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• (1115)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick South-west, CPC)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to the 55th meeting of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3) (g), the committee is meeting today to study reports 1 to 4 of the Auditor General of Canada, published in March 2023 and referred to the committee this Monday, March 27.

[English]

Now I would like to welcome our witnesses. From the Office of the Auditor General, we have Karen Hogan, the Auditor General; Carey Agnew, principal; Milan Duvnjak, principal; Susan Gomez, principal; and Sami Hannoush, principal.

Thank you, all, for joining us today. We will have a somewhat modified committee meeting. We're going to hear from the Auditor General with her opening remarks for five minutes or so. Then I'm going to do question rounds of about five or six minutes per member. Of course, if they would like, they could truncate those because then we will turn to rounds of questions for about three minutes until either we exhaust the time or we hit 12:15 p.m.

Ms. Hogan, without further ado, you have the floor for five minutes. Thank you.

Ms. Karen Hogan (Auditor General, Office of the Auditor General): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Just to clarify, my opening remarks are about twice as long because they are the same remarks that I'll be giving at the press conference.

The Chair: Okay, I'm prepared to indulge that.

Go ahead, Ms. Hogan. We will listen to you.

[Translation]

Ms. Karen Hogan: Mr. Chair, I want to begin by acknowledging that this meeting is being held on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe people.

I am pleased to be here today to discuss four performance audit reports that were just tabled in the House of Commons. These four audits cover a variety of government activities, yet they are linked by a common thread. That thread is inclusion.

[English]

These audits are important because every person, regardless of his, her or their health status, gender or location, has a right to participate fully and equally in society.

Consider this: It's frustrating enough to land after a flight only to find that your luggage didn't make it. Now consider the impact when that missing cargo is not your toothbrush or a change of clothes but your wheelchair, and without it, you are unable to move around independently.

Some people in Canada have to constantly fight for rights that others take for granted as basic rights. Whether access to these rights is delayed or denied, the impact is that some members of society are excluded or left behind. This is the current concern that these four audits are highlighting today.

Now let me turn to our findings.

Our first audit focused on whether Via Rail, the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority and the Canadian Transportation Agency worked to identify, remove and prevent barriers for travellers with disabilities. In 2019 and 2020, more than one million persons with disabilities who travelled on a federally regulated mode of transportation faced a barrier.

[Translation]

We found that all three organizations had identified some barriers and taken steps to improve accessibility.

VIA Rail held consultations with persons with disabilities to design its new fleet. It also consulted on its accessibility plan and training programs, as did the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority.

Despite improved accessibility, many barriers remained. For example, we found that websites were not fully accessible which is very concerning because this is a barrier that travellers with disabilities often face.

To further improve the accessibility of trains, planes and other federally-regulated modes of transportation, responsible organizations need to broaden their consultations, make their online content fully accessible and use complaint data to identify, learn about, and prevent barriers.

Our second audit examined whether Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada and the CRTC had improved the accessibility, affordability, and quality of high-speed Internet and mobile cellular connectivity for Canadians in rural and remote areas.

• (1120)

[*English*]

At a time when so much takes place online, it's critical for all Canadians to have access to reliable and affordable high-speed Internet and mobile cellular services. This again is a matter of inclusion. When services are of poor quality, unaffordable or unavailable, people are effectively excluded from participating fully and equally in the digital economy; accessing online education, banking, medical care and government services; or working remotely.

We found that, overall, access to Internet and mobile cellular services has improved across the country since our last audit in 2018. However, Internet connectivity in rural and remote areas remains below 60%, and below 43% on first nations reserves. Therefore, while connectivity has improved in urban areas, the federal government strategy has yet to deliver results for many rural and remote communities and first nations reserves.

We also found that there were delays in approving projects that were meant to bring services to rural and remote areas. This means that the 1.4 million households that are already underserved—first nation reserves and people in rural and remote areas—are left waiting.

Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada tracked only some dimensions of the quality and affordability of services. The department considers pricing, but not household income, to be part of affordability. I find this puzzling, because if the price of the service is beyond a household's means, then connectivity will not improve and some people will remain excluded.

[*Translation*]

These findings emphasize the persistent digital divide for people living on First Nations reserves and in rural and remote communities, compared to people who live in urban areas. The government needs to take action so that there is affordable, high-speed connectivity coverage for Canadians in all areas of the country.

Let's turn now to our report on international assistance. Global Affairs Canada spends an average of \$3.5 billion each year to support gender equality in low- and middle-income countries, but it is unable to show how this spending is improving outcomes for women and girls.

[*English*]

We found significant weaknesses in the department's information management practices. These included not having a standardized approach for storing, managing and using project information. In addition, the department has not set itself up to track long-term outcomes. So while it is able to show, for example, that money has been spent to provide nutritious meals, it does not know whether long-term health outcomes have improved for people who were supposed to receive these meals.

These weaknesses make it impossible for Global Affairs Canada to accurately track and report on the outcomes of funded projects against the goals set out in Canada's feminist international assistance policy.

