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PERSUNI B'DIZABILITÀ**



**NATIONAL COMMISSION
PERSONS WITH DISABILITY**

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Diversity Strengthens

The Chairman's Word

It is essential that, as human beings, we express our emotions both at an individual level and at a public level. One way of doing this is through the creation of symbolic activities and ceremonies. Signs of solidarity please us and thus, in important occasions in our lives, such as births, birthdays, weddings and deaths, we seek each other's support.

This is also true in society: we create a national calendar of activities that instil in us a sense of identity and national solidarity. The International Day of Persons with Disability, that is celebrated on the 3rd of December, is an example of this.

Over the last sixteen years, the National Commission Persons with Disability, together with governmental and non-governmental organisations involved in this sector, have chosen the first week of December to celebrate, at a national level, the contribution of persons with disability as full citizens of the Maltese society. The year 2004 is going to be slightly different from usual as we have decided to collaborate with other minorities that, like us, work in favour of Human Rights.

Therefore, this year, the Persons with Disability Week commences on the 3rd of December and ends on the 11th of December, that is the day after the International Human Rights Day. A number of activities with the theme of Diversity Strengthens are being organised throughout this week.

We have chosen this slogan because we believe that diversity gives strength. Nature teaches us that the world is rich in life because it is rich in diversity. Whenever there was an attempt to eliminate diversity in favour of uniformity, there were extremely negative consequences. Two examples come to mind.

The first example is that of the city of Sparta in Ancient Greece. The Spartans were warriors who saw strength and perfection as crucial. They believed in the concept of a 'pure' race. In this society, people were either citizens (a small minority) or slaves. The consequence of this was that over a period of just 200 years, the number of Spartan citizens decreased from 10,000 to less than a 1,000. This led to enemies attacking and destroying Sparta.

The concept of a pure race reappeared in the twentieth century in a number of developed countries. Between 1920 and 1945, the Nazi Party in Germany spread the belief that the Arian race was superior to other races. The Nazi claimed that they had a divine right to overcome and possibly annihilate 'inferior' races. Accordingly, they

exterminated millions of Jews and several thousands of gypsies. They also killed tens of thousands of German persons with disability, especially intellectual disability. Luckily, this diabolical regime did not last long and after thirty years it came to an end as a political force. Unfortunately, despite that, racist ideas and the belief that who is not 'normal' is inferior and worthless still exist.

I think that, unfortunately, there are still too many people who look at us, persons with disability, from a medical perspective. They only perceive a body or mind which is 'not normal': ugly persons, persons to pity and forget, or persons to be afraid of and to exclude (also emotionally). Few people declare this in public but many more than we think fully believe in these ideas.

Despite the negative forces around us, there has been a significant improvement in Malta over the last few years. Nowadays, the positive qualities of persons with disability, their abilities and their courage and strength of will that help them face and overcome difficult situations, are recognised. The spirit of parents of persons with disability, who face negativity and obstacles but who, in spite of everything, continue to work to improve their children's quality of life, is also recognised.

Thanks to this positive attitude, we have seen significant improvements in the disability sector at every level of our society. For instance, we have progressed in terms of legislation, education, physical accessibility, information technology and more. This does not mean that there is no room for improvement. There is still a lot to be done until we, persons with disability, and our families, can enjoy a standard of living that our friends without disability assume as being 'normal' and, more importantly, as a fundamental right.

However, in order not to lose that which we have obtained through our efforts and in order to continue improving our life, both as individuals and as a group, we must keep on working together incessantly.

We have to be united because unity brings strength. There are too many differences that pull us apart, especially the differences in our mental and physical impairments. We do not always understand, tolerate and support each other.

This makes us work on our own or in small groups without power and credibility. We have to make sure that our diversity does not divide us but rather works as the root of the strength of persons with disability, their families and those who support them.

Finally, we have to remember that when we talk about an inclusive society that does not exclude anyone, we should not focus solely on ourselves and our situation but also on other minorities, such as those that due to religion, race, sexual orientation, age, financial situation and other factors, are being deprived of human and civil rights and therefore have an unacceptable quality of life.

To live with a disability, to bring up children, or to take care of adults with disability, is not easy – in fact, it is often dispiriting. However, if we think of others and if we find the time to fight not only our battle but the wider battle for a better community and for an inclusive society, our diversities will not weaken us but will give us more power –Diversity Strengthens.

International Day of Persons with Disability

The 3rd of December of every year is the International Day of Persons with Disability. Every year, the Commission organises a series of activities to celebrate this Day in order to raise awareness about this sector and thus help persons with disability to attain equal opportunities and a better quality of life.

