# **BRIEF REPORTS**

# Accessibility and Participation of Persons with Disabilities in Tourism: Perspective of Tourism Workers in the Ashanti region of Ghana

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#### **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** Tourism contributes a great deal to the world's economy. However, persons with disabilities are underrepresented in the industry, particularly in Ghana, due to inaccessible tourism structures and facilities. Accessibility and participation in tourism will enhance social inclusion of persons with disabilities. This study sought to document the nature of access as well as the participation of persons with disabilities in tourism, from the perspective of tourism workers in the Ashanti region of Ghana.

**Methods:** An exploratory study using qualitative methods was conducted among workers at tourist centres in the Ashanti region of Ghana. A total of 21 participants were involved in the study. A voice-recorded interview was used to collect data from respondents. Results were generated through thematic content analysis to develop themes.

**Results:** Findings revealed that the participation of persons with disabilities in tourism is limited due to factors such as the inaccessible tourism environment, the nature of transport services and the language barrier. Suggested provisions were canopy walks, accessible banquets, vehicles, and sign language interpreters at various tourism destinations.

**Conclusion:** Tourism destinations should be made disability friendly through regulations, monitoring and supervision with regard to accessibility, structures and environment.

**Key words:** persons with disabilities, accessibility, participation, environment, tourism.

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# **INTRODUCTION**

The contribution of tourism to the world economy of today cannot be overemphasised. Tourism is now ranked second to the banking sector as one of the world's largest industries, contributing 9% to the world's GDP (Neto, 2003; World Travel & Tourism Council, 2011). Statistics from United Nations Environment Programme and World Tourism Organisation in 2005 show that, on an average, tourism accounts for more than 10% of the growth of the world economy, through income generation, investment, exports and employment. More recent data shows that, either directly or in related sectors, nearly 260 million jobs across the world are being supported by travel and tourism (Carbone and Yunis, 2005; World Travel & Tourism Council, 2011). Bohdanowicz and Zientara (2009) concluded that tourism, particularly by hotel companies, contributes significantly to the development of destinations or communities. In Tanzania for example, tourism has been found to be one of the important elements in alleviating poverty in low-income communities (Luvanga and Shitundu, 2003). In Ghana, the national tourism marketing strategy for 2009 - 2012 found that in 2008, the tourism sector was the fourth highest foreign exchange earner, after gold, cocoa and remittances from Ghanaians abroad. Another relevant contribution by the sector was that 234,679 jobs were, either directly or indirectly, created in the same year (Ghana Tourism, 2009). Tourism also brings individuals, families and other members of society together through their participation in the industry.

It appears that participation by persons with disability in the tourism industry can make them economically independent and socially acceptable. Tourism has the potential to ensure that persons with disability have much more quality of life satisfaction when they access varied tourist services (Card et al, 2006). However, persons with disability seem to be underrepresented in the sector. Cameron et al (2003) confirmed that many tourist sites have barriers to participation by persons with disability. This is attributed to the fact that tourism structures and environment remain inaccessible (Smith, 1987; Burnett and Baker, 2001; Daniels et al, 2005; Packer et al, 2007; Buhalis and Darcy, 2010). Some studies suggest that although persons with disability have a significant amount of free time, they do not utilise it to participate in tourism (Parker, 2001; Stumbo and Pegg, 2005; Angeloni, 2013). Participation may be subject to doctors' recommendations and having friendly groups who motivate and support them (Bergier et al, 2010). The level of participation also varies and depends on the disability and severity of the condition. For example, Poria et al (2011) posited that individuals

with disabilities have different experiences when they attempt to participate in tourism. Chen (2005) added that these differences could be attributed to the type of accommodation that the persons with disability require. Their inability to participate in tourism could also be attributed to the distances they travel to reach tourism destinations and the inaccessible nature of the transport system. In Australia, research has found that persons with disability have the same rate of travel during the daytime as the population without disability, but have lower rates than persons without disability for overnight domestic and international travel (Darcy and Dickson, 2009).

