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# The Employability of Persons with Disabilities and Groups at Risk in Enterprises of Skills Development: International Perspective of Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)

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[See table of contents](#)

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## The Employability of Persons with Disabilities and Groups at Risk in Enterprises of Skills Development : International Perspective of Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)

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### Abstract

This account explores the employability of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in enterprises of skills development in eleven countries (Canada, Brazil, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Slovakia, Romania, Uganda and Afghanistan). Participatory research approach is used including empirical component in Canada, aspiring to inform labour market policies, namely access/accessibility and safety nets. Results show that enterprises (N=39) are somehow serving PWDs, but they do not have special provisions to reinforce disability focused services. Particularly, there are inadequate disability policies and a limited presence of disabled people in programs. This is possibly due to limited workplace accommodations, limited capacity and lack of resources. The research calls for an activation of Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) into the sector of enterprises, coupled with capacity building in disability policy research and after placement services. In essence, this means: increasing employability opportunities; reducing vulnerability through social protection and reinforcing the capacity of enterprises.

**Keywords :** employability and skills development, persons with disabilities, groups at risk, practice firms and social enterprises, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, labour policies, safety nets, accessibility

### Résumé

Cet article explore les mesures favorisant l'employabilité des personnes ayant des incapacités déployées dans les entreprises d'entraînement actives dans onze pays (Canada, Brésil, Espagne, Italie, Suisse, Belgique, Luxembourg, Slovaquie, Roumanie, Ouganda et Afghanistan). Une approche de recherche participative a été employée, de même que des études de cas empiriques, afin de soutenir l'élaboration de meilleures politiques en lien avec le marché du travail, notamment en ce qui concerne les mesures d'accès/d'accessibilité et de protection sociale. Les résultats montrent que si les entreprises (N=39) soutiennent les personnes ayant des incapacités, elles ne leur offrent souvent pas de services permettant de répondre à leurs besoins spécifiques. On note tout particulièrement l'absence de politiques favorisant leur intégration et un faible nombre de personnes ayant des incapacités dans leurs programmes. Cette situation est possiblement due aux manques de ressources, de moyens et d'aménagements proposés. Cette recherche appelle à la mise en œuvre de la Convention relative aux droits des personnes handicapées dans le secteur des entreprises, ainsi qu'au renforcement des capacités en recherche dans le champ des politiques les concernant. L'article conclut en invitant les acteurs à augmenter le nombre d'opportunités d'emploi leur étant disponibles, à mettre en place des mesures de protection sociale pour réduire leur vulnérabilité et à renforcer les capacités des entreprises les accueillant.

**Mots-clés :** employabilité et développement des compétences, personnes ayant des incapacités, groupes à risque, entreprises sociales et d'entraînement, Convention relative aux droits des personnes handicapées, politiques dans le champ de l'emploi, mesures de protection sociale, accessibilité

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<sup>1</sup> [www.handicapdev.ca](http://www.handicapdev.ca)

## Introduction

Recent years have witnessed high rates of unemployment and this has been aggravated by the current global economic crisis. Those who lost jobs require improvement in their employability skills in order to reenter the labour market. This is particularly true for certain groups such as young people, long-term job seekers and persons with disabilities (PWDs). For transition into adulthood and integration in the labour market, employability and skills development is paramount. Although work is key element in PWDs' well-being and integration, recent trends in labour markets is characterised by a significant higher unemployment rate of PWDs perpetuated by rigid patterns of job search or recruitment and lack of work accommodation which negatively impact employment outcomes. Therefore, it can be argued that the employability (ability to obtain, maintain and retain employment) does inform labour market policy and subsequent socio-economic inclusion of PWDs. This is because their socio-economic inclusion is strongly tied to employability skills and labour market accommodation as will be seen in the subsequent sections of this analysis.

This account explores the employability of people with disabilities (PWDs) in skills development enterprises<sup>2</sup> in eleven countries which signed or ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006). The participating eleven countries include: Canada, Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Spain, Italy, Brazil, Slovakia, Ro-

mania, Uganda and Afghanistan. A multilingual online survey was filled out by participating countries while a participatory research approach was used with an empirical component in Canada, aspiring to inform labour market policies related to employability, namely access/accessibility and safety nets.

Results show that enterprises (N=39) are somehow serving PWDs, but they do not have special provisions to reinforce disability focused services. Particularly, there are inadequate disability policies and a limited presence of disabled people in programs. This is possibly due to limited workplace accommodations, limited capacity and lack of resources. The research calls for an activation of CRPD into the sector enterprises, coupled with capacity building in disability policy research and after placement services. In essence, this means: increasing employability opportunities; reducing vulnerability through social protection and reinforcing the capacity of enterprises.

This analysis comprises four sections in addition to the methodology used in this research. Section One presents an analysis of poverty and social exclusion in relation to employability arguing for a correlation between restricted access to training facilities to unemployment and poverty. Empirical data reinforces this argument, making poverty a global phenomenon that is increasingly widespread in the developed world. This section concludes by highlighting the important role of safety nets in social protection and in reducing vulnerability.

The second and third sections focus on concept, application and employability policy. Section Two provides different conceptual definitions that recognize the instrumental role of employability in labour market integration. Section Three looks at employability from a global policy perspective detailing historical and present day provisions for the employability of PWDs. It looks at international instruments that affirm employability rights, in particular International Labour Organization (ILO) and United Nations (UN) conventions.

