

“Activation measures - a key challenge for social security organisations in Europe”

On 16 September 2015 the European Social Insurance Platform (ESIP) and the German Social Accident Insurance (DGUV) held a breakfast discussion at the European Parliament under the auspices of the German Member of the European Parliament, Jutta Steinruck (S&D). Around 30 participants from the European Parliament as well as representatives of national social security organisations and European stakeholder organisations discussed the challenges of activation measures in Europe.

In her welcome speech Jutta Steinruck (MEP) underlined the importance of integrating persons with disabilities in the worklife. She referred to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) and the EU Framework for the UN CRPD both of which call to promote and to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. She also pointed out the need to remove obstacles to entering the labour market. Not only financial incentives but also the reduction of prejudices are necessary and the better involvement of employers should be taken into consideration. Dr. Franz Terwey, President of the ESIP highlighted the importance of activation measures as a social investment in the productivity of our societies as well as a vital contribution to social cohesion in the EU Member States. In this respect, the activation of persons with disabilities represent a core element of the social insurers' endeavour and engagement.

Eva-Marie Höffer then presented the findings of two projects that have been conducted by the Disability and Reintegration Committee of the ESIP (DisRe) over the last three years. Both projects are related to each other and underline the importance of promoting activation measures at national, European and cross-border level.

The first initiative, a joint position paper on the coordination of activation measures in Europe points to the positive effects of reintegration for individuals, employers and social security organisations. Members of the DisRe-Committee from different areas of social security such as pensions, unemployment and accidents at work contributed with their administrative and practical experiences and their observations. The paper draws particular attention to the difficulties that occur in practice when it comes to cross-border activation measures and vocational rehabilitation.

In a second, related initiative, a peer review on activation measures, several social security institutions from European countries presented their systems and vocational rehabilitation measures. The peer review shows that across the Member States significant differences can be found regarding the way activation benefits are granted (cash versus 'in kind' benefits)

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and that Member States struggle with the cross-border dimension of supporting their citizens throughout the EU. One main finding is that measures focusing on the needs of the individual enable a sustainable reintegration into working life. Early detection and intervention is of utmost importance as well as intensive collaboration with employers. Furthermore integrated approaches that offer coordinated processes are preferable, uncoordinated and unstructured processes lead to less success in reintegration.

Both projects show that vocational rehabilitation services focusing on the possibilities of people with disabilities have become more and more important in social security systems in EU countries. This is underlined by the report of the UN expert committee for the rights of persons with disabilities which points to the freedom of movement and the right to employment of these persons in Europe.

Opening the discussion to the floor, similar concerns were raised. Beneficiaries are practically unable to take advantage of their freedom of movement, since, for example their assistants are not paid outside the country of residence. Furthermore, the effectiveness of financial incentives to employers was discussed, and the idea was developed to better inform and train employers on the value disabled persons can add to the workforce. This development should go in line with a stronger commitment to the human rights established under the UN CRPD, enabling persons with disabilities to benefit, amongst others, from equal employment possibilities, mobility within the labour market and access to education.

The discussion showed that in a number of countries across Europe there are examples of good practice that include the use of vouchers, action plans, and campaigns or individualised step-by-step reintegration of older workers. The participants of the event also stressed that the notion of disability should be expanded to include mental health problems that have become increasingly prevalent during the last years. The need for further action at EU level is deemed to be important, for example, the European Accessibility act, which is still under discussion.

Creating awareness through campaigns and promoting best practice have been identified as next steps to intensify the discussions at European and national level. Data and evaluations/analyses that demonstrate positive effects can also promote investment in activation measures. At the same time, further action is needed when it comes to cross border measures. Finally, participants were invited to contribute to a joint network, a common platform to share and promote common ideas.

Jutta Steinruck concluded by thanking the participants for their valuable input and promised to take the discussion points with her to discussions in the European Parliament. She also invited the ESIP and the attendees to keep up the dialogue with her and her colleagues in Parliament.