Forum: GA3 - Social, Humanitarian & Cultural

Issue: Fostering accessibility through reconstructing urban and rural infrastructure as well as media

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I.   Introduction

Around 1.3 billion people around the globe are living with one or more significant disabilities. That makes up about 16% of the world's population. Unfortunately, these people have to face large disadvantages and inequalities until this day. It is twice as likely for them to develop depression, diabetes, obesity and several other conditions. Which also makes them die up to 20 years earlier as people without a disability.[1]

This alone should be alarming enough to understand the certain need for this topic to be discussed about.

First and foremost, accessibility applies to buildings and other structures, means of transport, technical products, information processing systems and both acoustic and visual communication sources and facilities. It also extends to any other environments that are shaped and designed by people. These are considered accessible when individuals with disabilities can independently locate, access, and use them in the usual manner, without encountering any particular difficulty.

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[1] https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health#:~:text=An%20estimated%201.3%20billion%20people%20%E2%80%93%20or%2016%25%20of%20the%20global,diseases%20and%20people%20living%20longer.

II.   Key Terms

a. Accessibility

Accessibility is the possibility for disabled people to maintain the same opportunities to engage in the same services as people without a disability. This means, they are able to access information and participate in interactions the same way people without disabilities do.

b. Disability

A disability is a temporary or permanent difficulty for someone to do something other people can do. Said difficulty is mostly caused by an illness, injury or a (genetic) condition given since the date of birth or obtained over the course of life.
Types of disability include physical, auditory, visual, cognitive, neurological and speech disability.

c. Urban and Rural Infrastructure

In general, infrastructure consists of transport, communications, power supplies and buildings that allow an area to function.

Urban infrastructures are said to be facilities related to urban areas, such as cities.
Rural infrastructures therefore are said to be facilities related to regions outside towns and cities, typically with a low population density and small settlements.

d. Media

Media are all means of communication, such as radio, television, newspapers, magazines and the internet, that reach or influence people widely.

e. Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

The ADA is a U.S. civil rights law that prohibits discrimination based on disability. It ensures individuals with disabilities have equal opportunities in various aspects of life, including employment, access to public services, and participation in public accommodations.

f. Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)

The WCAG is an internationally recognized set of guidelines, developed by the W3C, that explains how to make Web content more accessible to people with disabilities. These guidelines aim to improve the user experience for individuals with various disabilities, including visual, auditory, motor, and cognitive impairments, by making Web content more perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust.

III.   General Overview

    a. Defining Disability and Accessibility Globally

Because definitions and measurement methods vary across countries, disability prevalence rates are not directly comparable internationally.

For instance, under the ADA, a person with a disability is defined as someone who has a physical or mental impairment that significantly limits one or more major life activities, has a history or record of such an impairment, or is perceived by others as having such an impairment.

In Germany on the other side, the "Degree of Disability" (GdB) is a numerical assessment ranging from 20 to 100, indicating the impact of a disability on daily life. A GdB of 50 or higher classifies a disability as severe, granting access to certain rights and benefits. The GdB is determined by the competent pension office, considering how disability affects a person's ability to function in daily life.

Some countries, especially ones in Africa, do not even have accessibility regulations to start tackling the matter. This is already an issue that needs to be addressed.

Continents with accessibility standards or guidelines

Europe 95%

Asia 73%

Oceania 71%

Americas 64%

Africa 48%

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By only looking at these different types of approaches, it becomes clear that drawing conclusions about disability and accessibility on a global scale is almost impossible. Therefore, the author encourages all readers to perceive the following statistics with caution and awareness about national differences. It should only give a glimpse of how accessible the world really is.

2 https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/accessibility-regulations-around-world-glenn-barfield-1m6tc/

b. Shortcomings for People with Disabilities

i. Health

Disability results from the interaction between health conditions and external factors. People with disabilities are a highly diverse population whose health needs are influenced by factors such as age, gender, race, and socioeconomic status. Many experience restrictions in daily functioning, worsened by a lack of access to quality healthcare and being excluded from public health interventions aimed at disease prevention and health promotion.

