

## International cooperation and the inclusion of persons with disabilities: the Italian system

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Two key themes emerging from recent studies on disability are the shift in the conception of persons with disabilities, expressed in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), from objects to subjects of policies concerning them and the recognition of the close interconnections between disability and poverty. Both themes have clear implications for international development cooperation. It is essential that the high number of persons with disabilities in developing countries is recognised and that the programmes implemented by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including those in emergencies and disasters, are made fully inclusive of them. Community-based rehabilitation (CBR) programmes are important in achieving inclusiveness and fulfilling the rights of persons with disabilities. Italian NGOs such as AIFO (Associazione Italiana Amici di Raoul Follereau) have played an important role in helping launch CBR, most notably in Mongolia. Two sets of research data published in 2008 have measured the impact of Italian action on disability in international development cooperation. The reports on the one hand reveal inadequate levels of funding in general, and funding by banks and private companies in particular, and insufficient involvement of disabled persons' organisations, but on the other suggest that Italy's domestic experience of advanced disability legislation can be productively applied in international contexts to include and empower persons with disabilities.

**Keywords:** development cooperation; CRPD; community-based rehabilitation (CBR); Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); Capability

### Introduction

Two key themes have recently emerged from various studies on disability. The first is the shift in the way people with disabilities are seen: from being the objects of policies, strategies and action they are now conceived of as subjects entirely able to take responsibility for their own development. They can therefore be involved in the development of policies and strategies and in the implementation of action that affects them, and can become a resource (Coleridge, Simonnot, and Steverlyncck 2010). This shift can best be seen within the new model of disability based on respect for human rights that is most fully articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The main aim of this model is the inclusion of people with disabilities in all spheres of society, and it expects states to promote, protect and monitor the human rights that have already been recognised for all other people. The second

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theme is the recognition of the strong link between disability and poverty. Persons with disabilities do not have equal access to the education system, work or health services, and as a result they have limited opportunities to escape from being poor, in cultural as well as financial terms; they also have limited means with which to counter the financial, social and cultural impoverishment that society causes by creating barriers, obstacles and discrimination, which greatly limit their participation in society (Griffo and Ortali 2008; Griffo 2011, 2013; Lafratta, Marano and Saquella 2012; Lord et al. 2010).<sup>1</sup>

### **The international frame of reference**

The CRPD and its Optional Protocol, approved by the UN General Assembly in December 2006 and ratified by 138 countries, constitute a complete frame of reference that grounds its various spheres of action on a definition of disability based on the human rights model: 'Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others' (Article 1). Article 32, in particular, emphasises how important it is that 'international cooperation, including international development programmes, is inclusive of and accessible to persons with disabilities'. Moreover, it recognises the role that can be taken by disabled people's organisations in partnership with states and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It also points out the need to pay due attention to persons with disabilities in the field of emergency humanitarian aid.

Despite this, there remains a worrying lack of interest, on the part of NGOs working in international cooperation, in the inclusion and full participation of people with disabilities. This is revealed in an important report that captures the current position of the implementation of Article 32 across the world: the *Thematic Study by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Role of International Cooperation in Support of National Efforts for the Realization of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNHCHR 2010; for the Italian submission to the study see AIFO–DPI 2010). This report highlights many examples, around the world, of good practice on the inclusion of disability in international development cooperation, but the conclusion also sets out some challenges yet to be faced. In particular, it can be seen that the vast majority of actions taken to date have been projects directed exclusively at people with disabilities. Only rarely have cooperation projects that are not aimed specifically at people with disabilities actually addressed inclusivity as regards disability. In short, this study illustrates how many cooperation projects aimed at people with disabilities are still characterised by a 'charity' approach rather than a rights-based one, and there is still a general tendency to regard people with disabilities as a homogeneous group, ignoring their diversity in terms of gender, socio-economic status and types of disability. It also highlights how projects that specifically address intellectual and psycho-social disabilities are still peripheral.

### **New guidelines on community-based rehabilitation**

Community-based rehabilitation (CBR) is now recognised as one of the most effective strategies for implementing the CRPD in remote rural areas, and for supporting development in the community. In 2004 the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) published a joint position paper on CBR, which describes it as:

a strategy within general community development for the rehabilitation, equalization of opportunities and social inclusion of all people with disabilities. CBR is implemented through the combined efforts of people with disabilities themselves, their families, organizations and communities, and the relevant governmental and non-governmental health, education, vocational, social and other services (ILO–UNESCO–WHO 2004, 2).

