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Community-led support and equal opportunities for persons with disabilities: the cooperative approach**- CECOP's contribution to the European Commission's call for evidence on Enhancing the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities up to 2030 -**

CECOP, the European Confederation of Industrial and Service Cooperatives, welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the European Commission on Enhancing the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities up to 2030 (the Strategy). CECOP represents approximately 43,000 cooperatives across Europe which in turn employ over 1.3 million people. These are democratically owned and managed enterprises that contribute to sustainable and inclusive growth by combining economic performance with social progress. They belong to the larger social economy family. Almost 30% of them are so-called social cooperatives, meaning they are specialised in providing services of general interest – including social services, care, education, and more – or in the reintegration, through work, of disadvantaged workers. Among vulnerable groups, people with disabilities represent the largest group of beneficiaries.

The Strategy has been an essential guide and an effective political framework for coordinated EU action to support the rights, autonomy and participation of persons with disabilities. CECOP recognises that progress has been made in the past five years but reiterates the need to update the Strategy and strengthen the impact of EU action in light of the changing political context and new societal challenges. In fact, since the adoption of the Strategy in 2021, the disability employment gap has increased¹ and, in 2024, almost one third of persons with disabilities was at risk of poverty or social exclusion.² Furthermore, persons with disabilities still face considerable barriers to participation and inequalities in all areas of life, especially with regard to participation in employment, living independently, social protection, and accessing care services.

Cooperatives are at the forefront of addressing these challenges with their locally anchored, human-centred, community-based approach. The cooperative model is characterised by strong social innovation, allowing flexibility and adaptability to various contexts and realities. Worker-owned cooperatives give the possibility to workers to become co-owners, including to groups that are often underrepresented in the

¹ Eurostat. Disability employment gap by level of activity limitation and sex. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tepsr_sp200/default/line?lang=en

² Eurostat. Disability statistics – poverty and income inequalities. Available: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Disability_statistics_-_poverty_and_income_inequalities

management of enterprises, such as persons with disabilities, by giving them the opportunity to have a direct say in the operation of the enterprise. In particular, social cooperatives, which can be worker-owned or characterised by a multistakeholder governance³, provide community-led social services, including in areas not covered by public service provision. Work integration social cooperatives' core mission is to assist people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups in their (re)integration in the labour market. Cooperatives also represent an excellent tool with and for persons with disabilities to promote self-representation, in line with Articles 3, 19 and 29 of the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(UNCRPD\)](#), to the extent that persons with disabilities themselves are often founders of social cooperatives.

As such, cooperatives constitute key allies in effectively achieving the objectives of various priority areas of the Strategy as they are fully aligned with its rights-based approach aimed at ensuring equal access and opportunities in the economy and in society.

The communication on Enhancing the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities must set new ambitious, tangible and time-bound actions to be undertaken until 2030 and take into account the UNCRPD. To this end, CECOP calls on the European Commission to consider the following recommendations in preparing the communication regarding the Strategy:

1. Recognise the impact of cooperatives as providers of quality services for persons with disabilities

Cooperatives are seldom recognised as key service providers, despite their immense contribution, particularly in regions where there is a lack of available, affordable, or quality services in the local area. Social cooperatives specialise in the provision of services of general interest, including for persons with disabilities. In particular, social cooperatives characterised by a multistakeholder governance provide crucial, community-led services for persons with disabilities. Due to this community-ownership and control, these cooperatives guarantee the effectiveness, relevance, and quality of the services provided. However, their lack of visibility leads to limited recognition at the policy level, disparities among members states and the underutilisation of their potential to provide further quality services. The Strategy must explicitly recognise social cooperatives as providers of quality services for persons with disabilities.

³ Multistakeholder cooperatives have more than one category of member, with different stakeholder groups, such as service beneficiaries, their families, or public authorities, sharing a common interest in the success of the enterprise.

2. Recognise the impact of cooperatives as providers of quality employment opportunities for persons with disabilities

Cooperatives uphold values of democracy, equality, equity, solidarity and empowerment. They also operate in compliance with Article 27 of the UNCRPD and, in some Member States, they are often among the only organisations capable of guaranteeing employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, thanks to their expertise and strong capacity for social innovation.

Work integration social cooperatives' primary mission is to reintegrate people with disabilities (and other disadvantaged groups) into employment, while they also provide additional services, such as skills development and training. In some cases, they act as transitional actors by providing persons with disabilities with supported, rights-based employment that builds skills, confidence, and experience relevant to integration into the open labour market. However, while their impact is significant, they face challenges due to lack of visibility and adequate recognition. In order to support and enhance the achievements of cooperatives, the Strategy must recognise them as providers of quality employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. Furthermore, the Strategy must strengthen the role of the social economy and explicitly include cooperatives in policy design and implementation, thus valuing the quality employment opportunities they generate.

