Engagement of people with functional variation in the urban planning processes in Russia and Sweden

How do we assess the usability of our urban spaces?

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Introduction

Making our cities inclusive for all, not just persons with full functional ability, is a challenge that all countries are facing. Some countries have come far in making cities accessible – but are facing challenges of catering for all, maintaining the implemented structures and solving the conflicting needs of groups with different kinds of functional variation.

With the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006), many countries intensified their focus on improving the possibilities for persons with disabilities to participate in society and life in general. The UN convention was ratified in Sweden on 15 December 2008 and in Russia on 25 September 2012.

About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

Abstract

The inclusion of all people in local political and urban planning decision-making is one of the foundations of local democracy. This briefing paper examines a simple transferable methodology for assessing the usability of our city spaces for persons with functional variation. The focus is on the everyday experiences as people use the city in their normal lives. The research is based on three case studies in Sweden and Russia – but in principle the same methodology could be used in other municipalities and country contexts. By direct observation of city spaces and working directly with persons with functional variation, we can gain insight into how well our efforts to make our cities accessible for all are working.

Functional Variation in Sweden and Russia

This policy brief is based on research conducted in the ICLD-funded 'Legitimacy, Urban Planning and Sustainability in Russia and Sweden – LUPSRUSS' project in Sweden and Russia, and hence focuses primarily on these cases[1]. In principle, however, the same issues arise in many other countries and cities.

In Sweden, the move to adapt cities for persons with functional variation began already in the mid-1960s with the 'Omsorgslagen' (1967: 940). Since then various laws have been implemented in order to secure the rights of persons with functional variation. But according to the Swedish Disability Rights Federation's report to the UN (United Nations/Funktionsrätt Sverige 2018), there is still room for improvement.

In Russia, a federal programme was introduced to make Russian cities more accessible: 'Accessible Environment 2011-2020' (Dostupnaya Sreda 2011-2020). Its key aim is the 'creation of legal, economic and institutional conditions conducive to the integration of persons with disabilities into society and the improvement of their living standards'. Among the sub-programmes are projects to facilitate accessible priority public buildings and services; equal access to rehabilitation services and the labour market; and objectivity of social and medical institutions for people with functional variation (Resolution of the Government of the Russian Federation 2015).

Since the introduction of the Accessible Environment programme, activists with whom we have spoken have indicated that the number of people in the Russian Federation willing to change, cooperate and influence the implementation of government resolutions has been rising. There is a growing interest among the community of people with functional variation in decision-making participation at all levels: from local municipal-level governance to federal politics.

The government programmes have led to many improvements of the urban fabric and the standard of new buildings. All new projects have to comply with high standards of accessibility for people with physical functional variation, but there will always be a mix of old and new. The overall usability is a sum of all the different projects in the city done at different times. Even solutions which comply with all building regulations can sometimes turn out to be less useful or impractical – e.g., street elevators to access pedestrian underpasses that involve long waits – while solutions which are not completely in compliance can be very useful – e.g., ramps that are technically slightly too short or steep, but link two levels adequately.

[1] In the wider project, pairs of case study towns in Scandinavia and Russia were chosen for their comparable characteristics – size, urban and infrastructural challenges, economic structures, etc. – and comparison was made of their approaches to these challenges. (See http://wpmu.mah.se/rucarr/research/lupsruss/ for further details.)

Methodology

In this policy brief, we report on the steps taken by a group of researchers to develop a simple transferable methodology for assessing usability of our city spaces for persons with functional variation. The focus is on the everyday experiences of people with functional variation as they use the city. The case studies used in the research are the cities of Malmö (Sweden), Ekaterinburg (Russia) and St Petersburg (Russia) – but in principle the same methodology could be used in other contexts.

The methodology should be seen as a complement to the many good checklists accompanying building/road regulations, and other guides such as United Nations studies on good practice in accessible urban development (UN 2003/UNDESA 2016). These checklists are valuable tools when conducting objective evaluation of the city spaces. Most cities have local regulations, masterplans and strategic development plans/strategies. These documents establish the framework in which the rights of persons with functional variation are taken into account in the city planning context.

The historical context of the city is also important, because it can explain many of the challenges that cities face in becoming accessible. A medieval city layout generally consists of narrow streets with steps up to doors and many buildings have protected status, which makes it difficult to bring the city centre up to present day standards for disabled access. A new city area with very wide streets can have issues of wind turbulence and long distances to public transport. The topographical context is important, as a flat city is easier to access with wheels than a city with many hills.