This year, these activities are being organised as part of an awareness campaign “Diversity Strengthens” that the Commission is organising in collaboration with the Jesuit Refugee Service and with the support of the Community Action to Combat Discrimination of the European Union. Thus, the theme for this Week too is “Diversity Strengthens”.

This year, the Commission is organising these activities:

- A presentation of the research entitled The Major Concerns of Persons with Disability and their Families. This will be held during a half-day seminar, organised in collaboration with the National Statistics Office (NSO), at the Waterfront Hotel in Gzira on Friday 3rd December 2004 from 9.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m.
- A presentation of the Easy-to-Read format of the research entitled The Major Concerns of Persons with Disability and their Families. This activity, which is aimed mostly at persons with intellectual disability, will be held in the hall of the NSO, Lascrais, Valletta, on Monday 6th December from 6.00 p.m. till 8.00 p.m.
- A Ministerial message for the International Day of Persons with Disability that will be given by the Hon. Minister Dolores Cristina and Mr. Omar Jelassi, a person with disability. This speech will be broadcast at 6.15 p.m. of the same day.
- A consultative conference regarding the document entitled “Access for All - Design Guidelines” that is being organised together with the Building Industry Consultative Committee, on Monday 6th December 2004, at the Waterfront Hotel, Gzira, from 9.00 a.m. till 1.00 p.m.
- A meeting for persons with disability and their organisations about European Union Programmes and Persons with Disability. This will be held at the Centru Hidma Socjali, Santa Venera, from 6.00 p.m. till 8.00 p.m on 7th December.
- An official visit by the Hon. Prime Minister, Dr Lawrence Gonzi, at the offices of the National Commission Persons with Disability. During this meeting, which will be held on Thursday 9th December 2004, the Prime Minister is meeting the members of the Commission and the employees of the secretariat of the Commission. There is also going to be a discussion about major themes relevant to this sector.
- Blood Donation by persons with disability and their friends at the offices of the National Commission Persons with Disability. This activity is being held on

Thursday 9th December 2004 in the morning and is being organised with the co-operation of the Blood Bank of the Knights of St. John.

- National Conference about the European Union Directives for Equal Opportunities in Employment in relation to discrimination due to disability, nationality, sexual orientation, age or beliefs. The principal speech is going to be delivered by Ms. Elizabeth Straw, from the EU Directorate for employment and Social Affairs. This conference, which is being organised in collaboration with the Jesuit Refugee Service, will be held at the Coastline Hotel between 9.00 a.m. and 1.00 p.m. on Friday 10th December 2004, the International Human Rights Day.
- A Human Rights Walk on Saturday 11th December 2004. The walk will start at 9.00 a.m. from various places all from the Christ the King Statue, Floriana, towards Freedom Square, Valletta. After a variety programme, a declaration will be presented to the Prime Minister or his representative. This activity is being organised in collaboration with the Jesuit Refugee Service.

For this Week, the Commission has also published a poster, issued a message to the general public, a message to children and a video-clip to be broadcast by all television stations.

Equal Opportunities Act

One of the most important functions of the Commission is its application of the Equal Opportunities Act (Persons with Disability) that is aimed at combating discrimination due to disability.

Annual Report

The Equal Opportunities Division within the Commission publishes an annual report of its performance in October. This year, the report was presented to the public during a press conference given by Mr. Joseph Camilleri, Chairperson of the Commission, and Marianne Debono, Manager of the Equal Opportunities Division. Also present at the press conference were the Hon. Dolores Cristina, Minister of the Family and Social Solidarity, and the Hon. Marie Louise Coleiro, Opposition speaker for this sector. During this conference it was announced that the Commission would conduct a study of this law so that, on its fifth anniversary, necessary changes would be made to enhance its efficiency.

Principal Cases

Over the last six months, the Commission has continued to work on various cases where discrimination allegedly took place. Some of the most important cases are the following:

A Court Judgment about Access for Everyone at the University. On Tuesday 16th November, 2004, the Civil Court made a historical decision about access for everyone at the University of Malta in a case that the National Commission Persons with

Disability instituted against the University about Student's House. The case was filed in accordance with the Equal Opportunities (Persons with Disability) Act 2000.

The Commission argued that while access on the University Campus had generally improved, Student's House was still inaccessible. The Commission had been pushing since 1994 for this important building to be made accessible. The University had always promised that major works would be carried out on the building thus making it accessible but this development never occurred.

The Court ruled that while it can understand the University's concerns, "enough time has passed for the restructuring work to have been carried out but this has not occurred. As long as this work is not finished, university students with disability will complete their studies without having access to this building. This is not appropriate and the Court does not believe that the work should be delayed again." The Court ordered the University to, within two months, install a platform stair-lift on the stairs leading to the upper floor of Student's House in order to make the building more accessible to everyone. The Court also declared that it does not think that this ruling would create unjustified difficulties for the University.