Furthermore, the facilities that exist to promote tourism may create barriers which adversely affect the access of persons with disability. For instance, Chen (2005) specified that a very high percentage of the population with disabilities use only accommodation facilities throughout their travel. They are unable to utilise other facilities that exist in hotels such as toilets, washrooms and restaurants. Similarly, Darcy and Daruwalla (1999) asserted that hotels do not have adequate number of rooms suitable for persons with disability. They mentioned numerous logistical factors, such as shower seats and modifiable beds that should be in a hotel room specifically for wheelchair users. Similar studies have also touched on the shortcomings of lodging facilities and transportation difficulties for persons with disability (Parker, 2001; Sen and Mayfield, 2004; Stumbo and Pegg, 2005; Angeloni, 2013).

However, persons with disability are seen to be loyal and often become attached to places with good enough accessibility provisions (Westcott, 2004). Therefore, an awareness of the need to factor accessible tourism into decision-making and policies is required. It is essential that government and other stakeholders are encouraged to make it a priority to ensure the participation of persons with disability in the tourism sector. This study sought to document the accessibility and participation of persons with disability from the perspectives of tourism workers in the Ashanti region.

## **METHOD**

# **Study Design**

The study employed an exploratory design to examine the participation of persons with disabilities in tourism from the perspective of workers at tourist centres. A qualitative method of data collection was used to ascertain factors preventing participation of persons with disabilities in tourism in Ashanti region.

## Setting

Ashanti region was selected as the setting for the study. With a total of 21 districts, this is the most populous region in Ghana. The 2010 population census recorded over 4 million people in the region, representing 16.3% of the entire Ghanaian population of about 24 million, with approximately 148 people per square kilometre of land (Ghana Statistical Services, 2012). A third of this population is in Kumasi, the capital of the region. Ashanti is second to Greater Accra as the most urbanised region in the country.

With its traditional activities, Ashanti region is considered to be at the heart of Ghanaian culture. The region is home to beautiful tourist destinations, ranging from lakes and rivers to festivals and events, sports and leisure, wildlife and nature reserves and museums (Tourism Ghana, 2008). The tourism facilities have made it a destination for recreation and provide opportunities for study and research (Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly, 2006). There are various heritage sites, historical sites and natural tourism destinations in the region (CTB World Travel, 2012).

## Sample

Convenience sampling was used to select 21 workers at various tourist centres in Ashanti region. The selection was limited to three workers per tourist site. The tourist centres that were covered include Manhyia palace museum, Cultural centre, Ghana Armed Forces museum, Prempeh II Jubilee museum, VIP bus terminal station (Transportation), Rex Mar Hotel (Hotel), all of Kumasi Metropolis and Bobiri forest and butterfly sanctuary, Ejisu-Juaben district. This technique was adopted because respondents were readily available at the study site.

#### Data Collection

Information was collected on accessibility and participation of persons with disability in tourism from the perspective of tourism workers. The researchers used a semi-structured interview guide to gather data from participants. All interviews were recorded with permission from participants. The interview guide was developed in line with the study objective. There were questions on accessibility to tourism, participation of persons with disability in tourism, and suggestions for provisions to ensure accessible tourism. There were also questions to gather background information about the respondents, such as age, gender, marital status, position within the organisation, and type of tourism services. Data was collected over a one-month period. Each interview session took

approximately 1 hour. With permission from the participants, a voice recorder was used to record the responses.

## **Data Analysis**

The audio-recorded information was transcribed verbatim into a word document. The researcher performed Thematic Content Analysis to develop themes and sub-themes from the data base on the variables of the objective. The Principal Investigator read through the transcribed data several times to identify concepts and ideas that were related to the questions presented to the respondents. The evolving ideas were grouped into categories to form themes and sub-themes, such as accessibility to tourism, participation of persons with disability in tourism and the provisions needed to ensure accessible tourism for persons with disability.