These weaknesses were not new; they were flagged in a departmental internal audit in 2021. It is imperative that Global Affairs Canada act immediately to improve its information management practices and reporting on results to show parliamentarians and Canadians the value of Canada's bilateral international assistance to support women and girls in low- and middle-income countries.

[*Translation*]

Our final audit today focuses on whether Public Services and Procurement Canada effectively managed the cost, schedule, and scope during the early phases of the rehabilitation program of Parliament's Centre Block.

Based on a 2021 estimate, the rehabilitation is expected to cost \$4.5 to \$5 billion. This vast program involves many partners, such as the House of Commons, the Senate, the Parliamentary Protective Service and the Library of Parliament.

We concluded that Public Services and Procurement Canada used flexible approaches to effectively manage the planning, design and early construction phases of the program. The department adjusted workflow to deal with delayed planning decisions on important user requirements, such as the number and size of rooms required by various partners.

• (1125)

[*English*]

We also found that the department consulted and worked with experts to balance environmental sustainability and accessibility elements while respecting the heritage nature of the building. Given the size and complexity of this undertaking, a streamlined decision-making process will be required to continue effectively managing the costs and timelines of the rehabilitation project as construction work accelerates between now and the planned completion date of 2030-31.

[*Translation*]

These four audits provide a snapshot of progress and concerns in specific areas. The public service has a duty to serve all Canada's peoples, and that means working actively to provide as full and equal access as possible to services, opportunities and national heritage, both within Canada and abroad.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my opening statement. It would be our pleasure to answer questions from members of the committee.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hogan.

[English]

We're now going to turn to our members.

Mr. Mazier, you have the floor for up to six minutes, please.

Mr. Dan Mazier (Dauphin—Swan River—Neepawa, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the committee members for coming here today.

I have to agree with the Auditor General here. This report is pretty startling, especially if you're living in rural Canada. It's nothing that we didn't know before. Over a million households in rural Canada and over half of first nations still don't have access to high-speed Internet. I think it's quite startling.

I have been hearing that. We have all been hearing this from rural Canada, and now the proof is in the pudding. I can't get over how the government keeps saying that they have Canadians' backs and they are looking after rural Canada, but the facts aren't lying here. This is quite detrimental to keeping Canada together.

I thank you so much for bringing out these important points.

Another kind of startling thing is why. Why is this all happening? In your report, you say that the universal broadband fund was supposed to be rolled out and awarded within 10 months. Actually, in your findings, it took up to 22 months to have the broadband fund award these projects. What was supposed to take only 10 months took 22 months. That's twice as long. The rapid response stream—we added up the numbers here—was supposed to be really fast and get to those shovel-ready projects. It was supposed to be five to 13 weeks, but it got extended out to 41 weeks.

Things are a mess. They are not reporting and there seems to be no accountability to this. This is quite troubling, for sure. Again, I thank you for shining some light onto these problems.

You raised concern about inaccurate connectivity data in your report: “We were told that network coverage information on the National Broadband Internet Service Availability Map was not only out-of-date but also sometimes inaccurate. One potential consequence of these inaccuracies was that households or communities without coverage could be shown to have coverage.”

Does this mean that the government's connectivity data is inflated?

Ms. Karen Hogan: You are right that this audit does point out that the digital divide in our country persists. You mentioned 1.4 million households. To put that into context for some people, that's like every single person who lives in the city of Montreal doesn't have Internet access. It's a lot of people.

When it comes to data, what we were talking about there was the broadband map. There is a map available online for service providers, anyone who might be interested in launching a project to increase accessibility, or even for the average Canadian to go check

it out. We found that a lot of the data was inaccurate. It was often pointed out by service providers during our consultations that they repeatedly asked the departments to update it.

That doesn't speak to the statistics that we found and that we report on. When we talk about four out of 10 households in rural and remote communities not having Internet, growing to six out of 10 in first nations communities, those are accurate numbers. They are validated. We also look at Statistics Canada.

It's that map and that coverage that is used to help fund projects. You don't want service providers to think that an area is serviced and therefore not recommend a project or not try to get a project funded.

It's really about expanding the access, so we do recommend that the departments find better ways to ensure that information is accurate.

● (1130)

Mr. Dan Mazier: I think you can imagine the frustration from rural Canadians and first nations when they're being told that they have service and they know that in fact they don't. I think we have a long way to go in getting accurate data and acting on that deficiency as well.

The government claimed that they have lowered cellphone bills by 25%. However, you state in your report that the government's “strategy did not include any national indicators or targets to evaluate whether its affordability outcomes were being achieved.” Did you find any data that proves the government has made cellphone service more affordable?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Mr. Chair, I think that's an excellent question.

When I look at affordability, I think beyond the price. What we found was that the government is really just tracking price and comparing prices to ensure they remain affordable. They haven't set targets linked to household incomes, and I believe that's missing half the story. While you can expand access across the country, it doesn't mean that households will pick up the Internet service if it isn't affordable for them.

We recommend not only that they set indicators to monitor the progress, but that they also consider household income as they evaluate whether or not the service is actually affordable.

