



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Inclusive Tourism in the Framework of Sustainable Development: Analysis of Current Russian Practice

Marina Strelnikova^{1*}, Raisa Ivanova², Olga Skrobotova³, Irina Polyakova⁴, Galina Karaseva⁵

¹PhD, Associate Professor - Bunin Yelets State University, Yelets, Russian Federation

²PhD, Associate Professor - Bunin Yelets State University, Yelets, Russian Federation

³PhD, Associate Professor - Bunin Yelets State University, Yelets, Russian Federation

⁴PhD, Associate Professor - Bunin Yelets State University, Yelets, Russian Federation

⁵Senior lecturer - Bunin Yelets State University, Yelets, Russian Federation

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*Corresponding Author:

m.a.strelnikova@mymail.academy

ABSTRACT

Today, attention to the problems and interests of people with disabilities has grown to be an important part of the social and economic policies of various states and an important element in the framework of sustainable development. The present study examines the concepts of sustainable development, sustainable tourism, and inclusive tourism in their interdependence. The topicality and importance of building a worldview consistent with the framework of sustainable development with respect to protecting the rights of people with special needs and disabilities is emphasized. An analysis of publications on the research topic is conducted. A monitoring of the Russian tourism market highlights the leading organizational forms of inclusive tourism, the most common and demanded being inclusive tourism centers. Examples of inclusive tourism centers in various regions of the Russian Federation are given, and the main areas of their activities are described. The study concludes on the effectiveness of socially oriented projects implementing inclusive tourist products. The role of non-profit organizations participating in grant competitions, in particular, the Presidential Grants Fund, is substantiated. The implementation of sustainable tourism principles in their social aspect in Russia is argued to be at its beginning stage. However, the State Program "Accessible Environment," which aligns with global trends in sustainable development, and the analysis of current Russian practices of inclusive tourism are indicative of a continuous search for the best forms of organizing tourist services for people with disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of sustainable development was first presented at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm, 1972). This conference became the starting point for the further development of the sustainable development framework. In time, several documents outlined the principles of sustainable development more clearly, in particular, the World Conservation Strategy report (1980) and its second edition titled "Caring for the Earth: A Strategy for Sustainable Living," where the concept of "sustainable" gained a natural science foundation. The Our Common Future report (1987) by the UN Commission on Sustainable Development presented a basic definition of sustainable development as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." The three-pillar model of sustainable development (social, economic, and environmental) was proposed, embodying a new understanding of the environment with accessibility for all as the most vital social criterion.

An important factor in the sustainable development of a territory is its tourist and recreational characteristics. The first reason behind this role is that tourism is one of the most dynamically developing sectors of the global economy. Second, tourism is a significant, sometimes even the only, source of GDP growth. Third, the turnover of the tourism sector directly or indirectly involves more than 60 industries and sectors of the regional economy. Therefore, tourism has become ingrained in the concept of regional sustainable development. Proof of this is the 1996 adoption of Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism Industry by the United Nations World Tourism Organization and the Earth Council. This document can be considered fundamental to the development and finalization of the concept of sustainable tourism development.

In 2004, the United Nations World Tourism Organization presented the concept of sustainable tourism development, the key points of which were 1) the application of norms and practices for managing sustainable tourism development in all its types and 2) the extension of sustainability principles to environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects. Consequently, the main objectives of sustainable development are to ensure the optimal use of environmental resources, the preservation of natural heritage and biological diversity, respect for the socio-cultural characteristics of the host communities, and the preservation of cultural heritage.

The next stage in the implementation of sustainability principles in tourism was the development of indicators of sustainable tourism development necessary to plan and manage the industry at various levels (national, regional, and local). This topic is addressed by several policy documents and scientific papers, which actively search for effective tools to monitor sustainability and develop the methodological principles of this concept in the scientific and practical planes.

Thus, it can be argued that the tourism industry has long been part of the sustainable development framework, the essence of which is the striving to balance environmental protection, promote economic growth, and maintain social and cultural integrity both in the present and in the future (McCabe, Diekmann, 2015). However, both practice and the extensive coverage of sustainable development issues show that social sustainability issues enjoy less attention than economics and ecology. This is especially true for the phenomenon of disability, which naturally affects the development of tourism (Darcy et al., 2010; Dwyer, 2005; Minnaert et al., 2009).

