

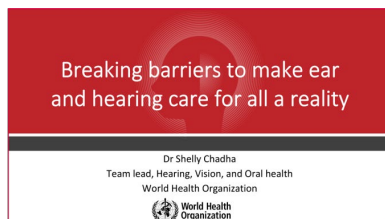
## AEA Mini Symposium “Breaking Barriers”

Sunday, 7 June 2026 – Vienna



The AEA–ECAT Mini Symposium 2026 in Vienna brought together a wide range of international stakeholders, including WHO, ITU, EFHOH, EHIMA, the Zero Project, Euro-CIU, Bluetooth SIG, and others. The central objective was to address a shared challenge: how to break barriers and ensure that ear and hearing care becomes accessible, inclusive, and effective for everyone.

The symposium offered a comprehensive and multidisciplinary perspective by combining insights from policy, science, user experience, and real-world implementation. This allowed for a rich and well-rounded discussion of both challenges and solutions.



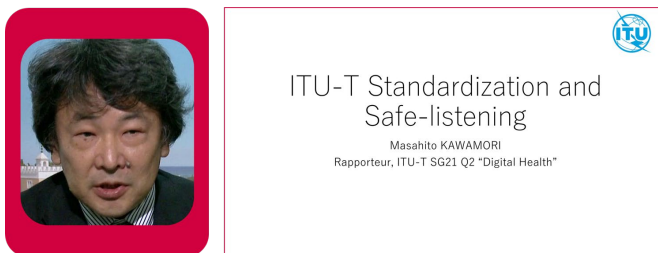
### WHO – Breaking Barriers for Ear and Hearing Care (Shelly Chadha, WHO)

Shelly Chadha, WHO Team Lead for Eye, Ear, and Oral Health, presented the global vision of integrated, accessible, and affordable ear and hearing care. Despite ongoing progress, she emphasized that a significant gap remains, as only a minority of people who require hearing care currently receive it.

Several key barriers were identified. These include limited capacity within healthcare systems, a persistent lack of awareness combined with social stigma, and insufficient

prioritisation of hearing care at the policy level. In response, WHO promotes the integration of hearing care into primary healthcare systems and encourages the training of non-specialist providers to expand service delivery. In addition, global awareness campaigns, guidelines, and advocacy initiatives such as World Hearing Day play an essential role.

The overarching message was clear: hearing care must be recognised and addressed as a major public health priority with broad societal impact.



## ITU – Standard Development & Safe Listening (Masahito Kawamori, ITU)

Masahito Kawamori highlighted the importance of standardisation and prevention, particularly through the collaboration between ITU and WHO. He explained how the development of safe listening standards contributes to reducing the risk of hearing loss, while sound exposure monitoring and regulation support safer listening environments.

He also stressed the importance of accessibility standards in digital health and telehealth services. A notable example is the ITU-T F.780.2 standard, which defines requirements for accessible telehealth services and ensures that deaf and hard-of-hearing users are fully included in digital healthcare systems.

These initiatives demonstrate how technology and regulation, when aligned, can significantly improve access to care while also reducing risks at a population level.



## EFHOH / AEA – Inclusion, Toolkit & Employment

Mark Laureyns, President of the AEA (European Association of Hearing Care Professionals), presented the impact of hearing loss in the workplace. He showed that individuals with hearing loss face an increased risk of unemployment and

underperformance, and often experience higher levels of fatigue, stress, and burnout. Communication efficiency is also frequently reduced.

At the same time, hearing interventions were shown to have a clear positive effect, improving communication, speech understanding, social participation, and emotional well-being. Survey data collected across Europe reinforced these findings. The vast majority of respondents indicated that communication is a core part of their work, yet a large proportion experiences difficulties, which in turn affect performance. Poor acoustics in the workplace and a lack of awareness about available accommodations further exacerbate these challenges.

Even with hearing devices, many individuals continue to struggle, particularly in noisy environments. These challenges are often compounded by limited employer support and ongoing issues related to discrimination.

**Andrew Sciberras, President of ECAT** (European Committee for Audiology and Technology – the technical AEA workgroup), emphasised in his presentation that technology alone is not sufficient. He argued for a broader approach in which hearing care professionals take on an expanded role that includes communication counselling, workplace assessments, fatigue management, and advocacy. He highlighted that effective accommodations—such as assistive listening technologies, captioning tools, flexible work practices, and improved acoustics—can significantly improve outcomes when systematically implemented.

**Lidia Best, President of EFHOH** (European Federation of Hard of Hearing People), presented the Hearing Loss Inclusive Employment Toolkit. She underlined that hearing loss is both widespread and often invisible, and that many challenges stem from environments that are not designed for accessible communication. The toolkit emphasises that simple measures, such as reducing background noise, providing captions, and structuring communication more clearly, can make a substantial difference.