Mr. Dan Mazier: So is the statement that the cellphone service or bill has gone down by 25% inaccurate? How would Canadians judge that from what you're finding?

Ms. Karen Hogan: We did not verify in our audit actual invoices to Canadians about cellphone bills, so I can't comment on whether or not that would be an accurate one, but we globally sat back and said, "How are you measuring whether the service that is being provided to Canadians is affordable?" Just looking at price, in my view, is looking at only half the story, when household income is hugely important.

We saw in a recent audit about housing that they measured the affordability of rent by linking it to income. I think that might be a better way to monitor affordability, by looking at the two metrics.

The Chair: That's your time, Mr. Mazier. We can come back to you if you'd like.

I'm turning now to Ms. Yip.

You have the floor for up to six minutes.

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Ms. Hogan, in your opening statement, you said, "These audits are important because every person, regardless of his, her or their health status, gender or location, has a right to participate fully and equally in society." You also said, "Some people in Canada have to constantly fight for rights that others take for granted as basic rights."

I want to thank you for reminding us with such a visual example, because those words, as well as your example of the lost luggage, really struck me. I think it's really important to remind ourselves of that, and also that there is still so much work to be done to be a truly inclusive society.

I'd like to ask you a question regarding the report on improving accessibility for travellers. What progress has been made to continue to achieve a barrier-free Canada?

Ms. Karen Hogan: We were looking at the accessibility act and many of the new regulations that came into effect in 2020. We found that the entities we looked at, which were Via Rail and the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority, which is the federal organization that does your baggage screening at the airport, had made progress in developing an accessibility plan, doing significant consultations and having those consultations inform their training.

While there is some progress, there is much left to be done in order to reach the federal government's goal of barrier-free transportation by 2040. I would highlight three things.

One would be making sure that websites are fully accessible. Many travellers start their journey there, and you want to be able to independently start a travel journey. The second one would be around training, to ensure that those providing services understand the lived experiences of persons travelling with disabilities. Finally, the third one is better use of complaint data to find systemic weaknesses or barriers that just aren't identified normally.

While progress has been made, there's still a lot that needs to be done.

• (1135)

Ms. Jean Yip: Why was the online information not fully accessible?

Ms. Karen Hogan: There are many regulations for websites in order to make them accessible. We looked at the Via Rail and the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority websites, and we found some gaps against some of the regulations. About 15% to 17% of the regulations had not yet been met.

Some of the information was inaccurate, so if you were using a reader to read their website you would get inaccurate departure times, which is critically important if you're trying to book travel. Also, information was difficult to find. For example, if you were trying to come through security at the airport with your service dog, it was very difficult to know what to expect or how to go about that.

Those are two of the many examples we saw, but there are significant regulations here, and it really is up to every service provider to show that they meet those.

Ms. Jean Yip: Are there enough resources towards improving online accessibility?

Ms. Karen Hogan: We didn't look at people's websites and their IT resources when we looked at Via Rail and CATSA. I think that's really a question to ask the departments. Some of the gaps were probably minor, but others were rather significant if you're going to get inaccurate information, so it's important for them to look at it.

I would point to the Canadian Transportation Agency, which is the federal department that regulates these service providers. What we found was that they have only four individuals who actually monitor all of the service providers and the over 400 different regulations. We made a recommendation to the agency to determine whether they have sufficient resources to enforce and monitor the regulations that do exist.

Ms. Jean Yip: Why did the staff and management not always complete the accessibility training?

Ms. Karen Hogan: We heard many reasons. Sometimes it was just a timing issue. In some cases, it was not really clear that individuals who were in management had to complete the training. When they were made aware of that, improvement occurred.

We found that members of management were not taking their training on time. There's a time delay in which it needs to be taken, and then it needs to be renewed. It's really important that those who set policy, coach individuals, or have oversight over those actually dealing with individuals travelling with disabilities understand the policies and weaknesses.

I know that Via Rail has since ensured that its management has taken the training. CATSA will do so by March 31. That's an improvement, if everyone has done it in that short time frame.

Ms. Jean Yip: How much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have about 30 seconds.

Ms. Jean Yip: Do you want to comment about the data, the last point in your recommendations?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I would be happy to talk about the complaint data.

What we found was that Via Rail and CATSA were really focusing on addressing an individual's complaint. We made recommendations to sit back and really look for systemic problems across all the complaint data to see if maybe they have missed something.

We also looked at the Canadian Transportation Agency. We found that it doesn't really have access, or the right to have access, to a lot of the complaint data, for example from airlines. Without that data, it may be missing opportunities to provide better oversight or improve regulations in the future.

There are a few recommendations in our report related to using complaint data in a better way.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné (Terrebonne, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Hogan, thank you for these interesting and instructive reports. I notice that they have two underlying themes that keep coming up.

The first is that data management by government departments and agencies seems to be badly structured and a throwback to another decade. As we saw in the report on the renovation of Parliament, there is also a project management problem. In the private sector, it would not necessarily take two years to make a decision. This problem might be attributed to poor decision-making abilities or a lack of autonomy of the project managers. Both data management and project management leave something to be desired.

