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Europe without barriers: accessible tourism between places and projects

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Abstract

In the last few decades, the tourism sector in Europe has been facing growing demands from travellers who want better access in hotels, at holiday destinations and tourist attractions. The number of European travellers in the 55+ age group is increasing and, together with disabled people and their families, these customers are looking for travel options where basic accessibility features are standard. The so-called accessible tourism for all is not about providing separate services for separate targets or niche tourist markets. It aims at full integration or rather the inclusion of people with special needs (age, size, disability) in the tourism sector. Its long-term goal is the creation of a tourist environment in which all tourists can participate actively. Viewed from the perspective of accessible tourism for all, tourism policy in the European Union can be said to unite accessibility targets that are part of the otherwise trade-related aspects of tourism policy and a disability policy that, based on the United Nations' Standard Rules, support goals and specific measures at various levels that are designed to enhance accessibility in connection with tourism policy. Within this framework, the main purpose of this research is to investigate strategies and actions to which the European Commission is committed to increase accessibility in tourism. Using a qualitative methodology, the paper explores objectives and activities of some initiatives that are helping to make travel and tourism accessible for everyone. Therefore, it offers an overview of some projects and good practices taking place in European countries.

Keywords: Accessibility, Accessible Tourism, EU Policies, Integration, Projects

1. Introduction

The journey is future, but it is also memory, indelible trace, emotion. We all indiscriminately feel the need for the unknown and the encounter, the unexpected experience, the impact with the beauty of a place with the sensations of an exhibition, an artistic masterpiece, a sporting event, and an expected show.

People with disabilities perhaps feel this inner need even more. There is an idea of chal-

lenge; there is the deep desire to change direction, leaving the routine of an existence often marked by the limit, the deficit, the already experienced (Popiel, 2014). The traveller with disabilities can be considered almost as an ideal tourist (Allan, 2013), because he strongly desires the trip, to fill it with experiences to tell and share on his return (Alén, Losada and Domíngue, 2012). Therefore, the right to undertake tourist or recreational activity should be treated as one of the fundamental social rights. However, making a trip with and for disabled people is not always easy, because there are a number of misconceptions about people with disabilities and their desire for travel, and even their wherewithal to do so. Their travel experiences are still highly restricted by physical accessibility barriers such as transportation constraints, inaccessible accommodation and tourism sites as well as information barriers such as a general lack of information or poorly designed web sites.

According to Miller and Kirk (2002) tourists who have varying levels of accessibility requirements are all too often served insufficiently by the tourism industry. The reason why is a combination of missing tourism product supply and inadequate or missing information (Stumbo and Pegg, 2005).

Within the literature, a medical approach has been firstly applied. It considered disability as being the problem of the individual and encompassing every aspect of the individual life (Aitchison, 2003; Gilson and Depoy, 2000). Health is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, including physical health, emotional well-being and social cohesion (Stokols, 2000). Disability mainly lies in the social environment that can be limiting or empowering depending on many factors. These considerations underlie an alternative approach known as the social model. It shifts the attention from the condition of the individual to the social context describing disability as a community question.

Hence the focus is placed on providing necessary services in order to eliminate or minimise social and environmental barriers to full social, physical and leisure participation (Gilson and Depoy, 2000; McKercher et al., 2003; Shaw and Coles, 2004). A collective responsibility emerg-

es for the full participation of individuals with impairments in all the areas of social life, including the travel and tourism sphere (Filon, 2018).

The process of raising awareness for the creation of places accessible to all and hence suitable tourist locations has been developing consistently only for a few years (ISFOL, 2008; Pencarelli and Splendiani, 2010; Tóth and David, 2010; Vila, Darcy and González, 2015; Lyu, 2017). At the basis of the reasons that led to a slow development of accessible cities and places are both cultural and educational factors and the relative way in which disability is thought of (Darcy and Dickson, 2009; Hall and Page, 2014).

This paper provides a framework of accessible tourism, specifying the vision and the strategies of Europe and more specifically of the European Commission (EC). The methodology adopted is qualitative and based on the case study approach, deemed a suitable research strategy because it makes it possible to address the contemporary phenomenon of accessible tourism in a largely exploratory and comparative perspective.

