



Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

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Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Thirty-first session

Summary record of the 735th meeting*

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Thursday, 22 August 2024, at 10 a.m.

Chair: Ms. Fefoame

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* No summary record was issued for the 734th meeting.

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The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

Consideration of reports submitted by parties to the Convention under article 35

(continued)

Combined second and third periodic reports of Belgium (CRPD/C/BEL/2-3; CRPD/C/BEL/QPR/2-3)

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Belgium joined the meeting.*
2. **A representative of Belgium**, introducing his country's combined second and third periodic reports (CRPD/C/BEL/2-3), said that the federal, regional and community governments were jointly responsible for the implementation of the Convention and had cooperated closely, and with civil society organizations, in preparing the report to provide a comprehensive picture of the situation on the ground.
3. **A representative of Belgium** said that several developments of consequence to the implementation of the Convention had taken place since the submission of the State party report in 2020. In 2021, the Constitution had been amended to include a new article 22ter, which enshrined the right of persons with disabilities to full inclusion in society and the right to reasonable accommodation. Efforts had been stepped up to improve disability mainstreaming and coordination across policies and sectors, but the country's federal structure meant that implementation in the different regions and communities was not always uniform.
4. The adoption of the Federal Disability Action Plan 2021–2024, which reflected the Government's coalition agreement, the Convention rights, recommendations from international bodies, and civil society requests, had strengthened implementation of the Convention and fostered dialogue between representative organizations of persons with disabilities and policymakers. Among other things, the Plan made it mandatory for all future governments to develop action plans to further the implementation of the Convention. The Interministerial Conference on Persons with Disabilities, a permanent platform for cooperation and decision-making, had been re-established in 2022 to strengthen coherence between different strategies and action plans adopted by the federal Government and the communities and regions and resolve cross-cutting issues. The Conference met twice a year, and thematic working groups had been set up to prepare and implement decisions. The Inter-federal Disability Strategy 2021–2030 provided a framework for linking the different plans and strategies with the work of the Interministerial Conference and the European Union of Equality: Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030. Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels and the French- and German-speaking communities had set up advisory councils to facilitate the participation of persons with disabilities in law- and policymaking.
5. The Walloon government's Accessibility Plan, 2022–2024 had been developed in collaboration with organizations of persons with disabilities and set out actions to mainstream accessibility across the region. It included guidelines on the development of accessible public spaces, the construction and renovation of accessible hospital infrastructure, and support for professionals. In the Brussels-Capital Region, regulations on buildings and public spaces had been amended to broaden the concept of accessibility. In addition, new training courses on accessibility were being provided for road workers. In Flanders, a concept note had been drafted that laid out the principles for revising accessibility regulations; the Flemish Accessibility Agency, Inter, was conducting awareness-raising activities around accessibility.
6. The protection of the rights and autonomy of persons with disabilities in the judicial and prison systems had been strengthened with the adoption of legislation to ensure that judicial and prison staff adhered to the Convention and human rights standards in their interactions with persons with disabilities. The Act of 26 June 1990 on the protection of the mentally ill had been revised in May 2024 to promote inclusive practices, reduce stigma, and curb involuntary hospitalization. In prison settings, the focus had shifted to the mental health of inmates, including persons with intellectual disabilities. Extra-penitentiary facilities were being built that were adapted to the needs of persons with disabilities.

7. In an effort to promote independent living and social inclusion, the Flemish government had refinanced personal assistance budgets, stepped up individual support, and launched an assistance programme for childcare institutions and schools. The Flemish Agency for Persons with Disabilities cooperated with an academic working group to identify areas for improvement of public services. To support deinstitutionalization, the Walloon government had developed a strategy for integrated life pathways, which proposed frameworks for persons who were losing their autonomy, including persons with disabilities, their relatives and caregivers to maximize the person's autonomy through choice of living environment and diversification of home-care services.

8. In the field of education, the Flemish government had adopted a decree on learning support in 2023 to facilitate the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream primary and secondary schools. Each school was affiliated with a learning support centre operated by teams of experts who delivered support to pupils and teachers. Efforts were also being made to provide additional support to mainstream schools, enhance the quality of specialized education, and foster collaboration between both systems.

