'Nothing about us without us': organizing disabled people's solidarity within and beyond borders in a polarized age

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Social Movement Studies

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Abstract
This article examines collective action and the alliances between social movement organizations engaged in the work of solidarity with disabled people within and across borders during austerity. Building upon social movement theory, specifically political opportunities (Eisinger, 1973; McAdam, 1996) and resource mobilisation (McCarthy and Zald, 1977), we focus our analysis on data from in-depth interviews with thirty-five organizations at the UK and European levels, where we examine both how solidarity is operationalized by such organizations and the everyday cooperation and alliances they build with others in a UK policy context that has been hostile to disabled people (Bambra and Smith, 2010; Garthwaite, 2014) and a European context which disabled people's solidarity organizations have sought to seize as political opportunities. Our study therefore adopts a multi-level approach by analysing the building of alliances between organizations at the local, national and transnational levels and it reveals the impact of the political context and organisational pressures which can diminish resources and generate competition, thus placing strains on solidarity between disabled people.

1. Introduction

Collective action at the transnational level has played a pivotal role in the journey towards the recognition and enforcement of disabled peoples' rights, a process that was crystallized in 2006 with the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People (CRPD). This was a milestone for disabled peoples' rights; one which replaces a medical understanding of disability with a social model that recognizes that impairments only become a disability when they meet with an obstructionist human and physical environment. More broadly, CRPD is a cornerstone of human rights law. In Europe, the CRPD principles have become part of the 'acquis communautaire' and as such are embedded in EU member states legal systems. This achievement has been realized primarily due to the mobilization of social movements advocating a different understanding of disability, and having campaigned and lobbied in their countries as well as at the transnational level (Soldatic, 2013).

In fact, activism at the national and transnational levels has been a constant in the history of social movements advocating for the recognition of the rights of different groups: from indigenous people to children, from ethnic minorities to LGBT+ people (Smith 1995, Smith et al, 1997, Baglioni, 2001, Giugni and Passy 2001, Passy 2001). Collective action at the transnational level is justified for two main reasons: firstly, because the struggle for the recognition of rights has become integrated at the international level due to the processes of globalization (Eterovic and Smith 2001); and, secondly, because the integration of social, economic and political processes at the international level have led to the creation of supranational or transnational political opportunity structures available to social movements (Della Porta, Kriesi and Rucht 1999, Imig and Tarrow 1999, Giugni and Passy 2001). Traditionally such opportunities are generated by contextual factors at the national or sub-national institutional level (e.g. political actors and political institutions) (Kriesi et al. 1995, Tarrow 1998) but in some cases, transnational opportunities can be seized more easily or effectively than national opportunities. Social movement actors of course seek authorities or institutional arenas that are open or permeable. As movements meet obstructive arenas at home they seek support from transnational authorities and/or allies in other countries, which can exert pressure on reluctant governments to change their policies; a policy change process defined as the 'boomerang effect' (Keck and Sikkink 1998). In devolved authorities, support for social movements can also come 'from below', that is via sub-national political-institutional settings. Hence, to be successful, social movements have learned to execute strategies across spatial levels, adopting the rationale that policy change is a 'multi-level game' (Marks and McAdam 1996).

Furthermore, social movements scholars have argued that for outcomes to occur, actors require resources (primarily organisational and human), which transform ideas into action: grievances will not achieve this alone (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). This reality cuts across spatial levels of action. In the disability field, the mobilisation of organisational resources and human capacities at the transnational level has been crucial to achieve the international support that led to the CRPD. Disabled people's organizations have established transnational organizations for decades and have been active in turning to their advantage the opportunities offered to them by supranational bodies such as the UN and the European Union. For example, in 2010 the European Commission, building upon the CRPD, launched a ten-year European Disability Strategy to promotes actions to eliminate the societal barriers facing disabled people in areas such as accessibility, participation, equality, employment, education and training, social protection, health, and external action (European Commission, 2010). Moreover, the European Union has further demonstrated a commitment to eliminating barriers for disabled people through the European Accessibility Act 2018 which promotes convergence among Member States towards ensuring products and services in the internal market are designed to be more accessible (European Commission, 2018). Furthermore, a number of initiatives at the EU level

enable disabled peoples movements to share information and expand their networks through instruments such as the Academic Network of European Disability Experts[1] (ANED) and the European Day of Persons with Disabilities[2]. Nevertheless, the EU level has also exacerbated the inequalities experienced by disabled people through austerity measures pursued by the Troika which have had consequences for health outcomes across Europe (Karanikolos et al, 2013) and specifically for disabled people in contexts where the impact of austerity has been most punitive (Rotarou and Sakellariou, 2019). This reflects how the EU institutions can on the one hand act as a venue for solidarity to take place but on the other hand be identified as a target for solidarity action against the systemic drivers of the austerity agenda (Della Porta, 2015) where movements against budget cuts – such as those impacting upon disabled people - can also have broader goals such as challenging the neoliberal consensus (Flesher Fominaya, 2017).

