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**PROMOTION OF BARRIER-FREE TOURISM
FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES
IN THE ASIAN AND PACIFIC REGION**

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a rapidly growing industry in the Asian and Pacific region. Following the trauma of the recent Asian financial crisis, the region has regained its status as one of the world's fastest growing destinations. As reported by the World Tourism Organization (WTO), the Asian and Pacific region, after two years of decreasing tourist arrivals, registered in 1999 a growth rate of 7.5 per cent reaching a new record of more than 94 million international tourists. It is also expected that such a positive trend will continue into the early years of the new millennium.

Tourists, today are not content with staying within the confines of a resort hotel compound, being bussed to individual sites and entertained in places that mainly cater to tourists. Instead, tourists are increasingly interested in experiencing diversity of holiday environment in all aspects, including its people, culture, nature, architecture and way of life. This trend will be even more marked as consumers become better informed about options and entitlements, as well as more sophisticated and less willing to accept poor quality facilities and services that entail discomfort and stress. Tourists want access to everything that a city or a country has to offer. In view of the changing consumer demand, tourism for all is an increasingly important sales argument in a competitive market. At the same time, it can serve as an effective tool in furthering the human rights of people with disabilities in the destination communities.

People with disabilities and older persons are becoming a growing group of consumers of travel, sports, and other leisure-oriented products and services. Furthermore, with regard to physical access, families with young children, who are also becoming part of this increasing tourist market, have similar needs to persons with disabilities and older persons. Thus large numbers of people require tourism to be made barrier-free.

Although the number of tourists who would benefit from accessible facilities and services is on the increase, most tourism services providers in the Asia-Pacific region have still not yet recognized the importance of taking action on this issue. Most hotels, transportation facilities and tourist sites are not physically accessible for many people with disabilities and older persons. Their staff members have not been trained to provide disabled person-friendly services. This is associated with an absence of explicit government policies and strategies for promotion of accessible tourism, lack of training for tourism service personnel on means of meeting the access needs of tourists with disabilities, and shortage of tourism programmes that address such needs.

I. DISABILITY AND ACCESS

Present policies and programmes suffer from a dearth of disability data and inadequacy of existing data. In the majority of the countries and areas of the Asia-Pacific region, it is difficult to estimate the number of people with disabilities. There is a wide variation in the estimated disability rates reported by the developed and developing countries. The variation depends, to a large extent, on the definitions of disability used. The types of disability range from hearing, vision, and mobility impairment to intellectual impairment and psychiatric disorders. For example, Australia's 1993 survey indicated that persons with a disability comprise 18 per cent of its population. New Zealand's first national household survey (1996)

yielded a disability rate of 19.1. In 1994, the United States Census Bureau estimated that some 54 million Americans were covered under the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) of 1990, constituting nearly 21 per cent of the United States population. In contrast, China's (1987) and Pakistan's (1984-85) sample surveys both indicated a 4.9 per cent disability rate. The 1991 National Sample Survey of India, covering four disabilities -- visual, hearing, speech and locomotor -- yielded a prevalence rate of 1.9 per cent ¹

The share of the older people in the populations of developed countries is already rising dramatically. The same phenomenon is occurring in developing countries. According to United Nations projections, by the year 2025, about 14 per cent of the Asia-Pacific region's total population will be 60 years or older, and the region will be home to 56 per cent of the world's older persons. Among older persons, a significant percentage presents some type of disability. For example, in Western Australia over 50 per cent of people over 60 years of age have a disability ².

It is now widely recognized from many quarters that people with disabilities, together with carers, friends and relatives, and older persons constitute a large potential consumer market segment for the tourism and hospitality industry. However, to take advantage of this potential niche market will depend on how the tourism sector as a whole and the tourism industry in particular will address the issue of tourism accessibility for people with disabilities. Indeed good access will benefit not only people with disabilities, but also many other members of the community, especially senior citizens.

Access varies depending on disability and goes well beyond the physical type alone. Darcy (1998) ³ has characterized access from three main dimensions:

- (a) **Physical access** which involves people with physical disabilities requiring the use of wheelchairs or walking aids and requires the provision of, for example, handrails, ramps, lifts and lowered counters.
- (b) **Sensory access** which involves people with hearing or sight impairments requiring the provision of, for example, tactile markings, signs, labels, hearing augmentation-listening systems and audio cues for lifts and lights.
- (c) **Communication access**, which involves those people who have difficulty with the written word, vision, speech, and hearing impairment of persons from other culture.

