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# Tourism for all: Accessibility and social inclusion in Brazil – the case of Socorro (São Paulo State) tourism destination

*Turismo para todos: Acessibilidade e inclusão social no Brasil – o caso do destino turístico da cidade de Socorro (São Paulo)*

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## Abstract

The article reflects about the relationship between accessibility and social inclusion for people with disabilities (PWD) – people with physical, intellectual or sensory impairments and senior people – through tourism. Brazilian tourism industry is preparing for the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. The paper analyses the case of Socorro, a tourist destination 130 km far from São Paulo City (capital of São Paulo State). Socorro has been recognized as having multiple initiatives in accessible and inclusive tourism focused on PWD as tourists, public infrastructure and hospitality organizations adapted to this segment. These organizations also search for the economic insertion and social inclusion of PWD as employees. The results show that comparing with Brazilian and International accessibility legal requirements/guidelines Socorro can be visualized as a reference destination although it has improvements to enhance.

**Keywords:** Accessibility. Social inclusion. People with disabilities. Brazilian tourism. Tourist destination

## Resumo

O artigo reflete acerca da relação entre acessibilidade e inclusão social para pessoas com deficiência ou mobilidade reduzida (PDMR) – pessoas com deficiência física, intelectual ou sensorial e pessoas na terceira idade – via turismo. O sistema turismo brasileiro está se preparando para a Copa Mundial de Futebol FIFA 2014 e para os Jogos Olímpicos e Paraolímpicos 2016, no Rio de Janeiro. Foi analisado o caso de Socorro, um destino turístico a 130 km de São Paulo (SP). Socorro foi reconhecida pelas múltiplas iniciativas em turismo acessível e inclusivo focalizadas nas PDMR como turistas, infraestrutura pública e organizações hoteleiras adaptadas a esse segmento. Essas organizações têm buscado ainda a inclusão social e inserção econômica dos PDMR – como empregados. Os resultados mostram que – comparada às normas de acessibilidade nacionais e internacionais – Socorro pode ser percebida como destino referência, embora haja melhorias a serem realizadas.

**Palavras-Chave:** Acessibilidade. Inclusão Social. Pessoas com deficiência e mobilidade reduzida. Turismo no Brasil. Destino turístico.

## 1 Introduction

Throughout the world, the mega events bring to a country thousands of people that would not be there in regular conditions. In Brazil – with the proximity of 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro – the situation is not different. In these special occasions, the question of accessibility and social inclusion take a prominent place. Rio+20 Conference has declared about the Future they look at (UN 2012: 2): ‘We strive for a world that is just, equitable and inclusive, and we commit to work together to promote sustained and inclusive economic growth, social development and environmental protection and thereby to benefit all’. Tourism Forum from People Summit at the same event searched for another model of tourism “focused in questions as social inclusion, responsibility and citizenship (TFPS 2012: 1). Both declarations can be included in the UNWTO (2013) theme “Tourism for all”.

Scientific works, governmental and private efforts related to Social Inclusion have been increasing in Brazil during the last years. Even so, the subject Social Inclusion and Accessibility in Tourism need further investigation and reflection since the expectation is that the three close to happen mega events will bring more than a million new inbound tourists to Brazil. The Tourism Industry in the Brazilian cities involved with the mega events – 2014 to 2016 – is developing strategies of Accessible and Inclusive Tourism. Socorro<sup>4</sup>, viewed in Brazil as an Icon in Accessible Adventure Tourism – even by Brazilian Ministry of Tourism – is central to this study.

## 2 People with disabilities in the tourism context

Accessibility and tourism are two related concepts that combine increased competitiveness and social value to the tourism market, as a significant business opportunity (BORDA and NASCIMENTO 2011). Tourism destinations and businesses compete in an increasingly globalised and challenging market. The new standards of tourism development are moving towards new critical issues such as quality, sustainability, image, innovation and accessibility (BORDA, 2009; GARCÍA-CARO, WAAL and BUHALIS 2012).

Contrary to classical marketing methodologies that target tourism products based on the motivations of the markets, accessible tourism focus at the visitor’s condition, offering solutions to overcome physical, intellectual or sensory impairments – or any other disabilities (FONTES and MONTEIRO 2009).

In recent decades, people with disabilities and researchers around the world have

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4 Socorro is a tourist destination, 130 km far from São Paulo – Brazilian largest city with more than 10 million inhabitants.

contributed to a growing change in social perceptions about disability. This change also leads to a reconsideration of dilemmas like equality and difference in the context of disability (PINTO 2012).

