



POLICY BRIEF ON INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

to ensure physical accessibility in the Arab region



Introduction

Accessibility has been ingrained in global legal and policy discourses as both a normative and operational concept. This is also the case on the regional and national level in Arab States.¹ However, despite the increased awareness of the importance of creating inclusive physical and digital environments,² challenges remain.

This brief will focus on the component of environment/ physical accessibility. Information on the exact level of accessibility of the built environment in the Arab region is scarce. There is a shortfall of accessibility assessments and audits, even in large urban cities in the region. Exploring ways to fill this data gap is an important question, but one that is beyond the scope of this brief.



Why has it been a challenge to translate commitments to accessibility on the ground? Is ensuring accessibility always costly? What are some examples of innovative solutions to accessibility in the region? And how can these good practices be mainstreamed?

This brief aims to shed light on these questions, offer some good practices and provide recommendations to policymakers to help make the Arab region more inclusive of everyone, especially persons with disabilities.

What is accessibility?

“To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas.”

Excerpt from Article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons Disabilities (CRPD).

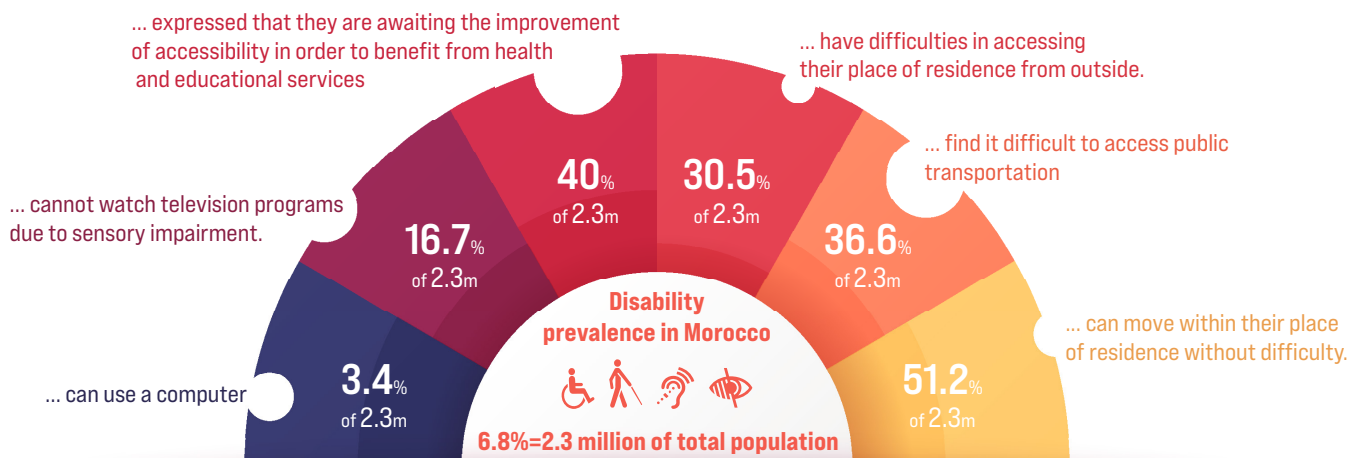
1. The challenge

The challenge in mainstreaming accessibility of the physical environment does not necessarily lie in establishing new legal and technical standards; there are numerous models and guidelines that set international standards. The challenge lies in implementing these standards and norms on the ground based on the local and national context. Most Arab countries have some legal frameworks, municipal guidelines or provisions in national building codes to ensure accessibility, but there is little evidence of compliance per the lived experiences of persons with disabilities. It is important to highlight that accessibility helps facilitate social inclusion, while inaccessibility of the environment leads to isolation and exclusion.

Achieving accessibility requires a normative shift in how societies perceive disabilities and construct the physical, social and digital environment. Accessibility “refers to the provision of flexible facilities and environments, either virtual or physical, to accommodate each user’s needs and preferences. This may be any place, space, item or service that is easily approached, reached, entered, exited, interacted with, understood or otherwise used”.³

Data on accessibility in Morocco

Data on accessibility is often scarce, but one snapshot from Morocco illustrates some of the challenges. Per the national Moroccan disability study conducted in 2014, the following findings were observed.





