The European Conference of Ministers of Transport (ECMT) which is a forum for political co-operation at the paneuropean level, but also maintains working relations with associated members outside Europe, including Japan, has developed over nearly 15 years a strong policy in favour of adequate provisions in the transport sector for persons with reduced mobility as a way of helping them become fully integrated in society.

The underlying considerations are that the proportion of the population concerned is by no means a tiny minority, that with the foreseeable changes in the age pyramid it will continue to increase everywhere, that barrier-free access to transport services is essential to human dignity and autonomy and that specific improvements made in this respect ultimately benefit a broad range of users.

The ECMT has a special working party for this issue with the aim to improve knowledge of the problems to be addressed, promote the exchange of information and experience, identify weak points in existing transport systems and awaken overall political consciousness.

Step by step, concrete proposals have been adopted by the ECMT Council of Ministers for rail transport (including metros and trams), coaches and buses, air transport and taxis.

The article presents more details about the recommendations in each of the sectors mentioned. It also deals with the crucial question of practical implementation. In this respect, a field survey shows that, in spite of undoubted progress, the achievements are unevenly distributed across the different countries and the different modes of transport, so that in many cases, critical links in the transport chain continue to present serious obstacles to access. At the end, the article formulates certain guiding principles which could make the way to further improvement easier.

Since the European Conference of Ministers of Transport (ECMT) may not be particularly well known to a certain readership of this journal, a brief comment on the organisation itself and on its field of activity seems to be called for.

The conference has three essential characteristics, which can be directly inferred from its name. It is in fact an intergovernmental organisation, which:

i) specialises in the transport sector, more precisely in the inland transport sector;

ii) works on behalf of the Minister responsible for transport in each member country; and

iii) is predominantly geared to conditions in Europe.

The conference therefore provides a co-operation forum for the Transport Ministers of its member countries and has recently served mainly as a means for aligning the transport policy of the European Union (EU) and that of the Central and Eastern European countries. Although it was originally set up as an association of purely Western European countries, its founding protocol has no ideological bias; consequently, after the historic changes at the end of the eighties, the ECMT was very soon able to open up to new partners in the extended Europe and to accept them as full members shortly afterwards.

In addition, the ECMT, which is closely associated with the OECD for administrative purposes, made the non-European members of the latter eligible for associated membership. For many years associate membership has been held by Australia, Japan, Canada, New Zealand and the USA, and was recently granted to the Republic of Korea.

Essentially the ECMT sees itself not only as an organisation that deals with purely economic matters, important though they may be, but also as one that quite consciously offers its members the opportunity to become actively involved in the interaction between the needs of the transport sector and the wider interests of society, chiefly in respect of the protection of the environment, the supply of energy, regional planning, safety, social issues, etc. In view of this, it not only regards transport as a branch of the economy, whose normal work in international competition needs to be put in order, but also embraces the idea that modern transport policy must help deal with the social issues referred to.

The ECMT accordingly recognised at an early stage that improving access to transport systems by persons with limited mobility should be treated as a priority and carried out pioneering work in this area chiefly in co-operation with its associate members far beyond the boundaries of Europe.
For nearly 15 years now, in addition to pursuing its normal activities, and in accordance with the basic idea referred to, the ECMT has been speaking out energetically in favour of adequate provision for persons with reduced mobility as a way of helping them become fully integrated in society. To this end it established a working group, which first set out to increase awareness of the issue in different countries, improve knowledge of the problems to be addressed, promote the exchange of information and experience, identify weak points in existing transport systems and, most notably, awaken political consciousness, so that the preconditions and foundations of genuine progress might be laid in individual areas (to be considered in more detail at a later stage) through cooperative efforts at governmental level. Furthermore, the group had a remarkable grasp of the way in which it might establish a network for personal contact between committed parties in different countries, indeed in all circles that were to become partners in the exercise.

I should first make a brief comment on the basic thinking, which the group has made its own and which has since been the basis of its concrete suggestions. This thinking may be summed up in the following points:

1) The proportion of the total population concerned – if all persons with reduced mobility are taken into account; not only those in wheelchairs, but also frail elderly persons, adults with small children, and pregnant women – is generally speaking quite high, somewhere in the region of 20% in Europe. The group in question, therefore, is by no means a tiny minority.

2) With the prospect of an age pyramid, resulting from the increase in life expectancy, this proportion will continue to increase everywhere, as there is clearly a close correlation between old-age and reduced mobility.