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<sup>2</sup> In this research, the term 'enterprise' refers to a variety of social driven ventures including practice firms who provide training services for skills development. Although not necessarily profit based, these organizations do generate revenues to cover running cost and create employment in the local community. A practice firm is a realistic simulation of a business with all of its administrative functions except the actual production and exchange of money, which remain fictitious. Worldwide they are networked by the 'European Practice Enterprises Network' (EUROPEN - [www.cms.europen.info](http://www.cms.europen.info)). In Canada, practice firms are coordinated by 'Canadian Practice Firm Network' comprising of 45 enterprises ([www.rcee-cpfn.ca](http://www.rcee-cpfn.ca)).



Section Four reports the main findings of this research with respect to service providers and their clientele. Empirical views obtained from focus group discussions in Gatineau (Canada) are also presented in this section. This section includes varying barriers to employability in the sector of enterprises.

The paper concludes with policy recommendations highlighting guidelines for possible future action to increase employability opportunity and reduce the vulnerability of PWDs in this sector.

## Methodology

This international study involves three research stages: online surveys, interviews and focus group discussions. Individual and group meetings made part of empirical data collection at provincial and federal levels in Gatineau (Canada). Individual interviews were carried out with service managers and planners of employment services as well as focus group discussions with a number of PWDs (employed, unemployed, and those attending training or retraining facilities). The bulk of the data for the international perspective in this study however, was obtained from an online multilingual survey (English/French/Spanish) filled out by a number of enterprises in the participating countries in 2010. For example, the English survey can be accessed at: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/MMG89HY>. There were 39 enterprises in total that took part in this research and filled out the online surveys. Those enterprises refer to organizations delivering training and skills development services necessary for integration or reintegration in the labor market. They include mostly practice firms associated with European Practice Enterprises Network' ([www.cms.europen.info](http://www.cms.europen.info)), but there are also few other enterprises that could be classified as social enterprises, providing training or short-term paid work in Quebec (Canada). In Canada, practice firms are coordinated by 'Canadian Practice Firm Network' comprising of 45 enterprises ([www.rcee-cpfn.ca](http://www.rcee-cpfn.ca)).

The data was mainly analyzed using qualitative interpretation and there was limited statistical

analysis with SPSS. Given the exploratory nature of this study, results and recommendations should be understood as policy pointers and as justifications for further research into employability of PWDs in light of CRPD.

This research adopts a participatory approach to planning where the onus is put on the involvement of users (i.e. PWDs) in the process of decisions concerning their employment. In the empirical stage of this research (field work in Canada), users were involved in various ways in an attempt to further their emancipation in the area of employability and eventually labour market integration.

## Disability, poverty and social exclusion

Poverty remains one of the major obstacles for achieving development goals, peace and prosperity. The face of poverty is changing and its magnitude is spreading not only in traditional developing countries but also increasingly in the developed world. For example, between 2009 and 2011, there were increasing numbers of people using food banks across Canada estimated at 900,000 people each month (Food Banks Canada, 2011). Among the most vulnerable are children, youth and PWDs. Statistics Canada puts child poverty at 12% in 2009 (Statistics Canada, 2010). Young adults are affected by poverty, especially those who live on the streets, estimated at 250,000 homeless people. Fortunately, Canadian social safety nets are fairly effective and an estimated 1.7 million people receive welfare. This number has sharply increased since the global economic crisis of 2008 (ISQ, 2011). The situation in the United States (US) is not much better since one in seven Americans lives in poverty with several million on social assistance and unemployment welfare according to the US Census Bureau (2010). Worldwide, it is estimated that up to 100 million additional people have fallen into extreme poverty as a result of the 2008 food crisis (ILO, 2011). Social safety nets for the most vulnerable (i.e. PWDs) are necessary to mitigate negative economic shocks and the impact of troubled labour markets on food prices and household poverty

(Canuto & Giugale, 2010; FAO, 2011; World Bank, 2011).

Throughout the world, there is significant evidence that PWDs - estimated at more than one billion (World Report on Disability, 2011) - are disproportionately misrepresented in the labour force compared to the general population. Worldwide, it is estimated that there are 470 million working aged PWDs. Despite possessing aptitudes and potentials similar to the general public, the majority of them remain unemployed, 50 to 80% depending on the country (ILO, 2006). When they are employed, they tend to hold low paying jobs, are the first to lose their jobs and last to re-employ. Exclusion from work is strongly linked to poverty, but also to low levels of employability. In the capitalist world, work is a defining feature of everyday life, not only for providing everyday substance, but also as a means for self-identity (Somavia, 2001). People who are excluded from work due to disabling barriers are thus labelled as non-productive members of society and are pushed further into the cycle of poverty and exclusion. Recent research on Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries including the majority of participating countries in this study affirms the link between disability, poverty and social exclusion (Shima, Zólyomi, & Zaidi, 2008; OECD, 2011). Research elsewhere highlights poverty and social exclusion among PWDs due to unemployment and lack of employability skills (O'Riley, 2007). The higher unemployment rate among PWDs could be partly explained by the lack of employability skills gained through education, vocational training or other means (USAID, 2009). In addition, various physical and attitudinal barriers further exclude PWDs from recruitment processes and subsequent employment, pushing them into the margin of poverty and reinforce the link between poverty and disability. This is true in developing countries, and increasingly in the developed world.

Widespread poverty in developed countries is increasingly adding yet another challenge to the UN millennium development goals (MDGs) claiming to reduce poverty in half by 2015. In

Canada for example, 10.7% of the population lives in poverty and for working aged PWDs poverty rate is 22.4% according to The Council of Canadians with Disabilities (2010). A fresh look at the concept of poverty and strategies for poverty reduction (PRSP) is necessary, focusing on both creating employment and social protection by involving PWDs in the process as partners rather than just recipients of services (Stienstra, Fricke, & D'Aubin, 2002; Hartley, 2006; Coleridge, Simonnot, & Steverlynck, 2010; Barnes & Sheldon, 2010). These partnerships makes sense since recent UN statistics show 82% of PWDs in developing countries live below the poverty line, and they make between 15 to 20% of the world's poor (Hope, 2003).