2. The solution

A. Plan with accessibility in mind

Contrary to the belief that “accessibility is too costly”, one United Nations report affirms that “available evidence illustrates that urban infrastructures, facilities and services, if designed and built following accessibility or inclusive “universal design” principles from the initial stages of planning and design, bear almost no or only 1 per cent additional cost”.⁴

If accessibility is put at the forefront of any development project or the construction of roads, transportation infrastructure, airports or other public and private facilities, it would save later costs to retrofit, adjust and revamp. This also includes basic facilities like residential buildings, schools, hospitals, police stations and emergency services, which provide critical services and need to be accessible.

B. Building back better in conflict and post-conflict contexts

Many conflict and post-conflict countries in the region – including Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen for example – have an opportunity to mainstream accessibility in reconstruction and development efforts. Organizations of persons with disabilities in all those countries have been advocating for inclusive development in reconstruction efforts and could be an excellent source of

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United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Good Practices of Accessible Urban Development,” 2016.

information and support. This is especially the case when there are international agencies involved. The responsibility becomes heightened, as these organizations have access to the technical expertise that would facilitate mainstreaming accessibility.

This also applies in the case of reconstruction following emergencies and disasters, like the floods in the Sudan or the Beirut Port explosion, where rebuilding damaged areas presents an opportunity to make them accessible.

C. The business case for accessibility

The business case for accessibility can be best illustrated in the example of the tourism economy. Many coastal cities in the Arab region along the Mediterranean and Red Seas rely on tourism as the main economic activity.

Making sure that hotels, beaches, restaurants and transportation are accessible would allow a greater number of tourists to visit, whether they are persons with disabilities, older persons, pregnant women, children and their caretakers. The same example applies across different economic sectors, with tangible economic benefits when facilities and services are made accessible.

Some inclusive design examples



Coloured ramps: Very simply made and designed for places that are close to ground level, with one small step that is not accessible. They are light in weight, can be picked up easily with the ropes on the sides and help make facilities and businesses more accessible.



More accessible libraries: The original design of libraries should be made accessible through a process of review and adjustments for existing.



Two-level drinking fountains: for people of short stature, wheelchair users and children.

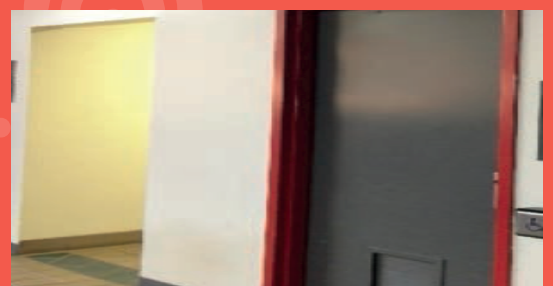


Visual contrast: the use of bright colours for doors, walls, floors, etc allows persons with low vision to easily navigate and use the amenities.



Accessible transportation: such as low-floor buses for wheelchair users.

"Taking accessibility into account in urban and rural development not only has tangible economic benefits, but it should be pursued as a goal in of itself, a human right enshrined in the CRPD with the consensus of the international community and its members."



3. Innovative practices in the Arab region

Below is a list of good practices for achieving physical accessibility in the Arab region. It is not an exhaustive list, and rather provides examples by public and private actors of pursuing the goal of accessibility.



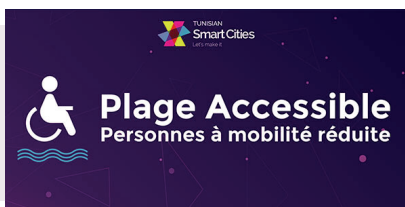
Sharjah as an “Accessible City for Persons with Mobility Disabilities”

Sharjah Accessibility Office: compliance office at the city level

Sharjah is the third largest city in the United Arab Emirates, and in 2018 it gained the recognition of the World Disability Union as a “Disability Friendly City”.⁵ How did the city achieve this recognition? It did so through the creation of a coordination and compliance office dedicated to ensuring the accessibility of public and private institutions. The office is called the Sharjah “Accessible City for the Disabled”, and it is mandated to do the following:⁶

- ✓ Submit proposals and recommendations to public and private entities on how to comply with international accessibility standards.
- ✓ Respond to any queries by public and private entities.
- ✓ Grant awards/recognitions of entities that successfully comply with accessibility standards, local or international.
- ✓ Raise awareness on disability inclusion, through collaborating with media entities in the Emirate.
- ✓ Coordinate with HR departments of public and private entities to find employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.
- ✓ Coordinate and collaborate with Sharjah University and the American University of Sharjah to conduct applied research aimed at supporting the United Arab Emirates as a disability-inclusive country.

