

Access to the Future

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Mr. Co-chairs, distinguished participants esteemed guests. Ladies and gentlemen, Mesdames et Messieurs.

This Conference is about **freedom**. Freedom of movement for ...anyone. Freedom for **everyone**. Freedom from any form of discrimination and particularly Freedom from discrimination resulting from any type of limitation physical or otherwise.

Probably the most notorious of all the “freedom fighters” was Mahatma Gandhi whose non-violence movement and charismatic personality brought political freedom to India.

But freedom is an empty word unless a framework is built and the conditions exist that enable freedom to be fully exercised to be fully enjoyed.

In India that task fell to Nehru who had become the first Prime Minister and Nehru transformed himself from a political activist and freedom fighter into a nation builder. Nehru had a dream a dream to provide the basic essentials for his people. A dream to create the conditions under which everyone in India could live with dignity. He insisted on the term everyone! And we understand how difficult it was to achieve such a dream in India given the lingering presence unfortunately still today in some quarters of the “caste system”.

I suppose that one could trace the concept of human rights back to the “Magna Carta” which was signed in 1215 and probably long before that. The Americans and of course the French Revolution among others made major contributions to the advancement of the concept and the definition of human rights.

And as we know the United Nations at its meeting in Paris on December 10, 1948 established a set of international standards which were to be agreed by every nation and would apply to everyone. It is worth recalling in passing that Canada made a major contribution to the drafting of that declaration.

Among the many freedoms identified in that declaration such as freedom of expression freedom of religion and so on are listed some freedoms of particular interest to this conference. Freedom to move and travel as we wish And freedom from any form of discrimination!

The United Nations decided to go further in 2006 when it established a committee on “The Rights of Persons with Disabilities”. The Convention came into force in 2009 and has been ratified by some 150 nations.

The purpose of that Convention is:

“To promote protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities” And “To promote respect for their individual dignity.”

It’s a great and noble statement. I find it a bit cold somewhat remote but nevertheless a great statement!

Who does this statement apply to? Who are we talking about? Who are all these people with disabilities? Who are these people that we need to treat with respect and individual dignity?

Well ladies and gentlemen let’s look at ourselves in a mirror! And reflect on the current demographic trends. And these demographic trends are very interesting, very revealing! The good news is that we are all living longer, on average and that our life expectancy has grown considerably. Talk to people who manage pension plans for retirees about this!

The not-so-good news is that this increase in our lifespan often comes at the cost of some deterioration in our physical condition.

A research document for the federal government of Canada completed in 2012 on the issue of human rights established the proportion of Canadians with a disability at 14% in 2006. In 2006, this represented 4.4 million people and the document concluded that in light of the aging of the population this number was growing rapidly! Approximately half of these persons had a motor impairment. If we extrapolate this worldwide, the number becomes considerable.

Let’s just take the number of airline passengers. We now have a situation in which an increasing number of people have the time to travel and given the proliferation of low prices available more and more people have the *means* to do so. However these same people have an increasing number of diverse physical disabilities.

IATA at this year’s general meeting, informed us that 3.1 billion passengers were transported by airlines in 2013.

If the conclusions of the Canadian study hold up internationally this would mean, proportionately that the potential number of air passengers with a disability would be, in 2013 around 450 million a year of which 225 million are with reduced mobility.

I grant you that this approximation lacks scientific rigour. However there's no denying that serving such a market represents a huge economic potential!

We have clearly made remarkable progress in medicine, thanks to advances in biomechanics, robotics and cybernetics. More recently, research in direct neuronal interfaces or brain-machine interfaces if you prefer has been very promising. All this allows us to envision new prostheses that could minimize the impact of our physical difficulties. Physical difficulties due to illness accidents or simply aging—you know, that incurable disease that we all have! There are plans for new prostheses that should improve our hearing, our sight and allow us to walk with the assistance of robotic adaptations that obey commands from our brain.

Unfortunately, the day that all these marvelous possible and probable developments are available to all is still far in the future.

We must be aware of current realities. There is an urgency to act to compensate for conditions that will continue to be with us for a long time to come.

You will recall that ICAO was established by the Chicago Convention signed on December 7, 1944.

In the context of this Summit I believe that the preamble of the Chicago Convention is most appropriate.

Allow me to quote a short excerpt.

“WHEREAS international civil aviation can greatly help to create and preserve friendship and understanding among the nations and peoples of the world” etc.

