

Key results of the report based on Eurobarometer 54.2

ATTITUDES OF EUROPEANS TOWARDS DISABILITY

Produced on the basis of the Eurobarometer (54.2/2001) based on interviews of more the 16,000 EU Citizens between 2nd January and 6th February 2001, the report on “Europeans and disability” reveals the following major facts.

- Close to six Europeans out of ten know someone, in close or more distant circles, who is affected by a long lasting illness, disability or invalidity. More than 5% of EU citizens consider themselves as a disabled person.
- 76% of EU15 respondents think that the access for blind people to basic public equipment and events is difficult. 73% believe that it is too difficult for intellectually disabled people, 71% for the physically disabled, and 54% for deaf people. However 57% of respondents consider that the access to public spaces for people with disabilities has been improving in the course of the last 10 years.
- 66% of EU15 respondents consider that local authorities are the ones truly responsible for improving access to public spaces for people with disabilities. 55% think that it is the government, 30% employers and companies and 28% voluntary or charitable organisations. The European Union comes in 5th position with 16%.
- From a list of 21 types of disabilities, 57% of the EU15 respondent admit to a lack of knowledge. Only 4 types of disabilities have achieved a level of knowledge of at least 50%. In descending order these are cancer (61%), asthma and diabetes (58%) and arthritis (54%). Nearly one out of four Europeans thinks that 20% or more of their country’s population have a physical disability of some kind.
- 97% of EU15 respondents think that something should be done to ensure a better integration of people with disabilities into society. 93% express the desire to dedicate more money to the removal of physical barriers that complicate the life of people with disabilities.

This study, which pictures the European public opinion at the beginning of the year 2001, will be the basis of a reflection in the prospect of the year 2003, which will be “the European Year of people with disabilities”.

Results of this study are structured around the 5 following axis:

I. Europeans and people with disabilities

- A majority of EU citizens know at least one person with disabilities, and show a high level of concern regarding the issue of disability.

About six EU citizens out of ten know, whether in their immediate surroundings or not, a person having a long lasting illness, disability or invalidity. One European out of four declares having a member of their family affected by a disability. But less than 2% declares knowing a disabled pupil at school and only 4% having a colleague with disabilities.

A majority of people in Sweden (75%), Finland (74%), the Netherlands (73%) and Denmark (71%) declare knowing at least one disabled person. Closer to the European average (of 58%) and at the higher end of the scale are Italy (61%), Ireland (60%) Belgium (59%), and Spain (59%) followed by the United Kingdom (58%); Germany (55%), Austria (54%), France (54%), Portugal (53%), and Luxembourg (52%) are at the lower end. Greece should be considered separately as only a minority of respondents (47%) declare knowing a person with a disability.

More than 5% of EU15 citizens consider themselves as disabled.

- A large majority of Europeans declare themselves as very much at ease in the presence of people with disabilities.

Eight people out of ten say to be at ease in the presence of people with disabilities. Country analyses show that a majority of citizens feel at ease when with people with disabilities.

It is in Denmark, United Kingdom, Sweden, the Netherlands, Spain and Ireland that the feeling of being at ease is the strongest, as the level of ease in each of these countries is on average at least 3.5 (the average is based on a scale going from 1, very uneasy, to 4 completely at ease, with the central point at 2.5).

Between the level "3.5" and the European average (3.28), one can find a second group of countries which also express a feeling of being completely at ease in the presence of disabled people. It is made out of Finland (3.42) Belgium (3.37) Austria (3.34), Luxembourg (3.29) and Portugal (3.28). Italy and France (3.17) follow closely, feeling mainly (somewhat) at ease. Finally, on the lower end of the scale are Germany (3.01 and 2.97 for the Eastern part of the country) and especially Greece (2.65).

On the other hand, more than 40% of the public opinion believe that "other people" do not feel at ease in the presence of people with disabilities. Only Spain expresses a very high level of ease, and obtains an average level higher than 3 (3.03) (previous question, 3.51). Spain is followed by Ireland, Belgium, Portugal, Denmark, Finland, Luxembourg, Sweden and the United Kingdom, where the average level of expressed ease is between "3" and the European average (2.55). A little under the European

average is Austria, which with its 2.54 still tends to feel at ease. Italy, France, Germany and the Netherlands show an average level a little under the central point of 2.5, expressing thereby that the citizens of these countries think that “other people” feel uneasy in the presence of people with disabilities. At the bottom of the scale, is Greece with an average of 1.98.

