

# “Can I Work Here?”: Employment Barriers for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities in Greece

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**Abstract:** Research evidence has shown that employment is crucial and purposeful for people with intellectual disabilities, promoting positive effects associated with independent living and social inclusion. Notwithstanding, people with intellectual disabilities find it particularly difficult to accomplish successful employment. They face discrimination, and they are considered to lack work capacity. The extremely marginal position of people with intellectual disabilities in the labor market appears to prevail across national settings. Over the last 35 years, there has been an improvement in the vocational inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities in Greece, with the legislation embracing the human rights-based approach to disability. Nevertheless, the challenge of accomplishing full participation and equality in employment for people with intellectual disabilities still remains huge in Greece. Their participation rates in the Greek labour market are significantly lower than in the rest of the European Union. This article illustrates the employment provisions for individuals with intellectual disabilities in Greece. Additionally, it presents the current implemented models of their occupational inclusion while critically discussing the convention's pursuance on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the Greek context.

**Keywords:** Intellectual disabilities, social inclusion, employment, human rights-based approach, Greece.

## INTRODUCTION

Disability movements worldwide have brought about substantial changes in the way disability is approached [1, 2]. The disability movement in Britain [3], the disability rights movement in the US [4] and socio-political conceptualisations of disability [5] all arose from disabled people's fight against the medical approach to disability [1]. This fight has resulted in shifting from an individualised/medical to a human rights-based approach to disability. The international human rights legislation recognises disability as a human right [6].

For example, the European Commission's "Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities: A European Action Plan (2004–2010)" [7] included anti-discrimination legislation, accessibility and mainstreaming (integrating disability perspectives across policies rather than developing separate disability policies) as its main objectives [8]. Additionally, the fundamental principles of the "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" (CRPD) [9] are to ensure full and effective participation as well as inclusion in society, respect for difference, acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity, equality of opportunity and accessibility [10]. Likewise, "The European Disability Strategy (2010–2020)" [11] advocates that disability is a human rights issue in line with the CRPD.

Indeed, the notion that the human rights model dynamically evolves, based on the founding principles of the social model, is gradually prevailing. The core subjects of the social model are disability and social response, whereas the core subjects of the human rights model are disability and policy [12]. Moreover, the CRPD specifically defined the rights of people with disabilities to work and employment with Article 27. Its main purpose is to ensure an open, inclusive, and accessible labour market for people with disabilities, where they enjoy their fundamental right to work and are treated equally with the other members of society. Discrimination in job-related matters is prohibited, and the promotion of self-employment, entrepreneurship and starting one's own business is required [13].

Nevertheless, research consistently confirms that people with disabilities are employed at significantly lower rates than the general population in all countries, are seriously under-represented in paid employment [14], and are discriminated against in all aspects of social participation [15].

## EMPLOYMENT PROVISIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH INTELLECTUAL OR OTHER DISABILITIES IN GREECE

The Greek State recognises that "individuals with disabilities have the right to enjoy the measures that ensure their autonomy, professional inclusion, and participation in the country's social, economic and political life" [16: no. 21, par. 6], while the Law 3699/2008 [17] refers to the state commission for providing equal opportunities to citizens with disabilities

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to participate fully and contribute to society and secure their right to employment in the open labour market. Moreover, on April 11<sup>th</sup> 2012, the Greek Parliament enacted Law 4074/2012 [18], ratifying the UN CRPD and its Optional Protocol.

Nonetheless, despite all the aforementioned laws being enacted over the last twenty years in Greece, the country still lags behind the average European policies. An indicative fact is that, during the financial crisis, only 0.02% of the country’s gross domestic product was invested in the social inclusion of people with disabilities, compared to 0.11% average expenditure in Europe [19]. In Greece, the unemployment rates of people with intellectual disabilities (IDs) or other disabilities are significantly higher than in the rest of the European Union [20].

With regard to people with IDs, the limited opportunities given by the Greek State to disabled people’s organisations to participate in the development of a national action plan, the lack of a counselling and career guidance system [21], the existence of segregated provisions adhered to an individualised/medical model, yet described as inclusive, the lack of an accessible work environment, stigmatisation and linking reduced work capacity with ID [22] are the main causes of their exclusion from the workforce [23].

Additionally, employers play an important role in the employment of people with disabilities (including IDs), which is a significant parameter in their social inclusion [24].