Given the above situation, welfare (social assistance) plays an important part of the social safety net for PWDs in Canada as elsewhere. For the unemployed, those with no other source of income or those who are not entitled to other benefits, welfare is the last resort (Malacrida, 2010). Statistics show a substantial proportion of Canada's total welfare caseload is made up of PWDs. This is typically true in the province of Ontario where the total welfare caseload for PWDs in 2009 was just over 50% (ISQ, 2011; MCSS, 2011). The Canadian welfare program is typically based on 'needs test' to determine eligibility, type and amount of benefits from welfare. Welfare however comes with a price tag attached to it for both people with or without disabilities alike. When welfare recipients try to break free from social assistance and move into the workforce, they lose access to vital supports such as access to health care (i.e. prescription drugs, dental and vision care, and child care) which are generally not available to the working poor.

Social welfare systems provide disincentives<sup>3</sup> for employment is well founded and could be regarded as the reason behind high unemployment rates among PWDs in the West as well as in this research (Golden & Jones, 2001;

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<sup>3</sup> Luxembourg, has overcome this situation by providing financial incentives to PWDs who move from benefits to work to compensate for possible loss of income (OECD, 2010a).



MacDonald, 2007; OECD, 2009a; WHO, 2011). This places heavy demands on an already stretched social welfare system. The Federal Disability Report of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) 2010 puts the employment rate for working aged Canadians with disabilities at 53.5% in 2006 compared with 75.1% of people without disability. The unemployment rate for PWDs is 10.4% compared to 6.8% for people without disabilities. According to PALS, in 2006, the employment rate for persons with disabilities reached 44.9% in Quebec (Statistics Canada, 2008) and the unemployment rate was 14.7% for PWDs compared to 7.9% for people without disabilities (HRSDC, 2010). Although poverty is a priority<sup>4</sup> issue on the government's agenda with solidarity issues included in the 2010 federal budget (PAEC, 2010), PWDs continue to live on low household incomes and experience social exclusion (OPHQ, 2009).

It is interesting to look at the perspective of Disability Rights Organisations (DPOs) in Quebec as voiced by Confédération des organismes provinciaux de personnes handicapées du Québec (COPHAN), on employability and employment services which go in line with empirical evidence of this research. COPHAN (2007) expressed their utmost dissatisfaction of the current initiative targeting employability and fighting poverty and social exclusion in Quebec<sup>5</sup> where they ascertained the "total failure of employability of PWDs despite 'good intentions' of governments and other partners" (p. 5).

To conclude, social exclusion is evident among PWDs especially in the presence of poverty and unemployment. Such exclusion raises an ethical issue concerning the lost opportunity for labour market participation, loss of financial revenues and high spending on benefits

(OECD, 2009b). The latter is important in reducing vulnerability, but can be effective when combined with measures to increase opportunities for labour market integration through employment and employability services. An attempt to estimate the financial cost of excluding PWDs from the economy in Canada in 2001, using a calculation formula developed by Buckup (2009), showed a varied loss of \$US26.6 to \$US36.6 billion. Worldwide, Metts puts this figure at a maximum of up to \$US2 trillion of global economic loss (Metts, 2000).

### Employability: Concept and application

Employability (ability to obtain, maintain and retain employment) does inform labour market policy, determining its size, operation and future direction. According to McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) the concept of employability is tightly linked to employment and labour market policies, supply and demand. The current global economic crisis caused unemployment to rise sharply and those who lost their jobs need to upgrade their employability skills in order to re-enter labour market when possible (ILO, 2011).

There are various definitions for the term 'employability', which all revolve around a mix of personal and contextual factors related to skills and the labour market. These include: assets (knowledge, skills and attitudes); how these assets are deployed in the labour market and to employers; and the context in which they are deployed (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Wilton, 2011). It is the interplay of above factors that lead to a state of employability. In Canada this term is defined by Conference Board of Canada (CBC, 2000) as: "The skills you need to enter, stay in, and progress in the world of work - whether you work on your own or as part of a team". This understanding is in line with ILO's international definition (ILO, 2004) and comprises three essential components: fundamental skills (communication, numeracy, management of information and problem solving); personal management skills (positive attitudes and behaviour, adaptability, responsibility, continued learning and awareness of work safety); and teamwork skills (working with others and

<sup>4</sup> A pioneer policy is notable in Quebec's 'Act 112' which includes a strategy to combat poverty and social exclusion through the creation of employment, strengthening of safety nets and building individual capacity and employability skills (MESS, 2008a).

<sup>5</sup> The limited or poor access to services including financial has negative consequences on health status of PWDs and often leads to social exclusion (Fougeyrolas, Beauregard, Gaucher et Boucher 2008).

participation in projects and tasks) (CBC, 2000).

Employability skills are hardly sufficient on their own – they are part of a bigger parcel. The provision of training needs to be linked to other levels of employment process. Watson, Williams, Wickham, Kyle and Dury (2005) found three important elements in improving access to employment: employability skills, connecting people with work and equal opportunities in the workplace. A recent discussion organized by the World Bank in 2006 highlights the key role of intermediaries in connecting PWDs with potential employers, emphasizing the importance of building the capacity of such intermediaries with service users (PWDs) participating in planning such programs (Roggero, Tarricone, Nicoli & Mangiaterra, 2006). Respondents in this research highlighted the importance of the above issues and emphasized the urgent need for an effective policy of follow up. The ‘follow-up’ stage was made an inseparable step in the US Agency for International Development (USAID) model for skills training and employment consisting of six key components: job preparation (orientation services), job development, job match, job placement and job training ‘employability skills’, and follow up services (USAID, 2009).