Therefore, following the adoption of the CRPD, the transnational opportunity structures that were pivotal in such policy change were also shaped by crisis and austerity. In this article, we examine how transnational solidarity in the field of disability unfolds in a context of such crisis and austerity. Our understanding of solidarity reflects the complexity of the concept and thus our analysis of organizations reflects these nuances. On the one hand solidarity can be broadly understood as the sharing of resources (e.g. through the donation of time, money or expertise) with others (Stjerno, 2009). On the other hand 'political solidarity' mobilizes collective action as a response to injustice (Scholz, 2008). Our aim in this article is not to apply labels of particular types of solidarity to specific organizations, instead we seek to clarify that some organizations can act as insiders and thus perceive solidarity as being performed in its broader sense (Stjerno, 2009) while engaging with the state to ensure a voice for marginalised groups and/or that services are delivered. While other organizations acting as outsiders perceive solidarity in a more politicized way and thus promote solidarity towards disabled people by adopting a more contentious disposition towards the state and public authorities (Scholz, 2008).

To better understand transnational solidarity this article is shaped by a number of key research questions. What impact do diminishing resources have upon transnational solidarity (conceptualised as the sharing of resources with disabled people across national boundaries through a range of collaborative or contentious actions in transnational arenas such as the European Day of Persons with Disabilities) in the field of disability? Moreover, does access to supranational political regimes help mitigate the effect of hostile national political opportunities in the field of disabled people's rights? To what extent can disabled people's movements seize opportunities at different spatial levels? What lessons for social movements studies can be drawn?

To answer these questions this article is structured in the following fashion: i) firstly we detail the context of our study across the national (the UK) and transnational levels (the European Day of Persons with Disabilities in Brussels 2016); ii) following this we set out the research design including our sampling strategy and our thematic method (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of analysis that we apply to our interview data; iii) next, we elaborate upon our findings from the national (UK) perspective, outlining the opportunities and challenges generated in a context of austerity and welfare reform; iv) we then move to the transnational level and discuss our findings from participants at a transnational event in the field of disability, highlighting the political opportunities and resource challenges at that level; v) and finally we outline the conclusions we have drawn from our analysis and connect these to the social movement theory which underpins our study.

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[1] https://www.disability-europe.net/
[2] https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=88&eventsId=1264&furtherEvents=yes&langId=en

2. Research Context

In this article we adopt a perspective of the transnational from the starting point of the UK and the specific challenges experienced in that national context before turning to a specific case of transnational solidarity. In doing so we contribute to the extant research by, on the one hand, helping to bridge the connections between the struggles facing social movement organizations at the local, national and transnational levels and, on the other hand we seek to begin a dialogue with researchers in this field and others applying a transnational lens to social movement studies from the position of other national contexts.

Understanding solidarity with disabled people in the UK cannot be divorced from the impact of austerity policies introduced by the then Coalition Government in 2010 and the programme of 'welfare reform' that same government pursued. For example, the reduction in welfare support for the cost of housing which affected all claimants in the UK (Wilcox, 2014) was later revealed to have had a disproportionate impact on disabled people as revealed by figures published by the UK Government themselves (Department of Work and Pensions, 2012). The foundations for the changes applied to the specific support for disabled people were laid by the previous Labour Government (Bambra and Smith, 2010) but were later intensified with a major reassessment process known as the 'Work Capability Assessment'. This led many disabled people being redefined as fit for employment which, rather than an act of empowerment, in reality meant the withdrawal of the welfare support (Wright, 2012; Baumberg, 2015) that was vital to live independently. This was further exacerbated by the reform of 'personal independence payments' which again included a major reassessment process that some scholars have evaluated as a form of 'state violence' towards disabled people in the UK (Roulstone, 2015) that has caused not only pain and distress to individuals but also the demonization and scapegoating of disabled people in society (Ryan, 2019). In response, organizations which form the disabled people's movement in the UK have sharply criticised the policies and discourses of austerity and welfare reform. However, such scrutiny and criticism of the impact of welfare reforms on disabled people has also been applied from outside the UK.

