

Promoting inclusive employment: a Romanian experience

Laila Onu Laila Onu

The author is Executive Director, Foundation Pentru Voi, Timisoara, Romania.

For Romania, a country where 13 years ago the conditions of life for people with mental disabilities in institutions shocked the world, inclusive employment remains the dream of a handful of human rights NGOs.

Because the appalling situation of institutions for children has been widely covered in the international media and by intergovernmental organisations, most efforts of the Government and Romanian and international NGOs have been focused on children, developing community services for them, providing education, and foster care. In 1992, the Ministry of Education started two pilot projects for inclusive education in Timisoara and Cluj, with the financial support of UNICEF and with professional guidance from UNESCO. It has been a success and based on these encouraging results, the Ministry of Education is working to expand the programme at the national level. Initiatives regarding the mainstreaming of children with disabilities are based in two legal acts: the “Strategy regarding equalisation of opportunities for children and youngsters with deficiencies and their access to education and protection,” and a “National Programme of integration and rehabilitation of children with deficiencies in/through community.” [1] Today, the number of mainstreamed children with disabilities is around 5,000.

However, what about inclusive employment? The concept in itself is largely unknown, and the public opinion is more sceptical about the possibility that people with mental disabilities can hold jobs on the open labour market. The mass media does not offer a favourable image of people with mental disabilities as workers with potential and adequate abilities for certain jobs. The media insists more on charity, and not on the human rights approach.

Inclusive employment is not the only problem; another major problem is a very low number of sheltered workshops. Romania uses a quota system: the legislation provides that in companies with over 100 employees, four percent of employees must be people with disabilities. Companies that fail to meet the requirement must pay a tax to a special fund. There is a difference between the text of the law and practice, however, and most companies do not respect this provision in practice.

The economic transition has had an important effect on the labour market, increasing unemployment and with it poverty. Although there are no statistics for the (un)employment rate of persons with mental disabilities in Romania, NGOs working in this field believe that the number of people with disabilities who are employed is extremely small. Young people with mental disabilities, who graduate from special vocational schools, lack marketable skills. The Centre for reorientation and reintegration for the unemployed organises vocational training, but these courses are not appropriate for persons with intellectual disabilities, and applicants who are unemployed but have exceeded the period for unemployment allowances must pay for this training, which is quite expensive. In addition, applicants must have completed primary “ and in some cases secondary “ education to be eligible for such training, making the courses inaccessible for most people with intellectual disabilities.

Foundation Pentru Voi from Timisoara is an NGO that provides community services for 100 persons with intellectual disabilities. Our goal is to increase the quality of life for persons with intellectual disabilities. The services provided include a day Centre with five workshops, residential services, and advocacy programmes.

In 1999, we started a project for inclusive employment. Because the concept was very new for our country and we lacked experience in this field, we began by training our staff with professionals from the UK and the Netherlands. We organised study visits to the Netherlands and UK, to learn from employment programmes developed there.

Based on these trainings, we started our own programme.

First we selected a group of 20 people. Our placement expert drew up the vocational profile of the clients, and started to search for appropriate jobs. In order to do this, every week, she took the list of available jobs from the local employment agency, and looked for jobs in the newspapers and on the Internet. Then our placement expert assessed the available jobs against the vocational profiles of our clients. Once the placement expert considered that a certain job was appropriate for one of our clients, she went to the company to advocate for the idea of employing a person with disabilities. Sometimes, the answer was very short: “no,” and the employers refused to discuss the matter further. But there were other employers who were persuaded to try. Sometimes we invited them to come to the day centre of the Foundation, to see our clients in the workshops, or we suggested that a person with intellectual disabilities volunteer for two weeks in their company, to see how he or she will manage. We have organised a workshop for employers to raise their awareness about the potential of people with mental disabilities as part of the work force.

After an employer was persuaded to agree in principle to the idea of employing a person with disabilities, our placement expert prepared the client for the interview and accompanied him or her to the interview. If our client was accepted after the interview, then the work of the job-coach started. She went to the company and she spoke with the co-workers to get them used to the idea that they will have a colleague with a mental disability. Stigma and prejudice are still widespread in Romania, so the attitudes of the co-workers can be hostile and show a lack of respect and sensitivity towards people with mental disabilities. The job-coach accompanies the client to the job for one or two weeks, training him or her for the demands of the job and assisting in the development of relationships with the co-workers. Afterwards, the job-coach visits the workplace once a week, and whenever the employer or the client requests a visit because of some problem.

