

Improved mobility of people with disabilities through harmonized procedures

Tuesday 22 October, 2013, 14.30-17.30

Committee of the Regions, room JDE53, Rue Belliard 101, B-1040 Brussels



- 14.00 Registration
- 14.30 **Welcome speech**
Simone Beissel, Vice-President of the CoR and Chairperson of the Commission for Economic and Social Policy (ECOS)
- 14.45 **Presentation of the High Level Group Inclusion**
Helmut Heinen, Managing Director of the Office of the German-speaking Community of Belgium for People with Disabilities
- 15.05 **A European Mobility Card**
Carlotta Besozzi, Director of the European Disability Forum
- 15.30 **Roundtable**
Representatives of the partner regions
- 17.00 Cocktail

Joëlle Floener welcomes the participants to the meeting and introduces herself. She explains that, seen, that in 2013 Luxembourg chairs the High Level Group Inclusion in 2013 she will have the honour to guide the participants through the agenda.

The conference languages will be German and English and simultaneous interpretation into these two languages is available. The participants have got in front of them all the relevant documents for the conference.

“Borders should not allow excluding people and everybody, with or without a disability, should be able to go for shopping or have leisure activities. The mobility of people needs to be guaranteed as a basic right of any person.”

She emphasizes that it was very important for all the partners to make the work of the High Level Group Inclusion largely known and that the organisation of the present conference, hosted by the Committee of the Regions, has been a very important challenge. She therefore expresses her thanks to Mrs Simone Beissel, vice-president of the Committee of the Regions, for having accepted straight away to host this meeting at the Committee of the Regions. By the same way, she apologizes for Mrs Beissel not being able to attend and to make her welcome speech due to anticipated national elections in Luxembourg.

Finally she thanks the participants for having joined the meeting and encourages everybody to contribute to the conference with questions and suggestions.

Then she passes the floor to Mr Helmut Heinen, director of the ... to explain the starting phase of the High Level Group's activities.

Presentation of the High Level Group Inclusion

Helmut Heinen, Managing Director of the Office of the German-speaking Community of Belgium for People with Disabilities

Mr Helmut Heinen explains the aim of the HLG that is to improve and to enhance the cross-border mobility of people with disabilities. The 1.01.1993 the barriers within the European Union were removed and people wanted to take benefit of that in order to increase their personal mobility. The German speaking region of Belgium then got in contact with their neighbour regions in order to explore how this could work.

He refers to a visit of President Jose Manuel Barroso in Liège a week ago and to a message in the President's speech calling for personal commitment of all those who want things to progress in Europe. And this is what the HLHI members did since the early 1990ies. He explains the "EureWelcome zone" covers a European region counting about 4,5 Million inhabitants, 4 member states and 7 federal regions. In 1999 a starting point was created by convening an inter-ministerial conference where the politicians responsible for this area signed an agreement to promote cross-border mobility and participation of people with disabilities.

The steering group of that agreement, today called "High Level Group Inclusion" or HLHI, is composed by representatives of the regions and bases its work on the UN Convention on the rights of people with disabilities. The steering group has based its main attention on 6 core topics all covering the inclusion of people with disabilities: employment, education, housing, tourism, leisure, accessibility and participation.

The HLGI is a committee of experts working cross border. It has a platform for exchanging knowledge and organising common projects in many different fields.

In the past, different products have been created by the HLGI, as for example the **EureCard**, the **Euregio for All competition** for best practice examples and the **EureWelcome label**.

The EureCard is a service card entitling to certain benefits in the HLHI area. Every partner was given the task to propagate this in the respective region. At the moment it is a reference to the European Commission for the creation of a European Mobility Card.

The Euregio for All competition was organised from 2005-2008 in order to promote the idea that cities should be more accessible to everybody in the 6 core topics mentioned before. Joint training activities for various actors and seminars were provided in different fields in order to improve cross border knowledge transfer. At the end of the project, an international jury selected the best projects and published them in a best practice catalogue.

