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Address to be given by Mr Frans Andriessen, Member of the European Commission, at the First European Symposium on tactual town maps for the blind - Borschette Centre, 29 September 1983

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to address such a distinguished audience at the official opening of this symposium.

The approach to the care for the handicapped is changing: new ideas and new initiatives are taking shape, as our presence here today clearly shows. This trend is to some extent inevitable; there are, after all, many millions of people in the European Community who have to live with a mental or physical handicap. We no longer accept the paternalistic attitudes of the past, which produced situations where handicapped people were afraid to be seen in the street, where many wasted their talents in monotonous work, often well below their true abilities, and many others were kept hidden away in institutions.

We want to see the handicapped where they belong - with us and among us; they must be able to give and receive. They must be able to take a full part in all aspects of daily life.

To attain this ambitious goal requires a new awareness and a considerable change of mentality in all of us, including, I would add, the handicapped themselves!

The technical field also requires our attention; we shall have to mobilize all available technical know-how and manpower to solve the practical problems which we have neglected for too many years.

The approach which I have indicated here is commonly known as "integration": it aims at putting an end to the isolation of the handicapped and giving them their rightful place in society.

What is the European Community doing to help? Not enough, that much is certain. This year the European Social Fund set aside more than 140 million units of account to subsidize projects for the handicapped. That is twice as much as the year before!

Projects are funded through the joint work programme drawn up by the Bureau for Actions in favour of disabled people. We are also active in the field of medical research.

The scope of our efforts is impressive, in particular with regard to the coordination of experimental and innovative research, the promotion of exchanges of information and experience throughout Europe, and the encouragement and application of policies. Our guiding principle in all this is to improve the quality of life of handicapped people. The European Commission intends to continue and expand these activities in the future.

The Commission attaches particular importance to a programme, which is still in a preparatory stage, to give support to practical cooperation at a European level between non-governmental organizations.

This symposium is an excellent example of such cooperation. I would like to make use of this occasion to express my admiration for the excellent cooperation between Rotary, the Braille League and the European Committee of the International Federation of the Blind; we particularly welcome the fact that representatives of the blind themselves were able to indicate which project most urgently required the support of the European Community. I am glad to say that this choice has been received with enthusiasm by blind people throughout Europe.

The subject of this symposium, moreover, fits in well with the Commission's priorities. The Commission is currently engaged in preparing a joint initiative on the sort of environment needed by handicapped people.

One of the most important aspects of care for the handicapped is, after all, their personal mobility in the widest sense of the word. The choice of tactual town maps therefore fits in well with the Commission's own programme. Another positive aspect of this European project is that its objective can only be attained at a European level - an example of technical harmonization at its best!

Before I conclude I would like to briefly look at what the future is likely to bring. I believe that the recently reorganized European Social Fund has things to offer as regards vocational training and employment for the visually handicapped, particularly through projects using new technologies.

In medical research the joint Community action programme on the visually handicapped has now reached the stage where important practical work is being done.

In the field of direct cooperation between the Commission and the European Committee of the International Federation of the Blind, a new area has been selected: the Commission has committed its support to a symposium on the effects of technological developments for the employment of blind telephone exchange operators. Preparations for this meeting are already under way.

These are just a few of the future activities within the framework of the Community. I am well aware that we need to increase our efforts. In spite of all financial problems, which also affect the Community, the care of the handicapped remains a priority area.

I would furthermore like to congratulate the Braille League and the East Brussels Rotary Club on their excellent joint initiative, for which they had the support of the European Committee of the International Federation of the Blind. A final word of thanks to Mr Wehrens, who was both the initiator and organizer of this symposium. Without his commitment and his considerable organizational talents this symposium could not have been organized as well as it has been. The project is well chosen and well prepared: I am convinced that the symposium will be a success and I look forward with confidence to the results.

Thank you.