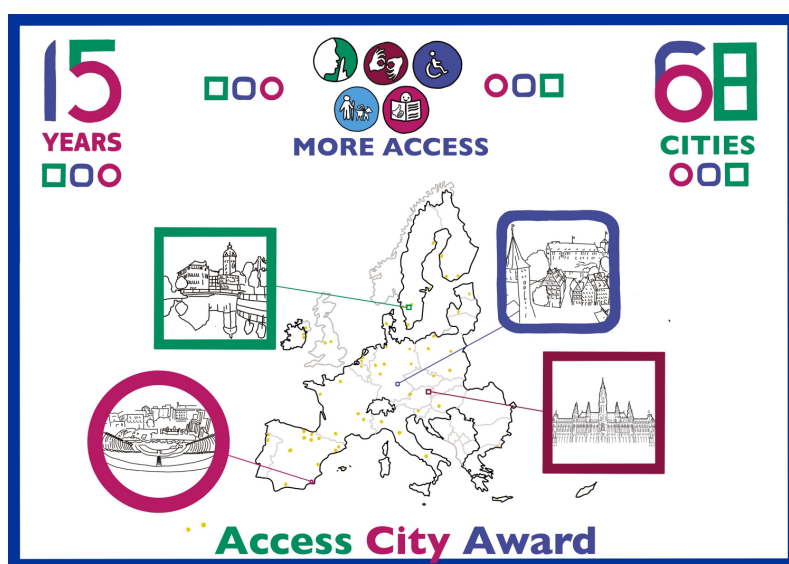
Vienna is recognized as a standout example of how large cities can integrate a comprehensive and successful approach to accessibility into all aspects of urban life. The city excelled with its long-term plans to improve accessibility in municipal buildings, innovative use of technology, including real-time sign language avatars, multi-sense emergency intercoms, and highly accessible public transport. Its collaborative approach with organizations representing persons with disabilities further strengthened its accessibility policies.

Second prize: Nuremberg (Germany)

Nuremberg was commended for its long-term inclusion efforts, with a highly accessible public transport, with lifts and guidance systems at all underground stations, nearly 85% of tram stops accessible, and its close collaboration with the disability council, using accessible tools like tactile maps so persons with disabilities can participate in planning. The city's annual conferences and inclusive cultural programmes reflect its dedication to urban accessibility and inclusion.

Third prize: Cartagena (Spain)

Cartagena's urban planning prioritises pedestrian-friendly streets and accessible public spaces. To support accessible tourism, the city offers Braille guides, accessible information on the city website, and augmented reality and audio features at bus stops. Through its 'Beach for All' project, Cartagena provides assisted bathing at beaches with trained staff, amphibious wheelchairs, and accessible showers, helping over 500 persons with disabilities in 2024.



ACA 2025 SPECIAL MENTIONS

Special Mention for Accessible Sport Infrastructure: Nuremberg (Germany)

Nuremberg is committed to accessible sports, investing in adapted sports centres inclusive clubs and specialised equipment. In 2023, the city declared a ‘Year of Inclusion in Sport’ and is now offering training for coaches in adaptive sports and an inclusive swimming programme. To continue these efforts, Nuremberg created a permanent role in the city council for ‘Inclusion through Sport’.

Special Mention for Role Model on Built Environment and Transport: Borås (Sweden)

Borås stands out for its accessible urban design. About 90% of public transport is accessible, and buses are equipped with audiovisual systems to assist persons with disabilities. Going beyond national standards, Borås has made, by working closely with disability organisations, public buildings, swimming areas, and recreational spots, like birdwatching towers and fishing piers, fully accessible.



PANEL 3: ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE CITIES



Moderators: **Inmaculada Placencia Porrero**, Senior Expert in Disability, DG EMPL, European Commission and **Alejandro Moledo**, Deputy Director & Head of Policy, European Disability Forum

Speakers :

Miguel Ángel Valero Duboy, Associated Professor, Telecommunications Engineer (PHD), Polytechnic University of Madrid (Spain)

Agnes Kojc, Observer, EDF Youth Committee and Youth Representative, Cerebral Palsy in the European Union Association