The second thing, which is unconscionable, especially for the average taxpayer, is that the government often presents itself as a champion of inclusion and rights for all, but in fact, we often see that these are just words and sadly the objectives are not being met. The song *Paroles, Paroles* or "Words, Words", may have been written for the government.

It is really obvious in international assistance. If I understand correctly, in 2021 you were already flagging issues with objectives monitoring and project performance and there has not been any notable improvement since. A lot of money is allocated to programs to help women around the world, which is noble, but we have no way of knowing whether those women are seeing improved outcomes. It is truly a shame to see that. Having worked in that field, I know that donors, benefactors, often demand performance indicators. How is that in Canada, we are not more demanding of the government when it comes to the money we are sending abroad?

Ms. Hogan, you have conducted several performance audits: what is the best practice for monitoring projects and return on investment?

• (1140)

Ms. Karen Hogan: You raised a number of things, but I will focus on the last one.

In my opinion, performance indicators need to measure two things: products and the progress or results. In our audit on international assistance to support gender equality, 26 indicators were es-

tablished to monitor progress. However, 24 of those 26 indicators measure only the products, not the results.

For example, we reviewed a project to make schools more welcoming for young girls, including by building washrooms for them and hygiene stations where they could wash their hands. Global Affairs Canada showed us that the washrooms had been built, but follow-up had not been done on how often girls attend or use the school. That was the real objective.

In my opinion, we need to assess both, products and results, to be able to monitor the progress over the years. Usually several years need to pass before we can assess whether the main objectives have been met.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: What you said about results is very interesting. What is missing within the department? Is it a matter of data, organization or structure?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I would say it is all those things. The issue is knowing how the department is organized.

In this specific case, it did not give itself a chance to collect the information. At the beginning of the program, the department established performance or progress indicators, but omitted the result indicators. Not establishing them from the start prevented the department from gathering data for years. As I mentioned, it can take several years to meet an objective such as improving hygiene. We need to gather data at the beginning of the project and throughout and I think that is a question of planning.

I admit it is hard to evaluate the results, but it is very important to do so.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: We are talking about \$4.5 billion to \$5 billion for rehabilitating Parliament's Centre Block. Why was the other work related to rehabilitating Centre Block not included, the rehabilitation of West Block for example, destined to accommodate parliamentarians? Why was the scope of the audit not broader?

• (1145)

Ms. Karen Hogan: The work on West Block is over and West Block is currently occupied.

We want to focus on the current work. It is a large project that involves many partners. This is the second time that we are getting involved in the rehabilitation of Parliament's Centre Block. The first time, we noticed that the government was slow to make decisions. We wanted to see whether there had been any improvement since the work began.

We noticed that decision-making remains fragmented and takes time. Public Services and Procurement Canada needs to find ways to improve decision-making because many partners are concerned about this project. There needs to be a balance between the environment, accessibility, user needs, as well as the heritage nature of the building. There is a lot to manage and it is time to improve decision-making.

The Chair: Your time is up, Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné. Thank you very much.

[English]

Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor for up to six minutes, please.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais (Edmonton Griesbach, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the Auditor General and her office for what I believe are good reports for us as members of the public accounts committee to review. In particular, I really appreciate your opening comments.

Oftentimes when I am in this committee, I find that there's a similar trend, which is that there seem to be processes that are intended to include Canadians, many Canadians from diverse backgrounds, and oftentimes they don't make the mark. For decades and decades people fall behind.

These issues that you're presenting, both the accessibility challenges for persons with disabilities and the digital divide, have been well known to Canadians for a long time. They have felt isolated and alone during that time, but I think what you're saying here in many ways verifies their truth, so I want to thank you for that. It's oftentimes the hardest piece for marginalized groups to obtain a credible assertion to these experiences and, without that, it is very difficult for the government in some part to understand fully the totality of these experiences, so I want to thank you for your work in truly centering people.

I want to talk about the importance of people and the importance of how these investments, or lack thereof, don't, in fact, help some people.

These clear audits, one being the accessibility challenges present within transport and Via Rail and the analogy you used about the lack of a wheelchair upon arrival... I can only sympathize with that kind of pain and struggle. It would make me fearful of wanting to ever travel and experience the vastness of this great country.

There is a kind of sadness that I think many of us have been on the opposite end of. We have been able to go everywhere, whether it's by plane, train or car. We can go everywhere in this country. We can see the beautiful mountains in my home province, the Great Lakes, or the oceans at both ends. We have that freedom, but persons with disabilities still don't. It's a shameful reality, which I'm happy you have highlighted here, and I hope that our committee in our report truly identifies that changes need to be made within Transport Canada.

I also want to mention the digital divide and how hurtful that digital divide has become, particularly while we navigate COVID. COVID-19 is still with us. It has had a devastating impact on rural and remote areas, more so than urban areas at times. Part of that is

the challenges that parents and particularly teachers in rural settings have had.