Additionally, health disparities are rooted in structural barriers such as stigma, discrimination, poverty, exclusion from education, unemployment, and healthcare systems. Environmental and systemic challenges - including inaccessible transport and facilities, negative healthcare provider attitudes and insufficient data collection - further compound their health risks.
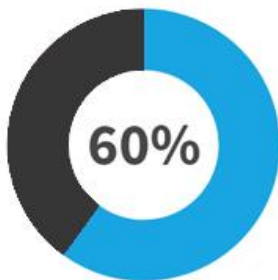
ii. Employment

Employment plays a vital role in society by providing individuals with a sense of purpose and the means to support all aspects of life. It serves as the foundation of the economy. However, accessible employment remains out of reach for many. Disabled individuals in the UK face significant barriers in the job market, with an unemployment rate of 9% compared to 3.8% for non-disabled people. On average, disabled job seekers must apply for 60% more positions before securing employment. As a result, 9 in 10 disabled individuals who are not working are classified as economically inactive, meaning they are not actively seeking work. Among those who do apply, only 51% of disabled candidates receive interview opportunities, compared to 69% of non-disabled applicants.

iii. Transportation

Transportation is another essential aspect of daily life, particularly for disabled individuals who are unable to drive. For this group, transport can be a crucial link to independence. Although 38% of people in the UK with mobility difficulties use driving as their main form of transport, the remaining 62% rely on alternatives such as being a passenger, walking, buses, and other public transport services. Nonetheless, many transportation networks still lack the infrastructure and features necessary for full accessibility. In London, improvements have been made, with over 25% of Tube stations and more than 50% of Overground stations now accessible. Meanwhile, other cities, such as Washington D.C., have achieved full accessibility in their metro systems.
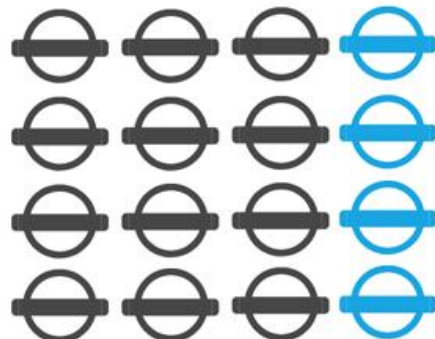
Accessible
Transportation

94% of UK buses were issued with an accessibility certificate in 2016

Increase of accessible trains in the past year
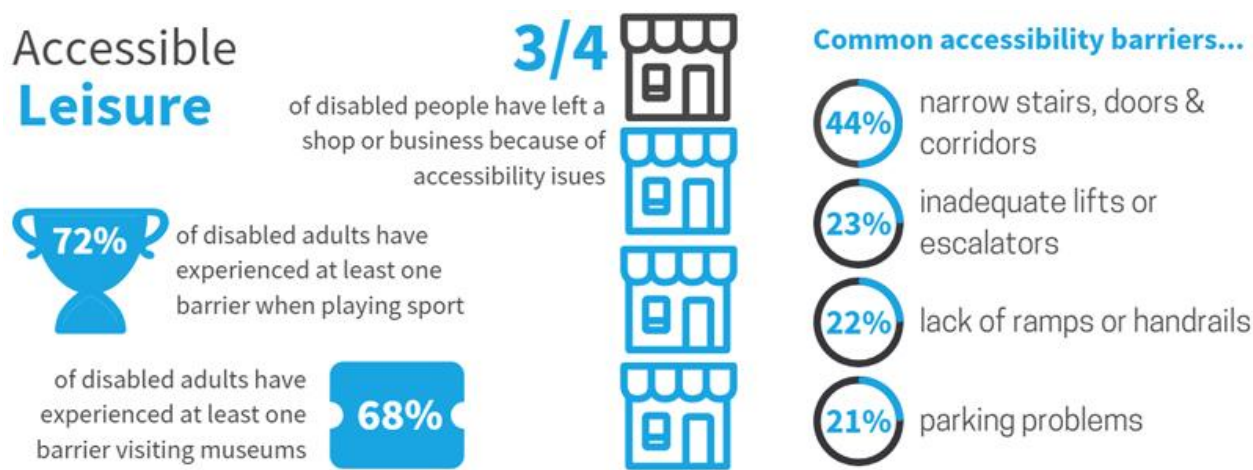**5%**