The Commission sees this sentence as a historical one because it is the first one to have been given by the Maltese Courts in application of the Equal Opportunities Act, and also because it recognises the right of persons with disability to be provided with access without undue delays.

The Commission is also satisfied that the Court passed the judgment within a reasonable time. Unfortunately, the Commission is involved in other cases that have been going on for years and it encourages those involved to make sure that these and other similar cases are concluded within a reasonable time.

Other Court Cases

The Commission is involved in another three Court cases that, unfortunately, are taking too long to be closed. These are:

- against Michele Peresso about access for everyone in a shop selling products, such as wheelchairs, for persons with disability. This case was opened in 2001 and no judgment has yet been passed.
- against Invicta where the Court has still to decide on the taxed bill of costs since this company no longer sells products for persons with disability and since the entrance to this shop has been made accessible.
- against SBT that still do not want to publicise a mobile phone number that would allow persons with hearing impairment to use their services.

The Commission also filed proceedings against Les Lapins Hotel but this case was closed because the hotel is no longer open and it has accepted to pay the taxed bill of costs.

Closed Cases

Over the last six months, the Commission has closed the following cases, permanently or temporarily:

Tax Rebate for Parents of Students with Disability in Independent Schools

The Commission complained that parents sending their children with disability to independent schools were being made to carry the extra costs needed to support their children. The Commission recommended that these parents should be given a tax rebate on these expenses. This request was accepted by the Government and these parents will now be given a rebate on a maximum of Lm 4,000 a year.

Qawra Church

The Commission closed this case as it felt that the Church had been made adequately accessible, especially through its main entrance.

Riviera Hotel

The Commission was dissatisfied with the main entrance and the entrance to the pizzeria of the recently opened Hotel Riviera. The parties reached an agreement after which the main entrance was made accessible and the entrance to the pizzeria will be accessible within a reasonable time.

Reasonable Accommodation Board

The Equal Opportunities Act (Section IV) states that entities can be exempted from carrying out changes that would eliminate discrimination if it can be proved that such changes would cause unjustified difficulties or if there are technical reasons that impede the implementation of these changes. The Commission is receiving a substantial number of such requests most of which are about accessibility in buildings.

The Commission has created a board to examine those requests. The Board is composed of the Director of the Commission, in the role of Chairperson, a person with disability, a parent of a person with disability, a person from the industry, and a representative of the Building Consultative Committee.

Over the last six months this board analysed 33 exemption requests, out of which 16, that is, almost half, were accepted as reasonable. On several occasions, there were negotiations and the imposition of conditions that guaranteed that the Principle of Accessibility for All was followed. In the remaining 17 cases, the Board ruled that the requests were not reasonable.

Moreover, in the application of this section of the Act, the Board decided to establish a number of guidelines. These included:

Industrial Buildings

This development was regulated by an agreement reached between the Development Corporation (Malta Enterprise) and the Commission. The Board decided to improve this agreement by subdividing industrial development into three rather than two

subcategories: the production section, the administrative section, and the section open for the public.

As regards the production section, the board will enforce the following:

- a) the principal entrance and at least one toilet have to conform to the KNPD guidelines;
- b) if this part of the building consists of only two floors, there is no need of a lift or a shaft;
- c) if this part of the building consists of three floors, there has to be a shaft which permits the installation of a lift in accordance with KNPD guidelines and the lift must be installed as necessary;
- d) if this part of the building consists of more than three floors, there has to be a lift in accordance with KNPD guidelines.

As regards the administrative part, the board will enforce the following:

- a) the principal entrance and at least one toilet have to conform to the KNPD guidelines;
- b) if this part of the building consists of only two floors, there has to be a shaft which permits the installation of a lift in accordance with KNPD guidelines and the lift must be installed as necessary;
- d) if this part of the building consists of more than two floors, there has to be a lift in accordance with KNPD guidelines.

Small Enterprises

The Board notes that there were a number of small enterprises that requested to be exempted on the grounds of technical and financial problems, especially due to limitations of space. The Board determined that most of these requests were reasonable and hence decided to divide these applications into three categories based on the total space of the building:

- a) If the total area does not exceed 75 square metres, the building has to have an accessible entrance in conformity with KNPD guidelines and can be exempted from having sanitary facilities and a lift accessible to everyone;
- b) If the total area is between 76 and 150 square metres, the building has to have at least the main entrance and a toilet in conformity with KNPD guidelines and can be exempted from having a lift which is accessible to everyone;
- c) If the total area exceeds 151 square metres, the building has to be completely accessible to everyone, that is, incorporating a lift, at least one toilet and a main entrance which are accessible to everyone.

