

## Can accessible tourism be sustainable?

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### Purpose:

This study investigates the link between sustainability and accessibility for tourism destinations. Specifically, it explores how environmental, social and financial facets within sustainability can be adopted. The rationale for this conceptualisation lies within the fact that we experience a considerable demographic change, which refers to the increasing number of the elderly population. It is important to consider that the tourism industry will be influenced by this demographic change in many ways. This change represents a significant challenge for the tourism industry and the strategy development of Destination Management Organisations (DMOs). Considering the triangle of sustainability, DMOs have to place their focus on social, environmental and economic aspects. The question that arises is if accessibility is needed for a destination to be truly sustainable. Accessibility gives all people the opportunity to



participate in social life, which includes travelling. This basic idea is underpinned by the social model of disability and can be realised by implementing universal design principles. Conceptually, the link between accessibility and sustainability is made by creating a pyramid, which connects the social aspect of sustainability with the social model of accessibility, the environmental aspect with accessibility and the economic aspect with the business case of accessible tourism, as illustrated in the figure above.

### Methodology:

To investigate the complex interplay between sustainability and accessibility, an inductive, qualitative approach was deemed appropriate. A series of in-depth interviews were conducted with experts from seven DMOS, which shed light on the current practices and future directions, which revealed awareness, perceptions and attitudes of DMOS towards sustainability and accessibility. The sample consisted of participants purposively selected for their role in strategy development of the DMO, including managers.

### Results:

By interviewing different DMOs in Germany it became clear that a big perceptual gap exists between DMOs in urban and rural environments. Inner-City DMOs suggested that improving the accessibility of their destination would result in creating a greater competitive advantage to other destinations in the future. These cities already invest a lot of money and have innovative ideas to implement projects, whereas the basic

idea of accessible tourism has not yet been prioritised in the rural areas, due to a number of barriers, including lack of familiarity with the requirements of disabled traveller's market. In summary, there is fragmentation of perceptions between DMOs of diverse areas, as evidenced by the level of financial, time and resource investments in accessible tourism development projects.