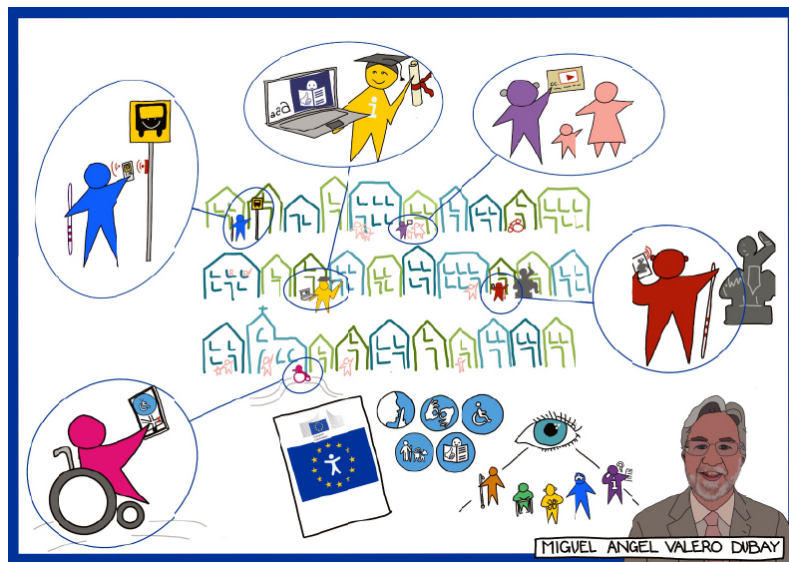
Bertrand Maes, Deputy Mayor of Lyon (France)

Jesús Manuel Sánchez Cabrera, Mayor of Ávila (Spain)

Miguel Angel Valero Duboy, Associated Professor at the Polytechnic University of Madrid emphasised the need for greater focus on the **digital aspect of accessibility in smart cities**. A truly accessible city ensures that everyone can fully enjoy its resources, while a smart city operates with empathy and integrates accessible digital technology. Digital cities leverage ICT to **provide inclusive services for all citizens**, enabling independent living, mobility, and access to education, health, work, culture, government, banking, and entertainment.

Accessible and inclusive digital cities must be designed to **meet the needs, rights, and expectations of persons with disabilities**, ensuring accessibility, affordability, and sustainability. The evolution of ICT accessibility since the early 2000s has been driven by heightened awareness, better legislation, improved standards, and greater participation by society, the public sector, and companies. Both cognitive and sensorial interaction needs have been considered more and more in ICT products and services in recent years.

Recommendations by Miguel Ángel Valero Duboy included to **apply the principle of «no city for us without us»**, ensuring that persons with disabilities are actively involved in the design and development of accessible cities. **Accessibility must be sustainable**, with technology updates and management systems supporting ongoing improvements. Sharing experiences and making accessibility efforts visible are crucial. While public bodies bear primary responsibility, everyone plays a role as accessibility agents to foster continuous improvement.



Agnes Kojc, from the EDF Youth Committee shared her personal testimony and recommendations for improving accessibility in cities. She began by acknowledging the achievements of the ACA winning cities, which have demonstrated that **creating accessible environments for persons with disabilities is both possible and impactful**. However, she emphasized that **many cities still fall short in providing adequate accessibility**, making everyday life challenging for people like her who use electric wheelchairs.