#### **Ethical Consideration**

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Committee for Human Research and Publication, KNUST. The Ghana Tourism Authority in Ashanti region also gave its approval to enable the workers to participate in the study. Participants were given a written informed consent form which described the purpose of the study, the risks, the benefits, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Data collection was initiated only after their consent was received.

#### **RESULTS**

# **Background Information of Workers at various Tourism Destinations**

Table 1 presents the demographic information of 21 workers at various tourism destinations in the Ashanti region. Participants' demographic information from the in-depth interview includes age, gender, levels of education, marital status, position held and type of tourism services. The majority (71.43%) were men while six respondents (28.57%) were women. In terms of education, over 50% of participants had a bachelor's degree and around 14% of the participants were in each of the other three categories of professional, masters and junior high school qualifications. The youngest respondent was 28 years old, while the oldest was 55 years old. The mean age was, however, 41 years. Responses indicate that all the workers were married. The various positions they held at their working places included curator, director of operations, director, conductor, tourism guide, receptionist and cashier.

**Table 1: Background information of Tourism Workers** 

Variable	N	Percentage
Age		
Mean	41	
Min	28	
Max	55	
Gender		
Male	15	71.43
Female	6	28.57
<b>Educational Qualification</b>		
Masters degree	3	14.29
Bachelors degree	12	57.14
Professional course	3	14.29
Junior High School	3	14.29
Marital Status		
Married	21	100.00
Position within the Organisation		
Director of Operations	3	14.29
Senior Executive Officer	3	14.29
Director	3	14.29
Receptionist and Cashier	3	14.29
Curator	3	14.29
Tour guide	3	14.29
Conductor	3	14.29
Type of Tourism Services		
Ghana Armed Forces museum	3	14.29
Manhyia Palace museum (Cultural)	3	14.29
Rex Mar Hotel (Hotel)	3	14.29
Bobiri forest and Butterfly sanctuary (Natural)	3	14.29
VIP Buses (Transportation)	3	14.29
Cultural Centre (Culture)	3	14.29
Prempeh II Jubilee Museum	3	14.29

Table 2 presents the themes that emerged from the interview with the participants. The themes describe the participation of persons with disability in tourism, accessibility of tourism to persons with disability and provisions that

are required to ensure accessible tourism. These provisions include accessible vehicles, banquets, canopy walks and necessary assistance by staff.

Table 2: Themes and their Characteristics

Themes	Characteristics
Participation	Extent of participation of persons with disabilities in tourism
	Limited participation by persons with disability in tourism
Accessibility	Inaccessible Structures
	Inaccessible Facilities
	Inaccessible Transport
Provisions to Accessible Tourism	Accessible vehicles
	Banquets should be made accessible
	Staff should provide all necessary assistance to satisfy persons with disability
	Canopy walks should be an option since vehicles cannot go round such places

Source: Field Data, 2015

# Participation in Tourism by Persons with Disabilities

This section presents the views of tourism workers in the region on the participation of persons with disability in the industry. When asked to describe how persons with disability participate in the tourism sector, most of the workers commented that persons with disability did not visit the tourism centres frequently. Only one worker described their participation as frequent when he stated that, "in a typical month, four persons with disability access their hotel." Additionally, all the interviewed workers at various tourism centres in the region confirmed that persons with physical, visual or hearing impairments visited the tourism centres. However, people who used crutches were the most mentioned group. A senior executive member at a tourist centre in the region disclosed that:

"In fact, in a whole year, we normally receive few persons with disability as tourists. In a month however, it is sometimes zero such that we do not receive any of them. In June, July and October where we have our peak level, we sometimes receive some of them from institutions or churches. It is very difficult for me to actually say one or two persons with disability access our services because there is no consistency in

that. We receive the visually impaired, the deaf and the physically challenged in our museum."

It can be seen that the extent of participation of persons with disability in tourism is generally limited.

