Changing Attitudes Towards Persons
with Disabilities in Asia

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Introduction

We are in the last phase of the United Nations' "Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons" (1993-2002). It is timely to examine what has been happening in the Asia Pacific region, and the exciting changes that are set to take place in the first decade of the new millennium.

Before this UN Decade was declared there had already been previous United Nations initiatives, chiefly the "International Year of the Disabled (1982)" and the "Decade of People with Disabilities (1983-1992)" each stressing greater awareness of the need for equitable environments and full participation by all citizens in Asia.

Awareness and advocacy have been increasingly popular themes because the level of accessibility is, to some extent, a physical manifestation of society's acceptance and respect for persons with different ability sets. This is also seen in the on-going production of advocacy materials for people with disabilities to become involved in disability issues (accessibility et al.) by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific region (UN ESCAP). UN ESCAP, and especially the Disadvantaged Groups Section within the secretariat, is committed to work to show governments what can be achieved. The UN ESCAP region includes sixty-one governments and over three hundred million people (over sixty percent of the world population).

In certain societies in Asia, disabilities can be perceived as being related to misconduct in a previous life. Also, in some instances, a family member with a disability is perceived as a disgrace to the family - which is another important reason for raising public awareness and destigmatizing disability issues. The effort to increase awareness must be accompanied by two key features: co-operation and commitment amongst all agencies (governmental and non-governmental organisations, voluntary and user groups, self-help organisations, professionals, educational institutions, etc.) and the positive involvement of mass media (press, television, radio, etc.).

Local Initiatives

Local initiatives in Singapore often arise from individuals who persuade others and

organisations to become involved. For example the Singapore Polytechnic Centre for the Application in Rehabilitation Engineering (SP CARE), established in 1992, produces assistive devices every year, sometimes generic such as a height adjustable sink but often to aid a specific individual such as a breath operated computer interface (<www.sp.edu.sg /about_spcare.htm>). "Access Singapore" is a printed guide to accessible buildings in Singapore (and available at <www.dpa.org.sg/DPA/access/contents.htm>) and is the result of access audits by persons with disability - the attached accessibility map being an output from students on the Masters Elective "The Accessible Environment" at the Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore.

One of the high profile events that contributed to the raising of awareness in Singapore was the "Day in a Wheelchair" event, a mass simulation exercise, that was conducted in March 1999. This involved about 150 members of the public simulating what it was like to spend time in a wheelchair. The public responded to press announcements about the event and also the organisers invited politicians and locally-based embassy officials to participate. Teams of about twelve persons spent half a day to experience journeys and facilities in the built environment. The event was run in a professional manner, jointly organised by the Singapore Adventurers' Club (SAC), Handicaps Welfare Association (HWA) and Singapore Action Group of Elders (SAGE).

One example of the forward planning was the training, the week before, of trainers in how to handle wheelchairs - overseen by volunteer Occupational Therapists and persons with disability. It received press and television coverage which is an important feature as increasing the awareness of the general public was a prime goal. Questionnaires were provided to the participants before and after the exercise to judge any changes in attitude and the short-term effectiveness of the event. Both the `before' and `after' questionnaires had more than 100 respondents and the negative expectations about the quality of accessibility to the built environment for wheelchair users were met and often exceeded (Parker 2000).

Another event in Singapore, repeated annually, is the Handicaps Welfare Association's "Wheel, Walk or Jog" consisting of a show and a sponsored promenade up and down part of Singapore's famous shopping nirvana, Orchard Road. This helps to raise awareness and break the stereotyping of persons with disabilities.

The Malioboro Pilot Project in Jogjakarta, Indonesia, commenced in July 1999 and is coordinated by the Gadjah Mada University (Parker and Sasiang 2000a). Although small in scale, concentrating on the accessibility features of one pedestrian thoroughfare, its approach of `learning by doing' has aroused much interest from representatives of other Indonesian cities. Thus there is a likelihood of other, and larger, projects arising in Indonesia. For instance, there is presently a proposal seeking funding from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) for making Yogyakarta, a popular tourist destination, more people-friendly. Take-up has been slow due to political and economic difficulties, but these should ease in future years.