9. In the Flemish Region, companies employing persons with temporary or permanent occupational disabilities received financial assistance to enable them to provide individual, tailored support and to compensate for additional costs or reduced productivity. Similar support was available for self-employed persons with occupational disabilities. In the Brussels-Capital Region, a new subsidy had been introduced in July 2024 to promote the recruitment of jobseekers with disabilities, and the "Pool H" service would manage job offers provisionally reserved for persons with disabilities. A July 2024 study set out recommendations for improving employment services and opportunities for persons with disabilities, with a focus on gender disparities. In the Walloon Region, supported employment services offered training, job coaching and guidance to help employees with disabilities find and keep jobs. At the federal level, new back-to-work pathways had been created and barriers to employment for persons in receipt of social security disability benefits had been reduced. Recipients of income replacement benefits were given the possibility to earn additional income without losing their entitlements for a period of two years; those benefits had increased by 10.75 per cent in the period 2021 to 2024 and the system whereby benefits were tied to the partner's income had been abolished. In addition, access to self-employment had been simplified, the methodology for calculating the impact of employment on household incomes had been improved, and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities in the public sector were being expanded.

10. **A representative of the Inter-federal Centre for Equal Opportunities and Combating Racism and Discrimination (Unia), Belgium,** said that despite the progress made in the implementation of the Convention, no decisive steps had been taken towards independent living and inclusive education and employment. The lack of an accessible environment, reasonable accommodation and individual support measures prevented the full participation of persons with disabilities in society. The many important measures taken often fell short of requirements for full inclusion, and even new laws sometimes contravened the provisions of the Convention. The Pact for Excellence in Teaching adopted by the French Community, for example, fostered the inclusion of certain pupils through reasonable accommodation, but largely excluded pupils with intellectual disabilities.

11. Those inconsistencies were largely owing to the absence of a comprehensive policy framework to mainstream inclusion across policy areas. Existing action plans and strategies lacked a common vision and implementation was uneven across sectors. Voting rights were restricted under the guise of "protection" and although the definition of disability set forth in the Convention was widely accepted in case law, the medical model continued to prevail in the political discourse. Much remained to be done to replace outdated ideas whereby persons with disabilities needed protection and others to decide on their best interest by effective measures for supported decision-making.

12. **Ms. Kayess** (Country Task Force), speaking in a pre-recorded video message, said that, during the dialogue, the Committee would explore the extent to which the State party had been able to address the pervasive impact of ableism on the lives of persons with disabilities and the extent to which the policies and programmes in place took an intersectional approach to the diversity of persons with disabilities and the effectiveness of

government processes to ensure that, as Belgium was a federal State, the implementation of the Convention extended to all regions without any limitations or exceptions.

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13. **Mr. Schefer** (Coordinator, Country Task Force) said that the Committee welcomed the State party's efforts but was disappointed that nothing had been done to bring the existing body of laws and regulations fully into line with the Convention. It was discouraging that even new legislation and policies raised serious questions of compliance. He wished to know whether there were any plans to conduct a systematic review of federal, regional and community legislation to ensure alignment with the Convention, and whether any measures were envisaged to prevent the adoption of non-compliant instruments in future. He wondered how the Government prevented the adoption of regressive measures, such as cuts in social security benefits, that might affect the realization of social rights guaranteed under the Convention.

14. **A representative of Belgium** said that there were no plans to conduct a comprehensive legislative review. Instead, the Convention, the Committee's recommendations and input from independent monitoring mechanisms and civil society organizations were used to inform future policymaking. Issues of concern highlighted by different entities had been taken into account when drafting the Inter-federal Disability Strategy 2021–2030. Regulatory impact assessments, which had recently incorporated a disability perspective, were carried out for all proposed laws and regulations. Guidance for policymakers to accompany the regulatory impact assessments would be updated to provide clear instructions on the principles underlying the Convention. Since impact assessments were often conducted late in the legislative process, the Federal Action Plan on Disability provided, in addition, for awareness-raising activities to ensure that law- and policymakers took account of the potential impact of legislation on disability rights early on.

15. **A representative of Belgium** said that the decree of 10 July 2008 on the Flemish policy framework for equal opportunities and treatment, as amended in 2024, recognized the role of the advisory council of persons with disabilities in law- and policymaking, and decision-makers were required to heed the council's opinions. The council also advised on the impact of new regulations on children and young people, including children with disabilities.

16. **A representative of Belgium** said that the Walloon Code of Social Welfare and Health provided an overarching framework for the inclusion of persons with disabilities. The Code would shortly be revised to repeal provisions that were inconsistent with the Convention and international human rights standards. The Walloon Agency for Health, Social Protection, Disability and Families, known as the Agency for Quality of Life, was responsible for disability inclusion, health, and family benefits. A mainstreaming test had been introduced which was applied to all proposed legislative texts and policies to measure their potential impact on inclusion. In that connection, the Agency delivered awareness-raising activities, training and support around the potential impact of public policies.

