



This project is funded by
the European Union



Romania-Republic of Moldova
ENI-CROSS BORDER COOPERATION

Policies and practices of career guidance for young people with disabilities in the Republic of Moldova

Sociological study

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2SOFT / 1.1 / 145



Executive summary

The literature on social inclusion of people with disabilities highlights the relationship between career guidance and the level of socio-professional integration of people with disabilities, identifying a number of benefits of career guidance at individual, organizational and societal level, as well as certain issues in ensuring the vocational orientation of this group of people throughout life.

The sociological study of career guidance policies and practices for people with disabilities have analyzed the particularities of providing career guidance services to young people with disabilities through the education system, the employment sector and the non-governmental sector, applying a mixed research design.

National regulatory and institutional framework on career guidance. The field of career guidance for people with disabilities is present in the public discourse and national policy documents. Thus, both the National Development Strategy "Moldova 2030" and the sectoral strategies in the fields of education, employment, and the rights of persons with disabilities contain specific activities and measures for career guidance. At the same time, there are several regulatory gaps that hinder the proper implementation of strategic goals in the field of career guidance for people with disabilities. These include: the lack of a clear and consolidated concept for the provision of career guidance services for people with disabilities; lack of clear working methodologies, focused on correlating the labor market and the needs of people with disabilities; lack of mechanisms for implementing legal provisions; deficiencies in the regulation of support services for people with disabilities, etc.

The institutional network of career guidance includes institutions in the field of education (educational institutions, inclusive education centers, psycho-pedagogical assistance services, career guidance centers), employment (National Employment Agency - NEA) and the non for profit sector. Although diverse, there is a weak cooperation within the institutional network, which leads to a fragmentary intervention in the field. There is no clear delimitation of the responsibilities of different institutions and different specialists with attributions in the field of career guidance. There are also shortcomings in ensuring the continuity of interventions at all levels (educational, employment).

There is a lack of a clear budgetary framework for funding career guidance services. The current precarious funding (mainly focused on covering the salaries of specialists invested with responsibilities to insure career guidance) has a negative impact on specialists' professional level, (in)accessibility of career guidance services both physical, informational and technical-material, and finally on the quality of services provided to people with disabilities.

Opinions and attitudes of young people with disabilities regarding career guidance. Having a job (87%) and obtaining a profession (82%) are very important values for persons with disabilities.

At the same time, most survey participants believe that the current level of knowledge and skills they have is not enough to choose a profession or to find / keep a job. 50% of all young people with disabilities surveyed mentioned that they are not at all / little prepared to enter the labor market.

In this context, 62% of young people with disabilities feel the need for additional professional training. Areas of interest for young people with disabilities are IT (20%), cookery (8%), medicine (7%), education (6%), care / beauty (5%), etc.

For young people with disabilities, informal sources - family and friends - play a key role in choosing a profession, in obtaining information about the labor market and in identifying a job. Educational institutions and National Employment Agency accumulate lower shares in responses. Therefore, young people with disabilities believe that their family would help them rather than the education or employment sector in choosing their profession and accessing the Labor market. The low level of trust in formal institutions is explained by the fact that they do not succeed to adapt career guidance services to the needs of people with disabilities.

The results of the study indicate a moderate level of knowing of the notion of "career guidance" among young people with disabilities. Although most (62%) respondents are familiar with this term, more than 1/3 of them (or 38%) have never heard of it.

2/3 of the young people with disabilities interviewed (64%) benefited from some institutionalized career guidance services (provided in educational institutions, career guidance centers of National Employment Agency or CSOs). At the same time, about 1/3 did not benefit from such services for various reasons: most did not know that such services exist (55%), others did not know where to access them (9%), lack of time to access them (7%), difficulties in accessing them geographically, being provided away from home (4%), etc.

94% of young people surveyed consider career guidance to be rather necessary or very necessary for people with disabilities - an opinion expressed especially by young people who have benefited from these services and understood their effectiveness and usefulness (81% compared to 69% of young people who have not received career guidance services).