UN ESCAP Pilot Projects
On a much larger scale awareness can be raised and major players encouraged to become stakeholders in improving the built environment (buildings, streets and transportation) by full scale demonstration projects. UN ESCAP Pilot Projects in Beijing, New Delhi and Bangkok served this purpose. In each case approximately a square kilometre of city was made more

accessible, each project being tuned to the local contexts and needs. Each project site was chosen for its high visibility and logistical arrangements for future demonstrations. Beijing and New Delhi are the capital cities of the world's most populous nations. China is expected to attain a population of 1.4 billion by 2010, whereas India has, presently, one billion citizens and various studies suggest that it will surpass China as the world's most populous nation by 2040. Bangkok has a strategic location and is the home base of UN ESCAP.

The intention of UN ESCAP is to work with developing economies that are doing something and are open to doing more. And not, as one might initially presume, to automatically select and work with the poorest and least developed economies. Japan has been a major contributor in terms of both financial assistance and technical expertise and support through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) began in 1954 when it joined the Colombo Plan (an organization set up in 1950 to assist Asian countries in their socio-economic development). Lesser, but significant, contributions are received from Australia and New Zealand. These Pilot Projects are a physical realisation of how the built environment (buildings, streets and transportation) can be improved for the whole user population. Officially, the Pilot Projects ran from May 1995 to June 1998 and were preceded by an earlier phase whereby model guidelines were developed (comprising planning and building design, access policy provisions and legislation, and the promotion of public awareness with respect to accessibility issues).

The Bangkok Pilot Project focused on eleven streets in commercial and tourist areas (possibly due to the influence of major funding contributions by the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority (BMA) and the Tourist Authority of Thailand). At the time of completion of the project, over 15 kilometres of footpaths, incorporating Braille blocks and user-friendly features, were installed together with over 5000 points of ramp access. By the middle of 1999, over 50 kilometres of continuous upgraded footpaths had been completed (but the total installed in and around Bangkok nearly doubled to about 100 kilometres after a further 15 months). New kerb ramps/cuts, for road crossing, presently exceed 10,000. Further spin-offs have been the improved accessibility of the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority's district offices and the completion of an accessible city park, the Phra Atit Park and Walkway. Work `in progress' includes the improved accessibility of 70 health centres, 7 hospitals and the first school upgrade. Future initiatives will include enhanced legislative action and enforcement, greater co-ordination between the BMA and public utility organisations and transportation operators.

In Beijing the chosen site was a mixture of residential, commercial and educational facilities. The site had 23 specific targets and was the most demonstrative in terms of the variety of designs. The Fanzhuang area in Beijing was chosen as the Pilot Project site, instead of other proposed sites, because there were many who would benefit (about 4,000 persons with disabilities and 20,000 older persons in the population of 76,000). The Project delivered a range of upgraded facilities including 15 ramped entrances to public buildings, 18 ramped entrances to high-rise residences and about 8 kilometres of Braille blocks. By June 1998 in the city of Beijing there were 24 pavement routes with over 200 kilometres of Braille blocks and 20 underpasses and overhead walkways with ramps.

The New Delhi site consisted, primarily, of fourteen government buildings with large numbers of employees and visitors. In New Delhi there were problems in funding and, eventually, funding was secured from renovation and maintenance budgets. Due to the many

levels of bureaucracy ingrained in the Indian decision-making and financial approval procedures, it became important to mix the accessible features into overall budgets so that they could not be isolated, modified or deleted. The impact of the Pilot Project in New Delhi is seen in both the on-going improvements in physical access to other government buildings and in terms of legislative developments (new guidelines, model by-laws, and strengthening of enforcement on access issues).

Upcoming events in Bangkok and Beijing were also supportive of the Pilot Projects. The 7th Far East and South Pacific Games for the Disabled (FESPIC) Games in Bangkok, 1999, were mentioned as another reason to provide more accessible features in Bangkok's built environment. The FESPIC Games are for persons with disabilities in the Far East and South Pacific region which has 42 member countries. The games were attended by a wide spectrum of athletes, the physically disabled, the visually impaired, those with cerebral palsy and cognitive disabilities. In Bangkok, 15 sports were represented and 2,500 competed. Around Beijing there were a number of additional accessibility, barrier-free projects which were speeded by the wish to complete them before the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Peoples' Republic of China, the National Day (guoqingjie) celebration of 1st October 1999.

