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Guideline on travelling with a disability



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1 Introduction

1.1 CBM's person focused, disability inclusive security risk management approach

CBM strives for equity in its security risk management approach. CBM recognises that you may face different risks or be more vulnerable to certain threats because of your nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability. Under certain circumstances, the prevailing security context, or specific risks to you, because of your personal profile, may require CBM to take additional security measures. The person-centred approach is about focusing on the individual, understanding the diversity of personal profiles, behavioural differences, potential risks associated with them (for the individuals, the team, and the wider organisation) and planning accordingly. In this guideline, the focus is on how to mitigate travel risks that you may encounter because of a disability.

Naturally, preparation is one of the main elements when going on a trip. Preparing for “what if” situations can result in a more confident reaction in unexpected situations. Having contingencies in place will decrease the likelihood of an incident or situation escalating even further. Finally, getting in touch with persons who have travel experience and who are willing to share their knowledge, is a good opportunity to ask for first-hand advice.

You are encouraged to share the information in this document. Furthermore, if you have additional tips and experiences you would like to see documented in these guidelines, please do not hesitate to get in touch and share.

1.2 Who is this guideline for?

CBM work has a global approach. The focus of this guideline is on disability inclusive travel health, safety, and security advice to countries in the Global South. The following paper is mainly written from the perspective of colleagues with disability traveling on their own or with a personal assistant to developing countries, and who have a heightened awareness for health, safety, and security.

This guideline was developed by and for travellers with disability. It takes into account considerations for travellers with disability (and personal assistants), who may face specific risks due to their disability. Their personal experience was invaluable in producing this document. In addition, this document is useful for anyone who is travelling together with a person with a disability.

1.3 Objective of this guideline

The objective of this guideline is to provide useful and practical advice for travellers who have a disability. It also aims to sensitize persons or personal assistants travelling together with person with a disability, by pointing out specific challenges that arise from having a disability. However, some points mentioned can be considered general advice which applies to any traveller, irrespective of their personal risk profile.

2 Travel related challenges for persons with a disability

2.1 Planning and preparing your travel

Be very specific about what you need, what you expect, what you can organise for yourself and what you request others to organise for you.

When you are alone, plan carefully to reduce the amount of external help required. But if help is needed, people are usually happy to do so, if asked in the right way.

For example, when you travel by train/airplane/car, be very clear what you (or your personal assistant) organize yourselves and what you request from the host party at your destination. Don't expect things to be arranged. Carefully plan and agree. Consider things like:

- How will I get from one train/airplane into the other? What if I miss a connection?
- Do I have the numbers to call for support (announce delay) if I need help? Language? Who can I call if I need support in the evening?
- Will there be a dedicated parking place for my vehicle close to the entrance?
- Will the taxi be able to accommodate my wheelchair?
- Hotel, restaurant, lavatory accessibility during travel? Can support equipment (e.g. hoist) be arranged/rented and can these be placed in the hotel room?
- How will you or who will pay for extra services required?

After completing your travel, discuss what went well and where things should be adapted next time. Store useful telephone numbers e.g. good taxi companies or places where you can rent equipment.

2.2 Booking accommodation

For a person with a disability using a wheelchair, it is recommended not to ask a hotel if the rooms are accessible. The reason is that the answers might be just a "yes" or "no" answer, which means little.

It is better to ask in detail about the facilities, and to let them describe the access. For example, one can ask if there are steps to go to the rooms, bathrooms, to the restaurant or where the elevator is located, if any. Then it can be decided if the hotel suits one's needs in terms of accessibility.

On arrival, discuss with hotel staff on how you should be alerted (and supported) should there be a calamity in the hotel (fire, evacuation etc). Specifically request staff to pass on these requirements to the next shift of personnel taking over later during the day or night.

When traveling with a power chair, taxis are a challenge because it needs a taxi with a lift that can fit the power chair and the person seated on it. When using a manual chair, it is easier to use any taxi. The person in the wheelchair may ask the driver to help transferring him or her to the taxi; the driver would most likely never refuse to do so.

