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# The Belgrade Declaration - 22 October 2021

Over 150 participants, gathered in Belgrade, Serbia and online, examined over two days the employment situation of blind and partially sighted people in many countries across the continent. The conference took place in an atmosphere of hope: The worse of the global COVID-19 pandemic is hopefully behind us, and many more political and technological tools to make employment a lived reality for blind and partially sighted people exist today.

The following observations were made during the conference, and the resolution was adopted by all participants:

* The employment of people who are blind or partially sighted constitutes both a right and one of the most powerful means of inclusion in society, as a fulfilling job is much more than an income-creating activity!
* While the policy environment, at the global, regional and national level, is more conducive to equal participation of blind and partially sighted people in the labour force than ever before.
* While new fields of occupation have been opened-up in recent years, especially thanks to new technologies.
* While new forms and types of employment, such as self-employment offer new opportunities, in addition to “traditional” forms of employment.
* While many initiatives, both at individual and institutional level exist to improve the employment situation of blind and partially sighted people.

We deplore that the number of blind and partially sighted people in employment remains relatively low, in comparison to our sighted peers. This being an overall trend, we acknowledge that the exact statistical picture of the employment situation is often unclear or incomplete, and therefore call on governments and statistical authorities, at all political levels, to gather more reliable and comparable data. This is a precondition for adopting targeted policies and other supporting measures to further the inclusion of blind and partially sighted people in the labour market. Official data should not only paint the picture of employment versus unemployment, but also help to understand the situation of blind and partially sighted workers in employment, in terms of their salary level and type of contract. An important feature of improved statistical evidence must also be to analyse the impact on the employment situation in terms of gender and multiple forms of disability.

We note, with disappointment, an overall slow implementation of legislation and policies with the result that intended benefits do not reach blind and partially sighted workers and job seekers right here and right now.

We call for more efforts to be deployed to fight prejudice and stereotypes that hinder the inclusion of blind and partially sighted people in the labour market; this is often a higher obstacle to overcome than legislative or technical hurdles. For this to change, long-term investments in awareness-raising amongst employers of all kinds and size need to be strengthened. All such efforts and initiatives should emphasise the abilities and skills of blind and partially sighted workers, in line with the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Moreover, we call upon both private sector and public actors to provide adaptations that may be required for blind and partially sighted people to perform a job on an equal basis with their sighted peers, at no extra costs for the employee.

We ask for all measures to encourage employment to be conceived in a holistic manner; meaning that education, skills development and life-long-learning are an integral part of such measures.

All innovations in the area of new technologies should be based on the “design for all” approach and hence benefit blind and partially sighted people. Otherwise, there is the risk that new technologies may even deepen the exclusion from the labour market. Such new technologies can be usefully complemented by special devices and aids that are tailored to the needs of blind and partially sighted people.

* All supporting schemes and measures put in place by public authorities should be based on a long-term approach, thereby allowing for predictability both for employers, employees and job seekers. Such long-term vision will also help to overcome the current situation where support schemes are often scattered across many levels of governance or agencies or depend on the will and leadership of only few individuals, rather than forming part of a robust system.
* The private sector has a crucial role to play in stepping up its efforts to employ more people who are blind and partially sighted. This commitment can build upon very positive examples that exist, but that need to be multiplied and replicated, in order to make a real difference.
* We insist on the importance for blind and partially sighted people to have a job of their choice, in line with their talents, aspirations, skills and qualifications. This must move away from the traditional approach according to which only few professions were “reserved” to them. At the same time, we recognise that this transition of the labour reality for many blind and partially sighted workers must be organised in a smooth way, always opening new opportunities and allowing for choice.

Conclusion: The European Blind Union and all its members are committed to making the employment of blind and partially sighted people a reality and will give high priority to this goal! In doing so, we will partner with public and private actors to share experience and to push for change. On the long journey towards equal opportunities for blind and partially sighted people in the labour market, we make the commitment to ourselves to lead by example and to make the change finally happen!

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**About EBU**

EBU is a non-governmental, non-profit making European organisation founded in 1984. It is one of the six regional bodies of the World Blind Union. It protects and promotes the interests of blind and partially sighted people in Europe. It currently operates within a network of national organisations of the visually impaired in 41 European countries.

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