In one way or another, all travelers who move out of their familiar surroundings are handicapped by new environments, the exciting aspects notwithstanding. Thus, the degree of sensitivity, clarity, safety and convenience required in designing tourism facilities from the perspective of disabled travelers will benefit everyone else.

¹ ESCAP, *Asia and the Pacific into the Twenty-first Century: Prospects for Social Development* (ST/ESCAP/1887). Part II, Chapter VI: Prospects for persons with disabilities – page 241.

² Disability Service Commission (1998) *accessing new markets: customers with disabilities*. West Perth. Western Australia.

³ S. Darcy (1998). *Anxiety to access: tourism patterns and experiences of NSW people with physical disability*. Tourism NSW, Sydney, NSW.

II. MAIN CONSTRAINTS OF DISABLED TRAVELERS

People with disabilities have a right to, and do want to enjoy travel and leisure experiences. Tourism is a means of broadening horizons and developing friendships for a social group, which increasingly is less willing to remain segregated from mainstream society. Furthermore, as more people acquire disabilities or survive with disabilities, they too wish to enjoy travel, just like everyone else. However, their travel experiences are still characterized by transportation constraints, inaccessible accommodation and tourism sites, and inadequate customer services.

A. Transportation

While air travel in general has become easier and airlines increasingly provide friendly services to the average travelers, still some problems arise from time to time, such as misplaced luggage or delays in flight schedules. However, these mishaps might seriously inconvenience travelers with disability. For example, an issue among some travelers with disabilities is the damage to and loss of wheelchairs on airplanes. Indeed, being without one's wheelchair is much more distressing than having the misfortune of lost or delayed luggage for the average travelers. Other constraints facing wheelchair-travelers include the difficulty of boarding and disembarking the aircraft, changing flights and the inaccessibility of airplane restrooms. For blind people, identifying and retrieving luggage becomes another additional obstacle in the course of their already difficult journey. The pain of long-haul travel in air economy class seat for someone with stiff limbs or arthritis, the sheer size of modern airports for those with mobility problems and endless forward planning for all are some of the challenges still facing travelers with disabilities.

Most travellers negotiate structural constraints associated with air travel by using other modes of transportation – car, bus or train. Private automobiles equipped with customized features have the advantage of providing schedule flexibility if used for pleasure travel. However, only a small group of affluent people with disability can afford such cars. Modern technology greatly facilitates bus travel by people with disabilities. People with physical disabilities can now journey in buses equipped with hydraulic lifts, which help them to board easily. So-called “low-floor” buses are gradually becoming the standard for intra-urban public transportation in a growing number of countries. These buses have the floor some 50 cm above street level. They feature a hydraulic “kneeling” function, which reduces the step to some 25 cm. However, in most developing countries the availability of such specially designed buses remains limited. While trains could better accommodate disabled persons travel needs, often the gap between car doors and the platform are too wide; access to toilets and compartments remains a constraint, especially for people with physical disabilities and wheelchair users.

B. Accommodations

Reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities constitute still another set of challenges. For example, very few hotels offer accessible disabled person-friendly rooms with wider entrances; low-level switches, hand dryers, towels racks and beds; chair lifts and room information written in simple and concise language for people with cognitive disabilities. Of the rooms available, few have ground floor access. Access throughout hotels is also

problematic. Few hotels have lifts to all floors on slow timers, access to reception, pool and bar areas, clear signage, visual alarms and clear access through the entire building. While the majority of hotels provide special parking areas, often these are uncovered and quite distant from the main hotel entrances, requiring that steps be negotiated in order to access the buildings.

Another issue relating to accommodation facilities and amenities concerns the different types of disability to be provided for. Indeed the needs for people with vision or hearing impairment or intellectual disability are quite different from those with physical disability. Most of the hotels provide facilities and amenities responding more to the special needs of people with physical disabilities and specifically those in wheelchairs. For example, among hotels that offer wheelchair access, few provide information available in Braille or in audiovisual format.

Many travelers with disabilities find facilities at eating and drinking establishments within tourist destination areas to be difficult to access. Some others encounter problems when making hotel reservations. It was observed that in some hotels, specific accessible rooms even when available, could not be reserved by an individual. In some other instances, some room accommodations, which were promoted as accessible rooms, actually appeared to be inaccessible to people with disabilities. For example, showers with handrails may well accommodate some people, but for many wheelchair users, bathtubs present a major barrier.