The benefits of guidance services, accessed by young people with disabilities were: extended social network (51%), increased level of professional qualification (30%), job found (28%), better performance at the work place (23%).

At the same time, the results of the study indicate multiple problems at the level of career guidance services for people with disabilities: (1) staff unprepared to provide services based on needs of persons with disabilities and consistent with the labor market; (2) lack of accessibility in terms of geographical location, physical infrastructure, methodological and informational infrastructure, technical and material endowment; (3) low level of awareness among people with disabilities, their families and support persons, career guidance service providers regarding the importance of these services for persons with disabilities. For these reasons, the majority of respondents (57%) stated that it was quite difficult / very difficult for them to get employed even after being professionally guided.

Professional orientation within educational institutions. Approximately 64% of the interviewed young people benefited from at least one institutionalized career guidance service. 59% of them – in educational institutions, 7% – NEA, and 4% – CSO.

Out of the total number of young people with disabilities who benefited from career guidance in educational institutions, about 85% referred to general secondary educational level, 27% – vocational level and 13% – higher education.

In general secondary education, most young people have benefited of career guidance activities only in middle school (79%), while in high school their share is 11%. Only one in ten respondents benefited from career guidance activities, at both levels (10%).

The high share of responses according to which young people with disabilities have benefited from some career guidance activities in the general education system is explained by the fact that this subject is mandatory in educational curriculum. Although aspects of career guidance are included in several school subjects (civic education, personal development, leadership classes, technological education, Romanian language etc.), de facto, there is no clear and consolidated concept of providing career guidance services for persons with disabilities. Career guidance is therefore inconsistent and scattered.

Young people from urban areas have benefited from career guidance services within educational institutions (of any level), to a greater extent than young people from rural areas (64% versus 55% respectively). The deeper the degree of disability, the lower the share of persons who have benefited from career guidance services in educational institutions. Depending on the type of disability, the fewest beneficiaries of career guidance services are among people with intellectual disabilities (48%) compared to young people with other types of disabilities (sensory – 65% and physical – 63%).

Career guidance in educational institutions involves a wide range of activities: information sessions; applying self-knowledge and skills assessment tests; individual discussions with the school psychologist and other teaching staff; support in personal marketing; inviting business representatives, National Employment Agency representatives or former graduates of educational institutions to discuss about certain professions, etc.

At the same time, the teaching of career guidance in educational institutions is done in the absence of vocational training programs focused on the needs of persons with disabilities. The curriculums, training materials and teaching methodologies, do not meet the specific needs of persons with disabilities. And the frequency of guidance activities indicates their sporadic nature: 54% of young people stated that they had benefited from guidance activities no more than 3 times during all years of study.

The study also highlighted the limited capabilities of human resources in ensuring career guidance for children and young people with disabilities. Teachers either have no training in the career guidance for persons with disabilities, often having to train themselves, or do not consider career guidance as necessary for this group of persons.

In addition, the educational environments are inaccessible, and career guidance lessons are carried out in the absence of materials and tools adapted to the needs of persons with different types of disabilities.

The information is not accessible to everyone. Only 26% percent of respondents with disabilities mentioned that during career guidance activities, informational materials in alternative format (images, videos etc.) were used.

Support services for children and young people with disabilities, which could assist them in the educational process, are insufficient.

Career guidance through career guidance centers within educational institutions. At the time of the study, 25 career guidance centers were operational within educational institutions, of which 6 - in VET institutions and 19 - within higher education institutions. About half of them have been active for more than 5 years.

People with disabilities represent approximately 1% of the beneficiaries of the guidance centers (with 11,110 beneficiary students in the academic year 2019-2020 and 8629 pupils / students in the academic year 2020-2021).

The centers do not have enough trained staff to be able to provide assistance to people with disabilities. Overall, 84% of the centers' specialists received career guidance training, and only 1/3 of them participated in training focused on providing career guidance to people with disabilities. Only in 3 of the 25 career guidance centers there is a specialist who knows sign language.

