

Inclusive Tourism Ecosystems: Key Stakeholders And Their Roles

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Abstract

The ecosystem approach is now the main direction of the evolution of industries and businesses and applying it to inclusive tourism can contribute to its development. However, it requires the identification of different groups of stakeholders and their roles within the ecosystem of inclusive tourism. We demonstrate that stakeholders of the inclusive tourism ecosystem perform the following key roles: consumers, producers, enablers, protectors, regulators, and observers. A superposition of stakeholders exists as stakeholders may perform more than one function. This complex nature of stakeholders should be taken into account within strategies for the development of inclusive tourism as it creates a good basis for cooperation between different groups of stakeholders. Special attention should be paid to fostering the participation of people with disabilities in different roles.

Keywords: *Inclusive Tourism, Inclusive Tourism Ecosystem, Ecosystem, Stakeholders, Ecosystem Roles.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Ensuring equal and guaranteed access to products and services for all groups of customers notwithstanding their physical and mental impairments, race, gender, sexuality etc is one of the main trends of the evolution of business along with digital transformation (this phenomenon can be described as inclusive transformation). Tourism is among the industries that give a high priority to this trend [17, 20] as a new market of inclusive tourism emerges [7, 18, 10, 16]. However, adaptation of existing tourist products and services to specific needs of people with disabilities (PWD) requires a lot of joint efforts from all stakeholders of inclusive tourism.

It is extremely important to develop a strategy of cooperation of all existing and potential stakeholders of inclusive tourism to ensure sustainable development of the inclusive tourism industry [19]. This strategy, in turn, requires a sound methodology that could be used as a basis for its development.

One of the main directions of organizational transformation that is taking place now is the transition towards an ecosystem-based model of the organization of industries and businesses [5]. This transition is induced and enabled by digital transformation as novel digital tools greatly reduce the transaction cost of cooperation between independent economic agents. Being a novel model of doing business, the ecosystem approach may be an efficient basis for the development of inclusive tourism. But its implementation requires, first, clear identification of all stakeholders of inclusive tourism, and second, a precise definition of functions that each stakeholder will fulfill within this ecosystem [8].

The goal of the present paper is to provide answers to these two questions.

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2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper uses the ecosystem approach for analysis of the evolution of businesses and industries. As Barykin et al. state [5], an ecosystem can be described as a combination of various homogenous groups of stakeholders that cooperate, implicitly or explicitly, to create a specific value. Ecosystems are normally open. It means that any economic agent who agrees to abide by the rules and standards of an ecosystem can freely join it. Relations between ecosystem participants are based on cooperation as they simultaneously cooperate to reach collective goals and compete for individual ones. Ensuring equal and guaranteed access to products and services for all groups of customers notwithstanding their physical and mental impairments, race, gender, sexuality, etc is one of the main trends of the evolution of business along with digital transformation (this phenomenon can be described as inclusive transformation). Tourism is among the industries that give a high priority to this trend as a new market of inclusive tourism emerges. However, adaptation of existing tourist products and services to specific needs of people with disabilities (PWD) requires a lot of joint efforts from all stakeholders of inclusive tourism.

The ecosystem approach has already been applied to various industries and results obtained in the extant research can be a good indicator for the identification of specific groups of stakeholders of the inclusive tourism ecosystem. It should be noted, however, that the existing sources dedicated to ecosystem evolution of different industries are normally limited to the division of these ecosystems into separate groups of homogenous stakeholders without trying to identify similarities between them. The present research will follow a novel two-level logic. In the first stage, key stakeholders of the inclusive tourism ecosystem will be identified. In the second stage, these stakeholders will be grouped in larger sets based on the nature of the functions they perform within this ecosystem. This two-level approach will help to understand not only the roles of separate stakeholders but also the common features of different groups of stakeholders. One can easily see that this two-level approach corresponds to the classical method of analysis and synthesis. The paper is based on the descriptive literature review methodology. The present research is conceptual and does not use empirical data.