Despite the hostile political environment that disabled people in the UK have been navigating, it is a context where historical efforts of organized disabled people have progressed legislative landmarks in securing rights and protections from the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to the Equality Act 2010. However, the rights of disabled people in the UK have also been shaped by transnational commitments. One example is the ratification by the UK Government in 2009 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities which places obligations upon each 'State Party' signatory to protect the rights of disabled people and promote positive attitudes towards disabled people (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010). Adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2006, the CRPD provides a framework for international cooperation and the national implementation of strategies, policies and programmes that protect the human rights of disabled people and mainstream the inclusion of disabled people in society. What makes the CRPD unique among other frameworks or agreements is that it is the first human rights convention to be ratified by a regional organisation, the European Union[3] . Thus, what the CRPD represents is a tangible example of a political opportunity structure (McAdam, 1996) at the transnational level. Nevertheless, this is a commitment that the UK Government has been accused of violating by disabled people's organizations and as such the UK Government became the first ever signatory to come under investigation by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities into the impact of the UK Government's policies on the rights of disabled people (Jones et al, 2017). A subsequent report by the Committee found that the UK Government had committed 'grave and systematic

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[3] https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1138&langId=en

violations' of the Convention as a consequence of its welfare reforms and its contribution towards creating an environment that was increasingly hostile to disabled people (United Nations, 2016). Thus at the transnational level there have been opportunities to hold the government to account for its actions. In the subsequent sections of this article we shall explore the context that organizations have been navigating within the borders of the UK and the realities of activism at the transnational level, but in the next section we turn to our methods.

3. Methods

In our research, conducted during 2016, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted that sought to ensure maximum variation (Bryman, 2016) in order to provide a diversity of voices from those who were engaged in solidarity activities with disabled people across two levels: the national level (the UK) and the transnational level (participants in the European Day of Persons with Disabilities). Our sampling strategy ensured a diversity that connects with the thematic method of analysis undertaken with the data that was generated. Our interview data was analysed manually using the thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) which emphasises the importance of eliciting latent themes in the data that can be connected to the animation and development of theory.

In the analysis of our thirty-five interviews (twenty-two at the UK level and thirteen at the transnational level) those situated at the UK level have primarily (although not exclusively) focused upon formally constituted organizations (e.g. registered charities and other third sector organizations), therefore our findings reflect the experiences of such types of organizations. Moreover, our interviews have been conducted across a broad spectrum of organizations in terms of their geographical scope of action: some are UK-wide, others are focused on the constituent nations of the UK in which they are operating (e.g. Scottish), while other interviewees are from local or regional branches of national level organizations.

We focused our sampling on organizations that had some form of transnational linkage (e.g. they may have been active or passive members of transnational networks; or may have collaborated bilaterally with organizations from outside of the UK in the recent past). To be clear, despite our targeting of organizations in the UK with such linkages, these varied in terms of the extent to which they viewed the transnational level as important. Most organizations we spoke to were predominantly focused on the national or sub-national level of action with the transnational level a secondary consideration. A number had some active or passive connection with pan-disability transnational networks while a few were internationally connected through disability specific associations or initiatives. Our interview sampling in the UK also sought to ensure that our data would reflect the diversity of the disabled people's movement in the UK in terms of the focus and mission of organizations, from those which work across different forms of disability to others which specialize on rare conditions. Furthermore, the interviewees whom comprised our UK sample also reflected the mixture of organizations that are either user-led and service-led organizations. Although the issue of the 'representativeness' (Beresford and Campbell, 1994) of organizations is important, an in-depth discussion of those issues deserves a more dedicated space and is beyond the remit of this article. However, what we can say is that despite the fact that organizations were motivated to tackle the inequalities of disabled people in society, inequalities between organizations (in terms of resources such as budgets, staffing etc.) were evident. A consciousness of these inequalities was demonstrated by interviewees throughout our research and there was consistent concern with ensuring the inclusivity of diverse groups within networks or events, reflecting the mantra within the disabled people's movement of 'nothing about us without us'. Nevertheless, despite a clear and consistent concern with inclusivity, this did not translate into any substantive discussions regarding the possible redistribution of resources between organizations to ensure representational diversity (for