Centers are poorly equipped with materials and tools accessible for people with disabilities. Less than half of the centers have audio equipment (44%) and career guidance platforms (40%). Only 28% of the centers use specific assessment tools for people with disabilities, 12% have boards adapted to the needs of people with disabilities and 8% have assistive technology (specialized software for people with disabilities, Braille printers, etc.).

Another problem is the lack of support services (support teachers) for people with disabilities.

The physical infrastructure of the institutions where the centers are located is not accessible either: 1/3 of them do not have an accessible ramp, 2/3 do not have accessible toilets, and in case of 4 out of 5 centers located on the upper floors, there is no elevator. These findings are based exclusively on the subjective opinions of the representatives of the centers, whereas the accessibility of the institutions has not been assessed by the application of special instruments.

Representatives of educational institutions reiterate the need to create career guidance centers in general education institutions, with more active involvement of resource centers in inclusive education, or their establishment at the regional level.

Career guidance within National Employment Agency and its territorial units. Career guidance services for people with disabilities are provided in all territorial units of the National Employment Agency (NEA).

At the same time, the study showed a low level of accessing them by people with disabilities. Out of the total number of interviewed young people (1111 people), only 7% (73 young people) benefited from career guidance services within NEA / territorial units. Most of them are young people from urban areas (67%), male (56%), over 30 years (45%), with accentuated degree of disability (56%). Depending on the type of disability, young people with sensory disabilities are the “rarest” beneficiaries of NEA services / territorial units.

NEA’s spectrum of career guidance activities includes: information about professions and the labor market, self-knowledge, skills assessment and establishing the vocational profile, personal marketing. Although varied, they are often not provided to people with disabilities. Therefore, 68% benefited from information activities on the professions (while 1/3 did not benefit from these services). 49% were helped to find a job, and as many did not receive this support. 48% of young people with disabilities were informed about the possibilities of additional training to acquire certain knowledge and skills, and 47% did not benefit from this information. 45% of young people were informed about how to look for a job, but many did not benefit from this information (52%). 32% of young people with disabilities benefited from skills testing services, by completing various questionnaires, tests, compared to 56% who did not benefit from this type of support. ¼ young people were trained to develop personal marketing products (CV, cover letter) and presenting at the job interview, while 2/3 did not benefit from this activity. Approximately every 5th respondent received support from NEA employees / territorial units in adapting the job by the employer, while most did not receive this support (respectively 21% versus 74%).

According to 2/3 of young people with disabilities, access to the career guidance services of NEA / territorial units was limited by a number of barriers: insufficient financial resources (30%), which prevents travel to territorial offices, due to the need to pay transportation costs; limited access to information on the availability of services (23%); lack of qualified specialists to provide career guidance to people with disabilities (21%); communication difficulties for people with sensory disabilities, due to the lack of translators in sign language; lack of interest from young people with disabilities (11%); physical inaccessibility of spaces (7%).

Despite the difficulties, the attitudes of the respondents towards the career guidance services provided by NEA / territorial units are, for the most part, positive: 92% appreciate the courtesy of the specialists and 79% - their professionalism. However, although 71% of the respondents appreciated the advice and recommendations offered by NEA specialists, every 5th person with disabilities mentioned that the advices were not useful to them. Although the availability of information was appreciated by 71% of the respondents, every 5th mentioned lack the information that would help them in the field of career guidance. A lower level of satisfaction was manifested in relation to the technical-material endowment: 58% of respondents are satisfied with this aspect, 21% - dissatisfied, and another 21% do not remember this aspect. 52% of people with disabilities were satisfied with the activities they participated in within NEA, while 21% - were dissatisfied, and 26% do not remember them.

The aspects that satisfy young people to a lesser extent are the access conditions for people with disabilities (ramp, elevator) - 43%. Dissatisfaction was expressed by 26%, and every third stated that he did not remember if the physical access conditions were appropriate.

