



WORKING PAPER

ASSEMBLY — 42ND SESSION

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Agenda Item 12: Facilitation Programmes

ACCESSIBILITY TO PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES: ADDRESSING OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES UNDER A UNIFIED ACTION PLAN

(Presented by Denmark on behalf of the European Union (EU) and its Member States¹, and the other Member States of the European Civil Aviation Conference (ECAC)², and co-sponsored by Australia, Canada and Japan)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Full accessibility is a goal for the global aviation sector with existing International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Resolution A41-15 stating “that dignity and non-discrimination are universal rights that apply to all persons, including persons with disabilities and persons with reduced mobility travelling by air”.

While significant strides have been made in meeting this ambition at the national, regional and international level, there is no room for complacency as demographic and societal trends are resulting in increasing demand for accessibility services. Meeting this demand and ensuring appropriate services are provided to all passengers in a timely and dignified manner is a challenge that requires strategic action by the aviation sector in coordination with consumer and disability groups.

Action: The Assembly is invited to:

- a) amend Resolution A41-15: *Accessibility in International Civil Aviation* to include references to future proofing accessibility services by monitoring and adapting to societal and demographic changes to accessibility needs, as suggested in the Annex;
- b) in furtherance of the objectives set out in section a), task ICAO to develop a comprehensive and strategic action plan to address the growing demand for accessibility provision. This could include:
 - Analysis of the drivers of the increased demand for accessibility services;
 - Measures to address gaps in current and projected future service provision, in cooperation with industry and consumer stakeholders, and seek innovative solutions to increased demand for accessibility services;

¹ Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden.

² Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Türkiye, Ukraine and United Kingdom.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Better involve, in line with the Doha Declaration (April 2025), the views of persons with disabilities (visible and hidden) and reduced mobility “in decision-making processes, fostering data collection and sharing, and advancing personnel training”; and – Further mechanisms to improve accessibility pre-notification requests so that airlines and airport operators can better meet demand and tailor the service to passengers.
<i>Strategic Goals:</i>	This working paper relates to the Strategic Goal — Aviation Delivers Seamless, Accessible and Reliable Mobility for All
<i>Financial implications:</i>	The activities referred to in this paper will be undertaken subject to the resources available in the 2026–2028 Regular Programme Budget and/or from extra budgetary contributions.
<i>References:</i>	Doc 10184, <i>Assembly Resolutions in Force (as of 7 October 2022)</i>

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Persons with disabilities and persons with reduced mobility (PRM) form a large and growing proportion of the world’s population. World Health Organization 2024 data found that 16 per cent of the world’s population (1.3bn) has a disability. In many places the percentage of persons with disabilities and with reduced mobility is increasing, in line with or slightly ahead of overall growth in airline passengers. This leads to increased demand for and pressure on accessibility services at airports and on board aircraft although the lack of sector specific statistics on a global level makes it difficult to quantify the impact. The needs of people with disabilities and reduced mobility should be met, enabling them to access air transport. This challenge has been recognized as a long-term issue by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) who set the strategic goal under the *ICAO Strategic Plan 2026-2050* for “Seamless, Accessible and Reliable Mobility”.

1.2 The increasing demand for accessibility services varies from State to State and is a result of a range of different factors, including (but not limited to) ageing populations, increased recognition of hidden disabilities, increasing prevalence of conditions which can limit mobility and rebound in travel post-Covid. While there are many examples of good practice in meeting the challenges of increased demand for accessibility, there is still some way to go in achieving the goal of an all-inclusive air transport system and ensuring it is fit for the future. This paper calls for an evidence-based action plan to address the current and future gaps in service provision for persons with disabilities and reduced mobility.

2. CHALLENGES FOR ACCESSIBILITY

2.1 Societal and demographic trends, including ageing populations, increased recognition of hidden disabilities and the prevalence of conditions that can limit mobility, are contributing to an increase in the number of passengers requiring assistance. This is combined with the increasing digitalization of travel, which can affect those with additional needs. Increased numbers of assistance requests not only requires resources for providing the day-to-day management of delivering these requests, but also requires higher levels of organizational planning, strategic decision-making and for the industry and States to invest larger amounts of time and resources in activities such as training, monitoring and quality control. More comprehensive tracking of these trends through data gathering and analysis of their impacts on air transport assistance and accessibility would enable better understanding of the operational needs for the sector and setting of long-term accessibility goals for the industry.