more on this see Baker et al, 2004). Instead the space of inter-organizational solidarity was shaped by asymmetries rather than substantive equality between groups in terms of their capacity to seize opportunities, which is particularly relevant for transnational solidarity given the resources involved. This again reflects the complexity of solidarity as groups can have both complementary goals but asymmetric opportunities often shaped by the competition for the same pool of diminishing resources (Scholz, 2008). In terms of our interviewees, they occupy key positions in the organizations that form our sample, being either executive directors or those in charge of specific activities/tasks (e.g. project manager; policy manager, etc.) and as such are well situated to speak on behalf of the organization. Our interviews revealed that organizations rely upon individuals with a depth of knowledge and often highly focused specialization: most interviewees had several years' experience and some had migrated from backgrounds as health professionals (e.g. in the UK National Health Service) or had been working in other public services (e.g. social work) or third sector organizations.

To capture transnational solidarity in action we focused on a transnational event relevant to the pursuit of the rights of disabled people, namely the European Day of Persons with Disabilities. This gathering took place over two days in Brussels in November 2016 to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The event (which we attended and undertook non-participant observation) held at the European Commission brought together a range of actors from across the European Union to celebrate the progress that has been made since the implementation of the CRPD and examine avenues to advance the rights of disabled people across diverse European contexts. Organized jointly by the European Disability Forum and the European Commission, the event featured a number of thematic panels focused upon issues such as human rights, employment, accessibility, independent living and the issues facing disabled women. We conducted interviews with 13 participant organizations from across Europe, including national associations of disabled people's organizations, organizations focused on specific disabilities and pan-European platforms. As with our UK focused organizations, our interviewees held key positions in their organizations and were well placed to elaborate their perspectives on and experiences of transnational solidarity. Therefore the focus of the event and the participating organizations provided a favourable environment for understanding the challenges and opportunities of building solidarity among disabled people across borders at a time of austerity.

4. Findings I: The mobilization of resources for a fragile solidarity

The impact of the global financial crisis of 2008 and of its corollary of austerity policies, on the development of intra-organisational solidarity links, at both national and transnational levels, needs to be understood bearing in mind the role that different contexts play. In the UK, although macro-economic policy remains determined by the UK Treasury at Westminster, the diffusion of powers and responsibilities for a range of policy fields brought about since the first wave of devolution in the late 1990s means that the impact of austerity measures has been differentiated across the constituent regions and nations of the UK (Beatty and Fothergill, 2016). Therefore, among those organizations which were drawn from our UK sample it was clear that despite the shared context of austerity and welfare reform that these organizations were navigating, there were some differences across the UK. This indicated a variegated political opportunity structure marked by a de-alignment of policymakers (e.g. the contrasting views on austerity between the Scottish Parliament/Welsh Assembly and Westminster) as well as more openness (Eisinger, 1973) to the claims articulated by disabled people's movements. Thus, at the sub-national levels different political opportunities are generated for those organizations which recognize (Gamson and Meyer, 1996) and take action to adapt their

strategies and tactics accordingly to seize these opportunities. This was illustrated by one organisation in the north east of Scotland involved in discussions regarding the new governance arrangements relating to health and social care integration and who were finding the sub-national level somewhat responsive:

'we work really closely with the Scottish Government and I have to say the civil servants in a number of the departments are really responsive and very enabling, so we provide information and advice and they'll often ask us if there is service redesign if we've got access to the best evidence and they'll ask our opinion' (Interviewee 4).

For at least some organizations the fewer resources involved in accessing these institutions was clearly shaping some of their campaigning strategies and the alliances formed around them. For other organizations, their charitable status placed statutory restrictions on the type of critique they could apply to policymakers and thus a careful approach was undertaken when working with those organizations more involved in taking direct action. Earlier in this article we explained the variegated expressions of solidarity (which can speak to a broad sense of mutualism or take a more politicised form) and this was elicited from a number of our interviews. We detected it was clear that although there was some campaigning by most organizations, there was a tacit understanding that those driven more by political or ideological objectives (linked to more radical societal change) had a more indirect relationship to those organizations involved in service delivery. Indeed a number of interviewees among the latter often referred to navigating a balancing act between advocacy work and maintaining good working relationships with the state:

'Our organisation gets quite a bit of its funding from local authorities and the NHS and so it can be hard to be directly aligned as an organisation with a political organisation like [a radical disabled people's organisation] in the sense of their active campaigning and their ideology' (Interviewee 18).