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) recognizes the civil rights of people with disabilities and is rooted in the principles of respect and equality, access, and inclusion (Michopoulou et al., 2015). The right of citizens to travel is an especially important point in this document (Darcy, Dixon, 2009; McCabe, Diekmann, 2015). Article 9 touches upon access to transport and the built environment, and Article 30 concerns participation in all spheres of cultural life, including sports, leisure, and tourism (United Nations, 2006). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, ratified by the UN in 2015, and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) lay the groundwork for balancing the economic, environmental, and social aspects of sustainable development (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). The purpose of this structure is to promote the creation of just and inclusive societies that are built on respect for human rights and human dignity and provide equal opportunities for all.

The centerpiece of the SDGs is the principle of inclusiveness. Hence, development can only be inclusive if people with disabilities have equal rights to recreation, travel, and tourism (Gillovic, McIntosh, 2020).

Disability, and especially the challenges people with disabilities face, cannot be ignored in achieving SDGs in tourism (Darcy et al., 2010, 2020).

The relevance of examining the problem of inclusive tourism in the framework of sustainable development in Russia is evidenced by such aspects as the needs of people with disabilities in travel and the inaccessibility of tourism for many of them, as well as the underdeveloped state of the market for inclusive tourist services.

This thesis can be backed by the following statistics. According to the 2022 Living Conditions Monitoring Survey, 26% of people with disabilities aged 15 and over had made a tourist or excursion trip (Federal State Statistics Service, n.d.). The distribution of this category by age is presented in Figure 1.

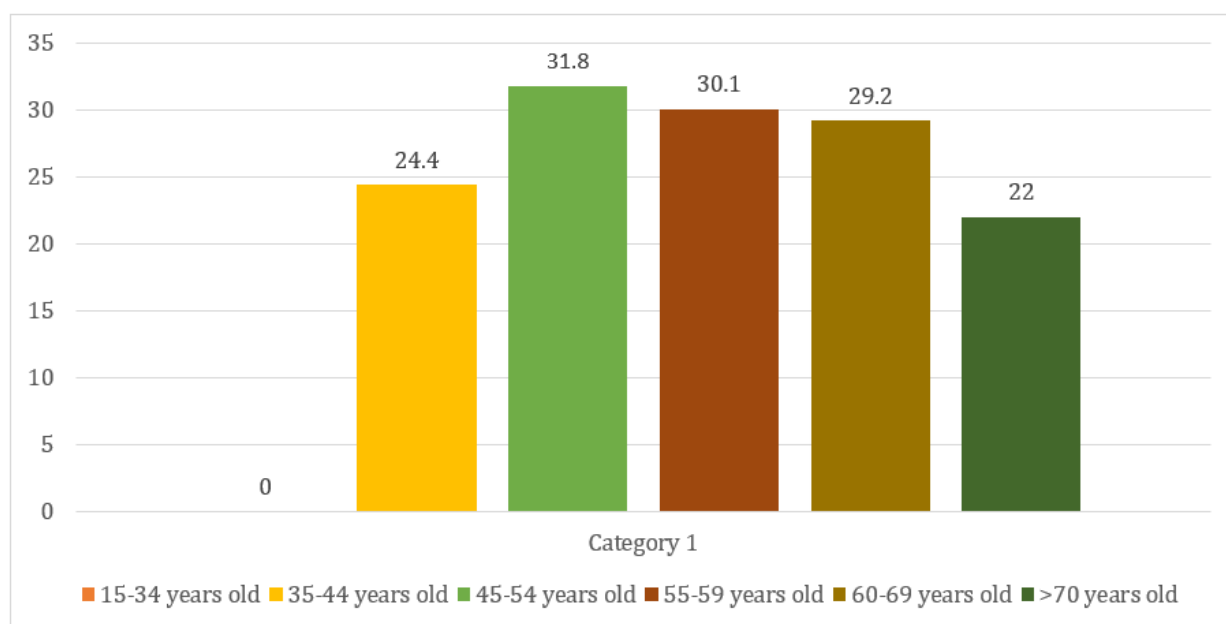


Figure 1: People with disabilities who had had a tourist trip or excursion in the last 12 months

Data on people with disabilities aged above 15 who have never been on a tourist trip or excursion are rather thought-provoking (Figure 2).