I have spoken to many teachers whose students didn't have connectivity. That meant that for years, children, particularly on first nations reserves, were unable to learn. That has long-lasting effects. We're talking about the kind of society we want to build, and when we don't include people within our digital space, which is a growing space in Canada and one that first nations find themselves continuously excluded from, it's clear from these reports what has to be done in terms of closing the gap. I really appreciate the Auditor General's work in making sure that these are identified.

Last, I do want to comment on the report on the global efforts toward better outcomes for women, and the fact that, during this really challenging time across the globe, when I believe women's leadership is necessary now more than ever, we're seeing at the same time troubling concerns with the lack of attention towards violence against women, not just here in Canada but right across the globe. It's imperative that our country be a leader in this space and demonstrate the value of women in government and in every organization. It's troubling to hear that the investments toward this end aren't hitting the gaps.

You mentioned, for example, the construction of bathrooms in a school and not knowing how many girls are going to that school. This is a really important piece for us to understand because, of course, we're in Canada, and sometimes we're isolated from these realities. We think that it's awesome that we're investing in this, but often we don't see the gaps of our results, and that's an important piece I also want to mention.

I want to turn directly to the digital divide in first nations communities and speak to some particularly troubling facts.

On your website, you published today, in association with your reports, clear statistics of accessibility challenges for first nations. In my home province of Alberta and right across the Prairies, you can see clearly that we have a huge gap between first nations and the rest of Canadians in those places.

I will just read some of these facts. Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba average below 25% in terms of first nations' accessibility. In Alberta, 26.9% of first nations have digital connectivity. Saskatchewan is at 10%, and Manitoba at 14%, but if you look at comparable jurisdictions just beside Alberta across the border, first nations have 71.5% access. If you look north to the Northwest Territories just north of my province, which is even further, even larger and more remote, it's 74.89%.

• (1150)

Ms. Hogan, why are Alberta and many of the Prairies so far behind these other statistics, particularly for British Columbia and the Northwest Territories?

Ms. Karen Hogan: It's an excellent question. I knew, when we published this map, that we would get this kind of question, but we really sat back and didn't dissect it by province. Our objective was to see whether the government was meeting its goal overall. When you look at all of the first nations reserves together, it's clear that, when six out of 10 households do not have Internet, that is the majority.

It's really a fundamental need in today's society. The pandemic has just accelerated that need. I would point to the slowness in the approval of some of the funding projects that are available. We know the funding is there. It's just that the two entities are slow to approve those projects, and the longer it takes for projects to get out there, the longer individuals in the Prairies and other parts of the country will wait.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll turn now to Mrs. Gray.

You have the floor for three minutes.

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to everyone for being here today.

My questions are on “Report 1: Accessible Transportation for Persons With Disabilities”.

My first question is this. Were you concerned by the delayed or failed uptake in accessibility training by the senior management at Via Rail and the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority, even when it was mandatory?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I am always concerned when training isn't taken, but more so here, when it comes to accessibility needs. The training of supervisors and executives is just as essential as that of those who actually deliver the services, because they either set the policies or guide and exercise oversight over individuals who provide direct services.

Here, the training needs to be done within 60 days of employment, and then it needs to be repeated; it needs to be refreshed. It really does help identify unconscious biases and tackle what I would say is an attitudinal barrier sometimes, perhaps, when it comes to accessible transportation.

Via Rail has told us that, since our audit, all their executives have completed that training. At CATSA, they will do it by March 31. I am happy to see that they take it seriously, and hopefully they will continue that trend.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Great. Thank you.

The report mentions that there was only one on-site inspection, and 47 virtual, by the Canadian Transportation Agency to identify, remove and prevent barriers. Do you think that inspections in person would be required to fully identify accessibility issues? Did you find virtual inspections to be as effective as the in-person ones?

Ms. Karen Hogan: In our audit, we didn't compare the virtual inspections to previous years when perhaps they would have been done in person. Virtual is the mode used mostly during the pandemic. In my view, what we saw in those inspections, however, was that they were really just focusing on the design of the service instead of the actual service delivery. The fact that they are now moving back to in-person inspections will, I believe, help improve the oversight mechanism, and then, hopefully, help remove barriers.

• (1155)

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you.

The Canadian Transportation Agency is responsible for enforcement, yet they don't have access to complaints. My understanding is that there is an obligation for airlines to report in other countries, such as the United States, but not in Canada. This applies even to Canadian airlines operating in the U.S. There appears to be less oversight in Canada by the Canadian Transportation Agency.

Are there rules that are in fact different? How does this play out practically? Is there something that should be changed?

Ms. Karen Hogan: The accessibility requirements in Canada and the United States are rather similar. What is different is some of the authority that the Canadian Transportation Agency has in its oversight. It is the reporting and monitoring that are different in the two countries.