Involvement in policy implementation arrangements can of course create quite formalized relationships between organizations but this did not mean that organizations across the UK existed in silos and indeed most organizations had broader connections with UK wide networks and platforms. Nevertheless, just as resource mobilisation theory indicates, the tactics of social movements with scarce resources can be influenced by competition as much as cooperation (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). The austerity driven reduction in public resources did impact existing alliances between organizations. This was exemplified by the experience of one organisation we spoke to in Greater Manchester who described how partnerships between organizations and the local authority became increasingly shaped around competitiveness. This had consequences not only for budgets but also the solidarity between organizations:

'the local authority contract became more prescriptive…it became a lot more target driven and the policy work then became attached to specific outcomes rather than us calling the shots…when austerity was first happening there were some tensions between our local organizations that hadn't been there before because we were all competing for the same pots of money… I think it was all about money really, whose got a legitimate voice now we're having to compete with each other for money' (Interviewee 15).

This insight that resources can have an impact on solidarity between social movement organizations, particularly in the context of austerity has been identified in extant research conducted in the UK (Milbourne and Cushman, 2013; Egdell and Dutton, 2017). In fact, austerity driven funding issues had also created an existential crisis for some organizations and consequently some of the more localized forums and networks that were key sites of exchange

of information had been hollowed out. Thus the increasing scarcity of one form of resources (finance) was leading to the decline in another form of resources (networks) (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). This was well elaborated by one interviewee from an organisation in Wales:

'The funding for the third sector at the moment is really atrocious to be honest. The alliance itself has really suffered because it's about half as well attended as it used to be simply because a lot of people aren't in positions any more' (Interviewee 14).

The difficulties of constructing and sustaining solidarity between organizations is not however restricted to funding issues. Ensuring that the 'constituencies' of disabled people – i.e. those for whom organizations are advocating and whom social movement organizations rely upon for resources (not just donations of money but also labour, McCarthy and Zald, 1977) - are given an equal platform is crucial. The diversity of the networks and alliances that organizations have constructed are clearly beneficial, if not essential for the advocacy work of these organizations and this was a message underpinned by a number of interviewees. However that same diversity also poses an ever evolving set of challenges, one being the sheer variety of conditions and disabilities that are often at the core of the mission of the organization. From our sample alone there was a very wide range of conditions that were represented from mental health to rare genetic disorders and the solidarity across disabled people was a key component of the success of some organizations:

'For charities working on rare diseases, it is essential to be part of umbrellas and network organizations, as that is the way we can have our voice heard' (Interviewee 1).

Although challenging it was clear those organizations had to consistently work at ensuring their networks and alliances were inclusive of the broad spectrum of disabilities. In fact, despite this challenge, some organizations had also been working hard to ensure that the voices that they supported in being heard were also inclusive of those groups in society who were facing additional forms of discrimination:

'We seek to retain a balance of people in terms of education and class terms as well as other forms of diversity' (Interviewee 17).

Thus, the various forms those alliances between organizations take may be shaped not only by different priorities but also by strategies that organizations adopt to advocate for disabled people. However, there is another dimension that we should explore. That is the extent to which organizations can engage in collaboration not just at the local and national level, but also at the transnational level (Tarrow and McAdam, 2005). When we discussed engagement in transnational solidarity with our UK level interviewees a diversity of interactions were explored (from memberships of pan-European networks, to being involved in European research projects or having bilateral relationships with organizations outside of the UK) and an awareness of the multi-level factors shaping such opportunities was demonstrated (Marks and McAdam, 1996). However, some common issues were elicited from our data. For example, as with alliances at the national level, the issue of resource scarcity loomed large, with the precarious financial environment exacerbated by austerity measures meaning that the UK level political context was generating more risks than opportunities (Koopmans, 2004) and for some it was difficult to divert resources from frontline work to build transnational connections:

'It's hard to justify saying 'I'm going to Spain or whatever'. We don't have funding. Unless we have specific funding for it we can't do it' (Interviewee 18).