There are two main objectives of CBR. The first is to ensure that people with disabilities are able to maximise their physical and mental abilities, so that they can gain routine access to services and opportunities and become active contributors to their communities and society. The second is to galvanise communities into promoting and protecting the human rights of people with disabilities by significant internal change, for example by removing barriers to participation. In 2005 the WHO initiated a process to develop new guidelines on CBR, taking account of the recommendations arising from an international consultation event in Helsinki the previous year. These had included the need for CBR programmes to focus on reducing poverty, developing multi-sector collaboration, and promoting evidence-based practice. After a five-year process involving various UN agencies, a range of bodies belonging to the International Disability and Development Consortium (IDDC), which brings together the main organisations of people with disabilities, and many CBR projects based in developing countries, the new *Community-Based Rehabilitation Guidelines* were launched in October 2010 (WHO 2010).<sup>2</sup>

In order to restore consistency to CBR programmes that have been developed across the world, a framework is established that identifies five interconnected spheres: health, education, livelihood, social, and empowerment. Each of these key areas of life is in turn divided into five key elements relating to its specific nature. The guidelines are set out in seven separate booklets:

1. Introduction: analysis of the position; planning and design; implementation and monitoring; assessment.
2. Health: promotion; prevention; medical care; rehabilitation; and assistive devices.
3. Education: early childhood; primary; secondary and higher; non-formal; and lifelong learning.
4. Livelihood: skills development; self-employment; wage employment; financial services; and social protection.
5. Social: personal assistance; relationships, marriage and family; culture and arts; recreation, leisure and sports; and justice.
6. Empowerment: advocacy and communication; community mobilisation; political participation; self-help groups; and disabled people's organisations.
7. Supplementary booklet: CBR and mental health; CBR and HIV/AIDS; CBR and leprosy; CBR and humanitarian crises.

At the time of writing, the WHO is developing training units on each section of these guidelines.

Italy, and the Associazione Italiana Amici di Raoul Follereau (AIFO) in particular, has played an important part in promoting CBR projects; its best results have been achieved in Mongolia, where CBR became a national policy in 2011. Starting in 1992, training initiatives have been supported that match the five key components of the CBR matrix: with general medical practitioners, specialists and paramedics, leading to the development of training units for university medical and nursing programmes; with teachers and heads of primary and secondary schools, on inclusive education; with disabled people's organisations and associations (DPOs) on income-generating activity and good management of various types of microfinance; with DPOs, from those in rural areas right up to the national federation, on setting up self-help groups and on the role, and rights and responsibilities, of people with disabilities and the

organisations that represent them; and with legislators on the drafting of amendments to current laws and the development of new legislation on disability, still under discussion. In the CBR approach, which is in operation across all the country's regions, there has been a strategic redevelopment of initiatives aimed at people with disabilities. A further contribution by AIFO has been its work on linking CBR to the CRPD, developing innovative tools such as emancipatory research: this directly involves people with disabilities and their associations in the research into their living situations, thus increasing their awareness of these (Deepak 2012; Deepak et al. 2013).<sup>3</sup>

### **The European situation and Italian structures for disability**

Within the European Union (EU), the European Disability Strategy (2010–2020) was presented to the European Parliament in November 2010. At the same time, the European Commission published a study on disability within international cooperation initiatives; its recommendations included both the participation of DPOs, not just consultation with them, in the processes of developing policies and strategies, and the development of a European strategy on persons with disabilities, with their involvement. Responsibility for international cooperation, such as emergency humanitarian aid, has been delegated to the EU by its member states, and as the EU has also ratified the CRPD (23 December 2010) it should be working on appropriate policies and monitoring systems in this area. Lobbying activity on this theme is already under way by both the European Disability Forum and the IDDC. In the arena of emergency aid, attention has been given to people with disabilities within various European Parliament documents.<sup>4</sup>

The Italian government ratified both the CRPD and its Optional Protocol with Law 18 of 2009, thus acknowledging these new international standards of protection and promotion of human rights, and it established the Osservatorio Nazionale sulla Condizione delle Persone con Disabilità in order to monitor their implementation within the Italian system. The Osservatorio, which is located in the Ministry for Employment and Social Policy and supported by its own specialist unit within the Inclusion and Social Policy section, has consultative functions and provides expert support for the development of national policies on disability. It has particular responsibilities for: promoting implementation of the CRPD; preparing a two-year action plan for the promotion of disabled people's rights and their integration, to implement national and international legislation; encouraging the collection of relevant statistical data and the carrying out of research in this area; and preparing reports on the implementation of disability policies.<sup>5</sup> Regular reports are to be prepared on policy implementation in the fields of employment and education.