International Efforts

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability

At the moment, the United Nations is discussing the draft version of an international convention on 'The Safeguarding of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disability'. The European Union member states have decided to co-ordinate their efforts to ensure that the EU speaks with one voice about the matter.

Malta is taking part in these important discussions, through the participation of the National Commission Persons with Disability, both at a European level and at a United Nations level. The Commission took part in the three following meetings:

- Ms. Anne-Marie Callus, an official in charge of the international section within the Commission's secretariat, attended the first of two meetings in Brussels where the EU's position as regards this Convention was discussed. The EU is in favour of this Convention and believes that in its drafting there should be the full participation of organisations representing persons with disability;
- Mr. Joe Camilleri and Mr. Fred Bezzina, Chairman and Director of the Commission respectively, attended the second week of the third session of the Ad Hoc Committee of the United Nations that is discussing the Convention. During these meetings it became clear that the discussions regarding this topic were complex and that there is the need for several further discussions and meetings.
- The Chairperson of the Commission, Mr. Joe Camilleri, attended a European Union meeting held at The Hague, Holland, where the EU's position was discussed in view of the fourth session of United Nations meetings.

Due to financial and human resources limitations, and also due to the fact that the discussions will clearly take a long time, it was decided that the Commission would continue to participate in these discussions only at a European level.

On the other hand, the Commission considers the debates about this international convention about persons with disability to be extremely important and believes that persons with disability should be informed of the developments and also given the opportunity to express their views. For this reason, the Commission held a public meeting in order to supply relevant information and to facilitate a discussion about the matter. This meeting was held on the 13th of July 2004 and was attended by a significant number of people. The meeting was introduced by the Hon. Dolores Cristina, Minister for the Family and Social Solidarity. The members present at this meeting emphasised that this Convention should give importance to the following:

- a) the education of children with disability;
- b) parents and families of persons with disability;
- c) the right to life of persons with disability even prior to their birth;
- d) the need to recognise Sign Language of deaf persons;
- e) the need to give importance to the double discrimination to which women with disability are victims;
- f) the need to monitor this Convention effectively also with the full participation of persons with disability and their families.

The Commission took note of these comments and will keep them in mind during the participation of its officials in meetings about the drafting of this important convention.

VSA Arts Festival and Educational Conference

Mr. Joe Camilleri, Chairman of the Commission, was invited by the VSA Arts of America to attend the International Arts Festival and Educational Conference that they organise in Washington, US. This invitation was made through Ms. Marie Therese Lowell from the Washington-based Maltese Embassy for the United States. The Commission, the Maltese Council for Persons with Disability, this Embassy, and VSA Arts worked together to make the participation of Mr. Camilleri possible. The latter attended the conference together with Mr. Fred Bezzina, who, apart from accepting to give the necessary support to Mr. Camilleri, also participated in this interesting event.

The arts festival gave the opportunity to persons with and without disability to exhibit their artistic talents, which turned out to be of a very high level.

The educational conference, that was held simultaneously with the festival, focused on how art can be integrated in the educational curriculum of students with disability in order to contribute to their full development and on how art can be an effective means for inclusion both at and away from school.

This participation was made possible by the support of VSA Arts, Alitalia, HSBC (Malta), the Malta Community Chest Fund, GoMobile and the Maltese Embassy in Washington. The support provided by these entities also helped Mr. Camilleri and Mr. Bezzina to participate in the Committee meetings of the United Nations that are discussing the Convention on Persons with Disability. A session of these meetings was held exactly before this festival in the United Nations' headquarters in New York.

Efforts within the European Union

Participation in a Seminar and EU Conferences

The Commission receives several invitations, mostly related to the European Union, to participate in seminars, conferences and other activities abroad. The Commission decides whether to participate in these activities or not depending on its financial resources and the importance of these meetings. The Commission believes that, together with persons with disability, their families and their organisations, it should remain up to date with what is happening in this sector both in Malta and abroad. Over the last few months, the Commission participated in European Union events in the following ways:

- Mr. Joseph Stafrace, a person with disability, and Mr. Ronald Caruana, an official within the Commission's secretariat, attended a seminar for youths with disability with the theme "Planning Diversity". This seminar was held in Izola, Slovenia, and it gave the opportunity to the participants to get to know more about the European Union Programme 'Youth' and to discuss how youths with disability can benefit more from such projects. The seminar was funded by the programme 'Youth' itself.
- Ms. Debbie Schembri, a person with disability, supported by her personal assistant, Ms. Larissa Schembri, worked for four weeks in Swansea, Wales. This was made possible by funds from the European Union Programme, Leonardo.