As for other challenges, a number of our interviewees highlighted the diversity of contexts across Europe as posing an obstacle to building long term partnerships in other countries. For

example, governance arrangements shaping interactions between organizations and healthcare professionals may be diverse. Furthermore, very different health and social care systems can present additional challenges in communicating ideas. Thus, just as we found at the sub-national level in the UK, political opportunities are evident but contextually variegated (McAdam, 1996; Kriesi, 2004). Moreover, some interviewees expressed concern that those resources accumulated in the form of networks (McCarthy and Zald, 1977) in the past few years would now be devalued given the uncertainty regarding the future relationship between the UK and the European Union. In fact, the interviews that we undertook was in a context of the aftermath of the decision by the UK electorate in June 2016 to vote to leave the European Union. There were concerns expressed by some interviewees that Brexit was now dominating the policy agenda, thus representing an even greater closure of the political opportunity structure (Eisinger, 1973) at that level. Among our interviewees there was a sense of uncertainty about what the future may hold in a post-Brexit Britain. Indeed the consequence of Brexit for disabled people remains one of uncertainty at the time of writing more than three years following the vote. Nevertheless, campaigners have highlighted the negative impact on disabled people who are EU citizens in the UK and concerned about their future (Huijg, 2017) as well as the potential consequences for the social care system that relies upon workers from the EU (Graby and Homayoun, 2019). Moreover, in addition to the already existing challenges of investing in building transnational solidarity, the UK organizations we interviewed were now dis-incentivized to engage in advocacy work within EU institutions that may be less relevant in a post-Brexit context, as one interviewee exemplified:

'The EU level feels, sadly, out of the scope of pressure now because of the obsession with Brexit by a small majority of people in this country, EU pressure counts for nothing now' (Interviewee 22).

Nevertheless, transnational solidarity is not exclusive to EU institutions. An example of this was the participation of some organizations we interviewed in feeding into the work of the United Nations Committee for the Convention on the Rights of Disabled People (CRPD). Those who did so were part of national level alliances and coalitions which were working together to ensure the pernicious impact of austerity and welfare reform raised earlier in this article were evidenced. This included one organisation in Scotland which had sent delegates to United Nations meetings and others such as one disability consortium in Wales who explained the learning process involved in feeding into a United Nations Committee which she described as:

'Challenging but constructive, we've never been through this process before. Together we're learning what the review involves and getting together to coordinate evidence gathering and priorities for presenting to the committee. There is plenty of negotiation but I feel it brought our organizations together and we were united and made a strong case' (Interviewee 21).

Thus, alongside some obvious challenges, the transnational level of solidarity activism was viewed as a catalyst for building solidarity for a number of organizations whom we interviewed. It is however difficult to fully grasp the specific challenges that such types of solidarity can generate given the various actors and institutions among which organizations can construct alliances. Therefore, in order to gain insight into these challenges, we need a relevant and contemporary example of a transnational political opportunity structure that connects organizations and issues at the UK level . That example was offered by the European Day of Persons with Disabilities, a gathering which took place over two days in Brussels in November 2016 to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and that we discuss in the next section.

5. Findings II: The challenges and opportunities of solidarity at the transnational level

In the course of our interviews with social movement organizations that had participated in the European Day of Persons with Disabilities it became clear that a number of interviewees regarded the event as being both well organized and open and inclusive as a platform. For example, one participant we spoke to from a Brussels based European network explained that in many of these types of events it could often be difficult to strike a balance not only in terms of the composition of those who spoke over the course of the two days while ensuring contributions could be made from the floor. Echoing the views of other respondents, this same interviewee explained that she perceived the event as an opportunity to build new partnerships. But building and sustaining solidarity at the transnational level is not without its challenges.

Reflecting some of the key issues highlighted by resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald 1977), one consistent challenge elicited from our interviews was that of resources in participating in transnational solidarity. One disability specific network we interviewed explained that given the cost of travel and accommodation it was impossible for some of the national associations which formed their network to participate. This view was echoed by another pan-European specialist association where the interviewee explained that few organizations had the necessary resources to fully participate in such transnational events. He identified in the process a lack of European funding particularly among the smaller networks which according to his experience was reserved for the larger organizations who are better connected to the European Commission and who have a Brussels based staff to build partnerships and locate opportunities, echoing a critique in existing research (Lahusen, 2004). Moreover, the impact of the broader context of austerity, as illustrated earlier in this article to be crucial in understanding the role of diminishing resources at the UK level in determining the seizing of opportunities could also be elicited at the transnational level. This was exemplified by an interviewee from a large national charity in western Europe who shed light on how even organizations like his own had experienced a relationship with the European level of activism at almost one step removed, having no direct relationships with the Commission themselves and relying upon their membership of a European platform to stay updated with the developments in the European Union. He added that this had not always been the case and echoing the findings elicited earlier in this article from our UK cohort, explained that:

'In the past, in this organisation going back ten years or so there was a member of staff who specifically worked on European policy [...] those posts have largely gone across disability charities over the last ten years, so that kind of work seems to have been de-prioritised [...] resources have been stretched and that work has been de-prioritised and you would expect a lot more focus on the domestic agenda given how challenging the last seven years have been' (Interviewee 30).