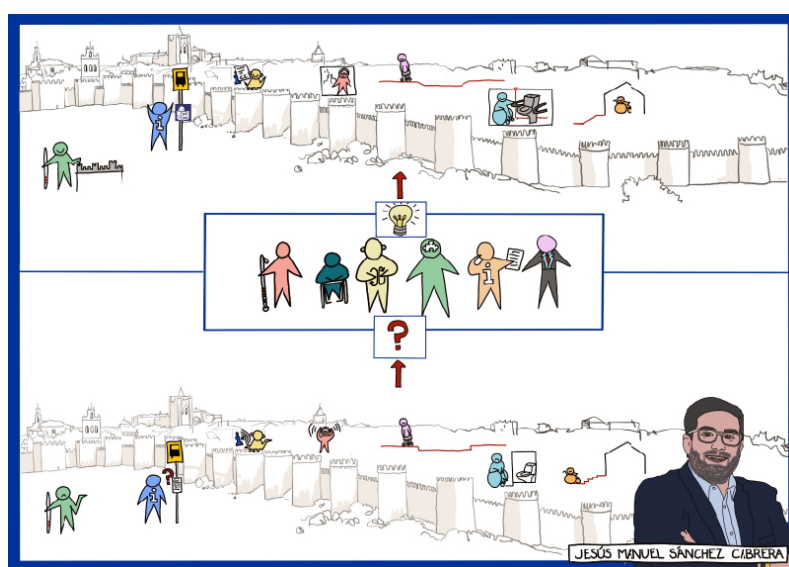
Agnes Kojc described **several obstacles she faces regularly**. **Public transport is a major issue**, as local buses are not wheelchair-accessible due to high floors or stairs, and ramps are only available on certain buses with irregular schedules. In addition to transportation, she encounters barriers at cafés, university lectures, and swimming pools, among others, where the lack of accessibility often prevents her from entering or participating. She called for more accessible cities to enable persons with disabilities to fully exercise their rights, including the rights to education, health, work, and participation in public life. Agnes Kojc emphasized that **accessibility is not just a technical requirement but a pathway to a more inclusive, equitable, and kind society**.

To address these challenges, Agnes Kojc proposed **five key recommendations**:

1. Cities should consult persons with disabilities and their representative organizations throughout the decision-making process and test outcomes to ensure real-world usability.
2. Accessibility should be treated as a political priority, with universal design incorporated early in construction projects.
3. Cities need to allocate sufficient resources, framing accessibility as a long-term investment that benefits everyone, including older adults and families with children.
4. The use of tools such as public procurement is important to ensure accessible infrastructure, such as buses and trams.
5. Awareness raising and training stakeholders, including municipal staff, to understand and implement accessibility measures effectively is another key issue.

Jesús Manuel Sánchez Cabrera, Mayor of Ávila (Spain), highlighted the **profound impact of winning the ACA** award in 2011, becoming the first winning city of the history of the award, which motivated them to prioritize daily improvements in accessibility. Ávila, a UNESCO World Heritage City, blends historical significance with modern adaptability, striving to be a city for all its residents and visitors. The **award reinforced Ávila's commitment to universal accessibility**.

Ávila's **Municipal Council for Persons with Disabilities**, established in 2004, serves as a platform for addressing challenges and fostering collaboration between disability organizations and the municipal government. Initiatives by the Accessibility Department and Municipal Accessibility Office include promoting employment and independent living for persons with disabilities, enhancing social support through services like telecare and in-home assistance, and improving urban accessibility in architecture, transportation, and tourism. Notably, Ávila's Visitors' Reception Center supports **accessible tourism with tactile models, adapted brochures, and inclusive guided tours**. Jesús Manuel Sánchez Cabrera stressed that accessibility extends beyond removing barriers, requiring societal awareness and collaboration. Ávila aims to remain a model for inclusive urban development, ensuring accessibility for all.



SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

How can OPDs and local municipalities work to raise awareness and improve accessibility for all, especially for women with disabilities facing abuse?

The panellists acknowledged that grassroots organizations often lack resources but play a crucial role. Gender-specific services for women facing violence must be accessible. Local municipalities need to collaborate with diverse groups to improve awareness and services.

How can we improve accessibility with tools like pictograms and easy-to-read materials, and train public workers to understand autism better?

The speakers agreed that pictograms and easy-to-read materials are necessary in public spaces and services like local transport or municipal administration. Sensory overload must also be considered, and public service workers need training to understand autism and other types of disabilities and address empathy gaps.

How can we ensure consistent, visible information on public transport across different providers?

Panellists underlined that cooperation between bus services and providers is essential to standardize information, such as bus stop locations and schedules, ensuring equal quality of service for all users.

CLOSING SESSION



Moderator: **Lucie Davoine**, Acting Head of Disability Unit, DG EMPL, European Commission

Speakers :

Lydia Vlagsma, Co-chair of European Disability Forum Youth Committee

Katrin Langensiepen, Member of the European Parliament (EP)

Katarina Ivankovic-Knezevic, Director for Social Rights and Inclusion, DG EMPL, European Commission

Piotr Cieszewski, Vice-director, Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Disabled People

On behalf of the European Disability Forum, Lydia Vlagsma, Co-chair of the Youth Committee presented EDF's proposal of eight new flagship initiatives until 2030, covering topics such as accessibility, assistive technology, deinstitutionalization, and ending forced sterilization. From the perspective of young people with disabilities, two key recommendations stand out:

1. Establishing a **Disability Employment and Skills Guarantee** to ensure equal access to education, training, and employment. Retaining disability allowances is vital for those transitioning into work or education.
2. Creating a **fund for accessible housing through EU cohesion funding**. Accessible and affordable housing is essential for young people with disabilities, shaping their opportunities for work, education, and social participation during transitional phases of life.