The Pilot Project outputs and impact have been tangible: media coverage, expansion to other areas, changes in intention in terms of making accessibility a key agenda and design requirement. Each of the Projects has developed its own momentum and will continue to demonstrate good practice for many years.

The Pilot Projects do not directly empower individuals. Instead they lead to a more universal and equitable built environment to enhance the quality of life of all citizens. This physical work goes `hand in hand' with training in access issues in order to build up the number of persons with the skills necessary to advocate about and improve existing accessibility conditions. More work is needed in less developed economies, such as Vietnam and Korea, which have first to develop a thirst and a will to become more inclusive in servicing the access wants and needs of their total populations.

From Awareness to Advocacy

Brendan Gleeson (1999) stated that it is the "capacity to direct empowering knowledge against disabling practices and ideologies that will define an enabling Geography". Awareness campaigns and talks can focus on the benefits of barrier-free environments, concentrating on the abilities rather than the disabilities. But `awareness' by itself does not effect change. Simply changing attitudes from a lack of knowledge, rapidly through `sympathy', to understanding and empathy is laudable, but it is the channelling of awareness into action and empowerment of people that is vitally important. For the greatest effectiveness in making change, efforts and initiatives need to be targeted to professionals who influence and control the design, maintenance and operation of the built environment.

Singapore is a small equatorial island with scant natural resources. It is therefore very aware that it must trade and be `ahead of the game' to survive. Because of this, economic arguments are the prevalent methodology to win support for change. Singapore is not a `welfare state' as might be understood by a Western audience (Parker 2001). For example, the cost of elevators was deemed too high for the few potential beneficiaries and hence the Mass Rail Transit (MRT) underground rail system was not made wheelchair accessible (fortunately, this is

now changing). In Singapore there is no equivalent legislation to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or the U.K.'s Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). The demographic trend of increasing numbers of elderly persons is a major concern to the authorities and it is probably this, more than anything else, that has brought more attention to inclusivity in recent years.

One way to convince authorities, organizations and individuals of the advantages of barrier-free environments is, for example, to explain the cost implications of a fall (the occurrence of falls should decrease with fewer hazards in the built environment). Whereas attendance at a Singapore Accident and Emergency (A&E) department is S$70 for the individual and S$150 for the government, this rises to S$4,000 and S$7,000, respectively, if a fall results in a fractured femur. These figures are fully comprehensive in Singapore dollars for surgery, hospital stay, medication, etc. (the exchange rate is approximately S$1.7 = US$1).

Another argument is to explain how tourism for persons with a disability can improve the environment for everyone whilst increasing tourism revenues (Parker and Sasiang 2000b). This is especially of significance when, according to the World Tourism Organisation, about 12-15% of the potential travelling public has some form of temporary or permanent disability (World Tourism Organization 1997). Also, the number of tourists roaming the world is set to more than double by 2020 (The Straits Times 2000).

The first "Asia-Pacific Conference on Tourism for People with Disability" was held in September 2000. Mr. Abdurrahman Wahid, the blind President of Indonesia and the First Lady, Mrs. Sinta Nuriyah Abdurrahman Wahid, who uses a wheelchair, opened it. At the end of the Conference the delegates (over 250 from 15 countries) presented the Indonesian Minister for Tourism and Culture with a draft "Bali Declaration" for consideration by the United Nations relating to the needs and rights of travelers with disabilities (Asia-Pacific Conference on Tourism for People with Disability 2001). This was a good example of advocacy making full use of opportunities whenever they arise. This Declaration, when accepted, will be a powerful tool in disability advocacy in the Asia-Pacific region including garnering better governmental support.

A new and recent initiative was the holding of the first regional "training of trainers" course on "The Promotion of Non-handicapping Environments for Persons with Disabilities" in Bangkok, Thailand, over the first two weeks of March 2000. It was so successful that it will be repeated in February/March 2002. Funding from JICA enabled people from nine cities in Thailand and some 60 participants from the ESCAP region to attend. They came from as far afield as Iran and Fiji with representatives of organisations coming also from China (including Hong Kong), India, Indonesia, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines and Sri Lanka.