The group of people that need accessibility as a requirement for participation in all aspects of society includes those with physical impairments (e.g., mobility and manual dexterity conditioned and / or wheelchair users), sensory, learning and mental impairments. Also, including persons temporarily suffering the effects of an accident, parents carrying strollers, travelers with heavy luggage, families with children, or elderly (DEVILE 2009).

Tourism should be opened to any individual, including those who have limitations, due to its characteristics of plurality, diversity of peoples, races, or creeds (DUARTE 2005). Thus, the principles of inclusive tourism should aim tourism for all those who wish to enjoy such services.

According to the Brazilian decree 5296/2004, accessibility is an essential condition for a person with disabilities or reduced mobility being able to use with safety and autonomy – whether aided or not – space, urban furniture and equipment, buildings, transportation and media services (MTUR 2006).

UNWTO (2013: 1) declares: ‘the facilitation of tourist travel for persons with disabilities is a vital element of any responsible and sustainable tourism development policy’. The organization considers that ‘great efforts should be made to ensure that tourism policies and practices include persons with disabilities’. It emphasizes ‘the need of providing clear information on accessible tourism facilities, the availability of support services in destinations for persons with disabilities, and the training of employees on the special needs of these individuals’.

All these policies and declarations show that the issue of accessibility – although included in local and global agenda – need some additional positive steps to move from talking to action.

Serpa (2009) discusses tourism facing the PWD as the offer of facilities among all aspects and steps of a trip, such as accessible transportation, touristic information, accommodation, leisure options, adapting to an environment that people with disabilities can enjoy in the same way that a person without a disability, among other adaptations that facilitate their social inclusion.

In this context, training is a highly significant aspect. Nevertheless, there is no official body regulating and / or approving the activity. Beyond this, there is a large variation in this marketplace. Therefore, accessible tourism needs to be developed

conceptually and incorporated in the training programmes at different levels. This will enable the industry to promote employees awareness and achieve total quality (GARCÍA-CARO, WAAL and BUHALIS 2012).

Primarily, accessibility in tourism connects with the universal rights of the person, PWD in particular. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union – Title III – Equality – Article 26 – discusses about the integration of people with disabilities: ‘Brazil recognizes and respects the right of persons with disabilities to benefit from measures designed to ensure their independence, social and occupational integration and participation in the life of the community’ (EC 2009).

Beyond looking at the rights of PWD, seems that this group desire increasing their participation in the Tourism and they did not do so until now in consequence of accessibility problems in destinations. According to European Union statistics, there are 100 million people who would travel more if tourism establishments and destinations improved their accessibility. So new business opportunities are evident (GARCÍA-CARO, WAAL and BUHALIS 2012).

The European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT), composed by 13 organizations, has the purpose of promoting the development of accessible tourism – internationally – as a mean of enhancing social inclusion. The main objective of the association is to coordinate actions which support tourist activities of its members; to keep them informed of any question concerning accessible tourism in its technical, economic, social, legal and cultural aspects; and to disseminate to the wider community information concerning accessible tourism (ENAT 2008).

Australia – considered an icon in accessibility – has a website ([www.australiaforall.com](http://www.australiaforall.com)) that was created for and by people with disabilities. It indicates locations accessible to all kinds of limitations, whether physical, visual or hearing.

In this country, one in five people (about 4 million in Australia) have a disability. Their total spending power is around U\$1.5 billion per year; in other words, including this people in tourism is not just an ethically correct action, but it is also economically and financially attractive (AFA 2013, ABS 2012).

However, in Australia, a survey of the barriers confronted by tourists with disabilities when making travel arrangements, finding accommodation and visiting tourist venues has highlighted the challenges that tourists with disabilities confront when making arrangements to a holiday, compared to tourists who do not have the need for accessible facilities.

The survey confirms that the number of accessible hotels/motels and other tou-

rist facilities in Australia is low, making the arrangement of holidays for tourists with disabilities difficult and time-consuming. The survey of 1307 people across all disabilities identified many factors that made their holidays less enjoyable. Amongst these were:

- 42.7% of tourists with a physical disability had problems in finding suitable accessible accommodation
- 36% of tourists with a physical disability found that hotels/motels displayed the international symbol for access, but the accommodation was not wheelchair accessible.
- 80% of tourists with a vision impairment highlighted a lack of audio display in hotels/motels and tourist venues such as museums.
- 86.7% of tourists with a vision impairment highlighted the lack of Braille and/or tactile signage in hotels/motels and tourist venues.
- 100% of tourists with a hearing impairment highlighted the fact that there were no visual alarms for emergency egress in hotels/motels or tourist venues.
- 100% of tourists with a hearing impairment highlighted the fact that – especially in cases of emergency egress – airports did not provide visual information to complement their public address announcement.
- 18.7% of tourists who took their mobility aids on a flight with them found it was damaged on arrival at their destination. A number of those same tourists reported that their mobility aids had been damaged more than once (AFA, 2013).

