
Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities as an Important Element of Economic and Social Development: The European Union Case

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to present the issue of accessibility for persons with disabilities as an important element of sustainable development, taking into account the activities of the European Union (EU) in this area.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The article is based on an approach according to which sustainable development focuses on the quality of life of a human being. The question arises how the EU refers to these problems in its internal and external policies. Therefore, after the analysis of the UN general documents on sustainable development and accessibility for persons with disabilities, the EU programmes, acts and concrete actions concerning these issues are presented and commented on. This legal analysis is supported by critical analysis of literature and available statistical data.

Findings: Ensuring access to goods and services for persons with disabilities is vital for sustainable development as one of its main objectives is to improve the quality of life of all human beings. This issue is taken into account both in the UN and EU documents and is important for both economic and social sustainability.

Practical implications: The results are of major importance to governments formulating their programmes on accessibility. They should consider the important role of accessibility within the scope of actions undertaken for social and economic development. Policy makers should also take into account the main challenges that ensuring access to goods and services for persons with disabilities poses in relation to architecture, transport, education, digitalisation, health, culture etc.

Originality/value: The article is based on a critical analysis of documents and literature. As a result, it indicates strong and weak points in the implementation of accessibility goals in the frame of sustainable development policy. Moreover, the last part of the article presents solutions indispensable for ensuring access to goods and services for persons with disabilities, which may contribute to the development of good practices in this area.

Keywords: Accessibility, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, CRPD, Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs, EU Policy on Accessibility, European Accessibility Act.

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1. Introduction

Ensuring access to goods and services for persons with disabilities is one of the international standards developed under the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Convention or CRPD). This legal act has had enormous impact on the protection of the disabled not only because it refers to disability as “(...) an evolving concept ... that results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (art. 1 of the Convention), thus giving rise to the social model of disability, but also because it introduces the concept of accessibility. The latter is mentioned in several CRPD provisions beginning with the preamble where it is seen not only as a human right issue but also as an important element for international development. Therefore, the States-Parties to the Convention are obliged to promote accessibility for persons with disabilities and take it into account in the frames of actions connected with sustainable development. It is thus important to note that the European Union is also a party to CRPD and has been bound by its provisions since 22 January 2011. As a result, the following research questions have been asked in this study:

Q1: How accessibility can influence economic and social development? Are there any connections between accessibility and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2015?

Q2: Does the European Union treat the issue of accessibility for persons with disabilities as an important element of sustainable development? What actions are undertaken to achieve this goal in practice?

The research process has required the following hypotheses:

H1: Accessibility affects many areas of life of all human beings; it conditions the quality of life and is important not only for economic but also for social development, inter alia by diminishing the risk of social exclusion of persons with disabilities. Therefore there are many connections between accessibility for persons with disabilities and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2015 as the latter refer to both economic and social sustainability.

H2: The EU treats the issue of accessibility for persons with disabilities as an important element of sustainable development and a precondition for participation in society and economy. It undertakes many actions to achieve this goal e.g. by adopting the European Accessibility Act of 2019.

To answer the questions and verify the hypotheses, the text presents and comments on the UN general documents on sustainable development and accessibility for persons with disabilities as well as EU programmes, acts and concrete actions

concerning these issues. This legal analysis has been supported by critical analysis of literature and available statistical data.

As a result, the first part of the article refers to the concept of sustainable development and its main goals as envisioned in to the UN documents. The second part tries to show that accessibility for persons with disabilities is an important element of sustainable development given the provisions of the UN 2030 Agenda. In the third part the EU activities are analysed, with the indication of the main weaknesses related to the realisation of accessibility goals by this organisation. The fourth and final part tries to show the solutions indispensable for ensuring access to goods and services for persons with disabilities in practice, which may contribute to the development of an appropriate accessibility policy model.