3) At the same time, mobility is essential to human dignity and autonomy. All members of the public must be able to lead their lives with the greatest possible autonomy, regardless of disability or age. Barrier-free access to public buildings and transport services is a fundamental requirement in this connection.

4) Improvements being made in the transport system, which are specifically intended to provide easier access to persons with reduced mobility, ultimately benefit a broad range of users, who also enjoy the advantages of improved access.

The last of the arguments put forward would seem to be of particular importance, since it shows how in certain circumstances a link may be established between the goals pursued for the benefit of people with reduced mobility and the normal business interests of transport companies. The more these two sets of interests can be harmonised, the more we can move away from the excessive short-termism of the established productivity criteria; and the better this is understood, even in board rooms, the less opposition there will be to practical applications!

So much for the basic thinking. The group quickly moved on to consider concrete measures, so that operational proposals for various sub-sections of the transport sector, each of which presents specific problems, might be submitted to the Transport Ministers at the ECMT, who would take appropriate decisions.

A crucial point, which has rightly been seen from the outset as an essential requirement for success in all this work, is the need for a dialogue, and not one that merely involves Transport Ministry representatives from the different countries, as would normally be the case, but one that goes further and includes virtually all interested parties. The ECMT working group consequently attaches great importance to open discussion of all the problems that have arisen so that the views of all participants might be taken into account in its investigations.

In recent years, therefore, a series of seminars or workshops has grown within the framework of the ECMT, in which all interested parties have been represented, whether the competent administrative authority at national, regional or local level, motor manufacturers, professional associations, transport companies, operators, and not least the groups of disabled people concerned or their international associations, or experts acting on their behalf. All have been called upon, without exception, to help bring about a better understanding of the problems in this area, to resolve conflicts of interest wherever possible, to put forward innovative solutions, and thus contribute to the progress everybody aspires to.

What then are the goals of the ECMT in the area under consideration? What does it wish to achieve through international co-operation, and what can it achieve?

Over the past few years the Conference’s Ministerial Council, as already indicated, has adopted a series of guiding resolutions for each of the transport sectors in question.
According to these, minimum requirements for appropriate, barrier-free access in all areas should meet all the following criteria:

- total access for persons reliant on wheelchairs (conforming to ISO standards) with appropriate toilet facilities if possible;
- aids for persons whose mobility, sight or hearing, or sense of balance is impaired (including anti-slip surfacing, support poles, handrails, etc.);
- aids to persons with visual handicaps (including contrasting colours, clear inscriptions, suitable lighting, acoustic signals to supplement visual ones where appropriate, additional tactile or acoustic guidance facilities or warning signals); and
- comparable aids for the hearing impaired.

In addition to these generally applicable minimum requirements, there are specific sectoral targets, which are to be described in more detail (see below). For our purposes a distinction has been made between rail transport, buses, aircraft and taxis. This section is followed by a short comment on the question of reserved parking places.

### 3.1 Rail

As far as rail transport is concerned, i.e., trains, metros, and trams, a minimum solution for Europe and the ECMT associated member countries would comprise the following:

- all new types of rolling stock should be designed and constructed in such a way as to allow easy access to persons with limited mobility;
- in new intercity fast-train systems, the platform and the floor of the train carriage should be at the same level, and the space between them should be kept as narrow as possible;
- for access to new station facilities, buildings and rolling stock, passengers in wheelchairs should not be required to leave their own wheelchair and change to another;
- lastly, facilities already in use, which could be adapted at relatively low cost, should be adapted within as short a time as possible.

Moreover, the ECMT in association with the UIC, the International Union of Railways, has laid down guidelines for the establishment of common standards, which will apply both to special devices such as lifts (addressing in particular the surface area of the platform, the load-bearing capacity and other safety-related features) and to access to toilets and other facilities inside the train. These guidelines will also contain an international implementation programme.

### 3.2 Bus

As regards the bus sector, a distinction should be made for the purposes of our study between the type of bus used in local public transport and coaches used over long distances. As far as the first type of vehicle is concerned, a striking feature and an essential step towards greater mobility for everybody is the greater use of low-floor buses. This breakthrough involves a relatively simple idea, which has already been widely accepted. It is particularly necessary here to ensure that new buses are routinely built according to the low-floor principle, that access is effected at the same level and that there are no steps inside the vehicles.

In places where operating conditions rule out the use of low-floor buses at present, alternative ways of achieving access at the same level should at least be seriously examined. This requirement would call for an appropriate structural adaptation of the bus stop.