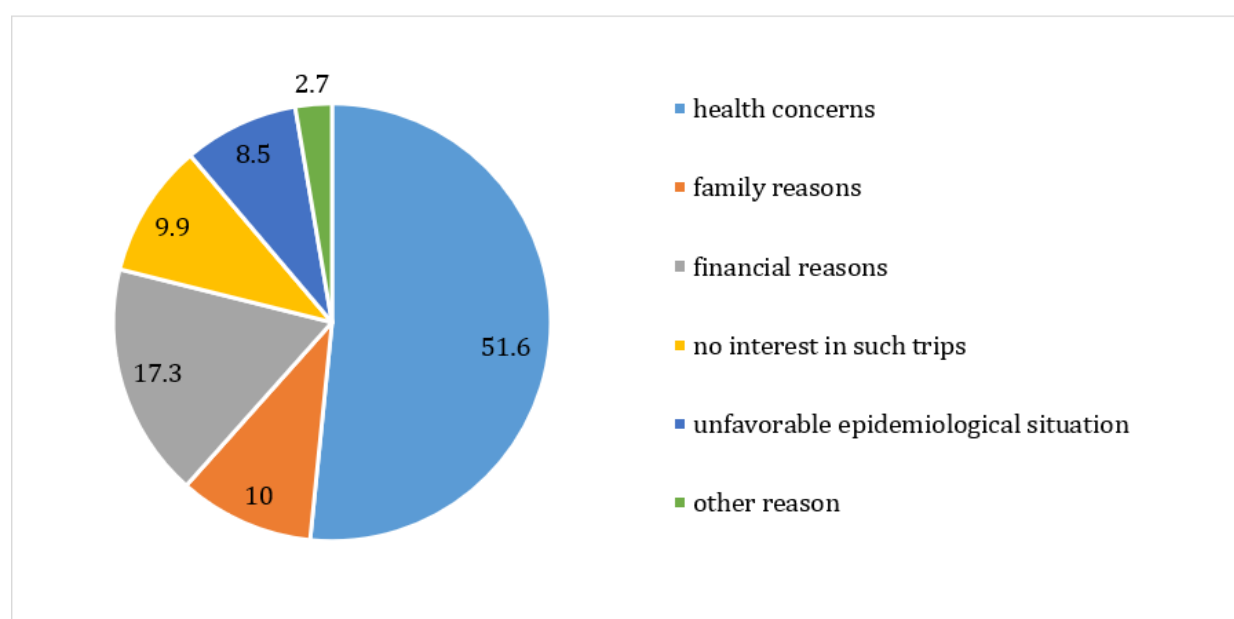


Figure 2: People with disabilities aged above 15 who had never been on a tourist trip or excursion

Here, we should emphasize the reasons cited by respondents. More than half of the respondents attributed their lack of participation in tourist programs to their health, meaning, as we understand it, to disability itself. This argument seems to be very telling, proving the need for systematic, comprehensive work to include people with disabilities in the social and cultural environment through inclusive tourism with its tremendous adaptive capabilities. Moreover, only a small part of respondents, 9.9%, expressed a lack of interest in tourism altogether.

Another thought-provoking indicator is financial reasons. Tourist trips could not be afforded by 17.3% of respondents. Indeed, inclusive tourist and excursion programs are typically expensive. Their high prices are due to several factors: the complexity of design, the high material and technological costs of their organization, the need for technical support, and, most certainly, the underdevelopment of the market. This problem cannot be solved without the involvement of the

state, social entrepreneurship, and grants. This is the reason why inclusive tourism is often considered a type of social tourism.

These figures show that the development of inclusive tourism is a social demand. Our monitoring of successful inclusive tourism practices in Russia aims to answer the question of how it can be implemented.

Thus, the purpose of the study was to analyze the current organizational forms of inclusive tourism in Russia, which allow considering Russian tourism from the standpoint of sustainable development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scientific understanding of the concept of sustainable tourism is produced by the academic environment. Over the past 30 years, there have accumulated about 5 thousand works reporting the results of studies on sustainability in tourism. This body of research shows a tendency to distinguish between two concepts: sustainable tourism and sustainable tourism development. According to experts, the concept of sustainable tourism developed in parallel but separately from the original paradigm of sustainable development (Gavurova et al., 2020). This is explained by the varying semantic content of the category of regional uniqueness in the historical, cultural, and socio-economic planes. For the most part, modern research continues to be defined by this distinction.

