SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND GENERATIONAL ISSUES IN ACCESSIBLE PUBLIC TRANSPORT IN EUROPE

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1. SUMMARY

This paper presents the concepts and recommendations on successfully tackling social, cultural and generational issues in public transport (PT) services in the European Union (EU). This was part of the ACCESS2ALL (A2A) project which aimed at defining concrete mobility schemes, guidelines and policy recommendations to ensure the accessibility of public transport to all users, especially for mobility-impaired (MI) passengers. A2A is funded under the Seventh Research Framework Program of the European Commission.

Highlights of the results were:
- An international review of policies, practices and issues for PT operators to accommodate social, cultural and generational issues was undertaken, including issues on service animals and guide dogs.
- A list of key social, cultural and generational issues affecting MI users of PT had been identified.
- A total of 47 proposed solutions were developed under 7 topics: i.e. Socio-spatial Exclusion; Gender; Communication and Information; Culture and Customs; Racism; Ageism and Children and Youth. Each recommendation was classified into 5 fields: Policy, Training, Implementation, Research and Evaluation.
- A checklist had been developed for the PT transit operators to tackle the 7 topics listed above.

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Key Words: social, cultural, generational issues, accessible public transport, best practices, guide dogs.
2. PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

The primary aim of the European A2A was to define concrete mobility schemes, guidelines and policy recommendations to ensure the accessibility of public transport to all users [http://www.access-to-all.eu/]. This paper was a sub-study that addresses its third objective to provide guidance on how to optimally incorporate social, cultural and generational issues into PT service provision and to increase ridership by mobility-impaired (MI) users. The context, Europe, is a multicultural society. Comfort, security and accessibility of public transport (PT) services are critical attributes for users from different socio-economic, ethnic and age groups, each with distinct travel needs and requirements. Issues such as socio-spatial exclusion, gender, cross-generational information and communication, culture and customs, racism and intolerance, etc. need to be addressed so that PT systems can provide all users with an affordable, comfortable and secure travel experience.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology employed included an exhaustive literature search drawn from the Internet, reports, journal articles, news articles and conference proceedings. Survey results obtained from a user forum at the Porto Workshop held on September 29, 2009 were used to identify issues, priorities and recommendations. A framework was developed to group the recommendations into Policy, Training, Implementation, Research and Evaluation categories. Finally, a detailed checklist had been compiled for PT operators and planners to use as tools.

Eighty seven (87) documents sourced from the Internet, reports, journal articles, news articles and conference proceedings were reviewed. The literature was classified into three main themes (i.e. social, cultural and generational) according to the terms of reference. Issues, recommendations and checklist under these three categories affecting MI users of PT had been identified, analyzed and developed from the literature and the survey results of the September 2009 user forum in Porto.

4. SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND GENERATIONAL ISSUES FOR MI-PT USERS

MI users is a broadly defined category that encompasses an extremely heterogeneous group of population, who may have functional limitations ranging from physical (i.e. motor, visual, hearing, speech, etc. impairments), to cognitive (memory, reaction time, orientation and way finding, etc.) and communication (i.e. ability to read and write, language understanding, dyslexia, etc.) issues. Also, a user’s method of coping may depend on whether the impairment is congenital or temporary in nature. Note that all of the social, cultural and generational issues identified below for PT users will become even more problematic if they have mobility impairments.

4.1 Social Issues

4.1.1 Gender

Women had particular travel patterns that were not well accommodated by PT, including travelling at off-peak hours and taking multi-purpose trips with many stops
Women were more likely to be travelling with parcels, strollers, children, and older/disabled passengers [The University of East London 2006]. Women were apprehensive about safety in PT, especially when travelling at night and the likelihood of facing sexual harassment [News World, 2009; Department for Transport, UK, 2000]. Being mobility-impaired could increase the exposure rate of female passengers to such risks.

There was a scarcity of research data on female users. Female MI users’ perspective in planning and implementation of PT services was not routinely sought. These partly explained why PT vehicle and infrastructure were not necessarily well designed with the needs of women of all age groups in mind.

