Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues,

I am very glad to be here representing Italy at this year’s celebration of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, that my Country has had the honour to co-sponsor since its inception, and we are confirming our support this year too. I wish to warmly thank and congratulate DESA for organising this event.

As you know, Italy has always been at the forefront of the global commitment to promote and protect the human rights of persons with disabilities, and such efforts stand at the very core of the human rights foreign policy of my Country. The first draft of the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was firstly submitted by the Italian delegation in 1987 and the Convention itself, adopted in 2006, was largely based on the relevant Italian legislation. In a particular sector Italy has resolutely led the way, i. e. in the one of mental and intellectual disabilities. The so-called “Basaglia Law” (1978) – of which this year we celebrate the 40th anniversary – has been the first legislative measure worldwide to abolish permanently psychiatric hospitals, fully integrating persons with mental and intellectual disabilities into the society, in full ottemporance with the saying: “nothing about us without us”. This is precisely the embodiment of a human-rights approach to disability, which is after all the paradigm-shift brought about by the CRPD.

Now, coming to today’s event, I want to commend DESA for the choice of the topic of this year’s International Day: “Empowering Persons with Disabilities and Ensuring Inclusiveness and Equality”. And I am particularly glad to take the floor in this panel, which focuses the topic of urban planning and accessibility and of “smart cities”. The issue of accessibility, indeed, is in my view one of the cardinal principles behind more open, just and inclusive societies. In order to enable persons with disabilities to live independently and to participate fully in all aspects of the life of their community and of society more broadly, access to the physical environment and transportation, as well as to information and communication, including information and communication technologies (ICTs), must be ensured. The parallel challenge, which all of us are called upon to win, is to make our cities smarter, taking advantage
of the immense potential of ICT for a dual purpose: on the one hand to simplify services for citizens; on the other, to promote the progressive transformation of the urban fabric through all the informative, technological and technical expedients that can render cities an inclusive environment for all citizens, including and especially for persons with disabilities.

Italy is leading the way also with reference to this specific aspect. Through the coordination National Observatory on the Condition of Persons with Disabilities – constituted of representatives of public administrations and of organisations of people with disabilities and established in 2010 in order to provide guidance and innovative strategies on the implementation of the CRPD – specific programmes and initiatives have been devised both at the national and local level.

Allow to mention some of those:

First of all, at the national level, and with reference to the full enjoyment of cultural heritage, to which we are strongly committed: in 2017, the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities launched a vast-scale project aimed at overcoming architectural, cognitive and sensory barriers to fruition of public cultural heritage and was instrumental in renovating and equipping with innovative infrastructures and technologies several cultural sites nationwide, from Rome to Urbino to Naples to Florence.

Also, at the beginning of 2019 the project “Bandiera Lilla” will be launched, which will target the strengthening of the accessibility of reception and touristic infrastructures in Italian cities, awarding those which will make significant progress in this field with, as the title of the project goes, a lilac flag.

Finally, in 2016 Italy was celebrated by the UN in Vienna as a model in education inclusiveness and for relinquishing once and for all the separation of classes for students with disabilities.

Furthermore, at the local level: The city of Milan has by now established a system of complete accessibility of its public transportation system and information and technological facilities, which earned the city the European Union Access City Award in 2016.

Also, it is with great satisfaction that I wish announce that tomorrow, in Brussels, the city of Monteverde, a small town of less than 1000 inhabitants not far from Naples, will be awarded a special prize for the preservation of cultural heritage and
accessibility in the framework of the European Union Access City Award Ceremony, as a tribute to the exemplary efforts carried out by the town to promote a urban environment suitable to everyone.

May today’s celebration, Ladies and Gentleman, be an occasion to build on the momentum, to remove physical and cultural barriers, and to promote in concrete terms the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities in all spheres of their life. Please be assured that Italy will not fail to continue providing its unabated support, also in the framework of the upcoming membership of the Human Rights Council (2019-21). Persons with disabilities, both as beneficiaries and agents of change, will guide the process forward in order to promote a more resilient, equitable and accessible society for all.