17. The Walloon Advisory Council for Persons with Disabilities, which had been established in March 2022, provided advice on the potential impact of legislation on disability rights upon request or at its own initiative. The disability committee of the Agency for Quality of Life, which was made up of equal numbers of sectoral representatives, trade unions and representative organizations of persons with disabilities, also performed advisory functions with regard to the new legislation.

18. **A representative of Belgium** said that, in the Brussels-Capital Region, the equal opportunities test was a mandatory tool for measuring the impact of policies and regulations on different populations groups, including persons with disabilities. A dedicated website for the test had been created in March 2023, which provided access to tests already conducted. The Brussels Council for Persons with Disabilities participated in the development, implementation and follow-up of legislation.

19. **A representative of Belgium** said that the French Community advisory council of persons with disabilities had been established in 2023 to promote the participation of persons with disabilities in the drafting and implementation of laws and policies and to provide advice

to legislators. The council was mandated, among other things, to issue opinions and conduct studies, upon request or at its own initiative. Eight of its 15 members were persons with disabilities.

20. **A representative of Belgium** said that there were no plans to reduce social security benefits. In fact, the minimum allowances for persons with disabilities and other social security benefits had been increased. Specific constitutional provisions restricted the possibility for governments at all levels to reduce the level of social protection, and the Constitutional Court actively monitored compliance with those provisions.

21. **Mr. Schefer** said that he wondered how the State party made sure that the membership of the various advisory councils met the conditions set out in article 4 (3) of the Convention, given that the councils also comprised representatives of service providers and other entities that might pursue their own interests, rather than those of persons with disabilities.

22. **A representative of Belgium** said that the National High Council for Persons with Disabilities mainly comprised persons with disabilities, but also some professionals working in the field. The Council had recently prepared a series of recommendations to reform its working methods and composition to strengthen its independence, drawing on the Committee's general comment No. 7 on article 4 (3) and 33 (3) of the Convention. However, the recommendations were less concerned with the Council's membership than with its overall functioning and the way in which the Government should respond to its advice. New regulations on the operation of the National High Council were currently being drafted on the basis of those recommendations.

23. **A representative of Belgium** said that the advisory council of the German-speaking Community comprised both members of non-governmental organizations and persons with disabilities or parents of children with disabilities. At least half of its members must be persons with disabilities participating directly or through representative organizations.

24. **A representative of Belgium** said that in the Walloon Region the definition of what constituted a representative organization was established in legislation.

25. **Mr. Schefer** said that it would be useful to know whether any mechanisms other than the regulatory impact assessments were in place to ensure the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in the early stages of legislative and policy processes.

26. **A representative of Belgium** said that, at the federal level, the formal advice given by the National High Council for Persons with Disabilities was complemented by interactive engagement between administrative entities, government units and civil society organizations earlier in the process. In recent years, the Minister with responsibility for persons with disabilities had also attended meetings of the National High Council to engage directly on issues that might arise from draft legislation or policies.

27. **A representative of Belgium** said the rules of procedure of the advisory council in the French Community, which had been set up in April 2024, clearly stipulated its role as a monitoring mechanism for the implementation of the Convention, including by advising on the impact of proposed legislation on persons with disabilities.

28. **A representative of Belgium** said that the equal opportunities test was applied at the outset of all legislative processes and the advice of the National High Council for Persons with Disabilities was sought in respect of all inter-federal strategies.

29. **A representative of Belgium** said that, although the Walloon Advisory Council for Persons with Disabilities was consulted only after the first reading of draft legislation, it was kept abreast of all legislative developments and was free to intervene on its own initiative at any stage. Even if an advisory opinion came later in the process, it was difficult for the government not to take the Council's views on board. The opinions were made public, and any decision to disregard the Council's advice must be well reasoned.

30. **A representative of Belgium** said that the advisory council in Flanders included representatives of disability advocacy groups and parents of children with disabilities. In addition, structural funding was provided to partner organizations, including human rights organizations.

31. **Mr. Schefer** said that he wished to know what measures had been taken to harmonize the definition of disability across government levels and administrative units and thereby reduce the administrative burden on persons with disabilities who had to navigate multiple systems.

32. **A representative of Belgium** said that the definition of disability contained in the Convention provided the overarching framework for government action generally. However, more specific definitions were used by different entities to assess eligibility for certain rights or benefits. The Interministerial Conference on Persons with Disabilities was currently working on identifying areas where definitions could be aligned in order to reduce the administrative burden for persons with disabilities undergoing multiple assessments in different entities, but the fact that the different scaling methods used were entirely incompatible complicated matters. A working group had been set up to map the different definitions and databases with a view to simplifying processes and interlinking databases in future.

33. **Mr. Schefer** said that it would be helpful if the State party could clarify its position vis-à-vis the permissibility of disability segregation.