25% of London Tube stations are accessible

iv. Leisure

Reports in the UK indicate that 20% of disabled people experience difficulties when shopping, 15% at cinemas or theatres, and 14% in pubs or restaurants. Furthermore, 72% of disabled adults have encountered barriers in sports participation, and 68% when visiting museums. A lack of accessible options has also led 22% of disabled adults to report having little choice in how they spend their free time, compared to 13% of non-disabled individuals. Commonly cited barriers include narrow stairs, doors, or corridors (44%), inadequate lifts or escalators (23%), insufficient ramps or handrails (22%), and parking difficulties (21%).

Accessible **Leisure**

3/4 of disabled people have left a shop or business because of accessibility isues

72% of disabled adults have experienced at least one barrier when playing sport

of disabled adults have experienced at least one barrier visiting museums **68%**

Common accessibility barriers...

44% narrow stairs, doors & corridors

23% inadequate lifts or escalators

22% lack of ramps or handrails
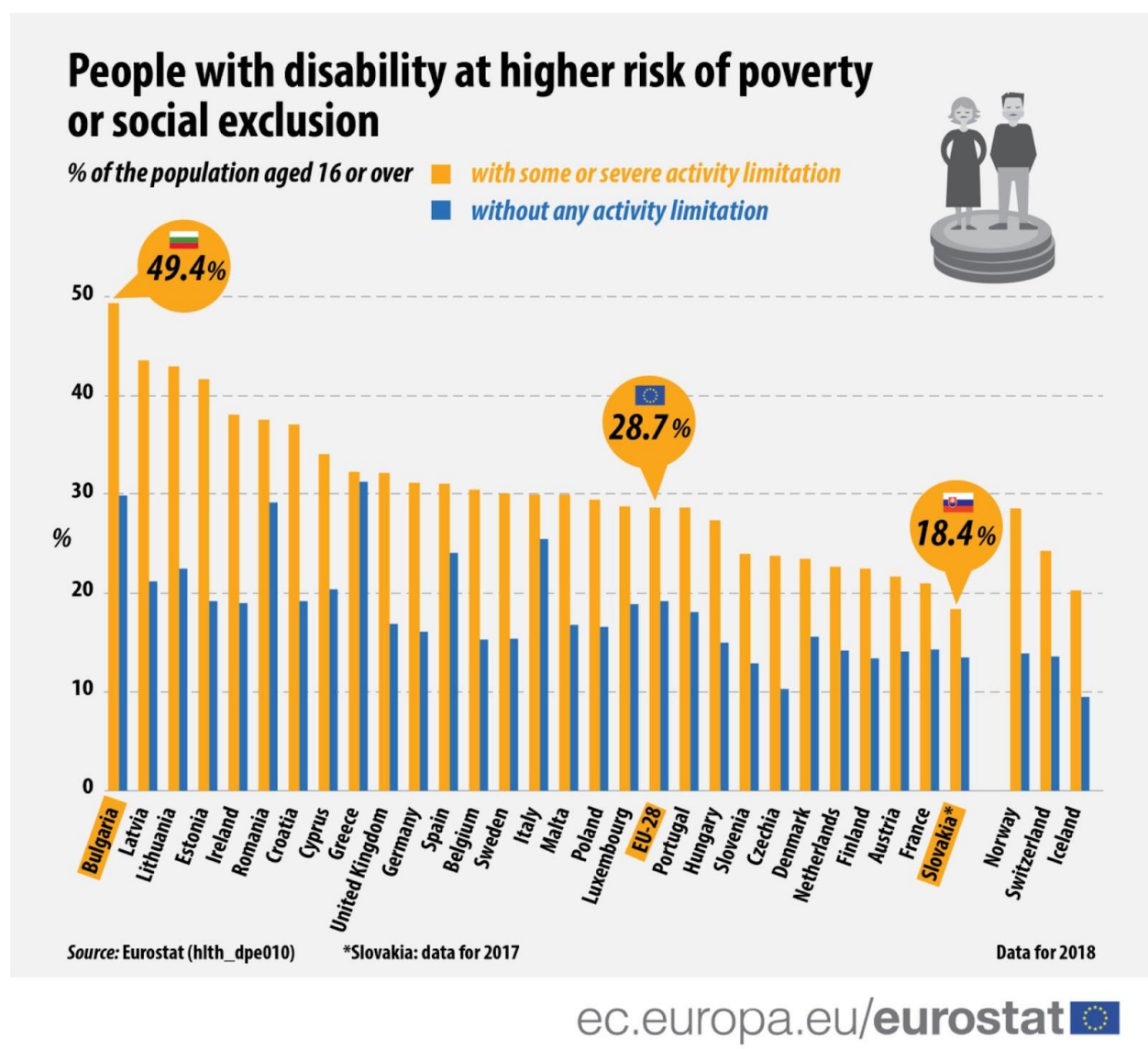
21% parking problems

