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THE G7 ‘SOLFAGNANO CHARTER’: WHAT IS IT TELLING US ABOUT THE GLOBAL TRAJECTORY OF DISABILITY RIGHTS?

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In October this year, the [Group of Seven \(G7\)](#) countries – i.e. Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, United Kingdom and United States (US), with the European Union (EU) as additional member – convened in Assisi under the lead of the [Italian Presidency](#) in the ‘G7 Inclusion and Disability’ meeting. Originating from an *ad hoc* meeting of finance ministers in 1973, the G7 – [a key international forum of the world’s leading advanced economies](#) which is not based on an international treaty – is primarily geared to discuss economic issues and address financial contingencies. While macroeconomic issues remain at the core of the G7, since the 1980s, issues related to social rights, climate change, culture or human rights broadly conceived of have fallen within the scope of the discussions held. However, it is [the first time](#) that the G7 dedicates a meeting entirely and specifically to disability rights.

At the end of the meeting, Italian Minister for Disability, Alessandra Locatelli, and the Ministers dealing with disability from all the participating countries adopted the ‘[Solfagnano Charter](#)’ (hereafter ‘the Charter’), a programmatic document that reaffirms the rights of persons with disabilities to full and effective participation in civil, social, economic,

cultural and political life. Albeit arguably devoid of legal effects, the Charter highlights political commitments undertaken by the G7 States to foster inclusion of persons with disabilities in all ambits of life. As emphatically noted by [Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights Nada Al-Nashif](#), when participating in the meeting in Solfagnano, 'nclusion is the right thing to do, because together with diversity and respect for the other, these are a strength for any society'.

While the Charter has not attracted much interest in legal scholarship, it arguably presents noteworthy facets and exhibits a significant symbolic value. This short blog post outlines the core tenets of the Charter and reflects on its programmatic nature as well as on its role in the global trajectory of emergence of disability rights.

The Charter was drafted by the G7 following a relatively participatory process that included not only ministries of the G7, but also ministers from some 'Global South' countries (particularly the relevant Ministers of Kenya, South Africa, Tunisia, and Vietnam) as well as representatives of organization of persons with disabilities (OPDs) such as the [International Disability Alliance](#) (IDA) and the [European Disability Forum](#) (EDF). Such participatory approach is deemed to be in line with the motto of the disability movement 'Nothing About Us, Without Us', cited at the outset of the Charter. Further, the participatory approach that characterized the elaboration of the Charter is reflected in the commitment to engage in 'a cultural shift in policy-making to ensure the disability community is actively and meaningfully engaged in decision-making processes' – a commitment that traverses the full text.

Notably, the Charter recognizes that the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (CRPD or the 'Convention') – ratified by all G7 countries bar the US – represents the global standard on disability rights. By referring at various junctures to its key tenets and principles (dignity, equality, accessibility and participation), the Charter 'requires that individuals be placed at the centre of policies and interventions with a view to develop the autonomy, independence, talents, skills and empowerment of each person in the entire community, taking into account the many different types and degrees of disability'. It identifies

eight priority areas: 1. Inclusion as a priority issue in the political agenda of all countries; 2. Access and accessibility; 3. Autonomous and independent life; 4. Enhancement of talents and work inclusion; 5. Promotion of new technologies; 6. Sports, recreational and cultural dimensions of life; 7. Dignity of life and appropriate community-based services; 8. Prevention and management of emergency preparedness and post-emergency management situations, including climate crises, armed conflicts and humanitarian crises. Those areas broadly overlap with CRPD provisions, confirming that the Convention is a norm-setting instrument. Within the first priority area, the G7 countries commit to promote discussion and prioritization of disability issues in other international fora, for example the [G20](#), and to involve OPDs in policy-making in compliance with the CRPD obligation of participatory policy-making laid out in Article 4(3). Notably, the Charter highlights collaboration between G7 countries and the EU, in that way signaling the current role of the Union as global leader when it comes to disability. Notably, the US, with the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) (ADA), have for long been considered the spearhead in the field of disability, with the EU, as [Flynn and Quinn](#) contended, ‘borrowing’ from the ADA to build European disability anti-discrimination law. However, the EU now seems to be a step ahead. It has not only [ratified the CRPD](#), alongside its Member States, while the [US still have not](#), but also adopted a multifaceted and [comprehensive disability legislation and policy](#), which mainstream disability rights across all its ambits of action.

In its second priority area, the Charter further makes a strong pivot on accessibility, which, as the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD Committee) in its [General Comment No. 2](#) put it, is a ‘precondition’ for the enjoyment of all human rights. In doing so, the Charter aligns with Article 19 CRPD and recognizes the right of people with disabilities to live independently and being included in the community. To that end it acknowledges that social protection and support services need to adopt a person-centered approach. Such point is further developed under the eighth priority area, which emphasizes a commitment ‘to making community-based services – starting with health, social, and

support services, but not only limited to – accessible through a universal design approach, the removal of barriers and the provision of reasonable accommodations’. The Charter also recognizes that ‘wills and preferences’ of people with disabilities should be at the center of any support tool.

