

My name is Inmaculada Placencia Porrero and I am Deputy Head of Unit in the unit for the integration of people with disabilities in DG Employment.

One of my most important dossiers is accessibility to the public built environment where I liaise with many other DGs who do a great deal in this respect. I have become increasingly aware that an accessible environment is not only essential from a social point of view (combating social exclusion) but affects a large number of other policy areas.

We started in earnest in 2003, the European Year of People with Disabilities. I invited a number of accessibility experts, including Ivor Ambrose here to-day, with knowledge of both disability and accessibility, to make a report on the public built environment.

We originally intended to compile a common data base of accessibility measures in the then 15 Member States. We soon saw that this was not only impossible due to lack of available information, but also that such an approach would fail to recognise the social and economic dimensions of an accessible environment. Moreover, as a purely technical document, it would not be likely to interest the wider public that we wanted to reach.

Their report "2010: a Europe Accessible for All" is available on our web-site (http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/index/final_report_ega_en.pdf). The report stresses that making buildings and their surroundings accessible to disabled people also meets the needs of many more people: older people, parents with young children, people with a temporary disability.

Accessibility affects all activities of daily life. Employment opportunities increase if more people can get into the workplace; travel and tourism benefits if a wider population can take advantage of accessible transport, hotels, leisure facilities. Shops benefit from a larger customer base. Moreover accessible buildings have an increased value.

The report emphasises the importance of design for all – i.e. encouraging stakeholders to take disability into account in all buildings right from the original planning and design stage when it is much cheaper than making later and more expensive adjustments. We were very clear that we wanted building professionals, such as architects, to become more knowledgeable about access issues and to incorporate them from the outset.

This report has triggered a great many follow-up activities; new accessibility provisions in Structural Fund regulations as a prerequisite for European Funding; projects to illustrate best practice in accessible building design; the setting up of a European Network of Accessible Tourism – co-ordinated by Ivor; studies on the impact of accessibility of workplaces, schools, in public transport.

But none of this work will have the desired effect unless the people employed in the relevant industries are trained in access needs. This is especially important in the tourism industry which employs a large number of people who all need the relevant training. We have tried to provide training tools by means of our pilot projects (one of which is an educational training course for schools and universities to teach accessibility). We also work closely with the Member States to promote accessibility issues either by national legislation or by improved training facilities. And in all that we do, we involve people with disabilities themselves on the basis of 'nothing about us without us'.