European Conference

On

Transport and Accessibility,

Taking the Challenge Further

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Opening Speech

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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.
Monsieur le Ministre, Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you all on behalf of the European Conference of Ministers of Transport to this important event. We are very pleased to be a partner with the French Ministère de l'Equipement in the organisation of this day of exchange among elected officials, transport organisations, policy makers and associations of disabled persons and their constituencies on the critical issue of accessibility to transport.

“Allons plus loin: Taking the challenge further”. This is our charge for the day.

This is in fact a very appropriate mandate for our discussions today, as we come to the end of 2003 European Year for People with Disabilities. This special year has quite effectively turned the spotlight to issues surrounding disability and drawn the attention of transport policy makers, operators and authorities to the need to improve accessibility to transport services and infrastructure for everyone.

But it is essential that the energies devoted this year to increasing awareness of accessibility problems not dissipate on 31 December. If this year serves any purpose at all, then it must be to transmit the message that accessibility must no longer reside in the margins of transport policy and operations: it is now time that accessibility figure among the principal preoccupations of all actors and stakeholders in the transport system.

The ECMT has for over 15 years been working with transport policy makers, operators and authorities at all levels of government to develop and implement policies that facilitate access to transport for all people, particularly for those who for reasons of disability, age or other find their mobility constrained.

Much progress has been made over the last couple of decades. Awareness is greater, integration in policy making has improved, the approaches have moved from voluntary ones to stronger more legislative ones. More specifically

- The number of low-floor buses continues to grow, and this is now obligatory for new buses thanks to recent EU legislation;
- New light rail networks and tramways are completely accessible in more and more cases;
- Many metro and rail networks are being retrofitted and renovated to improve their accessibility;
- And air and maritime transport are working towards better access to their services and facilities for passengers with limited mobility;
- There have been improvements in information flow and planning for people with disabilities;
- Adaptations to cars allow many people to drive safely.
On the policy side, the majority of countries in Europe and a growing number of operators now recognise the benefits of better mobility for disabled and elderly clients of the transport system.

Many countries now have basic civil rights or anti discrimination legislation rendering illegal any form of discrimination against persons with disabilities -- including lack of access to transport services and facilities. And increasingly refined technical standards are setting parameters for improving access to vehicles and infrastructure.

That there is progress was made clear to us earlier this Spring, when along with the European Disability Forum, we organised a joint prize for Accessibility to Transport Services and Infrastructure. Over 60 candidate dossiers were received, the majority of them excellent examples of initiatives being taken throughout Europe to improve accessibility. The two winners’ ex-aquo of the prize, the SMTC from Grenoble and VAG from Nürnberg, are represented today, as is the runner-up to the prize, HKL of Helsinki. These transport companies demonstrated long-standing commitment to improving the accessibility of their transport systems – and showed long-term results based on committed dialogue and consultation with the disability organisations in their communities.

A great deal however remains to be done. The signing of the French national charter on accessibility this morning is a clear sign that many of France’s principal transport service providers and authorities are committed to continuing to improve accessibility to transport in this country. From our experience, the most important thing now is to have mechanisms for following up this Charter, for monitoring implementation and for correcting failures to carry out obligations.

In 1999 ECMT Ministers signed a Charter on Access to Transport Services and Infrastructure that in particular calls for public funding to be conditional on compliance with accessibility principles. This demonstrates that Transport Ministers have made the commitment to ensure that all new transport infrastructure should be constructed to take into account the needs of people with disabilities. This Charter has also been agreed in principle by the European Commission, and the same principles should apply to spending by the European Union on Transport projects. The application of this charter will ensure that we do not make mistakes in infrastructure provision, mistakes that will be with us for 40 or 50 years.

In general, we have the political declarations and the promises that we need. It is really time to go beyond them and ensure compliance. We are ready now in Europe to move on from voluntary agreements, from guidelines and codes of practice to a legislative framework which will guarantee accessibility in the future. But such an endeavour takes time and everyone involved including people with disabilities and their representatives have an important role here in following up on existing commitments and promises and in keeping the subject on the agenda.
ECMT will continue to work on improving access for all and in trying to bring the subject into the mainstream of policy. We look forward to working together in order to achieve the aim of a transport system where it will only be the inaccessible parts that have to be indicated.