### **The Italian system and international development cooperation**

An interesting and detailed examination of the way the Italian system works in the area of international development cooperation, and of the degree to which the disability theme has been incorporated, can be made by looking at the findings of two research projects, both published in 2008. By 'Italian system' we mean the system in its entirety, with its component elements including NGOs, universities, public bodies at both national and local level, and private businesses. The first project is 'Disabilità, cooperazione internazionale e sviluppo – l'esperienza della Cooperazione Italiana 2000–2008' (Disability, International Cooperation and Development – The Experience of Cooperazione Italiana 2000–2008), carried out by the Italian

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAE) in collaboration with the World Bank (MAE–World Bank 2010), and the second is ‘Breaking the Cycle of Poverty and Disability’ by the International Disability and Development Consortium (IDDC 2008). The Italian part of the latter research was conducted by AIFO and Disabled People’s International (DPI) Italia, in collaboration with the Centro Interuniversitario di Ricerca per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile (Inter-university Research Centre for Sustainable Development).

Both pieces of research operated with ‘mainstreaming’ as an overarching principle and were aiming to identify the number of initiatives expressly dedicated to disability or inclusive of it, the areas of involvement, and the bodies engaged. Among the areas that the first project investigated were funding sources, financial commitments, and the response to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The second project, by contrast, worked on an experimental analytical model for collecting significant data on the degree of inclusion of disability within cross-cutting themes, and in particular within the theme of gender, where their interests were the recognition of the importance of including disability, perceptions of this, and situations where people experienced double or triple discrimination. While it is not possible to make a direct comparison of the results from the two projects, cross-referencing their data helps us to identify some issues that allow legitimate observations on how well the Italian system works, and identification of its strengths and weaknesses.

In view of Italy’s ratification of the CRPD, the first fact to emerge is the inadequate financial commitment to projects explicitly dedicated to disability or including this theme: the 51 projects examined, which were operational between 2000 and 2008, were in receipt of 37.9 million euros, which represents 0.6% of the total of just over 6 billion euros spent on cooperation activity during this period.

Despite the fact that NGOs remain the main agencies carrying out projects, the involvement of public bodies, both national and local, has been increasingly important. According to the MAE and World Bank study, local partners have in fact contributed 17% of the total joint finance for projects, while 2% has come from decentralised cooperation (projects led by Italian authorities at the local and regional level). In this context, both studies confirm the meagre number of DPOs active in the cooperation field, although it should be added that this number has been rising, especially of those performing a consultative role in the determination of policies and strategies. The same is true for universities and research centres: their involvement is considered important for the development of projects that include data collection and analysis, an essential element that has been noted as missing or insufficient, and yet the number of these bodies involved in projects already under way remains very small, even if reasonably stable over time. Businesses were involved in only two of the 51 projects mapped by the MAE and World Bank, and in only one, which had a bank involved, of the 36 examined by the IDDC.

Looking at the typology of projects, the majority related to the fields of health and education, although there was an upward trend regarding projects whose impact is harder to assess in the short term: those directed at awareness raising and training on disability-related themes.

With regard to the ‘mainstreaming’ of disability, as an element cutting across other themes including the MDGs, here too there has been positive movement that is starting to bear fruit; when the MDGs were launched it was thought necessary to initiate a big global campaign, known as ‘Include Everybody’, to raise awareness of the inclusion of disability in the eight goals. On the other hand, disability has a minimal presence in the areas and themes overseen by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and

Development (OECD). In the other areas where there are international conventions – human rights, the rights of the child, women’s rights, migrant workers, torture, economic, social and cultural rights – mainstreaming of disability has proved especially important in that of children’s rights, to the extent that DPOs have a presence within the networks of NGOs that have been established to monitor the implementation of international treaties and to develop non-governmental reports to be sent to the relevant commissions. One notable example of good practice is the supplementary report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, put together by Italian NGOs and DPOs, in which a whole chapter is dedicated to children with disabilities. This theme also runs through the rest of the document (Gruppo CRC 2012).

In the awareness that international debate is developing strategies to bring into operation the model of disability based on respect for human rights, and using among other things the methods and tools of ‘capability’ (Biggeri and Bellanca 2011; Barbuto, Biggeri and Griffo 2011), the discussion on cooperation and its related initiatives have slowly been coming into line with the Convention’s principles. One concrete example of this can be found in the establishment of the Rete Italiana Disabilità e Sviluppo (RIDS) (Italian Disability and Development Network), which consists of two NGOs – AIFO, concerned with health cooperation, and Educaid, concerned mainly with education and training – and two organisations for people with disabilities – the Federazione Italiana per il Superamento dell’Handicap (FISH) and DPI Italia.<sup>6</sup> RIDS was set up in 2010 in order to promote and share the wealth of experience gained from projects that prioritise respect for the human rights of people with disabilities: an international standard for all programmes aimed at developing countries, based on observance of the UN Convention.