C. Tourism sites

Attractions are the elements of a tourism destination that stimulate the purpose of a journey and visit. They may be of a leisure-type, such as visiting theme parks or participating in sport events; nature-based, such as sea-side tourism or mountain trekking; historical, such as visiting museums or antique shopping; or socio-cultural, such as festivals or visiting friends or relatives. Most of the constraints encountered by tourists with disabilities in the course of these activities focus on site inaccessibility. For example, beaches are often not equipped to accommodate wheelchair users. Similarly, poor access to museums, historical monuments or shopping areas restricts people with disabilities from enjoying the opportunity of participating in these activities.

D. Travel planning

For people with disabilities, planning a vacation can be somewhat more complicated. Depending on the type of disability, the would-be travelers need to ensure that during the envisaged vacation due attention will be given to their special needs such as special lifts for coaches and adapted hotel rooms. Such arrangements cannot be made without the assistance of travel agencies that cater to those special needs.

As for several years accessible tourism shows promising sign of expansion, tour operators have started to appreciate the potential of a market that has traditionally been poorly served. However, tailoring packages to people with various disabilities requires labour-intensive work, making therefore a low-margin business. Yet specialized agents, especially in Europe, are joining forces through transnational association to exchange information, set up

data banks, launch joint marketing campaigns and lobby for better services. At the same time, specialized European travel agents and non-profit organizations have been cooperating by pooling what they have learned about the availability of special facilities in various countries.

III. CONDITIONS TO PROMOTE BARRIER-FREE TOURISM FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

People with disabilities are being acknowledged as a consumer group of travel, sports, and other leisure-oriented products and services. If professionals of the tourism industry are to succeed in accessing this potential new market, they must understand the needs involved and learn how to respond to these challenges for the benefit of both parties.

A. Legislation framework

One crucial element in meeting this goal is the existence of a legal framework, which ensures that people with disabilities have the right to access to tourism facilities and services and to encourage tourism professionals to adopt related measures. Several governments in the region have passed comprehensive legislation to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. Others are in various stages of adoption, formulation and planning such legislation. Those countries, which have already adopted such legislation, enacted additional laws and regulations or amended existing one to further protect the rights of persons with disabilities in specific areas crucial to the equalization of opportunities.

For example, in Australia the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) and the Disability Service Act 1993, plus various other State legislation, require departments, public authorities and the tourism industry to ensure that people with disabilities have the same fundamental rights as the rest of the community. Furthermore, the 1993 Act specifically relates to access to appropriate accommodation and services and allows people with disabilities the opportunity to make decisions, which affect their life. Tourism providers are subject to all requirements of both acts, which means that all premises, goods and services used by the public must be accessible to people with disabilities. Failure to provide equal access is illegal, unless it is proved to cause unjustifiable difficulties such as excessive cost.

Legislation on access should also apply to a variety of public areas and services -- including information services -- such as travel agents, cafes, restaurants, libraries, transport, shops, theatres and other places of entertainment. Accordingly, related information needs to be provided to people with disabilities. Lack of proper physical access to transport, buildings and sites will not only exclude people with disabilities from participating in community life but also affect tourism and leisure providers. In this connection, the appropriate legislation would indeed help to design an air travel transportation system able to remove barriers to travel for people with disabilities. In Australia, the Air Carrier Access Act (1986) ensures that no air carrier might discriminate against disabled persons in the provision of air transportation. This Act represents a major advance towards a comprehensive adaptive air travel system for people with disabilities.

One great challenge regarding legislation implementation is the provision of information to tourism professionals, such as for instance hospitality providers, of the key relevant legislation relating to people with disabilities and their obligations under the legislation.

According to the findings of a recent survey⁴, the majority of the hospitality providers interviewed in Western Australia stated that they were not aware of any specific legislation regarding issues of access for people with disabilities. This was further supported by representatives from disability agencies who said that there was a general lack of awareness on those issues. There is also evidence that most of the laws enacted lack of any credible legislative power, due to low enforcement.

B. Tourism services providers

To fully harness the potential of barrier-free tourism, it is essential that the tourism industry improve its services to people with disabilities. This includes improved access of hotel facilities within all areas of the property to the entire disabled community, including those with physical, sensory and communication disabilities. For example, particular attention should be given to providing people with physical disabilities with a clear accessible route to the main entrance of an establishment and then to the reception desk. Similarly, persons with sight or hearing impairments need to be provided for with adequate facilities to facilitate their free mobility within the premises. Accessible rooms should also be made available and designed with features, which can accommodate wheelchair users as well as people with sight and hearing impairments.

