Smart Cities enhancing the lives of people with disabilities

Stephen Robert PEARSON[a] & Mahmoud SHAFIK[a]

[a]University of Derby, College of Science & Engineering, Kedleston Rd, Derby, DE22 1GB, UK.

Abstract: Smart cities hold great promise for revolutionising urban living, but their potential to improve the lives of people with disabilities remains underexplored. This paper investigates the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in everyday urban environments and explores how smart technology can mitigate these challenges. By leveraging data-driven insights, connectivity, and innovative solutions, smart cities can create more inclusive environments that enhance accessibility, mobility, and overall quality of life for people with disabilities. This paper discusses the various issues encountered by individuals with disabilities in towns and cities and proposes strategies for utilising smart technology to address these challenges effectively.

Keywords. Smart Cities, disabilities, quality of life, social exclusion, physical barriers, inclusivity, accessibility

1 Introduction

Urbanisation has revolutionised our lifestyles, but for people with disabilities, navigating busy urban landscapes remains daunting. Despite strides in accessibility, barriers persist in towns and cities, hindering full inclusion. From infrastructure limitations to transportation constraints and communication hurdles, challenges abound.

Smart cities offer promising solutions, using technology and connectivity to optimise infrastructure and services. Yet, their potential to benefit individuals with disabilities remains underexplored. This paper delves into these challenges and explores how smart technologies can transform urban accessibility. By leveraging data insights and assistive tech, smart cities can create inclusive environments.

This paper has three aims: firstly, to outline the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in urban settings, from physical barriers to social isolation; secondly, to explore how smart technology can enhance urban accessibility and inclusivity; and thirdly, to propose policy recommendations for integrating smart solutions into urban planning. By addressing the nexus of disability and urbanisation, this paper contributes to understanding how smart cities can drive equitable, inclusive environments. (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019; World Health Organization, 2020)

2 Challenges Faced by People with Disabilities in Urban Environments:

1. Physical Barriers: One of the most pervasive challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in urban environments is the presence of physical barriers. These barriers include inaccessible infrastructure such as buildings without ramps or elevators, narrow footpaths that are difficult to navigate with mobility aids, and poorly designed public spaces that limit mobility and independence. Lack of tactile paving, proper

signage, and accessible parking spaces further exacerbate these challenges, making it difficult for people with disabilities to access essential services, employment opportunities, and recreational facilities.

2. Transportation Challenges: Accessible transportation options are essential for people with disabilities to maintain independence and participate fully in urban life. However, many cities still lack adequate accessible public transportation systems, including buses, trains, and subways. Even when accessible transportation options are available, they may be unreliable, inconvenient, or insufficiently equipped to meet the diverse needs of individuals with disabilities. As a result, people with disabilities often face barriers to accessing education, employment, healthcare, and social activities due to limited transportation options.
3. Communication Barriers: Communication barriers pose significant challenges for people with disabilities in urban environments. For individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, lack of sign language interpretation services, inaccessible websites, and communication devices can hinder their ability to access information, participate in public events, and engage with their communities. Similarly, people who are blind or have low vision may encounter difficulties accessing printed materials, wayfinding signage, and digital information, leading to social exclusion and limited participation in urban life.
4. Social Isolation: Social isolation is a common experience for many people with disabilities living in urban environments. Limited access to accessible public spaces, recreational facilities, and community events can contribute to feelings of loneliness, depression, and isolation among individuals with disabilities. Moreover, stigma, discrimination, and lack of awareness about disability issues can further isolate people with disabilities from their peers and communities, leading to diminished social networks and support systems.
5. Emergency Preparedness and Response: Emergency preparedness and response efforts in urban environments often overlook the needs of people with disabilities, leaving them particularly vulnerable in times of crisis. Inaccessible evacuation routes, lack of accessible shelters, and communication barriers during emergencies can prevent people with disabilities from accessing lifesaving information and support services. Additionally, first responders may lack training and awareness about how to effectively assist individuals with disabilities during emergencies, further exacerbating their vulnerability and risk of harm.
6. Financial Barriers: Financial barriers can also limit the ability of people with disabilities to fully participate in urban life. High costs of accessible housing, healthcare, assistive devices, and transportation can create economic hardship and financial strain for individuals with disabilities and their families. Moreover, limited employment opportunities, wage disparities, and discriminatory practices in the labor market can exacerbate economic inequality and hinder the socioeconomic integration of people with disabilities in urban environments.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that combines policy interventions, infrastructure improvements, technological innovations, and community engagement efforts to create more inclusive and accessible urban environments for people with disabilities. By recognising and addressing the unique needs and experiences of individuals with disabilities, cities can create environments that promote equity, dignity, and social inclusion for all residents. (Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund (2020), Zola (2018), World Bank Group (2017))

