

ROAD TRANSPORT AND DISABLED PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

Access to transport is essential for the participation and inclusion in social and economic life, and indispensable for independence and personal fulfillment. Journeys on the roads – as drivers or pedestrians - constitute a large majority of all journeys undertaken in Europe.

Persons with reduced mobility are often depending on their private cars, as public transport does not always fulfill accessibility requirements. Despite this, the road environment today is more often than not insufficiently adapted to the needs of disabled people, which constitute a great barrier for their equal use of the public roads and as a consequence limit their independence and inclusion.

Every year within the European Union there are also about 40 000 persons who lose their lives on the European roads, and many thousands become disabled or injured in any other way. In addition, evidence shows that disabled people are at an increased risk of involvement in such road accidents.

Ensuring accessible and safe roads benefits everybody, as accessibility means also comfort and high quality. Accessibility makes life easier and safer for elderly people, pedestrians with buggies or heavy luggage, pregnant women or persons with temporary disabilities.

It is therefore crucial that measures are taken, in close cooperation with accessibility experts from the disability movement, in order to ensure that everybody, including disabled people, can benefit from a safe and accessible road transport environment.

1. THE EUROPEAN DISABILITY FORUM

The European Disability Forum (EDF), founded in 1997, is the representative organisation of the approximately 50 million disabled people in the European Union. Its mission is to ensure disabled citizens' full access to fundamental and human rights through their active involvement in policy development and implementation in the European Union. To this aim, EDF is working closely with the EU institutions, but also with other international organisations, such as the Council of Europe and the United Nations, specifically throughout the process leading to the adoption in December 2006 of the new UN Convention on the rights and dignity of disabled people, covering all areas of life.

The full membership of EDF is two-fold. It is constituted of all national disability Councils of the EU (plus Norway and Iceland) and of the European Disability-Specific non-governmental organisations. This structure allows EDF to speak with one, strong, single voice, defending and promoting the rights of all disabled people more efficiently.

Disabled people cover a wide range of persons with very varying needs, including people who have reduced mobility or a chronic illness, people with sensory impairments and persons who have an intellectual disability or a psycho-social disability. Common for all those persons is that they face social exclusion and discrimination in most areas of life.

EDF has been working since ten years to address the various barriers that disabled people face in their every-day life. Central to our ideology is the social model of disability, which means that disabled people do not face disadvantage because of their impairments alone, but experience discrimination in the way we organize society. If society respected and believed in principles of design-for-all and equal opportunities, impaired people would be less restricted by their impairment and able to participate in society on an equal basis as other citizens. EDF tries to mainstream disability in all policy areas, as almost all political decisions have an impact on disabled people and require therefore specific considerations in order to ensure full inclusion of disabled people.

2. ACCESS TO TRANSPORT

Being able to travel independently is necessary for full participation and inclusion in economic and social life. However, as public transport is rarely fully adapted to the needs of people with disabilities, many disabled individuals rely on their private car. Yet, there are barriers created by the management and operation of our roads and parking systems and design of vehicles that restrict access for disabled people even to this mode of transport.

Therefore, when it comes to road transport, there are still a series of measures to be taken in order to ensure full access and a high level of protection for the disabled road users, who constitute a particularly vulnerable group of road users, as well the disabled pedestrians as drivers with a disability.

2.1. Access for drivers with a disability

Reallocation of road space is a measure that is often promoted when it comes to increasing safety and promoting a sustainable road environment.

This is indeed a valuable and important measure to undertake, but only acceptable as long as the reallocation ensures equal travel opportunities for disabled people. As disabled people – and in particular persons with mobility impairments – often rely on their cars, reallocation of road space must be made in a way that does not create a disadvantage for disabled drivers who will otherwise suffer from less road space for their daily mobility. For example, reallocation of road space in favor of public transport must guarantee that measures are taken to ensure accessible public transport vehicles, just as roads being closed to motorized transport in favor of pedestrians must be usable for disabled persons.

Other measures to promote sustainability, such as road tolls, must be exempted for disabled people as long as acceptable alternatives to the car are not available for them. This is even the more important as disabled people also generally live on lower incomes or social security (due to insufficient measures to include disabled people in e.g. the employment market and access barriers to education etc.).

Road access for disabled drivers also implies that there must be a sufficient number of disabled parking places and accessible facilities at the resting areas along the roads. The

complex traffic environment could also be made easier in order to facilitate some traffic situations.

Another concrete barrier today constitute the emergency telephones on Motorways, which are set at a height that is unsuitable for a wheelchair user in general, and there is rarely any provision for deaf people in the design of those telephones.

When it comes to safety for disabled drivers, drivers of adapted vehicles do not run a greater risk for accidents than drivers in general.

2. 2. Safety and access for disabled pedestrians

Disabled people use the footpaths of the roads, where those exist, as pedestrians or wheelchair users.

Scooters and some kinds of electrical wheelchairs are allowed on the roads together with motorised transport or at the cyclist lanes under some circumstances and depending on national legislation.

There are several measures that could be taken to ensure better safety and access for disabled pedestrians.

2.2.1. *Persons with sensory impairments*

People with visual impairments run a much more important risk for accidents than other pedestrians. Many visually impaired individuals also feel unsafe in the traffic, which lead many of those persons to avoid situations that they experience as dangerous or unsafe.