2.2 In addition to the challenge of meeting increased demand for assistance, there is growing awareness that the correct kind of assistance needs to be provided by the airport and airline operators to meet that demand, in the way that is best for the passenger (i.e. to facilitate their journey in the best possible way). As a result of both of these facts, there is a more pressing challenge for the aviation sector to enhance and strengthen the knowledge and awareness of the importance of requesting assistance in advance through the “pre-notification” by passengers with disabilities and reduced mobility when purchasing an airline ticket both through airlines’ websites and travel agencies and tour operators. While pre-notification is not always possible for a number of reasons, it should be encouraged to improve operational efficiencies. Passengers, airports and airline operators have a role to play in ensuring that the provision best meets their needs in a timely way.

2.3 As education and awareness has grown about different disabilities, supported by specialist organizations and associations established to defend the rights and treatment of all in society, there is better understanding that different people require different levels of assistance and communication. The air transport industry has made significant strides in improving accessibility. For example, for persons with autism who have access to dedicated projects such as early visits at the airports to familiarize themselves with the environment and early simulation of the flight (for example the Italian project *Autism. Through the airport and onboard*), sensory rooms at airports or for persons with different types of hidden disabilities. These measures aim to enhance independence and improve the overall travel experience for PRM passengers. But other innovative approaches, whether digital or other types of tools and efficiency measures, could also be beneficial to ensuring the right type of assistance can be provided. Innovative solutions and new approaches or technologies, such as automated wheelchairs, can be challenging to introduce and may benefit from shared experiences at national and international levels. This can also give rise to resource issues, such as training or change management, and economic requirements for operational efficiency.

2.4 Innovative approaches and digitalization has significantly improved efficiency and convenience in the aviation sector. Automated processes such as online booking, self-service check-in, bag drop and boarding procedures have streamlined operations, reducing waiting times and enhancing the overall passenger experience. However, for some travellers these advancements can also introduce new challenges. The shift towards digital solutions often reduces direct human interaction, which can be a barrier for individuals who require additional assistance or are unfamiliar with technology-driven processes. Moreover, crucial travel information, such as flight changes or cancellations, is frequently communicated in written digital formats that may not always be fully accessible to passengers with visual or cognitive impairments. Ensuring that digital solutions are inclusive, intuitive and supplemented by accessible alternatives remains essential to prevent technology from becoming a barrier rather than a facilitator in air travel.

2.5 Another growing issue in the aviation sector is tailoring assistance services to meet the growing needs of passengers who do not necessarily have a disability or reduced mobility, rather they have needs stemming from some of the circumstances unique to the airport environment — for example, unfamiliarity with airport processes and procedures, language barriers, digital divide or perhaps anxiety over navigating often large and intimidating spaces. Some air operators are also reporting the inappropriate use of the assistance system as a means to avoid queues. It would be useful to understand how to better serve all passengers in a way that is complimentary, and not detracting, from PRM assistance services. Currently, there is no coordinated international approach to analyse the drivers behind assistance requests nor a comprehensive action plan to ensure that the needs of all passengers are being met. A structured examination at the ICAO level could provide clarity, ensuring that accessibility remains effective and fair while safeguarding the quality of assistance for those in need.

3. **DISCUSSION**

3.1 The challenge of increasing demands for accessibility services impacts stakeholders across the aviation spectrum. States have a role to ensure appropriate and quality services for persons with disabilities and PRMs are delivered by industry. However, with the increasing demand for these services and the operational pressures faced by the industry, collaboration is needed to achieve this goal. States should work closely with industry stakeholders and consumer groups, to identify practical solutions to operational challenges (for example the One-click-away initiative) both now and with an eye on the future. In this regard states may foster effective cooperation through existing mechanisms on a national level, such as National Aviation Disability Boards and develop collaboration between the various stakeholders through the effective implementation of National Air Transport Facilitation Committees. But there is also a role at the global level to establish best practice and ensure that the needs of international travelers are better served — with a predictable and consistent level of service.

