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Accessibility and sustainable tourism: a kaleidoscope of issues and perspectives. Introduction

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Accessibility and sustainability have become two of the most contemporary issues in the tourism industry (Buhalis and Darcy, 2011; Edgell, 2019).

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2011) estimates that worldwide 1 billion people experience some form of disability, representing about 15% of the world's population. Adding spouses, children and caregivers of persons with disabilities, more than 2 billion people, representing almost a third of the world's population, are directly affected by disability (*ibidem*). This estimate is expected to increase due to population ageing, the spread of chronic diseases, and greater ease in identifying and measuring disabilities (*ibidem*).

For this reason, tourist destinations need to improve accessibility for all to tourist facilities, products and services, facing this issue as a central part of a responsible and sustainable tourist policy (UNWTO, 2016).

Moreover, the challenges of sustainability are increasingly more evident in response to the effects of overtourism, that has contributed in different areas to global warming, pollution, degradation of cultural sites and deforestation

(Peeters et al., 2018).

However, it is important to underline that accessibility is not uniquely related to disability, just as sustainability is not solely about the environment. In fact, these issues must be understood and analyzed within different and broader perspectives.

Sustainable tourism development should seek a balance between protecting the environment, maintaining cultural integrity, establishing social justice and promoting economic benefits, while meeting the needs of the host communities in terms of improved living standards both in the short and long term (Liu et al., 2013).

According to the UNEP and WTO (2005, p. 12), tourism can be defined as sustainable when it "takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities".

Additionally, sustainability should be seen as a means to make destinations inclusive and accessible for all, in terms of physical, cultural, and infrastructural accessibility.

Within this scenario, the present thematic

issue offers multiple insights into the theme of accessible and sustainable tourism, addressed as a scientific discussion area within the fourth international Global Management Perspective (GMP) conference, held in Lecce on 1-2 March 2019.

Set up in Novara in 2015 and promoted by the University of Piemonte Orientale together with Leeds Beckett University (UK) and the Dublin Institute of Technology (Ireland), the research group of GMP scholars has expanded to involve numerous researchers from over sixty universities, spread across five continents.

The GMP conference took place in different locations, including Novara, Malta, Athens and Lecce, becoming a platform for academics, professionals, policymakers, researchers and doctoral students for presenting and discussing management issues and innovative practices at a global perspective¹.

Moreover, the GMP conference has always paid attention to the didactic aspect in the discussion of the proposed topics, opening the sessions to the public and the students of degree courses in tourism, geography and economy of the universities involved.

The theme of tourism and the analytical approach offered by geography on the various areas that this phenomenon affects have always been a central topic of the conference, declined in various perspectives and sub-themes:

- innovation and sustainability in global management (theoretical perspectives on sustainable tourism);
- managing culture and heritage (creativity in events, hospitality and tourism management; cultural heritage tourism);
- tourism sustainability (ICT challenges for tourism organizations; tourism sustainability leadership and global boundaries; global tourism strategies; accessible tourism);
- managing alternative forms of tourism (creativity in events, hospitality and tourism management; cultural heritage tourism; destination management and destination

branding; sustainable development strategies for events and festivals).

The fourth edition, organized in Lecce by the Department of Cultural Heritage of the University of Salento (Lecce, Italy), was aimed at providing practical and theoretical insights into long-term global issues on sustainable and accessible tourism.

The conference set out to offer a conceptual framework for a sustainable development plan, supported by planning and policy models, economic feasibility, environmental philosophy and cultural impacts.

The conference focused on a broad range of topics related to accessibility and sustainable tourism from different perspectives and methodological approaches.

In fact, extremely diversified topics were discussed, ranging from accessible tourism for people with disabilities or specific needs, as highlighted in the contribution by Cerutti, De Falco and Trono, to the accessibility of tourist destinations from the perspective of transport and infrastructures, pointed out in the study presented by Marcello Tadini.

The issue of sustainability was also explored from different angles. In particular, the paper presented by Elisa Piva addressed the topic of sustainable development in destination branding focusing on the perceptions of residents, while the study proposed by Pascoal, Neto and Soares dealt with sustainability concerning the refurbishment and repurposing of heritage buildings.

The thematic session related to the international GMP conference 2019 welcomes these four contributions, offering a multifaceted theoretical and empirical reflection on the issues and challenges for accessibility and sustainable tourism.

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¹ For additional information about the GMP conference see www.gmperspectives.com/.

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