MOBILITY OF OLDER AND DISABLED PEOPLE

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CONFERENCE
Improving and Implementing Accessibility
for People with Reduced Mobility

Den Bosch, The Netherlands

28 October 2002

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not represent the views of ECMT or those of its Member Countries
Introduction

This paper gives some broad indications of progress and problems across the European Continent. It reviews briefly and selectively the present position, examines some current issues of debate and focuses especially on the theme of this Conference - how to ensure that the political commitments made at national and international levels are actually implemented.

I would like to make two general points at the outset.

The first is that Europe is not homogeneous. It consists of over 40 Countries, with varying degrees of internal and external stability, with incomes per head varying from 1 to 20 and with cultural and ideological history that influences the approach and attitudes to disabled people and their mobility.

The second general point is that there is no recognised method or benchmark for assessing progress. Attempts to do this in the past, for example in European Union questionnaires, have focussed on counting various physical indications of progress, like the number of low floor buses or dropped kerbs. We know now that this is totally inadequate and more integrated, holistic, broader methods are needed to assess progress. This means too that it is difficult to assess which areas or cities are doing well and which less well.

I assess progress under a number of different headings.

These are the legal framework, the policy approach, the attitudes and behaviour of key actors, the physical adaptations, the funding and the consultation and redress mechanisms.

Progress Made

- Legal Framework

Here, Europe has a different tradition especially compared to the United States. We tended to make progress through voluntary agreements, guidelines and codes of good practice rather than laws and litigation. However, the 1990’s saw significant changes across Europe in the legal provisions affecting people with disabilities. Many Countries enacted anti-discrimination legislation, including several in this region like Poland, Romania, Hungary and Estonia. The UK introduced the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995, which takes a civil rights approach. Germany has introduced 3 new general laws in recent years including the Disability Discrimination Act which came into force in May this year. Many Countries have introduced specific regulations on means of transport: for example the UK regulations on access to trains were introduced in 1998. Sweden brought in regulations in 1998 requiring local authorities to improve local public transport for people with disabilities and has a specific deadline for making the system accessible. Switzerland is introducing a law that will require all Swiss Public Transport companies to submit an implementation
programme to the Federal Office of Transport. More details on these changes can be found on ECMT’s web site:

http://www.oecd.org/cem/topics/handicaps/index.htm

General law at European Union level focuses on general principles but it does not have a strong impact on improving accessibility. Specific rules on accessibility have been generally left to the Member states. But now there are a number of areas where the Commission might be able to help. The adoption of the principles in the ECMT Charter (that financing will be conditioned on access) is one possible legal step forward. Rail accessibility based on the COST 335 Report is also a potential area for legal action at the European Union level. But I realise that Countries accept principles more easily in ECMT than they do legal texts in the Union and that it is sometimes better to wait rather than engage in a fruitless battle. The experience with the Bus Directive, which took an age to get approved, has not been entirely positive.

To summarise, there has been across Europe in the last decade a significant move to introduce new legislation, both general anti-discrimination or civil rights type laws and specific regulations on access to the built environment and transport facilities to support the objective of achieving full integration of people with disabilities in all aspects of existence. In the Transport area, there has been a move away from a welfare approach to one based on equality of opportunities and provision of access.

- **Policy Approach**

The stated policies in almost all countries are now for an inclusive and integrated approach to people with disabilities. This is true also at international level where we in ECMT and others have very many excellent policy statements. I cite two of ECMT's, but our web site contains some others.

First, is the comprehensive Resolution that Ministers adopted in Lisbon just a year ago. This brings together in one text, all the main political Recommendations of ECMT over the last 15 years. This text summarises the main principles and policy objectives as agreed formally by the Countries. It exists in English and French but now also in Russian and in Polish.