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3 https://www.theramppeople.co.uk/blog/living-with-a-disability-accessibility-facts-and-figures

v. Social Exclusion

If we take the EU for example, approximately 28.7% of people in 2018 aged 16 and over with a disability in the European Union were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This contrasts with 19.2% of individuals without disabilities. While the rates vary significantly across EU Member States, people with disabilities consistently face a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion compared to those without disabilities.

People with disability at higher risk of poverty or social exclusion

% of the population aged 16 or over
- with some or severe activity limitation
- without any activity limitation

49.4%
28.7%
18.4%

Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Ireland, Romania, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Sweden, Italy, Malta, Poland, Luxembourg, EU-28, Portugal, Hungary, Slovenia, Czechia, Denmark, Netherlands, Finland, Austria, France, Slovakia*, Norway, Switzerland, Iceland

Source: Eurostat (hlth_dpe010)   *Slovakia: data for 2017   Data for 2018

ec.europa.eu/**eurostat**
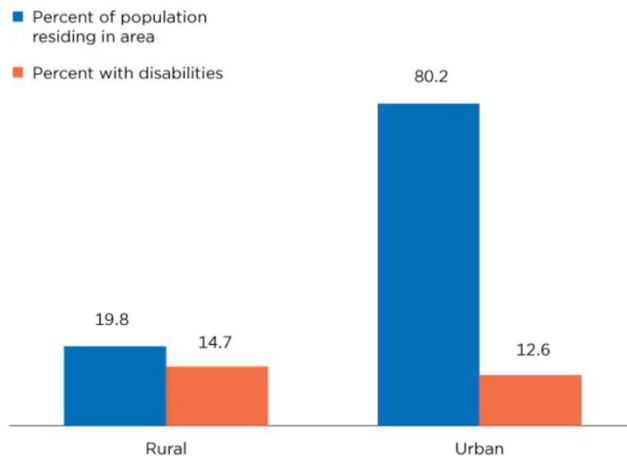
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vi.   Rural areas

Geographic location can significantly influence access to health care services, particularly for individuals with disabilities or those requiring specialized and frequent medical attention. For these populations, where they live can greatly affect the availability and accessibility of necessary care.

Regional and urban-rural differences in disability rates present unique challenges in addressing health disparities. Understanding where people with disabilities are concentrated helps identify areas that may face shortages of specialized health care providers or have limited transportation infrastructure.

Data from the 2021 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year estimates show that nearly 42.5 million people - 13% of the civilian noninstitutionalized population - were living with a disability in the United States. That same year, 80.2% of the U.S. population lived in urban areas, with 12.6% of them reporting a disability. In contrast, rural areas, home to less than 20% of the population, had a higher disability rate at 14.7%.