2. The Concept and Goals of Sustainable Development: General Remarks

The concept of sustainable development is the result of the growing awareness of the global links between mounting environmental problems, socio-economic issues to do with poverty and inequality, and concerns about a healthy future for humanity (Hopwood *et al.*, 2005). One of the first and at the same time the most frequently quoted definition of sustainable development comes from the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future (also known as the Brundtland Report) published in 1987: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 41). This definition is very general and it does not refer to specific activities important for achievement of sustainable development goals. However, it is conceived as a “bridging” concept that can draw together apparently distinct policy domains, and unite often opposed views and interests of society’s stakeholders behind a common agenda (Waas *et al.*, 2011). Meeting human needs is at the heart of sustainable development, and economic growth is seen as the solution to both ecological and social problems. Sustainable development can also be perceived as an effort at guaranteeing a balance among economic growth, environmental integrity and social well-being (Mensah, 2019).

Consequently, most authors present the model of sustainable development as three intersecting circles of environment, society and economy (Giddings *et al.*, 2002; Wanamaker, 2018) or refer to the three pillars of sustainability (Pope *et al.*, 2004; Gibson, 2006; Boyer *et al.*, 2016; Purvis *et al.*, 2018). Some works distinguish additional pillars such as institutional (Spangenberg *et al.*, 2002) or cultural ones (Soini and Birkeland, 2014; Sabatini, 2019). It is underlined, however, that these circles or pillars are not distinct spheres of actions, but complement each other in many ways. In other words, to be a useful concept, sustainability must be understood as permeating almost all aspects of life and profoundly dependent on the specifics of local contexts (Boyer *et al.*, 2016). The core argument here is that integration - particularly of social, economic and ecological considerations - is the essence of the concept of sustainability and must be a central consideration in the design and

implementation of sustainability-based assessment (Gibson, 2006). Therefore, integration is described as one of the fundamental sustainability principles together with the normativity, the equity and the dynamism principle (Waas *et al.*, 2011).

It should be noted then that sustainable development is an evolving concept and its goals are changing. The main objectives, activities necessary to achieve them, and means of their implementation were first outlined in Agenda 21, adopted by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (UN Agenda 21, 1992). Ten years later the UN Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (UN Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, 2002) was agreed upon in response to the weak progress seen in the follow-up to the Rio Summit and to the need for concrete guidance on how to accelerate the shift to sustainable development (Elder *et al.*, 2016). In spite of the adoption of the Plan, the Rio+20 conference concluded that the implementation of Agenda 21 was still insufficient (UN Conference on Sustainable Development, 2012).

Meanwhile the UN tried to strengthen its actions towards human development by adopting in 2000 its Millennium Declaration with the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be achieved in 15 years. They identified specific development priorities across a very broad range, including poverty and hunger, education, gender equality, health, environment sustainability and a global partnership for development. The MDGs had a notable success in encouraging global political consensus, improving the targeting and flow of aid, and the monitoring of development projects. However, they also encountered a range of common challenges, which was one of the reasons why it was suggested that future goals should be built on a shared vision of development, and not on a set of independent development targets bundled together (Waage *et al.*, 2010).

Considering that despite some progress not all targets within the eight goals had been achieved, in 2015 the UN approved the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, seen as a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity and as a way of strengthening universal peace and partnership - these are the five overarching themes, known also as the five Ps (Mensah, 2019). According to this document, "Sustainable development recognises that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, combating inequality within and among countries, preserving the planet, creating sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and fostering social inclusion are linked to each other and are interdependent" (UN 2030 Agenda, 2015).

Consequently, the Agenda refers to international human rights treaties and the Millennium Declaration on the one hand and to the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the World Summit on Sustainable Development and similar initiatives on the other. In this way it tries to combine the human rights and human development process with the sustainable development Rio+ process. Therefore, it is

emphasised that the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which constitute the centrepiece of the 2030 Agenda, go far beyond the MDGs. They can be characterised as primarily attributed either to the economic, environmental or social pillar, and as such they include:

- ending poverty and hunger while promoting sustainable agriculture (goals 1 and 2, economic),
- ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all (economic),
- ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education (social),
- achieving gender equality (social),
- ensuring access to basic services such as water, sanitation and sustainable energy (goals 6 and 7, economic),
- promoting sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all (economic),
- building resilient infrastructure, fostering innovation (economic),
- reducing inequality within and among countries (social),
- making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (environmental),
- ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns (environmental),
- taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts (environmental),
- conserving and sustainably using the oceans, seas and marine resources (environmental),
- protecting, restoring and promoting sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems (environmental),
- promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions (social),
- strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development (social), (UN 2030 Agenda, 2015; Barbier and Burgess, 2017).

