

**Including People with Disabilities in the Millennium Development Goals  
and Beyond**

**Conference by the European Disability Forum**

**SPEECH**

**by**

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**of the**

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*Seul le texte prononcé fait foi*

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*Check Against Delivery*

Ladies and gentlemen:

- It is with great pleasure that I would like to welcome you today to the EESC, for this seminar 'Including People with Disabilities in the MDGs and Beyond', organised by the European Disability Forum;
- I have the double pleasure this morning – firstly, because I am speaking alongside my dear friend, Yannis Vardakastanis;
- Yannis is a *very* valuable and active member of the Various Interests Group of the EESC, who as I understand only two weeks ago was re-elected to the post of President of the EDF;
- Bravo Yanni, you more than deserve this re-appointment and I am sure that you will continue to pursue with determination, energy and responsibility the multiple roles and 'hats' that you hold;
- The second reason why I am particularly pleased to be with you today is because we will be discussing the MDGs and development cooperation, a field in which I was personally very active at the beginning of my career and which remains very close to my heart;
- Once Africa is in your heart, it doesn't go away, which is a very good thing!
- But in today's discussions we will concentrate on the *future*, notably on how to better include our fellow citizens who have a disability, within the global development cooperation agenda in the post 2015 era;
- For currently some 1 billion persons world-wide are living with a disability and often in disproportionate levels of poverty, be it in the developed or in the developing world;
- Regrettably, despite the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was ratified by the EU in 2010, there is still a very long way to go in order to *implement* its provisions;
- So I have to congratulate you Yanni for having successfully negotiated only five days ago with the Presidents of the main political parties of the European Parliament, their agreement to a declaration supporting persons with disabilities;
- Crucially, in this declaration there is the explicit political support for *implementing* and *mainstreaming* the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;
- For the information of the members of the audience, the declaration also includes the agreement to introduce a legally binding *European Accessibility Act*;
- These are great achievements!
- For there is currently still a long way to go in order to ensure that our fellow disabled citizens are treated with dignity and respect, and that we reverse the status quo where disabled persons are often marginalised, vulnerable and poor;
- And although I am not a specialist in this sector, it is quite evident that disability is often *both* a cause and a consequence of poverty, be it in Europe or in developing countries;
- Certainly in most countries, the costs of basic amenities that we take for granted, are much higher for the disabled, be it education or health costs;

- And access to the labour market, training, to public transport, public buildings, ICT, etc, are often insufficient for the disabled;
  - Moreover, in most countries there is still a charitable dimension to society's and the State's relations with disabled persons;
  - This is fundamentally wrong and in 2013 we need to recognise accessibility as a *human right* and we urgently need to change our policies and our *actions*;
  - At the international level, there is now a window of opportunity within the context of the UN's General Assembly High Level Meeting on Disability and Development on 23 September, which is being piloted by Spain and the Philippines;
  - What we should expect from this meeting is an *action oriented* agreement which will feed into the post 2015 MDGs era and into the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;
  - For the UN Convention, through its Article 32 on 'International Cooperation', opens the door to a disability inclusive development agenda;
  - We must now seize the opportunity to recognise and directly involve disabled persons and their associations as active stakeholders in global development strategies;
  - We must give them a concrete role in the definition, implementation and monitoring of development cooperation;
  - Of course, we also need to include targeted funding, policies and programmes to translate ambitions into reality.
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- Ladies and gentlemen, Europe's domestic approaches to disability vary greatly between countries and in several Member States a great deal more needs to be done;
  - We heard only last week at a conference that we organised in Thessaloniki on the crisis, that the Greek authorities had only that day agreed to include statistics on disabled persons in their national data;
  - Unfortunately, not only do some European countries already have severe short-comings in national disability policies, but regrettably the crisis has placed even greater burdens on our fellow disabled citizens;
  - For this reason I greatly admire and salute the efforts of associations such as the European Disability Forum;
  - I hope that you will continue to consider the European Economic and Social Committee and the Various Interests Group in particular, as your allies;
  - Last year the EESC adopted two Opinions on disability, to be followed by another Opinion scheduled for adoption later this year;
  - May I wish you strength, determination and health!