When we started the project, we were afraid that we would not find jobs. But we did. After one year, we had ten people employed on the open labour market, which is not bad for Romania. But what happened afterwards was not so positive: some of our clients started to lose their jobs, usually due to their lack of social skills. Unfortunately, neither special schools nor the mainstreamed schools teach social skills. While a person without disabilities is able to learn these skills by imitation, a person with intellectual disabilities needs special training to acquire social skills. Therefore, we started to develop a programme of teaching our clients social skills, based on the Goldstein method.

[\[2\]](#)

Inclusive employment is probably the most challenging process. There are many barriers: the lack of environmental accessibility and communication, the lack of national policies in favour of inclusive employment, prejudices of employers, a lack of inclusive education in the past, and a lack of social skills of people with mental disabilities. Sometimes parents' attitudes can be a barrier to employment. Parents may not believe that their children are a resource in the labour market, and some are not willing to support their adult children in holding a job.

Our programme of inclusive employment has proven that it is possible for people with intellectual disabilities to get and to keep a job on the open labour market, despite all the difficulties. But these results, even if they are encouraging, are very small in relation to the total number of people with disabilities. What can be done to increase the number of employed people with mental disabilities and to develop similar projects throughout the country?

In order to call for a national policy promoting the employment of people with disabilities, in February 2000 we took the initiative of elaborating a National Strategy on Disabilities based on the UN Standard Rules on Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities. [\[3\]](#) At a national conference in Bucharest in March 2000, some 100 participants representing NGOs, ministries, the EU, the Council of Europe, the Delegation of the European Union, the UN and other stakeholders agreed on a draft of a National Strategy on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Handicaps. The keynote speaker at the conference was the UN Special Rapporteur, Dr. Bengt Lindqvist. Six months later we organised a follow-up workshop with Baroness Emma Nicholson of Winterbourne, the European Parliament's Rapporteur for Romania, as the main speaker. This was part of our advocacy efforts to promote the strategy. Finally, the Romanian Government approved the National Strategy for the Special Protection and Social Integration of Disabled People in Romania on October 31, 2002.

The Strategy states that the “[e]mployment of disabled people can be done:

- in a normal working environment, with or without protecting the workplace
- in protected units
- at home
- in occupational therapy units.

Existing labour market instruments, schemes, modalities and training programmes, and the promotion of employment measures will be accessible to disabled people as well.” As specific objectives, the Strategy includes the development of a job placement network comprised of counselling and information specialists regarding jobs for disabled people.

The accession process is an opportunity for Romanian NGOs to improve the legislation according to the *acquis communautaire*. In the field of employment of people with disabilities, there is the European Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000, establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation. According to this directive, “appropriate measures should be provided, i.e. effective and practical measures to adapt the workplace to the disability, for example adapting premises and equipment, patterns of working time, the distribution of tasks or the provision of training or integration resources.” Article 5 introduces the principle of “reasonable accommodation for disabled persons,” stating that “[i]n order to guarantee compliance with the principle of equal treatment in relation to persons with disabilities, reasonable accommodation shall be provided.



This means that employers shall take appropriate measures, where needed in a particular case, to enable a person with a disability to have access to, participate in, or advance in employment, or to undergo training, unless such measures would impose a disproportionate burden on the employer. This burden shall not be disproportionate when it is sufficiently remedied by measures existing within the framework of the disability policy of the Member State concerned.”

It is now our objective to lobby to the Government for changing the national legislation in order to comply with the demands of Directive 2000/78/EC. There are still four years before the possible date of accession in 2007, and this will be an opportunity for creating a strong advocacy for promoting legislation that will allow access to employment for people with mental disabilities, will encourage inclusive employment schemes, and will protect against discrimination in labour.

Footnotes

[1] Order of the Ministry of Education, no. 3634/1997.

[2] *Alias*, the "structured learning therapy." His method focuses on increasing social skills by providing useful behaviour patterns, reducing clients' social fears and offering realistic expectations with regard to one's own competences.

[3] UN GA Res. 48/96 of 20 December 1993.