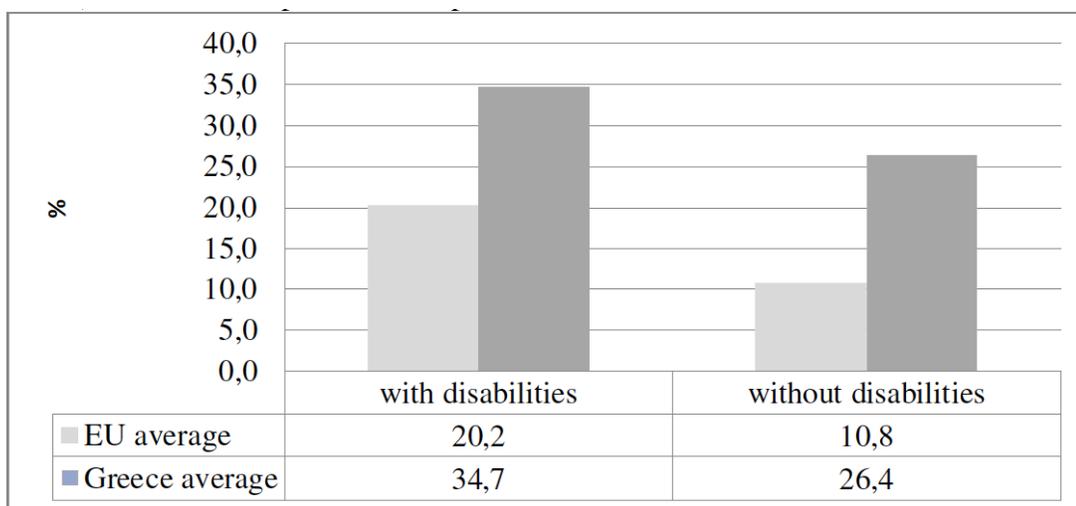
In Greece, employers’ attitudes to employing people with a range of disabilities were examined in the study of Zissi *et al.* [25]. It was found that those employers’ attitudes differed depending on the type of disability.

At the same time, a fairly recent study of Magoulis and Trichopoulou [19] on the employment status of young adults with IDs or other disabilities in the Greek context showed that the vast majority of them claim to be most interested in working but in spite of all interest and eagerness to work, most of them are unemployed. Their findings reflect the exclusion of people with disabilities from the Greek labour market. Besides, most respondents reported that their education did not play an important role in finding a job and that the study curriculum does not seem to meet the needs of the labour market, which is a serious drawback of the overall educational system and rather non-existent transition planning policies.

Furthermore, during the financial crisis (2008-2018), the quality of life for people with disabilities in Greece has deteriorated [26]. More cuts in pensions and benefits were imposed, and the accessibility to employment for people with disabilities became more difficult due to the very high unemployment rates compared to people without disabilities (see Table 1).

On the whole, people with IDs or other disabilities residing in Greece face serious obstacles in employment, including prejudice and stereotypes, barriers to education, accessibility barriers, and inadequate policies [26].

**Table 1: Recent Unemployment Rates of Individuals with and without Disabilities (aged 20-64) in Greece Compared to Europe**



Adapted from: Strati E. (2018). European Semester 2017/2018 country fiche on disability – Greece. Academic Network of European Disability Experts (ANED) [27].

## CURRENT MODELS OF EMPLOYMENT FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH INTELLECTUAL OR OTHER DISABILITIES IN GREECE

The main remark in existing policies for supporting employment for disabled people in Greece is that most of them focus on job placements through disability-specific schemes, while limited policies exist to ensure accessibility of workplaces and protection of employment rights [28].

### Sheltered Employment

In Greece, Law 2646/1998 [29] enabled Legal Entities under Public Law as well as certified non-profit organisations supervised by the Ministry of Health or Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs to operate Sheltered Productive Workshops. In these workshops, at least 60% of the employees should have IDs, autism spectrum disorders, severe physical and multiple disabilities, regardless of whether they receive a pension or welfare allowance.

Most of the skills taught to people with IDs in the sheltered productive workshops are related to traditional activities (carpentry, sewing, weaving, gardening, packaging, etc.). A variety of products are produced by the people with IDs themselves, which are usually sold in exhibitions two to three times a year, and the proceeds are often reinvested in these centres. A few of those sheltered productive workshops operate like regular trade companies and strive to become competitive [30]. The benefits of their operation include regular payment, good working conditions and continuous support for career development and transition to the free labour market [31]. Private non-profit legal organisations, such as the Theotokos, Margarita, Estia, Hermes, etc., have set up supported employment services for people with IDs who wish to work in the open labour market.