The ECMT has also made the following special provision for coaches used on long journeys:

- in future, the system of classification for coaches should also include accessibility as a distinguishing feature;
- where coaches have high floors, lifts to raise people to the level of the vehicle floor should be installed, this being the best solution capable of being implemented, and for this purpose common standards for dimensions as well as safety criteria should be drawn up;
- generally speaking, a considerable amount of work still needs to be done, to improve access to and alight from coaches as well as movement inside the vehicles for people with limited mobility.

### 3.3 Air

As to air travel, it should first be made clear that the ECMT is not directly concerned with this sector. However, as part of its close co-operation with the European Civil Aviation Conference (ECAC), it could implement its basic proposal on access conditions for persons with reduced mobility in this area, too. As a result of a jointly organised seminar, it has been possible to assess previous experiences and gain a better idea of the needs of disabled persons using air transport, the ultimate goal being to adapt the individual elements of the air transport system to the needs of the disabled wherever possible.

On this basis a series of guidelines has been worked out, covering the following areas in particular:

- access to aircraft;
- ways of providing information and briefing, including clearly identifiable information offices, where persons with limited mobility can receive help;
• assistance on the ground and on board the aircraft;
• specific aircraft cabin design features; and
• the important question of special training for ground and flight personnel to enable them to cope with special needs and deal appropriately with persons with reduced mobility.

Generally speaking it may be acknowledged that of all public transport modes, today's airlines probably offer the most satisfactory travel conditions for persons with reduced mobility.

3.4 Taxi

Unlike the airlines, the taxi sector has unfortunately made only very slight and hesitant progress so far. Taxis are of particular importance in this very area, since they provide an often indispensable, and in any event essential link between all other modes of public transport, and may offer the only round-the-clock and therefore night-time service where required.

The ECMT had been trying for many years, as in the case of the other sectors cited, to prompt the taxi sector to adopt measures to improve access to their vehicles. This attempt has covered objectives related to the structural features of taxis— in particular collapsible seats and doors that opened wide, as well as handholds, contrasting colours, etc., and it has been assumed that it would be more cost-effective to design and construct fully accessible taxis from the outset, than to make the appropriate modifications at a later stage. From a socio-political standpoint it also seems preferable to give persons with reduced mobility access to all taxis, where possible, than to provide them with specialised vehicles or comparable health service or social service transport facilities on the basis of need.

Now that the targets identified have been listed, the crucial question of practical implementation arises as a matter of urgency: What follow-up has been given to the ECMT recommendations? What measures have been taken in individual countries? Where is any noteworthy progress to be seen? Is it all just a lot of ideas put down in writing?

On this point, one might be satisfied to note that the task of the ECMT consists first and foremost in obtaining wide political support at the international level for its endeavours, which have meanwhile been the subject of numerous resolutions and publications. On the other hand, it is only normal that concrete implementation should be the responsibility of national and local authorities. The ECMT should nevertheless take an interest in the effects its resolutions have had in practice, if only to assess the credibility of its work. This was why it conducted a broad field survey some years ago on the follow-up measures taken in a total of 26 countries, whose most important findings will be briefly summarised hereafter.

By and large the survey shows that significant improvements in access conditions have already been achieved in many countries: the low-floor bus is gradually becoming more and more common, new trams allow easier access almost everywhere, there are now even trains equipped with special facilities, there have been considerable improvements at airports with much more and better information for persons with reduced mobility. Not least, a number of consultation sessions have been held with the disabled at different times at the sugges-
tion of the ECMT. An extraordinarily important socio-political concept, for which, with very few exceptions, there was still scarcely any real moral support as recently as 10-12 years ago, is now in the process of establishing itself in practice and at the international level.

In spite of this undoubted progress, it must be conceded that the achievements are unevenly distributed across the different countries and the different modes of transport, so that in many cases, critical links in the transport chain continue to present moderate or even serious obstacles to access. On the one hand, there are countries like the USA and Canada that follow a clearly defined voluntarist policy with an appropriate legal basis, and furthermore participate very actively in this work as associate members of the ECMT. There are clear sectoral successes in many countries of Western and Northern Europe as there are in Japan, even though a generalised, global approach is often lacking. On the other hand, it should be noted that questions of access, particularly in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, still have fairly low priority. There is a lot of catching-up to be done there at the present time.

Turning to individual modes of transport, the very hesitant steps of the rail sector have been alluded to above.