The United Arab Emirates has also produced a set of guidelines for universal design, including the “Dubai Universal Design Code”,⁷ which the country aims to roll out on a national scale, under the framework of the “UAE Universal Design Code”.⁸



Accessible beaches in Tunisia

Civil society initiative for inclusive tourism

Led by the Tunisian Association for Smart Cities, the “Plage Accessible: Personnes à mobilité réduite”⁹ (Accessible beach: Persons with reduced mobility) initiative aims to make beaches accessible to persons with disability in five coastal towns and cities: Bizerte, Monastir, Djerba, Gabes and La Marsa. The initiative aims to retrofit the recreational and swimming facilities

in these beaches to make them accessible, including modifying the infrastructure to make sure persons with mobility disabilities are able to use the facilities independently, without external help. The Tunisian Association for Smart Cities prepared the proposal for this initiative after a series of consultations with the relevant civil society organizations and local municipalities. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been some delays in launching the initiative, and



implementation is scheduled for summer 2022. The initiative's team is also working to advocate for a new law to stipulate that public facilities including beaches be accessible.

In parallel, other municipalities have already retrofitted their beaches to become accessible to wheelchair users, including the Nabeul beach, which was modified in August 2021,¹⁰ and the Chaffar beach, where an accessible beach corridor was installed in July 2020.¹¹

ACCESSIBLE JORDAN

Accessible Jordan

A social enterprise linking government and civil society initiatives

"Accessible Jordan"¹² is a social enterprise that aims to raise awareness on accessibility, improve the accessibility of workplaces, public spaces and recreational facilities and build a database of all accessible places in Jordan.

With various initiatives in the country, such as a project to make Amman's public buses accessible,¹³ or another project to make Amman's parks accessible to children with disabilities,¹⁴ Accessible Jordan provides a one-stop-shop guide that brings these initiatives together, helping locals and tourists identify accessible sites.

The Accessible Express Bus Project

The Express Bus project was launched in 2019 in Jordan, taking into account accessibility for persons with disabilities. The Express Buses and bus stations were made accessible by using floor indicators for



persons with visual impairments, installing light signals equipped with sound systems and ensuring that sidewalks, parking lots and buses are wheelchair friendly. The buses are also equipped with screens identifying the bus route and stop locations through both voice and sign language.¹⁵



Accessible Qatar

An online platform linking private and public partners

Similar to Accessible Jordan, Accessible Qatar¹⁶ is an online platform that provides a directory of accessible facilities in Qatar. It provides an accessibility rating to help users identify the level of accessibility. It was founded by the company "Sasol" in partnership with the Qatari Ministry of Municipality and Environment, the National Tourism Council, Hamad bin Khalifa

University, the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, Mada-Qatar's Assistive Technology Center, the Shafallah Center, Qatar's Social and Cultural Center for the Blind, the Qatari Social and Cultural Center for the Deaf, the Best Buddies Initiative, UNESCO, Qatar's National Commission for Education, Culture and Science, and the Qatar Society for Rehabilitation of Persons with Special Needs.

Qatar Metro

Qatar launched its first public Metro system in 2019, and it is fully accessible to persons with disabilities. During the planning and construction phase of the project, the Shafallah Center for Persons with Disabilities was consulted to ensure accessibility. The centre was also consulted in other development projects related to the Qatar 2022 World Cup.¹⁷



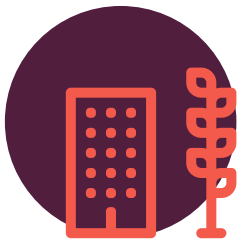
Saudi Arabia's "Universal Accessibility Program"

Encouraging compliance with national accessibility standards

Led by the King Salman Center for Disability Research, Saudi Arabia's "Universal Accessibility Program" was

launched in 2007 and aims to ensure the accessibility of public and private facilities.