Other challenges that were highlighted during the course of our interviews ranged from practical issues such as accessibility or mobility issues (Shakespeare and Watson, 1997; Imrie, 2001) and language barriers, to more ideological divergences on the approach to campaign work (with some organizations aiming at radical change while others less so) . In terms of the more pragmatic challenges one interviewee from a European platform working on issues of inclusiveness of disabled people explained that there would perhaps be a different approach required in terms of the format and organisation of the event with a specific focus on the ways that messages are communicated and even the language used which he identified as a particular challenge for people with intellectual disabilities. The issue of accessibility thus not only featured prominently in the agenda of the event but was also foremost in the minds of the participants we interviewed including a rights-based network whose representative explained that their work on discrimination and equality involved people with all forms of disability but that it was a consistent challenge to work effectively across the full spectrum of disabilities. This

concern about ensuring that people with diverse forms of disabilities are fully included was also emphasised by one national disability organisation from South-Western Europe who believed that it could be a challenge in such events to ensure the creation of an all-inclusive strategy, regardless of the category of a person's disability and as such maintaining the involvement of the broadest range of 'constituents' (McCarthy and Zald, 1977) dedicated to achieving the goals of the movement. Indeed one organisation, a pan-European disability network which played a key role in the event, echoed the importance of meeting this particular challenge:

'To make the whole event fully accessible for everyone […] I think there is still some work to do on that' (Interviewee 27).

However, despite this consistent concern elicited from our interviews it was clear that perhaps this consciousness of inclusion had helped to create a fairly open context (Eisinger, 1973). Indeed, even those interviewees from organizations that were keen to offer a critical voice to the European Commission and other institutions were of the view that there was an effort to ensure a broad range of organizations were participating, with some describing the event as crucial in raising awareness of their network. This openness was confirmed by one interviewee from a pan-disability European network who described the event as one that was collegiate and a good environment for building solidarity between organizations:

'my experience is that everyone is interested in cooperating so we try to build more and more partnerships and so far it seems to work quite well' (Interviewee 29).

Another interviewee from a user led European platform confirmed the openness (Eisinger, 1973) of the event by explaining that she had encountered no obstructions in terms of official support and indeed another interviewee from a rights-based network added that she had experienced good cooperation with the organizers. One interviewee from a Brussels based network also conveyed an atmosphere of cooperation and when probed about how this was materialized through things such as joint statements he explained that organizations tended to utilize these statements in such a way that can be shaped around their own agendas in their own specialisms:

'To be extremely frank these joint statements usually remain at the level which is fairly general to allow any individual organisation to adapt and add whatever specific message they want to add. The joint message is about opening new doors and drawing attention and then once the attention is there, once we have visibility, each individual organisation can use that for its own aims' (Interviewee 26).

Thus, we can observe a strategy for ensuring that organizations can utilize their participation in transnational events to obtain the raw materials for generating the 'boomerang effects' (Keck and Sikkink, 1998) that can convert the general public from 'bystanders' (McCarthy and Zald, 1977) into supporters and thus exert pressure on policymakers at the domestic level. Of course such strategies can also be beneficial for ensuring the cementing relationships between disability organizations. Of course as the event was also hosted by the European Commission there was a further set of relationships to negotiate and we elicited from our interviewees, particularly with those based in Brussels, that it was crucial to strike an even balance between the needs of their membership and the requirements of the Commission (Ruzza and Bozzini, 2008).

Another aspect we discovered was the actual degree of interest and proximity with the issues and events taking place at the European level. As one interviewee from a national disability organization from central Europe explained, it was sometimes a challenge to convey to member organizations within her association the connections between issues at the national and

European levels and that the European level can often seem distant and less important than national domestic issues and policies (see Schmidt, 2006). That did not deter her organisation from convincing others to recognize the opportunities available (Gamson and Meyer, 1996). Consequently, participation in transnational events offered an opportunity to highlight the common struggles faced by disabled people across a variety of contexts. Moreover, for some of our interviewees it also provided a source of new ideas: as exemplified by the perspective of a network focused on disabled people with hearing issues:

'As for European Day we take home with us a lot of inspiration to what to do next. This inspires us both for next steps at a national level but also within our organisation. When we have participated in the European Day in Brussels, we have in particular learned what we have in common with other disability groups' (Interviewee 32).