The EureWelcome label has the aim of improving accessibility in the sense of treating all visitors in a nice and welcoming way, without making any difference between people with or without disabilities and in the sense of inclusion. The second aim is a volunteer commitment of service providers to reducing barriers and obstacles in their own premises. EureWelcome is a brand concentrating on the human dimension.

Accessibility has to be understood as an ongoing process and it is important to make all actors understand that this can be done step by step.

EureWelcome calls for taking into account human diversity and for providing reliable information on the level of accessibility, all this with respect to local cultures and traditions.

Those who accept to be labelled through the EureWelcome procedure, have to sign a commitment called the EureWelcome Charter and to provide reasonable accommodation to visitors or guests with disabilities. Furthermore the labelled institutions are invited to improve, whenever possible, the accessibility of their premises and services. Additionally the staffs have to welcome visitors and guests in a proper way.

In order to facilitate the provision of reliable information, the partners agreed on harmonizing their assessment method. Assessments are done by external assessors, specially trained for that task.

Another aspect of EureWelcome is the limitation in time of the label in order to take into account the ongoing process.

EureWelcome does not aim at replacing existing labels but just to be considered as an added value.

The aim of this meeting is to make the EureWelcome label better known and to spread the approach in more European regions.

Joelle Floener thanks Helmut Heinen for his presentation and passes the floor to Mrs Carlotta Besozzi, director of the European Disability Forum, to provide more explanations about the European Mobility Card.

A European Mobility Card

Carlotta Besozzi, Director of the European Disability Forum

Carlotta Besozzi thanks the organisers of the meeting and for the information received about the work of the HLGI.

The EDF has been engaged in a freedom of movement campaign in order to have a European Mobility Card to enhance the rights of people with disabilities and to remove existing barriers to their freedom of movement when going from one member state to another.

And the campaign refers to the UN CRPD as well.

There are different dimensions to take into consideration.

One dimension is legislation of course, like the European Accessibility Act for example. The idea of a European Mobility Card comes very close to the definition of a EuroCard entitling to discounts, especially in transport (but not to social allowances). Nowadays there are many local, regional and national differences when using certain services in Europe and this is a considerable barrier for people with disabilities. A European Mobility Card should allow facilitating their mobility.

The EDF made a review of the systems used in different countries and found out, that in many countries specific cards do not exist, what makes it difficult to persons with disabilities to access certain benefits linked to particular types of disabilities. This is already difficult at national levels and becomes a real challenge at European level.

Beyond the easiness of accessing certain benefits, such a card could trigger improvements in the general discussion about accessibility and non -discrimination.

A harmonized card would be an advantage as people would not be called to explain all the time why they should be entitled to certain benefits or to have to provide information about their disability. The European Parking Card has been a good example on how this could work.

The idea of a European Mobility Card was also taken up in the European Union Disability Strategy in 2010/2020 which has been supported by different European institutions.

The European Citizens Report from 2013 mentions, among its 11 sections, in action 6 the necessity of such a card.

The European Commission is setting up a working group having to work on the idea of the "IncluEUative Card" that is discussing what could be included in such a card and for which the EureCard is a good example. The experience of the HLG is very useful for this discussion and it could be interesting to present it at occasion of the European Day of People with Disabilities the 3rd December 2013 in Brussels.

(Note from Silvio Sagramola: Mrs Danielle Breyer, from the Ministry of Tourism, was indeed invited by the European Commission to present, on 3.12.2013 in Brussels, Luxembourg's method of dealing with accessible tourism and she described the Luxembourgish way of using EureWelcome.)

Joëlle Floener thanks Carlotta Besozzi for these explanations concerning a European Mobility Card and opens now the round table discussion. She asks the partners to present themselves and to explain how they use the EureWelcome approach in their respective regions.