In particular, the case studies presented have been selected through the analyses of several publications, reports and websites carried out by the Commission or participants and stakeholders involved in large European territorial projects, aimed at creating more inclusive and accessible tourist places. The qualitative parameters of the selected projects since 2010 are related to: the nature of the projects themselves and the funds set up (EU direct or indirect funding programmes), their effects on territories, operators and people in terms of both public-private stakeholder involvement and growth of tourist flows. These cases can be defined as good practices due to their capability to design or find effective solutions to the accessibility issues. Thus, they can be replicable and recommended as a model in order to create places and products accessible for all.

2. Accessible tourism: persons, barriers, visions

The words tourism and accessibility came together for the first time in the late 70s in Great Britain, when a working group of the English Tourist Board tried to study and understand what useful means there were for people with special needs, in order to ensure that they could access the tourism offer. At the end of this research, a document called "Holidays – the social Need" was drafted, in which it emerged that the main problem was communication and information towards these categories. In this regard, in 1981, the European national information and advice service for the tourism of disabled people was created in England. Also, in the same year, to increase the sensitivity of people towards individuals with disabilities, it was proposed by the United Nations (UN) to proclaim 1981 as the International Year of Disabled People.

Accessible tourism enables people with access requirements including mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive dimensions of access, to function independently and with equity and dignity through the delivery of universally designed products, services and environments. This definition is inclusive of all people including those travelling with children in prams, people with disabilities and seniors (Darcy and Dickson, 2009). Therefore, it can be said that accessible tourism targets any segment of the market that prefers accessing a tourism experience with ease (Souca, 2010).

Facilitating travel for all including people with various disabilities and socio-economic challenges is a basic social responsibility. To give a boost to this, the United Nation World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) dedicated the year 2016 to World Tourism Day, a campaign with the theme "Tourism for All – Promoting Universal Accessibility". Everyone has the basic right to travel. However, it is depressing that for a significant percentage of the total population, the beauty and diversity of the world and the pleasure of visiting new places is unfeasible due to limited accessibilities to various sites and services (Sibi and Abraham, 2017).

Worldwide, it is estimated that there are over 1 billion persons with disabilities: it means that 15% of the world's population experiences some form of disability, and disability prevalence is higher for developing countries. Adding spouses, children and caregivers of persons with disabilities, more than 2 billion people, representing almost a third of the world's population, are directly affected by disability (WHO, 2011).

While this signifies a huge potential market for travel and tourism, it still remains vastly under-served due to inaccessible travel and tourism facilities and services, as well as discriminatory policies and practices. There are various impediments that considerably limit and sometimes even completely prevent people with dysfunctions from participating in travelling.

Accessibility can therefore play a considerable role in development (Della Fina et al., 2017). A significant spectrum and percentage of the world's population of all ages can benefit from accessibility measures and the progressive removal of barriers to their full and effective participation in social life and development[1]. There are various impediments that considerably limit and sometimes even completely prevent people with special needs, dysfunctions or impairment from participating in travelling such as the lack of knowledge about the market of tourists with special needs, the lack of dialogue, coordination and exchange of information between different levels of government, businesses and the tourism industry. Barriers in access to tourism have been divided into two main groups: internal (health condition, family condition or physical, sensory, communication) and external (architectural, urban, economic, social, communication, financial, etc.) (Eichhorn and Buhalis, 2011; Dimou and Velissariou, 2016). Another classification places the emphasis on the human being and his/her social relations; it differentiates three main categories of limitations in participation in tourism (Popiel, 2016b). Personal limitations include a lack of self-confidence, a lack of motivation or information about possibilities of relaxation that influence preferences or may lead to the lack of interest in the way of recreational and tourist activity. Interpersonal limitations, as result of human interactions or relations, include the lack of

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[1] https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities; https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/accessibility_and_development.pdf.

social interaction skills. These are the limitations that occur between individual preferences. Structural limitations regard the participation in tourism and recreation and the actual participation in the act of travelling and recreation; they include the lack of finances, lack of transport, limited skills, the lack of free time or architectural barriers.