The view expressed above reflected that of many of our interviewees at the European Day of Persons with Disabilities. Although the event provided opportunities to pose questions to the European Commission and to lobby officials, as well as providing a high-profile platform for organizations to raise awareness of the work they were doing at the national and transnational levels, what became clear was that the primary outcome of the event was the coming together of disabled people from across various contexts and the generated resources through the widening and deepening of networks (McCarthy and Zald, 1977).

Although participation at the transnational level can be fruitful in terms of building and sustaining solidarity among disabled people, such endeavours are clearly resource intensive and thus some interviewees were conscious that in a resource scarce environment, choosing to participate in such events presented a resource dilemma (McCarthy and Zald, 1977) and required justification. This was exemplified by one interviewee from the UK who was a representative of a transnational umbrella and who explained that he had now attended the event a number of times in recent years and though at times he could question the value of participating in terms of resources, he was clear that there was a potential cost of not being active at the transnational level that had to be taken into account in terms of missed opportunities (Gamson and Meyer, 1996):

'I might meet someone, I might hear something that will spur me on to contact someone else, so if I don't go I might miss out on that […] I did question the benefits but then on the other hand I was frightened of missing out on some information' (Interviewee 31).

6. Conclusions
Solidarity has been crucial in advancing the rights of disabled people in the UK and beyond. Those factors that make solidarity through collective action both possible and effective have been well established in the social movement literature through theories of political opportunities and resource mobilisation. In this article, we have explored how collective action is mobilized at the national and transnational levels in times of crisis and austerity. We discovered that the austerity driven welfare reform agenda in the UK has stalled, if not reversed, the progress made by disabled people. Nevertheless, although the political opportunities (Eisinger, 1973) for disabled people's movements at the UK level may be closed, variegated opportunities have been made available at the sub-national level through a de-alignment (McAdam, 1996) of policymakers in devolved legislatures (e.g. the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly). The context of austerity has been inescapable for many organizations due to the reduced pool of funding available from public authorities and can place strains on the solidarity between organizations by infusing relations with competition as opposed to

cooperation (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). In this context organizations are faced with a dilemma when it comes to recognising (Gamson and Meyer, 1996) political opportunities and spending resources to seize them at the national and transnational levels.

However, at the transnational level, we found a landscape that offered recognisable opportunities for organizations and disabled people, evidenced not only from the interventions by the UN into the debate surrounding welfare reform in the UK, but also through the experiences of organizations in a specific case of a transnational event. The transnational level was not however short of challenges, and as we explored earlier some of these challenges echo the difficulties encountered by organizations at the national level (e.g. resources and negotiating the diversity of the movement). Therefore, engaging in transnational solidarity should not be seen as a substitute for activism at other scales of action given that issues can cut across such boundaries. However, those organizations with the resources to do so, may find opportunities for advancing the rights of disabled people open at the transnational level when other scales of action are closed. The openness (Eisinger, 1973) of the transnational level and the strategies adopted in terms of the messaging that emerged from it presented opportunities for solidifying existing alliances and building new ones, raising the profile of organizations and their specialist focus. This can generate the raw material required for the development of 'boomerang effects' (Keck and Sikkink, 1998) that can be utilized to convert members of the general public at the national level from 'bystanders' (McCarthy and Zald, 1977) into supporters and thus contribute towards the accumulation of new resources (e.g. donations, labour and networks) that can prove crucial in seizing opportunities when the institutional context reveals openings. What we can observe however is that despite the opportunities offered by the transnational level to organizations working in the realm of solidarity with disabled people it is an arena that is under pressure from below (in terms of the austerity measures that have created a perfect storm for organizations by increasing the needs of disabled people for support as a result of the withdrawal of welfare state support) and,a precarious funding environment that generates challenges for inter-organisational solidarity. But challenges come also from above, with contradictory messages from the EU level, which on the one hand offers political opportunities but on the other hand (via the austerity pursued by the Troika) helps shape the conditions which makes the lives of disabled people more difficult.

Finally, the transnational arena is also under pressure from the emergence of populist and reactionary political forces that valorize borders and are thus are far less invested in cross-border solidarity initiatives. Such developments should reanimate issues raised by extant research on the importance of citizenship for disabled people to enact their rights (Soldatic and Grech, 2014), but particularly those whose future status (such as those navigating Brexit Britain) remains uncertain.

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