Regardless of definitions, employability is closely linked to sets of abilities and competences that enable someone to perform job related activities. Such skills are different from one person to another (individual differences are especially notable among PWDs) and such differences should be taken into account when determining the ‘best fit’ between job and job seeker or other courses of action such as training program or welfare benefits.

### **Employability policies in global perspective**

Disability has been long debated as a human rights issue, especially in the past decade with a separate international instrument coming to promote and protect their rights, including the right for employment and labour market integration. The CRPD (2006) affirmed the above rights clearly in Articles 27, 28 and 32. Howev-

er, it should be pointed out that other instruments<sup>6</sup> in place have played an important role in promoting and protecting the rights of PWDs, namely the ILO Convention concerning Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons) No. 159 and recommendation (No. 168) of 1983. Together with CRPD (2006), they can have an impact on global policies and programs dealing with PWDs in the labour market.

CRPD (2006) has fully exploited previous conventions related to training and work culminating in a thorough and detailed article devoted to labour market integration in relation to employability. Article 27 (1) d and K states:

1. State Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities. States Parties shall safeguard and promote the realization of the right to work, including for those who acquire a disability during the course of employment, by taking appropriate steps, including through legislation to, inter alia:

(d) Enable persons with disabilities to have effective access to general technical and vocational guidance programs, placement services and vocational and continuing training;

(k) Promote vocational and professional rehabilitation, job retention and return-to-work programs for persons with disabilities. (p. 19-20)

The CRPD has affirmed rights in other conventions, but also added a political, legal and moral weight to the rights of PWDs for employment and labour market integration. With the social

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<sup>6</sup> Other international instruments pertinent to employability includes: ILO’s Human Resources Development Convention, 1975 (No. 142) and Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948).



model of disability<sup>7</sup>, equal opportunity and non-discrimination ideals integrated in the convention, CRPD has positioned itself as an instrument with potentials for not only identifying barriers but also removing them in cooperation with member states that signed or ratified the convention. Some countries were more receptive than others in developing policy frameworks to allow the adoption of the convention into national laws and hence facilitate the integration of PWDs into society. This is the case in Uganda<sup>8</sup>, which has a considerable history of human rights and disability laws integrated positively into the sector of enterprises.

## Research findings

Types of businesses in the participating enterprises (N=39) ranged from mere skills development training services (N=22) to supported work or paid work (N=7) with a handful specialized in leadership and advocacy or business entrepreneurial development. Over half of the participating enterprises offered employment workshops with individual and administrative support to their clients. As for exclusive disability services, of the total participants, 10 enterprises participating in this study offered services for different types of physical and mental disabilities. Four of them were offering general training of skills development; three were offering vocational education services; one enterprise specialized in labour security and conflict resolution; one in food production and one in accessibility training.

A recent analysis of the labour market situation of PWDs in Europe found a high rise of quota schemes in the participating countries of this research including Italy, Luxemburg, Slovakia, Spain<sup>9</sup> and Belgium. It also showed an increasing number of PWDs participating in sheltered employment, especially in Italy and Luxemburg. The highest rate of open employment was reported in Slovakia and Belgium at 42% and 50% respectively (Shima, *et al.*, 2008). It should be noted that quota and sheltered employment themselves may be considered as measures of positive discrimination, hindering the full enjoyment of employment rights guaranteed in CRPD. There is a recent shift taking place from sheltered employment towards supported employment (WHO, 2011) and this was evident in various placement programs offered by enterprises participating in this research.

The overwhelming majority of participating enterprises in this research served small clientele (males and females) of less than 70 people in 2010. On average, less than 20 people attended training services during one session which varied between 4-20 weeks. With the exception of centers serving PWDs exclusively, PWDs made a small proportion of the clients. The overwhelming majority of enterprises reported to serve PWDs among their clients in one way or another. It is noticeable that centers were under staffed, especially people with disability dedicated staff. The age group of their clientele varied between 20-50 years old with half of the participating centers serving all age groups.

The majority of enterprises served people with mild and moderate sensory disabilities (physical and auditory disabilities). Although mental health issues are on the increase in most OECD countries (Switzerland: 40% of total benefit claims; Canada: 27% of total benefit claims) (OECD, 2010b), fewer enterprises in this research served intellectual, psychiatric disabilities. Enterprises serving people with

<sup>7</sup> The social model views disability as a creation of disabling environment that reflects society's varied barriers placed against the rights of PWDs (Barnes, Mercer and Shakespeare, 1999; Finkelstein, 2005; Fougeyrollas, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Data for this research was obtained from an enterprise specialized in training rural PWDs in agricultural and food production (i.e. home gardens, and livestock). It is the 'Kawule Disabled Persons and Their Families Association'. Among notable challenges is the issue of accessibility in transport which sometimes prevents some people participating in their programs. Elsewhere, research noted that lack of transport could be an important obstacle determining access and level of integration in the workplace, especially for those with severe impairments (McQuaid, 2009; WHO, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Spanish employment policy guarantees the rights of PWDs to education, training and various options of employment including supported, sheltered and quota options (Pallisera, Vila, & JOSEP Valls, 2003 & LIONDAU, 2003) as well as employability (MTAS, 2003).

intellectual disabilities were evident in Romania (two out of three participating enterprises). Perhaps, this is due to a low rate of employment among this group at 1.2% (Inclusion Europe, 2006).