The five tools

Tool 1: Visual registration of the city spaces

We made photos of all the major intersections/road crossings in the city centre:

- 1 photo with an overview of each intersection
- 2-4 photos of the representative kerb conditions at that particular intersection.

The objective was to give an overview of the accessibility of the city centre, as road intersections often are the main obstacles or facilitators for getting around the city for persons with functional variation.

The photos were collected on a large size poster and used as basis for discussing the overall standard of the road crossings in the city centre *(see figure 1)*.

Figure 1 Posters made of the intersections in Malmö and Ekaterinburg provided a way to compare the accessibility of the city centres. We observed that in both cities the city centre is generally accessible, and much has been done to lower kerbs and make tactile areas at intersections.

Picture on next page shows an example of an A1 size poster, showing all the intersections in the area of Malmö which we examined in our pilot study.

Figure 1

Below is an example of an A1 size poster, showing all the intersections in the area of Malmö which we examined in our pilot study.

Below is an actual size image from the poster:

Figure 2

Public space observations in Ekaterinburg and Malmö

The number of persons with functional variation counted during our observation of the studied areas was not high enough to present a quantitively representative study of the area. In order to do a quantitively representative study it would be necessary to carry out many more hours of observations.

But our observations did give us a good qualitative impression as to the extent that persons with functional variation participate in life in the studied areas:

- We observed that in Malmö many persons with functional variation were visible in the city spaces. We saw many persons in wheelchairs or with other walking assisting equipment, but we did not see any visually impaired persons during our observations.
- In Ekaterinburg we did not observe nearly as many persons in wheelchairs as we did in Malmö, but we did notice blind persons using the city spaces.

Tool 2: Observation of public city spaces

In order to access to what extent persons with functional variation were present, we observed selected popular public spaces.

We started by identifying the places most frequented by the public in the city centre. Places were selected based on interviews with local residents and our own observations of where many people come during their spare time. From this long list, we selected two places to study in each city:

- The 'traditional' meeting place: the historical city centre
- The 'new' meeting place: a popular shopping centre

The historic centres of Malmö and Ekaterinburg both have pedestrianised areas in the oldest parts of the city, which remain the core city centres and shopping districts. Due to the cold winters, indoor meeting places are important in northern cities. Shopping centres in general have become popular places to meet and attract a younger public than the traditional city centre (Beiro et al. 2018; Jäger 2016).

Using the methodology of using non-participant structured observation (Bryman 2008: 273-85), we investigated the extent to which we see persons with functional variation using the public city spaces. This method is naturally limited to observing those persons who exhibit visible functional variation.

We used techniques of counting and tracking (Gehl and Svarre 2013: 21-33), specifically, the following methodology *(see also figure 2)*:

1. Walk-through counting

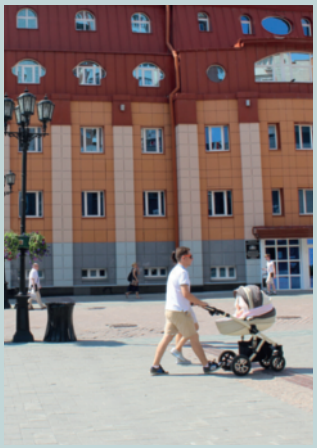
Given that the areas we wished to observe were too large to observe from one single point, we started by making a walk-through observation. The observations consisted of walking around in the selected area and counting how many persons with visible functional variation we could see. We chose a time during the week-end on when the spaces were busy (on a day with nice weather for the outdoor observations). We made two walk-throughs in each city of two hours' length.

2. Fixed-point counting

Once we had a feeling for the area, we chose a place where we could sit down and count the number of persons passing, in a non-intrusive manner. We sat down for one hour and counted the number of persons with visible functional variation, the type of variation, and the number of persons without functional variation. The time for the counting was chosen to coincide with a time at a weekend when there were many people in the public space.

Malmö city

Malmö shopping



Ekaterinburg city

Ekaterinburg shopping

Figure 3:

Walk and talk observations in Ekaterinburg and Malmö

We did a 'walk and talk' test walk through each city space with a person in a wheelchair or mobility scooter. We talked about how she moved through the city and which challenges and opportunities she saw in the studied areas. The walk gave us an insight into her personal observations on the area. It confirmed what we had previously observed – that both cities are reasonably accessible for persons in wheelchairs – but also gave us a personal insight into how uncomfortable it is to drive on the cobblestone streets in Malmö, and how unpleasant it is when the lift to pass under the road is out of order in Ekaterinburg and stairs are not an option.