### Social Cooperative Enterprises for the Inclusion of Vulnerable People

Law 4019/2011 [32] on Social Economic and Social Entrepreneurship defines social economy and Social Cooperative Enterprise (SCE), covering a broad range of social enterprise purposes and activities. SCEs are categorised into three types according to their purpose:

a. Integration SCEs aim at the socio-economic inclusion of persons belonging to vulnerable groups of the population, mainly through work integration.

- b. Care SCEs are by definition offering social care, such as care to the elderly.
- c. SCEs of Collective and Productive Purpose supply services and goods to satisfy collective needs (culture, environment, ecology etc.).

Integration SCEs refer mainly to people with IDs or other disabilities, and at least 30% of the employees must belong to vulnerable groups. They offer various jobs in catering, cleaning, garden maintenance, and the provision of various services. Additionally, a key protection measure for employees with disabilities working in SCEs is to retain any social or disability-related benefit or pension [33: art. 13].

An example is Myrtillo in Athens, operating as a cafeteria and arts centre since October 2013. It is an innovative self-supporting business and training entity, where all employees are jointly responsible for its viability. At present, 90% of those who work there are people with intellectual or other disabilities.

Nevertheless, despite the positive organisational characteristics that SCEs have, significant problems seem to exist. According to the annual report 2019-2020 of the Directorate of Social and Solidarity Economy of Greece [34], only 2% of 1655 SCEs operate with the purpose of the socio-economic integration of persons belonging to vulnerable groups of the population (see Table 2).

By far, the greatest barrier faced by Greek SCEs, both in starting-up and in terms of being able to grow and scale-up activities, is undoubtedly lack of access to finance. It is nearly impossible for social enterprises to secure financing in Greece, with the only available possibilities being project-based funding or securing financing from abroad [35].

### Disability Employment Quota schemes

A renewed legislative framework for the employment of people with disabilities in the public sector [36] set the mandatory employment quota scheme, for those assessed with 50% impairment level, at 10%, whilst including a 5% quota for parents, spouses or siblings of a person with impairment level at least 67%, in all regular or contracted staff vacancies procured and managed by the independent Recruiting Council for the Public Sector. This recruitment process is particularly maintained in EU/National funded schemes of employment [28].

**Table 2: Legal Forms of SCEs in Greece (2019-2020)**

Legal Forms of SCEs in Greece	number	%
SCEs of Collective and Productive Purpose	1594	93,9
Integration SCEs	33	2,0
Limited Liability SCEs	29	2,7
Employee SCEs	29	1,7
Care SCEs	10	0,6
Total	1655	100

Adapted from: Directorate of Social and Solidarity Economy of Greece [34]. Annual Report 2019-2020. Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Social Solidarity [in Greek].

**Support by the Greek Organisation for Public Human Resources Development (OAED)**

There is a service for Special Social Groups running within OAED, which is responsible for the promotion, design, and implementation of programmes and actions targeted at the inclusion of people with disabilities in the labour market, established under Law 2643/1998 [37]. In particular, the service provides psychosocial support as well as career orientation advice and encourages disabled people to enter mainstream programmes of employment and vocational training, such as training vouchers, wage subsidy programs, public work schemes, or social enterprising.

In September 2017, there was a Call of Interest from OAED to recruit 2,000 persons from vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, for up to three consecutive years in the private sector. The program funds 70% of employment costs. Companies, who employ people with disabilities under that scheme are further eligible for funding intended for reasonable adaptations in the workplace (specialised software, hardware, infrastructure etc.). However, the bureaucracy is so complex that rarely interested employers take advantage of it [38].

**Supported Employment in the Open Labour Market**

Supported employment barely exists in the Greek context. Probably due to the austerity measures taken during the last decade of recession in Greece, employment provisions for people with disabilities and raising awareness of disability as a human right issue were not prioritised and were left behind.