4.1.2 Socio-spatial Exclusion
Many poor, isolated neighbourhoods were underserved by PT thus making it even harder for MI users to travel [Lucas 2002, p.12; Pashalidis 2006]. Cost of travel for people with low income could be an additional mobility burden [Lucas 2002, p.17]. PT in rural areas was particularly inadequate, making travel difficult for all users [Lucas 2002; TranSystems Corporation 2006]. This situation was true for the Roma people, commonly known as gypsies. Many of them still live a nomadic lifestyle and are generally found in settlements outside cities in Central and Eastern Europe. They rarely have access to adequate transportation [OMCT 2004; Papayova and Stevanovic 2006; Zoon 2001].

4.2 Cultural Issues
4.2.1 Communication and Information
PT users who did not speak the local language would have difficulties communicating with PT staff and other passengers, as well as understanding maps, schedules, websites, security/emergency information, announcements, etc. [Social Research Associates, 2003]. Passengers with visual-impairments might not be familiar with the local version of Braille signage in terminals and vehicles [New World Encyclopaedia, 2008]. Similarly, sign language could vary by country and region, a challenge to passengers with hearing impairments [Zeichensprache.org, 2009]. For those with sensory, cognitive and mental impairments, difficulties in comprehension and communication could hinder transport accessibility [International Transport Forum, 2009]. Non-verbal communication, such as eye contact and voice level, varies by culture and could lead to misunderstandings, further compounding the mobility problems of affected groups [Matsumoto, 2006].

4.2.2 Cultural Perception of Guide Dogs
Transit passengers with visual impairments often travel with service animals, the most common being guide dogs. Most countries in Europe and around the world allow service animals and guide dogs on all public transport modes. For private transport, policies and practices are less well defined and lack consistency in their applications. In the same country, there could be several access regulations with different geographical scope. In others, there might be no regulations at all. In addition, the policy for guide dogs could vary between transport modes [http://www.euroblind.org/fichiersGB/dogsaccess.htm].
The biggest issue with carriage of guide dogs worldwide occurs in the taxi industry. In Belgium, taxi drivers may refuse carriage if he/she is afraid or allergic to the service animal. However, the most common recurring contention arises from Muslim taxi drivers denying guide dogs onboard vehicles because dogs are considered unclean in the Islam religion. Many anecdotal accounts have been reported worldwide: UK [Keegan, 2009]; US, [http://www.affluent.net/sara/saratext.html]; Canada [Sinoski, K. 2007] and Japan [http://www.zenoaq.jp/english/aij/0610.html]. In the majority of cases, when the passenger filed a complaint, the court had consistently found the driver guilty with fines imposed as penalty [Keegan, 2009].

4.2.3 Cultural Customs

In different religions, the day of rest vary from Fridays for Islam, Saturdays for Judaism, and Sunday for Christians. Reduced schedules on Sundays and other Christian holidays could be an inconvenience to non-Christians MI PT users [BBC, 2009]. Drivers with religious beliefs that disallow physical contact with persons of the opposite sex except their own family members would refuse rendering help to MI users of the opposite sex [Rosenbloo, 2002; Wright, 2006].

Certain cultural practices could be contentious due to heightened security measures on the PT system. For example, female passengers wearing face veils could encounter problems in verification or security screening procedures that require visual identification [CTV, 2009; CBC, 2009]. The kirpan, a ceremonial blunt dagger carried by Sikh men, could be refused carriage on transport vehicles, especially where there is no clear policy from transport providers [Singh, Kaur & Singh, 2005]. Another inconvenience experienced by Muslims passengers is the lack of ablution facilities in public washrooms and even less so in accessible toilets [Islam Online, 2009]. For some religions, there are rules about physical separation for people of the opposite sex. Hence, seating in PT could be problematic for passengers of opposite sex, especially for MI passengers who require designated wheelchair spaces or priority seating arrangements [Berger, 1995].

4.2.4 Racism and Intolerance

Within the confined space inside a transport vehicle, conflicts could be triggered by seemingly trivial matters and arguments. There were cases when minority ethnic groups were subjected to racial harassment and violence in public transport situations from fellow passengers [BBC, 2009; Buaras, 2005]. Further, there were incidences of intolerance and cultural conflict with operators and drivers, which could be even more difficult for MI users to handle [The Local, 2009; Singh, Kaur & Singh, 2005].