Second, one of the key principles is that the needs of people with disabilities are taken into account from the planning stage. This is enshrined in a Charter adopted by Ministers here in Warsaw in 1999, which says that public funding of transport should be conditional on providing access. If this Charter were properly implemented, we would make no more mistakes. It is encouraging that the United Kingdom have taken it up in an official way. It originated in our discussions with the European Union and perhaps now the time is right to give it more official teeth by seeing to what extent it could be introduced into European law.
The individual Countries have strong policy integration aims and some have taken concrete steps to implement them. For example, Sweden, Finland and others are increasingly finding ways to integrate special services for disabled people and public transport. There has also been a strengthening of organisational structures to reflect the need to look at the entire transport chain. For example, France set up COLIAC, as a new unit within the Ministry of transport with responsibilities to look at the whole door to door journey. Similarly, the United Kingdom extended the powers of its consultative Committee DPTAC to look also at the built environment. In ECMT, we have decided to integrate the work on people with disabilities with that on ageing populations since many of the issues are common.

But the broad picture shows that, in practice, structures in the transport sector and especially in the transport Ministries are far from adequate to correspond with the ambitious policy aims. The majority of countries still treat accessibility as a relatively low priority subject, and deal with it in isolation. The responsible officials in Ministries will usually have many other dossiers to deal with and accessibility is, unfortunately, usually one of the least important. There is not good monitoring of implementation at subnational level and here this conference can really help to improve the links and the mechanisms for implementation.

**Attitudes of Key Actors**

This is important because operators can easily block or disrupt progress if they do not really believe in the aims. While the principle of integration is now widely accepted, it does not always translate into concrete support by key businesses in transport. Of course, operators do not usually refuse cooperation but they argue that the costs should all be paid by governments.

Public transport operators, through their international organisation UITP, have issued an encouragingly positive statement to replace their previous texts, which advocated separate specialised services for people with disabilities. This new text calls for shared efforts to solve the problems and accepts that partnerships with authorities can bring mutual benefits.

We are working with UITP and local authorities on a series of case studies which will show good practice at local level and identify concretely weaknesses that have to be overcome. Many mistakes have been made by focussing on only one aspect of the problem and there is now a much better understanding on the range of actions that need to be undertaken.

Local and regional authorities have a vital role to implement agreed policy. They can learn from good and bad examples and we will be pleased to act as a forum for this.

Another example concerns taxis where progress has been very slow. In a new attempt to move things along we have just completed a report together with the taxi profession, through its representative body the IRU, which discusses the economic implications of improving taxi access. This sets out a way forward here which also
involves a sharing of responsibilities and roles. This report is also available on the ECMT website:

www.oecd.org/cem/topics/handicaps/tphdocs.htm

To summarise, operators are gradually coming round to the view that accessibility is something that cannot be ignored and that they too have to contribute, even if they do not yet really believe that it can mean more business.

**Practical Changes (Infrastructure and Equipment)**

Drastic improvements that are being made to new public transport vehicles. Almost all buses, trams and light rail vehicles now have lower floors and the host of other improvements that we have been advocating for so long.

These new vehicles are finding their way onto the streets, quickly in countries like Germany, France, United Kingdom and others and more slowly where funds are scarce. Terminals for rail, bus and air, when they are renewed or improved generally build in or improve access facilities. In general, the principle that new or upgraded facilities build in access is gradually being implemented.

Problems remain, especially with the many old installations we have. There are good examples of retro-fitting improvements (e.g. lifts, ramps) in underground systems, which bring specific benefits, but because the whole system is inaccessible, these improvements do not bring the full benefits that an accessible system would.

In Central and Eastern Europe, there is a desire to improve vehicles but finance is limited. The old or second hand equipment from Western Europe that is often purchased is not good for disabled people.

- **Other Changes (Services and Information)**

There is a far greater realization that physical improvements have to be accompanied by much better information to users. There have been many initiatives in this area and there are now a large number of brochures, guides and other information on accessible services. But there are problems with the availability of this information in different formats and also whether it is really helpful. France is making a special effort to communicate with local officials so that they can take on the practical implementation at local level.

- **Funding**

It is difficult to get estimates of how much is spent on improving accessibility at national level. It is virtually impossible to compare funding between countries. There are several reasons. One is that it is difficult to identify funding as being specifically for accessibility; a second is that there are several sources of funding including...
different government departments, and different levels of government and private operators. There are well known facts, for example that the Nordic countries spend relatively more on services and concessions for people with disabilities than others; that Switzerland has spent heavily to improve rail access, Germany a lot on low floor buses and the Netherlands on facilities for blind and partially sighted people. Data in funding at local or regional level is very sparse an spending varies greatly between cities and towns.