Ms. Schembri carried out clerical work at Shaw Trust, a non-governmental organisation specialising in services for persons with disability.

- The Presidency of the European Union for these six months, The Netherlands, organised a conference with the theme, “International Forum on Disability Management”. Malta was represented by Ms. Rosanne Fenech, an official within the Commission’s secretariat, and Tessa Anastasi, a parent of a person with disability and an activist within a non-governmental organisation.
- The Commission’s Executive Director, Mr. Fred Bezzina, went on a study visit to the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) in the United Kingdom. This was part of the project “The Rights of Disabled Persons: Campaigning for Equality”, which was organised by the EU programme Leonardo. Mr. Bezzina visited this Commission’s offices in London and Manchester. DRC is the United Kingdom Equivalent of the National Commission Persons with Disability. This visit also included meetings with the DRC Chairperson, Mr. Bert Massie, and with Rod Robb, office manager of DRC’s London branch.
- The Commission represents Malta at the European Union’s High Level Disability Group. This Group meets three times a year and the last meeting for this year was held last October in Brussels. Mr. Bezzina, the Commission’s Director, attended this meeting.
- The Commission carried out a project that allowed funds from the Adult Educational Programme, Grundtvig, to be used by some Commission representatives to participate in a visit to Romania to discuss the theme “Designing Inclusive Sports Activities and Facilities for Persons with Disability”. The Maltese delegation was made up of Ms. Rosanne Fenech, Mr. Clayton Vella, Mr. Kevin Attard, Mr. Genio Calleja and Ms. Angela Agius, all of whom work for the Commission’s secretariat, and the personal assistant Ms. Helen Attard. The group stayed in Romania for four days during which time they held discussions with persons with disability from this country about experiences related to accessibility, especially as regards sports for persons with disability. Malta, Romania, Sweden and Italy are involved in this initiative. The next step is to carry out more research into sports and persons with disability in these countries.
- Ms. Marchita Mangiafico represented the Commission in the 27th meeting of the committee for the Rehabilitation and Integration of Persons with Disability of the Council of Europe. This committee works for the independence, social integration and participation of persons with disability in community life. Despite not being a EU activity, the Commission still believes that this Council of Europe event should be given importance. The meeting was held in Bucharest, Romania, in September 2004.
- Five workers of the Agency SAPPOR went on a study visit to the Foereningen Salta By in Stockholm, Sweden, as part of the project “Day and Residential Services for Disabled People”, organised by the EU programme, Leonardo. The Commission co-ordinated this project.

The Commission is an associate member of the European Disability Forum (EDF) that is the main organisation of persons with disability at a European level. Thanks to this Forum, the Commission keeps itself updated about the latest developments of the sector in Europe. Last October, the President, Yanis Vardakastanis, the Director, Stefan Tromel, and the future Director, Carlotta Besozzi, were in Malta to discuss the potential establishment of a non-

governmental organisation to represent persons with disability in this organisation. The Chairman and the Director of the Commission met this delegation and discussed with them the disability sector in Malta and how the two entities can collaborate more closely.

The Commission also nominated Mr. Leon Sciberras, a person with disability, to be part of the youth committee of EDF.

Community Action Programme To Combat Discrimination

The Commission has had two applications accepted by the Community Action Plan Against Discrimination. These are:

- Awareness Raising Campaigns for this sector. The application was made together with the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). For this application, the Commission was awarded 100,000 euros. This yearlong campaign is going to have the theme Diversity Strengthens and is going to include activities that will be held by KNPD and JRS separately and also jointly. Activities funded by this campaign organised by KNPD include:
 - a) A seminar and the publication of the booklet, Access for All - Design Guidelines;
 - b) A seminar for persons with intellectual disability about self-advocacy.

Activities funded by this campaign that are being organised jointly by KNPD and JRS include:

- a) a Human Rights Walk;
 - b) a National Conference about the EU Directive for Equal Treatment at Work;
 - c) an Art Competition for schools;
 - d) a course for teachers and students about Inclusive Society;
 - e) a seminar about the Equal Opportunities Act (Persons with Disability) and the EU Directive about Race.
- National Disability Information Days for which the Commission has been granted 40,000 Euro. The Commission has to organise two information days, the first of which is to be held during the Persons with Disability Week of this year and the other at the beginning of next year. The activities to be included are:
 - a) a seminar and publications by KNPD in various media;
 - b) a seminar about the European Union, its Programmes and Persons with Disability;
 - c) a seminar about and the publication of the results of the research, The Major Concerns of Persons with Disability and their Families;
 - d) Persons with Disability Parliament.

