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Accessibility of natural sites: an issue of empowerment for persons with disabilities

Accessibility of sites, buildings, facilities and transports is not only a legally enforced obligation in advanced democracy countries, but is considered also one of the criteria for measuring the degree of civilization for an inclusive society. Persons with disabilities in recent years have addressed the tourist experience; studies in the field refer that they are a significantly growing population, which requires structural interventions, innovative proposals, technical skills, specific knowledge and adequate sensibilities.

Accessibility is multifaceted and can be addressed according to many perspectives. Norms have been established and shared internationally for the accessibility of buildings, transport, roads and services; experiences of intervention on the territories multiply throughout Italy and Europe.

There is no doubt that the enjoyment of mountain areas by persons with disabilities is highly challenging and requires an additional inventive effort by technical and policy makers to identify functional, effective and sufficiently flexible solutions. With regard to the accessibility of tourism-related facilities and services, the Region of Aosta Valley has all the makings; institutions responsible for the use of sports facilities, museums, historical and cultural sites, can count also on the activity of the voluntary associations which are able to answer to the more complex individual needs of tourists.

A fascinating and promising issue concerns the accessibility of natural sites. Adapted paths have been created in any region – in Aosta Valley as well – to allow persons with particular disabilities to visit attractive sites; they are associated with an accessibility label which does not, however, explicitly state the criteria used for the adaptations: in this way, communication remains opaque for the potential tourists with disabilities, who can not know if the interventions made are sufficient or adequate for their own personal needs.

The ALCOTRA project "Intégration et Bien-être dans les Alpes" (2013-2015), to which UNIVDA participated, abandoned this approach. Considering the extreme variety of the potential users' needs, capabilities and difficulties, it developed a descriptive card of the characteristics of natural sites, capable to allow the individual users to make informed decisions about the possibility to access them, the difficulties to overcome or resolve, the caution to be taken.

The card provides a detailed and exhaustive description of the territories involved in the project by considering also their changes according to the seasons; it is based on a list of potentially critical aspects for which descriptive parameters are offered so that the end users can evaluate the site's accessibility by and for themselves: for their functioning modes, the aids they use, their expectations and interests. It is a kind of flexible, individualized "label", attributed to the natural site directly by the users.

Such an approach strongly focuses on the empowerment of persons with disabilities in their choice of enjoying a natural site. Furthermore: (a) it amplifies the construct of accessibility, as it provides useful information on the accessibility of natural sites to people with specific needs: the elderly, pregnant women, children, people with special health conditions, ...; (b) it increases the number of natural sites available to people with disabilities of different severity, as the model adopted can potentially be applied to all natural sites.

The presentation will discuss these issues, exemplifying the use of the developed tool.