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Agenda Item 12: Facilitation Programmes

ENHANCING ACCESSIBILITY IN AIR TRANSPORT FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

(Presented by Ethiopia)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper highlights the persistent and multifaceted challenges faced by persons with disabilities in accessing air transport services. These challenges span all phases of air travel from pre-travel planning to in-flight experience and post-arrival procedures and affect individuals with various types of disabilities. The paper invites the International Civil Aviation Organization to strengthen its leadership in promoting universal accessibility by enhancing Standards and Recommended Practices, providing implementation guidance, and encouraging harmonization across stakeholders.

<i>Strategic Goals:</i>	This information paper relates to Strategic Goal <i>Aviation Delivers Seamless, Accessible and Reliable Mobility for All</i> .
<i>Financial implications:</i>	To be determined
<i>References:</i>	Annex 9 — <i>Facilitation</i> Doc 9984, <i>Manual on Access to Air Transport by Persons with Disabilities</i> Doc 9957, <i>The Facilitation Manual</i>

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Access to air transport remains uneven for persons with disabilities despite commitments by States and industry stakeholders to inclusivity and non-discrimination. Air travel processes often do not fully accommodate passengers with mobility, sensory, cognitive or communication disabilities.

1.2 The purpose of this paper is to identify systemic accessibility barriers, outline key areas of concern across the passenger journey, and propose actions for the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to enhance its global leadership role in ensuring air travel is accessible to all.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 ICAO has recognized the importance of accessibility in its policies, notably in Annex 9 — *Facilitation*, Doc 9984, *Manual on Access to Air Transport by Persons with Disabilities* and the 2023 Declaration on Accessible Air Transport. Nevertheless, implementation remains inconsistent across Member States and industry stakeholders.

2.2 In line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), States and industry must take steps to ensure equal access to air travel, including physical accessibility, information access, service provision and participation in aviation careers.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Pre-Travel Planning and Booking

3.1.1 Many airline and airport websites are not fully accessible to users with visual or cognitive impairments. Booking platforms may lack screen-reader compatibility or simple navigation features. Operators and, where relevant, travel agents, should make available in accessible formats both general information, as well as specific information about services or arrangements for disabled customers.

3.1.2 Passenger requires assistance or lifting and Airlines be able to insist on advance notice where ideally the advance notice should be given at the time of booking, the airlines should be prepared to deliver the full assistance requested provided a minimum of 48 hours notice is given. However, where flights are changed at short notice by the airline, or disabled people make bookings at short notice, (for example by using “last minute deals”), there may not be sufficient time for the disabled person to meet any requirement for advance notice. In such cases the airline should do all that it reasonably can to accommodate requests.

3.1.3 Passengers often face difficulty communicating their specific accessibility needs, especially those with communication disabilities. Standardized channels and formats for submitting service requests are lacking.

3.2 Airport Navigation

3.2.1 Long distances, uneven surfaces, crowded spaces and insufficient seating can be barriers for individuals with mobility impairments.

3.2.2 Everyone arriving at an airport needs to be able to identify easily and quickly where they need to go and how to get there. Ambiguous, inadequate signage and lack of tactile or auditory way finding features impede navigation for individuals with visual or cognitive impairments.

3.2.3 Security screening processes may be distressing or inaccessible, particularly where staff lack adequate awareness or procedural flexibility for the handling of checks involving disabled people.

3.3 **In-flight Experience**

3.3.1 Aircraft cabin design limits accessibility, especially for passengers requiring assistive devices or physical support. Most aircraft lack accessible lavatories.

3.3.2 There is inconsistency in staff training and preparedness to assist passengers with disabilities, including during boarding, in-flight service and disembarkation.

3.3.3 Improper handling of mobility devices can result in damage, loss or delayed return affecting passenger safety and dignity.

3.4 **Communication and Service Consistency**

3.4.1 Gaps in disability awareness training result in inconsistent service delivery and negative passenger experiences.

3.4.2 Variability in accessibility standards across airlines and airports leads to confusion and inadequate service continuity, particularly in international travel.

4. **CONCLUSION**

4.1 While ICAO has made progress in recognizing the rights of persons with disabilities, there remains a pressing need to update, harmonize and enforce accessibility policies across all facets of air travel.

4.2 Enhanced cooperation among States, industry stakeholders, and disability advocacy organizations is essential to build a more inclusive aviation system.