



World Blind Union
Union Mondiale Des Aveugles
Unión Mundial de Ciegos

**CRPD MONITORING COMMITTEE
GENERAL DAY OF DISCUSSION**

RE: ARTICLE # 9 – ACCESSIBILITY

**Submission by THE WORLD BLIND UNION
September 21, 2010**

Access to the built environment, to transportation, to information and to communications are essential to maximizing the independence and full participation of all persons with disabilities and indeed are of particular concern to persons who are blind or partially sighted. Because blind and partially sighted persons must access information by different means - via braille, large print, speech or tactile – all elements of Article 9 dealing with Accessibility have particular relevance, and are relevant in all parts of the world. We will highlight some of the particular issues in this discussion paper.

1. The Built Environment

The built environment encompasses a number of elements, including roads and footpaths, buildings open to the public both indoor and outdoor. It includes such aspects as wayfinding, issues such as signage and lighting and safety features. Some of the issues that need to be considered include the following:

- There is a need for standardization of infrastructure that relates to design of traffic intersections, the use of accessible pedestrian signals, tactile wayfinding surfaces and other elements that make pedestrian travel for blind and partially sighted persons safe and comfortable. Standards vary widely around the world, making it difficult for those who travel. But equally important, in many cities around the world, the lack of adequate and unobstructed footpaths and controlled

intersections make independent travel for blind and partially sighted persons nearly impossible, and certainly unsafe. Most blind and partially sighted persons get around by foot, and the extremely narrow, cluttered footpaths and sidewalks found in many cities and towns in developing countries hinder independent travel. Similarly, the absence of smooth and discrete walking surfaces in rural areas renders independent travel extremely difficult and unsafe. A further issue related to pedestrian safety is the urban planning trend towards “shared spaces” in certain countries. This model proposes the sharing of space between vehicular and pedestrian traffic, whereby pedestrians and drivers will “negotiate” travel using eye contact. This concept not only removes any tactile wayfinding elements needed by blind and partially sighted persons but is an obvious safety issue.

- Access and wayfinding in public buildings is also problematic for blind and partially sighted persons in most parts of the world. In many jurisdictions where accessibility measures have been in place, and are effectively implemented and monitored, then such features as Braille markings on elevators and in some cases, talking elevators have improved access. However, many of these same buildings neglect to include high contrast edge markings on stairs; many also use poor lighting, high glare surfaces and inaccessible signage, thus making the facility very inaccessible for those who are partially sighted in addition to those who are blind. And while building standards exist in many jurisdictions, which specify acceptable standards to deal with these issues, such standards are not uniformly applied and building codes not adhered to.

The World Blind Union recommends to the CRPD Monitoring Committee that universal design standards for infrastructure, including adequate width and demarcation of walking surfaces, and building design be implemented and enforced.

2. Transportation

There are a number of issues related to transportation that are of particular importance to persons who are blind and partially sighted. These issues are relevant in all parts of the world, but likely more pronounced in developing regions of the world.

- The development of silent car technology, while environmentally friendly, has unintentionally resulted in a hazardous situation for blind pedestrians, who rely on sounds emitted by vehicles to know that a vehicle is present, and to determine when it is safe to cross the street.

While some silent car manufacturers are becoming aware of the issue, to-date corrective measures are voluntary and lack consistent standards in terms of when sounds might be emitted and volume of such sound.

The World Blind Union recommends to the CRPD Monitoring Committee that they promote the research and development of mandatory sound standards for silent vehicles.

- While some jurisdictions have done a good job to improve accessibility of public transportation systems, including implementation of automated stop announcements on subways/underground trains, bus services and so forth, in many cities and towns, accessibility measures have still not been incorporated. Access to transportation remains one of the key barriers to blind and partially sighted persons all over the world, particularly for those that live in rural areas where there is no access to public transportation at all. Indeed, in most developing countries, blind and partially sighted persons must rely almost exclusively on public transportation as their sole means of transport. The inability to identify bus routes, bus stops, where to locate buses and so forth makes independent travel very difficult. Adequate planning and use of technology makes this problem easily solvable. Indeed, the lack of accessible transportation systems means that blind and partially sighted persons cannot safely and independently travel to access education, employment, community services nor can they participate in the life of their communities.
- Airline travel continues to be difficult for many blind and partially sighted travelers in different parts of the world. We continue to hear of instances where a blind person travelling alone is prevented from boarding an aircraft, simply on the basis of his or her blindness; we hear of families with more than one family member that is blind who are prevented from being seated together. Many airlines do not have accessible airline safety cards to provide necessary safety information to blind and partially sighted passengers and staff briefings are inconsistent, thereby compromising the safety of blind and partially sighted travelers. When requesting assistance to departure gates or to transfer from one flight to another, some airport assistance personnel insist that the blind passenger use a wheelchair even though the person requests to walk using sighted guide assistance. These incidents happen with both major and small airlines and in both major airline hubs and small airports, and including jurisdictions that have clear regulations prohibiting such action. The inconsistency in service, whether from airlines directly or from airport authorities makes the travel experience unpredictable and stressful. Having said that, some

