

CONFERENCE

*'The Implementation of the UN CRPD by the EU: Assessing the impact of the
UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*

Concluding observations – The way forward'

Speech by

Mr Luca JAHIER

President of Group III 'Various Interests'

of the

European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

Thessaloniki, Greece

10 September 2015

Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Check Against Delivery

Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that I am with you today, in this beautiful city named in the 3rd Century BC by King Cassander after his wife 'Thessaloniki', who was also the half-sister of Alexander the Great! In Greece, we are surrounded by 'History', it is inescapable. We are graced by its wisdom, but also humbled by its responsibility. Indeed, when I think of Greece, three words come to mind: 'History', 'Filoxenia' and 'Filotimo'. Filoxenia is something that I have already experienced in this city, when in 2013 the Various Interests Group of which I am President, organised a large-scale conference on the impact of the crisis on Greek citizens. At that event we heard that the Greek government had just decided to include statistics on disabled persons within their national data. This was a significant step forward, for which all of your organisations working behind the scenes to achieve it, should be proud. But allow me to take this opportunity to personally thank Yiannis Vardakastanis in particular. Over the years, Yiannis has been a very active and respected member of the European Economic and Social Committee, and who has succeeded in raising considerably the profile of 'disability' within our work. I am pleased Yianni that you have been re-nominated by the Greek authorities for another five years as member of the EESC and I very much look forward to continuing our fruitful collaboration.

Now turning to the subject of our conference. Most of you will be aware that approximately 650 million people worldwide are disabled and often live in disproportionate levels of poverty. They are the world's largest minority. In Europe, 15% of the population, the equivalent of 80 million Europeans are disabled. Unfortunately, 3/4 of persons with disabilities are unable to participate in the European labour market. Indeed, access to public transport, public buildings, training, etc, is often very limited. Indeed, in many countries there is also still very much a *charitable* dimension to relations of society and of the State with disabled persons. This is fundamentally a wrong approach. Accessibility is a *human right* and policies and actions should be implemented in this direction. Regrettably, although social policy is considered an intrinsic European value, respecting it is often a challenge, notably since the economic crisis began. In many European countries funding for social services is insufficient. The reality is that social policy has become 'vulnerable', thus also rendering 'vulnerable' the beneficiaries themselves.

Within this context, at the end of 2011 Yiannis proposed that the EESC drafts an Own-initiative Opinion on 'The Implementation and Monitoring of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities'. As already mentioned by previous speakers, the UN Convention which was adopted in 2006 is the *first* human rights Convention to be signed and ratified by the EU. Clearly, the opportunity and timing had to be seized and I personally and our Group in its entirety fully supported the initiative of Yiannis and the other EESC members representing the disability sector. The Opinion was finally adopted by the plenary of our Committee in December 2012. Shortly afterwards, Yiannis came back with a second proposal. This time he suggested setting up an EESC 'Ad Hoc Group on Disability', which had been one of the key recommendations of the EESC Opinion. The aims of the body are to provide a forum for the civil society perspective, in addition to assessing and collecting reactions on progress on the UN Convention. Indeed, over the last two years, this Ad Hoc Group has carried out a number of hearings and events. It has created synergies with similar bodies in the European Institutions, provided an opportunity for trans-European exchange and has contributed to the internal application of the UN Convention, within the EESC. I am pleased to inform you that the Committee

has recently decided to transform this body into a *permanent* structure. This will allow further progress towards mainstreaming accessibility into a breadth of European legislative work.

I would now like to make a few general comments. I know that the EU is often criticised for being too technocratic and distant from its citizens. Many citizens feel that either 'Europe' is responsible for the socio-economic problems or that the EU Institutions are not doing enough to improve their daily lives. This is precisely why the EESC considered it important to support the creation and work of the Disability Group. For as a consultative body of the European Institutions, the Committee ensures the wide and systematic participation of organised representative European civil society in EU policy-making. Through its daily work, the EESC contributes to ensuring that decisions are taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen. In this way, our work helps to implement the key EU principles of 'subsidiarity' and 'proportionality' in the distribution of EU competencies.

In my view, the Disability Group has the potential to become a key example of participatory democracy. For let us not forget that the EU is committed to submitting an annual report to the UNCRPD Committee. This will necessitate continuous progress and evaluation, and consequently, the European Institutions are in the process of setting up permanent structures on the topic. Likewise, the EESC is bound to apply the UN Convention and to contribute to implementing any future recommendations for improvement. So the timing and policy area are 'right' for establishing the Disability Group and I am a sure that its work will be both fruitful and influential.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to end my intervention by recalling that the EU is undergoing the most challenging period since its creation. It is not only the economic, financial and social crisis which are fragmenting our continent and creating increasing divergences between people, countries and regions. Europe is also faced with dramatic external threats and insecurities (migration, terrorism, energy security, etc.), which are testing to the limit European solidarity and cohesion. Think only of the reality facing Greece and my own country, Italy, who are flooded daily by hundreds of migrants trying desperately to escape conflict or economic deprivation. Since January, some 350,000 persons have taken the perilous journey across the Mediterranean, with many cases ending in pure tragedy. The Mediterranean has for millennia been the cradle of civilisations and the crossroads of culture. But today it is becoming a graveyard and I cannot but think of the heart-wrenching image of the 3-year old Syrian boy who together with his 5-year old brother and mother drowned last week attempting the crossing. One of the many families destroyed seeking European 'salvation'... The point that I am trying to make is that no single European country can manage alone the economic, social and external threats facing the continent. These are cross-national problems that need to be resolved at that level and immediately. Today, we need to overcome hesitations and fears and work together to find joint solutions. It is now urgent to promote what unifies the people of Europe as opposed to what divides them. As was stated in the slogan of the Greek Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2014: 'Together we sail further!' Let us have the courage and the political will to live up to the ideals of our European forefathers and reclaim the European vision. Let us continue to build a Europe of citizens, *together*, for today and tomorrow!

Thank you for your attention.