34. **A representative of Belgium** said that article 22ter of the Constitution provided the overall framework by establishing the right to full inclusion in society. It was for legislators and policymakers to translate that constitutional principle across sectors and levels of government.

35. **Mr. Schefer** said that the Committee would welcome additional information on measures taken to include women and girls with disabilities in employment and education, remedy the high levels of institutionalization they experienced, address their disproportionate exposure to gender-based violence, and improve their situation in penitentiary institutions. Were there any plans to collect disaggregated data on women and girls with disabilities?

36. **A representative of Belgium** said that gender and disability were mainstreamed across all levels of government. The regulatory impact assessment included both the gender and disability perspectives. At the federal level, the Federal Disability Action Plan 2021–2024 and the Federal Gender Mainstreaming Plan 2020–2024, among others, included specific measures for women with disabilities; efforts to improve coherence between those instruments were ongoing. A workshop had been held to discuss, with civil society organizations, options for strengthening gender and disability components in the next Federal Disability Action Plan. It had been recommended that organizations of women with disabilities should be involved in the preparation of the new Plan.

37. Measures had been taken to step up data collection, improve disaggregation based on gender and disability and increase the availability of data on women with disabilities. No specific measures had been taken to promote the inclusion of women with disabilities in work and education, but general measures such as extended care leave and other benefits were also relevant to that group.

38. **A representative of Belgium** said that the Anti-Discrimination Act had been amended in 2023 to include explicit recognition of multiple discrimination, which covered both cumulative and intersectional discrimination and was highly relevant to women and girls with disabilities. The Federal Gender Mainstreaming Plan 2020–2024 provided for the integration of a gender perspective across policies and action plans, and ministers were required to report annually on relevant measures taken within their area of competence, including in the area of disability. Under a project to improve equality data collection in Belgium. A data hub of existing equality data, including on disability, which could be searched according to different criteria, for example to find data on the situation of women and girls with disabilities. The register of criminal offences had been overhauled to introduce a new type of offence that took account of different protected criteria and cumulative or intersectional discrimination. The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) and recommendations from expert bodies to address gender-based violence were implemented through the National Action Plan to Combat Gender-based Violence.

39. **A representative of Belgium** said that the Walloon Government Decree of 6 November 2008 on combating certain forms of discrimination had been revised in 2019 to include the criteria of multiple discrimination, including on grounds of gender and disability, and direct and indirect discrimination. The French-speaking regions and communities had developed a joint plan to combat gender-based violence, which included a disability perspective. The Agency for Quality of Life was developing a discrimination screening tool for the business sector, which included disability-based discrimination.

40. **A representative of Belgium** said that in March 2024 the Brussels-Capital Region, the French Community Commission and the Common Community Commission had adopted a common code to address discrimination in the areas of employment, housing and services. The new code regulated intersectional discrimination, including against women with disabilities, and discrimination by association and established corresponding penalties. An annual study had been commissioned to collect data on poorly researched gender issues in different regions; the first edition on entrepreneurship and disability included a gender analysis.

41. **A representative of Belgium** said that legislation in the Walloon Region did not contain detailed provisions on accessibility for persons with sensory impairments. However, expert accessibility services provided support to property developers. The Wallonia-Brussels Accessibility Coalition had produced a guide on accessible buildings for developers that contained recommendations that went above and beyond legal requirements. A draft decree containing provisions relating to the accessibility of existing public buildings, including on an accessibility audit system, was soon to be considered by the regional legislature.

42. **A representative of Belgium** said that a regional urban development ordinance on accessibility had been adopted in Flanders in 2010, establishing a number of minimum accessibility requirements. However, according to an evaluation carried out by Accessible Flanders, the ordinance was rarely applied in building permit applications. The ordinance was therefore to be reviewed and new regulations were to come into force at the beginning of the next legislative term, including regulations establishing the role of “recognized accessibility expert”, who could be, for example, a trained architect, responsible for assessing project applications against accessibility standards. Further planned regulations would make it mandatory to seek an external opinion from Accessible Flanders in the event of a request for a derogation from accessibility standards.

43. **A representative of Belgium** said that, in the Brussels-Capital Region, a reform of the regional urban planning framework was under way. Existing public buildings that did not meet accessibility standards would have to be renovated in line with accessibility regulations. Even if it was not possible to make an existing building accessible to wheelchair users, for example, regulations on the accessibility of signage, stairwells and parking areas must nonetheless be respected. In the past, compliance with standards for people with reduced mobility had rarely been monitored after a permit had been issued. That was now changing. In 2021, monitoring had been made a priority under the regional inspection plan and, as of 2023, the agency AccessAndGo had been tasked with verifying whether blueprints complied with accessibility standards during the examination of permit applications.