airlines and airports provide wonderful assistance, but it is the inconsistency and unpredictability that makes it such a stressful experience. Further issues related to airline travel relate to the trend to using touch screen check-in kiosks which, despite the ability to make them accessible using universal design features, are totally inaccessible to blind passengers. Similarly, the touch screen entertainment systems used on board many airlines are completely inaccessible for blind and partially sighted persons, thus making on-board entertainment unavailable to them.

The World Blind Union recommends to the CRPD Monitoring Committee that measures be taken with IATA and other airline regulatory bodies to ensure that the human rights of blind and partially sighted travelers are not violated and that appropriate assistance is provided by all airlines and airline terminals.

- Many blind and partially sighted persons rely on guide dogs as an essential mobility tool. And in many jurisdictions around the world, anti-discrimination laws have been enacted to ensure that a blind person has a right to travel and access goods and services when accompanied by their guide dogs. Unfortunately however, such laws are not uniformly enforced resulting in denial of service by taxis, airlines, restaurants, hotels and so forth, even in jurisdictions where clear laws are in place. A further issue impeding travel with guide dogs relates to the lack of consistency among countries for admission of guide dogs. Some countries do not allow access at all; others allow access only after travelling through another country first; many countries that are deemed "rabies free" have very different preparation requirements.

The World Blind Union recommends to the CRPD Monitoring Committee that the access and mobility needs of persons using service animals be considered and supported.

3. Access to Information

Access to information is an essential element to enabling persons who are blind and partially sighted to be able to access goods and services that are normally offered to the public. Accessible information can be provided in a number of ways: Braille, large print, audio, electronic, tactile. And no one solution works for everyone as preference will depend on the amount of vision one may or may not have, whether or not a person knows Braille, is comfortable with electronic information and so forth. And there are many public environments that offer information, from hospitals, medical centers

to restaurants, grocery stores, other shops and so forth. The types of information provided are very different and the means to render it accessible will also differ. It should not be a question however, of whether or not the service provider will make the information accessible and available, but rather how they might do that. While patient information provided by a hospital should be provided in accessible form, it might not be realistic for a grocery store to make its store and all product information totally accessible, in which case sighted assistance might reasonably be offered to provide that information. There are however, some particular issues and trends that need to be addressed to ensure access to public services.

A particular concern of the World Blind Union relates to the lack of access to published materials worldwide. A separate discussion paper has been submitted regarding WBU's proposal to WIPO for a Treaty to improve access for blind, partially sighted and other print disabled persons. This paper then will deal with other aspects of access to information of relevance to blind and partially sighted persons.

- Many services now provide service and product information via their websites and increasingly this is becoming the only service option in some instances. Unfortunately however, not all service providers are ensuring that their websites are fully accessible to screen magnifiers and screen reading software. When websites are fully accessible, they can provide an excellent source of information for blind and partially sighted persons who have the ability to use the internet, but only if all features are accessible. This of course is possible in this modern age.
- Government documents that are available in print to the general public should also be available in accessible formats upon request. Other necessary information that should, as a matter of course, be accessible include essential healthcare information, such as information about HIV/AIDS, and identifying tactile information on pharmaceutical and medicine products.
- A further trend in providing electronic information is the use of PDF files. While we understand that PDF files help protect the file from changes, these are often inaccessible for those using screen reading programs. Furthermore, many companies do not take care to ensure that their PDF files are accessible for screen readers and even used scanned image files which are completely inaccessible, and in addition, many blind persons cannot afford the most current screen reading software and are unable to access even accessible PDF files.

- Information available to the public through publicly funded libraries is often not available to blind and partially sighted persons – whether it be accessible format collections, accessible catalogues of holdings or equipment to assist with access issues. The availability of sighted assistance to help with accessing catalogues and sourcing materials as well as on-site equipment such as scanners and closed circuit TV readers could help alleviate this lack of access.

The World Blind Union recommends to the CRPD Monitoring Committee that mandatory requirements be developed for the accessibility of public websites and accessible alternatives to PDF files.

4. Communications and Technology

The evolution of technology continues to have an enormous impact on our lives in most parts of the world. Technology is intended to make our lives easier, enabling us to access information more efficiently and to communicate with each other around the world in a seamless fashion. And this technology has the potential to break down many barriers for persons who are blind and partially sighted; however, if accessibility is not incorporated into its design, that same technology has the potential to create new barriers and to leave blind and partially sighted persons behind as well as forcing them to incur substantial additional costs.