3. Accessibility as an Important Element of Sustainable Development

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) formulates ‘accessibility’ as a general principle and overarching obligation, referring to the inclusive practice of removing barriers to ensure equal access for persons with disabilities to, among other things, built environments, goods and services, and facilities (Broderick, 2020). Taken from the perspective of persons with disabilities, it is not only their inherent right but also a means of ensuring that they are able to exercise all rights and fundamental freedoms and are empowered to participate fully in society on equal terms with all others. Thus accessibility bridges the gap between the special needs of persons with disabilities and the realisation of social, economic, cultural and political inclusion (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs,

2013). Consequently, it is vital for sustainable development because one of the main objectives of the latter is to fight with social exclusion and improve the quality of life of all human beings.

The 2030 Agenda confirms this particular meaning of accessibility. The analysis of its provisions on targets to be implemented within the SDGs allows us to draw a conclusion that accessibility should be taken into account while implementing almost all goals attributed to the economic and social pillars and one attributed to the environmental sector. According to the Agenda, goal 1 (No Poverty) and goal 2 (Zero Hunger) are connected *inter alia* with ensuring that all people, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, “have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services” and “to safe, nutritious and sufficient food”. Undoubtedly, persons with disabilities should be treated as vulnerable, and ensuring their access to goods and services will contribute to eradicating poverty. Similar conclusion can be reached with regard to goal 3 (Good Health and Well Being) where one of the targets to be implemented is “ensuring access to quality essential health care services”, which is a very important issue for the disabled. Goals 6 and 7 (Clean Water and Sanitation and Energy) are also connected with “universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water” and “affordable reliable and modern energy services”, while the targets within goal 8 (Good Jobs and Economic Growth) refer directly to access to employment for persons with disabilities and to expanding access to banking, insurance and financial services for all.

Also targets to be implemented for goal 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) take the interests of persons with disabilities into account e.g. be referring to “equitable access for all to quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure” and to significant increase of access to information and communications technology, including universal and affordable access to the Internet. It can be noted then that ensuring access to different goods and services for all or for persons with disabilities in particular is an important task to be implemented to achieve the economic goals of the 2030 Agenda.

There is no doubt that accessibility should also be taken into account within the social goals which concentrate on reducing inequalities, in particular those based on gender (goals 10 and 5). Promoting the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of different grounds (*inter alia* disability), ensuring equal opportunities and reducing inequalities of outcome for all has to be connected with proper accessibility. Moreover, special attention is paid to equal access “to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities” (goal 4: Quality Education) and to justice for all (goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).

Accessibility is also an important task within goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) attributed to the environmental pillar. Firstly, “access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems” should be provided, and the

organisation of the public transport should respect the needs of those in vulnerable situations, *inter alia* persons with disabilities. Secondly, it is necessary to provide “universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities”.

Summing up, accessibility to goods and services such as food, drinking water, energy, health care, education, housing, public transport, infrastructure, information and communications technology, financial services etc. is an indispensable element of sustainable development. It is taken into account within targets to be implemented to achieve the majority of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (the word “access” appears 58 times in the text of the 2030 Agenda and 36 times in the part on Sustainable Development Goals and targets). Though it is essential for all, it gains particular importance for persons with disabilities. Therefore, special attention is paid to providing them with access in particular to food and basic goods (it is noted that more than 80 per cent of persons with disabilities live in poverty), health-care services, education, employment, information and communication technologies, including Internet, housing, transport, infrastructure and - last but not least - to justice, institutions and information. Now efforts should be strengthened to ensure that the goals and targets crucial for persons with disabilities are achieved in practice.

4. EU Activities on Accessibility

Taking into account the prominent role of accessibility in achieving the SDGs, it is interesting to see how it is implemented. The European Union activities in this area can be seen as the best example not only because it is a party to CRPD and is bound by its provisions on accessibility but also as it sets standards which should be implemented by its Member States. As a result, their national policies and practice should be built on the EU policy.