Working on the removal of physical, cultural and psychological barriers means understanding and sharing that the so-called accessible tourism for all is not about creating separate services for disabled people, but rather it aims at full integration, or the inclusion of people with special needs, in particular disabled and aged people, in the tourism sector (Buhalis et al., 2012).

As stated by UNWTO (2015), accessibility is a central element of any responsible and sustainable development policy. It is a human rights imperative as well as a great business opportunity. In this perspective, accessible tourism does not only benefit persons with disabilities, it benefits all of society (FRA, 2014). To ensure that accessible tourism is developed in a sustainable manner requires that tourist destinations go beyond ad hoc services to adopting the principle of universal design, ensuring that all persons, regardless of their physical or cognitive needs, are able to use and enjoy the available amenities in an equitable and sustainable way (UNWTO, 2016). This approach foregoes preferential or segregated treatment of differently abled constituents to permitting uninhibited use of facilities and services by all, at any time, to equitable effect.

3. European policies and strategies on accessible tourism

The main accessibility regulations and other instruments on international and European level are:

- UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, in force since 2008);

- UNWTO Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (GCET, adopted in 1999);

- Council of Europe recommendation on ageing and disability (adopted in 2009);

- Committee of the Ministers recommendation on the action plan to promote the rights and participation of the disabled (adopted in 2009);

- Council of Europe resolution on universal design to achieve full participation (adopted in 2007);

- Commission regulation on rights of disabled people in air travel (adopted in 2007).

As the European population is getting older, the number of Europeans with disabilities is rising significantly. It is expected that, by the end of 2020, approximately 120 million Europeans will have a disability (Lecerf, 2017). Additionally, Europe is now essentially an urban society, with four out of five EU citizens living in towns and cities.

Based on the forecasted growth of the elderly population and the growth of individuals with disabilities, and assuming the stable travel propensity and frequency of these people, a baseline forecast is obtained. It is suggested that by 2020 the demand for the EU's accessible tourism by people within the EU will continue to grow to about 862 million trips per year, and the demand by the key international inbound markets will reach 21 million trips per year (EC, 2014, 2015).

It is important to develop more accessible tourism destinations, to improve visitor satisfaction, encourage repeat visits and boost business. Accessibility means that people with disabilities have access – on an equal footing with other people – to the physical environment, transportation, and information and communication technologies, as well as to other facilities and services. Accessibility is a pre-condition for participation in society and in the economy. Facilitating travel for people with disabilities is an exceptional cultural and business opportunity. Yet, a change in mind-set and in the model of tourism services provision is needed in order to meet this major market demand. Accessible environments and services contribute to improving the quality of the tourism product and can create more job opportunities for people with disabilities. That is why accessibility is at the heart of the European Disability Strategy for 2010-2020 (EC, 2010). A fundamental part of its strategy involves working towards a barrier-free Europe both for domestic and foreign tourists. Accessibility should

not be treated as a burden: there is a strong social and economic case for it. Accessible goods, services and cities should be the norm, rather than the exception as it is now (EC, 2010). Viewed from the perspective of "Accessible Tourism for All", tourism policy in the European Union can be said to unite accessibility targets that are part of the otherwise commerce-related aspects of tourism policy and a disability policy that, based on the UN's Standard Rules, support goals and specific measures at various levels that are designed to enhance accessibility in connection with tourism policy.

The European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 focuses on actions in eight priority areas, which directly or indirectly include the tourism and travel sector: accessibility; participation; equality; employment; education and training; social protection; health and external action. It has led to initiatives related to the accessible tourism sphere such as:

- the Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the accessibility requirements for products and services (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2019/882/oj);

- the European Accessibility Act, which sets accessibility requirements for products and services and the Regulations on the Rights of Passengers with reduced mobility (https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1202);

- the Directive on web accessibility, which makes public websites accessible to all (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2016/2102/oj);

- the EU disability card project, which makes it easier for people with disabilities to travel across these Member States. It has been piloted in 8 Member States and is now under evaluation before continuation (https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1139);

- provisions in the Erasmus+ programme to allow better mobility for students with disabilities (http://www.icevi-europe.org/files/mobility-of-students-with-disability.pdf);

- the cross-border healthcare directive (https://ec.europa.eu/health/cross_border_care/overview_en);

- educational initiatives for disabled people;

- awareness-raising initiatives at all levels of the education system.