We found that the CTA doesn't really have the authority to ask for all the complaint data, for example, from airlines. If you look at the United States, where Canadian air carriers are required to report to the U.S. authority any damaged or stolen wheelchairs, or lost wheelchairs, or any issues with service dogs, that same mandatory requirement does not exist here in Canada. We identified that as a gap and made a recommendation to the CTA that they should try to find ways to get access to it. It might be the policy-makers giving them that authority, or them working collaboratively with airlines to get access to that information in order to improve oversight.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mrs. Gray. You can come back if you have further questions.

Committee members, this is informal, so if you have questions, catch my eye. If not, we'll go to those members who do.

Mr. Genuis, you have the floor for three minutes, please.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm the lead for our party for international development, and I was very struck by your report 4, which looks at the dissonance between the words the government uses around empowering women and gender internationally and the reality of what's happening. We know the Liberals love to talk about gender in international development. Your report shows that they're not measuring results: 50 out of 60 projects that you looked at didn't have complete data. Only 35 of those 60 projects actually measured policy indicators, and the vast majority of those policy indicators actually had nothing to do with results. Two out of three of the spending commitments were not met. Those are spending commitments, not results commitments; those are simply spending commitments. So, there's a massive gap between the rhetoric on gender and the reality in terms of what is not being measured and what is not being achieved. I think, sadly, this underlines that the government is trying to push a particular message to a domestic audience about what it does and doesn't care about, yet it can't be bothered to consistently track the data.

I want to ask you to share a bit more about the challenges you had in accessing this data. What kinds of challenges did you experience in getting access to the data that the government did have, and how do you explain the fact that in so many cases there's no data being gathered around outcomes whatsoever?

Ms. Karen Hogan: We looked at how Global Affairs is managing international assistance to support gender equality in low- and middle-income countries. We found out that it wasn't able to show us how all the spending—\$3.5 billion a year—actually improved the lives of women and girls. I would point to two issues, and they will link to the issue that we had about getting access to information.

The first was the significant weakness in information management. That is fundamental, and it was systemic across the organization. It was from gathering data to how you store it, how you manage it together, how you roll it up and use it for decision-making. A lot is done by paper or not even in the same IT system—if there are IT systems. It took us about about four months to gain access to the information that we needed to do our work. That just shows me that senior management is not using it for day-to-day decision-making. Then we saw that it really is an incomplete external reporting because it's only putting about half of its projects in its external reporting.

The second thing I would point to, as to why they couldn't show us how the investment was improving the lives of women and girls, would be with regard to the indicators. They didn't set themselves up to monitor outcomes. Twenty-four out of 26 of their indicators really just looked at results along the way, little things along the way. I'll give you an example, about providing nutritious meals to women. They may track how many meals were delivered, but then they did not set themselves up to monitor whether health would improve over time. Sometimes results, especially in these kinds of programs, take time to measure, but they haven't set themselves up. So, it's really about the design right at the outset of these projects, and then about the management of all the data linked to it to show the value of this investment.

● (1200)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We turn next to Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mrs. Shanahan, I do see you online there.

Mr. Fragiskatos, you have the floor.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Hogan, for your report, and thank you to your staff, as well.

I want to put the matter in context but think more broadly, as well. That's why I want to ask about the international situation. In the course of your work, did you look at what other democracies are faced with in terms of connectivity in rural and remote areas and how Canada compares?

Ms. Karen Hogan: We did try to do some comparisons. We turned to the OECD, as well, to look at what they were doing. It is difficult to compare Canada to some other countries. We have a

very geographically vast country with low population density in many areas. If we look at our urban centres, they're being served to 99%. It's really those hard-to-reach.... The issue of getting to the last few is going to be costly. We recommended that the departments really look at how much it will cost to get there. That's why linking it back to household income, when you look at affordability, is essential. Most other countries focus just on price. We do think that, given the nature of Canada, looking at household income is essential because of how costly it will be to reach the last few.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I understand.

You just used the phrase “the nature of Canada” and, in the early part of your answer, you talked about the uniqueness of this country when looking at the OECD and making comparisons. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but in some ways it sounds as if I'm asking you to compare apples and oranges. Your point is well taken, in that regard.

Based on that, can we say that Canada finds itself in a unique position—among democracies, certainly—when it comes to the whole question of ensuring connectivity for all citizens? Not every country has the remoteness of Canada. It's a vast landscape, and it's very hard to serve all Canadians. That does not mean we shouldn't make every effort to do so. There are many improvements to be made in getting to that goal.

Are we unique among democracies? Is that a fair understanding?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I'm not sure I would go that far.

I don't think every country has the means of Canada, as well. We found that funding is available. It's just slow to see projects approved and get rolled out. While you can compare us with other countries and see that we're doing well—if we look at pricing, we're following the same sort of metrics other countries are—when you sit back and look at it, four out of 10 households in rural and remote communities have no Internet, and six out of 10 on first nations reserves.

When you look at today's society, where Internet is a fundamental need, I think there's a lot of work left to be done.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Most certainly. I have no disagreement on the importance of the issue and the work that needs to be done.

You looked at previous years. For example, 10 years ago, where were we when it came to connectivity, in terms of indigenous focus and rural and remote areas more generally? Can we put that on the record? I think it would be interesting to have that.