Roundtable Representatives of the partner regions

Mr Roland Borosch introduces himself. He is the leader of the inclusion group in the Ministry of Labour, Integration and Social Affairs of North Rhine Westphalia and he represents also the Land North Rhine Westphalia.

Mr Martin Philippi represents the Agency "Barrier free" North Rhine Westphalia as being the operative partner of the Ministry of Labour, Integration and Social Affairs and specifically responsible for barrier free access.

Mr Helmut Heinen represents the German speaking community of Belgium within this group.

Mrs Elisabeth Masson represents the AWIPH

Mrs Danielle Breyer is from the Ministry of Tourism in Luxembourg and she is responsible for the EureWelcome label

Mr Silvio Sagramola is the Director of the National Disability and Meeting Center in Luxembourg.

Mrs Joëlle Floener represents the Ministry for Family Affairs and Integration.

Joëlle Floener: The EureWelcome Agreement has been signed by North Rhine Westphalia, the German speaking Community of Belgium and Luxembourg and will be, in a near future signed by Flanders and Wallonia. What does it mean for the partner regions and how will they link it with the existing labels in their regions?

Roland Borosch: NRW is a Land with 18 million inhabitants out of which 2,6 Million are considered to be persons with disabilities, what corresponds to 15% of the population. This is for sure a minority, but a social group that needs to be taken into consideration appropriately. It is a group that is quite heterogeneous and people have very different disabilities and needs calling for different measures. EureWelcome is an opportunity to address disability and accessibility especially in border regions. Our objective is to make sure that people who want to travel can do so without barriers and we want them to be able to move freely in our region as well.

We need to agree on common standards in this context and this is why EureWelcome is as important to us. We have in NRW criteria that go well beyond the EureWelcome label, but the label is a parcel of our own label and we believe that it is a very good thing that people can benefit from measures that have been agreed on by many different partners.

Silvio Sagramola: We had the good fortune in Luxembourg that we did not have a dedicated label to accessibility and so we agreed on taking over the EureWelcome label in Luxembourg. When it came then to developing accessibility standards, we received a good support from the Ministry for Family and Integration and later on, the Ministry for Tourism took over the responsibility for the promotion of the label. The label is granted to providers who fulfil the standards and has got a lot of recognition in Luxembourg.

Elisabeth Masson explains that Wallonia has not yet signed the agreement but that there is a strong intention to improving the regional tourism and to allow people with disabilities to be better included. That was the motivation for AWIPH to join the group. For the time being Wallonia is in a testing phase for a local accessibility label and, after that, the way on how it can be connected with EureWelcome will have to be worked out.

Joëlle Floener: EureWelcome aims at guaranteeing barrier free access. What is the importance of barrier free access in your region and what is happening concretely at that level?

Helmut Heinen: In the German speaking region of Belgium, we have, since 2007, a legal provision saying that all buildings subsidised by the Community must fulfil certain accessibility criteria and that means that even before the adoption of the decree, an awareness raising campaign had already taken place.

The first responsible for buildings and infrastructure must be made aware of the importance of that topic and they must understand that it is not only important for people with disabilities. So there is a need for a universal design that takes into account the needs of all members of Society. A lift is not

anymore a luxury article but a necessity for everybody. So this cross border initiative and exchange of information and knowledge is very important for our own progress.

Roland Borosch: in NRW the question of accessibility plays an important role. For an inclusive society we must be aware of the importance that people with disabilities are involved and this is particularly true for accessibility. We have created an "inclusion council" in which not only organisations of people with disabilities are represented but also experts from many different fields.

All laws and legal requirements were assessed in order to examine in how far it contained rules which might be problematic to barrier free movement. We want to make sure that all areas, not only infrastructure, but also information, or transport, or participation, etc... are improved in a way to make them barrier free. Our building requirements will be changed according to the UN CRPD.