Currently, there is no mutual recognition of disability status between EU Member States. The EU disability card can be considered one of the main results because it ensures equal access to benefits across borders for people with disabilities, mainly in the areas of culture, leisure, sport and transport. The card is mutually recognized between EU countries participating in the system, on a voluntary basis. A pilot of the card was launched in February 2016 in a group of eight EU countries: Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Italy, Malta, Romania, Slovenia.

As the strategy drew to a close, the Commission began the process of evaluating it in 2019. In January 2020, the European Commission (EC) then confirmed its commitment to presenting a strengthened European Disability Strategy post 2020[2]. It emerged that the Commission remains strongly committed to implementing the strategy to its full extent, also in order to increase accessibility in tourism through a number of actions. In particular, the European Commission's Tourism Unit aims to develop dialogue and partnership with industry stakeholders for the benefit of the sector and promote a wider understanding of the role tourism plays in European life. The accessibility webpage[3] highlights the Commission's activities concerned with improving the regulatory environment, working with stakeholders and promoting best practices in accessible tourism.

The European accessible tourism organisations represent very important added values in the accessible tourism industry. The most significant organisations are the European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT)[4], the European Disability Forum (EDF)[5]. European tourists with

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[2] This commitment was confirmed on 16 January by the Commissioner for Equality Helena Dalli during a speech presented at the conference "Towards Inclusion 2020". It is also present in the Communication "A strong social Europe for just transitions" released on 14 January 2020 (http://edf-feph.org/newsroom/news).

[3] https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1137&langId=en.

[4] https://www.accessibletourism.org/.

[5] http://edf-feph.org/.

disabilities can rely on the support of several websites and local programmes. One of the most successful websites is the Europe For All portal that offers practical guidelines and descriptions. Another popular site is Pantou[6], an initiative by the European Commission, which collects travel services and destinations in the EU. It also takes particular care to provide a wide range of Accessible Information Systems (AIS) in the accessible tourism industry. The development of tourism products is mainly the responsibility of service providers; however, the community programmes of the EU can further contribute to their success by collecting and offering these services in a standardised and certified way (EC, 2015).

In the last few decades, the European Commission has been co-funding several projects related to the design, implementation, and marketing of accessible tourism, as regards both the tourist offer side and the study of profiles, characteristics, attitudes of accessible tourism markets and the demand side. The main aims are to increase the travel opportunities available to people with special access needs, promote social inclusion and improve the skills of staff in the industry.

Within the European Union's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2014-2020, a wide variety of programmes and funds may be used to support the further development of the accessible tourism supply, such as:

- Competitiveness of Enterprises and SMEs (COSME): competitiveness, growth and sustainability of the EU's enterprises, in particular SMEs, and promoting entrepreneurship and jobs;

- ERASMUS+: boosting skills and employability by providing funding for the professional development of education and training staff, as well as youth workers and for cooperation between universities, colleges, schools, enterprises, and NGOs;

- HORIZON 2020: science and technology - funding the entire value creation chain from fundamental research through to market innovation, with support for SMEs;

- Rights, Equality and Citizenship: promoting the rights of inter alia people with disabilities;

- Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion: Themes under the European Regional Development Fund.

The European tourism sector is missing out on up to one billion euros every year due to poor infrastructure, services and attitudes towards travellers with special access needs. The latest figures set the value of the accessible tourism at 394 billion euros. This is an important portion of the market which, however, could easily expand with targeted measures. The EU has in fact tried to count the missed opportunities. According to the Brussels calculations, at least 142 billion Euros of potential expansion are lost every year. The EU has in fact tried to value the missed opportunities. According to the Brussels calculations, at least a 142 billion euro potential expansion is burned every year. This is money that can be translated into lost jobs in tourism: 3.4 million across Europe. Tourism facilities for disabled people in Europe are only 9% of the total. The market value could grow by 44% in the coming years if measures capable of responding to the potential user base were implemented. Being able to ensure successful and satisfactory implementation of initiatives, products and services providing wider access to disabled people would make it possible to improve the quality of holidays even for non-disable people.