To this end, four guidelines¹⁸ were launched:



The guideline for the built environment



The guide to universal accessibility of road transport



The guide to comprehensive accessibility for tourist destinations and accommodation



The guide to universal accessibility for marine transportation

Since the launch of the programme, a number of measures and campaigns were taken to encourage compliance with these accessibility guidelines. One example includes a campaign¹⁹ in July 2020 to ensure compliance of stores and retail locations by installing accessible ramps to their facilities. A 60-day grace period was given, and entities that fail to install the ramps would be fined per the municipal code. Another example is a circular²⁰ issued by the Minister of Human

Resources and Social Development/ Chairman of the Authority for the Care of Persons with Disabilities, which mandates universal accessibility standards for all government facilities, with a period of six months to implement it. The circular was issued in coordination with the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and Housing and the King Salman Center for Disability Research to prepare simplified guidelines on how to ensure accessibility, in line with the Saudi building code.





Recommendations

- ✓ **Raise awareness of accessibility:** The first step to solving a problem is to identify and acknowledge it.
- ✓ **Move from access to accessibility:** As the Secretary-General's brief on accessibility highlights, "Accessibility is not just access, but also availability and usability of products, programs and services, in physical and virtual environments".²¹
- ✓ **Remember the concept of "nothing about us without us":** Any endeavour to create laws, policies, programmes or initiatives on accessibility must include persons with disabilities and the organizations that represent them (organizations of persons with disabilities or OPDs). Not only is this in line with the CRPD, but it also ensures that accessibility initiatives are successful, in line with standards and truly accessible by persons with disabilities as the main users. Mapping the user experience, dividing it step by step and conducting simulations and audits are all helpful steps to follow.
- ✓ **Issue an open call to schools of architecture, engineering and urban planning in the Arab region** to conduct accessibility audits in their local urban or rural setting. This could help fill the knowledge gap on the level of accessibility in different Arab cities, towns and rural areas. Despite the discourse around accessibility, actual data on the degree of environmental and architectural accessibility of spaces in the Arab world remain scarce. Crowdsourced data could also support this endeavour.
- ✓ **Start from the design and promote the use of the principles of universal design:** This could be reflected in national and local legislations, building codes and urban development plans. Architects should consider accessibility in all their designs. A good design can make accessibility seamless and zero cost.
- ✓ **Encourage public-private partnerships** to make facilities accessible and create online directories of the accessibility of different cities or towns. Partnerships can include ministries of planning, urban and rural development municipalities, building permit offices, engineers, architects and urban developers. The private sector also has a great potential, and a business incentive, to be a key partner in ensuring accessibility, as accessibility can drive innovation, expand the market and establish companies as key stakeholders in ensuring an inclusive economy and society.
- ✓ **Conduct capacity-building efforts for all stakeholders and partners** to ensure the implementation of accessibility standards.
- ✓ **Ensure compliance and feedback mechanisms** that enable persons with disabilities to issue reports or complaints regarding any facility that does not comply with local or national accessibility standards. Periodic inspections are important, as are incentives and fines to encourage facilities to ensure accessibility.

Endnotes

- 1 21 out of 22 Arab states have signed or ratified the CRPD, and many have passed national disability laws that identify the accessibility of the built environment and digital accessibility as legal rights. To view disability laws in the Arab region, see the resources section of ESCWA's Arab Digital Inclusion Platform. Available at <https://e-inclusion.unescwa.org/resources>.
- 2 This brief focuses on the accessibility of the physical environment. To view ESCWA's work on digital accessibility, see ESCWA's Arab Digital Inclusion Platform. Available at <https://e-inclusion.unescwa.org>.
- 3 <https://undocs.org/A/74/146>.
- 4 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Good Practices of Accessible Urban Development", 2016. Available at https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/desa/good_practices_in_accessible_urban_development_october2016.pdf.
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- 15 Jordan's IGED focal point response to ESCWA's questionnaire on physical accessibility, October 2021.
- 16 <https://www.accessibleqatar.com/about-us>.
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