Participants were drawn from a range of professions and organisations. These included design professionals (architects, engineers), policy-makers and others from government departments or ministries involved in activities which have a bearing on the design or realisation of built environments including tourism authorities. Other participants were people with an active record of advocacy for access promotion, drawn from non-governmental organisations and user-groups of disabled people, such as welfare associations, and also from universities, Gadjah Mada (Indonesia), Universiti Malaysia (Malaysia), and King Mongkut University (Thailand).

Attitudes to designing non-handicapping environments have become much more enlightened in recent years, especially where the need to design for increasing numbers of older and potentially frail people is being recognised. Design professionals, however, are widely unaware of the impact of barriers for older or disabled people and how these may be removed

often by simple planning at both strategic and detail level. Equally, representatives of groups of disabled people may lack expertise in defining and articulating the needs of their members and be unsure of the range of practicable technical solutions which they could ask for and which could be provided at low, or no, cost. In this course, methods to close this gap between awareness of both of need and workable strategies and best-practice solutions were applied. By helping the participants to interact, share experience and develop their knowledge alongside each other, greater respect and empathy is built up, and working relationships established.

Project work, in design scenarios, where both users and implementers are given active roles, helped to establish confidence on both sides and provided participants with challenges to take away with them to be applied in their own countries and organisations. This work was consolidated by practical work, using group techniques, in disability simulation exercises, group design of access surveys and appraisal of built environments and transportation, including trying access features on the new Bangkok Skytrain system and its stations and an access audit of the World Trade Centre building. This workshop was the result of many earlier works, most notable of which was a one week workshop, in June 1998 (Pattaya, Thailand), developing materials to empower those with disabilities to become trainers and advocates on disability matters in developing economies.

Singapore's current "Code on Barrier-free Accessibility" (Public Works Department 1995) was developed as a useable working document and the first version included the increasing population of "the elderly" in its scope mainly because the numbers of disabled people alone were insufficient to justify its mandatory status. Although older persons may not be technically `disabled' they become `less able' as a natural part of the ageing process. It should be noted that this Code does not regulate on the interior of dwellings. Future revisions to the Code, to be published in early 2002, will include advisory information on design for elderly persons, children with disabilities, pregnant women and parents with young children. Also, it will include more mandatory requirements for the benefit of vision-impaired and hearing-impaired users, which will be of benefit to many elderly people.

Discussion

The initial work of UN ESCAP is to empower urban-based persons with disabilities in mainstream facilities, but the strategic intention is to work to raise disability issues in rural areas - a way to let persons with disabilities `out and about'. But this next focus towards rural sectors will not be solely related to disability issues. It will be more holistic and include other social and developmental issues such as child labour, exploitation, and poverty alleviation.

This strategic intention is manifested in the UN ESCAP documentation (UN ESCAP 2000) that seeks to promote the inclusion of disabled persons in the development process. The 73 targets for action, formulated in 1995, are proposed to be expanded into 107 strengthened targets for action by 2002 when the evaluation of the Decade will be conducted. These targets cover all 12 of the policy areas of the "Agenda for Action for the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, 1993-2002": national coordination, legislation, information, public awareness, accessibility and communication, education, training and employment, prevention of causes of disability, rehabilitation services, assistive devices, self-help organizations, and regional cooperation.

It is exciting to witness the rapid move away from playing scant regard to the wants and

needs of persons with disabilities, in the more developed Asian economies, by the trend towards the provision of high quality, centralized, facilities. But there has been a further, more mature, move to bring persons with disabilities back into the community, encouraging full participation in all aspects of living such as education, recreation and employment.

For education in Singapore there is the "Teach Me' initiative - providing access audits and recommendations to make standard schools more accessible. More accessible transportation features and systems are being introduced in Singapore - the retrofitting of access features to MRT stations and accessible new lines, a new accessible Light Rail Transit (LRT) system, accessible taxis (the London Cab TX1), low-floor buses, etc. This is, effectively, a move from a concentration on economic growth per se to focusing upon improving quality of life issues, a reflection of more caring and equitably aware societies. An accessible place is not a luxury. It is an essential requirement for all places in the twenty-first century. With a barrier-free built environment there will be less hindrance to equalities being realized in many other, associated, areas, such as employment, education and life experiences.

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