“THEREFORE the undersigned governments have agreed that international air transport services may be established on the basis of equality of opportunity and operate soundly and economically.”

Incidentally the same people established IATA in April 1947 that has similar principles.

ICAO has made a thorough review of the issues that must be addressed to ensure that each stage of air travel is adapted to the needs of people with disabilities. This excellent set of recommendations to airlines airports and various agencies such as security customs immigration etc. are proposed to facilitate the clearance and transportation by air of any person with disabilities in a dignified manner.

This fairly extensive list of recommendations covers from reservation assistance (including seat selection) to moving through the airport signage information on arrival and departure check-in baggage assistance security checks boarding access to bridges and ramps seat assignment signage on board availability and stowage of wheelchairs on board.

There is a need to give special attention to washrooms on all flights and not uniquely on long haul and wide-body aircraft. Although it is most certainly essential for airplanes that are designed to fly non-stop for thirteen to eighteen hours half-way around the globe! Should we not identify seats closer to washrooms which could be allocated as a priority to handicapped travellers? These should be aisle seats with removable arm rests. What guidance and support could be made available to assist a blind person in reaching a washroom and returning to his or her seat? And so on.

ICAO recommends appropriate training programs for all personnel involved in every step of a journey. Training programs ensuring that all personnel are sensitive to the various types of disabilities and are able to adequately deal with each of those disabilities.

I would add that particular care must be taken in the training requirements of crews when dealing with emergency procedures. As you all know safety in air travel is our number one objective. It cannot be compromised! Ensuring safety in the air at all times imposes a number of constraints on the operation of airlines. There are a number of necessary actions and conditions that must be carried out in the case of emergency whether we are dealing with excessive turbulence depressurization or an emergency landing on land or water. While those are fortunately infrequent events we must at all times be in a position to ensure the safety of everyone on board. Everyone regardless of any disability.

To be fair and give credit where credit is due we need to acknowledge that real progress has of course already been made by the travel and tourism industry as a whole. There is much to be commended. And their efforts deserve to be recognized.

There is already, obviously, a pictogram that clearly indicates which establishments or mode of transportation has the means and the capacity to welcome people with certain disabilities in a thoroughly satisfactory way, with dignity. For example, pictograms for people with limited mobility hearing-impaired people and blind people have been around for some time.

Should we continue to go it alone or would it be desirable to create a new international symbol that would group together these three main disabilities? A universal symbol that would show that all efforts have been made to

compensate for motor and sensory disabilities and that is accepted and recognized, by the international community.

Should we create a special award that could be given out each year to the most deserving company at a gala sponsored by a company that chooses to support the cause? During the closing session of this world summit, you will be invited to adopt a declaration. The Montreal Declaration that will commit all of us to complete the work so that this summit's objectives may be reached as quickly as possible.

Among the international tourism players the plane is one of the most important factors. The development of air transport continues to progress spectacularly. We can today carry up to 800 passengers aboard a wide-body aircraft and provide meal and bar service for all. Some airlines feature deluxe cabins that even have showers while carrying you halfway around the world in a single flight.

And yet despite these achievements, we have still not managed to make airplanes perfectly accessible to everyone. Major adjustments have been made in airports to welcome disabled persons and ensure their comfort.

But much remains to be done.

If it has not already been done I would suggest that these excellent ICAO recommendations be made available to all airlines airports and governments. Perhaps ACI and IATA would agree to include in their "passenger processing" facilitation programs a special section on the handling of passengers with handicaps.

The industry should set objectives and targets to achieve full compliance and implementation progress could be monitored by ACI and IATA in cooperation with ICAO.

It would be nice if the various government authorities were to review the situation of each of their agencies and re-enforce those directives. Should for instance agencies at airports provide a specific channel to more appropriately deal with disabled passengers?

In closing, ladies and gentlemen it also appears to be to be very important for the design of new aircraft... that the specifications manufacturers receive from airlines clearly stipulate the need to design and fit up cabin space so as to accommodate with dignity the increasing number of disabled travellers.

And if our famous aviator, Antoine de St. Exupéry, were still alive, he would no doubt have had an aging Little Prince say:

"Dear Mr. Aircraft Manufacturer, please draw me a plane

A plane that will allow me, who is now hard of hearing
And blind...
And with reduced mobility...
To enjoy the same privileges... as all other passengers...
and to also be treated with dignity.”

Merci - Thank you!