## **Accessibility to Facilities and Structures**

The interview with tourism workers was also centred on access to facilities and structures for persons with disability. Tourism workers disclosed that tourism services lacked facilities and structures that would enable access for these people. Interestingly, most of the workers felt that the existing tourist structures and environment did not factor in the needs of persons with disability when they were established. A curator at one of the tourist centres in the region expressed his concern:

"The museum is not accessible; probably we do not have facilities for persons with disability because the building is a storey building. We normally assist them to the ground floor. Because the museum does not have facilities for them, carrying them to the second floor is difficult. We take them through the items at the ground floor and then they watch the documentary. We also tell them what's at the second floor, the history and objects."

A theme that emerged from the interview with the tourism workers was the inaccessible nature of transport services for persons with disability. The participants felt that the transportation services at the various tourist centres were not accessible. For example, at one of the natural tourist destinations, a receptionist and a cashier explained that the natural tourist sites did not have accessible walkways because roads for vehicles to pass are not constructed in forests and other such places. In the view of the cashier:

"Some of the disabled are not able to access the sites here, especially the forest. This is because they cannot walk through the forest. Cars cannot be provided as a medium because there are no accessible routes into the forest. As a result they wait for the able to go for and tour the forest. This month, there was a woman who came but could not tour the forest so she sat in a car and drove alongside the main road here, just to have a view of the forest as well as snapping pictures."

This sentiment was shared by a bus conductor at one of the tourist destinations in the region. He felt that transportation was one of the major facilities that make tourism inaccessible to persons with disability. According to him:

"The physically challenged and visual impaired find it difficult in accessing the vehicles; we assist them in climbing the vehicles and even carry them. We have to ask permission or plead on behalf of them from those sitting in front or behind the driver to get up for them to sit. If the vehicle is full, we ask them to join the other bus."

"The blind, deaf and those who use wheelchair and crutches; the blind are assisted in climbing the stairs and we allow them to touch and feel the objects. For the deaf, is very difficult in communicating with them because we don't have sign language interpreter. Those using the wheelchair and crutches, we carry them in climbing the stairs. The museum doesn't have facilities for persons with disability to enable them access tourism. These are the challenges that face when they are accessing the museum."

#### Measures to ensure Accessible Tourism

Another emerging theme at the interviews was about the general provisions that need to be available to ensure accessible tourism. The participants gave different opinions and suggestions about the things that need to be provided at various tourist sites. For instance, a worker from the transportation industry felt that the company should purchase accessible vehicles which would encourage persons with disability to hire them, and also ensure that sign language interpreters are available at various stations to make communication easy.

"As I have already said, the association needs to purchase buses that have enough space or walkway and have remote for persons with disability in the buses. The company needs to employ sign language interpreters at the stations and the numbers on the seats should be in Braille text format. With all these provisions, I think it will encourage persons with disability to participate in tourism by hiring our vehicles."

Although the workers felt that all the hotel facilities were not accessible at the moment, officials were of the view that banquets should be made accessible and staff should provide all necessary assistance to satisfy persons with disability. A director of operations at one of the tourist destinations in the region expressed this:

"Depending on the personal and peculiar problem the person has, there should be an access for them to the banquet. Secondly, we have to make sure that persons with disability are satisfied depending on what facilities are available."

At the natural tourism destinations, professionals believed that canopy walks should be an option since vehicles cannot go round such places. The issue was highlighted:

"I think the canopy walk would be suitable to improve the accessibility of the persons with disability owing to the fact the routes into the forest are walking routes but not vehicle routes. We should do internal adverts so that Ghanaians would get to know this place. Foreigners are handed booklets just on arrival from the plane."

It is obvious that most tourist destinations are not accessible and conscious efforts have to be made in order to make these places accessible to persons with disabilities.