Research

The Major Concerns of Persons with Disability and their Families

The National Commission Persons with Disability has conducted a study, together with the National Statistics Office, about The Major Concerns of Persons with Disability and their Families. The aim of this research is to scientifically establish what the desires, aspirations and needs of persons with disability and their families are, in order to then be able to formulate our policies better. 599 persons with disability participated in this research. Several interesting points emerged and thirteen practical recommendations were made.

The Commission and the NSO are presenting the results and the recommendations arising from this study during a public seminar to be held during the Persons with Disability Week. In the same week, there will be an easy-to-read presentation of the study, this time aimed for persons with intellectual disability.

The results of this study have been published in Maltese, both in print and audio format, in English and in a large-font version. A shorter version of this study has been published in Maltese, in English, on video in Maltese Sign Language, and in an Easy-to-Read format. All these publications can be obtained from the offices of the Commission and the printed versions are also available from the Commission's website on www.knpd.org.

This activity and all the publications have been financed by the Community Programme To Combat Discrimination of the European Union.

VAT and Products for Persons with Disability

As from the 1st of May 2004, new VAT regulations were introduced. Products which are used specifically by persons with disability were made subject to 18% VAT.

After discussions between the National Commission Persons with Disability, the Ministry of Finance, the VAT Department and Customs, it was agreed that a number of selected objects would be subject to only 5% VAT. These items include:

- pressure relief mattresses and cushions,
- walking sticks,
- hoists,
- lifts and stairlifts,
- Braille typewriters,
- buggies and walking chairs,
- vehicle adapters,
- toilet adapters.

On the other hand, hearing aids, crutches, frames and walkers are VAT exempt. The full list can be obtained from the offices of the Commission or from the Commission's website, www.knpd.org. The importers and the clients were informed of these developments through a public statement issued by the Commission and also sent directly to the importers.

The Commission pursued discussions with the Ministry of Finance in order to introduce a scheme that would allow persons with disability to purchase these products with the same financial obligations in force before 1st May 2004. An agreement was reached according to which this scheme will be introduced and run by the National Commission Persons with Disability as from the 1st of January 2005. This scheme will cover those objects bought as from the 1st of May 2004 onwards. Thus, it is important that persons with disability who purchase such objects retain the relevant fiscal receipts in order to be able to benefit from this scheme. More information will be given through a public statement to be issued by the Commission when the details of the scheme will have been finalised.

A Report on the Employment of Persons with Disability

The Commission asked the economist Gordon Cordina to conduct an economic study of the support needed to allow persons with disability to live an independent life. Mr. Cordina completed this study and this was presented to the public during a public activity on the 4th of May 2004.

Employers, employers associations, unions, governmental entities and associations of persons with disability gave their feedback about this study.

This study shows that the objective to give the chance to persons with disability to live independently has been accepted by everyone. It also indicates that:

- In Malta there are at least 4,000 persons with disability, a fact which might have an economic impact;
- The rate of persons with disability who work is only 2/3 of that of the rest of the population while the unemployment rate is double that of the general population;
- As a general rule, families who have a person with disability have a lower than average income and depend more on social benefits;
- The rate of persons with disability who pursue their studies is significantly lower than that of the general population;
- Maltese persons with disability are afraid of losing their social benefits if they work.

The main aim of this study was to present an economic model on which to grant resources (new or existent) to support persons with disability in their attempt to live an independent life and thus avoid the situation where it is more convenient for them to live on social benefits rather than to earn their money through work.

An English copy of this version, together with the papers given during this activity, can be obtained from the Commission's offices or from the Commission's website, www.knpd.org.

The Commission has started to work towards implementing this scheme also by using funds from the European Union.

Special Education

Review Exercise

Last December, the Ministry of Education announced that it would start reviewing the special education system in Malta. It is clear that despite the fact that the government is investing heavily by providing facilitators, the service offered to persons with disability is often unsatisfactory. Moreover, it is also clear that this system is not sustainable.

The Commission supports this reviewing and has encouraged the Ministry of Education to carry out the necessary studies in the shortest time possible. Unfortunately, the Ministry of Education is struggling to find persons who are sensitive and competent enough to conduct this exercise. Nonetheless, although the Commission is aware of these issues, it insists that everything must be done to conduct this study as early as possible.

A Pilot Study at Maria Assumpta Secondary School

The Commission is working closely with Maria Assumpta Secondary School in Hamrun on a three-year pilot study. The aim of this programme is to ensure that the students in this school who have a facilitator also have an individualised educational programme and that the necessary support is provided to implement the programmes. The school has also managed to obtain funds from this programme from the HSBC Care for Children Fund.

At the moment, MAPS sessions are being carried out with each student with the co-operation of the parents and facilitators. Awareness sessions are also being offered to the school's staff and the students. The programme started with Form V students.