Using a power chair, one need trains, buses, taxis and buildings to be more accessible. Wheelchair users always have potential challenges in restaurants with access to tables (table legs and table height prevent access to the table). The same applies to desks in hotel rooms – very few are spacious and accessible, even in so-called 'accessible' rooms, making working difficult.

Provide positive and constructive negative written feedback on what went (not so) well during your trip for hotels and restaurants, which are frequently used by your agency, as well as when working with supporting agency staff. Both praise and feedback helps all actors to constructively work on the challenges of inclusive travel.

2.3 Travelling by air

- It is good to arrive at least two hours in advance to the airport to ensure time to deal with any wheelchair-related problems.
- For power chair users, one should have a letter from the manufacturer showing that batteries are dry or gel, not at risk of spilling, and therefore safe to travel (usually needs to be approved when booking).
- It is fine to insist to stay on your own wheelchair right up to the gate, so that if there is a delay, comfort and safety are ensured.
- If your own (power) wheelchair is broken, airport staff can help fixing the wheelchair or provide a manually operated one.
- It may also be wise to consider having an emergency medications package ready with someone at home, so that they could send it via DHL if necessary when you are abroad.
- When traveling with crutches in high security airport clearly show to officials that you are using crutches as, in a high-tension situation, they may be mistaken for a weapon. Pass them through the x-ray machines as well.
- If your flight is diverted or a spoken announcement is made, it can be difficult for a deaf person to figure out what is happening or what action (if any) is required. On boarding a plane, point out to staff (e.g., using a written sign) that you cannot hear the announcements and request the flight attendant to write down for you what is happening.
- Make one detailed file per traveller, spelling out what is vital for each person when going through check-in, customs, security check, boarding, arriving, equipment handling, document processing and safeguarding. You can then share this with relevant contact persons before your journey. Constantly update this after each journey to tailor it to your needs and challenges encountered.
- When possible, book direct flights or with few stop overs. When this is not possible, take flights which can be rebooked and with enough time between changes/ stop overs.

2.4 General travel advice

- Using bathrooms may be an issue when traveling. Depending on the destination, it may be wise to bring a hoist along. It is important also to know the right terms or words (in the local language) or to use pictures to make sure it is understood by all.
- When staying at an accessible hotel, ensure to keep the name and address of the hotel in case of future travels in the same place.
- It is common to have trouble when traveling regarding your grasp of the local language. A good way is to have the phone number of a person who could translate (by phone) if needed.
- Carry a letter or cards with useful information written on it (local language) such as the address, the name of the destination etc.
- Always anticipate spending a lot of time and plan for delays
- Research the area and the country setting before you plan to travel there.
- When traveling in different countries, and while encountering cultural diversity in your home country, consider the different ways people deal with issues such as: personal

space, touching, gender, age, physically helping, privacy, communicating needs etc. The more you know in advance, the better you can prepare and indicate what is (not) ok for you and how required support can be accommodated in a manner that you feel comfortable with.

- Some countries and cities have special alert systems via SMS or app to alert people of an incident or disaster. Ensure you have access to this on your smart phone and check whether you can use it in your particular situation.
- In an area with a significant security forces presence, it is recommended to carry / display a small sign that identifies you as a deaf person which you can show when approached.

Considerations for individuals

- The available means of transportation
- Possible discrimination which can be faced by persons with a disability.

Considerations for agencies

- Invite your travel agent for a conversation and point out which staff with disabilities travel and what they individually require at every stage of the travel process.
- Invite the account manager from your insurance company for a conversation and point out which staff with disabilities travel and what they and their personal assistants individually require in the event of a medical emergency. Consider health needs, medical evacuation, transport challenges, communication hindrances (24/7 email / sms instead of telephone) as well as equipment you require during your journey.