In other words, there is still lack of accessible tourism offers in Australia, concerning accommodation, touristic attractions, information, and so on. This is real about Brazil, likewise. There are no official data on the percentage of adapted touristic structure, but it is possible to say that a long way has to be walked to provide appropriate services and assistance to PWD tourists in Brazil.

Relatively to Brazilian legislation, the rights of people with disabilities are in some articles of the Federal Constitution, and there are other specific laws on pension rights, accessibility on public transportation and public buildings. For example, the Law 10,098/2000, 'establishes general standards and criteria for the promotion of accessibility for persons with disabilities or reduced mobility, by removing barriers and obstacles on roads and public spaces, the furniture, construction and renovation of buildings and in transportation and communication'. This law says that the government has to provide an annual budget for programs of promotion of ac-

cessibility, and informative campaigns to population on integration of people with disabilities (BRAZIL, 2000). It is perceived that the law promote all kinds of physical, intellectual or sensory impairments, even if the condition is temporary or permanent. In the specific case of tourism, the Decree 3298/1999, article 46, establishes that the agencies and entities of the Federal Public Administration must:

- a) to support and to promote the publication and use of tour guides with appropriate information; b) to stimulate the expansion of tourism for people with disabilities or reduced mobility offering accessible hospitality facilities and adapted transportation services.

The legislation includes all disabilities but do not specify clearly what are the necessary actions to guarantee the accessibility for each group. Exemplifying the situation, a study with twenty-eight hotels in Brasília (capital of Brazil and one of the 2014 FIFA World Cup games cities) indicated that the majority of the surveyed hotels (19 hotels) adapted their property only to meet legislation (DUARTE AND BORDA 2012).

Specifically, the Law 3298/DODF/2004 (regional law for Brazilian Federal District including the capital of the country – Brasília) determines – for the hospitality sector – that approximately 4% from apartments and toilets must be accessible to the **physically disabled with wheelchairs** [emphasis added]. So, most of the businesses have provided accessible equipment and facilities only for physically disabled people with wheelchairs. People with visual or hearing impairment in most of the cases do not have accessible equipment and facilities adequate to their needs.

In Brazil, 23.9% of the population – 45.6 million people – has some impairment or disability. When segmented by different kinds of impairments, 58.3% has vision impairments, 15.8% has hearing impairments and 4.3% has mental/intellectual impairments. Interestingly, the mostly known as PWD, the people with hand/mobility impairments represent 21.6%. Based on these data, most of the PWD – people with hearing impairments, mental/intellectual impairments and vision impairments that together represent 78.4 % from the total, have not the right attention to their needs. The laws need to be enforced in the inclusion of these people (IBGE 2011).

This fact strengthens the evidence that such public seems not be viewed as a market segment. However, twenty hotels believe that there is a regular or quite frequent demand of that public and 15 respondents consider that the adjustments fostered the demand for their services by the PWD and their families (DUARTE and BORDA 2012).

The estimations suggest that, during 2014 FIFA World Cup, about 500,000 tourists visit the country – in addition to the visibility that reaches billions of people worldwide through the internet and television broadcasts (MTUR 2010).

### 3 Methodology

A survey was conducted primarily to literature, permeating an exploratory study of issues related to the theme proposed to provide the necessary theoretical background. The main advantage of literature lies in the fact that it allows the researcher to cover a range of phenomena much broader than could be made by direct research (GIL 1991).

Also, it was used document analysis of Brazilian and International relevant legislation, policy and procedural manuals, and other key documents related to the projects carried out in the City of Socorro; as well as international research and practice literature about accessibility (BERG 1998; RICHIE ET AL. 2005).

The work began an exploratory phase of data collection in 2009 followed by interviews performed by telephone and personally in 2013. The goal was to investigate how the City of Socorro has become a benchmark at Accessible adventure tourism in Brazil.

The 2009 interviews were conducted with two managers from Socorro City Hall, one consultant of Socorro Accessible Tourism development project – supported by Brazilian Ministry of Tourism, two owners of hotels and one owner of an adventure tour operator that worked with Accessible Tourism in a total of six semi-structured interviews.

