

Enabling a sustainable rural-tourism: The challenge of accessibility

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Abstract. This paper explores the concept of sustainable tourism in rural areas and the relationship with the social dimension. In particular we address the issue of people with disabilities, above all physical, starting from the statement that the number of people with disabilities willing to practice tourism it's always increasing over the years and will continue to increase due to the aging population.

The work focuses on the one hand on the exploratory analysis of this category of consumers/tourists through the analysis of the literature aimed at identifying relevant research themes highlighted which is still virgin and not very attentive. Furthermore, the study aims to verify, again with on-desk investigation, what is the state of the art of the services offered in the rural area (parks, naturalistic sites, farms (specifically wineries); what services are available and how the information is communicated to the final consumer. The work highlights a still strong lack of: services offered; adequate promotion and communication policy, which allows this category of consumers to access even just simple information. Then from this exploratory analysis arises the fundamental need for a more careful research and proposal of adequate regulations, services and marketing actions suitable to overcome the barriers of structural and information accessibility, as well as the need to expand a calibrated offer of recreational and sports services, still lacking today.

1 Introduction

The aim of this study is to open a window on a “specific” segment of the tourism market: that of people with physical disabilities (hearing, vision, and mobility, as catalogued by WHO [1]); since it is too vast to deal with issues related to all disabilities we have chosen to focus attention only on physical-motor disability. Although it is considered almost completely superfluous to justify in detail why we want to focus attention on this segment, we only believe to underline the extreme social value in a perspective that aims to favor if not the absolute tendency to eliminate inequality between consumers/users of tourist, recreational and sporting goods, at least to minimize this inequality; it is about being in line with social sustainability and social justice. We recall in this regard, one for all, the regulatory reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) ratified in Italy in 2009, contains important references in the context of accessible tourism (art.30) and underlines that the signatory states of the agreement undertake to take appropriate measures to ensure that people with disabilities have access to recreational, sporting and tourist places. The UN flagship report disability (2018) [2] in the context of 2030 Agenda highlights the Sustainable Development Goals for person with disabilities: the third Goal is “Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all persons with disabilities”, and the eleventh reads “Making cities and human settlements inclusive and sustainable for persons with disabilities”. #Envision2030 introduced 17 goals to transform the world for persons with disabilities: the SDGs, even if the word disability is not mentioned directly, are aimed at raising awareness of the Agenda 2030 in their achievement for person with disabilities.

It has, also, been proven [3] that the participation in leisure activities such as holidays, going out, or attending

cultural events and church has a significant positive effect on the life satisfaction of people with disabilities. Event organizers, destination managers, business owners, professionals, governments, and the leisure industry in general must promote and facilitate full access and participation of people with disabilities in all leisure activities, especially in those that contribute more intensely to increasing their life satisfaction scores.

The challenges in the field are numerous and very complex, and disability is a theme dynamic, multidimensional, and contested. Person with disabilities are an important and constantly expanding tourism market: as just highlighted in the recent literature [4-10].

The site of UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (disability) [2] points out that there are over 1 billion persons with disabilities, as well as more than 2 billion people, such as spouses, children, and caregivers of persons with disabilities, representing almost a third of the world's population, are directly affected by disability.

We also recall that before in Europe there were 37 million people with physical disabilities and in the US the number of people with disabilities is expected to reach 100 million in 2030; in 2005 Eurostat estimates 46 million people with some form of disability (Europe without Barriers) a figure that increases to 50 million in 2010 (First White Paper on Tourism for All in Italy, 2013) and growth does not seem to stop due to the aging population. In Italy in 2019 people with mild or severe disabilities are about 13 million (United Nation [11]). So the segment of disabled people presents a huge potential market for the tourism for travel and tourism. However this segment still remains vastly under-served due to inaccessible travel and tourism facilities and services, as well as discriminatory policies and practices. The fast growing tourist demand ranges from facilitation in air travel, to the need for easy movement on the ground, both in the urban environment, in frequenting museums,

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libraries and urban parks, and in rural areas, in the attendance of natural parks, caves, naturalistic sites, agritourism, fishing, recreational and / or sporting activities (for example diving), cultural and experiential (for example fishing tourism). The methodology used is based on the principles of narrative/traditional literature review, far from being exhaustive, aimed at highlight gaps or inconsistencies and to identify the future research area. The main results underline a still scarce and inadequate knowledge of visitors' needs, still a very limited offer of services for tourists with motor disabilities, accessibility is generally perceived by the market as a burden rather than as a valid reason and opportunity.