Few enterprises reported having a full range of accessible facilities in their premises. The majority however had minimum accessibility standards, including accessible toilets, ramps and reserved parkings which mainly served people with physical disabilities. Accessibility inside the working place were noticeably missing from the majority of participating enterprises as well as accessibility for other types of disabilities such as Braille or sign language support were minimal or nonexistent. Adapted machinery was generally lacking and the interior space was not sufficient.

Less than 20% of participating enterprises had a policy favouring the employment of PWDs written in their manuals or a training policy for their staff. Few respondents reported that policy ensured mainly: quota<sup>10</sup> for employment, integration in the labour market, European Union (EU) rights regarding employment, or equality and no discrimination. Nonetheless, over half of participating centers had a policy to follow up with former participants including those with disabilities ones even on an ad-hoc basis. Problems with these policies included implementation, respect and enforcement of such policies. A policy of 'follow-up' has emerged in this research as a key issue for labour market integration.

Similarly, an overwhelming majority of respondents were not aware of CRPD, its clauses or aspirations and reported that CRPD was not adopted or adapted into national laws in their respective countries and that they were not aware of any consultation taking place towards that end. Recent research in Europe has re-

vealed that the majority of EU countries including participating countries in this research have not yet taken the first step towards the implementation of the CRPD (EFC, 2010).

Challenges facing participating centers varied to include all kinds of financial and technical difficulties, reaching target groups and accessibility issues in the workplace. These are common problems to modern institutions and they were pertinent to participating enterprises in this research too.

Views from individuals who participated in this research through individual interviews or focus group discussion were revealing and expressed a depressing reality. They reported clear dissatisfaction towards services and provisions necessary for their economic integration such as counselling, placement and open market jobs. Some of them were on social assistance for many years and getting out of it seemed a lost battle. They went further to highlight the lack of access and accessibility provisions in their neighbourhood, such as in restaurants, shops and the public library. They also reported various complicated procedures for obtaining equipment necessary for their everyday life. Overall, they had negative opinions about their current situation and strongly recommended improvement in government programs targeting PWDs (physical and psychiatric disabilities), especially regarding employability services and opportunities for employment.

While this research did not show significant gender difference in access to employability training across the board, the independent monitoring body on the implementation of CRPD in Spain highlighted this issue noting the importance of gender perspective in labour market participation (CERMI, 2010).

#### *- Service providers*

The lack of employment in public and private sectors led PWDs to search for other means of integration into the labour market such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) sector

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<sup>10</sup> In this research, quota ranged between up to 2% in Belgium, Luxembourg and Spain and to 10% in Brazil. Wage subsidies were prevalent in Italy, Spain, Luxembourg, Belgium, Slovakia and included direct financial support to employers or tax exemptions. Sheltered employment schemes were notable in Italy, Spain, Luxembourg, Belgium and Slovakia.



including various community organizations, social enterprises and more recently practice firms. The majority of these enterprises aim at enhancing the employability of participants (people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups) via programs of skills development. Although both social enterprises and practice firms provide employability skills in one way or another, there is a distinctive difference between them. Commonly, social enterprises are social business, providing mainly employment opportunities, but they may also provide training for employees in a hybrid model according to Lysaght and Krupa (2011). Practice firms however, are often a training provider of employability skills according to this research.

Providers of employability services in this research included practice firms and social enterprises. The majority of participating enterprises are specialized in training services such as vocational education for young adults offered notably in Luxembourg and Slovakia; skills development for adults, which is the case for the majority of countries, and short-term paid work, which is the case for certain centers, particularly in Canada. Some enterprises offered hybrid services – involving skills development training and short-term paid work. While the majority of enterprises are practice firms of EUROPEN, there were few social enterprises outside this network such as the case for Afghanistan, Uganda and a few training centers in Canada. All participating enterprises however, provided short-term training on skills development through a system of placement ranging between 4-20 weeks. Placement is defined as a system for providing short term job experience (Bergeskog, 2001). It could be paid, subsidized or unpaid employment and it may include classroom training.

As mentioned earlier, the majority of participating enterprises are serving the general public and included people with mild disabilities among their clients. There were few enterprises that exclusively provided disability focused employability training such as the following case study.

#### *- Case study: The Practice Firm for Persons with Disabilities, Ontario (Canada)*

The Practice Firm for Persons with Disabilities (doing business as 'Signs of Times') is the first Practice Firm in North America dedicated exclusively to persons with disabilities. It is funded by Employment Ontario and is operated by the Coalition for persons with disabilities, a not-for-profit volunteer run organization advocating for Persons with Disabilities in the areas of housing, transportation, and employment. Sign of the Times is part of Canadian Practice Firm Network (CPFN) and EUROPEN. The firm has notably good accessibility standards to accommodate various types of disabilities and it is based in Mississauga, Ontario ([www.signofthetime.ca](http://www.signofthetime.ca)). The firm specializes in simulated work including pre-employment preparation.

Eligibility criteria for a position within the firm include: to be unemployed; to have some experience or training for the position which is available; to be actively looking for work; to have a disability; to be at least 16 years of age; to be eligible to work in Canada.

The firm offers full time placement for a maximum of 16 participants for up to 16 weeks all year around. Twenty per cent of participation work time is allocated for job search. Since opening in 2006 and until September 2008, a total of 117 participants have completed placement. Thirty six percent of participants found employment upon the completing of the program, the majority in their field. In the first half of 2010 the firm served 60 participants (Source: Fact Sheet, Sign of the Times 2008; Research Note, 2010).