44. **A representative of Belgium** said that the Ministry of Mobility of the federal Government was responsible for the railway system. Accessibility had been made a priority for the next decade under a new management contract between the National Railway Company of Belgium (SNCB) and Infrabel, the railway infrastructure manager. The contract contained a clear and measurable route for reaching accessibility objectives and set out a cross-cutting approach to accessibility. It required the adoption of an accessibility master plan by SNCB and Infrabel in order to significantly increase the number of fully accessible railway stations by 2032, entailing modifications to the built environment, such as the installation of elevators and voice-assisted ticket machines. The master plan also required that new trains must be equipped with multifunctional spaces adapted to persons with reduced mobility. More than €4 billion would be invested in the renewal of the current rail fleet and the purchase of new railcars. The accessibility norms applicable to the newly purchased trains were stricter than those established under European Union regulations. More detailed information in that regard could be provided in writing.

The meeting was suspended at 11.45 a.m. and resumed at 11.50 a.m.

45. **Ms. Aldana Salguero** said that she would be grateful for an update on the measures taken by the State party to reduce the number of persons on the waiting list for disability support in Flanders.

46. **Mr. Kouassi** said that he wished to know what steps were planned to ensure that all existing public buildings were brought into line with accessibility standards.

47. **A representative of Belgium** said that, in Flanders, persons applying for a “personal budget” – a personalized annual sum which could be used by persons with disabilities to purchase care and support services – were placed in a category by level of priority, in view of their personal situation. There were three categories in which applications were placed depending on the urgency of the request. Persons placed in category 1, the highest priority category, received a personal budget within four months on average. There was thus no waiting list for persons in that category. The number of persons waiting for personal budgets in category 3 had declined from 11,487 in 2019 to 10,345 in 2022. However, the number of persons on the waiting list under category 2 had increased from 2,826 in 2019 to 6,172 in 2022. There was a separate system for persons in an emergency situation, whose applications for a personal budget were processed immediately. Detailed figures in that regard could be provided in writing.

48. **A representative of Belgium** said that, in the Brussels-Capital Region, particular attention was paid to accessibility for persons with reduced mobility during renovation work.

49. **A representative of Belgium** said that the agency responsible for the maintenance of federal buildings had taken steps taken to improve their accessibility. For instance, a digital accessibility questionnaire would soon be sent to the authorities occupying federal buildings, the results of which would be published on each authority’s website so that persons with disabilities knew in advance of their visit whether the building in question was accessible. An internal accessibility guide had been adopted in 2019, containing information about accessibility regulations and obligations. Private companies hired to conduct studies in relation to federal construction or renovation projects were required to seek the opinion of an accessibility expert.

50. **Mr. Al-Azzeh** said that he wished to know why the State party had no plans to harmonize the definition of “disability” across its various regional administrative structures, as confirmed in paragraph 10 of its combined periodic reports, and would be grateful for information on the participation of women with disabilities in the Institute for Equality between Women and Men and the interdepartmental coordination group.

51. **Mr. Schefer** said that he would welcome clarification as to whether there was a single unified definition of “disability” for data-gathering purposes that applied to all regional and federal entities, ensuring that data collected on disability in each region were comparable; whether data collection with regard to disability was based on the set of questions recommended by the Washington Group on Disability Statistics; and, in general, how data gathered at the federal and regional levels were compared.

52. **A representative of Belgium** said that, at the time when the combined periodic reports had been submitted, there had been no efforts to align the administrative definitions used at different levels of government. Since then, work had begun within the Interministerial Conference on Disability to align definitions and simplify the administrative burden on persons with disabilities engaged in processes in multiple systems. Information on the representation of women with disabilities in the Institute for Equality between Women and Men would be provided in writing.

53. **A representative of Belgium** said that progress had been made with regard to data collection and statistics since the combined periodic reports had been submitted. The Interministerial Conference on Disability had instructed the federal, regional and community governments and their statistical offices to fill gaps in existing data, propose new statistical approaches and improve access to information, recognizing the fundamental importance of accurate data to the development of disability policies. There was a working group on statistics within the Interministerial Conference, comprising representatives of the different administrations, statistical offices, civil society organizations and independent mechanisms.

The working group had developed a detailed report on available data and statistics on disability that had been published in 2023, with recommendations to address and identify gaps and strengthen statistical capacity. On the basis of that report, the Interministerial Conference had adopted a road map with priorities and next steps for 2024 and 2025.

