

I want to work, who can help me?

Strengthening the cooperation between policy makers and the non-profit sector in return to work of persons with health conditions

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Introduction

This study has been commissioned by the Active Citizens Fund and implemented in 2019 - 2020 by three organizations: Central European Labour Studies Institute (project leader), Slovak Governance Institute, and the University of South-Eastern Norway. The study analyzed the current situation of labour market integration of persons with disabilities (PwDs) in Slovakia and Norway, including both relevant policies for integration and their implementation. In particular, the project studied stakeholder cooperation in facilitating labour market integration of persons with disabilities (PwDs) and return to work of persons with health conditions or chronic diseases. The focus is on four types of stakeholders: policy makers, employers, trade unions as interest representatives of workers, and non-profit organizations including patient organizations and other types of organizations supporting PwDs and representing their interests. Besides this general focus, the project analysed two cases studies of persons with multiple disabilities, including the Roma ethnic minority with disabilities, and homeless persons with disabilities. The findings from empirical reality in Slovakia are compared with those in Norway in order to identify examples of best practices and assess the possibility of their transfer and implementation across different welfare state types and industrial relations systems.

Conceptual and analytical framework

PwDs refer to persons facing various barriers related to their health condition while accessing the labour market, or in the process of maintaining stable employment with standard working conditions, regardless of their formally recognized position of being disabled or being a beneficiary of disability benefits. The empirical analysis was developed following the framework summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Types of labour market integration of people with disabilities

	Labour market inclusion/integration	Return to work
Persons with a formal status of being disabled	A PwDs or persons that are formally recognized as disabled in the process of labour market integration, without a current employment relationship with a specified employer. This includes persons seeking labour market integration via other forms than an employment relationship, e.g. entrepreneurs and other forms of integration	B PwDs after long-term absence from work due to health conditions or chronic disease with a recognized special status of having health impairment in the process of returning to work to the previous workplace and employer
	C Persons after long-term absence from work due to a health condition, or after chronic disease and without a formally recognized status of disability during labour market integration, currently without an existing employment relationship. Includes also persons seeking labour market integration via other forms than an employment relationship, e.g. entrepreneurs and other forms of integration	D PwDs after long-term absence from work due to health conditions or chronic disease without a recognized special status of having health impairment in the process of returning to work to the previous workplace and employer
Persons without a formal disability status of recognition of specific health conditions		

Source: the authors

2 Main empirical findings – Slovakia

A systematic analysis of original interview data, roundtable discussion with four types of defined stakeholders as well as secondary evidence and the scrutiny of legal documents and media coverage leads to the following main empirical findings.

The expected role of particular stakeholders refers to their specific role in the process of labour market integration of PwDs. Representatives of the state and institutions create policies, legislation, participate in its implementation, control, monitoring and data collection. Trade unions represent the interests of employees, including PwDs in the labour market, participate in the creation of legislation, implementation practice, e.g. through collective bargaining. Representatives of non-governmental organisations directly support the integration of PwDs in the labour market and society, defend the rights of PwDs. Employers directly facilitate employment, resp. return to work of PwDs; some are interested in a workforce diversity strategy.

In contrast to these expected roles, interviews with stakeholders in Slovakia showed that most of the organisations focus on the work integration of PwDs only marginally in addition to other competences. For 1/3 of the addressed organisations, work integration is the primary focus; the rest do not focus on the work integration of PwDs at all. Nevertheless, the description of their activities and implementation of projects demonstrates that there is widespread experience with labour market integration of PwDs.

Barriers to stakeholders' more active role in the process of integration of PwDs to the labour market can be summarized to the stakeholders' lack of skills, expertise, capacities, and information relevant for integration of PwDs to the labour market. On the side of PwDs, perceived barriers to work integration include pressure on performance, high working pace, keeping standard working procedures, but also perceived prejudice towards PwDs.