Ms. Karen Hogan: We have an exhibit in our report that goes that far back. I don't have this committed to memory, so if you give me two seconds, I will take a quick gander back.

We tracked back to 2018. If you look at first nations reserves, you can see they had access, in 2018, in 31.6% of cases. That has grown to 42.9%.

Canada's connectivity strategy is absolutely making progress. The strategy is meant to target rural and remote communities, including first nations. There's just a lot left to be done, when you think about how many households still don't have access.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mrs. Shanahan, you have the floor for three minutes.

• (1205)

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Many thanks to the Auditor General, again, for this work, which is so important to accomplishing the goals we all have. It's so important to the theme of inclusion we're seeing here.

I think the focus is on the outcome. Am I right, Auditor General? It's not just about the measurement of activities. You've spoken about this before.

Ms. Karen Hogan: Absolutely. I think you need to measure activity along the way. You need to show progress and know whether or not you need to adjust your approach, but the ultimate goal should really be on the outcome.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I think that's what we're here for. We have a vision and very ambitious goals, but it's in the implementation of the programs and policies to get to those goals where we encounter difficulties.

Again, around the design measures.... I'm not targeting any particular report here, although I do want to talk about the connectivity report a bit, as well. What is the role of consultation with stakeholders in designing measures that will actually allow us to collect relevant data?

Ms. Karen Hogan: When it comes to connectivity, I think collaboration and coordination with stakeholders are absolutely essential. The service providers need to provide that information. There's a lot of coordination here with other levels of government. As we saw in our audit, certain MOUs have been signed with provinces to ensure they coordinate and the joint money goes further in order to increase accessibility.

It isn't just the federal government working here. It is important to have good collaboration and speak to stakeholders in order to know their needs, pain points and concerns. We did that during our audit as well. We raised some of the concerns they flagged for us around how slow it is for departments to approve funding so projects can get under way.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you.

On the report concerning access to rural and remote communities, it's so important in your report that you do that disaggregation, because overall, if I'm reading the key findings correctly, over 90% of households had been connected by 2021, but that's not good enough. I get it—we need to get to that *dernier rang*, as we say in Quebec, to that last household.

You did mention the MOUs. Are all provinces on board to work with the federal government to make 100% coverage a reality?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I do believe there are seven provinces that have MOUs with the government, because they already have connectivity initiatives. Whenever there is a connectivity initiative in one of the provinces, they have signed an MOU with the government in order not to duplicate efforts but to expand efforts.

When it comes to coverage, while the country does show 90% connectivity, that camouflages the results of rural and remote communities and first nations reserves. We shouldn't forget that 1.4 million households are underserved or not served at all. That's sizable; it is like every single person who lives in the city of Montreal not having Internet, so that is a large group in the country who still need to be reached.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Auditor General.

We turn now to Mr. Genuis again for three minutes.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Chair.

Auditor General, could you dig in further on the significance of it taking you four months to get access to certain information? Oftentimes, for parliamentarians, it takes a long time to get certain information and they say, "Oh, it's translation", or whatever it is, but you've drawn the specific conclusion that the fact that it took you such a long time to get that information really indicates that people within the department also don't have access to the information or that it took them so long to get it because the information is not readily available, which means that, to the extent that it exists, it's not being used.

Ms. Karen Hogan: Normally, when we request information from the departments we audit, they provide it to us rather quickly, because they should be using it for decision-making purposes. What we found here was that there was no standardized approach to storing that information or gathering it. We then went a little further than that to see whether or not senior management committees and senior management groups were asking for and looking for the information, because maybe it was being provided but just not used and so on, and I think the issues we saw were pretty vast.

Four months, to my mind, is a great amount of time, and we weren't able to analyze in detail all 60 files we would have liked to. We did a really deep dive on gender analysis, and we would have liked to do that more broadly. We were able to look at only 10 because of when we received the information.

If you don't have it readily at your fingertips in a database, that means you're not using it to make fundamental decisions, such as determining whether you are achieving good outcomes in this one area of the world and whether you should spend more money there or allocate more money in a different place. You're also not demonstrating the actual outcomes of this large investment. It is important that they fix those information management weaknesses.

• (1210)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you. That's really important for us to understand.

In terms of the spending commitments, the report identifies three commitments around spending: that 80% or more of the projects include consideration of gender, that 15% be focused on gender in particular, and that 50% or more of those projects be in sub-Saharan Africa. Of those three, the first is the only one they satisfied. In some ways, it's the easiest one to satisfy because it's not that difficult to say that a project includes a gender lens. It's the other two that are more specifically measurable in terms of achieving them or failing to achieve them, and they failed to achieve them.

What do you make of that?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I would highlight a few things.

During the pandemic, some of the funding was used in different ways in order to ensure that, for example, if girls couldn't go to school, they would get tablets instead of something being built in a school. But I agree with you that when you spend more on just considering gender—and it could be as easy as having a gender analysis in a project—you take away from other buckets. Evidence shows that when you really empower women and girls, you will drive meaningful and important change, and I think that's why we included a comment about needing to really focus on meeting those spending commitments.