Nevertheless, the Hellenic Society of Supported Employment (ELETYPÉ), founded in 1997, aims at disseminating its principles and practices to

professionals, parents and people with disabilities. Indeed, ELETYPÉ, as a coordinator of supported employment, has successfully developed and implemented specialised programs through the cooperation of few sheltered productive workshops (e.g., Theotokos, Margarita etc.), aiding people with IDs to find paid employment, with more than 200 people having been included in the workforce of free-market enterprises. Additionally, the enactment of Law 4488/2017 [39] enables people with IDs or other disabilities to maintain all disability benefits even in the case of job placement in the free labour market.

Official data on supported employment in Greece has not been recorded, and research in this field is scarce [40].

**Corporate Social Responsibility for Individuals with IDs**

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) means the voluntary commitment of enterprises to integrate practices of social and environmental actions into their business beyond what is required by law. Companies developing a CSR policy to include people with IDs in their workforce while making accommodations to meet their needs are recently attracting the interest of researchers [41, 42].

In the Greek context, there are a few companies that have embraced the CSR practice for the benefit of people with IDs. An example is Coco-Mat, a medium-size Greek company, well known for offering both the opportunities and the infrastructure to people with disabilities, which amount to over 11% of the company’s employees. As presented at the Confederation of European Social Firms, Coco-Mat rebuilt its entire central building to make it totally accessible to people with disabilities. In addition, the working schedule for each person is developed

according to their needs and abilities. The company also recognises the difficult conditions people with disabilities face when seeking employment [43].

## DISCUSSION

The ratification of the CRPD in 182 countries, including Greece, as a tool promoting the human rights-based approach to disability, presents various challenges to states, policymakers, society, and persons with disabilities themselves. Admittedly, Article 27 of the CRPD refers to aspirations, which do not automatically guarantee actions. Its implementation is totally dependent on different interpretations of the terms, especially when they are not clear, in the local cultures, norms, laws, and state resources [44]. On the other hand, austerity has become a guide word in policymaking in many countries to cope with public debt [6]. Unfortunately, Greece is a typical example of such policymaking [26].

In addition, people with disabilities are not clearly defined or identified in the Greek legislation. They are considered as belonging to socially vulnerable groups [45: 24]. Indeed, the interpretation of the term "disability" in the Greek context resulted in splitting the 2,000 positions subsidised by the 2017 program, which funds the hiring of socially vulnerable citizens by up to 70%, between people with disabilities, recovering addicts, former prisoners and young delinquents in Greece [38].

Moreover, the principle of equality has a prominent place in the CRPD. However, a clear definition of equality is also not given. Thus, different interpretations have been given to the concept of equality by different national legislations and different local cultures. But does the same treatment of all people with disabilities mean real equality? Admittedly, people with different disabilities are in different position and have different accessibility to social resources. Therefore, there is the risk of reproducing inequalities in the name of equality [46].

State parties, other disabled people's organizations and community stakeholders should realize that CRPD refers also to people with IDs, who cannot advocate themselves and thus they are marginalized. After all, people with IDs still face discrimination against them, they are mostly considered to lack work capacity, and as a result, they are not given opportunities to enter the open labour market [47].

Unsuccessfully, the same applies to Greece. People with IDs are mostly employed in sheltered productive workshops, which do not usually prepare them to be included in the open labour market, thus reproducing the individualised/medical model. Although the legislative framework varies from country to country, and there is a wide diversity of sheltered employment programs, their main common element is that people with IDs are in a work environment separate from the workers of the general population. Thus, sheltered employment does not tally with a human rights-based approach to ID and depends, by definition, on work outside the mainstream labour market, promoting inequality and discrimination [48]. Therefore, it is not accidental that people with IDs perceive sheltered work as stigmatising. This applies, even though they produce goods for the market when they work full time and are responsible for certain tasks. Their embarrassment is actually related to the sheltered/segregated setting. Notwithstanding, sheltered employment provides job skills that assist such individuals in moving into the open labour market. Therefore, there is the need for effective policies enhancing the shift from sheltered employment to competitive or integrated employment [49].

Besides, in most countries, including Greece, people with IDs are likely to receive social security allowances, such as a disability pension. Undoubtedly, the allowance provides economic security, but it is likely to be associated with self-stigma. Additionally, employment services might not give priority to people with IDs since they receive the disability allowance providing them with security [50].

Additionally, limited, mainly private businesses promoting supported employment or cooperative social enterprises operating on quotas schemes also incur Greece. However, it should be noted that although the quota system provides an opportunity for people with IDs to become employed, they feel that they obtain employment just because the companies are forced to hire them, which in turn, may result in unpleasant working conditions [51] and stigmatisation [13].