This programme is being co-ordinated by Ms. Anne-Marie Callus, from the Commission, and Ms. Rosanne Grima, from Maria Assumpta.

From the Commission's Secretariat

Collective Agreement

The employees of the Commission's Secretariat have a collective agreement between the Commission and the Union Haddiema Maghqudin which represents them. The first collective agreement expired in December 2003. A few months before this, talks started between the Commission, the Union and the Collective Bargaining Unit within the Ministry of Finance. After several discussions and meetings, an agreement was reached for the second collective agreement that will be signed officially in an activity to be held during the Persons with Disability Week.

The Commission is proud that an agreement has been reached and that it offers a working environment which really reflects the strength in diversity of its employees.

Issuing Affidavits

Some clients of the Commission were asked to present an affidavit in order to be given another Blue Sticker to replace the one which they had lost. In an attempt to

offer a better service, two employees of the Commission were given the permission by the Ministry of Justice to issue affidavits under oath in the Commission's offices.

Replacement of Blue Stickers

The replacement of Blue Stickers is continuing at a fast rate. The Commission has asked all those who have a Blue Sticker to replace it. Obviously, there were a number of persons who for some reason or other did not come to the Commission to replace it. The Commission will send them a reminder. It is important that clients come on the date given in the reminder. The Commission will not be able to provide a service to those who do not come on the allotted date. After this, the Commission will issue a public statement in which it will announce the date on which old Blue Stickers will no longer be valid. Until this date, both old Blue Stickers and the new ones will continue to be valid.

The 2004 Budget and Persons with Disability

As in the previous years, the National Commission Persons with Disability presented the Government a series of measures related to the persons with disability sector that it wished the Government would implement in the 2004 budget.

The Commission is satisfied that the two most important recommendations that it made were accepted, even though with different measures. The first request was that the Agency SAPPOR be given more funds in order for it to be able to offer residential and community services to persons with disability. The funds given to this agency have risen significantly from Lm 270,000 to Lm 507,000. This means that it can continue to offer its existent services and develop them to help persons with disability live a quality life in the community.

The second request was for the increase in funds for Day Services so that these would continue to develop their service and also offer it to other persons who need it and are not getting it at the moment. In this budget, the funds increased by about Lm 82,000 (from Lm 1,227,150 to Lm 1,309,900). While it appreciates this increase, the Commission believes that this is definitely not enough for this service to be extended to those students who will be leaving special schools in September.

Another accepted request for this budget was an income tax exemption on a maximum of Lm 4,000 for those parents who pay for services that their children with disability need to attend independent schools. This measure will definitely help to strengthen the concepts of inclusive education and equal opportunities in Malta.

The last measure is that about couples with disability who intend to marry. Now, if they get married, they will not lose one of their pensions. This is a just measure which will help persons with disability, like the rest of society, form a family with the necessary financial support.

Students and Day Services

Every year, a number of persons with disability leave special schools and some of them need to start using day services. Most of these services are offered by the Department for the Elderly and Community Services, within the Ministry of Health and Community Services.

This year, it immediately became clear that the Department would find it difficult to offer its services to any new clients. Moreover, the Department already had a number of persons who could not be provided with a service on the waiting list.

The Commission drew the attention of the Authorities several times in order to avoid ending up in September with these students staying at home with nothing to do. After talks between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of the Family, it was agreed that for this year, these students will remain in special schools. While this measure has lessened the problem, it is clear that there is still no permanent solution and that next September we will face the same situation again.

The Ministry of Health and Community Services offers this service mainly in Day Centres scattered around Malta. There is also one in Gozo run by the Ministry of Gozo. However, the Government has an agreement with some non-governmental entities that offer similar services to a small number of persons with disability. Such an agreement was made with the Eden Foundation and the Co-operative Franco-Si.

The Commission will continue working to ensure that all persons with disability have access to these Day Services. The Commission believes that these services are necessary not only to improve the quality of life of persons with disability and their families but also for financial reasons. If families can no longer take care of these persons because they are not given the necessary support, then, the Government has to offer residential services at a much greater cost.

PEKTUR Programme

Financial Assistance

PEKTUR is the Commission's programme aimed at assisting persons with disability, their organisations and those working in the field to carry out research or to continue their education and training. Small financial contributions are made to those who apply and whose requests fit the Commission's priorities. The programme is run by a board autonomous from the Commission. Over the last six months, PEKTUR approved four projects:

- The ADHD Support Group's publication of an information booklet for teachers illustrating ways of helping children with such an impairment;
- The Malta Caritas Epilepsy Association's publication of a poster for an international conference held in Malta, '9th Epilepsy and Society Meeting – Focusing on Change';
- A person with disability working for four weeks in the United Kingdom;
- A person with disability going on a study visit to the United Kingdom.