II. Access of disabled people to equipment and events

- Europeans tend to judge severely the poor level of access to equipment and events for people with disabilities

Overall, EU15 citizens perceive the access of disabled people to equipment and events as “fairly difficult” to “very difficult”. From a list of 7 typical types of equipment and public events, 76% find that the access for blind people is difficult. This result becomes 73% when asked about the access for intellectually disabled people, 71 % for the physically disabled and drops down to 54% for deaf people (averages are calculated by summing up results to “very difficult” and “fairly difficult” for each of the 7 standard types of equipment and events: public transport, other public services, sport events, work place, university or schools restaurants, hotels)

- 88% of Europeans consider that access to public transport for the blind is difficult (54% think it is “very difficult” and 34% “fairly difficult”)
- 85% point out the difficulties of access to public transport for physically disabled people
- Nearly three out of four think that access to public services (transport included) is difficult for intellectually disabled people.
- 59% of the interviewed people think that access to schools and universities is difficult for deaf people.

The majority of answers given to questions on access conditions for disabled people denounce the current situation that is too often encountered by the disabled. The severity of the criticism varies from one country to another. France and Greece are the ones where there is a higher propensity to claim the lack of access facilities to public equipment and services for disabled people. They are followed by Portugal, Belgium and Italy which also tend to have a critical view on the situation. Ireland expresses a more moderate stance with a median position (with as many responses above as below the European average). The United Kingdom and Luxembourg are the first countries to show a number of responses below the European average. Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Austria and Spain emphasise this tendency. Responses in Sweden stand out in comparison to the other EU countries, by being less critical and systematically below the EU 15 average. One should be reminded that Sweden is frequently set forward as an example in the field of facilities dedicated to the needs of disabled people.

- Developments in the improvement of access conditions

57% of Europeans believe that access to public places has improved over the last 10 years (the EU 15 average of 2.62, is based on a scale going from 1, “not improved at all” to 4, “very much improved”). In 4 countries, only few improvements have been noticed: Greece (1.85), Portugal (2.13), Italy (2.41) and France (2.49). Very close to the European average (± 0.1 point) are countries which are somewhat convinced of the improvement of access in the course of the last 10 years; Spain, Denmark, Belgium, Germany and Ireland. Countries that express a much more positive appreciation of the changes are Luxembourg (2.84), United Kingdom (2.91) Austria (2.95), Sweden (2.97), the Netherlands (2.99) and Finland (3.03), the only country to pass the mark of 3.

III. Who is responsible for improving access to public spaces for people with disabilities?

- Local authorities, truly responsible for improvement

66% of European citizens consider that local authorities are truly responsible for the improvement of access to public spaces for people with disabilities. 55% name the national government, 30% employers and companies, 28% NGO's or voluntary or charitable organisations. The European Union comes in 5th position with 16%.

- The wish to promote shared responsibility

These results, which stress out the will of Europeans to promote both a shared responsibility and a commitment of all parties, present an interesting lead for further reflection in the prospect of the year 2003.

IV. Europeans and their level of information about disabilities

- A global lack of information about disabilities in all European countries

If 57% of Europeans admit having a lack of knowledge about the 21 types of disabilities named in the questionnaire (the average is based on results collected by each item), it is worth noting that the word “disability” covers a series of deficiencies which generate various levels of information in the population. The degree of information about each of the named disabilities brings out 4 large groups:

- Disabilities due to long lasting illnesses such as cancer, asthma, arthritis or diabetes (which are not always considered as a handicap): these disabilities are the only ones with a level of information of 50 % or above; in descending order; cancer (61%), asthma and diabetes (58%) and arthritis (54%).
- Disabilities that correspond to a more widespread perception of handicap such as physical and sensorial disabilities. For instance, 48% of Europeans consider themselves informed about visual disabilities, 46% about hearing impairments,

43% about cerebral stroke, and only 23% about muscular dystrophy (which is the disability that obtains the lowest score out of the 21 selected type of disabilities).

- Mental and psychological disabilities are the less well known. Only 37% of Europeans consider themselves as being fairly aware about Alzheimer's disease, 35% about Parkinson's disease and 31% about psychiatric disabilities.
 - The other types of disabilities with uneven levels of information are: brain injury, head injuries and spinal cord injury (25%), multiple sclerosis (32%) and skeletal impairments (30%).
- A blurred perception of the number of people with disabilities.