3 Policy Implications and Recommendations

1. Inclusive Urban Planning Frameworks: Policymakers should prioritise the development of inclusive urban planning frameworks that integrate accessibility considerations at all stages of city development. This includes ensuring that accessibility standards are rigorously enforced in building codes and zoning regulations, as well as incorporating universal design principles into the design of public spaces, infrastructure, and transportation systems.
2. Collaborative Governance Models: Effective collaboration between government agencies, technology companies, disability advocacy groups, and community stakeholders is essential for the successful implementation of smart technology solutions for people with disabilities. Policymakers should facilitate multi-stakeholder partnerships to foster innovation, share best practices, and co-create inclusive urban solutions.
3. Accessibility Standards and Guidelines: Governments should establish clear and comprehensive accessibility standards and guidelines for smart city initiatives. These standards should cover a wide range of areas, including digital accessibility, transportation accessibility, built environment accessibility, and

communication accessibility. Regular reviews and updates of these standards are necessary to keep pace with technological advancements and evolving accessibility needs.

4. Inclusive Procurement Practices: Public procurement processes should prioritize the procurement of products and services that meet high accessibility standards. Governments can incentivize technology vendors to develop accessible solutions by incorporating accessibility requirements into procurement contracts and offering preferential treatment to vendors that demonstrate a commitment to accessibility.
5. Accessible Public Transportation: Improving accessibility in public transportation is critical for enabling people with disabilities to fully participate in urban life. Policymakers should invest in the development of accessible transportation options, such as low-floor buses, wheelchair-accessible taxis, and paratransit services. Additionally, real-time information systems and navigation apps can help people with disabilities plan their journeys more effectively and navigate public transportation networks with greater ease.
6. Data Privacy and Security: As smart cities collect and analyze vast amounts of data to improve urban services, policymakers must ensure that privacy and security considerations are prioritized. Data privacy laws and regulations should be enacted to safeguard the personal information of residents, including people with disabilities, and mitigate the risk of unauthorized access or misuse of sensitive data.
7. Capacity Building and Training: Training programs should be provided to urban planners, policymakers, and technology developers to raise awareness of disability issues and build capacity for integrating accessibility into smart city initiatives. These programs can include workshops, seminars, and certification courses focused on universal design principles, assistive technology solutions, and inclusive urban planning practices.
8. Funding Mechanisms: Adequate funding mechanisms should be established to support the implementation of smart technology solutions for people with disabilities. Governments can allocate dedicated funding streams for accessibility projects, establish grant programs to support innovation in this area, and leverage public-private partnerships to secure additional funding resources.

By adopting these policy implications and recommendations, policymakers can create an enabling environment for the development of smart cities that truly enhance the lives of people with disabilities, fostering greater accessibility, inclusivity, and equality in urban environments. (European Commission (2019), United Nations (2020), Johnson (2018), Aung & Tsuchiya (2017))

4 Technology in Practice

Metropolitan areas such as Glasgow are spearheading the integration of technology and innovation to augment the daily experiences of individuals, encompassing both those with and without disabilities. By embracing a multitude of technological advancements, the city has positioned itself as a frontrunner in the United Kingdom for the implementation of life-enhancing solutions. The ensuing list enumerates the prevailing technologies currently deployed within the urban landscape.

SmartCross: SmartCross represents a touchless augmentation to conventional pedestrian crossings, enabling remote activation of pedestrian signals by individuals with disabilities. This system integrates various assistive technologies, including SmartCanes, SmartButton, and dedicated mobile applications, to facilitate unique accessibility functionalities for remotely requesting crossing assistance. Glasgow boasts a deployment of over 1,000 SmartCross units, contributing to a broader network exceeding 10,000 installations across the United Kingdom to date.