Lydia Vlagsma highlighted that **autonomy—choosing how, where, and with whom to live with necessary support—should be central to the EU’s strategy** implementation in the next years. Panellists of the EDPD2024 illustrated how accessible and inclusive cities can enhance personal independence by enabling choices about socializing, shopping, voting, and other aspects of daily life.

Katrin Langensiepen, Member of the European Parliament, discussed in her closing speech the challenges of ensuring that the UNCRPD remains a priority in EP committees. **Only three of the newly elected MEPs are persons with disabilities**, thus there is a lack of direct representation in powerful positions. Furthermore, she pointed out that there is an unfriendly majority in the EP towards the implementation of human rights, such as the rights outlined in the UNCRPD. Katrin Langensiepen mentioned the establishment of a **disability network to better understand the progress made on accessibility** and highlight areas that need improvement. She hoped for the creation of a new Disability Intergroup to monitor progress effectively. Katrin Langensiepen also referred to the [Disability Week in the EP](#) as a significant event to raise awareness on the challenges faced by persons with disabilities. Additionally, Katrin Langensiepen highlighted the upcoming EU review before the UNCRPD Committee in March 2025 and the disparity in accessibility discussions between wealthy NGOs from the Global North and the realities faced by African countries.

On behalf of the European Commission, **Katarina Ivankovic-Knezevic**, Social Rights and Inclusion Director at Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion thanked all speakers and participants for their input during the 2024 conference celebrating the European Day of Persons with Disabilities. **While much has been achieved since the adoption of the EU Disability Strategy in 2021, there is still significant work to be done.** She highlighted that prejudice, discrimination, and systemic inequalities continue to affect many European citizens with disabilities in their daily lives.

Katarina Ivankovic-Knezevic emphasized that the primary goal of the European Commission is the **full implementation of the Strategy**, as outlined in Commissioner Hadja Lahbib’s mission letter and repeated by Executive Vice-President Roxana Minzatu during the hearing at the European Parliament on 12 November 2024. This includes taking stock of the progress made over the past four years, assessing the areas where barriers still exist, and focusing on dismantling them. She mentioned that **a progress report on the implementation of the Disability Strategy will soon be published**, which will help identify gaps and determine the direction for future actions over the next six years.

The European Commission will focus on **sustaining and consolidating the results of the flagship initiatives that have already been launched**, including the Disability Employment Package, the Directives establishing the European Disability Card and the European Parking Card for persons with disabilities. Katarina Ivankovic-Knezevic also stressed the importance of continuing to support Member States in implementing national disability policies in line with the EU strategy, particularly in areas like accessibility. She emphasized that the full and correct transposition of EU rules into national laws is essential. She assured that the **new Commission will uphold the rights of persons with disabilities** and promote their full inclusion in society and the economy, and she looked forward to working together with all relevant actors, including civil society and persons with disabilities to address both current and emerging challenges.

Piotr Cieszewski, Vice-director, Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Disabled People, provided concluding remarks on behalf of the **incoming Polish Presidency of the Council of the EU**. Piotr Cieszewski highlighted that the Polish Presidency will raise awareness about the needs and potentials of persons with disabilities in line with Article 8 of the UNCRPD. He emphasized that persons with disabilities should not be seen only as recipients of charity but as active participants in daily life, contributing to society. One key priority for the Presidency is **improving employment opportunities for persons with disabilities**, addressing gaps in the open labour market, and promoting inclusive employment practices. Additionally, Piotr Cieszewski noted the **importance of independent living and personal assistance**, with Poland preparing legislation to support these areas. He acknowledged challenges, such as employers’ reluctance in employing individuals with disabilities. Piotr Cieszewski expressed hope for continued progress, and collaboration to realise the rights of persons with disabilities.

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