



Fishbowl session: Modern travel and the digital divide: Bridging the gap

This session discussed the critical challenges that segments of the underserved population - such as disabled, older people, and low-income households in developing countries - are facing in terms of the introduction of digital technologies in the transport sector. It also looked at the positive potential of the digital technologies in tackling social exclusion.

Charlotte V. McClain-Nhlapo stressed the importance of collecting data related to the disabled people, who represent 15 % of the world's population. She highlighted the importance of training in accessibility for transport professionals and compliance with universal design standards to make public transport better suited to everyone's needs and abilities. She also presented the World Bank's initiatives for the Global awareness of disability-inclusive development. These initiatives, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, promote the full integration of persons with disabilities into society.

Greg Shaw illustrated, through a range of examples, the specific challenges that older people face. He highlighted the need to have programs and companies that cater to seniors, and underlined the importance of providing safe transportation for them. He also mentioned that one obstacle to mobility particular to older people is ageism, since stereotypes related to aging are often unchallenged and difficult to change. This can lead to seniors being perceived as less competent.

From an international expert perspective, Ann Frye put emphasis on the importance of keeping in mind that the digital divide is a long-term issue, and that we should not abandon human inter-faces nor human connections.

From a regional perspective, Ladi Delano highlighted his insights from major African cities, where rapid urbanization is being experienced. Traditional demand responsive semi formal public transport modes are expanding as a result and innovating to improve services through digital connection to users. But although the demands for ride-hailing services are increasing, these services encounter bottlenecks such as the lack of access to credits, lack of data collection, poor governance, and challenging physical and digital infrastructures.

Carlos López-Gómez added examples from Mexico, and emphasized how to use cyber space to improve the physical; how to address not only the digital divide but also the public transportation divide; and how to improve policy decisions and investments by innovative exploitation of existing data sources. The poorest sections of society are dependent on the poorest public transport, semi-regulated minibuses. They need better services, both through expansion of municipal bus and metro networks but also digital connection and formalized working conditions for the minibuses.

Private innovation, public-private collaboration and the critical role of policy-makers and the public authorities were all emphasised as critical elements to help bridge the divide between conventional transport services and the new app-based mobility technologies. These new digital technologies have not been a panacea to solve all problems related to the underserved population. However, they could be opportunities to reconsider the whole system and address social exclusion. Finally, this session concluded that the new transport services should be user-centered: as reconfirmed by the Covid-19 pandemic, these services are about human connections.