### **DISCUSSION**

The study findings revealed that only a few persons with disability are able to access tourism. The interaction with workers revealed that the few who do access tourism services are generally those with physical impairments. This might suggest that there are impeding factors which limit the participation of persons with other disabilities, such as those who have visual, hearing or intellectual disabilities. In a study, Borda and Duarte (2013) revealed that "tourism should be opened to any individual including those who have limitations due to its characteristics of plurality, diversity of peoples, race or creed." However, limited participation means that there are factors restricting the visits of persons with disability to tourist facilities across the country. This is confirmed by the workers in the current study sample who emphasised that most tourism services in the Ashanti Region were lacking facilities and structures that would enable access for persons with disability. This finding reinforces similar observations by previous studies which revealed that there were a plethora of barriers which worked against the participation of persons with disabilities (Cameron et al, 2003; Angeloni, 2013; Borda and Duarte, 2013). The inclusion of the needs of persons with disabilities is seen as an important factor in the sustainable development of tourism policy (Borda and Duarte, 2013). However the accounts given by workers suggest the inaccessible nature of the facilities, which have no provisions to enable or encourage the participation of persons with disabilities. It is possible that the facilities are put up without taking into consideration the needs of persons with disabilities (Smith, 1987; Burnett and Baker, 2001; Daniels et al, 2005; Packer et al, 2007; Buhalis and Darcy, 2010).

Individuals with disabilities might participate if the building designs consider their needs, as this would ensure their comfort and ease of accessibility to a larger extent. Similarly, there will be high level of participation by those with visual or physical impairments if the physical environment is made accessible. This finding corroborates studies by Parker (2001), Stumbo and Pegg (2005), and

Angeloni (2013). According to these studies, persons with disabilities have the same desire and need to participate in tourism as other persons without disability, but the exogenous obstacles that come in their way are architectural, ecological, transportation, legal, and also communication, attitude and information.

In addition, the findings of the study revealed that transportation to these facilities was not well-organised to enable the participation of persons with disability. Effective transportation enables individuals to lead independent lives as well as improves their mobility, but most often there are limited transport services for persons with disability to access tourist sites (Stumbo and Pegg, 2005; Field and Jette, 2007). This undermines the ability of persons with disability to visit tourist sites and results in their isolation. No special-need services are provided by transport organisations. This suggests that persons with disability may find it difficult to travel and this might discourage them from visiting such recreational facilities, as reported by Sen and Mayfield (2004).

The study results reaffirmed that the various sites did not have transport services that would support persons with disability. This might be one of the major reasons for their inability to participate in recreation. This finding is consistent with studies by Parker (2001), Stumbo and Pegg (2005) and Angeloni (2013) who found that the nature of the transport system affects whether persons with disability will participate in or visit such tourist facilities. Under these circumstances, the chances are that their involvement in recreation is very restricted.

The study findings also revealed that there are problems with regard to communication. The staff members working in the tourism industry are unable to communicate with persons with disability, especially with deaf persons. It is possible that the inability of the staff to communicate and address their needs may discourage persons with disability from accessing their services in future. This finding corroborates the findings of Angeloni (2013) that the inability of persons with disability to communicate where they live and their destination, makes them unable to convey their needs and preferences.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The study sought to examine the accessibility as well as the participation of persons with disability in tourism within the Ashanti region of Ghana. The findings confirmed that their limited participation in tourism was due to reasons such as the inaccessible environment, the nature of transportation and the

language barrier. These findings were consistent with other studies in relation to the area. Therefore, to ensure or encourage the participation of persons with disability, it is necessary that some measures be put in place. In the first place, the Government should revisit existing regulations on accessibility issues to include tourism destinations, so as to provide more accessible tourism structures and environment. Secondly, the tourism authorities in the region should carry out unannounced monitoring and supervision of tourism sites to ensure that their facilities and services are accessible to all persons, without discrimination. This should include monitoring the behaviour and attitudes of professionals towards clients, particularly those with disabilities. Also, churches, educational institutions and other organisations at community level should factor the inclusion of persons with disability when they organise visits to various tourism destinations. It is believed that if such measures are put in place, the participation of persons with disability will rise to an appreciable level.

#### Limitations

The main limitation of the study is that the researchers involved only service providers and not persons with disabilities. Thus, it is suggested that future studies involve persons with disabilities so that they can give a first hand account of barriers restricting their access to tourist sites.

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