



## Accessibility: How to design and promote an environment accessible to all

November 2009

### HANDICAP INTERNATIONAL

#### About...

#### Handicap International

“Handicap International is an independent and impartial international aid organisation working in situations of poverty and exclusion, conflict and disaster.

It works alongside people with disabilities and vulnerable populations, taking action and bearing witness in order to respond to their essential needs, improve their living conditions and promote respect for their dignity and fundamental rights.”

[www.handicap-international.org](http://www.handicap-international.org)

#### About... this brief

#### Authors

Éric PLANTIER-ROYON  
Priscille GEISER  
Hugues NOUVELLET

#### Editor

Handicap International  
Technical Resources  
Division  
Knowledge Management  
Unit

14, avenue Berthelot  
69361 Lyon cedex 07  
France

[publications@handicap-international.org](mailto:publications@handicap-international.org)

Editing and layout  
Stéphanie DEYGAS

This policy brief is an introduction to Handicap International's 2009 policy paper on accessibility. It provides an overview of Handicap International's activities in this sector. We would encourage you to read the full version of the policy paper available at:

English version:

[http://www.hiproweb.org/uploads/tx\\_hidrtdocs/AccessibilityBD\\_01.pdf](http://www.hiproweb.org/uploads/tx_hidrtdocs/AccessibilityBD_01.pdf)

French version:

[http://www.hiproweb.org/uploads/tx\\_hidrtdocs/AccessibiliteBD\\_01.pdf](http://www.hiproweb.org/uploads/tx_hidrtdocs/AccessibiliteBD_01.pdf)



### Key messages

- People with disabilities encounter numerous barriers in their physical environment, including **physical barriers that prevent them from participating in social, cultural and professional life** on an equal basis with other citizens and fully exercising their rights. A barrier-free environment is a key factor in the social inclusion of people with disabilities. Accessibility increases their participation and mobility and is a pre-requisite for a truly inclusive society.
- Since its inception, Handicap International has been working to reduce barriers to the full social participation of people with disabilities. To this end, it develops **one-off actions for improving the accessibility of the physical environment** (by adapting public buildings, for example), as well as **full-scale projects approaching accessibility as a cross-cutting issue** and in all its forms, including access to public transport, information and means of communication. In **development settings**, as well as during **post-emergency reconstruction**, the aim is to build strategies and projects that reduce barriers to the participation of people with disabilities by working in close cooperation with other development actors, local communities and/or authorities.
- In accessibility field, as in every other field, Handicap International works and campaigns for **all types of impairment** to be taken into account, not just physical. Contrary to common belief, accessibility does not just concern people with physical impairments; a whole series of actions can be implemented for people with other types of impairment.

# Why Handicap International works on accessibility



## Definitions

- **Accessibility** means that everyone has equal access to the built environment regardless of their aptitudes. It can be defined as providing individuals, in any location and whatever their aptitudes, with the opportunity to take part in an activity or set of activities within the built environment. It implies that the built environment is really usable by all.
- The **unbroken mobility chain** refers to a situation in which a person with disabilities can move around freely from their home to town, to any building or place they choose by any means of transport and return home without encountering barriers or becoming exhausted. One missing link is enough to undo all the efforts and improvements made elsewhere and can result in the exclusion of people with disabilities by making the environment inaccessible to them. The unbroken nature of the “mobility chain” is therefore a crucial factor in ensuring free movement within the built environment for all.
- A **barrier-free environment** implies that everyone, whatever their age or aptitudes, can move freely within this environment without encountering barriers.

Throughout the world, and in developing countries in particular, people with disabilities suffer from limited access to basic services such as health care, schools, training, employment, public transport, water and sanitation, etc. Yet access to these services is fundamental if people with disabilities are to participate fully in the life of their community. In order to improve this access, it is crucial to work on physical accessibility aspects.

## Situational disability

The importance attributed to environmental factors in the conceptual Disability Creation Process model highlights the extent to which the environment can be a barrier to the social participation of people with disabilities. Individuals can be considered to be in a disabling situation when the interaction between personal factors and environmental factors prevents them from accomplishing their life habits. This is why the projects developed by Handicap International target not only the people themselves but also their environment. Actions to improve accessibility modify not only the physical environment but also means of information and communication, thereby reducing the barriers or environmental factors creating disability situations. It is the environment that must be adapted to the person, and not the other way round.

## Developing an unbroken mobility chain

Ensuring the accessibility of the physical environment is about facilitating movement via an “unbroken mobility chain”. Of course, it takes time to develop this kind of chain. Obtaining the cooperation of the actors concerned and awareness on everybody’s part is a gradual process. It is however important to take this need on board and to consider the whole chain when designing new buildings or making existing structures accessible.

## Accessibility is a right and a principle

Accessibility is one of eight general principles outlined in the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (**Article 3**). This means that accessibility must be addressed in a cross-cutting manner: people with disabilities will only be able to fully enjoy all the rights set forth in the Convention if accessibility conditions are in place. Accessibility is also the subject of a specific article (**Article 9**).