#### *- Users of services*

Although this is a disability-focused study, the profile of service users is made up of mainly people without disabilities belonging to groups at risk such as immigrants, refugees and older job seekers. Having said that, the majority of participating enterprises do have participants with disabilities among their clients and some are exclusively providing disability services. Of the total participants', about a third are PWDs.

A typical depiction of service users is presented in the case study of participants from O'Bois International, Canada – a mainstream enterprise offering training and skills development to the general public including groups at risk. Of the total 20 participants undertaking training, there were only four PWDs and nearly 70% of total participants were immigrants, refugees or older job seekers.

#### *- Case study: Quebec*

O'Bois International is a training and skills development practice firm, member of Canadian Practice Firms Network (CPFN) and 'EUROPEN' and based at College de l'Outaouais in Gatineau (Canada). It is a placement firm specializing in human resource development: training in accounting, sales and marketing, Information technology (IT) and customer services. It offers services to mainstream clients some of whom are people with mild or moderate disabilities. Placements are offered for up to 20 weeks for a maximum number of 20 participants.

A focus group discussion was held with the 20 participants undertaking a placement where they gave their views on different issues concerning their placement. Later on they filled out an online survey about their individual experiences participating in the placements.

Out of the 20 participants who took part in the survey, there were 11 women and 9 men. Nearly half of them had a university degree and the majority were in the age group 40-50 years old and were either single or divorced. Four people had mild to moderate disabilities (physical, visual, hearing and learning disabilities).

Nearly half<sup>11</sup> of the participants finished their placement without finding a job – a few were offered voluntary posts or another placement. When asked about program, only a few people reported dissatisfaction concerning their current post in terms of grade, tasks and title and believed that the enterprise should update or

acquire new skills for supervising newcomers. Nearly half of the participants believed there is no need to take part in participatory planning concerning the program in which they were attending. Moreover, the majority did not think an evaluation of competence was necessary requirement for entry into the program. However, the majority thought that second language entry test was necessary and useful tool and so did they think of most of other services offered by the enterprise.

Those with disabilities recognized that accessibility standards available in the enterprise were sufficient for their mild level of disabilities. Other participants were unaware of what special provisions for PWDs might involve and this was also the trend in other countries. Nonetheless, they showed a positive attitude towards their colleagues with disabilities. Nearly all of the participants were unaware of national laws concerning the employment of PWDs or about the disability convention and the need for it being adopted into national laws.

Participants acknowledged the support offered by Emploi-Québec, especially in terms of procedures and follow up – even if only in a limited form. The latter issue was emphasized, especially for those who did not manage to get a job during their placement. They went further to include the issue of 'follow-up' in the recommendation as an important requirement for improving performance.

Ideas for improvement included enhancing equipment, updating software and an adequate number of supervisors, planning incorporates feedback from participants, improving bilingualism and keeping active communication with participants who did not manage to find a job by sending them relevant job information.

It should be pointed out that accessibility in the enterprise was of an acceptable standard for people with mild physical and visual disabilities. For severe cases, special provisions are necessary. As a leader in disability rights, Canada has long been involved in universal design and there exists some level of accessibility in public buildings, but there is always room for im-

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<sup>11</sup> This includes only participants who took part in this research and not the total number of participants from 2010.



provement. It is notable to point out the enterprise employed a woman with disabilities in the IT department. The average annual rate of success for finding a job by participants upon completion of their placement is around 70% according to internal statistics (Research Note: July 2010).

### **Barriers to employability**

Despite the importance of skills development to labour market integration, PWDs in the participating countries continue to experience difficulties and barriers in accessing such services. These include:

#### *- Restricted access to employability training*

While the research findings did not show much evidence of PWDs being refused training in the majority of the participating countries, it did show that exclusion from training does exist. This is especially true for people with severe disabilities who were not offered employability related skills training due to insufficient accessibility or general accommodation in the enterprise. In Canada, according to the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD, 2004), a significant percentage of people with disabilities reported being refused training at some point because of their disabilities. Internationally, mainstream research reported that barriers to the workplace are omnipresent (ILO, 2008a; WHO, 2011) and employers may be reluctant to recruit workers with disabilities due to expensive workplace adjustments and other accommodation issues (Powers, 2008; Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan, Haslam, & Rabinovich, 2008).

#### *- Lack of accessibility standards*

The socio-economic inclusion of PWDs requires the development of skills through education and training and this is high on the agenda of OECD participating countries reaching around 13% of total public spending (OECD, 2011). Among conditions for an effective socio-economic inclusion of PWDs into the labour market is the issue of accessibility. CRPD clearly highlights this issue by allocating a separate article for accessibility (article 9) and other articles dealing with independent living and

personal mobility under universal design framework. Universal design, sometimes referred to as inclusive or design for all, is an increasingly acceptable model to combat exclusion caused by poor accessibility standards. This model provides guiding principles that considers the needs of everyone regardless of ability in the built environment, namely building codes and standards (CHRC, 2007). Universal design principles are not only bound to physical accessibility, but they could also be applied to Information and communications technology (ICT), assistive technology (Mankoff, Hayes, & Kasnitz, 2010), policies and programming.

Accessibility is a cross-cutting issue that deeply affects all other levels of integration of PWDs. In Europe for example, although accessibility is a key priority in the EU Disability Action Plan 2008-2009 and in OECD countries as well as in CRPD, the majority of participating enterprises in this research reported problems related to workplace accommodation and various accessibility issues. Participating enterprises indicated some considerable lack of accessibility standards notably in Romania, Uganda and Afghanistan<sup>12</sup>. In fact, a part from few exceptions in countries classified as developed nations, accessibility standards in all participating countries could be greatly improved.