Initially, the EU focused mainly on technical guidance and standards related to products and services for people with special needs, including the building environment. In September 1999, the European Commission issued a mandate to European standardization organisations to prepare a guidance document for such standards. It was adopted by European Committee for Standardisation and European Committee for Electrotechnical Standardisation as CEN/CENELEC Guide 6: Guidelines for standards developers to address the needs of older persons and persons with disabilities. According to this document, its main task was to “provide guidance to writers of relevant International Standards on how to take into account the needs of older persons and persons with disabilities”. Consequently, it had three aims: a) to inform, increase understanding and raise awareness about how human abilities impact on the usability of products, services and environments, b) to outline the relationship between the requirements in standards and the accessibility and usability of products and services, and c) to raise awareness about the benefits of

adopting accessible design principles in terms of a wider market (CEN/CENELEC, 2002).

The next steps were based on Article 13 of the Amsterdam Treaty, which provided the European Union with a legal basis to take action to combat discrimination on different grounds including disability. The most important act adopted to establish a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation was the Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000. It concentrates on the access to employment and vocational training for persons with disabilities, but at the same time it introduces the concept of reasonable accommodation, which has been decisive for the process of integration of persons with disabilities into working environment (art. 5 of EU Directive 2000/78/EC, 2000, Goldschmidt, 2007).

In the literature it is noted that since 2000 the EU has lead an active disability policy with the main aim to ensure social participation and equal opportunities. The European Year of People with Disabilities in 2003 provided new impulses for public awareness of disability issues (Waldschmidt, 2009). Within the framework of the Year, the European Union sought to raise public awareness of the benefits of accessibility to all persons, and to assess the legal and political climate for implementing minimal standards toward achieving a Design for All approach to the implementation of accessibility (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013).

On 15 November 2010, the European Commission adopted the European Disability Strategy 2010–2020 with the aim “to empower people with disabilities so that they can enjoy their full rights, and benefit fully from participating in society and in the European economy, notably through the Single market” (European Disability Strategy, 2010). Eight main areas of action are identified, with accessibility mentioned as first. It is defined as “meaning that people with disabilities have access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, transportation, information and communications technologies and systems (ICT), and other facilities and services” and is treated as a precondition for participation in society and in the economy. The Strategy notices though that “the EU still has a long way to go in achieving this” (European Disability Strategy, 2010).

Therefore, the Commission promises to propose legislative and other instruments, such as standardisation, to optimise the accessibility of the built environment, transport and ICT; to encourage the incorporation of accessibility and ‘design for all’ in educational curricula and training for relevant professions; to foster an EU-wide market for assistive technology; to consider the adoption of a ‘European Accessibility Act’ by 2012. The main message of the document is that the EU is ready to support and supplement national activities for implementing accessibility and removing existing barriers, as well as improving the availability and choice of assistive devices.

The Disability Strategy has led to the adoption of many instruments both legislative and practical, including financing. One of the most important act adopted in this area is the Directive 2019/882/EU of 17 April 2019 on the accessibility requirements for products and services, whose provisions are to be implemented by the Member States by 28 June 2022 (European Accessibility Act, 2019, art. 31). However, it generally applies to products placed on the markets and services provided to consumers after 28 June 2025, which means that for the time being it is not possible to predict whether the Directive will improve accessibility in practice.

Nevertheless, certain comments can be made at least with regard to its general assumptions. First of all, the purpose of the Directive is to improve the functioning of the internal market for accessible products and services by removing barriers created by divergent rules in Member States. It also emphasises the necessity for facilitating the implementation of the CRPD by providing common Union rules which support Member States in their efforts to fulfil their national commitments. As a result, the Directive notes that accessibility should be achieved by the systematic removal and prevention of barriers, preferably through a universal design or ‘design for all’ approach (...) which according to the UN CRPD means the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design (...) universal design shall not exclude assistive devices for particular groups of persons with disabilities where this is needed (European Accessibility Act, 2019, motive 50 of the Preamble).

