



A review of the situation of people with disabilities in Estonia

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The goal of this review is to give the general overview of the situation of the people with disabilities and describe the welfare system provisions for people with disabilities in Estonia. The review will be used as background data in order to specify and compare the main targets of the project in each partner country.

1. Concept of disability in Estonian welfare system and statistics on disabled people in Estonia.

Disability is the loss of or an abnormality in an anatomical, physiological or mental structure or function of a person, which in interaction with various attitudinal and environmental barriers may hinder his or her participation in society on an equal basis with others. There are three degrees of severity of disabilities: profound, severe or moderate. The degree of severity of a disability is the basis for granting benefits and services. The concept of people with disabilities coincides with that provided for in the UN Convention on Disability Rights. Estonia signed the convention on 25 September 2007, but has not ratified it yet.

The approach to statistics on people with disabilities in Estonia distinguishes two different target groups in general:

1) The group based on self-assessment, i.e. a target group who replies in the affirmative to the question: "Do you have any long-standing illness, disability or handicap, which has lasted or will probably last for 6 months or longer?" People classified according to the above definition will hereinafter be called an extended target group.

The statistical data drawn from the Estonian Labour Force Survey (LFS) of Statistics Estonia pertain to this particular target group.

2) Disabled people with officially valid impairment ratings, i.e. people with disabilities within the meaning of the Social Benefits for Disabled Persons Act. People classified according to the above definition will hereinafter be called a restricted target group.

The statistical data drawn from the databases of the Social Insurance Board registers pertain to the restricted target group.

As at the beginning of 2008, people with disabilities in Estonia (restricted target group) break down as follows:

Age	Number
0-15	6,540
16-62	51,970
63-...	76,909
Total	135,419

Estonia is concerned about the increase in the number of disabled people (incl. those in the working age) every year. In the restricted target group, the number was smaller by 15,200 people among those aged 16-64 only a year ago (thus the growth was nearly 37% over the last year). On the one hand, it can be explained by the aging of population (the majority of disabled people are advanced in age). However, this may also refer to the poor health status of the population.

Besides disability, also *incapacity for work* is determined. Temporary incapacity for work and permanent incapacity for work are distinguished. Permanent incapacity for work is divided into partial (loss of capacity for work 10-90%) and complete (loss of capacity for work 100%) incapacity.

A person may be assigned either a rating of disability or incapacity for work or both. As of 2007, there were 67,459 incapacity pensioners registered by the Social Insurance Board. The biggest number of incapacity pensioners is in the age group 40-54 years (29,415).

The employment rate of people with disabilities (the extended target group of people aged 15-64 years) was 32.6 % as of 2006 (compared with 26 % in 2002). The overall employment rate in the same year was 67.7 % (compared with 61.1 % in 2002). In 2007, the overall employment rate grew even more, amounting to 69.1 %. Assumedly the employment of disabled persons grew as well.

Although in recent years unemployment and inactivity have generally decreased, the number of people who are inactive due to a long-standing illness or disability is growing.

2. Services and benefits for people with disabilities

2.1. General description of the provision of welfare services for people with disabilities

People with disabilities are granted various services and benefits to help them find and maintain work.

Social benefits for disabled persons.

On the basis of the *Social Benefits for Disabled Persons Act*, seven different types of benefits are paid, whereof working-age adults enjoy the following:

- disabled adult allowance to cover the extra expense related to disability;
- employment allowance (since 2008) to cover the extra expense accompanying working;
- in-service training allowance for work-related further training or formal education;
- rehabilitation allowance to disabled persons aged 16-65 for receiving a rehabilitation service aimed at employability.

Services for disabled persons.

Apart from subsidies, people with disabilities are entitled to different social services, which fall into services provided by the government or by the municipalities.

The government-provided services include:

1) Rehabilitation services (See in detail subsection 2.1.)

2) Provision of assistive technology

A person needing a prosthetic, orthopaedic or other technical device because of illness, age or handicap has the right to receive such a device. In 2006, assistive equipment was delivered to 34,790 people; the funds appropriated to assistive technology are growing yearly; in 2008, 80 million EEK have been appropriated for that purpose.

3) Services to people with special mental needs, incl. the services of supported employment and supported living.

4) Childcare service.

Further, municipalities provide the following employability strengthening services:

- adaptation of homes
- domestic services
- care in a social welfare institution
- adaptation of transport services, disability transport
- personal assistant; support person for the family
- translation services
- day centres
- social, debt or psychological counselling, etc
- access to public institutions (incl. schools)
- single subsidies.

The principle underlying the provision of welfare services is that a person needing help must get help as close to his/her residence as possible and according to his/her individual needs. Hence, the role of local authorities in the organisation and management of welfare services will increase. The government-provided services will be rehabilitation, child care and substitute home service, as well as the welfare of people with special needs regarding mental health. Aside from the services mentioned above, the government has committed to enhancing the quality of counselling services for people with special needs, in order to improve their ability to live independently and in this way promote the employability and better coping of these people and their caregivers.