In the case of taxis it should be noted that the situation in general shows only slight progress toward the situation aspired to. It therefore seems necessary to make another attempt in this area, for it is precisely in the taxi sector that a practicable and commercial or financially tenable way must be found to take greater account than before of the needs of persons with reduced mobility. Today this specific need is to be addressed once again by a group of experts, with the participation of the relevant professional associations, which will consider the technical characteristics and the associated aspect of profitability, with a view to proposing new and – we hope – successful solutions at the international level.

A practicable solution might consist of making access and alighting easier for everybody in the future, and then, at the very least, making a proportion of taxis in every town specially accessible to wheelchair users. Clearly, a considerable amount of work has to be covered here as well.

On the basis of past experience, it is possible to formulate certain guiding ideas, consideration of which could make the way to further improvement easier. The relevant points are set forth below with no claim to completeness and no indication of priority.

- A first important requirement is that specific needs of persons in terms of barrier-free access complying with recognised standards must be routinely taken into account whenever there is new investment. Most transport facilities are known to have very long lives and it is therefore of the utmost importance to be correspondingly far-sighted in designing, planning and operating them. Otherwise, it will only be possible to correct mistakes or omissions at a high cost at a later point in time.
- It is incumbent on all public authorities to ensure that new transport facilities comply with the most stringent regulations governing access to disabled persons. Public authorities should also be made responsible for the granting of public funds for suitable investment.
- Wherever it seems possible, an appropriate solution for existing facilities should also be sought, in circumstances involving the addition of suitable technical facilities.
- The specific needs of persons with reduced mobility and the associated practical considerations must be the object of special training for planners, architects and engineers on the one hand and for the operating personnel concerned on the other.
- A further point aims to achieve balanced use of the different approaches. It has been shown that sustained progress cannot be achieved simply through statutory orders, or at least not exclusively, and that a balanced set of different measures, each serving a specific purpose in its own way, is required. General framework laws, specific regulations, guidelines, economic incentives, measures to provide information and explanation all have a place in the broad spectrum of possible approaches, which must be combined together in such a way that an optimal outcome is finally achieved.
- Moreover, it cannot be repeated often enough that many individual measures can be taken at a relatively low cost, and that their benefits ultimately extend beyond the persons with reduced mobility directly affected to many other transport users. Directly linked to this is the need to take full commercial advantage of all improvements, even if they are primarily intended for persons with reduced mobility. It is clear that many transport enterprises duly endeavour to profit from the opportunities offered, pointing to the “quality of the service” and the “customer service.”
- Furthermore, mention should be made of the compel-
ling need for greater coordination, mainly between
governments, district corporations, and operators, in-
cluding those who provide special services. This con-
cerns both funding and the quest for the most
appropriate form of organisation.
• The special services, which moreover play an impor-
tant role in particularly difficult cases, are best re-
garded as a supplement to and not a replacement for
accessible public transport.
• Finally, reference should be made to the need for fur-
ther research work and ongoing exchanges of informa-
tion and experience at the international level, with the
object of using available resources as efficiently as
possible and not repeating mistakes made elsewhere.

The ECMT has compiled some of the aforemen-
tioned points together with others in a charter, accepted
unanimously by the Ministerial Council in 1998. It is to be
hoped that this charter can give a new stimulus to the imple-
mentation of the measures, which should be as broad as
possible, and above all provide for a harmonisation of the
levels of improvement in different member and associ-
ated member states of the Conference.

The improvement of access to all means of public
transport by persons with reduced mobility is one of the
stated goals of the ECMT and its member countries. We
can only note with a feeling of satisfaction that none of
the relevant proposals has met with fundamental opposi-
tion. In Europe therefore, as in other parts of the world,
there has been a distinct increase in awareness of these
issues, with the result that the improvement of access con-
ditions and the final goal of barrier-free access to trans-
port services have become basic elements of transport
policy in many countries.

Nevertheless, as so often in life, an evident gap
opens up here between objectives and reality. While on
the one hand it must be recognised that on a broader level
significant progress can be achieved, on the other hand
it must be admitted that this progress is very unevenly
distributed between countries and different modes of
transport. In this respect therefore a great deal still re-
mains to be done. Even today it is by no means easy for
a person with reduced mobility to travel from home to a
given destination with dignity, confidence, and a mini-
 mum level of comfort. Individual sections of the journey
may well be judged satisfactory, but changing from one
mode of transport to another and coping with the modal
“interface” points is often very arduous; and on top of
everything else, the information provided is quite insuf-
ficient. For the future therefore it is of prime importance
to consider a better integrated arrangement with a
harmonised system of barrier-free access standards. In
this respect present-day transport of persons with reduced
mobility perfectly exemplifies the fact that a chain is only
as strong as its weakest link.