Young people with disabilities highlighted some aspects that need to be improved in the provision of career guidance services for people with disabilities: the provision of the service focused on the specific needs of applicants (67%), the training of specialists in providing services (60%) and equipping guidance centers with tools and materials adapted to the needs of people with disabilities (49%). The issue of equipping with the necessary tools for assessing and assisting people with disabilities remains on the agenda of NEA. For example, currently, except for the Chisinau unit, which has the specialized CASPER platform and staff trained for its application, no other subdivisions have that platform. In addition, it is not accessible to apply to sensory disabilities.

Career guidance with the support of CSOs. In the Republic of Moldova, the associative sector had a certain contribution in developing the career guidance system both through the educational institutions and the NEA / territorial units. The activities of the CSOs were supported from multiple projects, yet having a sporadic and unsubstantial character. The study highlighted the fact that young people with disabilities have a low level of information about career guidance services provided by CSOs and only 4% of the total sample benefited from career guidance through local or national CSOs.

According to the young people with disabilities, the support provided by CSOs consisted of: referring to additional training (56%), developing a CV (42%), preparing for the job interview (35%), finding a workplace (27%) and carrying out additional trainings (23%). Another contribution of CSOs includes supporting the employers in adapting the work place to the needs of the people with disabilities (31%) - identified as a result of the delivery of career guidance services and intermediation of access to the labor market.

A larger access to the career guidance services provided by CSOs have young people from Chisinau municipality (58%) and from district centers (35%), where the presence of CSOs is higher (compared to rural areas). The most frequently mentioned CSOs, which in the opinion of young people provide this kind of services are: A.O. Motivatie-30%, Keystone Moldova-17%, A.O. Speranta Center-9%.

Young people with disabilities were satisfied with the way in which the career guidance was provided by the CSOs, the courtesy and professionalism of the specialists, the availability of information, the advices provided and the technical-material endowment. 78% of young people who benefited from the career guidance services provided by CSOs followed their advice and recommendations.

The study attested the following difficulties in accessing the CSO career guidance service: geographical location away from place of residence (42%), problems related to travel by public transport to CSO (42%), lack of information about the possibility of benefiting from services (31%), lack of interest from young people with disabilities in this type of services (21%), lack\insufficiency of qualified specialists who provide this service (19%).

Family involvement in the professional orientation of young people with disabilities. 75% of young people with disabilities mentioned that they benefited from career guidance in the family. Family support includes: discussions about the skills and abilities of young people (66%) and the most sought-after professions (61%), support in decision making in the field of vocational training (60%), but also in choosing the right job (64%). The family is less involved in preparing for a job interview (6%), preparing a CV (5%), and evaluating work potential (5%)

Although the family is important in establishing the professional path of person with disabilities, it is often responsible for the failure of their professional achievements. The reasons are many: the family does not trust the potential of the child with disabilities and does not believe that he/she could work, has not developed the skills necessary for independent living and work, is afraid that the employer will take advantage of the person with disabilities, it is convenient for them to keep the person at home to involve him/her in household activities etc.

Usually, there is no collaboration between the education system and the family in the career guidance process of young people with disabilities.

Recommendations

- Development of a clear and consolidated concept for providing career guidance services for people with disabilities;
- Development of mechanisms for implementing the legal provisions, which will ensure efficient access of children and young people with disabilities to career guidance services, and subsequently on the job market.
- Revision of the current normative framework by clarifying the aspects regarding the tasks of different actors, institutions in the field of career guidance for people with disabilities;
- Regulating support services for people with disabilities in post-secondary education and establishment of support teacher units at these levels;
- Create career guidance counselor units and regulate their responsibilities;
- Development of initial and continuous training programs for specialists in the field of career guidance;
- Development of parental education programs in the field of career guidance for children and young people with disabilities;
- Strengthening inter-institutional collaboration (education, employment, private sector) in order to ensure the synergy of career guidance activities;
- Adequate funding for career guidance field;
- Equipping the institutional network with accessible materials and tools for the good organization and provision of services based on needs of people with disabilities.