The discussed act covers products and services that have been identified as being most important for persons with disabilities, while being most likely to have diverging accessibility requirements across EU countries. Their list is quite long and includes computers and operating systems; ATMs; ticketing and check-in machines; smartphones; TV equipment related to digital television services; telephony services and related equipment; access to audio-visual media services such as television broadcast and related consumer equipment; services related to air, bus, rail and waterborne passenger transport; banking services; e-books; and e-commerce. In those areas where the EU has already established certain accessibility requirements (e.g. in the passenger transport or websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies), those standards continue to apply but the additional requirements of the Directive will supplement them. However, it should also be noted that certain essential fields such as built environment and household appliances are not regulated in this act. Thus the EU will have to continue its efforts to ensure equal access in all areas of life.

Apart from the European Accessibility Act, the EU has adopted many other legislative or practical instruments. The most important initiatives include further standardisation; provisions in the Erasmus+ programme to allow better mobility for students with disabilities; educational initiatives for disabled people, including the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education; the EU disability

card project, which ensures equal access to benefits across borders for people with disabilities, mainly in the areas of culture, leisure, sport and transport (it has been piloted in 8 Member States that participate in the project on a voluntary basis); and the Access City Award, which recognises and celebrates a city's willingness, ability and efforts to become more accessible and has been granted every year since 2010 (European Commission, 2019).

Generally, it can be seen that the EU has been very active in promoting accessibility for people with disabilities, and a fundamental part of its strategy involves working towards a barrier-free Europe. However, it is also important to see how it deals with accessibility while implementing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. In its Conclusions of 20 June 2017: "A sustainable European future: The EU response to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", the Council of the European Union stressed the commitment of the EU and its Member States to achieve the goals by 2030. It also urged the European Commission to develop, by mid-2018, an implementation strategy outlining timelines, objectives and concrete measures to reflect the 2030 Agenda in all relevant EU internal and external policies, taking into account the global impacts of the EU's domestic actions. Finally, the Council called upon the Commission to carry out detailed regular monitoring of the SDGs at the EU level, including it where relevant in the context of the European Semester, and to develop a reference indicator framework for this purpose drawing on existing indicators and data provided by the Member States, institutions and international organisations, and accompanied by a qualitative assessment of the progress made (Council of the EU, 2017). In May 2017 The Commission published "EU SDG Indicators set: Indicators for monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in an EU context" which was later developed in cooperation with a large number of partners and stakeholders to adjust to new challenges and changed in 2019 and 2020.

These documents show that the EU takes the SDGs into account while implementing all relevant policies, which means that it adopts a mainstreaming approach. Therefore it is interesting to note that the European disability strategy 2010–2020 is referred to as one of the EU actions supporting goal 1, targets 1.3. (implementing nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all) and 1.4. (ensuring equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services) and also goal 3, targets 3.8. (access to quality essential health-care services) and 3.9. b (providing access to medicines for all).

Moreover, it can be found as one of the instruments important for the realisation of goal 4, in particular targets 4.3 (equal access for all to education, including universities) and 4.5 (equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities). Rights of persons with disabilities and the European disability strategy 2010-2020 are listed among other actions necessary to achieve goal 8, in particular targets 8.5. (full and productive employment for all, including persons with disabilities) and 8.8. (protecting labour rights and promoting safe and secure working environments for all workers). All

actions promoting and protecting rights of persons with disabilities are seen as important for the goal 10, targets 10.2 (promoting the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of different grounds *inter alia* disability), 10.3 (ensuring equal opportunity and reducing inequalities of outcome) and 10.4 (adopting social protection policies and achieving greater equality). Finally, the European Accessibility Act is mentioned in the frames of the EU actions supporting goal 11, target 11.2. (access to transport systems and expanding public transport) (European Commission, 2020).