I would highlight, however, that the policy has only three spending commitments and those commitments aren't really about outcomes and making the lives of women and girls better. That was another recommendation we gave, that they should actually have some targets that measure progress.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I have just two more members on my list, and then we're going to have to let Ms. Hogan depart. She has another appointment after ours.

I'll be going first to Mrs. Gray, and then Ms. Bradford will end it for us.

Mrs. Gray, you have the floor for up to three minutes, please.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Hogan, the report refers to the accessibility of online information as one of the barriers most frequently experienced by travellers with disabilities. It refers to online information that was often “not fully accessible”, and there was an example given of incorrect information for a person using a screen reader or information that was difficult to find. Specifically, there was a departure time for a person with visual impairments that wasn't correct.

Did you find this was something that came up often with regard to the online information barriers? Was this something that you found was a real issue that needs to be addressed?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Fundamentally, think about the last trip that you may have built. The chances are that you started that by going to a website somewhere and figuring out how to get there, or where you would stay. It's really important that websites be accessible, so that individuals with disabilities can independently book their travel.

Statistics Canada found that the most frequent barrier that individuals with disabilities face is issues with a website, so it's con-

stantly being flagged as important. We looked at whether or not Via Rail's website and CATSA's website met all of the accessibility requirements, and we found that there was a 17% gap for Via Rail's website and 15% for CATSA's.

You highlighted some of the examples that we raised, but this is just the place where you start. If you're discouraged because you are unable to independently book your travel, you may not travel. That would not be the most desired outcome. You want everyone to be able to freely move around our beautiful country.

• (1215)

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you.

Your report looked at the agencies covered by the Accessible Canada Act, which has a goal of a barrier-free Canada by 2040. Did you feel, in your assessment, while going through the audit, that there was an urgency to meet these goals by 2040?

Ms. Karen Hogan: We saw a lot of progress being done, and I think consultation is the first one. However, I would highlight that I think consultation should be broadened and done on a more continuous basis. It isn't a “one and done” thing here.

I hope that action will be taken to bridge some of the issues we found, but will then keep focusing on meeting real, true barrier-free transportation in Canada before 2040. That would be a long time to wait for all these issues to be fixed.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gray. You're down to just a few seconds.

I'm going to turn it over to Ms. Bradford now, so that we don't hold up the AG and her team for too long.

Ms. Bradford, you have the floor for three minutes, please.

Ms. Valerie Bradford (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses here today.

Ms. Hogan, continuing on accessibility and accessible transportation for people with disabilities, on page 20, you refer to the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority. They categorize complaints “by their nature and not by the status of the person”, so sometimes people who had these challenges based on their disability weren't captured correctly. You gave the example of how “the screening of a service dog was considered as a complaint related to a security screening procedure rather than as a complaint related to a person with a disability.”

Are there other examples you can give us where they are miscategorized, so we're not fully capturing the impact on people with disabilities?

Ms. Karen Hogan: This is linked to the recommendation that we gave about better analysis and use of complaint data. What we found was that the entities were trying to address someone's complaint in a timely way. We recommend that they sit back and really look at the data.

We did some word searches. For example, we looked at “mobility devices”, “service dogs” and “autism”. We looked for words that might indicate that the traveller or someone travelling with the traveller had a disability. We found almost 1,000 complaints that contained similar words, and we had a broad view.

Not all of them will necessarily be an individual with a disability travelling, but this shows the importance of sitting back and looking for systemic issues throughout the complaint data, and that's really not being done by Via Rail and CATSA. We hope that it will improve their ability to identify potential barriers, so that they can remove those in the future.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: I would like to go back to report 4, about gender equality and Global Affairs Canada.

You did make the comment, and I just want to get it on the record again. In your report, you said, “Departmental spending in the 2020–21 and 2021–22 fiscal years was affected by world events”, particularly in this case COVID, so that some money was reallocated to respond to needs resulting from COVID. You said that might have affected meeting the spending targets.

Getting back to that, we didn't meet two of the three spending commitments. Can you just reiterate which is the one that we did meet out of the three?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Yes, you're right. COVID did likely contribute to some of the reasons why the spending commitments

weren't met. One of them was very close; it almost inched to 49%. Obviously, that means you still need to be focused on how you allocate money to projects.

Of the three spending commitments, the one that was met was the one where 80% of the spending needs to go to gender-inclusive projects. That could be as simple as a gender analysis, all the way to something that really targets women and girls. There really is a vast array of projects that are included in that bucket.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Thank you very much, Ms. Hogan.

The Chair: Thank you. That is our time for today.

Ms. Hogan, I want to thank you and your team for the work you've done. You've given not only us but all parliamentarians a lot to consider with these reports. As I mentioned to you previously, these are all important. Accessibility is important, whether it's high-speed Internet or Canada's transportation system, and looking for results.

I do want to thank you again. I appreciate your coming in. I know there is a lot going on this week.

With that, I will adjourn the meeting. The subcommittee will be meeting in camera right after this.

Thank you, everyone.

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