#### *- Lack of accommodation*

Bridging the gap between needs and provision is becoming more and more difficult in a world of increasingly limited resources. Accommodating all needs fully may not be realistic in some circumstances including those related to the full capacity of economic integration in a given society. CRPD has used the term 'reasonable accommodation' to refer to provisions which are necessary for the integration of PWDs into society and the protection and promotion of their rights including that of employment. Article 2 of CRPD (2006) defines 'reasonable accommodation' as:

<sup>12</sup> Given the fundamental importance of accessibility to the life of PWDs, Afghanistan has focused attention on this issue establishing an enterprise specialized in accessibility training known as 'Accessibility Organization for Afghan Disabled' (AOAD) [www.aoad-af.org](http://www.aoad-af.org).

Means necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. (p. 4)

Accommodation and modifications in the workplace can make all the difference between being employed or not. In Canada for example, most common workplace accommodation<sup>13</sup> for workers with disabilities are centered on modified job design including working hours, physical modification on workstations (i.e. chair or back support), washrooms and parking (HRSDC, 2010).

Although most enterprises in this research have an open and positive attitude towards serving PWDs among their clients, lack of accommodation was evident in the following areas: in the recruitment process as some enterprises reported the inability to receive severe cases or deal with certain types of disabilities; general lack of communication tools as well as insufficient facilities including equipment to respond to different and varying needs; absence of a disability policy in their regulations including a follow-up for participants who completed their placements. Modifications in facilities providing training for employability skills do not always refer to physical modifications in the building or machinery, but notably to modification and accommodation in job design, procedures, policies and technology used.

As noted in the CRPD, accommodation should not become disproportionate or a burden on the service provider. It is not expected that one single enterprise is able to respond to varying needs of its clients. In a specialized society, there are other agencies that may be able to provide missing services. Complementarity and referrals are good practices.

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<sup>13</sup> HRSDC divides workplace accommodation into two categories: resource-specific (i.e. job redesign, modified working schedule and computer aid) or physical/structural (i.e. handrails, modified workstation, accessible washroom) (HRSDC, 2009).

#### *- Lack of coordination*

A common challenge effecting service delivery is the issue of information sharing and coordination between different partners involved in employability of PWDs, especially in countries with different layers of government such as Canada, Switzerland and Spain. To simplify procedures, more countries are decentralizing services and using a one stop shop model for service provision. To some extent, this is notable in Quebec and this model could be further developed and expanded to other provinces.

Empirical findings illustrate the need for an effective system for reaching out and responding to the needs of individuals with disabilities who are seeking support for personal aid, equipment and accessibility issues. This theme of coordination was highlighted among the challenges facing effective service delivery of the participating enterprises at different levels: clients, enterprise and partners including sponsors and government.

#### *- Inadequate disability policy*

Although most participating countries have signed and ratified CRPD, there are insufficient disability policies and guidelines in the sector of enterprises throughout EUROPEAN network. More importantly is the lack of enforcement mechanisms for implementing policies concerning placement and subsequent employment of PWDs who complete training.

### **Conclusion**

The majority of participating enterprises serving PWDs need a few additional special provisions to enhance services provided, and a disability policy framework becomes instrumental for effective service delivery. This is primarily needed in the following areas: targeting, outreach, screening potential participants and workplace accommodation and follow-up. Effective policies and strategies may help in creating a prospect for work and reducing disadvantages of PWDs and other groups at risk.



Work and welfare go hand in hand when it comes to the socio-economic inclusion of PWDs and groups at risk. Social security including safety nets such as benefits and employability programs are essential requirement for labour market integration. Although a move was made in OECD countries towards reducing welfare dependency and increasing incentives to work in a parallel shift from unconditional rights to obligations (Dwyer, 2002), welfare and smart safety nets could play an important role in social justice by tackling disabling barriers, building skills and competence and providing for vulnerable people easing their hardship (Morris, 2011). In times of high unemployment, increased dependency on benefits and a greater poverty rate, the role of social protection is emphasized on building skills and competence of unemployed people through various employability programs (OECD, 2009b).

Yet, in this research, findings show limited access to training facilities, inadequate accommodations in workplaces and limited prospects of employment among other barriers. A major concern is the absence of an effective strategy for connecting people with employers and follows-up. Essentially, there is a need to enhance the general capacity of training enterprises for an effective service delivery and subsequent socio-economic inclusion for PWDs. An action plan with a multi-track approach to increase access to training for employability skills in collaboration with reducing vulnerability through social protection and reinforcement of capacity in enterprises is required. Specifically and in line with CRPD, measures are needed for:

*Participatory planning:* Effective service delivery is one that is based on decent planning and this in turns requires accurate data collected with the participation of service users themselves as partners in research process and production. The participatory and emancipatory approaches in disability research and subsequent planning are instrumental in the empowerment of PWDs as highlighted in this research (Turmusani, 2003; Sepúlveda, Calderón, & Torres, 2012). These research approaches may help to identify barriers as well as help build strategies to bridge gaps and removing

barriers. Enabling participation in policy and research has been highlighted throughout the recent and thorough analysis presented in the World Report on Disability (WHO, 2011).

*Activation of CRPD:* Disability rights have culminated in a legal instrument (CRPD, 2006) to protect and promote the rights of PWDs. It is now important to set up strategies and mechanisms<sup>14</sup> for adapting the CRPD into national and local contexts and making it work. Domestically, at the level of practice firms' networks, a policy framework is needed in order to reach and respond more adequately to the needs of PWDs who already receive training as well as those out of reach so that employability skills are enhanced to help them enter labour market.