Close to one European out of four thinks that 20% or more of the population in his country has a disability. This result is to be put into relation with the percentage of people who say that they are affected by a disability: 5%. 19% of Europeans do not have any opinion about the actual number of people in their respective country who are disabled.

V. Europeans and the integration of disabled people

- Virtually all Europeans are in favour of a better integration of disabled people.

97% of Europeans think that something should be done to involve people with disabilities more in society (by, for instance, making it easier for them to access public places). More precisely, 93% of respondents express the wish to spend more money on removing physical barriers, which complicate the life of physically disabled people. 72% are in favour of the idea that children with disabilities should be taught in the same schools as other children. This positive attitude is reinforced by the fact that only a minority of 39%, assert that disabled people are less productive at the workplace, and 76% of Europeans reject the idea of separating disabled people from the community.

National deviations level should be mentioned:

- *"Involve people with disabilities more in society"*: this statement is strongly backed up in all European countries, with a EU average score of 3.7 on a scale going from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 4 ("strongly agree"). A majority of countries have a score between 3.6 and 3.8, with Ireland and Greece at the higher end of the scale with 3.86 and 3.89 (in other words 89% of respondent in Greece expressed their strong agreement to this statement), and with Portugal and the Netherlands at the lower end with 3.51 and 3.49.

- *“Removing physical barriers”* is also widely supported in all European countries, with an EU average score of 3.57. Again Ireland (3.75) and Greece (3.8) differentiate themselves from the Netherlands (3.35), Belgium (3.44), Austria (3.46) and Portugal (3.47), which are the four only countries situated beneath “3.5”.
- *“A better integration of disabled children at school”*: A majority of Europeans believe that children with disabilities should be taught in the same schools as other children. Italy is the country where a vast majority strongly agrees with this statement. The majority of the other countries is situated between 3.2 and 3 (“somewhat agree”). Beneath “3” are four countries, in descending order: Portugal (2.95), the Netherlands (2.93), Greece (2.9) and Belgium (2.84).
- *“Disabled people are less productive at the workplace”*. Europeans tend to “somewhat disagree” with this statement (average of 2.34). Five countries state a stronger disagreement with an average situated between 2.3 and 2.1: the Netherlands, Sweden, Italy, United Kingdom and Spain. A couple of countries are situated a little below the median (2.5): Finland (2.38), France (2.41), Ireland (2.45), Luxembourg (2.47) and Austria (2.49). Greece is situated on the median.
- *“Mentally disabled people should be separated from the community”*; the European average (1.71) expresses a total disagreement with this provocative statement. In each country, the majority of Europeans has rejected the idea of a segregation of the mentally ill from the rest of society. Two groups of countries appears according to their degree of disagreement:
 - five countries “somewhat disagree”: Italy (1.89), Portugal (1.87), United Kingdom (1.85), France(1.79) and Ireland (1.78)
 - Five countries which “strongly disagree”: Germany (1.71), Belgium (1.7), Finland (1.69), Spain (1.52), Luxembourg (1.5). And five countries which are below “1.5”: Austria, Greece, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark closing the march with 1.33.

➤ The facto situation

The last question brings up the feeling of ease or unease that might appear when in the presence of a person in a wheelchair in different social statuses or functions. At the European level, one observation is to be noted: the feeling of being at ease in every situation, obtains a large majority of votes with a European average of 84%. 89% of EU citizens would feel at ease in the presence of a neighbour in wheelchair, 86% with a colleague and 80% with a boss. Only the thought of having a doctor in a wheelchair (76%) seems to alter slightly this positive attitude.

As a conclusion, it should be reminded that the survey only focuses on the opinions expressed by Europeans and do not necessarily reflect their daily behaviour. Europeans may show a diffuse knowledge about different forms of disabilities and their associated problems, but this lack of knowledge is not followed by indifference towards this issue. On the contrary, there is a tangible will to make things change. A clear mandate is addressed to the public authorities, they are the ones who have to take the first step, but also to the world of businesses, to improve the quality of the everyday life of disabled people. This mandate is also, but to a lesser extent, addressed to the European Union.

Results of this public opinion survey – an indirect indictment against praxis too often tolerated or ignored - constitute without any doubt a message to the decision-makers in its larger sense: politicians, civil servants, employers, organisation leaders acting on a local, national or European level.