



Implementation of accessibility policy in municipal transport planning – Progression and regression in Sweden between 2004 and 2014



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ABSTRACT

Practitioners and transport planners should be aware of the different policies in transport planning and laws and regulations in relation to them. Nevertheless, research has shown that implementation of transport policies, whatever their focus may be, does not always result in them being employed in the daily transport planning. In Sweden, accessibility policy has a long tradition but gained increased interest in 1999 with an action plan which aimed at ensuring participation of all people with all kinds of disabilities. The overall aim of this study was to investigate how accessibility policy for older people and people with disabilities in the outdoor environment has been implemented in the daily transport planning and how it has progressed/regressed over time. The results in this paper are based on longitudinal data from questionnaire sent out to all municipalities in Sweden in 2004 and 2014. The results indicate that it has become more established to consider accessibility in transportation planning. However, the results also show that there are still some considerable differences between the municipalities regarding their level of implemented accessibility policy. Also, the municipal transport planners seem to be less aware of the legislative directives and recommendations in 2014 than in 2004. Overall, there is need for improved knowledge and awareness of accessibility issues among all actors involved in municipal planning and a need for a more effective and systematic approach when planning and designing outdoor environments for all.

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1. Introduction

The transport system plays an important role in people's chances of living independent lives (Schwanen et al., 2012). The transport system connects people with work, social life and services. However, some people, in particular people with disabilities, can experience difficulties when entering a transport system that does not consider their needs. Consequently, people with disabilities are at risk of exclusion from the transport system (Church et al., 2000). In relation to that, The United Nations (UN), The World Health Organisation (WHO) and the European Union (EU) have emphasised that all people should have equal access to the transport system, regardless of their functional abilities (EC, 2010; UN, 1982, 1993, 2006; WHO, 2002, 2007, 2014). Accordingly, needs of people with disabilities should be considered in transport planning and accessibility should be included in transport planning. That could be made possible by collecting knowledge on accessibility and implementing it through appropriate legislation

and/or transport policies. In reality however, there are barriers to the implementation of transport policies, which have considerable effect on the level and extent that transport policies are employed in transport planning (see for example Banister, 1996; Hull, 2009; Lucas, 2012). This emphasises the need of closely monitoring the implementation progress, to be able to identify where further effort is needed, when progress is made, and to build up a knowledge base of effective measures (Marsden and Stead, 2011).

In transportation, there are a number of different interpretations of the concept accessibility, as well as different means of evaluating and measuring it. According to Geurs and van Wee (2004), there are four interrelated components to accessibility: the land-use component, the transportation component, the temporal component and the individual component. As a part of the individual component of accessibility, a transport system not designed to meet the needs of people with functional limitations, can prevent many people from accessing the transport system. In relation to that, Iwarsson and Ståhl (2003) conceptualised accessibility based on Lawton's Ecological Model of Aging, which states that less competent individuals receive more pressure from the environment than others (Lawton and Nahemow, 1973).

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Accordingly, Iwarsson and Ståhl (2003) conceptualised accessibility as the encounter between a person's or group's functional ability, and design and demands in the environment. Thus, accessibility as referred to in this paper is of an objective nature and relates to compliances with standards and official norms.

Accessibility has received worthy attention on the international level. For example, equal access for people with disabilities to the physical environment and transport system has been emphasised in numerous policy documents (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001; European Commission, 2010; United States Department of Justice, 2010; Council of Australian Governments, 2011; National Disability Strategy Implementation Group, 2013). On the national level in Sweden, accessibility has been subjected to laws and regulations since 1959 (SFS 612, 1959). In 1999, the accessibility work received increased attention with adaptation of an action plan, issued by the Swedish Government. The action plan aimed at ensuring participation in society of all people, in all ages and with all kinds of disabilities (Prop, 1999/2000:79). In the action plan, it was emphasised that all easily removed barriers should be eliminated before the year 2010. Furthermore, the action plan stated that municipalities should largely be responsible for elimination of environmental barriers. Linking regulations and guidelines to the Planning and Building Act was to ensure that knowledge on which barriers should be removed and how they should be removed, would reach the intended planners (BFS 19 HIN1, 2003; BFS 15 ALM1, 2004). Elimination of environmental barriers on municipal level has been closely monitored (Salar, 2008). The last follow-up on the national action plan for disability concluded that progress had been made. However, it also concluded that there was still considerable work left. Therefore, the Swedish Government made it clear that accessibility focus and objectives should remain intact (Skr, 2009/10:166). Consequently, a new strategy for implementation of disability policy was issued in 2011 (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2011). In line with that, guidelines for accessibility in all new and existing public spaces were updated (BFS 5 ALM2, 2011; BFS 13 HIN2, 2011; BFS 9 HIN3, 2013).