Rural communities often experience greater geographic isolation and generally have fewer transportation options, as well as limited access to clinics and hospitals. These factors can make it more difficult for rural residents with disabilities to coordinate and receive consistent care, further contributing to health disparities based on location.

Figure 1.
Share of Total Population and Population With a Disability in U.S. Rural and Urban Areas: 2021

■ Percent of population residing in area
■ Percent with disabilities

Rural: 19.8, 14.7
Urban: 80.2, 12.6

Note: Includes civilian noninstitutionalized population. For more information, visit <www.census.gov/acs>.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs>.
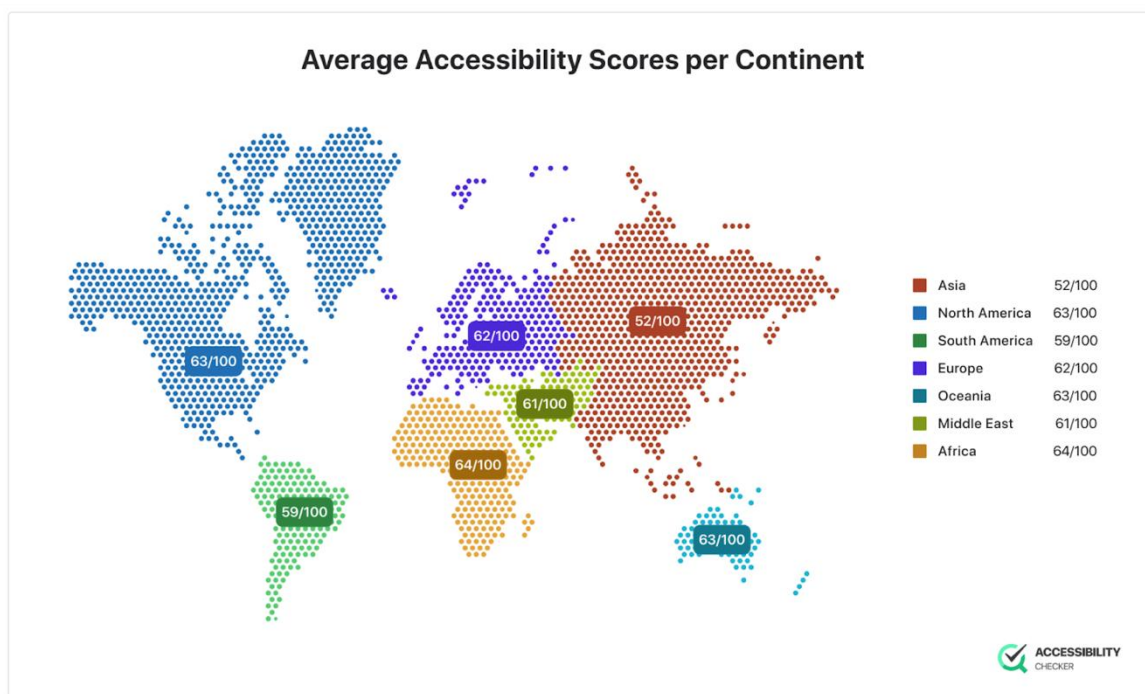
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vii. Websites

Properly designed and coded websites and web tools can be accessible to people with disabilities. Nevertheless, many are still developed with barriers that limit or prevent access for some users.

Improving web accessibility provides broad benefits - not only for individuals with disabilities but also for businesses and society as a whole. International web standards outline the requirements necessary to ensure accessibility for all users.

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[5] https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/06/disability-rates-higher-in-rural-areas-than-urban-areas.html

A recent analysis conducted by a leading accessibility scanning software provider, in collaboration with BuiltWith.com, examined over 63,000 websites to assess the state of web accessibility.

According to the findings, 88% of websites remain non-compliant with current web accessibility standards. The average accessibility score across all sites was approximately 60 out of 100. Moreover, the report highlights a strong correlation between higher accessibility scores and increased revenue, noting that websites scoring 75 or above tend to achieve better financial performance - emphasizing the business case for investing in accessibility.