Tool 3: Walk through together with a person with functional variation

Building on the concept of 'test walks' (Gehl and Svarre 2013: 34-6), we did a walk-through in the selected city areas with a person with functional variation *(see figure 3)*. During the walk we talked with her about how well the city space worked for her, and we observed how she negotiated the city spaces. This gave us valuable direct insight into how she used the city spaces and complemented our own earlier observations of the same city spaces.

Ideally, a number of 'walk and talks' should be carried out with persons with different kinds of functional variation, and different persons with the same kind of functional variation, in order to get a good overview of how the city spaces are working in reality.

Tool 4: Focus groups

Focus groups were held in all three cities to discuss issues of using the city with functional variation. Focus groups use a semi-structured but free-ranging discussion format to explore qualitatively an issue in which people have direct experience but different opinions. They are 'particularly useful for encouraging in-depth exploration of sensitive or potentially difficult issues' (Kerr et al. 2010: 1175-6). They also have the advantage of allowing a group dynamic to emerge and can allow issues to be raised by participants in their own words that may not have been considered by the interviewer (Halperin and Heath 2017: 302). They are therefore a good way to get an overview of the challenges and opportunities faced by persons with different kinds functional variation in the city. To facilitate group interaction (Bryman 2008: 513-16), it is important to choose participants with different kinds of functional variation, and preferably more than one person with the same kind of functional variation. The choice of location for the focus group must of course be suitable to persons with functional variation and easily accessible for them. If an area is to be studied, it is also advantageous to ask the participants in advance how much they go out and whether they use the studied part of the city, which may not be the case for all persons with functional variation.

Tool 5: Working with local activists

Another approach to gain practical information about the usability of the city spaces is to consult local activists or to follow their activities. They often spend much time and effort to influence decision makers to improve the conditions for persons with functional variation. Activists will often be working with a particular goal, but as long as this is kept in mind, they can be a very useful source of practical information *(see figure 4, next page)* and their information can be balanced against the findings from the previous four steps.

Figure 4:

Forms of influence used by activists

- Creation of internet communities. Online groups, mainly based on platforms of social networks (VKontakte, Facebook), unite thousands of people with common problems and issues. The purpose of online communities is to help people to solve individual or collective problems together.

- Writing petitions. Petitions commonly address problems encountered by communities or individuals. Petitions are sent to government representatives, district and city administrations, ministries, the prosecutor's office and other government institutions.

- Testing of urban furniture and facilities.

- Creation of public platforms which unite disabled activists and representatives from government bodies and businesses to discuss issues in the urban fabric.

- Involvement of activists in teaching and training seminars for those who interact with people with disabilities on a daily basis: bus drivers, metro station workers, etc. Such training raises public awareness about the needs of people with disabilities and functional variation.

- Involvement of activists in expert groups to support government actions aimed at improvements in disability infrastructure.

EXAMPLE:

Political participation findings from St. Petersburg activists

Among Russian metropolitan regions, Saint Petersburg is an example of a city with a vibrant political life and a tradition of public activism. Home to five million inhabitants, Saint Petersburg is a city with modern residential districts and a densely-populated historical city centre. Competent implementation of the 'Accessible Environment' programme goals is required for the programme's success. Therefore, political activists informally voiced the concerns of communities and individuals whose rights had been violated. Moreover, activists became involved in a 'testing' process of city objects, infrastructure and facilities constructed as a result of the programme 'Accessible Environment'. One of these forms of influence is the enhanced participation of people with functional variations in the political processes of the Russian state.

Conclusion

By direct observation of city spaces and working directly with persons with functional variation, we can gain a direct insight into how well our efforts to make our cities accessible for all are working.

The tools used are all heavily dependent on the persons involved and, as such, not intended for making quantitative studies. The aim of these tools is to gain qualitative information about the spaces, and they should be seen as a potential supplement to quantitative studies and studies using checklists to verify compliance with the various building standards.

Our pilot studies in Malmö and Ekaterinburg gave us insight into how it would be possible to further improve the public spaces in these cities. Working with activists in St. Petersburg gave us insight into how activists can be a help when assessing the success of city improvement.

When discussing the adaptation of city spaces for persons with functional variation it is important to remember that this is not just a matter for a minority, or for people officially classified as such: most people are affected by functional variation (a need to use space differently from the standard user) at some point of their lives – when they are small; when they are older; when they are ill; or when pushing babies around in prams, for example. As such, the inclusiveness of all citizens in our cities is a matter of crucial importance for sustainable societies.

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