2 Methods

The methodology used is both exploratory and generative, and is aimed at analyzing the literature relating to the theme of disability and accessibility in particular associated with the tourist usability of rural spaces, even if this theme finds space and research interest with reference to the usability of recreational activities and / or cultural in urban areas (museums, urban parks). This is a general literature review ([12], pp. 24-25) aimed at updating the state of the art on the issue, highlight the main critical issues and identify possible future research drivers associated with the study of solutions (rules and marketing policies) capable to break down the barriers and criticism found, to guarantee the full *liveability* of the tourist experience, transforming 'disability' into 'normality'. In addition to this bibliographical material, we also wanted to check the offer of tourist services for the disabled, starting from a still very approximate survey on the WEB, but indicative, looking for tourist offer sites (substantially farms and parks) for the disabled and what services were offered.

3 Results and Discussion

The result of this research is strictly connected to the record of works identified in the literature that deal with the topic of tourist usability of rural spaces (parks, naturalistic and archaeological sites, bed & breakfasts, farmhouses, etc.) by people with a motor disability. This served to update the state of the art of literature, still a virgin territory and therefore not very voluminous. Over recent decades, numerous researchers from the social and health sciences have identified the role of social and physical barriers in disability. As just underlined [1] we are witnessing a transition from an individual and medical perspective to a social and structural perspective, from a "medical model" to a "social model", in which people are considered disabled by society rather than by their body. Disabled men with severe disabilities, with no tourist traditions in the family, and not living with their families (living alone or in nursing homes) emphasised mostly social barriers [13]; other revealed that tourist agents were incompetent in meeting the needs of the disabled [14, 15]; others point out that many individuals find travel and tourism destinations and attractions to be unwelcoming, with attitudinal, social, environmental, and physical barriers preventing full participation [5]; many authors underline the necessity of a major understanding for their

customers by travel agency or organizers of tourism and marketers [5-8, 15-18]. Furthermore, as highlighted by Guyenot [19], "*many people with disabilities take the initiative to investigate and verify that the standards of handicap accessibility are met*" (p. 23). Here it is recalled that even if something has been done, there is still a lot to do.

It is also pointed out that tourism professionals find difficult to comprehend and evaluate the tourism market of people with disabilities, because of the low proportion of disabled customers who visit their sites so they think that market of people with disabilities is only an "opportunity market" (p. 24).

Positive signs from a marketing point of view can be seen from sites that have formalized their accessibility through the French brand "Tourisme & Handicap [20] introduced by the Ministry of Tourism in 2001 with the" objective to raise awareness among tourism professionals and the general public on the reception of people with disabilities in tourist and recreational facilities and to implement and manage mechanisms to promote policies that favor such reception. The site contains information for those who want to plan their wheelchair travel and evaluations and comments relating to the accessibility of the main cities that have joined the platform internationally.

With regard to urban tourism (visits to cities, visits to museums and shops, use of transport such as subways and buses), the international evaluations are the most disparate: there are European capitals such as Vienna which are evaluated with a high score for easy accessibility in a wheelchair both on the street and by public transport, while the shops are still often inaccessible due to the steps; Berlin is easily accessible by wheelchair but transport still needs improvement and so on. It is always people with motor disabilities who visit the cities and carry out the evaluation through a score. The trips to the cities are also documented through videos posted on Youtube (for example the visit to the city of Frankfurt). As already pointed out in 2014 [19] even today (access to the site carried out in August 2022) to a first analysis of the data reported on the site, it is found that people with motor disabilities have difficulty in participating in leisure activities, and in finding accessible destinations and sites; there is a significant lack of information on the part of site and destination administrators; moreover, the variously interested stakeholders do not communicate sufficiently and accurately on the ease of access to sites and products.

Mahmoudzadeh [21], investigated the environmental barriers and accessibility of Tehran tourism that affect tourism development for people with physical and motor disabilities. Three major areas were included: transportation, attractions and accommodation, and each of them were identified as inappropriate above all transportation facilities for people with physical and motor disabilities.

3.1 Rural/Natural tourism and disabilities

Rural tourism is way of traveling while participating in the rural lifestyle. This segment has been rapidly growing in the past decade, and rural tourism is expected to grow in

the future. It aims to preserve the local environment and cultural values and allows visitors to explore the natural, cultural and environmental issues. According to one definition, rural tourism is “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the wellbeing of local people” (The International Ecotourism Society, 1990).