3. RESULTS

Stakeholders of the inclusive tourism ecosystem include the following groups of economic agents:

- Inclusive tourism customers. People who for some reason are not able to consume traditional tourism products fall within this category (people with disabilities etc) [12]. These customers compose the core target audience of inclusive tourism. Customers should not be considered a passive part of the ecosystem of inclusive tourism as their voice plays an important role in the development, adaptation, and improvement of tourism products and services [11, 13, 21]. PWDs can also be incentivized to work in the field of provision of inclusive tourism services and products (as employees, entrepreneurs, or participants of non-governmental organizations) [22];
- Regular tourists. While regular tourists do not have specific requirements and can consume traditional tourism products, the concept of inclusive tourism consists of the common consumption of tourism products by regular tourists and PWDs. It means that the providers of inclusive tourism services should be able to offer a competitive product to regular customers. Participation of regular customers in this common consumption is important from two points of view. First, the presence of regular customers is necessary to create a real inclusion atmosphere (otherwise inclusive tourism customers will feel isolated). Second, regular customers can generate additional cash flow for providers of inclusive tourism services and this factor may be instrumental for the sustainable development of these companies (as the number of inclusive tourism customers may not be sufficient to cover the operation costs of these providers). Third, PWDs often travel with their family members who generally have no limitations for the consumption of

tourism services, and providers should be able to offer competitive products to PWDs and to people who accompany them [21]. Finally, C2C interactions can create additional value within the inclusive tourism ecosystem [9];

- Tourism service providers (TSP). They include companies that create the possibility to consume tourist products. Travel agencies, airlines, hotels, etc belong to this category. The key role of TSPs is to provide customers with access to the experience they are looking for, not to create this experience. One would say that TSPs ensure connectivity between tourists' ordinary life of tourists and new experiences. As participants of the inclusive tourism ecosystem, TSPs are supposed to create equal, safe, and guaranteed access to their services by adapting their service proposition to the specific requirements of PWDs [3, 21]. In most cases TSPs do not transform their services completely, they rather complement them by additional tools that enable PWDs to get access to these services [14, 21]. It is extremely important to take into account PWDs' needs and values not only in service infrastructure but also in service processes and service marketing [6]. As the extant literature demonstrates, TSPs may publish incorrect information about their facilities promoting them as accessible (to attract PWDs), but in reality, they are not accessible [11]. It disappoints PWDs upon arrival and destroys the value they expected to get from their travel [11]. Such marketing behavior should be avoided;

- Suppliers of tourist products (STP). This group of actors creates an experience for customers. Organizations like museums, theaters, providers of sight-seeing tours, etc fall within this group. They produce and deliver the key value of tourism services to customers. To be able to create this value for PWDs, STPs, like TSPs, have to adapt and complement their products to ensure PWDs' access to them [3];

- Adapters. This group of actors works in the field of adaptation of regular tourism services and products to specific requirements of PWDs. They develop necessary technological solutions to enable PWDs to get access to tourism services and products and deliver these solutions to TSPs and STPs (and help TSPs and STPs to implement these solutions). It should be noted that the use of novel technologies can lead to the emergence of new tourist products for PWDs (digital tourism) so advanced adapters can become suppliers of tourist services [15];

- Educational institutions. Their role in the ecosystem of inclusive tourism is prominent as they educate and train staff that will work PWDs. Educational institutions should not only develop professional skills but also build up inclusive values that employees within the ecosystem of inclusive tourism must respect and follow. These institutions can also contribute to the development of adaptation solutions as they have the necessary research and technological skills;

- Non-governmental organizations. They perform two key functions. First, they help PWDs get access to tourism services and products by providing them with financial and information support, rehabilitation, etc. Second, they act as a collective voice of PWDs protecting and lobbying their interests and setting up industrial standards for the provision of tourism products and services;

- State as a regulator of the tourism market and a provider of support for PWDs;

- Local communities. The development of PWD-oriented facilities in tourist destinations may have positive and negative impacts on the interests of local communities. It is crucial to evaluate this impact and to take it into account. On the other hand, the involvement of members of local communities into the provision of inclusive tourism services and products may create value for both PWDs and the local population [2];

- Employees of all organizations listed above. Normally employees are not identified as a separate group of stakeholders within industrial ecosystems as they are considered as part of their organizations. However, in our opinion, the role of employees in the accommodation of PWDs is extremely important and they should be viewed as separate

stakeholders of the ecosystem of inclusive tourism. Employees (especially frontline employees) may create value for PWDs, but they can also destroy this value despite all efforts of their organizations [1, 11, 21]. As Adam demonstrates, PWDs often have to deal with unfavorable attitudes from hotel staff [1]. This is why it is extremely important to pay attention to the selection, training, evaluation, and control of employees to provide tourism services with full respect to PWDs' human dignity [4].