Results of the survey on individuals with disabilities carried out in 2005-2006 indicate that over two thirds of the disabled, in their judgement, have not received enough information about the available benefits and services that could help them manage in daily life, a major problem being the access to information in the country and small towns. Further, people regard the relevant procedures as too complicated and time-consuming. The delivered services and benefits do not always meet the special needs of the disabled – the access to the needed services and their quality must be improved. It should also be ensured that a disabled person get the necessary information in a suitable manner.

Services provided to the unemployed disabled by the Labour Market Board in 2006 and respective expenditures (in Estonian currency):

Service	Number of recipients	Expenditure
Career counselling	870	-
Labour market training	1146	11,460,000
Work practice	239	1,774,097
Coaching for work	74	363,932
Wage subsidy	68	735,896
Working with a support person	60	868,573
Business start-up subsidy	45	1,033,569
Technical aids	5	87,338
Adjustment of workplace and equipments	1	15,340
	TOTAL:	16,338,744

During the year, the number of people registered was 4023, of whom 403 found job through the Labour Market Board and 355 found job on their own (percentage of engagement 18.8%)

There are no similar statistics available for 2007. It should be noted that under favourable economic conditions the number of the unemployed registered with the Labour Market Board and of recipients of services was smaller than in the preceding year. 21 percent of registered unemployed people with disabilities found job in 2007.

People with disabilities constitute a risk group in the labour market and they account for about 10 percent of the registered unemployed. As shown above, special services targeted at disabled persons (communication support at work interviews, working with a support person, adjustment of workplace and equipments, free use of technical aids needed for work) are provided to a lesser extent if compared with other services. On the one hand it is due to the fact that the disabled unemployed like other unemployed need counselling and training in the first place. At the same time, services targeted at disabled people need to be constantly elaborated so as to enhance their flexibility of use and attractiveness

for employers. For instance, the services of workplace adjustment or provision of technical aids entail a long period of waiting (up to 3-4 months) before a person can start working. But employers need an employee as quickly as possible and they are unwilling to wait for several months. Therefore two above mentioned services are piloted to working disabled people since the beginning of 2008. The first results has shown that these services are more popular among working people than among unemployed disabled people.

Social security expenditures (in 2005) on people with disabilities or incapacity for work accounted for 9 percent (i.e. over two billion EEK) of all social security expenditures. The total amount of social security expenditures in 2005 was nearly 22 billion EEK. Compared with other member states (EL-25), Estonia stands the last but one (before Latvia) in terms of the share of social security expenditures in the GDP.

2.2. Provision of rehabilitation services in Estonia

Rehabilitation service is a social service provided to improve the ability of persons to cope independently, their social integration and employment or commencement of employment in Estonia. In the case of persons who are unable to work due to age, disability or special needs regarding mental health, rehabilitation service is provided to support their ability to live independently and reduce the care burden of their family members. Children's rehabilitation service is aimed at ensuring equal development opportunities at the time of attaining working age.

In the course of rehabilitation services, the ability to live independently, personal potential for employment and the need for external assistance are assessed, and suggestions are made for adjusting the (home) surroundings, for obtaining and using assistive devices. A rehabilitation team comprises at least five specialists of different areas (physiotherapist, occupational therapist, speech therapist, nurse, social worker, psychologist).

The rehabilitation service provided by the government today includes:

- Rehabilitation assessment and development of an individualized rehabilitation plan (valid for a term of 6 months up to 3 years);
- Guidance in the implementation of the plan; evaluation of results
- Provision of services to a disabled person and his/her family by the different specialists of a rehabilitation team (list of services includes 17 services);
- Accommodation if services are provided in inpatient rehabilitation facilities;
- Refunding of travel costs if a person must travel outside of the municipality of residence for receiving rehabilitation services or the provider of rehabilitation service travels to the person in question.

The following are entitled to receive rehabilitation services:

1. Children and adults applying for a degree of severity of a disability
2. Disabled persons
3. People aged 16-65 years with special needs regarding their mental health whose impairment rating is at least 40%
4. Minors (aged 7-18 years) on the basis of a decision of a juvenile committee.

Rehabilitation services may be provided by sole proprietors, legal persons, local government agencies or agencies administered by governmental authorities registered as providers of rehabilitation services in the register of economic activities. The Social Insurance Board shall ensure the provision of rehabilitation services.

Over the recent years the system has been modified in order to enhance the employability of individuals with disabilities. In 2007, rehabilitation services were provided to 14,140 persons, incl. 4921 working-age and 3441 older persons. This amounts to 15,472,812 EEK for working-age and 11,193,823 EEK for older persons.

Problems related to the provision of rehabilitation services:

- The existing rehabilitation concept is too medicine-centred, focusing mainly on the provision of physiotherapeutic services. Although the purpose of rehabilitation, pursuant to the Social Welfare Act, is employability, it has not been emphasized or included as an objective in rehabilitation plans or the provision of the service.

Although almost three quarters of people participating in rehabilitation agree that this service has improved their status and ability to live independently, the goal of the service - to facilitate access to employment – remains in the background and actual employability of disabled persons has been low until now. According to the survey on coping and needs of the disabled carried out in 2005-2006, only about one fifth of working-age disabled are employed.

