



## Report on the employment of disabled people in European countries

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### Background:

The [Academic Network of European Disability experts](#) (ANED) was established by the European Commission in 2008 to provide scientific support and advice for its disability policy Unit. In particular, the activities of the Network will support the future development of the EU Disability Action Plan and practical implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People.

This country report has been prepared as input for the *Thematic report on the implementation of EU Employment Strategy in European countries with reference to equality for disabled people*.

The purpose of the report ([Terms of Reference](#)) is to review national implementation of the European Employment Strategy from a disability equality perspective, and to provide the Commission with useful evidence in support of disability policy mainstreaming. More specifically, the report will review implementation of EU Employment Strategy and the PROGRESS initiative with reference to policy implementation evidence from European countries, including the strategies addressed in the EU Disability Action Plan (such as flexicurity and supported employment).



## **PART ONE: GENERAL EVIDENCE**

### **1.1 Academic publications and research reports (key points)**

Research on the employment of disabled people is mostly found within government agencies (such as the Flemish, Walloon, and Brussels Government Agencies), and university-based research contract agencies (such as the Higher Institute for Labour Studies at the University of Leuven). One of the most prolific researchers in the area of employment of disabled people in Belgium is Dr. Erik Samoy, a sociologist who graduated with a Ph.D on employment policies for disabled people (see references). I rely greatly on Dr. Samoy's research as the primary sources for this report.

Belgium was situated in an OESO study of 20 countries closest to the mean when it comes to policies with regard to employment of disabled people, in particular integration and compensation policies. Belgium is not a country of extremes but rather of compromises. This means that not too many people who are not suited for employment actually leave the employment market and also that sufficient people with partly suitable capabilities are integrated in the employment market. The number of people who are in unemployment schemes is remarkably stable in Belgium.

About 45 years ago, Belgium (in this following France) issued a law for a quorum for disabled people in employment. This law was never implemented for the private sector but it was implemented however in the public sector. However, the law is not followed well nor are there sanctions. Since 2003 there is an anti-discrimination law in Belgium. In this law, disability is among 13 possible grounds for discrimination. It is not expected that the anti-discrimination law will change much in the situation of disabled people.

### **1.2 Employment statistics and trends (key points)**

One of the key findings is that the number of people with functional limitations is much larger than usually estimated, somewhere between 12 and 16% of the working population (between 15-64 years).

Approximately 60% of people with disabilities do not work. Those who do, namely 40%, means that there is about 1 in every 14 employees who is disabled. Of those disabled people that work, there is some information available in two groups, namely those who work in sheltered workshops (about 15000 in Flanders) and those who work in the regular employment market who receive a wage subsidy (CAO-26 or VIP, about 5000). Both of these groups represent only 10% of people who work with functional limitations. Only two surveys, Sociaal-economische enquête 2001 and the Enquête naar arbeidskrachten 2002), provide information about all workers with functional limitations.

### **1.3 Laws and policies (key points)**

The policies for disabled people are based on the conviction that employers are willing to employ disabled people but that they need assistance. This assistance is provided in different ways through:

- 1) bringing the employment capacities of disabled people up to date (through work rehabilitation, work education, re-education)
- 2) adapting the production requirements to the capabilities of disabled people (through wage subsidies, adaptations of the work space)
- 3) through improvement of the 'matching' process between demand and offer (through information provision, mediation, career counselling and guidance)
- 4) Sheltered work

The first specialised training initiatives for disabled people date back to the sixties.



It consisted of on-the-job training with little supervision. The situation changed in the nineties in the framework of recognized specialised training centres. Recently, the duration of the training has shortened and more training is taking place in the work space.

Disabled people who are working may not fulfil the production requirements of the job. In Flanders there are two kinds of wage subsidies that compensate this 'production efficiency shortage' (Collective Employment Agreement-26 or CAO-26 and Flemish Integration Subvention or VIP). Both systems only apply to the private sector. These subsidies can be applied without time-limit and up to 50% of the real employment cost. For about 5000 people, employers make use of these subsidies. In addition to a wage subsidy, there can be adaptations to the working space and there are subventions in the transport from and to work. All of these provisions are directed towards bringing the requirements of the work environment in sync with the capabilities of the person with a disability. With the anti-discrimination law existing for a number of years now it is expected that disabled people will even more rely on these existing provisions, based on the concept of 'reasonable adaptations'.