One can easily see that while these groups of stakeholders are separate, their goals and functions are partially superposing. It means that the same function can be performed by two or more groups of stakeholders, while a group of stakeholders can perform more than one function. Hence a simple identification of various groups of stakeholders is not sufficient for efficient organization of co-creation of value within the ecosystem of inclusive tourism. It is important to identify key ecosystem roles.

We can describe the following ecosystem roles: consumers, producers, enablers, protectors, regulators, and observers. These roles are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Key inclusive tourism ecosystem roles.

Ecosystem role	Description	Performers
Consumers	People who consume the value created and delivered within the ecosystem of inclusive tourism	Inclusive tourism customers, regular customers
Producers	Organizations that produce and deliver value to consumers	Tourism service providers, suppliers of tourist products, adapters (advanced), employees, inclusive tourism customers (as employees and entrepreneurs)
Enablers	Actors that create a possibility to consume tourism services and products for inclusive tourism customers	Adapters, NGOs, employees, inclusive tourism customers (as employees and entrepreneurs), state
Protectors	Actors that protect the right of inclusive tourism consumers to have equal and guaranteed access to tourism products and services	NGOs, state, inclusive tourism customers (as organizers and employees of NGO)
Regulators	Actors that set up a regulatory framework for development of inclusive tourism	State, NGOs
Observers	Actors that are not directly involved into production, delivery and consumption of inclusive tourism products and services but whose interests may be impacted by development of inclusive tourism ecosystem. Observers can potentially participate in all ecosystem roles	Local communities

As the Table 1 shows, the role of PWDs is not limited to being just inclusive tourism customers. They can perform most ecosystem roles. The real development of inclusive tourism should foster not only the consumption of inclusive tourism products and services but also the inclusion of PWDs in other ecosystem functions [22]. The importance of this inclusion is multifold:

- PWDs can be a valuable source of human capital for the inclusive tourism ecosystem. People without disabilities may not be interested in working within this ecosystem and may not understand the specific requirements of PWDs. PWD employment as well as fostering PWD participation in inclusive tourism entrepreneurship can solve this problem [23];
- PWDs can contribute to the development of inclusive tourism by investing their human capital. It will help them to overcome exclusion as they will see the importance of their voice and their efforts [11];
- Involvement in employment and entrepreneurship within the inclusive tourism ecosystem will help PWDs to have a source of income. It will help PWDs to overcome exclusion and to have financial resources for independent (not supported by financial support from the state, NGOs, etc) consumption of inclusive tourism services.

The table 1 also demonstrates that stakeholders of the inclusive tourism ecosystem are not homogenous from the point of view of their roles. The heterogeneity of stakeholders is typical for socially oriented ventures [18] and it should be taken into account in the strategy of development of inclusive tourism.

4. DISCUSSION

Our results show that, despite being independent, various groups of stakeholders in the ecosystem of inclusive tourism have a complex combination of functions and there may be a superposition of functions between different stakeholders. It means that development of the inclusive tourism requires a complex view of each group of stakeholders. This complex view supposes that stakeholders should be incentivized to perform all their functions. It also means that the cooperation of various stakeholders within the ecosystem of inclusive tourism ecosystem should be organized in two directions:

- Common work within the superposed functions;
- Helping each other to perform specific functions.

Stakeholders of the inclusive tourism ecosystem should not be seen as separate groups of actors. On the contrary, they should be seen as interdependent parts of a complex ecosystem and strategies for the development of inclusive tourism should foster this mutual dependence and cooperation.

Conclusion

The key contribution of our research is that in addition to the identification of various groups of stakeholders of the ecosystem of inclusive tourism, we introduce the concept of ecosystem roles and give a description of the ecosystem roles that these stakeholders perform. Identification of groups of stakeholders helps to understand different groups of interests within the ecosystem of inclusive tourism. Knowledge of ecosystem roles shows the mutual dependence between various stakeholders and demonstrates potential ways of their cooperation.

We show that the heterogeneity of stakeholders of the inclusive tourism ecosystem from the point of view of their roles is a key factor that should be taken into account in strategies for the development of inclusive tourism. This heterogeneity is a good basis for cooperation between stakeholders thanks to the superposition of their roles.

Finally, special attention should be paid to helping PWDs participate in various roles within the inclusive tourism ecosystem beyond the consumption of inclusive tourism

products and services. This participation will help to maximize the value created within this ecosystem and delivered to PWDs. It will contribute to the goals of inclusive tourism development and promote the real inclusion of people with disabilities.

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