Pedestrian access is an important topic where local authorities can do a great deal. Finland is one of the Countries that is trying to get walking (and cycling) given more importance in Transport Policy and our Working Group has just responded on how order and disabled people can benefit from good practice in this area.

Consultation/Possibilities of Redress

In the last few years there have been general improvements in the systems of consultation with people with disabilities. Many Countries now have systematic forms of such consultation. There are different models and they are described in more detail in an ECMT document, which is on the net:

www.oecd.org/cem/topics/handicaps/tphdocs.htm

These procedures usually have a consultative purpose and are non-binding. As a good example, the new laws in Germany and United Kingdom were drawn up with very close consultation with disabled people. In Switzerland, a private organisation coordinates accessibility work on Public Transport.

However, redress mechanisms are much less developed in Europe than in the United States and Canada. Few European countries have organised complaint procedures for people with disabilities and this is undoubtedly an area that needs to be developed in the future.

Some Lessons and Issues

Following from the above I would like to highlight some lessons we have learned and some issues that we are trying to come to terms with.

There is now a virtually complete agreement on certain fundamental principles, for example of integration, of barrier free accessibility for all, of close involvement of people with disabilities.

Countries have increasingly realised that improving access is complex, involving a need to take actions on a number of fronts simultaneously. Care is needed to design the full package so that the component parts work together.

For example, we know that legislation by itself is not enough. Its aims need to be supported by key actors, and it also needs to be monitored and enforced. Similarly,
physical improvements like low floor buses are not enough. They need to be supported by better bus stops and street access. More generally, we still need to work to evaluate critical changes that are needed and the effectiveness of some of the measures that we have introduced.

The funding discussion is frequently depressing. Operators argue that they are working in a commercial environment where all extra costs have to be justified by extra revenues; they do not believe that the extra costs bring in enough extra revenue. Governments contribute what they can but it is usually not enough and they also argue that the responsibility is with the operator. We argue that the extra costs are for a tiny proportion of the population and that the benefits are shared over a much wider base. Operators are slowly starting to believe that there are also benefits.

The role of specialised services is an important issue. Several of the more advanced countries especially the Nordic Countries are looking for closer integration of main line and specialised services and reductions in the quantity and cost of specialised services. But in other places, and in particular in Central and Eastern Europe, there are not many alternatives and the development of specialised services would seem to be essential in the short term.

But of crucial importance for implementation is the need to have dialogue with local and regional authorities on practical difficulties and on how they might be overcome.

Regional authorities will need guidance and a policy and legal framework from Central Government. But they have great scope and possibilities to implement improvements themselves. They should also act on their own initiative to do this and should not wait for Central Government funds or directives.

ECMT will be pleased to help in any way it can in fostering a dialogue with local authorities and in ensuring that good statements turn into good practice.
ECMT REFERENCES

(all available on web site: www.oecd.org/cem/topics/handicaps/tphdocs.htm)

Transport and Ageing of the Population

Consolidated Resolution No 2001/3 on Accessible Transport
(available in English, French, Polish and Russian)
http://www1.oecd.org/cem/resol/disabled/dis20013e.pdf

Legislation to Improve Access
http://www1.oecd.org/cem/topics/handicaps/pdf/TPH0007rev1e.pdf

Consultative Arrangements
http://www1.oecd.org/cem/topics/handicaps/pdf/TPH0008rev1e.pdf

Charter on Access to Transport Services and Infrastructure
Adopted by ECMT Council in 1999

Joint ECMT-IRU Study on Taxi Access
ECMT, Paris, 2001
http://www1.oecd.org/cem/topics/handicaps/tphpub.htm

"Improving Transport for People with Mobility Handicaps:
A Guide to Good Practice"
ECMT, Paris, 1999
http://www1.oecd.org/cem/topics/handicaps/tpphpub.htm