4.3 Generational Issues

4.3.1 Older adults

A third of the population in Europe will be over 60 by the year 2025 with a corresponding increase in the number of MI users [Swedish National Institute of Public Health 2009]. This will place a heavier demand on accessible transit. With more seniors travelling onboard PT vehicles, there could be reluctance by other passengers to give priority seating to older passengers [Sahay 2008; Lewis 2008]. Members of the public could have the misconception that all older passengers, including those who have no mobility difficulties, should use specialized transport rather than competing for rides in regular PT services [Harrold 2009].
Older passengers with mobility issues might find public transportation inaccessible; e.g. bus-stop too far away, vehicle design not easy to use, high costs, communication/information difficult to comprehend, etc. [Intelligent Energy Europe 2009; Svensson & Wretstrand 2007]. Hence, older travelers with mobility issues might prefer to continue using the car out of habit rather than switching to PT [Intelligent Energy Europe 2009; Svensson & Wretstrand 2007].

4.3.2 Children and Youth

Minority youth in particular felt discriminated against by other passengers and operators [Department for Transport, UK, 2006; Social Research Associates 2003]. There were cases where misunderstandings and conflicts arose between youth and service operators or amongst young passengers themselves in transport situations [Department for Transport, UK, 2006].

Due to capacity constraints, strollers could be refused carriage depending on the availability of wheelchair/stroller stations already on board the PT vehicle [CTVOttawa.ca, 2008].

Often, children with disabilities could not participate in extracurricular activities after-school due to lack of accessible transport service [Stobbs, 2008].

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

A framework was developed to group the recommendations into Policy (P), Training (T), Implementation (I), Research (R) and Evaluation (E). The following list consists of 47 proposed solutions, with 14 having multiple designations.

5.1 SOCIAL ISSUES RECOMMENDATIONS

5.2.1 Gender

It is recommended MI women should be represented in the planning process so that their values, needs and interests could be reflected in transport policies [Christensen, Poulsen & Oldrup, 2007] (P). Service providers should embark on new directions which better suit the needs of female MI users in terms of accessible travel information, more demand-responsive PT services, and improved use of technologies [The University of East London, 2006] (P) (I).

Transport planners and operators should conduct more research on the trip pattern of female MI users [Department for Transport, UK, 2000], e.g., trip planning, ticketing, and communication on board vehicles and terminals (R). They should perform regular evaluation on the vehicle, terminal and stop design with the needs of female MI users in mind, especially those travelling with small children and baggage, and focusing on step height and night safety, amongst other requirements [Department for Transport, UK, 2000] (R) (E). The Gender Audit Checklist [Department for Transport, UK, 2000] could be a useful tool to for the evaluation exercise (I).
5.2.2 **Socio-spatial Exclusion**
More research should be undertaken by transport planners and operators on underserviced suburban areas to see if MI users are getting adequate service frequency and coverage \((R)\). The lack of public transportation for ethnic minorities with MI users (e.g. Roma, immigrants from Africa, and S. America, the Central and Eastern European countries and the Middle East) should be studied in depth \((R)\).

Transport operators could employ service coordination techniques, innovative funding schemes, flexible routes, taxi subsidy and volunteer-driver programs in the improvement of rural services for MI users [TranSystems Corporation 2006] \((I)\).

5.2 **CULTURAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

5.2.1 **Communication and Information**
Transport service providers were encouraged to publish transit schedules in minority language papers [Social Research Associates, 2003], especially information on services for seniors and travellers with disabilities \((I)\). Moreover, they could hire more frontline staff from minority groups and have them wear badges showing the languages they could speak [Social Research Associates, 2003] \((P)\) \((I)\).

Transport providers could install translation software in the automated telephone information services, electronic information kiosks and auditory orientation signage systems (e.g. the remote infrared “talking signs”) [Social Research Associates, 2003] \((I)\). Websites could be set up in languages used by the local community [Social Research Associates, 2003] \((I)\). Alternative communication method, such as text messaging and email for schedule and route information [Social Research Associates, 2003] \((I)\) could be used to disseminate real time information and announcements in multiple formats [International Transport Forum, 2009]. Clear, simple language and signage in universal symbols [International Transport Forum, 2009] \((I)\) should be used throughout the system, including information packages distributed to new MI PT users [Social Research Associates, 2003] \((P)\) \((I)\).

Researchers should conduct studies on the regional/national variations in Braille and sign languages on their usability by second-language speakers with hearing or visually impairments \((R)\). More work is needed to reveal situations that could cause misunderstanding between MI users and frontline transit staff due to cultural differences in verbal and non-verbal communication \((R)\).

