



Disability Federation of Ireland

**Presentation on the Future of Europe to the Joint Oireachtas Committee
on European Union Affairs**

13th December 2017

Introduction:

The purpose of this presentation is to highlight the vital role which the EU plays in the lives of people with disabilities across the EU and within Ireland. DFI insists that social inclusion must be the driving force for the future of the EU. And persons with disabilities and the EU's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UN CRPD, must be central to this.

The Disability Federation of Ireland, DFI is an organisation which represents its member organisations which support people with disabilities across the whole range of disabilities.

DFI is active at local, national and EU level. It represents people with disabilities of Ireland at the European Disability Forum, EDF and is also a member of the European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities, EASPD. Our CEO, John Dolan (also a Senator) serves on the board of both. DFI is also a member of the Better Europe Alliance and the European Anti-Poverty Network Ireland, EAPN.

EAPN made a submission to this Committee's public consultation on the Future of Europe. DFI also made its own submission to the Committee focused on people with disabilities and the EU. And it is this submission which forms the bulk of this presentation, with some updates. The updates are based on the proceedings of the 4th European Parliament of Persons with Disabilities, EPPD. DFI led a delegation of 11 people to represent Ireland at the EPPD in Brussels. This took place on the 6th December 2017. However DFI would also direct the Committee to the fuller detail of position papers which were adopted at EPPD.¹

As per DFI's original submission however, it draws particularly on a Resolution of the EDF board on the Rome Summit from March 2017² and is informed by its

¹ EDF Resolution on the European Disability Strategy 2020-2030, http://www.edf-feph.org/sites/default/files/final_resolution_on_european_disability_strategy.pdf
EDF Manifesto on the European Elections 2019, http://www.edf-feph.org/sites/default/files/edf_manifesto_on_the_european_elections_2019_-_final.pdf
Emergency Resolution on the European Accessibility Act http://www.edf-feph.org/sites/default/files/edf_emergency_resolution_accessibility_act_.pdf

² Resolution on the Rome Summit, Adopted by the EDF board on 19th February 2017 in Malta

work with EASPD. The White Paper on the Future of Europe was the European Commission's contribution to that Summit.

Submission:

All EU Member States, except Ireland, have individually ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UN CRPD. But the EU as an entity has also ratified the UN CRPD. It has gone beyond being shameful to being downright embarrassing for Ireland. It damages our credibility and legitimacy on human rights and disability related matters at EU level. The Future of Europe consultations are an opportunity for Ireland. An opportunity to advocate and push for the inclusion of people with disabilities. And to rebuild Ireland's reputation and esteem as a champion for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

The EU is a precious democratic body. It was established to build a peaceful common future in Europe, and to create a stable and prosperous continent for all Europeans. 60 years on and the EU has a very different form. It has been through and continues to experience countless challenges, changes, successes, and crises, and all in a broader context of shifting power and global upheaval.

The context and impact of these are well documented in the White Paper and related documents and so will not be unduly repeated here. However the most persistent and significant for the last decade is the economic crisis. It is therefore worth considering one crucial question: what makes it a 'crisis'? It is not a crisis because of the loss of money, jobs and services, or the economic uncertainty or disruption to systems in and of themselves. It is a crisis because of the affects which these have on the lives of people in the EU.

Article 3 of the Treaty of the European Union states that:

'The Union's aim is to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples.'

Article 2 sets out its values as follows:

‘The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.’

Over the past decade the EU has demonstrated that it can act with determination, with strength and with resolve. However, poverty, exclusion and inequalities have grown across Europe and the EU and are at unacceptable levels. The people most affected are people already marginalised and disadvantaged across the EU - including people with disabilities. This is a dire disconnect with the EU’s founding aim and values. The EU must urgently take strong, determined and resolute action to improve the lives of people with disabilities, in line with its commitments under the UN CRPD.

There are 80 million persons with disabilities in the EU and by 2020 more than 100 million Europeans will have a disability. Disability impacts directly on the lives of persons with disabilities themselves, but also on the persons close to them, including families, friends and carers.

Despite this, there have been drastic cuts in social services and benefits for persons with disabilities across the EU. This has caused stagnation of and blockages to the process of deinstitutionalisation or ‘decongregation’ as it is called in Ireland. Deprivation of freedom and legal capacity also persists for many people with disabilities across the EU. There is a worrying implementation deficit of policies for equality, inclusion and community living.

Freedom of movement is one of the four basic freedoms under the EU Treaties and yet currently persons with disabilities cannot exercise this right fully and freely. Most of the goods and services in the EU internal market are not fully accessible to persons with disabilities.

Whatever future lies ahead for the EU, it must fully incorporate the UN CRPD and the rights of persons with disabilities and their families into every decision, initiative, policy and law. The EU has ratified and thereby committed to implementing the UN CPRD, whatever shape the Union takes.

In line with the OECD's recommendations on addressing public sector challenges,³ this incorporation and inclusion of the UN CRPD must be systemic and comprehensive in its approach. Issues and challenges must be traced back to the root cause. The EU cannot keep firefighting or dealing with issues in siloes. Policies, across all areas, including economic and social, are interlinked and interdependent. They do not exist in a vacuum; they affect each other and ultimately the lives of people, including people with disabilities.

Key to this is the fuller involvement of people with disabilities and their representative organisations in decision making and implementation processes. This is expertise which should be drawn on to inform how to meet the EU's objectives and commitments.

Crucially, the EU must develop a new Disability Rights Agenda for 2020-2030 to provide an overarching and comprehensive strategy for implementation of the UN CRPD. And it must maximise inclusion and improvement of living conditions of people with disabilities through the European Pillar of Social Rights.

EU funds must follow and be administered in line with social policies and laws. European Funds have already positively assisted implementation of the UN CRPD in Europe. For instance, the EU Funds are used to finance the work that EU countries do to promote accessibility and non-discrimination. In this way, they contribute to the removal of barriers to participation in society. But there is considerable room to build on this. The EU should incentivise compliance with the UN CRPD through the administration of EU Funds and the European Semester Process.

DFI would highlight that millions of refugees need support. People with disabilities and their families are often unable to travel and to escape from war and misery. When they are able to do so, the experience can be especially dangerous. The EU must be ready and willing to support refugees with disabilities. Special consideration must also be given to the particular experiences of women and girls

³ OECD (2017), *Systems Approaches to Public Sector Challenges: Working with Change*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

with disabilities. But more broadly DFI would call on the EU to address intersectional discrimination of people with disabilities.

Finally, in preparations and negotiations in relation to Brexit, DFI urges that account be taken of particular impacts it will have on the lives of persons with disabilities.

The EU has been a vital and positive force in the furtherance of human rights and quality of life for people with disabilities. It must build on this and champion the rights of people with disabilities into the future.

Fiona O'Donovan
Disability Federation of Ireland



DFI is about making Ireland fairer for people with disabilities.

We work to create an Ireland where everyone can thrive, where everyone is equally valued.

We do this by supporting people with disabilities and strengthening the disability movement.

There are over 120 member organisations in DFI. We also work with a growing number of other organisations that have a significant interest in people with disabilities.

DFI provides:

- Information
- Training and Support
- Networking
- Advocacy and Representation
- Research, Policy Development and Implementation
- Organisation and Management Development

Disability is a societal issue and DFI works with Government, and across all the social and economic strands and interests of society.

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