The assessment of particular tools available for facilitating labour market integration of PwDs leads to a conclusion that active market policies are short-term, administratively demanding and educational activities are underdeveloped. While sheltered workplaces are important and supported, support to the transition to an open labour market to prevent systematic PwD segregation is missing. Another form of sheltered workplaces includes legally recognized social enterprises. While these are perceived positively by the diverse stakeholders, there are difficulties with interpretation of their legal status and implementation of some legal documents facilitating PwD work integration policies. Contributions to PwDs employment are rather not motivating, and their real effect on the PwD employment is not known. Voluntary and soft measures support in particular the socialisation of PwD and individual approach. Mandatory quotas for PwD employment are according to unions the avoidance of employers' obligations, for employers, the quotas resemble a coercive mechanism. Therefore, employers demand a change in the policy philosophy to a more positive treatment of employers and providing more motivation rather than punishment regarding to employment of PwDs. Finally, the financing of skills development is not targeted at PwDs, but target all job seekers.

Stakeholder cooperation to facilitate improved labour market integration of PwDs into the labour market in Slovakia is currently underdeveloped, but informal network among stakeholders are established and have been identified as relevant for facilitating their cooperation. Collaboration is supported by legislative framework, individual contacts, specific know-how, availability of financial resources and state support. Nevertheless, obstacles to more intensive cooperation include a lack of willingness to cooperate, limited personnel capacities, financial resources and information, competition for resources and legitimacy between NGOs.

All studied stakeholders groups see a potential and need to strengthen their mutual cooperation, mostly in the following areas:

- Cooperation in cross-disciplinary topics, e.g., overall interest representation of PwDs vs. their labour market integration
- Overcoming sectoral focus and strengthening cross-sectoral cooperation including new actors, e.g. umbrella organizations facilitating policy making and implementation on the side of the state
- Cooperation via collective bargaining
- Intensifying the existing contacts and good practices of cooperation where they exist
- Cooperation covering new and target areas, e.g. with focus on persons with disabilities in mental health
- Information sharing, overcoming prejudice and exchange of good practice – across cases, sectors but also countries
- Setting priorities for developing activities financed from grants and structural funds available for the purpose of labour market integration of PwDs.

3 Comparative conclusions – Slovakia and Norway

The analysis uncovered key differences in the overall approach to labour market integration of PwDs as well as diverse roles for particular actors in this process between Slovakia and Norway. Differences are highlighted across several criteria/areas studied. First, in the overall approach to the relevant target groups and the actual definition of PwDs, Norway fosters an inclusive approach and recognizes different subgroups of PwDs. In contrast, in formal regulations but also informal interactions, Slovakia recognizes PwDs as persons with a formal disability status, whereas the definition of disability is medically conditioned. Second, the strategy of labour market integration of PwDs is decentralized but coordinated in Norway, where policies are diversified and integration competencies are delegated to particular employers. Slovakia possesses a centralized system of policies, whereby the key policies include financial incentives for PwD employment and the provision of sheltered workplaces. Third, the rationale behind labour market integration differs: in Norway, PwDs are first placed, then trained; while in Slovakia, placement to an employer occurs mostly after the PwD's preparation for labour market integration in a sheltered labour market. Fourth, transition policies in Norway refer to placing job seekers directly at the primary labour market but providing them support and mentoring directly at the workplace, while in Slovakia transition refers to sheltered employment with an overly weak transition aspect. Fifth, employers in Norway enjoy a broader range of competences, being equal partners in the implementation phase next to state agencies and other involved organizations, e.g., occupational rehabilitation centres. Unlike in Norway, in Slovakia the employers' involvement in facilitating PwD inclusion into the labour market follows a sanction-based approach. Employers call for more institutionalized support in strengthening their role. Finally, the role of trade unions also differs: in Norway, trade unions are active both at the tripartite level in policy adoption concerning PwDs and at the implementation phase. In Slovakia, union activity in labour market integration of PwDs is underdeveloped. This agenda is not a priority in national-level social dialogue. At the implementation phase, unions' role is constrained by the overall approach that the preparation of PwDs for the labour market occurs mostly outside of regular workplaces that are the domain of trade union operation.

More detailed project outcomes are available at the project website: <https://www.celsi.sk/en/projects/detail/99/>.