

Gala Dinner Speech by Otto Herskind Jørgensen, Mayor of the County of Vejle

Dear Madam Consul, Mrs Kalliga. Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of NetJob and the Danish Centre for Technical Aids for Rehabilitation and Education I welcome you to this Conference on disability and the labour market – INTO WORK.

Today, Europe is facing a wide variety of huge challenges and some of them are the basis for this Conference.

The challenge is to create a competitive, knowledge-based society with a room for everyone.

We must build a cohesive Europe, combat social exclusion, and create equal opportunities for all people.

The employment policy is an extremely important tool in this connection. Prosperity is created through workplaces. Social exclusion is combated by giving people jobs. As an example, integration of immigrants into European societies will only become a success if the immigrants work with the country's own citizens at a workplace and share the community of the life of work.

"Social Inclusion - through Social Dialogue and Partnership" was the overall theme for the initiatives initiated in the period of the Danish EU Presidency in the employment and social field. And this year the European Year of People with Disabilities along with the Greek Presidency carries on the work of developing and implementing these initiatives. A lot of initiatives have been started by disability organisations, government authorities,

institutions, research and knowledge centres, local networks, manufacturers and suppliers, in order to create awareness about managing diversity and – especially for our conference – opening the job market to people with disabilities.

At NetJob the aim is the never-ending development of an educational model in which Information Technology skills can be used as a mean of increasing job market opportunities for people with motor disabilities. The results reveal that individuals with computer skills are subsequently armed to compete on a level playing field with others in the job arena: 90% of our Danish participants obtain employment. And as far I am informed the prospects for NetJob Hellas participants look prosperous too.

The task of creating an inclusive Europe is big and is best solved by co-operating through social dialogue and partnership.

This Conference is an important part of this theme. The co-operation between authorities, employers and employees is necessary to achieve the goals of a future enlarged, harmonious EU. The co-operation between these players is also a vital element of the European social model.

In the view of many EU countries, this tripartism between the social partners and the authorities is a natural thing. The social partners are consulted when new policies are formulated and play an important role when the policies become a reality in areas such as employment, safety at work, vocational training and integration of marginalized groups on the jobmarket.

Through regular consultations and via committees with equal representation of the parties at central and regional levels public authorities and the social partners have a close day-to-day dialogue on the development, prioritisation and implementation of employment policy initiatives.

In the "new European jargon" this should be a **win-win-situation**. The social partners gain influence and are at the same time extremely important resources in relation to getting the various policies to work in the real world. Labour market policies based on this kind of co-

operation are working because people with good contacts to the real world have participated and therefore feel a sense of ownership in relation to the policy pursued.

Let me make it absolutely clear: All countries have their own traditions and special circumstances in this area. All countries must find solutions that will function in relation to the special conditions, which apply in their respective countries. But – as countless examples can show – the diversity of European experiences can be used to inspire one another, to learn from one another, and perhaps jointly, to make stronger links to further the co-operation between authorities and the social partners in Europe and at the European level.

As I am sure this conference will show, **non-governmental organisations** – and particularly **organisations of disabled people** and those working **with** disabled people – also have an essential role to play. In the political processes governing the labour market, I believe that NGOs can make a significant and positive contribution in their own right.

The European Year of People with Disabilities 2003 has given us the slogan: **“Nothing for disabled people without disabled people”** - and I firmly believe that the introduction of this principle in the areas of vocational training, employment and working conditions will give a tremendous boost to the implementation of new practices which can favour disabled people and re-dress the imbalances caused by many years of neglect and discrimination. In all political processes Disputes and conflicting interests are unavoidable - and that is not a bad thing. Absence of political conflicts and disputes is only found in totalitarian regimes. However, diversity is what makes sound democracies. But we must strengthen dialogue so that the differences have better and more constructive conditions.

Ladies and Gentlemen, let me end by thanking the Conference Organising Committee for its efforts in organising this Gala Dinner and tomorrow’s conference. I look very much forward to the programme, as I am sure we all do.

I would also like to thank, especially, Mrs. Eugenia Chandris, the owner of this hotel, who has so generously contributed the facilities for the conference and has made sure that we are all well cared for while we are here. Thank you very much!

Lastly, I should like to thank all of **you** for the interest and enthusiasm you have shown by coming – from Greece and from all the corners of Europe, North, South, East and West, to listen, and to join in the discussions we will have about employment and disability. I am very pleased to see so many people with so much interest for our subject.

I hope that we will have a good and fruitful Conference so once again - I welcome you all most warmly to this Conference.

Lets get INTO WORK!