Several measures can increase access and safety for persons with sensory impairments:

- Good, non-dazzling, lighting of the roads make it easier for persons with visual impairments to orient themselves;
- Walking paths and cycling lanes should be well maintained and preferably divided;
- Installation of audio tactile pushbuttons and audio signals for persons with visual impairments;
- Tactile paving to ensure essential information to persons who are blind or visually impaired (for example tactile tiles of contrasting colour to the surrounding pavement or the blister surface that warns of the presence of dropped kerbs etc). However, different countries use different standards for guide paths, which cause some uncertainty and even safety risks for persons with a visual impairment travelling around in Europe;
- Clearly marking of obstacles or protruding objects to alert persons with visual impairments;
- Special road signs and low-speed zones close to hospitals, special schools etc, alerting the drivers that there are many people with visual impairments or persons who are hard-of-hearing crossing the street at a particular place:



This Swedish road traffic sign indicates that there is an increased number of people who are have a visual impairment in this area. Drivers or any other road user must be particularly attentive as pedestrians might not see the traffic.



This international road traffic sign indicates that there is an increased number of persons who are deaf or hard-of-hearing in the area. Drivers or any other road user must be particularly attentive as the pedestrians might not hear approaching cars, cyclists or other pedestrians.

There are also variants of those road traffic signs. However, some countries do not use any such signs.

2.2.2. Persons with reduced mobility

In many cities, and even the more in rural areas, it is difficult for many persons with reduced mobility to move around independently. Sometimes there are no pavements, which means that a vulnerable road user may have to walk or push themselves directly on the road. This is not satisfactory, as you are exposed to greater risks when you share the roadspace with motorized vehicles. You are less visible as a wheelchair user because of your low height compared to other modes of transport, but also more exposed to dangers as you are not inside a vehicle.

Where there are pavements these are not always ramped, which makes it difficult for wheelchair users to access. In addition, accessible pavements do not always respect the need for firm and stable surfaces and are sometimes too narrow for wheelchair users.

These are some measures which facilitate access for persons with reduced mobility:

- Modifying centre median strips to allow pedestrians to wait in a safe area in the middle of the road and cross one stream of traffic at the time;
- Another possibility is to increase the walk time to cross roads at traffic lights, or installing microwave detectors which can increase the time to get across the road, based on how fast you are moving;
- Installing pedestrian traffic lights where those do not already exist;
- Lower pedestrian pushbuttons to make it easier for wheelchair users to use those;
- Dropping the kerbs – wheelchair users risk tipping the wheelchair over in addition to the difficulties in going up and down the pavement if the kerbs are not dropped.
- Making the gaps on pavements of limited size to prevent wheelchair wheels and cane tips from being caught in surface openings or gaps.

2.2.3 Persons with other disabilities

Evidence show that also persons with disabilities such as intellectual disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or Psycho-Social disabilities are over-represented among

pedestrian accidents. Many of these disabilities are invisible.

Ensuring access for disabled people to roads and road transport does therefore not only imply physical adaptations of the road infrastructure.

Road safety education measures are important and efficient. This kind of training must be targeted both to the disabled road users – for example roadside training - and the non-disabled drivers, who need increased understanding and sensibility about disabled road users.

Road safety education among children is well established in many countries, but disabled children can not always benefit from these interventions. There is a need for disabled children to get equal education, adapted to their reality. The general training to all children must also cover the needs and specificities of disabled children.

3. THE ROLE OF THE VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS

Everyone must work within their area of responsibility in order to ensure that disabled people will have the same opportunity to travel as non-disabled persons.

No public money should be used for funding an inaccessible road environment. All investments must ensure equal access for all.

Guidance on road safety education for people with disabilities needs to be issued to the various stakeholders. This might necessitate some evaluation of existing training tools and collation of best practice from professionals, schools, colleges and carers.

All stakeholders in the road infrastructure construction and decision-making must be committed to take all necessary measures to mainstream accessibility in their work conception from the very initial stage of all new construction planning. Consultation and cooperation with organisations of disabled people throughout the process, from the very outset when the physical environment is being designed, is indispensable in order to create successful solutions respecting principles of design for all.

Any road work undertaken must also be executed in a way that complies with access requirements and contractors should be encouraged to develop production methods that facilitate accessibility for disabled persons.

As an example of best practice it could be mentioned that the Swedish Road Administration has developed a “Disabled Persons Policy” ensuring among other things the progressive achievement of full accessibility and involvement of organizations of disabled people from the very conception of any road work. All employees must also undergo disability awareness-training covering the rights, needs and potential of disabled people, as well as how disabled people can contribute. Every employee of the Swedish Road Administration must be familiar with this policy and work according to its intentions.

Information is also an area where disabled road users all too often face barriers. All general information provided to the public about the road infrastructure and about any work undertaken must be provided in accessible formats.



*Sign for the right to non-discrimination of disabled people -
Support our campaign aiming at collecting one million signatures of EU citizens in favour
of the adoption of an EU disability-specific directive
covering all areas of life.*

www.1million4disability.eu

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...and, most importantly, extensive personal experience of members of the European Disability Forum.