Average Accessibility Scores per Continent

Asia	52/100
North America	63/100
South America	59/100
Europe	62/100
Oceania	63/100
Middle East	61/100
Africa	64/100

[6]

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[6] https://www.accessibilitychecker.org/research-papers/the-state-of-web-accessibility-in-2024-research-report/

viii. Economy

Many disabled individuals encounter obstacles related to the physical environment and information access. These challenges impact not only the individuals affected but also local businesses and the broader economy. Limited accessibility prevents businesses from fully engaging with the growing spending power of the disabled population, often referred to as the "purple pound."

Addressing these disparities isn't just a moral imperative - it also brings economic benefits. Investing in inclusive care for noncommunicable diseases could return nearly 10 US$ for every 1 US$ spent. Public health efforts - like improving air quality, water safety, nutrition, and violence prevention - must intentionally include people with disabilities to be truly effective. For example, women with disabilities are two to four times more likely to experience intimate partner violence yet are often left out of response strategies.

IV. Major Parties Involved

a. International Association of Accessibility Professionals (IAAP)

The IAAP is dedicated to advancing the accessibility profession worldwide. Its mission is to define, promote, enhance, and diversify the field through certification programs, educational opportunities and professional networking. These efforts support the development of accessible products, content, services, and environments. Likewise, the IAAP website offers a wide range of resources, including webinars, certifications, publications, and practical guides.

b. World Wide Web Consortium (W3C)

The W3C is a global community dedicated to creating protocols and guidelines that support the web's long-term growth and evolution. As a non-profit organization, it establishes standards that promote a web rooted in accessibility, internationalization, privacy, and security - ensuring it's open and usable for everyone.

c. United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU)

The UN and EU are crucial institutions regarding the topic of accessibility across more than one state. They have their own guidelines and assistance for their respective member states. For more on that, view "Previous and Possible Solutions".

V. Timeline of Key Events

Date   **Event**

Date	Event
1961	First standards set by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI, then called American Standards Association (ASA)) called "Accessible and Usable Buildings and Facilities specifications"
1964	First laws legislating equal access (yet not for people with disabilities) in the Civil Rights Act

1982	UN World Programme Of Action Concerning Disabled Persons
March 1988	"Deaf President Now" student protests at Gallaudet University. As a result, Gallaudet finally had a deaf president for the first time in its history.
1990	The ADA bans discrimination based on disability and sets design standards for making new or renovated facilities accessible.
1973	Section 504 of the *Rehabilitation Act* was passed, prohibiting discrimination based on disability in any federally funded program or activity
1994	UN Standard Rules On The Equalization Of Opportunities For Persons With Disabilities
1998	Section 508 of the *Rehabilitation Act* was introduced, requiring federal agencies to provide accessible information and technology for people with disabilities, marking a move toward digital accessibility.
1999	The World Wide Web Consortium *(*W3C*)* began publishing the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG*)* to establish standards for web accessibility.

2006	The United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), a major international human rights treaty supporting full rights for individuals with disabilities.
2008	The ADA was amended to broaden the definition of disability and expand the law's coverage to more people and situations.

VI.   Previous and Possible Solutions

a. UN Social Development Issues (article 9)

According to article 9, states' parties must ensure that people with disabilities have equal access to the physical environment, transportation, information, communications (including digital technologies), and public services in both urban and rural areas. This includes removing accessibility barriers in buildings, roads, schools, housing, medical facilities, workplaces and emergency services.

Measures should also involve setting and monitoring accessibility standards, accessible signage (e.g. Braille), live assistance such as interpreters and promoting the development of technologies - particularly from early design stages to ensure affordability and inclusivity. Private entities should comply with these measures as well.

b. WHO

Similarly, the World Health Assembly Resolution WHA74.8 emphasizes the inclusion of people with disabilities in universal health coverage and equitable emergency responses.

c. European Accessibility Act (EAA)

The European Accessibility Act is a directive designed to enhance the functioning of the internal market by harmonizing accessibility requirements across EU Member States. Its goal is to eliminate barriers caused by inconsistent national rules, making it easier to offer accessible products and services across borders.