3.2 As there are multiple challenges a coordinated, strategic approach across the stakeholder spectrum is essential to assess their impact and develop sustainable, future-focused solutions. States have a duty to ensure air transport is accessible to all, airport and aircraft operators have a duty to provide assistance to meet the needs of passengers, and passengers should be cognizant of their rights and responsibilities. A strategic approach to accessibility for all should align with emerging trends, maintaining safety standards, balance operational and sustainability goals, and ensure that accessibility measures continue to evolve in step with growing demand. By fostering collaboration and proactive planning, the aviation sector can enhance accessibility while maintaining efficiency and service quality for all passengers.

4. **CONCLUSION**

4.1 The growing number of persons with disabilities and reduced mobility, alongside global trends such as ageing populations, underscores the need for a proactive and sustainable approach to accessibility in air travel. As demand continues to grow for these, and potentially other reasons, it is important to ensure that services remain efficient and available to those who need them most.

4.2 It is not sufficient to only tackle individual challenges or a single trend, but instead these should be considered under a comprehensive, single action plan. This plan should encompass innovative and different approaches that, first and foremost, focuses on measures to ensure that PRM services effectively meet the needs of passengers with a disability or reduced mobility but also to enhance overall accessibility within the aviation sector.

APPENDIX

PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO ICAO RESOLUTION A41-15

Resolution ~~A41-15~~A42-xx: Accessibility in International Civil Aviation

Whereas persons with disabilities and reduced mobility form a large and growing proportion of the world's population;

Whereas the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol promotes, protects and ensures the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, including freedom of movement and freedom of choice;

Recalling the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy, which provides the foundation for sustainable and transformative progress on disability inclusion through all pillars of work of the United Nations;

Recalling that the UN Resolution A/RES/76/154 adopted by the General Assembly in 2021 recognized the importance of accessibility for persons with disabilities in all aspects of life and the need to identify and eliminate prejudice, discrimination, obstacles and barriers that limit the access of persons with disabilities to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications;

Noting with concern that, despite these instruments and undertakings, persons with disabilities and reduced mobility continue to face barriers in their participation as equal members of society, including barriers to their free movement;

Acknowledging that the aviation community needs to accommodate the growing demand of growing in the aviation sector for services for ~~number of~~ persons with visible and invisible disabilities, as well as persons with reduced mobility and ageing populations, and that evolving societal trends are reshaping the nature and prevalence of accessibility needs;

Recognizing the importance of government and industry working together to support the travel needs of persons with disabilities and reduced mobility while prioritizing safety in all circumstances;

Affirming that diversity and social inclusion are concepts that are essential to the sustainable growth of international civil aviation;

Recognizing the essential nature of air transport services and the need to provide equal access to such services for all passengers;

Also acknowledging that digitization and innovation are creating new opportunities as well as new challenges for persons with disabilities, with reduced mobility and aging populations;

Reemphasizing the relevant Standards and Recommended Practices contained in Annex 9 — *Facilitation* as well as the procedures and principles contained in Doc 9984 – *Manual on Access to Air Transport by Persons with Disabilities*;

The Assembly:

1. *Resolves* that dignity and non-discrimination are universal rights that apply to all persons, including persons with disabilities and persons with reduced mobility travelling by air;
2. *Requests* the Council to:
 - a) ensure that ICAO exercise continuous leadership on sustainability, including the social sustainability imperatives of inclusion and accessibility;
 - b) develop an effective strategy and work programme on accessibility for passengers with disabilities and reduced mobility, including actions to monitor the impact on the aviation sector of societal and demographic changes and assess their impact on the provision of accessibility services, with the aim of future-proofing these services, in order to reach for a disability-inclusive air transport system in cooperation with all the stakeholders;
 - c) ensure that Annex 9 — *Facilitation* SARPs recognize the essential nature of accessible services for persons with disabilities and reduced mobility and support the continued development of such services in line with evolving accessibility needs;
3. *Urges* Member States to prioritize the inclusion and accessibility of air transport services to persons with disabilities and reduced mobility;
4. *Encourages* all Member States to strive for uniformity in their air transport accessibility regulations, standards and procedures, to the greatest extent practicable, and to work closely with disability groups and other relevant stakeholders;
5. *Encourages* Member States to ensure that the transport sector coordinates its approach with the industry and civil society in order to deliver accessible end-to-end services to persons with disabilities and reduced mobility, and to work closely with disability groups and other relevant stakeholders; and
6. *Encourages* Member States to support ICAO activities with resources, both financial and in-kind, to ensure a successful implementation of agreed measures to support air transport of persons with disabilities and reduced mobility.