# How Handicap International works on accessibility



## Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

### Article 3 - General principles

Accessibility is one of the 8 general principles of the Convention.

### Article 9 - Accessibility

To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas. These measures, which shall include the identification and elimination of obstacles and barriers to accessibility, shall apply to, inter alia:

- a) Buildings, roads, transportation and other indoor and outdoor facilities, including schools, housing medical facilities and the workplace;
- b) Information, communications and other services, including electronic services and emergency services.

- **Component 1 - Information, awareness-raising and advocacy**

This is the first level at which action should be taken both nationally and locally to **promote collective awareness of the importance of accessibility issues**. Accessibility is an essential element in the recognition and respect of disability rights. Information and awareness-raising should target a wide range of audiences, and in particular civil society (local organisations and national or international NGOs), professionals or future professionals (architects, engineers, technicians, project managers) and decision-makers (national and local authorities) who define and implement accessibility policies. Awareness-raising work should be carried out by local stakeholders, especially Disabled People's Organisations. Handicap International's role is to provide these local partners with the technical support they need. However, there are two situations in which Handicap International should carry out this kind of awareness-raising work directly: in crisis situations where local actors have not yet been identified or are not yet ready to take action; when it is aimed at international aid and development actors.

- **Component 2 - Training for local actors**

In order to support local actors, help them to understand the issues at stake and accompany them in changing their practices, it is important to offer training in order to provide technical knowledge based on national standards or, where these do not exist, international standards and the principle of Universal Design, i.e. **accessibility for all** (people with disabilities, people with restricted mobility, service users). This training can target a wide range of actors: local and national authorities; civil servants working for ministries or local authorities; architects, civil and infrastructure engineers, town planners; engineering and design offices, construction companies, etc. It should include a presentation of the general principles guiding any work carried out in the field of accessibility, a presentation of local good practices (where possible), a presentation of national laws and standards (if these exist), and practical work on the integration of accessibility using plans or by visiting sites with local project managers.

- **Component 3 - Sharing good practices**

Another way of improving accessibility in a country is to **compile and share existing good practices** in order to:

- draw on them to make recommendations and analyse the mechanisms and stages involved in their implementation
- influence public policies on accessibility, for example by enhancing technical standards
- make the training and advice given locally more practical and suited to the context
- draft practical guides adapted to the context.



### Examples of expected outcomes

- Authorities (at national or local level) have developed and implement policies and procedures ensuring that accessibility considerations are included in the design of new buildings and public spaces, and/or that existing buildings are made accessible.
- Professionals and decision-makers involved in construction, urban planning and transports give more consideration to accessibility norms in the design and realisations of new projects.
- More importance is accorded to accessibility issues in existing architecture, urban planning and civil engineering training curriculums.
- At the end of the project, people with disabilities have a better access to local services, information and means of communication for accomplishing their life habits.
- Individual and collective capacities of people with disabilities are reinforced with regard to awareness-raising, advocacy and/or technical accessibility audits in order to obtain consideration for accessibility issues on the part of decision-makers and the actors concerned.

### • Component 4 - Improving and implementing technical standards and laws

In order to make real progress on accessibility in a country, national laws and standards must be in place. Our actions should aim to **improve existing legal frameworks** and ensure the effective application of these laws where they exist. Identifying good practices at a national level in order to **communicate on them and extend their use** is another means of facilitating the application of national standards.

### • Component 5 - Setting an example

Handicap international's actions for improving accessibility often concentrate on a particular area (housing, road, public spaces, public buildings such as schools, the workplace, health centres, wells, collective latrines, sports area, etc.) and are linked to one of our sector-based projects, such as inclusive education, professional inclusion, integration through sport, etc. **The priority is to provide some examples of comprehensive and good-quality accessibility work that can be reproduced by others.** These examples should then be communicated on to raise the awareness of local stakeholders.

### • Component 6 - Conducting local accessibility diagnoses

Accessibility diagnoses are used to assess barriers to mobility on a given site (a road, a market, a school, etc.) and in existing private or public-sector facilities. **They seek to identify the main problem areas in order to propose effective, reasonable and low-cost (if possible) technical solutions.** These diagnoses are also an opportunity to initiate dialogue between people with disabilities and/or their representatives and the local authorities. They produce a detailed inventory of accessible and non-accessible facilities and are thus highly effective awareness and/or advocacy tools.

### • Component 7 - Developing local plans for making the existing environment (built or otherwise) accessible

Working on a local scale is a relevant level of intervention when the aim is to make concrete and operational improvements to the accessibility of buildings, roads, public transport and public spaces. As these are community-based actions the results are visible to all. **The focus should be on developing local pilot projects so that local experiences can be reproduced on a larger scale.** To this end, knowledge capitalisation, modelling and experience-sharing are essential components that can constitute a project activity in their own right project. After carrying out an accessibility diagnosis of the existing infrastructure in a town or district, which is the first key stage in the process, we should then help the local authorities, service providers and civil society to work together to draw up an action plan, define priorities and start work to improve accessibility.

**The principle of accessibility for all is that it is not only for people with disabilities and restricted mobility; it ensures more equitable access to services for society as a whole.**