The Speak Out! Programme

PEKTUR also organises Speak Out! courses that are geared towards helping persons with disability and their relatives get the necessary training to run their own organisation.

The latest course was specifically prepared for fifteen persons with intellectual disability. This course ended with a public activity organised by the participants. There were short speeches, a discussion and an interview with His Excellency Dr. E Fenech Adami, President of the Republic. Afterwards, the President presented a certificate of attendance to the participants of the course.

The course was so successful that the participants kept meeting on a regular basis.

Assistive Apparatus Fund

Working with the Community Chest Fund

The Assistive Apparatus Fund and the Foundation for Information Technology Accessibility (FITA) reached an agreement with the Community Chest Fund to the effect that the latter would give financial assistance to persons with disability wishing to buy a computer. This was done because both the Commission and the Community Chest Fund believe that information technology can contribute significantly towards improving the quality of life of persons with disability.

In the last few months, there were some difficulties in the implementation of this agreement and several persons with disability had to wait a long time before receiving a reply from the Community Chest Fund as regards their application for assistance.

After the Commission and FITA held talks with the new President, His Excellency Dr. E. Fenech Adami, these problems were solved and a number of persons with disability benefited from this assistance.

The Commission agreed with the Community Chest Fund to work more closely so that their efforts to help persons with disability and their families would be co-ordinated and thus more effective. For this reason, His Excellency the President kindly invited a representative of the Commission to be a member of the Community Chest Fund Board. The Commission accepted this offer enthusiastically and Mr. Joe Camilleri, chairperson of the Commission, is now a member of this board.

Wheelchair Clinic

The Assistive Apparatus Fund has for a long time felt that our country needs a Wheelchair and Seating Clinic, ideally as part of the Health Division. The function of this clinic would be to give professional advice to persons with physical disability about the apparatus they need to live an independent life.

This proposal was discussed in a meeting that the Chairman and the Director of the Commission, together with the Assistive Apparatus Fund Manager, Ms. Vicki Sciberras, had with Dr Ray Busutill, General Director of the Health Division. The Division agrees with this proposal in principle.

The Special Assistance Service has begun to collect more information about this necessity. In a meeting held with the heads of the sections of the Therapy Services it was agreed that this clinic is badly needed. It was decided to carry out a four-week pilot test to investigate the necessity of this clinic. This study was completed and it has now been decided to extend it for another six months. The main aim of this study is to obtain a clearer idea of the qualitative and quantitative requirements of this clinic. It is hoped that the study will be completed by the middle of next year.

Hearing Aids

The Commission received complaints from the National Deaf People Association and the Gozo Association for the Deaf that deaf students were finding it difficult to obtain from St. Luke's Hospital the hearing aids they need.

The Commission voiced its concern and urged the relevant authorities to solve the problem because it was being detrimental to the full educational development of these students.

After several interventions, it now seems that the problem has been solved. The Commission will follow up the problem to as far as possible ensure that it does not manifest itself again.

European Pool Championship in Malta

The Malta Pool Association is organising the European Pool Championship in Malta between the 20th and 25th February at the Corinthia Jerma Palace Hotel, Marsascala. This game is played on small tables with three balls, a red one, a black one and a yellow one. This Association is planning to organise a competition reserved for persons using wheelchairs. In fact, several countries have already expressed their intention to send some of their members to participate. The Maltese Association is ready to train a team of players to participate in the event.

Interested persons should contact Mr. Vincent Degiorgio, General Secretary of the Association on 79499117 or on a fixed-line telephone (answering machine) 21677923, or by email: maltapoolassociation@global.net.mt.

Access for All - Design Guidelines

In the year 2000, MEPA, in order to ensure that the Equal Opportunities Act would be respected as regards physical accessibility, started asking the Commission to examine certain applications for development.

These applications included buildings for public major use. The Commission had to vet them in order to ensure that they were in conformity with the Principles of Accessibility for Everyone.

For this reason, that year, the Commission published guidelines called Access for All – Design Guidelines. Later on, these guidelines were adopted by MEPA itself.

After four years during which these guidelines were used, the Commission felt the need to revise their presentation and content. After some internal discussions, the Commission prepared a new draft version of this document which was circulated to all interested parties, especially those involved in the building industry and those working in the disability sector. The Commission is going to discuss this document formally in a meeting to be held specifically for this aim during the Persons with Disability Week.

After suggestions, comments and proposals will have been considered, the Commission will formulate new guidelines for publication.

A copy of the draft version of these guidelines can be obtained from the Commission's offices or from its website: www.knpd.org.