- Mobile telephone technology has the potential to provide access to telephone services for millions of persons in developing countries who have traditionally not had access due to the expense of installing landline infrastructure. And mobile telephones have the capability of being accessible for blind and partially sighted persons, thus enabling them the ability to communicate, to utilize services and enhance their safety. However, the lack of standardization in telephone technology and the lack of universal design as part of the design component for mobile telephones makes access either unavailable or very expensive for blind users, who often must purchase additional expensive software to make their telephone accessible and even this often only works on certain high cost phones.
- Similarly, many household appliances, such as ranges, microwave ovens, coffee makers and so forth are being designed with flat digital displays, even preventing tactile access by blind users. Universal design features could easily render such appliances accessible to all users, including those who are blind or partially sighted.

- And while Automated bank teller machines are not “household” items, they have become such an integral part of the fabric of modern life, that they could in fact been considered as such. The proliferation of inaccessible ATM’s and point of sale systems for use with debit and chip enabled credit cards have rendered these technologies inaccessible for blind and visually impaired users and their use often results in serious privacy issues as they must rely on others to assist with transactions.
- The proliferation of touch screen devices causes enormous accessibility issues for blind and partially sighted persons unless accessibility features are built into the design. Such touch screen technology is often used for voting machines, for store checkouts, check-in counters for travel, movies, self-service government kiosks. As our society is becoming more oriented to self-service, enhancing independence and convenience for many, the same technology which enables this self-service, will at the same time reduce independence and convenience for blind and partially sighted persons if universal design features are not regulated and enforced.
- Television is a source of entertainment and learning for millions of persons around the world. And access to digital technology provides access to more content from all parts of the globe. Unfortunately, this same digital technology has begun to render television inaccessible to blind and partially sighted persons who are unable to access on-screen information and navigation features. Again, universal design features incorporated into the design of digital television would ensure continued access to this mainstream form of education and entertainment. Similarly, the use of audio description would vastly improve the viewing experience of blind and partially sighted persons to TV and films, to live plays, to museum visits. Given that so much information is often conveyed visually, significant contextual or informational elements can be lost without the benefit of audio description.

The World Blind Union recommends to the CRPD Monitoring Committee that they advocate with the International Standards Organization for research and implementation of universal design features into all communications, technology and household devices.

5. Emergency Services Information

Blind and partially sighted persons can be among the most vulnerable during emergency situations. They may be unaware of the situation; may not know

where to seek refuge nor have safe and independent means to travel to it; and once arrived, crowded and stressful situations can make it very difficult to move around independently and access the information and services that are available.

- Emergency planners need to consider the specific requirements of all persons with disabilities including those who are blind or partially sighted. Such planning includes using various means to disseminate the information; ensuring that emergency centers meet universal design standards; that transportation is available; that guide dogs are accommodated and that blind and partially sighted persons will receive the same information as others affected by the emergency situation.

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WORLD BLIND UNION PROFILE

The World Blind Union (WBU) is an international not-for-profit, charitable organization representing the estimated 161 Million people who are blind or have low vision worldwide. The WBU is recognized as the international voice of blind and low vision persons speaking on their behalf at the United Nations, UN Agencies and other international organizations. The WBU has consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council and with a number of relevant UN Agencies such as WHO, WIPO, UNICEF, UNESCO, ILO, UPU and World Bank.

Its mission is achieved with and through its members - organizations of blind and partially sighted persons and organizations providing services to blind and partially sighted persons in some 181 countries and through six Regional Unions. The six WBU Regions include: Africa, Asia, East Asia/Pacific, Europe, Latin America and North America/Caribbean.

The overall long-term vision of the WBU is "a community where people who are blind or partially sighted are empowered to participate on an equal basis in any aspect of life they choose". This vision is actualized through the WBU three Strategic Priorities of:

Representation: Promoting full participation and equal opportunities for blind and partially sighted persons in all aspects of social, economic, political and cultural life;

- Working towards a world accessible to blind and partially sighted persons
- Representing Blind and Partially Sighted Persons at the United Nations and UN Agencies
- Advocating for human rights of blind and partially sighted persons

Capacity Building: Strengthening the capabilities and capacity of the WBU regional structures and member organizations; and

- Improving employment opportunities for blind and partially sighted persons
- Developing the capacity of our members
- Supporting our target populations for full inclusion
- Strengthening the World Braille Council
- Supporting our members to implement the CRPD at the National level.

Information Sharing: Serving as an international information and resource centre on matters in respect of blind and partially sighted persons.

- Developing a Resource Repository for members including website
- Developing international partnerships and collaboration
- Developing the capacity to include our various language communities within the work of the WBU

For additional information and access to our materials and publications, see the WBU website at:

www.worldblindunion.org