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Accessibility Issues in Travel and Tourism

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Accessibility is the ease with which a place can be reached or the degree to which a good or service is available to all users. In the context of travel and tourism, the concept of accessibility applies at different scales. Geographic isolation or lack of good transportation decreases the attractiveness of countries, regions, or localities. The design of tourist facilities, buildings, and transportation systems may also pose barriers to some users, such as older adults and people with disabilities or mobility restrictions. Although the concept is usually understood in terms of physical access, accessibility is also related to economic, social, political, and cultural factors.

Place Accessibility, Geographic Isolation, and Transport Infrastructure

From the perspective of tourism geography, accessibility can be defined as the ease with which a tourism destination can be reached. Some places may be inaccessible by some modes of transport. For example, landlocked countries cannot be reached by water transportation, and island countries cannot be reached by land transportation. Some places may also be inaccessible for some parts of the year due to climatic conditions such as floods and heavy snowfall.

The location of a place in relation to other places is a determinant factor for accessibility. Compared with central areas, peripheral areas in a country or region and isolated islands within an archipelago can be reached easily from only a small number of other places. Accessibility is also relative to the origin of potential trips. Rural areas and isolated places, far from population concentrations, are accessible to only a small number of potential visitors. Places near major cities or other tourist destinations can attract visitors who are already in the vicinity.

However, accessibility is not solely determined by geographic distance but also by the way in which transportation systems overcome that distance. The presence of features such as mountains and rivers may create barriers to travel between places that are geographically near, as they increase travel distances on the road or rail networks. Some areas may also not be covered by the transportation network. Places far from airports, roads, and public transportation are usually at a disadvantage. In contrast, cities that function as an airline hub or are located at a junction of major roads and railway lines can be reached from a large number of other places.

Travel time is a more accurate indicator of the separation between two places than travel distances, because there are substantial differences in the efficiency of the transportation systems in different areas. For example, motorways, high-speed railways, and fast ferries allow for shorter travel times than do conventional roads, railways, and ferries. The characteristics and condition of the transport infrastructure are also variable. Congestion also affects travel times, especially in the case of urban road transportation. There is a time dimension to accessibility, because congestion levels vary between high and low seasons, workdays and weekends, and peak and off-peak times.

The distinction between transportation infrastructure and services is also important. For example, some places may have good road access but may not be served by any bus services. Accessibility by public transportation also depends on the availability, frequency, and reliability of the services. The lack of services during the low season or on weekends and the small number of destinations and departures from local airports, trains, and bus stations are limitations to the accessibility of a place.

Accessibility, Tourism Development, and Public Policy

Accessibility is a key component of the competitiveness of a place in the tourism market. The distance of a place to major tourism markets is often a determinant in that the propensity of visiting a place depends negatively on its distance. However, the role of accessibility in the choice of travel destinations tends to be more important for leisure travelers than for business travelers. Research shows that tourism inflows at the national level are directly related to air accessibility. For example, the growth of low-cost airlines during the 21st century has helped increase the accessibility of several cities in Europe, with positive effects on the tourism industry. There is also evidence that the growth of tourism in developing countries has been hindered by the poor coverage of the road network, especially in rural areas.

On the other hand, geographic remoteness may have a positive influence on tourism demand. Visitors may be attracted by the distinctive character of the culture developed by the inhabitants of isolated places. Remoteness may also be associated with positive features such as clean environment, tranquility, and beautiful scenery.

The availability of local public transportation also has an impact on the attractiveness of a place for tourists and on levels of visitor satisfaction. The public transportation system is a component of a city's image and influences people's propensity for visiting or revisiting the city. The existence of fast and convenient services connecting airports with city centers is often a crucial factor in the choice of destinations for short trips.

The quality of public transportation may also be a criterion for a place to be chosen to host special events, which attract a large number of visitors. Good local public transport also enhances the mobility of tourists during a trip, increasing the number of places visited and activities taken, with impacts on overall tourist expenditure.

The improvement of accessibility usually requires policies to increase the efficiency of the transportation system. These policies may be aimed at improving the general accessibility of a region or city or be targeted at particular places or tourism facilities. As an alternative, land use policies can be used to influence the location of travel destinations.

Policies to improve accessibility may have adverse effects on local economy, including the tourism industry. The increase of the accessibility of peripheral places facilitates the flight of capital and labor to more central areas, and it may also decrease the amount of time tourists spend in a place, because it allows them to travel to a variety of places in a single trip.