54. **A representative of Belgium** said that the language used in the Flemish equal opportunities law was based on the Convention, which was also the basis of policy frameworks relating to persons with disabilities, such as the care and support policy of the Flemish Agency for Persons with Disabilities and education policies. The Flemish public authorities had updated the definition of “civil servant with a disability” on the basis of the definition contained in the Convention; that definition, alongside other administrative definitions, also informed data-collection activities.

55. **Mr. Makni** said that he would be interested to know whether the federal Government had strategies for raising awareness of the importance of the application and proper interpretation of the Convention.

56. **Mr. Morris** said that he wished to know what measures were in place to incentivize the development of information and communication technologies that were accessible to persons with disabilities at a minimal cost and what percentage of persons with disabilities in Belgium had access to information and communication technologies.

57. **A representative of Belgium** said that there was no coordinated plan to raise awareness of the Convention at the federal level, but there were specific policies and measures to combat stereotypes about persons with disabilities and to encourage them to apply to positions in the public service. There had also been campaigns on the use of the European Disability Card. Several campaigns had been carried out to train and increase awareness among federal officials with regard to disability issues, including national railway workers.

58. **A representative of Belgium** said that, as a member of the European Union and the European internal market, Belgium adhered to common standards on the accessibility of digital goods. The European Accessibility Act and Directive (EU) 2016/2102 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 October 2016 on the accessibility of the websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies had been transposed in Belgian law. Both instruments included elements relating to digital accessibility obligations. During the Belgian presidency of the European Council, the federal Government had worked with the European Commission and other member States to further strengthen accessibility in the framework of the internal market. The delegation could provide a conference report detailing those activities upon request. The federal Government recognized that a digital gap continued to exist between persons with and persons without disabilities.

59. **A representative of Belgium** said that the Flemish authorities applied the “Click-Call-Connect” model, a digitally inclusive customer process for service providers, and took a non-digital-only approach in their regional digital service strategy. In Flanders, digital inclusion focused on four pillars: access, skills, tailored support and accessible digital services. Statistics Flanders had only limited data on digital inclusion and research remained to be done in that area. However, within the Flemish agency for home affairs various initiatives had been launched to improve digital inclusion, such as the “Everyone Digital” action plan to support local authorities in establishing digital inclusion programmes. Accessible Flanders was receiving subsidies to promote digital accessibility and a network of digital support points where persons could seek assistance were to be set up. There was a media coaching programme to assist media professionals working with persons with disabilities to make their organizations more digitally inclusive, and “Digibanks”, which lent out materials, gave courses and provided cheap Internet subscriptions, had been set up in partnership with local authorities to assist persons with disabilities who were at risk of social and digital exclusion.

60. **Ms. Gamio Ríos** said that she would be interested to learn whether organizations of persons with disabilities were involved in the training provided to public sector workers mentioned by the delegation. She also wished to know what training was provided to ensure that advisory councils of persons with disabilities had adequate knowledge of legal, social,

political and economic issues relating to the application of the Convention. She would also be grateful for an update on the time frame for the completion of ongoing reforms.

61. **Ms. Dondovdorj** said that she wished to know whether the State party had any concrete plans to encourage media organizations to get involved in awareness-raising and how it ensured that the media portrayed persons with disabilities in a manner consistent with the Convention. She would also appreciate an explanation of the way in which organizations of persons with disabilities were involved in monitoring the accessibility of public infrastructure and information and communication technologies.

62. **Mr. Kabue** said that he wished to know how the State party facilitated the participation of organizations of persons with disabilities in decision-making, in particular in relation to the implementation of the Convention, and to what extent those organizations were able to work with the advisory councils of persons with disabilities. He would like the delegation to comment on reports that some non-governmental organizations, including organizations of persons with disabilities, had allegedly faced intimidation.

63. **Ms. Thongkuay** (Country Task Force) said that she wished to know whether there was a set timeline for the adoption of revised accessibility regulations, whether those regulations would include enforcement measures and be applicable to older buildings and facilities, and whether provision had been made to establish the necessary monitoring mechanism. She would welcome information on the proportion of laws, national action plans and strategies on children and young people that contained specific references to children with disabilities, and data disaggregated by age, gender and type of impairment on the number of children with disabilities who were living in institutions. It would be helpful to know what the State party was doing to combat stigma, discrimination and negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities, in particular children with intellectual disabilities and those with Down syndrome.

64. **A representative of Belgium** said that, while his country's report had been drafted from the Government's perspective, interactive, open and frank discussions had been held with civil society organizations on the report and ahead of the dialogue with the Committee. Meetings with civil society and Unia, the independent human rights mechanism, were planned in order to discuss how the Committee's upcoming recommendations would be implemented.