RIDS bases its activities on the following nine principles:

1. strategic alliance between organisations involved in development cooperation and disabled people’s organisations, recognising their respective knowledge and skills;
2. inclusion of persons with disabilities in projects, including international development programmes, guaranteeing the accessibility of initiatives to them;
3. respect for the rights of persons with disabilities in national and international projects combating poverty (a UN Millennium Development Goal);
4. empowerment, strengthening the competences and role of persons with disabilities and the organisations that represent them in developing countries, an essential factor in the sustainability of the CRPD, using the slogan ‘Nothing about us without us’;
5. support for inclusive development policies in all areas (health, education, livelihood);
6. improvement of local and national development strategies (such as CBR and action plans on disability) based on the CRPD and suitable monitoring systems;
7. promotion of the recruitment of cooperators with disabilities, who would become experts within activities of cooperation for development;
8. promotion of appropriate practice and policy innovations that are inclusive of persons with disabilities;
9. raising awareness of institutions and agencies, whether public, private, local, national or international, to promote the rights of persons with disabilities on the basis of the CRPD.

Aiming to support the inclusion of persons with disabilities, the objective of RIDS is to promote collaboration in the field of development cooperation, on the basis of respect for human rights as envisaged by the CRPD.

### **The theme of disability within Italian development cooperation: guidelines and plan of action**

A range of recommendations emerged from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and World Bank study discussed above (MAE–World Bank 2010), which found their way into the *Linee guida per l'introduzione della tematica della disabilità nell'ambito delle politiche e delle attività della cooperazione italiana* (Guidelines for introducing the theme of disability into the policies and activity of Italian cooperation) (MAE–DGCS 2010). These were formally approved by the Direzione Generale per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo (DGCS – Directorate for Development Cooperation) in November 2010, replacing the previous guidelines approved in 2003 and therefore prior to the government's ratification of the CRPD. The production and approval of these guidelines confirms the commitment of the DGCS to enforcing the rights of people with disabilities, and awareness of the importance of having robust legislative tools and the means for their implementation in order to ensure social inclusion. In terms of legislation, Italy is in fact seen as one of the more advanced countries in asserting and protecting the rights of people with disabilities; the DGCS has always taken its lead from the national legislation in employing an inclusive approach, aimed at moving away from special services for disabled people.

These guidelines had been required to indicate how they might in practice be implemented, and they therefore provided for the formulation of a DGCS action plan. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs set up a working party aimed at producing this, open to all the public and private stakeholders, but in particular with the ongoing involvement of RIDS; this was established following a RIDS awareness-raising initiative in September 2011 with the Minister at that time, and then it met regularly until the publication of the *Piano di Azione sulla disabilità della Cooperazione Italiana* (Italian Development Cooperation Disability Action Plan), which was finalised in July 2013 and presented at a press conference on 30 October 2013 (MAE–DGCS 2013). The added value of this document lies in the detailed and concrete nature of the action proposed, which is due to the adoption of a methodology that sought wide participation: 50 institutions, associations, local authorities, universities, research centres and businesses, in four working groups, took part in the presentation meetings and submitted their contributions to the text. This is divided into five chapters, each addressing an area for action: policies and strategies; inclusive planning; accessibility and availability of locations, goods and services; humanitarian aid and emergency situations; acknowledgement and promotion of the experience and skills of civil society and businesses.

As anticipated, the go-ahead has now been given to the process within Italian bodies for the adoption and official dissemination of the Action Plan. The five essential principles for drafting the plan were:

1. a *twin-track approach*, relating both to inclusive planning and to action directed specifically towards persons with disabilities;
2. the need to develop a *directive on accessibility*, which would regulate all construction and reconstruction initiatives;
3. the *mainstreaming of disability* within all the guidelines produced by the Ministry;
4. a *monitoring system* to enable assessment of progress in implementation of the Action Plan and the CRPD;
5. the issue of *awareness-raising in relation to donors*, especially the European Union, the largest donor in the world, which in its *European Disability Strategy* includes a specific point relating to policies on external action.

Furthermore, three priorities within the general programme of the MAE for 2011–2013 are particularly relevant for action on inclusion: human development, with particular reference to health and education and training; governance and civil society, as a tool for fighting poverty, including assistance for trade, e-government and information and communications technology (ICT); and support for inclusive and sustainable endogenous development of the private sector.