Numerous initiatives have been launched by the EU in support of accessible tourism: for example, in 2006 the Commission launched a series of awards for rural areas under the name of European Destinations of Excellence (EDEN) which stand out for their commitment to sustainability, social, cultural and environmental tourism. In 2013 the theme of Accessible Tourism was selected and 19 destinations won the award: specifically, these are areas without barriers (infrastructures and structures), accessible by means of transport suitable for all users, have high-quality services, quality provided by qualified personnel, have activities, exhibitions, attractions in which everyone can participate and have marketing systems, booking systems, websites and other information services accessible to all. To encourage initiatives on accessible tourism, EU funds have been made available through the COSME Program to encourage, among other things, the development of accessible itineraries.

Nonetheless, it is noted that a market failure still persists in terms of accessibility: around 90% of companies (according to a 2015 EU study) do not promote accessibility in their marketing [22].

Diversi studi sono stati condotti di recente in letteratura volti a migliorare l'accessibilità di luoghi specifici attraverso casi studio [23, 9, 15].

Positive signs must be mentioned by some initiatives, even if sporadic, in the Italian panorama: for example, just to name a few, in Sardinia we can mention the case of the Marine Protected Area of the Asinara Island (in the northern of Sardinia) which has prepared a project to improve the accessibility of the Park and activated diving services for people with motor disabilities.

Within the rural areas there are vineyards and wineries, which are also the main focus of this communication.

3.1.1 Focus on wineries creating inclusive spaces for guests with disabilities

In the international agritourism panorama, the enotourism phenomenon is of particular importance: travelers who move towards the places of wine production, for experiential tourism and/or to taste wines and get to know the realities of production, are constantly increasing. Vintur [24] defined enotourism as “*the development of all tourist and “spare time” activities, dedicated to the discovery and the cultural and wine knowledge pleasure of the vine, the wine and its soil*”.

So wineries open to the public and offering events, tasting, catering, visit and accommodation have to be accessible for people with disabilities and to meet standards by 1st January 2015.

I like to mention a sentence recalled in a degree thesis [19] and pronounced by the architect Grosbois which emphasizes the accessibility of the facilities for people

with disabilities: “People with disabilities in an accessible environment are non-disabled people. Non-disabled people in a not accessible environment are disabled people”. I think this is a very strong phrase, which shakes sensitivity and awareness of everyone's rights.

The Americans with Disability Act (ADA) provides regulations to ensure public spaces are accessible to those with disabilities, but these standards are not always respected, so “Tours through the cellar, barrel room or vineyard will often present impassable accessibility obstacles” (as Robert Kowal, longtime winemaker, said).

Many wineries have voluntarily begun to modify their structures in order to allow inclusive wine tourism. Examples exist internationally: the King Estate Winery (Oregon) pursues a philosophy according to which “Accessibility is part of our culture, and is also consistent with the values of the King Family - values of respect for others and inclusivity” (J. Ulum, senior director of communication).

The company has a lower tasting bar counter, has made the entire property accessible, incorporating ramps, improved single function locks, grab bars, road markings and additional accessible parking at their visitor center.

Fox Run Vineyards in Finger Lakes, partnered with a disabled organization to bring the tasting room up to standard with wheelchair ramps, a low bar and high tables that wheelchairs can fit under. They added an elevator and created a variety of channels for guests to contact the winery. They are also attentive to the needs of their disabled employees in several ways, from making accommodations in their duties to working with a job coach.

The vineyard's marketing and communications manager, and the office manager making the website compatible with screen readers. Furthermore the team stays in touch with the Center for Disability Rights in Rochester, NY, and encourages other business owners to work with their local disability organizations, too.

In France, in the Bordeaux wine production area, one of the most visited French vineyards with almost 4,3 million wine tourists per year [19], several wineries have adapted to the standards and received the “Tourisme et Handicap” label and some wine regions are very advanced in terms of motor accessibility and more ([19], p. 26). However, much needs to be done from an infrastructural point of view because numerous dysfunctions have also been detected in this region, especially architectural barriers.

Information and communication with people with disabilities is still a crucial point today to make accessibility easier. An effective WEB site is considered essential as a means of communication to promote appropriate tourist destinations (Huh and Singh): some sites and/or companies have websites that are inaccessible to people with disabilities.