In 2014, the UNWTO and the Government of the Republic of San Marino organized the 1st UNWTO Conference on Accessible Tourism in Europe, a unique opportunity to place the important issue of accessibility at the heart of discussions on tourism development in the region. It was confirmed that accessibility must be an intrinsic part of any responsible and sustainable tourism policy. Nevertheless, facilitating travel for people with disabilities is not only a human rights imperative, it is also an exceptional business opportunity. Accessible tourism benefits us all by improving access conditions, enhancing economic prospects and creating jobs.

In the light of these essential premises of accessible tourism, the 1st UNWTO International Conference on Tourism and Accessibility[7], co-

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[6] https://pantou.org/.

[7] http://www.sanmarinoaccessibletourism.com/.

organized with the Government of Ecuador, was organised in 2019 with the following objectives: to promote universal accessibility in the tourism sector as a factor of both inclusion and competitiveness; to highlight the leadership and coordinated work of public administrations, the business fabric and organizations of persons with disabilities; to illustrate success stories in making the different links in the tourism value chain and products accessible and to demonstrate the great potential of innovation and new technologies in accessible tourism.

Hosted by the European Commission, in partnership with the European disability forum[8], the 10th European day of persons with disabilities Conference took place on 28-29 November 2019, in Brussels. Politicians, high-level experts and self-advocates attended the conference to discuss the challenges, solutions and the projects for improving policies dedicated to persons with disabilities. It was an important opportunity to discuss the preliminary findings of the public consultation on the European disability strategy 2010-2020 (launched in July 2019), as well as the delegates' expectations for the next decade. Many other conferences have been held in European countries, focused on different forms and proposals of accessible tourism, and frequently related to European projects.

4. Best practices around Europe and Italy: the power of cooperation and inclusion

Europe's historical cities, museums, ancient buildings, monuments and townscapes are renowned worldwide for their beauty, diversity and historical significance. Millions of people visit them every year but many others feel unwelcome due to physical barriers and inadequate services that can prevent people with sensory or physical disabilities from accessing them. Therefore, it is important to make historical city centres and buildings more accessible without compromising their cultural heritage, further reconciling access with conservation interests. Launched in 2010 within the European Consortium of Foundations on Human Rights and Dis-

ability, the League of Historical and Accessible Cities (LHAC)[9] is a pilot project focusing on improving the accessibility of historical towns while at the same time promoting the development of sustainable tourism and the protection of cultural heritage. To date, six accessible tourist routes have been created in six different cities across Europe. The League is well framed in the European Commission initiative as its main goal is to allow the elderly, people with disabilities, and generally speaking every person, to independently visit interesting buildings, museums, parks, restaurants, shops, hotels and other key tourist attractions within the six historical cities involved in the project. Besides improving the accessibility for all by implementing an accessible tourist route within the city centres, at the same time it is promoting sustainable tourism development with the overall aim to find innovative ways to reconcile cultural heritage protection and accessibility. The main goal of the project is not only to allow people with disabilities and their families to take full enjoyment from leisure and cultural activities, but also to stimulate tourism among the 80 million people with disabilities living in Europe. From this point of view the project is therefore expected to contribute to the cities' long-term cultural and social development. Improved access to a city's cultural heritage makes it more dynamic and attractive to its residents and tourists and thereby increases its economic profit and growth. At the heart of this work programme is the need to overcome many physical barriers to access – some of which may have existed for centuries, while at the same time preserving the historical originality and authenticity of the cities. The project aims at providing a concrete example to the public and private tourism stakeholders on how accessibility can contribute to the improvement of the tourist destination, demonstrating its importance for city planning and management processes. It furthermore improves the competitiveness of tourist destinations and services, attracting a new market segment which typically travels during the low season and is usually accompanied by one or more companions and/or family members. The project has been simultaneously implemented by some foundations in different countries across Europe which have teamed up

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[8] http://www.edf-feph.org/.

