## Constructive dialogue - Opening remarks

Are the rights of people with disabilities in Belgium better respected today then ten years ago? This question is before us in this constructive dialogue. Unia, as monitoring mechanism, wants to provide an impetus to the answer to this question.

To start on a positive note, we must say that indeed, there has been some progress on several topics in the past two political legislatures, especially during the last one. For example, laws have been adopted to make it easier to combine work and benefits, and diminishing the risk of losing benefits due to cohabitation with a partner, the interministerial conference on disabilities has finally restarted in 2022 and a federal action plan and interfederal strategy on disability has been deployed.

However we have also seen too little progress on many important topics, such as accessibility, independent living, education and employment where no decisive steps towards inclusion were taken. A lot of people with disabilities remain referred to special education, remain institutionalized, don’t work or can only work in adapted companies. They lack an accessible environment, reasonable accommodations and individual support measures to guarantee full participation in society. Even when positive measures are taken, they are often more in line with the principle of integration, rather than inclusion. And in some cases there is even new legislation incompatible with the core principles of the CRPD.

An example of both these issues is the Pact for Excellence adopted by the French Community which seeks to “foster inclusive education” but is actually aimed at fostering integration for certain pupils with disabilities through reasonable accommodation measures. Children with intellectual disabilities are clearly excluded from most of the measures taken by the Pact, as shown by the Constitutional Court's ruling on the Territorial Poles.

So while we are taking positive steps in some domains, we are seeing standstill and even backlash in others. How is this possible? This ambiguity is mainly caused by lack of an ambitious and comprehensive policy framework towards inclusion in all policy areas. The existing action plans and strategies have their merits, but remain a sum up of certain policy measures and not a common vision towards inclusion.

This results in a varying level of ambition in the execution of these plans. While some ministers play a pioneering role, other ministers have far less ambition or even develop legislative measures that are diametrically opposed to the federal action plan and the principles of the CRPD, such as the law making it easier to restrict voting rights for persons with intellectual disabilities.

It is very unfortunate that these type of measures are still being defended using a discourse of ‘protection’. Although the disability definition of the CRPD is well accepted in case law, the medical vision remains present in the political discourse. The idea still persists that persons with disabilities should be protected from themselves on the basis of what is perceived to be their best interest, while on the other hand insufficient measures exist to enforce supported decision making.

So has there been progress ? Yes, in some areas. But there is still a lot of work to be done. Therefore, let us use this constructive dialogue as a starting point. To put every person with a disability in the heart of the discussion. To finally make their rights effective.

Thank you very much for granting us this moment and I wish all participants a very constructive dialogue.

## Constructive dialogue - Closing remarks

As we have seen today, we are not starting from scratch.

A number of measures have already been taken.

However, while the Convention has been applicable in Belgium for 15 years, we have heard today of many initiatives taken only in the last few months, i.e. before the end of the legislature and just before the passage before the Committee. Some of these initiatives have not yet been confirmed and cannot be evaluated, and most were adopted without consulting the organizations representing people with disabilities.

While Unia can welcome the authorities' stated willingness to move forward in favor of the rights of people with disabilities and the participation of all members of the delegation, Unia remains concerned about what it did not hear:

1) Unia did not hear an explicit response on a ban on segregation

2) Unia did not hear a commitment to ensure the accessibility of existing buildings

3) Unia has not heard what the authorities intend to put in place to guarantee assistance in decision-making.

4) Unia has not heard any commitment to end the indefinite deprivation of liberty of those interned.

Time is short, so I have one final point to make before concluding. Unia's consultation of people with disabilities shows that one of the biggest obstacles to their participation remains the existence of prejudice and stereotypes. As was pointed out this morning, putting an end to stereotypes takes time. We therefore call on the authorities to act immediately, at all levels. The challenge is complex.

On the one hand, inclusion is essential if we are to put an end to stereotypes. We need to ensure that children with and without disabilities live together from an early age: in nurseries, schools, public places, etc. They need to get to know each other in all their diversity.

On the other hand, putting an end to stereotypes is essential if we are to move towards inclusion. We therefore urgently need to raise awareness and provide training for the general public and professionals on the image of disability, inclusion and autonomy: training for teachers, architects, web designers, police officers, the medical world, and so on.

We would like to close this session by thanking the members of the Committee, civil society and the representatives of the delegation for this day and the work accomplished. And by appealing to all Belgian authorities to make use of this evaluation. Use the Convention. Use the recommendations of civil society, the independent mechanisms and the Committee, to create an ambitious plan that will effectively implement all the articles of the Convention.

In this way, we can come back to you for the next evaluation of Belgium, confirming that, yes, the rights of people with disabilities in Belgium are better respected today than they were 10 years ago.

Thank you for your attention.