

**Opening speech by  
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*Member of the European Commission, in charge of  
Employment, Social affairs and Equal opportunities***

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here today to address this very important conference, and I would like to thank the organisers for the opportunity to be here. It is my intention to engage in a communication with you – in order to learn more from you about your problems and achievements, and above all to find out about your wishes and expectations directed towards the European institutions.

In my view, "communication" is indeed the key word for this event and for today's and future policies. We should enhance our potential to communicate – overcoming the obstacles such as the fact that we have different modes and channels of communication. And indeed, we who represent the European institutions should avoid creating further obstacles to communication by using a highly formalized jargon which is sometimes difficult to understand for everyone around.

Let me, therefore, first say a few personal words which go beyond my official role here.

Although the experience of deafness cannot actually be transferred to anyone, I am very keenly aware of difficulties which deaf and hearing-impaired people are facing in our European societies today. The last century has brought a lot of progress, which was to an important degree a result of the activities of the deaf and hearing-impaired people themselves. If we remember that in many countries sign language used to be prohibited, and survived through the efforts of the deaf and hearing-impaired people themselves, then we who represent the majority cannot but express our highest admiration – for their perseverance and will to assert themselves both as individuals and as a real cultural community.

Of course, many barriers still remain. Some are objective, resulting from deafness itself; others are rooted in attitudes and prejudice. They are entrenched in many areas, notably in access to education, to employment and to social and cultural life.

As European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, I must of course emphasize that policies concerning disability – and policies concerning children – are primarily within the competence of Member States themselves. However, Europe can add a great deal of value by encouraging a coherent approach and by promoting good practices across all the Member States. In this sense, all three areas which compose my portfolio are no doubt relevant to the deaf and hearing-impaired people.

**Employment**, which generates income and self-respect, is a key issue for full integration of all people with disabilities, but it is particularly important for people with hearing impairment, out of whom a vast majority can have a productive working career.

**Social affairs** include, of course, the areas of social protection and social services whose functioning – in the 21st century – should increasingly be tailored to the needs of every individual.

And finally, **equal opportunities** are the central concept of all efforts to create a truly accessible and inclusive society. We must create a society in which discrimination is eliminated altogether.

In addition, the European Union also supports **research** activities which may be beneficial for the life of deaf and hearing-impaired children.

In general, the European Union can affect the situation and provide "added value" to what the Member States are doing through **legislative instruments**, such as the adoption of Directives against discrimination; through **financial instruments**, such as the European Social Fund or the Framework Program on Research; and through the **open method of co-ordination** which can, among other things, lead to the spread of good practices.

Concerning legislation, the European Union has adopted, in 2000, two important directives. One of them prohibits discrimination in employment on a number of grounds, including disability, where "reasonable accommodation" is demanded. I am aware that this may not be enough for many of those who represent the movement of people with disabilities. The interpretation of what is "reasonable accommodation" will depend on the jurisprudence of courts, on the evolution of societies' sensitivity towards the needs of people with disabilities, as well as on economic prosperity of European societies.

However, if we see how sensitivity towards these issues has increased over the last decades, I think there is reason for optimism. Indeed, we can draw such optimism from the example how the interpretation of "human dignity" evolved. Although the content of this term, as it appears in a number of legal texts including the European Convention on Human Rights, was never precisely defined, its interpretation has been increasingly broader and deeper. From a simple emphasis on physical conditions, it came to include a clear focus on the individual as an active subject, on his ability to influence decisions which concern him.

The European Convention on Human Rights is, of course, an instrument of the Council of Europe, and not of the European Union, which still does not have an overarching legal instrument in the area of human rights. However, the proposed Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe should change that, as it will include a Charter of Fundamental Rights of the Union.

In addition to the prohibition of discrimination which stems from article 13 of the current Treaty, the Charter will stipulate, in article 86, that **"the Union recognises and respects the right of persons with disabilities to benefit from measures designed to ensure their independence, social and occupational integration and participation in the life of the community."**

In article 84, the Charter also specifically protects the rights of children, saying that **"children have the right to such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being"**. Furthermore, the Charter stipulates that **"in all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration"**.

As further evidence of our very strong commitment to the principle of equal opportunities, we have recently set up a Group of Commissioners on Fundamental Rights, Anti-discrimination and Equal Opportunities. This Group will ensure that every initiative or piece of legislation tabled by the Commission complies with the Charter of Fundamental Rights already, although the Charter has not yet come into effect.

In our programs, we have gradually moved away from disability-specific programmes towards a more mainstream approach. **Mainstreaming**, by which we mean the inclusion of the disability dimension in all relevant Community policy areas, is a core principle of our policies today. **We do however recognise that it may sometimes be necessary to have a disability-specific approach.** This can be an essential first step in overcoming the disadvantages linked to the disability and to putting disabled people on an equal footing with non-disabled people. And perhaps most important of all, we consider that people with disabilities themselves must be fully engaged in this process, on the principle of "nothing about us without us".

One very important and specific way in which Europe can help Member States in their disability activities is by means of the structural funds. The **European Social Fund** is the main Community financial instrument in support of Member State policies in the fields of education, training and employment, with a global allocation of almost 63 billion for the period 2000 – 2006. It supports projects that enhance employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Of course, the concrete use of resources from the Fund depends on the Member States.

I am pleased that one of the priorities identified in the draft legislation for the continuation of the European Social Fund after 2006 is the financing of measures relating to the reinforcement of social inclusion of people at a disadvantage, including people with disabilities.

Although the European Social Fund after 2006 – like other structural funds – will be increasingly focused on the less developed regions and Member States of the EU, as the Commissioner responsible for the fund I am encouraging Member States to continue to make available sufficient financial resources for activities such as the social inclusion of the disabled, throughout the entire territory of the European Union.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Commission is committed to eliminating existing barriers and achieving equality for all European citizens. This is a responsibility I personally take very seriously and one for which my services will do everything possible to give real meaning to these words.

The valuable work you and your partner organisations are doing for the benefit of deaf children and their families will help them enormously. It will also bring advantages for Europe as a whole.

For example, enabling deaf and hearing-impaired children to remain longer in education increases their opportunities in life, not least their employment prospects. Their employment opportunities will improve and employers will benefit from the skills and expertise a deaf employee can offer.

I congratulate you on the great contribution you are making to an improved quality of life for deaf and hearing-impaired children and their families and to a more inclusive, more equal and more humane European Union.

Thank you.