For businesses, the Act introduces common accessibility standards across the EU, which can lead to reduced compliance costs, simplified cross-border trade, and expanded market opportunities for accessible goods and services.

For people with disabilities and older adults, the directive promises a wider range of accessible products and services at more competitive prices. It also aims to reduce barriers in key areas such as transport, education, and employment. Additionally, the growing demand for accessibility expertise is expected to create new job opportunities in related fields.

d. Leading Countries

i. Germany

Germany is a leader in accessibility, with strong laws ensuring access to public spaces, transport, and digital platforms. Measures include barrier-free building regulations, incentives for accessible infrastructure, and the upcoming EAA in 2025.

ii. Sweden

Sweden is among the most accessible countries globally, with a dedicated agency promoting inclusion. The government emphasizes awareness and training, and its public transport, buildings, and digital services are largely barrier-free, aligned with the EAA.

iii. Canada

Canada prioritizes inclusion through the "Accessible Canada Act," which mandates accessibility in both public and private sectors. Key initiatives include investments in accessible transport and infrastructure.

iv. Australia

Australia enforces the "Disability Discrimination Act 1992," banning disability-based discrimination. It promotes accessibility in services, education, and workplaces to ensure full inclusion.

v. Japan

Japan combines technology and accessibility through a holistic approach. Features like tactile guides, accessible toilets, and digital innovations enhance daily life for people with disabilities.

e. Tools and Technology

Accessibility tools play an important role in making digital content inclusive for all users. Captions provide a written version of spoken content, benefiting individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Alt text offers descriptions of images, allowing people using screen readers to understand visual elements. Therefore, screen-reader compatibility ensures that websites and documents can be effectively navigated and read aloud for users with visual impairments. Plain language simplifies complex information, making it easier to understand for individuals with cognitive disabilities or limited literacy. Together, these tools promote equal access to information online.

Technological advancements have greatly enhanced digital accessibility in recent years. Screen readers and assistive tools have improved significantly, thanks in part to developments in AI, which also help streamline the creation of accessible content.

Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) offer new opportunities for individuals with physical disabilities, enabling more inclusive learning and work environments. Innovations in mobile technology and the Internet of Things (IoT) have further supported accessibility in daily life.

Overall, the 21st century has brought major progress in technology, medicine, and social awareness, improving the lives of people with disabilities worldwide. Initiatives like the CSU Accessible Technology Initiative and standards such as WCAG continue to drive inclusion and accessibility across digital spaces.

VII. Conclusion

Physical environments - whether in cities or remote villages - must be designed to support the needs of all individuals, including those with disabilities. This means investing in barrier-free transportation systems, accessible public buildings, clear signage, and inclusive housing. In rural areas, where resources are often limited, solutions that consider local geography and community needs are especially important.

At the same time, media plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions and providing access to information. Ensuring that digital content, television, print, and online platforms are accessible - through features like captions, alt text, screen-reader compatibility, and plain language - empowers individuals with disabilities to engage fully with the world around them. When accessibility is prioritized both physically and digitally, it helps break down social and economic barriers, enabling fuller participation in education, employment, and civic life.

VIII. Questions to Consider

To what degree does my country define disability and possess guidelines upon accessibility?

What can my country do in order to make all kinds of regions and media accessible?

How is my country able to fund all measures ensuring accessibility?

What are the biggest challenges in adapting rural infrastructure to meet modern accessibility standards?

How can urban planning integrate accessibility from the start, rather than as an afterthought?

In what ways can media inclusivity influence public attitudes toward disability and accessibility?

What role do government policies and funding play in driving accessible infrastructure projects?

How can technology be used to bridge the accessibility gap between urban and rural communities?

How can all member states' guidelines on accessibility be more unified/standardized?

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