In addition to that, together with the organisations of people with disabilities, we develop criteria to improve the accessibility of buildings; we have something like 400 criteria when we assess projects.

The criteria are available on the Internet platform of the Agency Barrier free and the results of all this work will be linked with the EureWelcome approach containing 100 criteria for the time being.

The assessments are carried out by volunteer representatives of all these organisations and they are trained for carrying out these assessments properly in order to have reliable data. This whole process will take a few years, we are aware of that, but we have started and want to go on together with the Agency Barrier free.

The process around accessibility is handled at different levels. The legal level, the factual level, etc...

Danielle Breyer: Coming to tourism in Luxembourg, accessibility plays an important role and since the existence of the EureWelcome label, tourism providers have been more aware of accessibility. The label is not limited to tourism offers, but is also allocated to special events and even commercial infrastructures, like supermarkets.

We have taken on the administrative management of the project, but the practical tasks are carried out by Info-Handicap on our behalf.

Silvio Sagramola: we have tried continuously to expand the EureWelcome label to all kinds of infrastructure and services, as we believe that accessibility is an important prerequisite to the inclusion of people with disabilities.

On the other hand we started very early in Luxembourg to not limiting the question of accessibility to people with disabilities but to include all the citizens into the discussion in the spirit of a real Design for All approach.

In Luxembourg there is quite a good awareness towards accessibility and inclusion, but this does not mean that it is easy. We have laws and awareness, and also the willingness to provide a good level of accessibility, but the practical knowledge is lacking. So there are many different interpretations of what accessibility means and very often people do limit it to physical barriers for people with disabilities only.

This requires ongoing information and training activities, including training for people with disabilities and they have to be involved into the discussion about human rights and non-discrimination and to be empowered.

Therefore we have set up a working group with a very distinctive name: MEGA what is the abbreviation for *Multidisciplinary Experts Group on Accessibility*. In this group we have got these two levels including the technical experts and, in the same time, representatives of organisations of people with disabilities. These representatives have the clear task to know about the technical elements and to be able to link them with the particular needs of the populations that they represent in order to come to feasible results. Later on, they are responsible for explaining to their respective members what has been agreed on.

Joëlle Floener asks Mr Silvio Sagramola to explain the philosophy that is behind the EureWelcome label

Silvio Sagramola: We are lucky to use the EureWelcome label as our national label in Luxembourg and so we were in the good position to be able to bring a lot of input into the discussions of the High Level Group Inclusion.

For us the EureWelcome has to be a quality guarantee, what means that the information provided through the label must be reliable.

This can only be achieved if the assessment is done by properly trained assessors.

The information must be presented in a way that a person with a disability can find out whether an infrastructure of service fits with his or her particular needs and can make his or her decision.

The information in itself must be presented in an accessible way, allowing people with different disabilities to access the information in different formats.

This means that the EureWelcome label does not express the fact that an infrastructure or a service is fully accessible, but it says that reliable information about that infrastructure or service is available allowing interested persons to make their decision.

Joëlle Floener: Every region organises the award of the label in a different way. Can you provide information about your procedures?

Elisabeth Masson: In Wallonia the procedures are in process. If you want a label you have to contact the organisation Gamah who for the time are developing assessment tools and the rules for the award. The responsible governmental bodies in Wallonia are evaluating the process for the time being.

Helmut Heinen: We do our own assessments for the time being, but we are very interested in common trainings for the assessors in order to come to comparable results.

We got demands from the tourism industry and we are carrying out assessments in this field. Now we have to analyse, together with our Government, how the label has to be awarded, but we also follow the criteria that a common agreement is necessary and we consider the cooperation in the High Level Group as an added value to our own work.

Roland Borosch: Quoting a famous theoretician Daniele Toletto who spoke about “*Unity in diversity is important*”. In the different regions we have different references when we assess and evaluate accessibility and this label brings us together and unifies our approaches. This is an important signal for people with disabilities as well. And this is the meaning and strength of the EureWelcome label.