There are several international sites dedicated to tourism for disabled people: UN [25] which promotes accessible tourism for all, is particularly active on the international scene and has a specifically regulatory and research slant, and has produced several reports [26]. The French site Tourisme et Handicap has a more practical cut, and the Italian one [27] which is structured in such a way

as to offer specialized services (on the ground, by plane and on cruise) of assistance to people with disabilities who want to travel, visit cities, follow concerts, as well as visit wine regions (for example Tuscany, Chianti, Brunello di Montalcino, or Nobile di Montepulciano). The hotels and restaurants that are accessible to the disabled and the related services included are also indicated on the site.

Also important is the training of the staff who must entertain tourists in welcoming disabled people as well as the development of local proactive partnerships.

It was recently pointed out [22] that in Europe by 2020 there is a lack of a tradition or a widespread practice of training in the field of accessible tourism. An effective contribution to the dissemination of training was given by EU-funded projects in the field of lifelong learning (Leonardo and recently ERASMUS +) and national programs for the development of human resources.

One of the critical points identified is the financial availability to carry out the necessary interventions to make the structures accessible. Especially if the investment made is sufficiently capable of generating economic benefits.

To get a picture of the accessibility of Italian wineries open to the public “all inclusive” and to verify the type of service offered, a short survey was conducted in the summer of 2022 within the National Association of Women of Wine¹.

Eight wineries responded to the survey (3 located in Piedmont, 1 in Lombardy, 1 in Veneto, 1 in Basilicata, 1 in Abruzzo, 1 in Sardinia²). Almost all of them have made infrastructural investments with the aim of allowing the visit of all the premises of the company (winemaking and aging) and suitable tasting rooms with wider doors and higher tables; in Basilicata they are organizing to allow visits to the vineyards with their own vehicle; in Abruzzo they signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2020 aimed at creating opportunities for growth and collaboration in the organization and management of farm activities with the Amateur Sports Association ASD Polisportiva Amicacci, which boasts a Serie A basketball team in wheelchair: the company is committed to creating playful, recreational and training spaces and events for people with disabilities both physically and psychologically.

In some cases it has been stated that despite the infrastructural adjustments, the company does not promote this availability (only for simple inattention it declares): in this regard it is good to underline that “the disabled people require a complete and adapted signs and indications, accurate and reliable information and an appropriate reception adapted to their needs” [19]: for example people suffering from motor disabilities express the need to be informed of the accessibility of the site or equipments.

4 Some concluding remarks

This study is part of the relatively recent and still unexplored line of research relating to the theme of disability and tourist-recreational use with a particular focus on rural tourism (wineries but also parks, naturalistic sites, farm holidays / fishing tourism, sports activities). In the face of this finding, a first positive implication of the work is revealed because it contributes to enriching the little experience and literature available above all in the rural area. Furthermore, most of the studies in the literature are mainly demand-oriented, while we have mainly investigated the supply side.

Despite the recent interest in this specific market segment, which is constantly expanding, apart from some sporadic cases, to date, the situation is almost unchanged where it is recognized that the offer of accessible accommodation, and accessible website also in rural tourism is still very scarce or even non-existent: the search for facilities that offer services for the disabled is difficult; when you find it, it is difficult to identify the services available; if the companies have made investments to make the structures easily accessible, and offer facilitations in the activities carried out, this information is not adequately communicated to final consumers; in addition, the topic promoted is associated exclusively with accessibility and not with the availability of services associated with recreational and/or sports activities.

So in the face of strong commitment expressed by the international community for inclusive and sustainable development, persons with disabilities continue to face significant challenges to their full participation in society. This is also true in wine tourism companies that are open to the public: a short survey conducted within the National Association of Women of Wine in Italy, however, showed positive signs, although still sporadic, of a development in attention to people with motor disabilities.

This work aims to advance our efforts to remove barriers and empower persons with disabilities to make positive changes in their lives and communities as recommended in the context of the 2030 Agenda. Numerous points of reflection and suggestions for new areas of research arise from the analysis carried out; from regulatory to positive analysis, for case studies and direct interviews both to the different categories of disabled people, and to all the stakeholders who are involved, for various reasons, in the offer of tourist-recreational services.

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of wine and the role of women in the wine production chain and in society as a whole.

² See Benedetto & Corinto [28, 29].

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