Since 1997 there has been improved financing of the Centers for Specialized Information with regard to Employment Choice (CGVB), jointly with the development of employment career guidance services (ATB), which guide people with a disability on their journey to the employment market. Based on an intake and assessment by CGVB, a plan is developed which can include several phases and which ends with the placement in a job and an evaluation.

Sheltered workshops were, in the 1960s, developed as an alternative to regular work places. However, they have been developing into valuable enterprises. This means that disabled people who could work in regular occupations are working in these places. Without these people and also an increasing number of non-disabled workers, these workplaces could not remain operative. The question can be asked whether these sheltered workshops still have enough of the workers for which they were intended.

#### **1.4 Type and quality of jobs (summary)**

Matching of demand and offer on the employment market is a difficult process and this is not different for disabled people. In Flanders there are specialised work-guidance services. There are large instruments to guide disabled people into the regular work market but there is also a security net in the form of sheltered workshops. In Belgium there are about 20000 people with disabilities who work in a sheltered workshop, of which about 75% people with intellectual disabilities. There are also quite a number of enclaves in regular working places. The number of people who work in sheltered workshops is stagnant, and there is little expectations that more growth can be expected. Flanders does not have a system of supported employment.

According to occupations, we find most of the people with functional limitations among household or service personnel (10%) and least among functionaries in the private sector (10%). There are also differences according to employments sectors. We find the least of person with functional limitations in the sector of sale en rental of buildings (5%) and the most in public services and private households with employees (9%)



## **PART TWO: SPECIFIC EXAMPLES**

### **2.1 Reasonable accommodation in the workplace**

Apart from wage subsidies, it is possible, that because of a disability, special provision need to be taken to adapt the workplace or to provide special equipment (or clothing). In 2001, the Flemish Agency provided 36 subventions for adaptation of the work place (to employers, of which some are self-employed) and 151 for work equipment or clothing (to persons with disabilities). Both the number of interventions and the amount have increased strongly in comparison with prior years. People with disabilities who are enrolled in the Flemish Agency can also be compensated for payment of travel expenses (and also for the person accompanying) for expenses to and from their work place. Persons who are enrolled in the Flemish Agency can make use of the bus service 'De Lijn' free of charge.

### **2.3 One example of best practice**

Perhaps the practice of guidance of people with disabilities towards employment (ATB arbeidstrajectbegeleidingsdiensten) can be seen as a well organized service. There are five such services in Flanders, one in each province. In their structure (composition of the governing board) and the type of work, they form a crossing point for the different services that support disabled people (assessment centres, educational centres, and sheltered workshops). From 2001 the ATB services has become embedded in the Local Workshops, which means that the guidance of workers towards specialized provisions for disabled people now also occurs through the Flemish Service for Employment Mediation (VDAB). As a result of the common guidance system of clients there is slowly developing a common management system of the entire group of people with functioning disabilities.



## PART THREE: SUMMARY INFORMATION

### 3.1 Conclusions and recommendations (summary)

In the Belgian-Flemish policies there are almost no obligations, although there is an anti-discrimination law (updated in 2007) and there well-developed, but not completely suitable, provisions to support disabled people and employers. All of those supporting provisions are Flemish, whereas the unemployment compensations are a federal matter (Samoy 2003).

Provisions aim to increase the employment capacities of disabled people, including rehabilitation and employment training. These provisions are separately organized in rehabilitation centres and specialised training centres. There are no signs that there is a shortage of training initiatives for specialised occupations, but there is equally no proof that all disabled people are well reached. Mostly the employment results after training are quite good but we do not know whether they are long-term. What we do observe is that there is a shortage of specialised in-service training for people with disabilities who are already working.

### 3.2 References

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