Danielle Breyer: The cooperation with Info-Handicap is very important for the Ministry and we trust on them for guiding us when it comes to awarding those who deserve it.

Silvio Sagramola: The support by the ministry of tourism is indeed a very powerful instrument. On the other hand the assessment of infrastructures is not done for free and has to be paid for by the owners. We do not expect the owners to do a good deed, but we help them to improve their offer and to become more attractive to clients and guests. This is a service that has a price such as other services that have to be paid for and we do not believe that it should be the Government or the local authority to pay for that service and for the training that is automatically included in the whole process.

It was very important for us to get away from a charity approach.

Joëlle Floener wonders how other regions, interested in joining the EureWelcome approach, could do so.

Helmut Heinen: I can assure new candidates that we have been cooperating cross border for 15 years now, and I can assure that it is a very gratifying experience. I would really wish the HLGI to grow and to be enlarged. So, everybody is welcome.

Roland Borosch: Inclusion requires partners and we have a kind of inclusive partnership that is not only based on barrier free access. We exchange views on labour market, education, etc... and the UN CRPD. It can be really helpful to exchange with other people on how to approach this themes. In this regard the HLGI can benefit those who want to have a supplemental insight when it comes to implement.

Elisabeth Massson: the participation in the HLGI is a good opportunity for exchanging good practice and to carry out common projects.

Silvio Sagramola: We agree that diversity constitutes enrichment. In Europe we have a lot of different information and sometimes reading a lot of documents and reports may be confusing. So the possibility to meet and to exchange views and opinions can be very helpful for opening our mind.

The European Mobility Card is a good example of this. More dialogue is needed and helps to overcome problems.

Joëlle Floener addresses the audience and asks for questions.

Questions from the Audience:

1. How is the reaction of the tourism industry to this initiative? Good feedback? Did barrier free access improve due to the EureWelcome initiative?
2. EureWelcome promotes the idea of better information and the question is, if we should move forward and come to standardised criteria at European level?

→ Even though we don't have objective results, I am pretty sure the success we have had with Euregio for All have brought a change in our region. There is a competition in best practice examples and there is still a competition putting forward the idea of better accessibility.

→ As far as Luxembourg is concerned, it has become clear that EureWelcome is a success story. Due to the support of the Ministry of Tourism it has even gained in importance. We receive more and more requests for assessments.

→ As far as Germany is concerned, the proportion of elderly people is increasing and all these people will also benefit from better accessibility.

→ There are so many legal standards in Europe and it will be hard to believe that anybody is willing to give up their standards for other ones. So I believe that it makes more sense to share strategies and concentrate on the "how" to collect information and to publicize them, instead of fighting for centimetres.

→ The European Commission has asked the European Standardization bodies to come up with common criteria, even if it is in the long term. In the meantime it is important to involve people with disabilities in the whole process and to opt for a process of participation.

Questions from the Audience:

3. I come from Bulgaria. My husband has a disability and I would like to know if the EureCard can only be used by people from the Euregio or if it can only be used for transport?

→ I don't know if Bulgaria is involved in the discussion about the European Mobility Card and Carlotta can for sure provide more detailed information about the representative of your country. The EureCard is an initiative of this HLG limited to the Euregio.

Questions from the Audience:

4. Usage of the gathered data. Is it possible to share these data with other portals?

→ We have not addressed this answer yet.

→ We have on several occasions discussed the question of linking information via the Internet. The data have been gathered according to a particular method and the question is how to create such links and what will be the language to be used? And there will also be the question about the quality of the information. But unfortunately we haven't found the answer to that question.

Joëlle Floener thanks all the participants for having joined the conference and encourages everybody to fill in the evaluation form and invites everybody to the cocktail.

Joëlle Floener thanks the interpreters for their good job and Mr. Borosch thanks the Luxembourg coordination for having organised this conference.