

## **Transportation challenges and potential solutions from the perspectives of older people and persons living with disability in Sri Lanka**

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Widespread barriers to the participation of people (of all ages) living with physical, sensory and mobility impairments as well as older people more generally are commonly reflected in the physical barriers of the built environment. With improvement in transportation systems in the country, Moneragala district in Sri Lanka provides a unique opportunity to evaluate problems faced by vulnerable road users through the existing initiative of developing an age- and disability-friendly community.

The objective of this study was to identify the individual and environmental risks and barriers related to transportation among the elderly (60 years and over) and people living with disabilities (five years and older) in the Moneragala district.

This community based participatory research project was conducted among vulnerable road users (elderly and disabled) and key informants. Key informants were community stakeholders such as transport and road service providers, traffic police, healthcare personnel, social workers and care givers. Eight focus group discussions (8-10 in each group) were conducted with elderly and disabled to identify the local and regional destinations that were most important to access and the perceived risks and barriers related to transportation among the participants. Focus groups were randomly selected from the registers maintained by the department of social services. A total of eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants to explore their perception of barriers and facilitators for transportation and needs and suggestions on road safety.

The frequently visited places identified by older people were the government hospital/medical centre, the temple, the Sunday fair, the community hall and the bank. While the places visited most frequently by people living with disability varied by age, the vocational training centre, the special needs school and the community hall were common sites identified. The mostly used

travel modes were the public bus, three wheeled-vehicles or walking. The transportation barriers for the elderly were identified as poor road conditions, lack of a disability-friendly transportation system, financial constraints and negative human factors. People living with disabilities found accessibility to public places a major barrier. Suggestions for improvement included programmes to raise awareness among people involved in transportation, introduction of cost effective modes of transportation, mass media campaigns acknowledging the rights of elderly and disabled people, targeted group training/education, more effective legislation and improved engineering designs and maintenance of road infrastructure.

It is evident that there is an urgent need for improving road conditions, modification of modes of transportation, rigorous law enforcement alongside fostering favourable societal attitudes towards the elderly and persons living with disabilities.

Key words: vulnerable road users, transportation problems, elderly, persons living with disabilities.