65. **A representative of Belgium** said that, according to research carried out in Flanders on the representation of persons with disabilities in the media, in 2022, 1.7 per cent of people on television had visible disabilities. The public service broadcaster for the Flemish Community, VRT, intended to increase the number of persons with disabilities in more prominent roles on television and radio, including as presenters. Steps nevertheless needed to be taken to encourage the media to increase the visibility of persons with disabilities and to portray a positive image of persons with disabilities as citizens who participated fully in society. Under the Equal Opportunities Decree, funding was provided to organizations, including those that invested in analysing the media portrayal of persons with disabilities and actively tried to influence their positive, proportional and nuanced representation.

66. **A representative of Belgium** said that, in accordance with its management plan for the period 2023–2027, the French-language public broadcasting service, Radio Télévision Belge Francophone, was required to reflect the diverse nature of the French Community, which included persons with disabilities in all their diversity. It also had an obligation to broadcast sports involving athletes with disabilities.

67. **A representative of Belgium** said that various training initiatives had been implemented by Unia, including an e-learning module on anti-discrimination law. Under a federal disability plan, Unia was developing a toolkit for public officials and decision-makers on the legal framework to address discrimination against persons with disabilities, in consultation with the National High Council for Persons with Disabilities. Unia had held a workshop for members of the strategic cells of the federal Government to enable them to take the situation of persons with disabilities into consideration in the drafting and implementation of public policy.

68. **A representative of Belgium** said that, in Flanders, there were some 68,000 children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. Around 5,000 of those children followed an individually adapted curriculum or attended special education classes in mainstream schools; the vast majority followed the mainstream curriculum without access to special education. In addition, there were almost 55,000 children in special education. In total, around 4.5 per cent of all schoolchildren in the Flemish education system were in special education.

69. **Mr. Schefer** said that he wondered whether the State party might consider establishing a national human rights institution that was fully compliant with the principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles), in accordance with article 33 (2) of the Convention. He noted that Unia had been accredited only with category B status, apparently owing to coordination issues and the lack of a broad mandate, a situation that had reportedly worsened since the establishment of the Flanders Human Rights Institute. He noted with concern fears that Unia would be dismantled and stripped of its federal powers by the incoming federal Government.

70. **A representative of Belgium** said that the evolution of the human rights landscape in Belgium was contingent upon future political negotiations, which would take into account the relevant obligations of Belgium, with a view to the eventual establishment of a national human rights institution in full compliance with the Paris Principles. Those negotiations would also address the coherence and effectiveness of the broader human rights protection architecture, including with regard to the coexistence of the Federal Institute for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights, Unia and the Flanders Human Rights Institute.

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71. **Mr. Schefer** said that he wished to know whether the State party had conducted any research to identify the extent to which persons with disabilities living in institutional settings, including residential and psychiatric institutions, had lower life expectancy than other persons with disabilities in Belgium. He wondered whether any strategies or plans had been implemented to ensure that persons with disabilities in institutions received quality health, medical and other services to address that issue and, if so, whether organizations of persons with disabilities have been involved in their design.

72. He would like the delegation to comment on reports that a number of persons with psychosocial disabilities had died as a result of police interventions, owing primarily to inappropriate use of restraints and a lack of adequate training. It would be helpful to know whether the planned action plan, or any other strategies, to address the issue had been drawn up and, if so, to what extent further deaths of persons with psychosocial disabilities had been prevented.

73. **A representative of Belgium** said that, following the case of Jonathan Jacob, who had died in police custody in 2010, the Standing Committee for Police Monitoring, Committee P, had issued a number of recommendations. As a result, the Federal Public Service for Home Affairs had issued Ministerial Circular GPI 81, by which it defined, among other things, the tasks, functions and training of local police special assistance units. In addition, an interdepartmental working group on persons in crisis had been set up, frameworks to promote communication and information-sharing between the police and the emergency services had been established, and workflows had been put in place to ensure consistent responses to emergency calls. Other measures that had been taken included the issuance of a circular by the College of Prosecutors-General on monitoring and evaluation and the provision of multidisciplinary training by the federal police.

74. Pursuant to a law on the well-being of workers, all employers were required to establish internal bodies to prevent crisis situations in the workplace. In the police, such bodies were responsible for analysing reported complaints of violence. Lessons had been learned, including the importance of initial and continuous training, conflict and stress management, particularly in the context of mental disorders, and psychological and other forms of support for victims.

75. **A representative of Belgium** said that, in Flanders, a policy to tackle sexual violence was in place and several studies had been conducted on the incidence of violence, including

sexual violence, against women and girls, including those with disabilities. Research had also been carried out, in collaboration with persons with disabilities and the Flemish Agency for Persons with Disabilities, to identify the barriers to accessing support services for victims of sexual violence who had disabilities.

