Input for the DISCIT Final Conference – Brussels, Belgium, 9-10 November 2015

***The UN CRPD – Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities and their Representative Organisations***

WP 9 *“Active Citizenship as Political Participation”*

1. Disability Rights Advocacy & Activism: Organisational Structures and the Principle of Self-Representation

Our research focused on **collective political participation** of persons with disabilities, i.e. the structures and practices of organisations representing disabled persons in European countries. As first step we aimed at providing an overview of these organisations in all nine countries involved in DISCIT. On the basis of nine national reports (written by the DISCIT consortium members) and additional desk research, we developed a **categorisation** **of organisations** relevant for disability rights advocacy and activism. The analysis of organisational structures allowed for a differentiation between different **organisational types** (single vs. umbrella organisation, national assemblies and networks). Further, the **target group**, whether organisations aimed at an impairment-specific constituency or followed a cross-impairment approach, was a relevant criterion. Additionally, the **political level** of activities (regional, national and/or European) was used for differentiation. Last but not least, the criterion of **self-representation** proved important: Are the organisations formed of or for persons with disabilities?

A closer look at the statutes of the national disability councils resulted in the insight that **the principle of** **self-representation is realised differently**, ranging from very **general approaches** (as in the case of the Disability Federation Ireland) to approaches with comparably **strict quotas of self-representation** (as in the case of the UK Disabled People’s Council). Against the background of the principle "Nothing About Us Without Us" we consider the criterion of (self-)representation as eminent for characterising civil society organisations active in the field of disability policy.

As our research shows that this principle is yet to be fully practised in disability politics, we abstain from using the term “disabled people’s organisations” (DPOs) as a general name for all organisations active in disability rights advocacy and substitute it with the generic expression **“Disability Organisations” (DOs)**. In accordance with the UN CRPD Committee's guidelines, the term **DPO** should be designated solely for **organisations comprised by a majority of persons with disabilities** - at least half of its membership -, governed, led and directed by persons with disabilities.

2. Opportunity Structures of Disability Rights Advocacy at the European Level

In our second deliverable, we focused on the international opportunity structures that enable DOs to side-step national politics and work at the supranational stage to achieve reforms on European and national levels. With only a five years period of legal force of the CRPD in the European Union (2010 – 2015), **we could not detect a significant impact of the CRPD** **with regard to the establishment of new opportunity structures for DOs at the European level**. In the time prior to CRPD ratification, the European Union as well as the Council of Europe have already established several opportunity structures that enable DOs to exert influence in policy processes (e.g. via European Expert Groups [EEGs]). However, only few DOs have access to these structures. Our empirical data (interviews with representatives of seven European resp. international DOs and additional documentary analysis) indicates that the financial resources of the organisations heavily affect their opportunities to participate in (EU) policy processes. In fact, **organisations that receive EU funding seem to be more successful in their advocacy activities at the European level than those organisations that lack these monetary resources**. In this context it is important to note that the **collaboration in EU level advocacy coalitions** and networks (such as the European Social Platform) proves to be an effective way for some organisations to enhance their possibilities to participate in the policy process, regardless of their financial means.

3. The Involvement of National Disability Organisations in the Implementation of the CRPD

In our third and last deliverable we investigated the involvement of DOs in the implementation of the CRPD at the national level. Based on interviews with experts in the field of national, regional and local disability politics in the nine DISCIT countries, we come to the conclusion that **national DOs are playing important roles in the promotion of ratification and implementation of the CRPD in their countries**. Most national DOs are very active in drafting **shadow reports** accompanying CRPD monitoring processes. While most experts state that the participation opportunities have increased since the CRPD was ratified, some experts raise concerns that **DOs' full and equal involvement in the implementation processes is still not realised effectively**. Another often mentioned issue is the lack of resources. A lot of DOs seem to be affected by **public cutbacks**, hence they have **difficulties to realise sustainable involvement in CRPD related policy cycles**.

Additionally, the life-course perspective underlines the relevance of resources. Our analysis of life-course interviews with disabled persons confirms that individual **lack of resources directly affects a person’s opportunity or likelihood to become engaged in civil society organisations**. Another important finding of our research is that **persons with learning difficulties and persons with psycho-social disabilities are facing** **profound disadvantages**. Segregating and institutional settings still remain a reality for these two groups affecting considerably their possibilities to exert autonomy and influence. The life-course perspective emphasises that they are not only excluded from community living, but also less likely to engage in political participation.