In the area of transportation, efforts need to be pursued to upgrade and improve the level of facilities for people with disabilities. Accessible transportation features, such as toilets in aircrafts, are fundamental requirements for barrier-free travel. Airport authorities should ensure that basic accessible infrastructure adjustments for people with disabilities are included in the design of new and/or renovated airports, such as the introduction of greater areas of level access as well as the provision of easy access to toilets.

Travel operators that specialize in services for, and provide tailoring packages to, people with disabilities are instrumental in assisting them with their vacation planning. They are able to provide them with the information regarding the availability of accessible facilities suited to their needs. People with disabilities are more likely to rely on tourism professionals, such as specific travel agents and hotels that best serve their needs. It is therefore imperative that specific barrier-free tourism promotional activities be undertaken by travel agents in close cooperation with other professionals of the tourism industry such as hospitality providers. Disability organizations may also contribute to these promotional efforts by drawing the attention of the tourism industry to the needs and desires of the people with disabilities, especially with regard to flexibility in travel options.

C. Training and education

Training and education is one of the major challenges facing the tourism industry in relation to meeting the needs of people with disabilities. Sensitive and willing staff with the right attitude and strong interpersonal skills can overcome many of the barriers that persons with disabilities face and turn what may be perceived as an inaccessible property into a

⁴ Martin O'Neill, Edith Cowan University (W.A. Perth) and Jane Ali Knight, Curtin University (W.A. Perth), "Accessing the Disability Tourism Dollar – An Evaluation of Current Awareness and Provision by Hotel Enterprises in Western Australia", paper presented at the Sixth Asia Pacific Tourism Association Annual Conference, Phuket, Thailand, 28 June – 1 July 2000.

accessible one⁵. It is essential for the tourism industry to strengthen its customer services training in order to serve those with disabilities. Indeed, regardless of how well an establishment has been designed to accommodate people with disabilities or how well policies have been formulated to cater to the needs of disabled travelers, it will be of little value if the staff employed are uncomfortable and ill-prepared serving guests with disabilities. Comprehensive programmes should include policy setters and managers as well as front-line staff and should be extended at all educational levels, especially within tertiary level hospitality management programmes.

The availability of specialized tour guides is another important factor for people with disabilities, especially those with sight and hearing impairments to enable them to enjoy tourism activities. Efforts should be made to develop and strengthen appropriate specialized tour-guiding courses in training curricula on tourism management and related tourism services.

III. PRIORITY AREAS FOR PROMOTION OF BARRIER-FREE TOURISM

Notwithstanding the number of initiatives already pursued by countries in the region to make tourism barrier-free for people with disabilities, there are three key issues that require immediate attention.

One key area is the formulation and implementation of related legislation in order to protect the right of persons with disabilities to accessible facilities and environment. Countries should be encouraged to continue developing such legislation as well as introduce new amendments in keeping with changes in the tourism sector, including travel conditions, and the specific situations of different disability groups. While it is essential that legislation needs to be reviewed in a continuous manner, it is imperative that members of the tourism industry be informed of their obligations and operational implications in order to protect not only their interest, but also the interests of the people with disabilities. Of equal importance is the role of the various disability bodies and organizations, which must begin to work closely with the tourism industry to improve existing practices. The organizations are well acquainted with and knowledgeable about various disability issues. They should assist the tourism industry in introducing the necessary changes required under the legislation and to assist in the organization of related staff training programmes.

Education and training on awareness and sensitivity to disability issues is another top priority area in the promotion of accessible tourism. The education sector should be encouraged to include in their training curricula on tourism management and related tourism services courses on “disabled persons’ right to access” as well as “customer services to, and relations with, people with disabilities”. Here again, the close collaboration between the disability organizations and the tourism industry along with the education sector would facilitate the development of required training programmes. It would also help in the publication of training material, such as facilitative guide, student handbook and audio-visual training support, for wider distribution amongst the tourism industry.

⁵ A.N. Vladimir (1998) “Is there Hospitality for Disabled Travelers?” FIU Hospitality Review, Vol 16 No.2: 13-21

Provision of accessible facilities is by far the most important area of concern for achieving a barrier-free tourism for people with disabilities. Taking into consideration that it is highly unrealistic to presume that the situation would change overnight, owing to cost and time limitations, what is required in the short-term is that the tourism sector strives to achieve a reasonable level of accessibility, which balances disabled users' needs, the constraints of existing conditions and the resource available for such adjustments. In many cases, this relates to the issue of physical access, such as main hotel entrance access, appropriate access ramp, reception counters, disability friendly rooms, access to and location to all public areas. In the long-term, the approach will be to encourage major restructuring and/or refurbishment of hospitality establishments and tourism sites.