[9] http://www.lhac.eu/.

with local authorities, disability groups, architects and urban planning experts, to design itineraries of a minimum of 1 kilometre in length along which people with all types of disabilities can visit shops, restaurants, museums and other key tourist attractions of several historical cities. Specifically, Fondazione Banca Monte di Lucca is working with Lucca; Fondazione CRT is working with Turin; Centre Français des Fonds et Fondations, Fondation Réunica, and Fondation de France are working with Mulhouse; Fundación ONCE is working with Ávila; Sozopol Foundation is working with the city of Sozopol; and a Danish consortium of foundations (Bevica Foundation, Danish Disability Foundation, Labour Market Holiday Fund, and Realdania) is collaborating with the city of Viborg. The creation of a European network that goes beyond the mere exchange of information and acts jointly in several European countries in something as local as urban accessibility is a distinctive feature, adding a special value to this project.

Another project related to accessible itineraries is Accessible Transnational Thematic Itineraries and InterMOdality (ATTIMO)[10], a European project on accessible tourism supported by COSME, the Programme for the Competitiveness of Enterprises and SMEs 2014-2020. It started in June 2016 and finished in December 2017. It can be briefly said that ATTIMO represents the path to the accessible tourism market for sustainable and accessible businesses and destinations in Europe. The project aims to develop two transnational tourism itineraries, based on religious and cultural heritage and on the food and wine culture of two beautiful rural areas in Italy and Austria. Two paths have been outlined in the area of the Monti Berici of Veneto, in Italy, and throughout South and West Styria, in Austria, connecting some of the best points of interest for tourists who wish to encounter the regional culture, following the route of Saint James in churches and historical monuments, or tasting the best food and wine in picturesque wineries and taverns, but also enjoying a ride, walking or with a bicycle, on some of the trails and bicycle routes annexed to the itineraries. With the active involvement of the tourism ac-

tors of the two regional areas, throughout the entire tourism chain (from transport, to cultural heritage, to accommodation, to institutions), an action plan for the development of the itineraries has been prepared, together with the Guidelines to implement accessible tourist facilities and services. All the tourism operators along the routes and towns of the itineraries have received training on accessible tourism and customer care, so they are ready to host people with specific access needs. The project in fact provided support and information to small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) seeking to boost their business. A toolkit helps them to position their business, put the itineraries together, produce accessibility guides and carry out staff training. It suggests how to: present accessibility information on their website, manage the feedbacks from visitors and people sharing experiences, link to ATTIMO and Pantou. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, initially supported by the European Commission, Pantou is now an independent online Directory, managed by ENAT since 2017. The Pantou Directory:

- makes it easier for tourists with any kind of access needs to find what they are looking for when planning a visit;

- promotes accessible tourism suppliers, showing places to go and things to do – in safety and with convenience and comfort;

- enables suppliers and destinations to find new partners and build networks of accessible services, for the benefit of visitors, local businesses and communities.

Suppliers who are listed on Pantou provide a wide variety of tourism services, including accommodation, transport, tours, venues and attractions, equipment rental and sales, personal assistance – making tourism inclusive and accessible for people who have a disability, a long-term health condition or other specific accessibility requirements.

Accessible tourism is not only itineraries. Some other projects in Europe have been focused on education and training, culture and events and on health, etc. Other initiatives have been focused on specific supply tourist chain components (accommodation, transportation, attractions, related services, etc.). Or else they

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[10] http://www.attimo-tourism.eu/.

have been targeted at the tourist market niches related to different people with special needs.