On the whole it should be noted that these EU actions which implement the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) on accessibility are also important for the realisation of the SDGs. However, it is not a surprise given the fact that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a political momentum to push for the implementation of the CRPD. According to both documents, accessibility is an important element for international development. The EU presents the same approach, simultaneously emphasising that it is a precondition for full participation in society and economy and one of the ways to ensure social inclusion. Although many actions have already been undertaken by the EU in this area, their full effects can only be seen in the future, after the lapse of the time provided for the implementation of the Directive 2019/882/EU on the accessibility requirements for products and services.

Therefore, when we look at the statistics which present the situation of persons with disabilities e.g. in 2016, they are not very optimistic. They reveal the disadvantaged position of persons with disabilities compared to persons without disabilities in relation to many indicators, connected *inter alia* with: ending poverty, access to health care services (the main barriers include the costs, distance and waiting time), education (with the exclusion of early childhood education) and employment (we may observe a slow improvement of the situation on the labour market; however, persons with disabilities are overrepresented among persons with part-time jobs), and gender equality (worse position of disabled women) (Grammenos Report, 2019). With this in mind, certain solutions indispensable for ensuring accessibility within the EU and outside it should be suggested as they may contribute to the development of good practices in this area.

5. Ensuring Access to Goods and Services for Persons with Disabilities in Practice – Recommendations

Despite the fact that accessibility is an essential condition for a sustainable future, persons with disabilities are often left behind. Therefore it is important not only to identify good solutions and practices but also to present model actions which should be undertaken to achieve the SDGs for and with persons with disabilities. The vast majority of these recommendations come from the relevant UN reports, while others are based on the EU legislation and practice. Firstly, accessibility requirements have

to be fully taken into account in the design and creation of any place, product or service. Regarding the CRPD provisions and their practical application, accessibility seems to be best promoted by applying the principle of universal design according to which products, environments, programmes and services should be usable by all people, without the need for adaptation, though assistive devices for particular groups of persons with disabilities are not excluded. The European Accessibility Act is based on this general approach, so the Member States are obliged to apply it in practice and it should be recommended also to other countries.

Moreover, taking into account that persons with disabilities and their families are more likely to be subjected to hunger and poverty, all countries around the world should implement social protection programmes which ensure adequate income security and are available for all (barriers to access to such programmes, including public facilities, transportation, banking and other financial services, lack of information about due benefits etc. should be removed). “The development of social protection programmes for persons with disabilities should be guided by solid evidence and information on the situations of persons with disabilities, their standard of life and well-being, as well as information on the barriers to accessing such programmes and their impact on the ability of persons with disabilities to participate in society” (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019, p. 46).

National legislation and policies on health care should respect the CRPD provisions. It is particularly important to conduct accessibility assessments in medical facilities and eliminate obstacles in this area, including transport barriers, to disseminate health information so that persons with disabilities are better prepared to make decisions about their own health and become aware of the health-care services they can benefit from, and to prohibit discriminatory practices in health insurance. Persons with disabilities should also be better informed about healthy lifestyles, giving the fact that the obesity rate is higher in their case. Generally, it is crucial to achieve the highest attainable standard of health for persons with disabilities also with regard to their access to sexual and reproductive health services.

Full access to education requires *inter alia* educational system reforms, with a view to promoting inclusive education and ensuring equal learning opportunities, eliminating building barriers and providing training to teachers on how to meet the diverse needs of learners. It is also important to obtain bottom-up information on the accessibility of schools for persons with disabilities to improve the situation. All the countries should invest in education for women and girls with disabilities, support their transition from school to work through training, and develop policies and programmes focused on women and girls with disabilities aiming at their full and equal participation in society. Moreover, they should support the empowerment of women and girls with disabilities to participate equally in society (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019, p. 118).

There is no doubt that persons with disabilities face more difficulties in accessing adequate water, sanitation and hygiene facilities than those without disabilities. Consequently, their interests should be reflected in the development, implementation and evaluation of all policies and programmes in this area. Access to safe water and sanitation should be given to all, including persons with disabilities, and it also should be monitored on the basis of the bottom-up information on accessibility. The same applies to access to energy, *inter alia* “initiatives and programmes launched by countries, international organisations, civil society and the private sector aiming at expanding access to energy should include targeted actions for persons with disabilities to ensure they also benefit from these initiatives and are not left behind” (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019, p. 148).