5.2.2 **Culture and Customs**
Transport planners should conduct research on the impact that reduced level of services on Sundays and other Christian holidays could have on PT usability by non-Christian MI users and seniors \((R)\).

PT and taxi companies should establish clear policies to permit the carriage of guide dogs and other service animals on buses, paratransit vehicles and taxis \((P)\). Policies and procedures should be set up in taxi companies to allow for the re-assignment of trips involving passengers with guide dogs to drivers who have no objection or allergies to service animals [Sinoski, 2007] \((P)\) \((I)\). When passengers with service animals were refused access to PT and taxis without being offered viable alternative means of travel, a complaint process should be put in place to resolve such conflicts.
Harmonized EU policies in PT for service animals especially on guide dogs to facilitate universal access and the seamless travel chain are urgently needed (P).

PT operators should implement training and sensitization programs for drivers and frontline staff on how to assist and accommodate passengers with service animals (T). Community outreach videos on the cultural and religious practices of the diverse ethnic groups could be an effective tool to sensitize users, PT staff and the public (I) (T).

Transit systems could implement swipe or contactless smart cards that do not require photo ID [Social Research Associates, 2003] for all PT users (I). Service policies should be adopted to provide for the assignment of same-sex drivers to assist MI users whose religion does not permit body contact from helpers of the opposite sex; and to permit their family members to board paratransit vehicles as attendants (P) (I). In PT terminals, there should be at least one accessible washroom with ablation hose available for MI users, staff and the public (P) (I).

5.2.3 Racism and Intolerance
PT management should set up a system to receive complaints about abusive or discriminatory behaviour by passengers and staff. Feedback forms should be available in local community languages and be accessible to all. Complaints should be monitored and followed up with due diligence [Social Research Associates, 2003] (P) (I). Sensitivity training courses on understanding religious and cultural customs, on how to deal with racial conflicts amongst passengers and between passengers and staff, should be implemented for frontline staff [Social Research Associates, 2003] (T).

5.3 GENERATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS
5.3.1 Ageing Population
Transport planners and operators should conduct research on the travel needs of older women, especially those with mobility impairments (R). Public awareness campaigns to encourage able-bodied users to yield seats for older people should be implemented (I).

PT drivers should be sensitized on the needs of older users, especially those with disabilities (T). Community organizations and transport service providers should develop programs to encourage and train older adults to use PT [Intelligent Energy Europe, 2009] (I) (T).

5.3.2 Children and Youth
More research on the needs of young MI users (R) is required. Drivers should receive training on how to interact with young MI users (T). PT operators should develop clear policies on how many strollers and personal mobility devices could be accommodated on board (P).

6. CONCLUSIONS
PT is used by all age groups, each having different requirements and needs. Special attention should be paid to social, cultural and generational issues in the provision of
transportation services for all in the EU. While the aforesaid three factors are not inherent impediments per se to PT travel, yet they pose additional burden to MI users who are already disadvantaged.

The list of priority recommendations for PT operators to follow are:

6.1 **Conduct Research**
- on the usability and types of communication and information media and ICT devices most applicable to older MI users of both sexes;
- on the needs of young, older and socially marginalized MI users in the transport system as a social arena;

6.2 **Establish Uniform Policy**
- on carriage of guide dogs and service animals within the EU;
- on number, size and types of transportable personal mobility devices (strollers, wheelchairs, power wheelchairs, etc.) allowed on transit vehicles;

6.3 **Provide Improved Services**
- in multilingual transit information and communication systems;
- in mobility options available to transportation-disadvantaged MI users;

6.4 **Implement Programs and Systems**
- to raise public awareness about the need and requirements of MI users, in all age groups, of both sexes, and for those with diverse social, cultural and religious backgrounds;
- to train and sensitize transit management and frontline staff on issues and needs related to MI users, in all age groups, of both sexes, and for those with diverse social, cultural and religious backgrounds;
- to implement mobility counseling/training program for MI users of all age groups, both sexes, and for those with diverse social, cultural and religious backgrounds;
- to establish a complaint resolution system for MI users to remedy problematic situation and services in PT.

7. REFERENCES


http://ottawa.ctv.ca/servlet/an/local/CTVNews/20081008/OTT_strollers_081008/20081008/?hub=OttawaHome