By virtue of the fifth priority area, the Charter recognizes the importance of technology and Artificial Intelligence and their emancipatory value. In this respect, G7 States commit ‘to fostering dialogue with business, representative, civil society and academic stakeholders in the world of technology and innovation, as well as with those concerned with ethical issues to ensure that safe, secure, and trustworthy systems are developed, deployed and used in an ethical, responsible and non-discriminatory manner and requiring that digital professionals are aware and trained on accessibility’. Somewhat echoing Article 32(1)(d) CRPD, which obliges States Parties to provide ‘technical and economic assistance, including by facilitating access to and sharing of accessible and assistive technologies, and through the transfer of technologies’, the Charter envisages a pledge to ‘foster the widest possible dissemination of technologies domestically and internationally’.

Of note is the emphasis of the Charter on ‘sports, recreational and cultural dimensions of life’ which are included as the sixth priority area. In that the Charter seems to acknowledge that cultural participation is an essential element of social life, and, as noted by the [former UN Special Rapporteur on cultural rights](#), is intrinsic to being human. The Charter recalls the importance of culture for wellbeing, which has also become a core [area of attention](#) for the EU. It further refers to the need to ensure that people with disabilities have access to ‘cultural and creative professions on an equal basis with others’. However, compared to Article 30 CRPD, which requires States Parties *inter alia* to guarantee that people with disabilities can professionally engage as artists and cultural workers, the Charter seems to lean towards viewing cultural participation of people with disabilities as a social or therapeutic issue. This approach confirms findings of previous [research](#) showing how, often, due to attitudinal barriers and discriminatory assumptions, art created by people with disabilities is considered as having merely health, leisure or inclusion

aims.

Finally, it is not surprising that the Charter includes a dedicated part on prevention and management of emergency preparedness and post-emergency management situations, including climate crises, armed conflicts and humanitarian crises. The ongoing conflicts in [Ukraine](#) and in the [Gaza strip](#), as well as the recent extreme weather events show how people with disabilities are constantly left behind and are those who suffer the most. The commitments expounded in the Charter echo the obligations laid out in Article 11 CRPD to take all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk.

On the whole, the G7 countries reaffirmed their 'commitment to show leadership and ambition, in line with the ', and translate the priorities of the Charter into concrete actions. Nonetheless, the Charter is rather programmatic, and general in its approach. Its pledges (and the overall priority areas) are set out in a declaratory rather than prescriptive form, confirming the Charter's inherent nature of political statement. In fact, [EDF](#), while welcoming the Charter, highlighted that it 'should have presented more concrete actions'. Yet, the Charter identifies and singles out specific issues on which there is agreement, identifying common objectives. Further, while its effects are dependent on follow-through by G7 and other endorsing countries, in conjunction with OPDs, the Charter is significant in three main respects.

First, the Charter fully embraces the [social-contextual](#) view of disability which permeates the CRPD, i.e. the view that disability stems from the interaction between the individual's impairment and external barriers. Such view is crucial to making strides towards redressing the historical marginalization experienced by persons with disabilities. Back in 2009, [Hill and Blanck](#) noted that the importance of the CRPD was not merely linked to 'the technical legal changes it requires' in domestic law, but rather lied in its 'ability to create a new type of disability politics worldwide'. The Charter does confirm the long-lasting impact of the CRPD and its 'Copernican revolution' towards viewing disability as a social construct and shifting the focus on barriers. Notably, consistent with this approach, the

Charter adopts the semantic of the CRPD itself. While the debate on the language of disability is so lively in Anglo-Saxon disability studies and advocacy, global disability law and policy have gone further ahead consistently adopting '[person first language](#)'. As recently noted by [Blanck](#), person-first language best emphasises the importance of the individual as a person 'who has accompanying rights and responsibilities in law'.

Secondly, and linked to this, the Charter is the latest (but evidently not the last) evidence of the consolidation of 'disability rights' as autonomous category of human rights on foot of the CRPD. In that regard, it confirms that, as [Harpur](#) suggests, the CRPD has in fact created 'a new disability rights paradigm' on which there is an undisputed consensus.

Thirdly, the lack of intersectional approach that the Charter exhibits is a worrying signal that, in a time of [populism](#) and with the surge of far-right governments, there is a consensus on disability rights, but LGBTIQ+, women or ethnic groups' rights remain somewhat uneasy and contested. While the renewed attention to disability rights is to be welcomed and cherished, it cannot become a smokescreen to neglect and undermine other rights. In fact, as the [CRPD Committee](#) highlighted, disability is only one facet of our multilayered identity.

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