For instance, the performance of well-trained professionals is fundamental for people with disabilities to be able to participate in the industry. There is still a huge lack of knowledge amongst tourism industry professionals about who the customers with access needs are, what they need, how to treat them and how to organize a visit for them so that they can participate on an equal footing with other tourists, as well as poor interest in educating themselves in this field. Within this framework can be listed the ELEVATOR project[11]. Co-funded by the ERASMUS+ programme of the European Union, it focuses on adult education and business development (business competencies) in the field of accessible tourism for all. The name of the project represents the effort to raise the quality of human resources and services in tourism to a higher, more competitive level. Tourism for all is an integral part of sustainable, high-quality tourism and in terms of expected trends in tourism and society also a necessary condition for maintaining its competitiveness. It is based on three important values: independence, equity and dignity. Accessibility is not only about physical access to buildings, a truly accessible tourism product minimises or removes physical, attitudinal, information, financial and other barriers. The aim of the ELEVATOR project was to exchange good practices in adult education for accessible tourism between Italy, Belgium and Slovenia. From 2015 to 2018, the project participants were partners' staff (trainers, researchers etc.), tourist guides, teachers/trainers of (accessible) tourism, national/regional/local policy and opinion makers, tourism destination organisation, SMEs providing tourism services etc. They participated in transnational meetings, intellectual output creation and evaluation and in dissemination activities. The ELEVATOR project included four main activities: Project management; Transnational meetings with thematic workshops on education for accessible tourism; Intellectual output creation and evaluation; Multiplier events. It developed and disseminated three innovative intellectual outputs:

- Comparative analysis of existing tools and conditions for the development of competences for accessible tourism in partners' countries with innovative approaches to adult education and vocational training for accessible tourism;

- Open Educational Resource for Tourist and Travel Guides raising their awareness of the requests of tourists with special needs and skills for adaptation of guided tours which allow access and enjoyment for those tourists;

- Accessible tourism guidelines presenting in the style of "elevator speech" i.e. briefly, comprehensibly and attractively the substance of accessible tourism, good examples and recommendation which could foster tourism providers' and social entrepreneurs´ mind-sets and the taking of accessible tourism towards tangible actions.

COSME and ERASMUS+ are direct funding programmes, but there are many other projects for accessible tourism co-funded by European Regions through indirect funding and cooperation funding. Jointly managed by the European Commission Europe in partnership with national and regional authorities, the main funds are: the European Social Fund (ESF) for social inclusion and good governance, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) for regional and urban development, the Cohesion Fund (CF) for economic convergence by less-developed regions, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). These projects globally contribute to the achievement of the Tourism Accessible For All movement's long-term goal: the creation of a tourist environment in which all tourists, irrespective of their individual needs – age, size, (dis)ability – can participate actively.

For example, within the 2014-2020 INTERREG IPA CBC Greece-Albania Programme the main goal of the project Accessible Tourism 4ALL[12] was to support the sustainable development of heritage tourism in the Cross Border (CB) area and establish the region as an international destination for senior and accessible tourism, including tourism for persons with disabilities and persons with reduced mobility in general and their families. It aimed to: exchange and import know-how and good practices related to

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[11] https://www.accessibletourism.org/?i=enat.en.elevator-project-mini-site.

[12] https://www.keep.eu/project/20232/accessible-tourism.

the improvement of the accessibility of cultural and natural heritage structures; improve the capacity of authorities responsible for the management of cultural and natural heritage assets, and of professionals from the tourist field in better addressing the needs of senior and accessible tourism; raise awareness of the locals, especially of young people; collect data related to the accessibility and friendliness to disabled and elderly visitors of key cultural and natural assets of the CB area; conduct a joint strategic planning study towards branding the CB area as an international tourist destination for elderly and disabled, of high quality at low to medium cost; measure satisfaction and behaviour of elderly and disabled visitors.