Individual Accessibility

The concept of accessibility is also used in relation to the ability to access transport and tourism infrastructure by all users, regardless of age, physical limitations, and disabilities. This dimension of accessibility has become particularly important in light of the trend of population aging in most developed countries. The provision of accessibility for all is a policy priority in many countries; it improves the well-being and promotes the social inclusion of vulnerable groups.

Governments may invest in infrastructure and services or regulate private-sector activities to ensure certain standards are met. The travel and tourism industry has also been active in the development of accessible tourism, both at the level of individual organizations and

companies and at the level of associations, such as the Society for Accessible Travel and Hospitality, based in the United States, and the European Network for Accessible Tourism.

Accessibility issues are particularly relevant for people with restricted mobility, because they face a number of barriers when moving around in the built environment and using the transportation system. This is especially the case for older adults, wheelchair users, and people using walking aids. Mobility restrictions can also be temporary, in the case of parents using prams and pushchairs or people carrying suitcases and heavy shopping bags.

Obstacles to walking include pedestrian pavements that are narrow or in poor condition, obstructions, steps, undulations, poor lighting, and lack of rest points or handrails. Access to buildings and facilities such as public restrooms may also be difficult. The layout of rooms and the lack of hotel facilities to accommodate the needs of people with mobility restrictions or disabilities also create barriers.

The use of tourist facilities and private and public transportation poses challenges for people with other impairments, such as vision, hearing, and cognition problems. The ability for these people to use tourism services depends on a series of factors related not only to physical access but also to the degree to which those services safeguard personal health and safety. The ability to access information is also an issue: signs, leaflets, maps, and websites may be hard or impossible to use for people with certain disabilities.

The provision of inclusive travel often involves the adjustment of existing infrastructure. For example, streets can be redesigned to accommodate the needs of the visually impaired and individuals with mobility restrictions by widening pedestrian space, adding curb cuts at the edges of pedestrian pavements, and introducing audible signals in pedestrian crossings as well as tactile paving and contrasting colors to assist navigation. The provision of pedestrian-only spaces and the control of motorized traffic also enhance walking accessibility.

Accessibility is also relevant for car users and can be improved by measures such as the creation of accessible parking places, the provision of lighting at intersections, and the improvement of legibility of road signs and marking. Vehicles can be adapted by providing improved access for wheelchair users and equipment such as hand controls, adjustable steering wheels and pedals, large windows and rearview mirrors, and night vision enhancement.

Policies to overcome obstacles to access public transportation include the introduction of buses with low floors or access ramps and the provision of space to accommodate wheelchair users. Facilities in airports and aircraft can also be adapted. Most airlines have also introduced priority boarding for passengers with mobility restrictions and disabilities. The provision of information such as maps indicating the location of accessible facilities in a transportation network or in a building is also regarded as an essential component of accessible travel.

In the case of tourism facilities and buildings, accessibility can be improved by installing elevators and automatic doors, eliminating steps, and providing specialized services (e.g., three-dimensional maps for the visually impaired). These measures should be taken alongside initiatives to raise awareness of accessibility issues among the staff.

Other Aspects

The concept of accessibility has broadened over time to include aspects other than the physical access to places and facilities. Economic aspects are particularly important to people's accessibility to tourism services. The cost of visiting a country or place is one of the main factors explaining tourism demand. The cost of traveling to a place may also be disproportionate to travel distance and time. For example, airfares on routes with little supply tend to be more expensive than fares on other routes covering similar distances. The price of goods and services at the destination may also dissuade tourists from visiting that place.

Political factors may also reduce accessibility. Movement between countries is in most cases limited to a small number of border crossings. Some borders may be closed, such as those between Morocco and Algeria and between Armenia and Azerbaijan and Turkey. Visa regulations are also an obstacle to travel to some countries. Access to individual tourism destinations may also be restricted. For example, private companies may own or operate public places such as beaches and natural parks, restricting free access. Some facilities may also be open only to members.

Social and cultural factors are also relevant. For example, language barriers and cultural differences may inhibit travel to some destinations. Some individuals may be excluded from accessing some services due to overt or covert discrimination on the basis of race, age, nationality, marital status, and sexual orientation.

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See also [Rural Planning and Development for Tourism](#); [Tourism Development](#); [Transportation and Infrastructure Issues in the Developing World](#)

Further Readings

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