Among the cross-cutting issues identified in the general programme are gender equality and the empowerment of women (in relation to the capacity building of national institutions, mainstreaming in food security and the environment, work and business skills, including microcredit and skills training programmes), young people (promotion of the basic rights of children, adolescents and young people, reduction of the exploitation of child labour, combating sexual exploitation including for commercial gain, action against the genital mutilation of young girls and adolescents, support for youth justice systems, protection of child and adolescent soldiers and victims of armed conflict), and people with disabilities (social inclusion, community-based rehabilitation approaches, programmes relating to legislation on disability).

The hoped-for result is to re-launch Italy's role in the field of disability, both by promoting the good practice of the DGCS and Italy in general by greater visibility on both the national and international stage, and by putting forward pilot projects in a sector where Italy is at the cutting edge. Within this approach, it is essential to have effective communication at the official level to ensure that targeted social policies are implemented. Moreover, we believe it is important to reflect and promote a new model of cooperation, especially in relation to emerging economies, including the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), which can lift Italy above its traditional role as a mere donor and give it enhanced importance as a provider of expertise, often to standards of excellence.

The most interesting innovation of the process remains the shared desire to include persons with disabilities and the organisations that represent them in decision making, and thus for them to take an active part in determining the Action Plan. The DGCS Disability Action Plan is not only one of the most advanced examples of implementation of the CRPD in Italy. It is also making an important contribution to defining a way of engaging the Italian government on concrete and detailed points, while simultaneously putting forward an innovative monitoring tool, and a possible model of intervention for governments and for the European Union as a whole.

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## Notes

1. An extensive bibliography on this topic can be consulted on the website of Source (International Online Resource Centre on Disability and Inclusion) at [http://www.asksource.info/res\\_library/a\\_z.htm](http://www.asksource.info/res_library/a_z.htm)
2. Information on the Italian experience of CBR can be found on the website of the Associazione Italiana Amici di Raoul Follereau (AIFO), at <http://www.aifo.it/contents/la-riabilitazione-su-base-comunitaria-1>
3. The guide *Promoting Empowerment* (Deepak 2012) is based on an emancipatory research programme in India within the 'Samagama – Participatory Action Research and Knowledge in Community-based Rehabilitation' initiative (S-PARK/CBR) (2009-2012), part of a joint plan of action between the WHO's Disability and Rehabilitation team and AIFO. This initiative was jointly funded by AIFO (Italy), Deutsche Lepra- und Tuberkulosehilfe e. V. (Germany), Fondation internationale de la recherche appliquée sur le handicap (France) and Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation (Japan).
4. The European Parliament resolution of 4 September 2007 is known as the 'European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid'. Article 19 emphasises the importance of giving specific consideration, when responding to humanitarian needs in emergencies, to people with disabilities and their particular needs. Available online at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&langu>



age = EN&reference = P6-TA-2007-0362. See also the European Parliament resolution of 18 January 2011, 'Implementation of the European Consensus on humanitarian aid: the mid-term review of its Action Plan and the way forward', available online at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+TA+P7-TA-2011-0005+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN>. In 2007, in the course of the European project 'Rescuing Injured Disabled Persons in case of Disasters – Civil Protection's Challenge in the Challenge', managed by the organisation ASL 20 of Verona, the *Verona Charter on safeguarding people with disabilities in the case of disasters* was drawn up. For the first time in an international document, this identified the essential issues that should inform emergency initiatives where people with disabilities are involved. Available online at: <http://internazionali.ulss20.verona.it/docs/projects/rdd/cartadiverona.pdf>. See also the material on international cooperation on the website of the European Disability Forum: [http://www.edf-feph.org/Page\\_Generale.asp?DocID=13372](http://www.edf-feph.org/Page_Generale.asp?DocID=13372)

5. The Osservatorio approved its report on the application of the CRPD in Italy in November 2012, and its two-year disability plan, which became the government's national action programme on disability in October 2013. Both documents are available online at respectively: [http://www.lavoro.gov.it/Notizie/Documents/Notizie/RapportoOnudisabilita\\_2013.pdf](http://www.lavoro.gov.it/Notizie/Documents/Notizie/RapportoOnudisabilita_2013.pdf) and [http://www.lavoro.gov.it/AreaSociale/Disabilita/Documents/Programma\\_azione\\_disabilita.pdf](http://www.lavoro.gov.it/AreaSociale/Disabilita/Documents/Programma_azione_disabilita.pdf)
6. Further information on these organisations can be found on their websites: <http://www.aifo.it>; <http://www.dpitalia.org>; <http://www.educaid.it>; and <http://www.fishonlus.it>. Further information on RIDS can be found at: <http://www.ridsnetwork.org/>

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