

**16th Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights
Keynote Speech for the Opening Plenary on 8th November 2016
By Mr Yannis YALLOUROS, European Disability Forum**

Good afternoon to everyone.

I would like to thank the Board of the Directors and the Executive Director of the Asia-Europe Foundation for the invitation to speak in this important Seminar on the Human Rights of the Persons with Disabilities (PwD).

I would like to welcome the new Executive Director of the ASEF, Ambassador Karsten Warnecke, to whom I wish every success in his new duties and from my side, as EDF representative, I ensure our willing to co-operate closely with you and ASEF.

I would also like to welcome Ms Jia Yong, President of the National Council of Disabled Persons of the People's Republic of China and Mr Gerard Quinn, with whom EDF is often cooperating.

Mr. Quinn and Mrs. Catherine Naughton (EDF's Director) are from Ireland and I congratulate them for their excellent work that they are doing. EDF is cooperating very closely with all of them on several topics and issues regarding PwD.

I welcome Mr. Li Baodong. It is very important for us to have you and thank you for joining us today as representative of the Chinese Government.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Ms Li Xiaomei for hosting this important event for million persons with disabilities and severe diseases. Worldwide, China constitutes a rapidly growing mass market, in terms of services supporting PwD.

We have to highlight that nowadays the whole world is undergoing a tremendous crisis, economic, political, ethical and cultural. Its impact on PwD has caused deterioration on their living conditions and has undermined our identity. The impact of austerity on service provision is detrimental. So, we can say that the economic crisis is a human rights crisis and a social rights crisis in the European Union. The Amsterdam Treaty, the European Year, and the adoption of the CRPD were highlights of the recent decade. But, we are now in a new period and we have to learn from our successes and failures by looking back. I would also like to highlight that the access to information, legal capacity and poverty are some of the barriers for persons with disabilities. Especially for the poverty, I must say that it is the top barrier to integration and inclusion in society.

On behalf of the EDF, I would like to relay the warmest greetings of the President of EDF and also Treasurer of the International Disability Alliance, Mr Yannis Vardakastanis. He hopes that he will be able to join you in the near future in other events you will be organizing.

I would like to introduce myself. I am a deaf person from the age of 2. I hold a diploma in electrical and computer engineering and a master in business and administration. Professionally, I am an IT expert and also a journalist at the Greek Broadcasting Channel. I have been an advocator of the rights of PwD since 1997. At a national level, I was Secretary General and President of the Greek Federation of the Deaf for many years. I am now member of the Executive Secretariat of the Greek Confederation of PwD. At

European level, I was Board Member and Vice-president of the European Union of the Deaf and currently, since 2010, I am member of the Board and Executive Committee of the European Disability Forum. Also, I am a proud father of three children with hearing impairments and also a proud spouse of a wonderful deaf woman.

Many of you have worked hard together with our President, Mr Vardakastanis, during the decade 1995-2005, in order to set the final version of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was adopted at the UN Member States' General Assembly in December 2006.

Our contribution to this process was something extremely important for the UN Member States, as well as for all of the international, regional and national organizations of PwD. The global voice of the DPOs was loud and determined at all stages of the drafting process. In this respect, the UN CRPD, article 4, paragraph 3, outlines the obligation of all States Parties to receive recommendations by the national councils of the PwD on the development and implementation of legislation and policies to implement the Convention and in other decision-making processes.

EDF is the European non-profit and non-governmental organization umbrella of the PwD and persons with severe diseases and represents 80 million people across Europe. This huge number is similar to the respective number of PwD living in China, which means that we have very common voices and souls in fighting and advocating for our right to participate in all aspects of society on an equal basis with others.

In Europe there are three important decision making institutions, which is the European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission. These high-level official bodies often call us to participate in the drafting process of important legislative documents, as well as to co-organize some important events, such as the European Day of PwD and the European Disability Parliament, which was held in 2003 and in 2013 at the Plenary Hall of the European Parliament.

Another important initiative is the publication of the European Accessibility Act by the European Commission in December 2015. EDF and its members through our Freedom of Movement Campaign achieved to break the barriers to free movement within the EU on an equal basis with others. The Act takes the form of a European Directive and has a major influence on the accessibility of goods and services for persons with disabilities in the EU.

All of us are aware of the size of the Chinese markets, which are of the biggest and strongest in the world. I hope that a similar Asian Accessibility Act shall be your next success, towards the empowerment of the Chinese PwD and Persons with Severe Diseases.

On 28 September, there was a historic conference in the European Parliament: Multilingualism and Equal Rights, the Role of Sign Languages. It was a tremendous event that showed persons with disabilities can make a difference when they get mobilized. There were 32 sign language interpreters and approximately 1000 people, deaf and hearing, came together from European Countries inside the European Parliament, in order to show that sign language is a part of linguistic diversity. Accessibility is a human right. Communication via sign language is also a right.

As I have already outlined, our participation in all decision-making bodies is very crucial. Of course, each one's experience both at an individual and at a group level somewhere, somewhen and somehow can be helpful to disseminate the knowledge of what kind of barriers we face in our everyday lives. A very good example is the web, from which many PwD were excluded so far, due to the absence of relevant legislation for the web sites to be accessible.

As a result of our efforts, on 26th October the European Parliament adopted a directive on the Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications of public sector bodies. The Directive is called "Web Directive". From that day onwards, all websites and mobile applications, including the electronic documents and multimedia, of public authorities in Europe have to be accessible to a wide range of users, including 80 millions PwD. This is a crucial milestone to achieve an inclusive digital society in which PwD and other users have access to online services and information on an equal footing to other people. This is a right enshrined in the UN CRPD that the EU has ratified in 2010.

EDF is participating many years in several joint working groups with other technical institutions like the European Committee for Standardization, the so called CEN, European Telecommunications Standards Institute, the so called ETSI, and other high-level European bodies. This helps us to follow the rapid development of products and services, like the web and in general the technology. Now this has finally become an important part of our lives.

However, all these achievements I have addressed were the result of many years' efforts and work and personal involvement, not just of a few days and weeks' engagement. All these were included in European Disability Strategy 2010-2020. I strongly believe that the time has come to discuss the Agenda of the European Disability Strategy 2020-2030.

EU supports transition to community based services through structural funds, so I strongly believe that we can do more to support service sector in Europe, alike in China and other countries.

Ladies and gentlemen, DPOs' vision should be an integral part of the next decade's Strategy. We must go ahead united, in order to make significant and essential progress in exercising our rights, always having as a guide our motto: "Nothing about us without us". Only in this way we can bring a tremendous change worldwide.

Save it, please, in your minds!!!

I would like to close my speech with a big "Thank you" to ASEF and EDF for giving me the honor to be here with you. I wish you all a fruitful Seminar these three days, producing interesting work necessary for us and the disability movement. The magic word we have to keep in mind is CHANGE. We can change our world if we get mobilized!

Thank you for your attention and I am open to questions of the audience, if any.