In 2013, allied to literature, it was prepared a new script of semi-structured interviews consisting of open questions directed to public managers and entrepreneurs from the Tourism industry in the city. A new round of interviews were done with five hotel owners, one tour operator owner, the president of municipal tourism council, the mayor of the city, three managers from the city hall, one consultant from the city, and two employees from Brazilian Tourism Board (EMBRATUR) that work with the promotion of the destination. Totalizing fourteen persons. It is understood that this aspect of exploratory research provides greater familiarity with the problem in study, having as main objective the improvement of an additional source of data collection.

The study used participant observation as two researchers of the group visited and observed the accessibility equipment disposable in the main tourism organizations, tourism attractions and public facilities from Socorro. Two visits were developed in April and September 2009 (three days long, each) and one in May 2013 (one day long). One researcher has participated of two practical training courses promoted by Brazilian Ministry of Tourism focused on Adventure Accessible Tourism – Socorro and in two meetings of the Socorro Tourism Council. It was perceived the way the

local tourism industry worked, what initiatives to adequate the tourism destination to PWD were in development and the level of integration between them. In the occasion, were visited public facilities, tourism businesses and tourist attractions.

To Valladares (2007), participant observation involves listening, looking, making use of all the senses. The researcher need to learn when to ask and when not to ask, as well as what questions asking at the right time.

Finally, the work fits as qualitative and case study. Qualitative research incorporates in the data the question of meaning as inherent to acts, relationships and social structures as human constructions (MINAYO 2004).

Socorro was chosen as a parameter of this paper, framed, therefore, as a case study. Yin (1994: 23) conceptualizes the case study research method as an empirical research 'that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used'.

#### **4 The city of Socorro: Brazilian reference in adventure accessible tourism**

Socorro is a tourism destination with 37,000 inhabitants, 130km far from the city of São Paulo. Its proximity to the most prominent tourism emissive market in Brazil makes Socorro a regional destination for people who look for rural and adventure tourism activities (around 100.000 visitors/year).

The main question is: how did Socorro have become a reference destination in Adventure Accessible Tourism?

Socorro has been for a long time an Adventure Tourism destination. With the Brazilian decree 5296/2004, it was established an adaptation time of four years for the services sectors (hospitality, tourist attractions, etc) to be accessible. Socorro used to participate of Adventure Sport Fair (a two-yearly event), in São Paulo.

In the 2005 event, Brazilian Ministry of Tourism was stimulating tourism destinations to become accessible. It was highlighted that because of its complexity – it would require not only adaptations like ramps, toilets, chairs, etc but also the innovation of creating safe and comfortable equipment to PWD – Brazilian Ministry of Tourism was financing the development of one reference destination in Adventure Accessible Tourism to be replicated throughout the country.

There were more than 20 activities whose viability to PDW should be tested – with variations in risk and control not only to the practitioner, but also to the conductors.

Hard work and great responsibility were involved. The tourism destination choice was not easy.

The chosen destination should have run a large number of Adventure Tourism activities. Socorro was close to São Paulo (the biggest city of Brazil, having an annual inbound flow of more than 80,000 tourists) and – compared to other competitor cities – had the greatest number of adventure tourism attractions – 24 different activities. It was verified also that Socorro had the necessary infrastructure. As Socorro was the destination with the best conditions to the difficult challenge, it was chosen.

For the project – named ‘Special Adventurers’ – it was developed a joint action between the Ministry of Tourism, NGO Special Adventure, Field of Dreams Farm Hotel, the Park of Dreams, the Rivers of Adventure, Monjolinho Park and Socorro City Hall. Representatives of these organizations conducted the necessary studies to develop the best conditions to receive well PWD.

The group indicated specialized professionals – doctors, psychologists, physiotherapists, nurses, engineers, communication specialists, etc – who would study the proposed activities and understand not only the anatomy of the body of practitioners, but also the best way of communicating with them. PWD volunteers that participated in the process were fundamental to its success.

The money allocated to the process was transferred to the NGO Special Adventure, which coordinated the whole process. The tourism operators offered their tourism attractions, space, time and people to run the study of adaptation, as well as, participation in technical workshops. Socorro City Hall participated with ambulances and local transportation.

There were many difficulties during the two-year project development. For example, the creation of equipment to conduct safely and comfortably quadriplegic people. It involved creative engineering design; training and capacitation of conductors to work technically secure but treat carefully and cheerfully PWD.

In 2007, the initial project ended with great success. Among the adventure activities studied, 8 were fully adapted to PWD (after, two more were included, totalizing 10 activities). Based on it, Brazilian Ministry of Tourism published the guide Accessible Tourism: Introduction to an Inclusive Trip (MTUR 2008) – application of the results to be transferred to others.

Socorro was challenged with a new project by Brazilian Tourism Ministry: Accessible Socorro – adapting the center of the city to receive PWD tourists – due to the success of the first project. Streets and sidewalks – at the center were strategically

adapted to PWD, contemplating places used by the tourists such as banks, shops.