- Those needing the service do not receive it as much or as often as they actually need. According to the PIU, rehabilitation services are needed by 85 % of the disabled, whereas only 47 % actually get them. The main obstacles to accessibility of rehabilitation services are little information about opportunities and difficulty in applying for the service, but also too long waiting lists, poor access to rehabilitation facilities, inadequate means of transport (especially in rural areas) and the high cost of services and travel.
- Currently, the rehabilitation system is not adequately linked to the service of supported employment for people with disabilities, in the course of which the supported work counsellor finds a job for the disabled, assists him/her to

conclude a work contract negotiated with the employer and make adaptations to the workplace, and advises him/her after starting work. The background and expertise of supported work counsellors differ from that of rehabilitation teams; therefore it is essential, for shifting the goal of the rehabilitation system towards better employability, to cooperate much closer with supported work counsellors.

- Rehabilitation specialists who provide rehabilitation services funded by the government (psychologist, social worker, speech therapist, occupational therapist/ creative therapist, nurse, physician, physiotherapist) have corresponding special education and professional expertise, but do not have common understanding of the principles of rehabilitation services.
- There is no common accredited training programme which could be used for the in-service training of evaluation teams drawing up rehabilitation plans or providers of rehabilitation services or in the curricula of universities.
- There are no unified quality standards for the provision of rehabilitation services.

3. Challenges of welfare system for people of disabilities

Education of people with disabilities

A precondition for independent living, and working, of people with disabilities is good education, i.e. education for all irrespective of the severity or extent of a disability. Estonia proceeds from the assumption that each disabled child is capable of learning and acquiring education, but the challenge is to find a suitable mode of study for each learner. Basic education is compulsory in Estonia, but it is essential to pay particular attention to further study opportunities. It is education that determines the ability to cope and work for people with disabilities. However, work is important not only in terms of earnings; it is equally important in terms of social networks and self-esteem accompanying employment: I am needed.

Young people with disabilities can acquire vocational education both in ordinary vocational schools and the Astangu Vocational Rehabilitation Centre.

Changing attitudes

On the one hand, the motivation of people with disabilities to find work is very low. There are several reasons for that: health condition, lack of suitable work, opinion that employers do not want to hire disabled persons. On the other hand, also employers hold a negative attitude that disabled persons pose more problems at work than normal people do. Such an attitude may arise from unawareness, which in turn may cause fear of persons with disabilities.

Hence, the consultants of the Labour Market Board and representatives of disabled people's organisations continue to play a key role in reducing negative

attitudes. The consultants of the Labour Market Board can help raise the qualifications of disabled persons and in this way improve their competitiveness and help them get a suitable job.

Changing attitudes means continuous information. A prospective activity is to publish, in June this year, a special edition on employment of people with disabilities targeted at employers.

Facilitation of flexible working arrangements

The survey on coping and needs of the disabled (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2006) revealed that a disabled person would like to work in an office or another workplace with the daily working time being less than 8 hours. Flexible modes of employment have been used little so far. In certain areas like information technology or services, flexible working is easier to arrange. In other cases flexible work arrangements call for longer discussions with the employer. On the basis of the projects we can claim that upon employing people with disabilities employers have agreed to arranging working hours, working conditions (e.g. standing work has been reorganised into sitting work) and work duties (easier tasks have been assigned if appropriate).

We plan to advocate the use of flexible modes of employment among employers even more under the programmes “Increase in the supply of qualified workforce 2007-2013” and “Improvement of the quality of working life 2007-2008”. Flexible working is to the advantage of both the disabled people and other target groups (e.g. working students, persons who live and work in different locations, parents with small children, older workers).

Development of alternative working arrangements, incl. supported employment.

Although many people with disabilities manage, under favourable conditions, in the open labour market, there are lots of others who need a safe working environment or to go through the different stages of workability before entering the open labour market.

For the time being, alternative working arrangements can only be developed under the projects financed from the European Social Fund.

Restructuring the rehabilitation service system.

The restructuring of the rehabilitation system began already in 2005 within the framework of the project “Access to employment of the disabled through case-by-case rehabilitation” (PITRA) when the bottlenecks in the provision of rehabilitation services were mapped, process-based descriptions of rehabilitation services were developed and a new scheme for the provision of rehabilitation services was designed. Within the framework of a follow-up project “Access to employment of the disabled through the modification of the rehabilitation system” (PITRA 2), the following measures are being developed – principles for the implementation of a new rehabilitation system, policies and documentation for preliminary evaluation, criteria for the assessment of the need for rehabilitation

services; guidelines for the implementation of the main stages of the rehabilitation process (evaluation of needs and resources, target-setting, planning of activities, interventions and evaluation of efficiency) and for the design of rehabilitation intervention programmes; the mechanism for funding rehabilitation on a needs basis – and their applicability is tested.

The need for a in-service training programme for rehabilitation service providers consistent with the new system has become evident in order to:

- enable rehabilitation specialists to develop a harmonized understanding of the concept and goals of rehabilitation;
- further cooperation between the medical, social and employment sectors and
- promote employment-centred approach in rehabilitation.