76. **A representative of Belgium** said that special attention was paid to the subject of ageing and the life expectancy of persons with disabilities in the services of the Walloon Region. The issue had, for example, been taken into account in a strategy concerning the renovation of buildings and in the “Decent Treatment” plan of the Agency for Quality of Life, which provided for audits of service quality and training for professionals. In addition, the Agency’s catalogue of training included topics on ageing. With support from the Agency, a non-profit organization was providing support services, and had published a related guide, to address the needs of persons with intellectual disabilities and support their transition to living independently of their parents.

77. **Mr Schefer** said he was concerned to note the increased number of deaths of persons with disabilities during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and during the floods that had affected the country in 2021, reportedly owing to the lack of a coordinated framework for the protection and safety of persons with disabilities. He wished to know what measures the State party had taken to put in place disability-inclusive prevention and response measures, with coordination at all levels of administration, and to implement the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030.

78. **A representative of Belgium** said that the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic had hit Belgium particularly hard, affecting the country’s preparedness for subsequent waves and having an impact on the whole population, in particular persons with disabilities. Efforts to strengthen the country’s disaster preparedness were ongoing. A wide-ranging evaluation of the handling of the health crisis had been carried out, albeit not focused specifically on the disability dimension, and an evaluation of the country’s current preparedness was to be conducted by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. The use of disability criteria in pandemic triage, which had been cited as an issue globally, was to be further investigated, although he was not aware of that criteria having been used in Belgium.

79. **A representative of Belgium** said that, in the light of the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Crisis Centre had drafted a multi-year plan on accessible and inclusive crisis communications. The plan was designed to increase public awareness of the risks and appropriate behaviours during emergency situations, with a special focus on vulnerable groups, and to improve emergency preparedness and crisis communications, including by drafting simple, ready-to-use communications for certain population groups. Steps were being taken to ensure that the Centre’s websites were fully accessible.

80. Other accessibility measures had been taken, such as the audio description of a film on the “BE-Alert” system, which provided alerts during emergency situations, to assist persons with a visual impairment; the display of BE-Alert messages on municipal information screens; and the provision of sign language interpretation during press conferences. In addition, efforts had been made to raise awareness of the European Disability Card, which would enable humanitarian workers to be alert to the special needs of individual cardholders in an emergency situation. Emergency response plans took account of all population groups, while plans that had been drawn up to address specific risks and emergencies also contained measures and additional resources for the protection and evacuation of vulnerable institutions, including residential homes. Accessibility considerations had also been taken into account in respect of the emergency number 112, which hard-of-hearing persons could contact by text message or online chat.

81. **A representative of Belgium** said that, in the Brussels-Capital Region, a socio-health risk management plan had been drafted on the basis of the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. The plan contained recommendations and guidelines in case of a crisis or emergency, with a special emphasis on vulnerable groups, such as persons with disabilities.

82. **A representative of Belgium** said that, in the Walloon Region, a parliamentary committee on the COVID-19 pandemic had been established in November 2020. It had made

around 125 recommendations, which had been integrated into a crisis and pandemic-risk management plan, alongside the disability dimension.

83. **Mr. Schefer** said that he wished to know whether the State party might consider further amending its law on guardianship, last amended in 2013, to fully replace substitute decision-making with supported decision-making. Details of any additional measures that had been taken to establish supported decision-making mechanisms at the community, regional and federal levels of government would also be welcome.

84. **A representative of Belgium** said that, as a result of the 2013 law reforming legal incapacity schemes, a priority had been placed on non-judicial protective measures and on respecting as much as possible the autonomy of individuals to plan for their future with minimal judicial intervention. The current system favoured assistance over representation, involving individuals in decision-making processes and maintaining regular consultation between them and their appointed administrator. An evaluation of the implementation of the 2013 law was under way and would provide data-driven recommendations to ensure that the law met the needs of those it was designed to protect. Those recommendations, including any on supported decision-making, would be for the incoming federal Government to implement.

85. **Mr. Schefer** said that he would like to know what steps the State party had taken to provide the necessary procedural and age-appropriate accommodations and ensure the effective participation of persons with disabilities in judicial proceedings. He wondered what measures were in place to ensure that certified sign language interpreters were available in all criminal, civil and administrative matters and that the police and lawyers were trained to use gender- and age-appropriate interviewing techniques.

86. **A representative of Belgium** said that the right of persons with disabilities to have access to sign language interpretation in court proceedings was guaranteed in all jurisdictions. There was a national online register of translators and interpreters, including sign language interpreters, which the judicial authorities could consult to provide assistance, where needed.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.