SmartBus: SmartBus is an inclusive real-time information system designed for users awaiting buses at designated bus stops. It employs both auditory and visual interfaces accessible through a dedicated mobile application. The system delivers real-time updates on the arrival times of the next five buses scheduled to serve the specific bus stop. Its primary function is to provide accurate and timely information to all users, including those with visual impairments, thereby enhancing accessibility and facilitating informed decision-making regarding bus travel.

SmartTrain: SmartTrain is a real-time information system deployed at Glasgow Central Station, analogous to the SmartBus system. It serves visually impaired individuals by offering audio information and a visual display through a dedicated application. The system provides data on the next 45 minutes of train schedules at the station, including departure platforms. This implementation significantly improves the daily experiences of visually impaired individuals by alleviating the uncertainty associated with accessing train platforms upon arrival at the station.

SmartEVA (Smart Emergency Vehicle Assistance): The traffic light system employs motorised zoom cameras and artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms to identify approaching emergency vehicles exhibiting blue flashing lights. Upon detection, the system dynamically adjusts the traffic signal sequence to prioritise the passage of the emergency vehicle, thereby optimising response times to emergencies and potentially mitigating risks to life and property.

Smart Toilet Beacons: Glasgow Central Station has implemented Smart Toilet Beacons within its disabled toilet facilities, offering visually impaired users an audio description of the spatial layout within the restroom area. This system enables users to navigate the toilet space without reliance on visual cues, thus mitigating the need for tactile exploration of surfaces, which poses hygiene concerns. Unlike sighted users who can visually discern spatial arrangements, visually impaired individuals may encounter challenges in identifying amenities within the restroom, potentially exposing them to microbial contaminants and viral pathogens present on surfaces.

Smart Talker: Glasgow City Council is currently piloting a novel system called Smart Talker, aimed at enhancing pedestrian safety. This system functions as an audio annunciator, supplanting traditional audible bleepers within the push button units of traffic signals. Audible bleepers are being phased out at road junctions due to potential confusion, particularly when multiple crossings are in close proximity, which may lead visually impaired individuals to inadvertently step into traffic. This safety concern necessitates their removal. Conversely, Smart Talker delivers personalised audio notifications to users at specific crossings, indicating the activated crossing by name and inviting pedestrians to cross. Furthermore, this system offers the flexibility to convey additional information as needed, potentially aiding visually impaired individuals in wayfinding by providing auditory descriptions of surroundings post-crossing.

Additional Systems: Additional systems, such as the VivaCity sensors, leverage artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms to discern various objects such as pedestrians, cyclists, and vehicles, supplying pertinent data to Glasgow City Council. Moreover, these sensors aid in prioritising buses at pedestrian crossings. This process is facilitated through a Smart Interface, which interprets incoming data and converts it into signals compatible with traffic lights at junctions and pedestrian crossings.

Furthermore, Wireless Mesh Networking is employed to interconnect traffic signals across the city, enabling seamless control and introducing supplementary functionalities.

5 Conclusions :

In conclusion, the challenges confronting people with disabilities in urban settings are manifold, spanning physical, social, economic, and systemic realms. Despite advancements in accessibility regulations, many cities still lag in providing inclusive environments. Nonetheless, the advent of smart cities presents an auspicious opportunity to address these hurdles and foster more accessible, equitable urban landscapes.

Smart cities, through data-driven insights and innovative technology, hold promise for revolutionising urban living for people with disabilities. From IoT-infused infrastructure to inclusive transportation systems, they offer diverse tools to enhance accessibility and quality of life. Furthermore, the adoption of smart technologies could benefits not only individuals with disabilities but also the broader community, promoting efficiency, sustainability, and resilience. Prioritising accessibility in smart city initiatives can engender social inclusion and economic empowerment for all residents.

Realising the full potential of smart cities necessitates collaborative efforts among stakeholders. Governments, tech firms, advocacy groups, and communities must collaborate to ensure accessibility and address systemic barriers. Meaningful engagement with individuals with disabilities is imperative to uphold their rights and needs. In summary, smart cities can catalyse positive change, fostering greater accessibility and inclusivity in urban environments. By embracing universal design principles and prioritizing social equity, cities can empower people with disabilities to thrive, thereby advancing a more just, resilient, and sustainable urban future for all. (Centre for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access, 2016; United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2019; European Disability Forum, 2020)

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