*Preventing disabling barriers:* It is important to prevent disabling conditions and barriers to employment by creating policies able to respond to changing needs that ultimately facilitates access to training programs and increase accessibility in the workplace (Greve, 2009). Innovative and effective policies dealing with modifications in the workplace may include: flexible recruitment processes; modified working hours (i.e. part-time jobs; telework, etc.); micro enterprises and physical infrastructure accessibility such as workstations, technology, washrooms and buildings (Roggero *et al.*, 2006).

CRPD has emphasized the theme of prevention and identification and removal of disabling barriers. The concept of prevention should be widened beyond traditional medical rehabilitation to include preventing disabilities in groups at risk 'border lines', especially those prone to developing mental health problems due to exclusion from social and economic life. Comparative research in the United Kingdom (UK) and

<sup>14</sup> CRPD was hardly adopted into national laws in any of the participating countries. It may still be too early to expect hard results at the international level since CRPD came into force in 2008, but there is a pressing need for activating the process of national consultations coupled by international debate and support. Tools are needed to help governments to adapt CRPD into their national policies including the sector of enterprises of skills development.

USA has shown increasing demand for accommodation-adjustment information and suggested capacity building of professionals working with this population (Bruyère, Erickson, & VanLooy, 2004).

The convention has covered important grounds in the life cycle of individual from conception emphasized by the right to life through different stages of life up to elderly issues including some hints to controversial euthanasia. However, the right to life does also imply decent life to everybody including groups at risk. Together with the prevention of potential impairing condition, it is important to reach out in identifying and providing for people with hidden and less visible disabilities. This latter group makes an important proportion of PWDs in OCED countries including those participating in this research<sup>15</sup>.

Based on the above analysis, it could be argued that high rate of unemployment among such invisible groups is not only a question of lack of employability skills, but mainly inadequate access to training, social exclusion and disempowerment experienced by such groups. In line with Mitra (2006), a more radical debate is needed based on a capability approach that questions disability definitions, construction and its determinants which leaves huge sections of people at risk, vulnerable and unprotected.

*Developing partnerships:* inclusion is a collective responsibility of society, organizations and individuals. The collaboration and partnership needs to include organizations of PWDs, the state and other key partners. The support of the government including financial is fundamental to this partnership including effective aid policy for enterprises based in developing and transitional countries. Financial incentives are needed to encourage businesses to adapt their facilities so that PWDs and other groups at risk may become fully integrated and productive. These are good practices that could be enhanced and further strengthened.

In particular, support is needed to develop entrepreneurial skills and funding to establish self-employment projects for interested clientele. While self-employment provides flexibility, autonomy and relative job satisfaction, this form of employment, if not carefully monitored, may further isolate PWDs especially telework as being reported in certain countries (ADES, 2002).

*Policy framework:* Policies may focus on both current recruits and reaching out to potential clients. This means changes and modifications on recruitment processes, machinery, physical environment and daily operation procedures as well as in marketing and advertising. An important policy aspect will have to deal with disability equality training. Equally important is a system for follow-up with participants upon the completion of their training. A twin-track system is needed where information is shared between practice firms and their participants as well as an intermediary mechanism to linking people with employers.

*Barriers based approach to monitoring CRPD:* A barrier-based approach to monitoring (Roulstone & Warren, 2006) can be particularly useful to CRPD, given that current monitoring of implementation of CRPD appears to be ineffective in the area of accessibility and workplace accommodation (EFC, 2010). An approach based on 'monitoring cycle' (UN, 2010) and incorporates social view to disability may provide clearer insights into obstacles in place, their construction and how to tackle and remove them.

Monitoring by definition means ensuring that performance is in line with objectives (i.e. ensuring that rights of PWDs are held according to articles stated in CRPD and subsequent national laws). If PWDs for example, continue to experience exclusion from the labour market shown by high unemployment rate and poverty, this is clear indicator of violation of their rights for employment. Therefore, mechanisms should be put in place to identify barriers, disabling practices and ways to protect individuals filing complaints from retaliation or prejudice (HRSDC, 2011). Towards this end, provisions

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<sup>15</sup> Statistics Canada identify half a million persons ascribing to this group in PALS survey in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2007).



were made in the convention including an established International Coordination Committee with mechanisms commensurating with the Paris Principles (UN, 1993) referred to in Article 33.2 favouring human rights institutions (watchdogs) as monitoring bodies. This is to ensure independence and integrity of implementation of CRPD.

**Strengthening capacity:** Overall, enterprises and practice firms seem to respond fairly well to the needs of general population. To reach and respond more effectively to the needs of PWDs and other groups at risk, majority enterprises and firms need to reconsider their position regarding such groups. At different levels (enterprise, central national level or at EURO-PEN level), there is a need for a policy framework to coordinate such a vision commensurate with CRPD.

To facilitate the transition of persons with disabilities into the labour market, skills training should focus on creating opportunities to acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to compete in the labour market, in other words: enhancing their employability skills. This means creating a framework that encourages PWDs to participate in existing training and skills development programs. Community-based approaches to rehabilitation proved to be effective in developing the skills required for self-employment of PWDs (Hartley, 2006; Turmusani, Vreede, & Wirz, 2002). Community-based approaches to employability may be the way forward in developing the skills of PWDs in both developed and developing countries guided by CRPD: by moving away from centralized services to a community based intervention based on the capacity of participants and local market needs.

For meaningful integration, it is important to increase opportunities for labour market integration by enhancing employability skills offered to participants in collaboration with strengthening social protection and safety nets to reduce vulnerability. It is at the heart of this debate to create favorable conditions of capacity building to support this development.

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