It was based on Decree 5296/2004 and developed according to Brazilian Accessibility Standard 9050/2004 – ABNT (Brazilian Association of Technical Standards). From 2007 to 2008, the Ministry has invested US\$ 804,000 dollars for tourism infrastructure and professional training in the city.

In 2013, an elevator to PWD visit the highest observation point of the city is being constructed with community participation within the project. New projects – according to international standards and based on universal design – are in development.

As mentioned before, Brazilian adaptations for PWD normally focus on people with hand/mobility impairment. Socorro is different. The signalization on tourism attractions is available in braille and self-relieve. Traffic lights provide audible alert to help blind tourists, and there is telephone equipment adapted to deaf in some hotels. So the city has searched adaptation to all kinds of impairments.

In 2009, when the first data collection took place, the Brazilian Ministry of Tourism nominated the city as a “reference destination” in Accessible Adventure Tourism, and promoted it like this since then, among the costumers and Tourism Industry all around Brazil and abroad.

At that time, it was possible to conclude that the key of the success of accessible tourism in Socorro was the participation of all spheres of tourism management, such as federal, state, and municipality members, tourism trade organizations, and entrepreneurs themselves, on positioning the destination as accessible.

Furthermore, in planning and managing accessibility as a whole, providing adaptations in all phases of a trip, such as information, access, attractions, leisure offer, accommodation, food, and others, the destination offered accessible tourism product for all the needs of PWD.

Researches on costumer’s characteristics are done twice a year, and the results show a level of satisfaction between 95% and 98%, and a confirmation on the regional demand, in which 87% to 94% come from São Paulo state, and similar percentage used a car as transportation to get there. Being a reference in accessible tourism, Socorro has chosen not to have surveys on people with disabilities in their public opinion research.

The situation seems contradictory. Nevertheless, the explanation found during the research development was that Socorro was a regular tourism destination. Some ye-ars ago a tourist with a hand/mobility problem searched the region to Adventure Tourism. He has gone to the city several times and liked to stay in the same hotel. This

hotel was one of the best in the city and had Adventure Tourism attractions. This man talked with the owner of the hotel and convinced him to experience adapting his business to Accessible Adventure Tourism. The owner did so, and his business was running very well. He has turned an enthusiastic about Accessibility, and like a viral marketing the main owners of businesses in the city began to adequate their businesses to PWD.

Nevertheless, the two men that began the movement always thought that the adaptations must be with the objective of receiving all kinds of visitors – not only people with visual, mental/intellectual, hearing or hand/mobility impairment: a city opened to everyone. Socorro tries to practice Tourism For All.

## **5 Final considerations**

As a successful experience, Socorro has to offer to other Brazilian cities the example of a City Tourism Council able to plan and manage the destination with coordinated action. That is not easy in tourism destinations. This integrated work is also presented in the regional coordination in Circuito das Águas Paulista (Regional Tourism Board).

The other aspect Socorro could inspire other Brazilian destinations is concern about the qualification of the people who give assistance to the tourist, making the adaptations on the service go further elimination of architectural barriers. Many times the adaptation has happened only in the service, having no need of new equipment to serve PWD.

Looking to promote the city as a “reference destination”, representatives of Socorro have been in conferences, events, seminars in tourism destinations throughout Brazil, and also in some international countries, such as Chile and South Africa, presenting the successful issues of the destination.

In 2013, there was a new data collection to indicate Socorro initiatives in preparation to receive the mega sporting events, due to the proximity with São Paulo – one of the cities where FIFA World Cup 2014 games will take place. One of the first challenges for Socorro is that Brazilian Tourism Board (EMBRATUR) has not pointed the city for international promotion since its product has been labeled as attractive for regional demand.

Nevertheless, the same government institution organized a press trip, bringing journalists from South America and Europe to know the city, so that they could write reviews on Socorro Accessible Tourism in their home countries.

The city has, also, a partnership with a tour operator in São Paulo specialized in accessible tourism products and that organizes group visits to the destination.

According to the City Hall, the destination intends to diversify the tourism product, by repositioning the brand in the market, based on studies that will take place in the next few months.

This trajectory of eight years, between 2005 and 2012, left to Brazil an example of understanding the needs of the PWD and perceiving the accessible tourism potential market. Together with the city tourism industry integrated group work, the result was at the same time a greater proximity with the objective: Tourism for All – through the creation of adequate facilities for tourists with disabilities – and a successful marketing position that made a difference to a city that wants to receive people – People with disabilities and people without disabilities – and receive all in the best way.

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