

Championing the rights of the disabled

Written by Stelios Kypouropoulos on 3 December 2019 in Opinion
Opinion

The European Day of Persons with Disabilities is a chance to invest in the whole of society, writes Greek EPP deputy Stelios Kypouropoulos.



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I remember when I was growing up. Watching people, I realised that people are blessed with different kinds of gifts; some gifts are visible, others need to be cultivated. In fact, our lives are on a spectrum of challenges and comforts.

Therefore, we need to wonder whether all challenges are negative by default. Personally, I see every challenge in the same way as I see a dam – it has been built to create a new lake or allow hydroelectric power generation.

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When I was young, I saw myself unable to go left or right by myself, so I could only go up. Therefore, we should define every problem as a push to improve ourselves. For me, learning has been my unique way of moving forward. Isn't it like this for everyone?

If people want to catch to catch fish, they need a fishing rod. This is why social policy is essential. First, we need an inclusive educational design; one that is personalised and student-driven. Education is the investment with the biggest profit for society.

Second, optimal mobility for all must be guaranteed. Some need personal help, others the right instruments, but we all need a degree of attention. The structures have to be sustainable and - as the ever-changing nature of technology has shown - they must be accessible and easily re-adaptable.

"Institutions that limit, segregate and confine people have no place to exist in what is the cradle of functioning democracy and equality at the outset of the 2020s"

This is a process which academia and policy makers would refer to as the "Sustainable Community Design", a process of pursuing continuous innovation. Clearly, what is called "institutionalisation" for disabled people must be of the question.

Institutions that limit, segregate and confine people have no place to exist in what is the cradle of functioning democracy and equality at the outset of the 2020s. We must say 'no' to institutionalisation in Europe.

We either already have in place the appropriate social structures or we must create them. This should be underlined as my priority. Unfortunately, there remain institutions for disabled with European funding. This is absurd.

Thankfully, there are networks that can assist Europe's transformation at the local and regional levels, to make it more inclusive. The European Commission has made a good plan to support their work with the right financial instruments.

I think that the European awards, like the EU Access City Award, can create a positive symbiosis between different actors that will benefit the disabled people and society as a whole. I visualise an EU that acts as a global lighthouse in the way in which it provides opportunities for its disabled people.

I envisage an EU Centre of Excellence providing the appropriate, future-proof skills online for disabled people. Since my election, I have been trying to convince my colleagues and the European Commission to make this a reality. More than anything else, I believe in the value of employment.

"If a disabled person is willing to go through so much in their daily life for a small action, this should act as a reminder for able-bodied people to try a little more"

In addition, I think we need to pay special attention to our fellow citizens with mental health issues. There are best practices for including them as part of society, allowing them to work and be happy as well as to permitting their family and friends to share their happiness.

The strong EU's strong commitment to human dignity is highlighted by the actions it takes. I can assure you that providing dignity for disabled people, as well as people with mental conditions, more than pays back the investment to the whole of society.

The principal message is that people have to do the extra mile. If a disabled person is willing to go through so much in their daily life for a small action, this should act as a reminder for able-bodied people to try a little more, as the famous hashtag #YesWeCan puts it.

We all can be a better version of ourselves and that should be the goal of good policy. I am proud to see more and more disabled people becoming mentors and inspirational figures for the whole of society.

Equally important is overcoming our minor differences, the silos that societies have created. It does not matter whether you are left wing or right wing, black or white, Fleming or Walloon, as Michael Jackson and Stromae suggested in their song.

What matters is to care; caring makes us better people. The European Day of Persons with Disabilities is one opportunity to ensure that more people, beyond the core, have the opportunity to be informed, through discussions, internet campaigns and social media. Let's seize this opportunity.

About the author

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