3. Improve access to funding for cooperatives providing services and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities

Worker and social cooperatives are committed to enhancing the rights of persons with disabilities. Nevertheless, they often face unstable or short-term financing and limited access to EU and national funds. Improving access to and tailoring EU funding and social investment instruments would allow cooperatives to:

- *Design quality, accessible and affordable services.* In our aging society, improving existing services is pivotal, but it requires long-term investment and sustainable funding for care cooperatives. Attention must be paid to cooperatives offering a community-led approach to service provision. Furthermore, financial instruments must be adapted in a way that cooperatives are eligible for relevant funding and are not excluded due to their characteristics or size.
- *Foster inclusive employment.* Thanks to their inner principle of equal participation, cooperatives open access to management and ownership to people with disabilities, improving their professional growth, self-confidence and inclusion in the society. Adequate funding for inclusive

employment provided by cooperatives would further enhance inclusion and skills development.

- *Invest more in skill development.* Beyond 2027, it is crucial that the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) is aligned with the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to ensure that social spending is sufficient to meet their specific objectives. In particular, the next MFF should prioritise funding for skills development in social cooperatives by investing in workforce training for disability-related services and by supporting cooperative-based training pathways that equip persons with disabilities with transferable skills for quality employment.

4. Foster more comprehensive partnerships with public authorities

On top of the need for further investments, it is also essential to improve and redesign current public investment avenues. Public procurement is a key lifeline for both cooperatives providing services and public authorities contracting them. However, under the current public procurement rules, as lowest price is still often used as the deciding criterion when awarding contracts, cooperatives – which apply higher social standards and do not compromise on these – are often excluded. The revision of public procurement rules has the opportunity to alleviate this⁴, nevertheless, partnerships must be developed as well.

Similarly, EU rules on state aid must be strengthened to achieve wider-reaching positive impact. In particular, the General Block Exemption Regulation (GBER) includes provisions on aid for disadvantaged workers and workers with disabilities, however, these rules must be strengthened and simplified in the current review of the GBER, e.g., by increasing the maximum threshold, eliminating the distinction between the duration of compatible aid for employment of disadvantaged, severely disadvantaged, and disabled workers.⁵

Particularly in the care sector, there is a need for a paradigm shift, from seeing care as an expense, where costs must be minimised regardless of the implications for the care recipients, to treating it as an essential service to the community, where quality must be prioritised.⁶ To this end, collaboration between public

⁴ Access our full position on the revision of public procurement rules here:

<https://cecop.coop/works/revised-public-procurement-rules-must-strengthen-social-and-environmental-standards-and-increase-access-for-cooperatives>

⁵ Access our full position on the review of the General Block Exemption Regulation here:

<https://www.cecop.coop/works/cecops-contribution-to-the-european-commissions-call-for-evidence-on-the-gber>

⁶ CECOP (2022). Cooperatives care! Available at :

<https://cecop.coop/uploads/file/Care%20publication%202020page.pdf>

administration and social cooperatives providing such services must move towards a more integrated partnership model, based on a joint analysis of community needs and long-term planning of the services provision.

5. Promote quality employment for professionals delivering care and support

The role of professionals delivering care and support for persons with disabilities is not sufficiently recognised: workers are often poorly remunerated, face precarious working conditions and experience high levels of violence, which leads to a high turnover. This, in turn, affects the quality of the services. Against this backdrop, cooperatives have been emerging as innovative providers of quality work, especially for worker-owned cooperatives where job quality is integral to organizational objectives and, thus, prioritized in practices, such as stable employment, control over working conditions, work-life balance, gender equality, and training for the staff.⁷

Despite their valuable contribution and their commitment to ensuring quality jobs, cooperatives lack targeted support to further invest in skills development and expand their training programmes for their workers. Only by enabling better working conditions, upskilling and training, can quality care and support be guaranteed to recipients.

6. Involve cooperative organisations in policy design and monitoring

Cooperatives offer experience and expertise in both the provision of quality services and quality jobs to persons with disabilities. Building on this, cooperative organisations can act as key partners in fostering inclusive growth and social cohesion, and they must be recognised as such. To this end, the involvement of cooperative organisations in policy design and monitoring should be strengthened at EU, national, regional and local levels. Attention must also be paid to ensure that these partnerships are substantive and meaningful, rather than merely procedural.

7. Ensure synergies with other EU initiatives

To ensure successful implementation, the Strategy must be coherent with other existing policy initiatives, including the Social Economy Action Plan, the European Care Strategy and the Union of Skills, as well as upcoming initiatives such as the new European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the new Gender Equality Strategy, the first EU Anti-Poverty Strategy and the Quality Jobs Act.

⁷ CECOP (2022). Cooperatives care! Available at :
<https://cecop.coop/uploads/file/Care%20publication%202%20page.pdf>

CECOP is the European Confederation of Industrial and Service Cooperatives, representing approximately 43,000 cooperatives, employing over 1.3 million workers, across 15 EU countries and the UK. The majority of cooperatives affiliated to CECOP's members are worker cooperatives (72%), which are democratically managed and owned by the workers, and social cooperatives (27%), which, in addition to workers, often include other types of members, such as service beneficiaries or public authorities. Social cooperatives primarily provide services of general interest and many of them contribute to the work integration of disadvantaged and marginalised people. The remaining cooperatives represented by CECOP (1%) are composed of self-employed workers.