However, implementation of transport policies does not guarantee that the policies are employed in the daily transport planning. For example, inspired by the Theory of Symbolic Interactionism (Charon and Cahill, 1992; Grönvall (2004) conducted a study to learn why accessibility is not included in the daily transport planning process in Sweden. The Theory of Symbolic Interactionism states that people act in accordance to what is important to them. Furthermore, it states that the environment and social interactions with other people, shapes their beliefs on what is important. In accordance to The Theory of Symbolic Interactionism, the implementation process of accessibility policy, should affect the beliefs of people within the organisation who, eventually, ensure that accessibility is always included in the daily transport planning. However, Grönvall found that conflicts of interest occur within an organisation, affecting how accessibility is treated in the daily transport planning. Grönvall identified conflicts of interest on three levels: between an individual/group and society, between individuals, and within an individual. More specifically, Grönvall identified eight constraining factors: weak lobbyism; lack of knowledge; economic restrictions; social structure and infrastructure; aesthetics and other technical issues; engagement of the municipal transport planners; time; and application and formulation of the laws. In relation to Grönvall's (2004) findings, weak lobbyism would be planners and decision makers arguing that accessibility planning is not always reasonable, due to the low number of people with disabilities. Therefore, it has been emphasised that the proportion of people with disabilities is higher than many expect, or up to 15%. Furthermore, with population ageing, this proportion is expected to increase in the future (WHO, 2011). That is to say, the proportion of older people in the

world is increasing and may reach 21% of the world's population in 2050. Furthermore, the proportion of the oldest old (80 years and older) within the population of older people may reach 19% (United Nations, 2013). To elaborate, prevalence of functional limitations increases with age and so does the number of reported limitations among individuals (Carlsson et al., 2002; Iwarsson, 2005; Hovbrandt et al., 2007). This means that with increasing age, older people experience further restrictions in their abilities to perform activities, such as walking (Verbrugge and Jette, 1994). Nevertheless, having functional limitations does not imply that people have disabilities, because disability is the outcome between the interaction between a persons' health status (such as functional limitations) and the environment (WHO, 2001). Therefore, an older person with functional limitations only has disability when environmental or personal factors restrict them from participating in society or performing activities. Therefore, in an accessible environment, prevalence of disability should not rise (Schneidert et al., 2003).

Focus in research on accessibility in the transport system as well as impact of an inaccessible transport system, has often centered around older people (see for example Lavery et al., 1996; Davey, 2006; Hovbrandt et al., 2007; Hjorthol et al., 2010; Rantakokko et al., 2010; Risser et al., 2010; Wennberg et al., 2010; Ziegler and Schwanen, 2011; Schwanen et al., 2012; Hjorthol, 2013; Nordbakke, 2013; Phillips et al., 2013; Rosenberg et al., 2013; Stjernborg et al., 2014). Associated research has explained how mobility and independent living are interrelated. It has emphasised how important it is for older people's health and well-being to be able to, independently, use the transport system. Associated research has also emphasised the importance of societies taking actions to enable older people to use the transport system independently (see for example Banister and Bowling, 2004; Schwanen et al., 2012; Rosenberg et al., 2013). Moreover, it is worth mentioning that since the oldest old people, women in particular, do not always have access, nor the health to drive a car (Hjorthol, 2012) they have to rely more on walking, cycling and public transport. Whichever mode of transport they choose, the trip always starts and ends with walking. Therefore, an accessible outdoor/pedestrian environment plays a central role in older people's mobility (Stjernborg et al., 2014).

Research has found that accessibility measures in the outdoor environment can improve older people's perception of their environment (Ståhl et al., 2008; Wennberg et al., 2010; Ward Thompson et al., 2012; Ståhl et al., 2013; Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2015). However, there are also indications that it is challenging for municipalities to comply with the accessibility legislation. For example, Wennberg et al. (2009) found that most municipal transport planners in Sweden were positive towards accessibility for older people. However, Wennberg also found a great difference among municipalities, regarding level of implemented accessibility policy in transport planning. Moreover, in 2011, another study found that awareness of and knowledge about accessibility issues had increased among municipal transport planners in Southern Sweden (Wennberg, 2012). At the same time, Wennberg (2012) found that only half of the municipalities in Southern Sweden had completed their inventories and removal of easily removed barriers. Bearing in mind these results, and the fact that the initial goal of accessible Sweden in 2010 has passed, it is interesting to explore how extensively accessibility policy relating to the outdoor environment, has been implemented in the daily transport planning. This leads to the questions: are the municipal transport planners still working towards an accessible outdoor environment and how has the accessibility work progressed during the latest decade? In relation to population ageing, an additional question is whether the older people perspective is a decisive factor for municipalities in their strategic planning, towards a

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