The Quality Network on Sustainable Tourism (QNeST)[13] included in the 2014-2020 INTER-REG Adrion Adriatic-Ionian Programme is another motivating project aimed at valorising the common quality features of the cultural, traditional and environmental heritage of the Adriatic-Ionian area[14]. Through the realization of a transnational model of participative interaction between private and public stakeholders such as local and traditional operators, tourism service providers, craftsmen, sectorial experts, local communities, institutions and cultural, social and environmental associations, the project foresees the launch of an Adriatic-Ionian vision and strategy for the development of new quality tourist solutions, based on co-design processes between key-stakeholders at local and joint levels and on the capitalization of existing good practices related to the most interesting features of a sustainable and accessible tourism. Paying attention to the abilities to preserve and promote the cultural heritage mainly linked to traditional crafts, to carry out environmental sustainable initiatives, to promote and enhance food traditions on the Mediterranean Diet and to strengthen the development of accessible services, the QNeST project launched a common brand, representative of quality standards for a sustainable tourism and stimulated the creation and promotion of a quality network of Adriatic Ionian actors and economic operators, active or indirectly

linked with the tourism sector. Finally, QNeST ensured the implementation of the common strategy through the launch of demonstrative and innovative initiatives able to: promote the quality network and the common brand; stimulate the exchange of information among the network members also through a collaborative ICT platform; improve the fruition, at local and transnational levels, of new routes and best practices, evocative of a common awareness for the development of a qualitative, accessible and sustainable tourism.

5. Conclusions

Travelling and discovering new places should be an opportunity for everybody. The process leading to accessibility of tourism is very important since this sector constitutes an integral branch of the economy and society. Nevertheless, as shown in this paper, there are still several barriers and limitations to the participation of some people in tourism (Popiel, 2016a).

Accessible tourism is a priority in the European Union. The EU undoubtedly promotes equality of opportunity and accessibility for people with disabilities. The creation of products and services designed for all, free of barriers, easy to understand and to use, is based on the vision of a society without any kind of limitation but functioning for everyone. Hence, accessible tourism is about making it easy for everyone to enjoy tourism experiences.

There is a social responsibility behind making tourism more accessible. But there are also business opportunities in improving accessibility, making it possible to boost the competitiveness of tourism in Europe (Miller, 2014).

It is our opinion that evidence and project results have shown that making basic adjustments to a facility, providing accurate information and understanding the needs of disabled people can increase the visitor numbers and diversify their targets and profiles. We agree with both scientific and market research in saying that enhancing the accessibility of tourism services increases their quality and the enjoyment of all tourists. It also improves the quality of life and involvement in local communities.

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[13] http://www.qnest.eu/.
[14] The University of Salento is a partner of the project and Prof. Anna Trono is the Project Manager.

We take the view that accessible tourism is an important challenge for all European countries, due to the fact that destinations and service providers in tourism nowadays still have insufficient awareness of the importance of accessible tourism. Demand for accessible tourism will also continue to grow in the future. Challenges can be overcome, whether in the form of architectural barriers, a dearth of knowledge, or cultural and societal attitudes.

The case studies presented in the paper, allow us to highlight the need to consider persons with disabilities in all their diversity and to respond to the multiplicity of access needs in innovative ways. While much more remains to be done, it is hoped that these good practices will inspire public institutions, private enterprises and civil society organizations in advancing the cause of accessible tourism for all. We think that tourism experts and urban planners have to take the aspect of tourists with special needs more into account, and design special tourism spaces and proposals for them.

Accessible tourism requires long term commitment (Michopoulou et al., 2015). European countries have access to the ENAT network, and national or regional networks exist in many countries. These networks generate several benefits, such as the exchange of knowledge, enhanced advertising opportunities and improved communication with tourist and user groups. They also play an important role in putting accessible tourism issues on the political and administrative agenda.

It can be said that the projects and the best practices themselves represent territorial networks: they are based on a collaborative and inclusive approach able to enhance the stakeholder engagement and satisfy the accessible tourism demand. By increasing and leveraging the knowledge and experience of the network, we believe that projects and actions can be implemented and funded, providing models of excellence in accessible tourism for the whole of the tourism sector and society.

In conclusion, we are in a position to say that the lines of action for accessible tourism outlined by the EU will allow progress to be made on non-discrimination and on access to tourism by all. It is important to work together both at European and local level in order to ensure that tourism for all concerns the sphere of responsibility of public authorities as well as the private entities and associations operating in this socioeconomic context. The modalities of travel, access and use of tourist goods and services by elderly and disabled people is certainly one of the elements to be taken into consideration when discussing tourism during and after the COVID-19 outbreak.

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