

Statement by H.E. Mr. Jean Marc Delizée, Secrétaire d'Etat aux Affaires sociales, chargé des personnes handicapées

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Mister President, Ladies and gentlemen,

Belgium is pleased to share with you our point of view on full participation in political and public life for persons with disabilities. Article 29: political rights Politicians have a crucial role to play when it comes to the implementation of the Convention. We can only talk about an inclusive society if the political decision makers are intimately convinced of the need to include persons with disabilities fully in our societies. Inclusion in our societies also means participation in political and public life. It's a condition sine qua non for a human rights-minded citizenship.

Persons with disabilities have indeed the right to enjoy their political rights on an equal basis with others. This includes the right to vote, the right to be elected and defend their rights. Political rights: the right to vote Firstly, political rights means the right to vote. In Belgium, the vote is compulsory. Belgium has ratified the UN Convention in 2009 but we already had instructions to make elections accessible for persons with disabilities long before that. Belgium is a pioneer in this area. In 2001 we already voted an antidiscrimination-law. This law protects the human rights of persons with disabilities, namely by the introduction of "reasonable accommodation". The law is a legal instrument. When a person with a disability feels that he or she is being discriminated against because the environment is not adapted, he or she can claim the right for adaptations before a court of law.

Also long before the Convention, Belgium had regulations about the organisation of elections. Since 1980, every building that hosts one or more polling stations, has to have at least one voting booth per 5 polling stations that is adapted for persons with a reduced mobility. At every election we prepare a document with practical instructions for the polling stations. In our report, we give more detailed information about all the measures Belgium takes to make elections accessible for people with disabilities. But what about people with intellectual disabilities and mental health problems? A lot still has to be done in this area. In October 2010, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights published a document about the right to political participation of persons with mental health problems and persons with intellectual disabilities.

The UN Convention demands that everyone has the right to participate fully in political life. We are equal so we all should have equal political rights, no matter what kind of disability we have. In a lot of European countries, as in Belgium, the right of political participation is linked to the legal capacity of the individual. All persons under a protective measure such as a partial and plenary guardianship, regardless of their level of functional ability, are denied the right to political participation. There now is a proposition of law that abandons the principle that these persons are denied their political rights and states that it will be a judge who decides whether the person has the capacity or not. It's a delicate problem and we have to discuss about it. We would like to hear best practices or lessons learned from other countries. Political rights: the right to be elected Secondly, political rights are about the right to be elected. There should be fewer barriers for people with disabilities to participate as candidates in an election. We need to have more persons with disabilities in politics if councils, parliaments and governments want to be a reflection of society. Once elected, reasonable accommodation also means that the person with a disability can fully exercise his function, for instance by providing him or her with an interpreter. Full citizenship also means being able to be a politician. We would very much like to hear how other countries deal with this issue. Full participation in public life Finally, about the participation of persons with disabilities in public life. Belgium has several levels of competence and at each level there are councils of persons with disabilities that advise the administrations and ministers. At the level of the Belgian federal government, persons with disabilities are represented by the National High Council of Persons with disabilities.

On the 20th of July, the Belgian government has accepted the proposal to give this Council a more structural role so that in future, it will be more involved in political decisions and that for these decisions, the eventual impact for people with disabilities will be taken into account from the very start. Conclusion Belgium can give you some more «best practices » but our time is limited. I will conclude here.

Thank you for your attention.