

Orientation and Mobility Challenges Around the World

Maryanne Diamond

The World Blind Union (WBU) is an international not-for-profit organisation, representing people who are blind or partially sighted worldwide. The WBU is recognised as the international voice of persons who are blind or partially sighted speaking on their behalf at the United Nations, UN agencies and other international organisations. Its mission is achieved with and through its members – organisations of persons who are blind and partially sighted and organisations providing services to persons who are blind and partially sighted in some 190 countries and through six Regional Unions.

The World Blind Union (WBU) believes that lack of proper mobility training, access to the built environment, and inaccessible transportation pose some of the most significant obstacles to persons who are blind and partially sighted in accessing community services, education and employment, and participating fully in their communities.

This paper addresses the challenges of accessibility experienced by WBU members, outlines some of the initiatives the WBU is undertaking to overcome these and suggests ways the O&M sector could work with the WBU.

Here are some important facts about blindness:

- The World Health Organisation estimates there are 285 million persons who are blind or partially sighted worldwide
- Of these, 39 million are totally blind
- Close to 90% of these persons live in developing countries

- Less than 10% of children who are blind living in developing countries receive any form of education
- Unemployment of persons who are blind or partially sighted is around 90% in developing countries and around 70% in the most developed world
- Between 95 – 99% of published books are never produced in a format which can be read by people who are blind or partially sighted.

The challenges of accessibility fall into three areas: (i) accessing the built environment (ii) using transportation and (iii) access to mobility training.

The built environment includes the issues of silent vehicles, shared spaces, way finding, and suitable pedestrian infrastructure such as footpaths and accessible pedestrian signals.

The issue of silent cars has resulted in a great deal of advocacy over recent years. The UN WP-29 (World Forum for Harmonization of Vehicle Regulations) is

working on developing a Global Technical Regulation (GTR) to establish a minimum sound standard for electric and hybrid electric vehicles. They have established a working group known as the Quiet Road Transport Vehicle (QRTV) to which WBU has a representative.

The trend towards shared spaces is being rolled out in many parts of the world. The WBU shares the concerns of many about the safety and loss of independent mobility that these shared space environments pose.

In many parts of the world where our members live, transportation of any kind often does not exist or is not safe to use. Moreover, the lack of consistent footpaths makes using public transportation very challenging. Where public transportation does exist, a problem often encountered by our members relates to location of entry points, information about payment, services, timetables, wayfinding within transportation terminals, and the huge issue of safety.

All forms of transportation are affected by the issue of use of dog guides. Even in the most developed world where there is legislation permitting access, this legislation is inconsistent, imposing barriers for travel from one country to another. In addition, users of dog guides continue to fight battles that arise from being denied entry to venues and/or taxi services.

Access to mobility training services is a major issue for our members in all parts of the world. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) which came into force in 2006 is one of the greatest tools we have which can make

a real difference to accessibility. There are two articles of particular relevance - Article 9: Accessibility, and Article 20: Personal Mobility.

The WBU has developed a Toolkit to assist our members to advocate with their governments to sign, ratify, implement, and monitor the CRPD. Access to information plays a key role in accessing the built environment, transport, and access to appropriate services. The WBU is working to achieve a treaty which would allow the sharing of information produced in alternate formats, under exceptions to national copyright law, be shared with persons who are blind in other countries.

Our technology working group has as one of its priorities the promotion of affordable mobile devices. A great deal of work is happening with manufacturers to ensure that their products are accessible 'off the shelf'. There are Apps. for wayfinding that are accessible in addition to the devices developed specifically for persons who are blind. Of course, access to resources to purchase such devices and obtain the training in how to use these is something we need to address.

Suggested areas where the WBU and the O&M sector could work together include:

- Research, bringing together the perspective of persons who are blind and those providing services
- Problem-solving the ways to bring more mobility training services to those who currently have no or very limited services

-
- Harnessing the technological advances to ensure their accessibility and providing appropriate training in their use
 - Promoting accessibility of mainstream devices at the design stage.

*Maryanne Diamond, B.Sc., Grad. Dip (IT), President
World Blind Union, Kooyong, Melbourne; e-mail:
<maryanne.diamond@visionaustralia.org >.*