

## **WEBINAR REPORT**

### **Access to quality employment for people in vulnerable situations: The need for a person-centred approach & inclusive skilling programmes.**

On 10 November 2021, we hosted an online event where we launched and presented our [new policy paper](#), provided an overview of ongoing and upcoming European initiatives on how to develop skills, and discuss some of the remaining key challenges that make it difficult for people in precarious situations to access quality employment.

The webinar was hosted by Eurodiaconia's Head of Advocacy, **Ms Anne-Sophie Wislocki**, who welcomed the participants and introduced the speakers. Then, a brief presentation of our new policy paper was given by **Mr Stefan Kitzmann**, Eurodiaconia's Policy Officer. Departing from Eurodiaconia members' broad experience providing work integration services, this paper sheds light on some of the remaining key challenges and gaps in legislation that make it difficult for people in precarious situations to access quality employment. It also showcases best practices from our membership and delivers policy recommendations.

Among the key messages shared during his presentation, Mr Kitzmann identified the need for more inclusive education and vocational training, to further include migrants and Roma, particularly women. Moreover, there is a need for positive flexibility to break out of rigid up- and reskilling programmes, which then should be adapted to the individual life situation and allow for different "learning speeds". For the future, a key challenge will be how to ensure that young people will have the right skills to thrive in a digital and green economy. Unfortunately, there is still a long way ahead to overcome all barriers and eradicate discrimination on the labour market. It was stressed that particular attention must be paid to people in vulnerable situations, so they are not left behind as Europe recovers from the COVID-19 crisis and faces digital and green transformations.

Then, our panel discussion kicked off with the intervention of **Ms Ana Carla Pereira**, Employment and Social Adviser in the team of Commissioner Nicolas Schmit. She underlined how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated challenges in access to employment for people with disabilities, the low skilled, young people, and single mothers, among others. She stressed that these groups had been exposed to several deficiencies in our system before the pandemic, which were exacerbated by the crisis. Now, there are also new vulnerable groups such as the self-employed.

She reaffirmed the importance of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan and its headline targets as a policy framework that can ease access to quality employment. She also emphasised that this needs to be materialised in cross-sectorial concrete actions and mentioned some of them. First, the upcoming Social Economy Action Plan will be relevant for access to employment for vulnerable groups because very often it is social economy actors that bring opportunities to those furthest from the labour market. Second, the European Disability Strategy presented earlier this year includes a specific commitment from the

Commission to come up with measures related to access to employment, which will be presented next year. Third, the recently announced European Care Strategy will address the issue of work-life balance and the difficulties for women to maintain or access quality employment and to cope with care responsibilities. In this context, there will be a revision of the Barcelona targets for access to childcare and a Council Recommendation on Long Term Care. Finally, the upcoming initiative on Minimum Income, which is first and foremost to support those who are not in the labour market, but that will include enabling factors such as the integration to the labour market and the need to have accessible, quality social services and public employment services acting in a coordinated and integrated manner.

After that, **Ms Katrin Langensiepen**, MEP from the Greens took the floor to address the specific challenges that persons with disabilities face to enter the labour market. Earlier this year, the European Parliament adopted a report to foster equal treatment of persons with disabilities in the workplace in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). In Ms Langensiepen's opinion, the report showed that numbers are worrying and that some European countries, such as Germany, are ignoring the UNCRPD.

She asserted that persons with disabilities must be protected and that sheltered workshops need to be phased out. She explained that these workshops work well for some enterprises as they provide cheap manufacturing, but they are not benefiting persons with disabilities. Moreover, she affirmed that persons with disabilities must be given the right opportunities, mainly through education. She noted that in some Member States there are persons with disabilities that leave school without certificates, and thus cannot apply for a job even if the employees want to take them. Also, she stressed the issue of lack of proper advice, information, and personal assistance for persons with disabilities to access the job market. Finally, she reaffirmed the relevance of supporting inclusive enterprises and the social economy as a sector that usually provides more opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Then, it was the turn of **Mr Dirk Kehr**, Head of Social Enterprise of the Uppsala City Mission, one of our Swedish members, and who has been working for about 13 years providing working opportunities and training to people who are excluded from the labour market despite how good the economy is doing.

During his intervention, Mr Kehr shed light on the problems of the system in place in Sweden to enable access to employment for people with mental health issues, which requires them to first get medical and social support while staying at home. Only after people have done that, they are allowed to start work training. He argued that this process is very destructive, and people do not make the progress they need to make. He explained that what the Uppsala City Mission has done within their social enterprises is to reverse that logic, letting people join their programmes even if they have mental health issues. They have seen people improving radically because they have a community, meaning in their life, and a purpose. That increase in their wellbeing creates an opportunity for them to incorporate into society that is not possible when they are at home.

Moreover, he emphasised that people who attend their workshops have difficulties that go well beyond a lack of skills. Thus, he affirmed that while skills programmes are important, the focus should be on generating workplaces that are health promotional and create an opportunity for people to not only work but to improve their well-being, as we need to understand work as a

powerful tool to help people re-enter society and regain well-being. Finally, he highlighted the importance of a person-centred approach in job inclusion interventions. In his opinion, this can be achieved through a participatory approach that looks for beneficiaries' regular and systematic feedback.

To close our panel, **Ms Manon Deshayes**, Policy Officer for Social & Economic Inclusion at the European Youth Forum commented on some of the challenges and policy recommendations regarding access to training and employment for (vulnerable) young people. She reminded how young people were disproportionately affected by COVID-19, especially regarding employment. In fact, almost 12% of young people stopped working during the pandemic. This was worst for young people in marginalised situations who were more than twice as likely to have stopped working during the crisis. Also, the crisis revealed a lack of information among young, marginalised people and the need for better reach out to those that are farther away from society and less likely to know about any sort of programme or support available.

Another big challenge she underlined was the impact of COVID-19 on young people's education, particularly in terms of quality and accessibility. This was exacerbated for young people in marginalised situations as many did not have access to digital tools or digital literacy. She affirmed that this will directly affect young people's acquirement of skills and future employability. However, she remarked that even if there was complete equal access to employment and skills, there is still a worrying lack of quality entry-level jobs for young people.

Ms Deshayes ended by delivering some recommendations to face these challenges. First, investing in accessible, inclusive, and tailored training is key to improve young people's chances to thrive in the new digital and green economy. Also, participatory design of those programs is important as well as investing in and recognition of non-formal education. Ensuring the creation of entry-level quality jobs, for instance through incentives for employers is also crucial, as well as addressing the challenges in a holistic way, making sure that we tackle root causes of structural discrimination in the labour market.

We finished our webinar with a Q&A session where participants had the chance to ask their questions and panelists could reflect on each other's interventions. For instance, Ms Pereira concurred with the need for the discussion to go beyond just skills and underlined the importance of having quality jobs, living wages, and access to social protection for all to fight precariousness. There was agreement among the panelists on the fact that sanctions and conditionalities should be avoided if we are to encourage people to follow employment activation programmes. Equally, there was a common emphasis on the key role that social services providers and social enterprises play as "service points" and enablers of access to employment for people in vulnerable situations and the need for greater support and funding for them. Finally, speakers agreed in the relevance of personalised, person-centred, and flexible assistance and support to allow for higher success in training and working integration programmes.