# People with disabilities: promoting equal rights and opportunities

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PURPOSE : to remove barriers and enhance the opportunities for people with disabilities to participate fully in all aspects of society. CONTENT : people with disabilities are recognised to be one of the most disadvantaged sections of our society and continue to face considerable barriers in accessing all aspects of social life. The approach endorsed by the European Union acknowledges that environmental barriers are a greater impediment to participation in society than functional limitations. Barrier removal through legislation, provision of accommodations, universal design and other means, has been identified as the key to equal opportunities for people with disabilities. While responsibility for these issues remains mainly with the Member States, the present scope of Community competence provides for substantial means and added value to achieve better equal opportunities for people with disabilities. The inclusion of a general non-discrimination article (Article 13) covering inter alia disability in the Treaty of Amsterdam provides the basis for a crucal leap forward to promote equal rights for people with disabilities at EU level. To complement the above mentioned initiatives as well as to meet the commitment made by the Intergovernmental Conference should take into account the needs of people with disabilities, the present communication seeks to review some key EU policies which can contribute to the improvement of access for people with disabilities. In this context, the communication places a particular emphasis upon the achievement of a greater synergy between related issues in the fields of employment, education and vocational training, transport, the internal market, information society, new technologies and consumer policy. Mobility plays a crucial role in ensuring participation in economic and social activity and the lack of it is an inhibiting factor against the participation rights of people with disabilities to the detriment of all. The improvement of access for people with disabilities will have positive implications for other areas such as quality of working life, the protection of the consumer and the competitiveness of European Industry. Accordingly, the Commission is drawing the links between the relevant inter-sectorial policies and is looking forward how much more synergy can be obtained. Furthermore, recent EU developments in the field of new technologies will also play a crucial role in enabling people with disabilities to overcome functional limitations and thus enhancing their prospects for participation. Equally, the communication underlines the fragmented and underdeveloped state of the EU market in this field and identifies some actions to be undertaken to develop a truly common market and to bring supply more closely into alignment with demand. A strong knowledge base, including reliable statistical data onthe prevalence of disability and on its implications to particiapte fully in all aspects of society are seen as essential tools for the implementation of this communication. Lastly, negative attitudes towards disability must be challenged. With this aim in mind, the Commission will propose to the Council that the year 2003 be declared as the EuropeanYear of Disabled Citizens in order to promote society's awareness of disability issues and to provide a catalyst for the introdution of new policies in this regard at all levels of governance. The objective of the proposal, therefore, is to strengthen the concept of citizenship for people with disabilities.