3 Travelling with a personal assistant

Personal assistants (PA) understand that many persons with disabilities do try to do as much as they can independently even when they travel. You should set a strict routine to follow to ensure that each PA is supporting you in the most efficient way possible, depending on their strengths. Some persons with a disability prefer to employ people with no prior experience as they are easier to train to replace the functionality they do not have themselves (“to do things the way I would do if I could”).

3.1. Incapacitation of personal assistants

In case a person needs a personal assistant for physical tasks, a few extra issues should be considered. In the situation of an incapacitated PA (e.g. PA getting sick during travel), one could manage by asking colleagues and hotel staff for help, but depending on the location (or the skill level of support tasks) one may need to consider returning home early. It could also be organized that other people help with physical tasks that the PA normally does. If feasible, plan a back-up in advance.

3.2 Insurance for personal assistants

Plan in advance what you would do in case your PA gets sick. Identify where and how you could find a replacement person to assist you. Discuss this also with your health/travel insurance company.

It is also worthwhile to inquire with your insurance company, before traveling, whether replacement support services of a PA are paid for and whether the insurance company could help find a replacement.

Personal Assistants should travel with their own medical, theft and repatriation insurance. Both the PA and the person with a disability should carry all details of each other's insurance (policy number and insurance 24/7 telephone number) so that if one becomes ill, the other can contact the insurance for support.

We recommend that when you frequently travel with a PA, you and your PA are both insured with the same insurance company. This can simplify issues when support is needed.

4 Health, Safety and Security

4.1 Responding to a security incident: crime or attack

It is recommended not to resist in case of an attack or theft. Let any assailant take whatever valuables they want. Your wellbeing and safety are the priority. To be able to respond to a security incident in the safest way possible, the PA and the person with a disability should partake in a CBM S&S training. When preparing for travel, spend enough time to reduce risks as much as possible. Consider risks, threats and possible additional vulnerabilities as a person with a disability (as well as mitigating measures) for each visited location. Where needed, questions in this regard can be asked during a (remote) pre-departure travel briefing with CBM IO or regional S&S staff.

4.2 Responding to an incident: fire or evacuation situation

When arriving in a hotel or a conference centre, evacuation routes, fire escape, exits, location of firefighting equipment, telephones etc. should be noted.

Staff traveling together or a person with a disability traveling with a PA should discuss how each would respond and what s/he may need during an incident.

A hearing impaired person e.g. may not hear a fire alarm or the sound of gunfire or an explosion. A visually impaired person may not see a flashing alarm light or see directions being provided with hand gestures. In your own office, regularly practice evacuation drills with colleagues especially if you need a special evacuation chair.

4.3 Responding to a natural disaster: earthquake or typhoon

Explore your direct environment (alone or with your travel companion) on arrival in an area prone to natural disasters. Make sure that you know how to safely exit a building also when there could be debris in the corridors. Where deemed useful ask hotel/conference centre staff to show you around. Also explain to hotel staff what you need in case of an emergency, e.g. when you can't get out of bed alone. Consider also that in an emergency the lights may be out and there may not be any electricity to use an elevator.

Detailed advice on this subject is provided in factsheets that can be accessed on CBMnet.

It varies slightly with each personal assistant of course, but autonomy is rarely compromised.

Assistants understand that many persons with disabilities do try to do as much as they can independently even when they travel. You should set a strict routine to follow to ensure that each PA

4.4 Preparing for unforeseen events: "What if"-Questions

What if I am in need of medical treatment?

Ensure that in each location where you travel you know the telephone number of a doctor and / or pharmacy (consider language). Also research in advance which hospital you could go to. Generally the CBM representative where you travel should be able to provide you with this.

When depending on a PA, this person should be very knowledgeable on specific medical needs of the person with disability. Having people who basically know how to stay calm and rational is an important priority as well.

Remember to have a (contextualised) personal first-aid kit at all times (also when not travelling) in your backpack. Ensure you have sufficient spare medication when trips unexpectedly get delayed.

What if a vital travel item disappears, is stolen or broken?