A balance that ensures that the necessary promotional measures are implemented while securing they do not lead to segregation and exclusion of the persons with IDs from the labour market [9] seems not to exist in Greece. The sector of integration SCEs appears weak. For the empowerment and development of social entrepreneurship in the field of disability, a new institutional framework and targeted interventions

are needed. Emphasis should be given on counselling and informing Greek citizens about people belonging to specific groups and their equal rights to employment.

It sounds like an oxymoron that the Greek State enacts laws to promote the employment of people with disabilities or to develop special incentive programs in private enterprises, yet the Greek working environment is not favourable enough to accommodate people with IDs. The challenge lies in the Greek state legislative and policy initiatives to smooth the path for the appropriate working conditions that will enable the rights of people with IDs to be exercised in practice [9].

Finally, vocational training programs and intensive support for job placement in the free labour market increase the likelihood of people with IDs finding a job [52]. Students with IDs must be equipped with other essential skills such as social and self-determination skills to promote successful educational and employment student outcomes [53]. Unfortunately, the institutions that promote self-determination and autonomy in Greece are limited and often inappropriate. Most of them result from the private initiative and especially care for parents and guardians of individuals with IDs [54].

Hopefully, implementing a new program entitled "Organization and operation of Post-secondary Year-Apprenticeship classes" enacted by ministerial decision 3459/2019 [55] will play an important role in this direction. People with IDs, who are graduates of the Unified Special Vocational Secondary and High School (EN.E.YI. L), and they are unemployed, will be able to enrol and attend these classes, receiving vocational education and training, thus facilitating their inclusion in the labour market. More specifically, the post-secondary year apprenticeship class lasts about nine months and includes: (a) workplace training program (salaried apprenticeship) lasting 156 calendar days and (b) laboratory courses of the speciality with a total duration of two hundred and three (203) hours. This program is taught one (1) day a week for seven (7) teaching hours by teaching staff assigned by the Ministry of Education and Religions in Laboratory Centers. Employers, public sector entities and private companies can participate in the implementation of the Apprenticeship training program.

## **CONCLUSION - FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS**

Research consistently shows that the employment rates are particularly low among people with IDs and, if

employed, they are much more likely to be in sheltered work (mostly segregated), in day activity centres, or without any occupation. Although labour markets and support systems differ among countries, the extremely marginal position of people with IDs appears to prevail across national settings. Communities and cultures around the world and Greece still question the rights of individuals with IDs to enjoy equal opportunities of employment and social inclusion. Besides, including individuals with IDs in the workforce is not just a matter of job placement. The attitudinal views of employers and co-workers are critical in formulating social impediments to equal employment opportunities.

Importantly, the 'non-definition' of disability and equality in the CRPD hampers the recording of accurate data about rates and types of disabilities or the implementation of its articles. Subsequently, any definition is left to national legislations along with the available state resources to identify who qualifies as a person with a disability and who does not. At the same time, policymakers are faced with the challenge of facilitating the appropriate labour market conditions for people with IDs to exercise their rights.

Indeed, legislation in many countries encourages employers to hire people with disabilities. Nonetheless, their lack of knowledge about the types of disability and the prevailing misconceptions regarding the work efficiency of people with IDs, together with legal issues, organisational changes and accommodation, contribute to the reduced given opportunities for people with IDs to enter the open labour market.

Consequently, it is pivotal for state policies to prioritise and promote awareness of the employment of people with IDs among employment organisations, employers and administrative executives, thus fighting stereotypical and biased attitudes, stigmatisation, and discrimination. Next, reasonable accommodations in the workplace, vocational rehabilitation and training, transition programs, flexible working conditions, on-the-job support, and job quality, which are also agents that influence the employment rates of people with IDs, should be considered. Moreover, research data and monitoring mechanisms, examining the extent to which rights of people with IDs are respected and exercised in different countries, including Greece, will provide various stakeholders with insights into the experiences of that population in the work environment and allow for their voices to be heard. Future research must incorporate voice data of individuals with IDs to

comprehend their work needs better and smooth their path to the open labour market.

Last but not least, international and local organisations advocating for people with IDs should initiate a dialogue to promote the shift from localised to globalised policy making related to vocational inclusion for individuals with IDs.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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