Numerous steps must be taken to address the existing barriers for persons with disabilities at the labour market and improve their access to employment; e.g. all the states should ensure that national legislation protects them from discrimination in all matters of employment and that it includes the denial of reasonable accommodation as a form of discrimination as provided for in the CRPD. Moreover, the public sector should be an example for hiring persons with disabilities and should create a model for other employers. It is thus essential to encourage their employment in the private sector; in particular, public procurement policies and systems should include provisions with regard to this aim. When designing and implementing social protection systems, states should consider a flexible, complementary combination of income security and disability-related support (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019, p. 168). Developing proper databases on the situation of persons with disabilities at the labour market (including the unemployment rate, earnings, hours worked etc.) is also an important element of the strategy aimed at improving their access to employment.

Access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) is recognised as crucial for independent living and inclusion of persons with disabilities and is thus imperative for achieving all SDGs. Therefore, all states should adopt proper accessibility policies and regulations which would also involve persons with disabilities in ICTs development. They should also promote the principles of universal design in the ICT industry and the public sector as their implementation is more affordable and often simpler than developing specialised software or hardware for persons with disabilities (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019, p. 188). It is also essential to provide affordable Internet access for persons with disabilities.

Eliminating inequalities within and among countries from a disability perspective requires review of national laws and policies to identify and eliminate discriminatory provisions against persons with disabilities, raising awareness about their situation through public campaigns to combat negative stereotypes against them, and developing mechanisms for reporting on discrimination. Moreover, this goal should be achieved by taking special measures such as enhanced access to assistive

technology for persons with disabilities; deinstitutionalisation, which requires *inter alia* elimination of policies and laws that allow forced institutionalisation of persons with disabilities; and empowering persons with psychosocial disabilities (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019, pp. 208 and 218).

Accessible housing, public infrastructure, transport and services are crucial for social inclusion of persons with disabilities, and make it possible for such persons to enjoy their livelihoods. Therefore, the states should adopt and implement national policies and laws with regard to this aim, eliminate discriminatory laws that prevent persons with disabilities from exercising their right to adequate housing, and improve research and data to monitor, evaluate and strengthen urban development to be more accessible and inclusive for them. Equally important is to ensure their access to justice, institutions and information, *inter alia* by empowering them to exercise their legal rights, promoting legal support services designed for them, reviewing national legal and policy frameworks on their political participation, strengthening their capacities to apply for public office, as well as adopting guidelines, monitoring and evaluating accessibility of information to persons with disabilities (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019, pp. 258, 267 and 275).

6. Conclusions

The conducted research proved that ensuring access to goods and services for persons with disabilities is an indispensable element of sustainable development. It has therefore been given wide consideration in numerous documents of the UN and the EU. Both organisations attach great importance to accessibility and present the view that is crucial for economic and social development. Consequently, all the states - their members have to take into account the main challenges for ensuring access to goods and services for persons with disabilities in relation to architecture, transport, education, digitalisation, health, culture etc.

The results of the research confirmed the hypothesis no. 1 set at the beginning of the study. Accessibility affects many areas of life of all human being; it conditions the quality of life and is important not only for economic but also for social development. A thorough analysis of the 2030 Agenda provisions revealed that there are many connections between accessibility for persons with disabilities and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2015. Accessibility is included in targets to be implemented to achieve the majority of these goals. Special attention is paid to accessibility to food and basic goods, health-care services, education, employment, information and communication technologies (including the Internet), housing, transport, infrastructure and - last but not least - to justice, institutions and information. The analysis of the EU activities on accessibility confirmed also the hypothesis no. 2. It was proved that the EU treats the issue of accessibility for persons with disabilities as an important element of sustainable development and a precondition for participation in society and economy. It undertakes many actions to achieve this goal; however, their positive

results will be fully seen in future. Unfortunately, the current statistics related to the EU still reveal the generally disadvantaged position of persons with disabilities compared to persons without disabilities. Therefore it is crucial for all the states to follow the recommendations presented in the report of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019), in particular to apply the principle of universal design, supplemented by assistive devices for particular groups of persons with disabilities.

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