Consider carrying spare parts if these are small. Carry a multi-tool, such as a Leatherman in your check in luggage so you can do small repairs yourself. Take sufficient time at check in to ensure vital items are packed/wrapped/sealed well so that they don't get damaged during transport. Where applicable, ask for 'fragile' stickers and mark check in pieces.

Consider calling your airline in advance to discuss your dependency on e.g. your own wheelchair and ask how it can be ensured it is handled with care and transported safely.

Most airports will be able to provide a wheelchair but for many users these are not very comfortable for using a long time.

Always carry photocopies of your and of each other's passports, vaccination certificates, insurance details and a full contact list specific to the current trip (with details of people, organizations, embassies at the destination and emergency contacts at home). It is relevant to have this as soft copy.

Ensure that everything that is essential (medication, ID, communications equipment and laptops including charge cables, plus above mentioned documents) are always carried in hand luggage. So if main bags are lost en-route one can - in theory - survive without them and then replace missing items.

What if my carefully planned trip is interrupted, or does not go as planned?

It is important to rely on PAs or fellow travellers who are able to be calm/relaxed for travel and in stress situations. Even the best travel plans are interrupted. One should expect it and always have contingency plans for any eventualities. As long as nobody suffers, it should be treated as part of the 'joy of travel'. If it is an interruption which can have serious consequences then, until it has been dealt with, one needs to raise his/her awareness to all risks to prevent further 'derailment'.

If any travel plans change occurs, you must inform people who are expecting to see you or hear from you.

What if I am required to pay for unexpected costs during travel?

It is advised to carry two personal credit cards (a MasterCard and a Visa, in case one is not accepted) and where applicable, a work credit card. Also some hard currency and appropriate amount of local currency in small denominations. These are always split up and spread around the body/wheelchair/rucksack, usually in two or three places, so that if one batch is lost/ stolen you still have a back-up. The PA should do the same - s/he has his/her own credit card, his/her own money, and often carries some of the other persons' money when working.

Where possible, use hidden places on a wheelchair to virtually guarantee that a major robbery won't be a disaster (remember to remove it before giving the chair to airport staff!) Depending on hotel security, leave passports and one credit card and some cash in the hotel safe.

Changing money can also be a challenge for visually impaired persons. The best is to make sure there is trusted person to assist and ensure there is no cheating or theft during the transactions.

5 Cultural perception of disability at various locations

It is common to hear that cultures in Africa, for instance, can see disability as a curse/punishment. However, in most cases, often in remote places, it is also common to experience great hospitality. In fact, maybe because people are so much more used to seeing disability, in their families etc, and because they are used to having to help infirm family members (eg grandparents), people are much more likely to want to help.

This willingness to help can be good, but can also be annoying to travellers who like to be independent. It is important to be relaxed when, all of a sudden, you discover that someone has decided to grab your wheelchair and move you to where they think you want to be.

On the whole, people in less-wealthy countries are more ready to physically help (lifting you over obstacles, up steps etc) and are better at it as a result.

An advice would be to always be polite, but firm on the type of help required. Do not be afraid to clearly describe or explain what you need. This will help other people to better support you.

Talk to other persons with disabilities that have travelled to your destination before you or that live there. Ask for advice and helpful tips.

6 How can I (and my PA) prepare for the mentioned challenges?

We encourage you (and your PA where applicable) to participate in a CBM Travel Safety & Security training. We include specific disability challenges into the training and role play components. We also have a dedicated topic on what to carry with you. Dedicated pre-departure travel briefings, with a disability inclusion component, are available from the Health & Safety and Travel Risk Management division of CBM.

When experiencing an incident or a 'near miss', talk through what went wrong and how to avoid it in the future. CBM has a dedicated crisis hotline available for travellers caught up in a serious incident with direct support available 24/7.

7 Contribute towards this document

Should you want to add your personal input, share your experience, or have any advice that you believe would be worth sharing with others through this document, kindly contact Philipp Burtzlaff (philipp.burtzlaff@cbm.org). We'd love to hear from you and incorporate what you have found to be important as a traveller with a disability or, alternatively, traveling with a person with a disability.

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