Importantly, she highlighted that reasonable accommodation is not only a legal obligation under European and international frameworks, but also a practical way to improve productivity and employee well-being. The toolkit provides a structured framework covering awareness, accessible communication, technology, and environmental adjustments, and applies across all stages of employment. A key message is that employers should take proactive action to remove barriers rather than waiting for formal diagnoses.

Toolkit: [https://efhoh.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Hearing-Loss-Inclusive-Employment-Toolkit-final\\_compressed.pdf](https://efhoh.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Hearing-Loss-Inclusive-Employment-Toolkit-final_compressed.pdf)



 For a world with zero barriers

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Finding and sharing innovative solutions for disability inclusion

AEA Mini-Symposium "Breaking Barriers"  
Sunday, June 7, 2026

**Robin Tim Weis**  
Executive Director



### **Zero Project – Breaking Barriers for Inclusion**

Robin Tim Weis introduced the Zero Project as a leading global platform dedicated to disability inclusion. He explained that its core mission is to identify and promote innovative solutions, share best practices across countries, and support the replication of successful approaches.

The project addresses fragmentation in the innovation landscape by bringing together a global network of experts and applying rigorous selection processes to identify high-impact solutions. Each year, approximately 75 initiatives are recognised, and these are showcased through conferences held at the United Nations in Vienna, as well as through a growing digital knowledge base.

A defining principle of the Zero Project is “Nothing about us without us,” ensuring that persons with disabilities are actively involved in shaping solutions. Contributions from Lidia Best and Masahito Kawamori further illustrated how inclusion and standardisation can work together to remove barriers effectively.



**BREAKING BARRIERS ROUND TABLE**

WHO: Shelly Chadha	Bluetooth SIG: Henry Wong
ITU: Masahito Kawamori	Euro-CIU: Tobias Fischer
EFHOH Lidia Best	EHIMA: Stefan Zimmer
Zero Project: Robin Tim Weis	CIICA: Sue Archbold



**AEA MINI SYMPOSIUM ECAT**

### **Round Table – Breaking Barriers**

During the round table, multiple perspectives were shared, highlighting the importance of collaboration across sectors.

Henry Wong from Bluetooth SIG presented Auracast™, a technology that enables one-to-many audio broadcasting. He explained how users can receive audio directly through personal devices such as hearing aids, earbuds, or cochlear implant processors, without the need for pairing. This allows for high-quality, low-latency sound in a wide

range of situations, including public announcements, television streaming, and shared listening experiences.

Auracast represents a significant shift from specialised assistive technologies to mainstream accessibility solutions, helping to reduce stigma while increasing adoption. Given the large global population affected by hearing loss, this technology has considerable potential as a scalable solution.

Tobias Fischer from EURO-CIU focused on the user journey, pointing out that barriers often begin long before treatment and continue afterward. He described the complexity of early decision-making, fragmented care pathways, financial burdens, and emotional stress. Importantly, he stressed that hearing solutions should not be seen as a cure, but rather as part of a broader process aimed at enabling full participation in society.

Stefan Zimmer from EHIMA provided the industry perspective, identifying inaccessible communication in everyday life as the primary barrier. He outlined a vision in which accessibility becomes a standard feature, with hearing technologies seamlessly integrated into public infrastructure. He also emphasised the importance of early intervention and awareness, noting that progress depends on cross-sector collaboration, education, and system-level integration.



## Organisation of Hearing Care in AEA Member Countries

Presentations from AEA board members representing Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Switzerland, highlighted significant variation in how hearing care is organised. Differences were observed in access, reimbursement systems, workforce availability, and overall system efficiency.

Some countries have implemented successful reforms. For example, France’s “100% Santé” programme has significantly improved access to hearing care, while Belgium has made progress by removing age-based reimbursement barriers. However, other countries continue to face challenges such as long waiting times and limited funding.

Workforce shortages, particularly of audiologists, remain a concern in several regions, and the profession often lacks visibility. In addition, fragmented care pathways and administrative complexity contribute to inequalities in access.

Across countries, there is a clear need to strengthen integration into primary care, improve patient pathways, increase funding and early screening efforts, and enhance recognition of audiologists as key healthcare professionals.



## Conclusion

The AEA–ECAT Mini Symposium 2026 clearly demonstrated that breaking barriers in hearing care requires coordinated action across multiple domains. Global frameworks provided by organisations such as WHO and ITU offer essential direction, while innovation platforms like the Zero Project help scale effective solutions. At the same time, new technologies such as Auracast are transforming accessibility, and user-centred approaches ensure that solutions address real needs.

However, meaningful progress will also require systemic reforms to ensure equitable access to care.

Ultimately, achieving “ear and hearing care for all” means moving beyond treatment alone and focusing on full participation, inclusion, and accessibility by design. This goal can only be achieved through continuous collaboration between healthcare providers, policymakers, industry, technology developers, and users themselves.