Few scientific publications consider inclusive tourism in the framework of sustainable development (except for a cursory mention as a statement). Despite this, the authors argue that the concepts of sustainable development, sustainable tourism, and inclusive tourism should be examined in their interdependence. In this study, we attempted to analyze the implemented forms of inclusive tourism in their association with sustainable tourism and sustainable development principles.

Presently, there are relatively few scientific studies, both in Russia and abroad, devoted to the problems of inclusive tourism. As a rule, they present the results of investigating a certain aspect in the development of inclusive tourism. For example, Dwyer and Darcy (2010) focus on the terminology and history of inclusive or affordable tourism.

The experience of organizing inclusive tourism has been investigated by authors such as Buhalis et al. (2012), who collected the world's best practices in the design, management, and realization of inclusive tourism products along with recommendations to participants in the travel market that offer services for people with disabilities and low mobility. The potential and prospects for the development of inclusive tourism as a separate sector of the economy in international practice are described by Bowtell (2015).

Here, we should draw attention to several works directly connected to the topic of our study.

Gillovic & McIntosh (2020) link the concepts of accessibility, inclusive tourism, and sustainable development together. The authors propose an inclusive tourism development program based on the seven principles of inclusive tourism by Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018), which serve as a tool for analyzing the current state of inclusive tourism. The pivotal principle of inclusive tourism, according to this work, is the principle of accessibility, which fosters the widespread involvement of people with disabilities in tourism and society. Thus, the proposed version of the program can be seen as aligned with the adopted dominant aspect of sustainable development – its socio-cultural component (Gillovic, McIntosh, 2020).

Darcy uses the concept of affordable tourism, linking it with the framework of sustainable development. Darcy considers affordable tourism in terms of some basic characteristics: accessibility of facilities, universal design, and the correlation between population aging and disability. An important result is the thesis that affordable tourism is not a frozen self-organized system but rather forms several interrelated and interdependent business mechanisms that go beyond the individual business entity (Darcy, Dixon, 2009).

The research of Nyanjom et al. (2018) can be seen as a continuation of the topic of cooperation as the basis and result of creating and realizing an inclusive tourist product. The authors examine the level of interaction between stakeholders in the development of inclusive tourism in Western Australia and conclude that, as of now, it is virtually negligible. Undoubtedly, this lack of interaction

affects the quality of the product and, ultimately, the engagement of people with disabilities in active leisure by means of tourism.

Notably, some researchers understand inclusive tourism widely, interpreting inclusion as participation in the production and consumption of tourist products not only for people with disabilities and low mobility but also for marginalized population groups. Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) view inclusive tourism as an element of social integration in Europe amidst the growing inequality around the world – first, because of refugee admissions and, second, due to new sustainable development expectations.

The lack of coordination between numerous participants in the tourism market is cited by Cassia et al. (2020) as the main barrier to the provision of inclusive tourism services. Zmyslony (2022) identifies key factors and presents a generalized model for building the future of inclusive tourism. The monograph offers an expanded understanding of accessibility in the tourism industry and identifies new opportunities offered by Tourism 4.0 technologies (Zmyslony, 2022).

In the Russian scientific community, the most popular topic of research is international experience in organizing inclusive tourism and comparative analysis with domestic practice. This topic is addressed by Romanova (2018).

The methodological and methodical approaches substantiating inclusive tourism are examined by Borisenko-Klepach (2020), Petrik and Gabdrakhmanova (2020), Konanova (2016), Ialov and Meshkov (2016), Khetagurova and Molchanov (2018), Okhramenko and Okhramenko (2020), Churilina and Egorova (2016). The resource approach is examined by Lukianova and Sigida (2015), Maslova and Mukhomorova (2022). The legal basis of inclusive tourism is discussed by Mezhova et al. (2015), Upornikova et al. (2020), and Konanova (2016). The issues and prospects of inclusive tourism in Russia are considered by Seselkin et al. (2015) and Mezhova (2011). The emergence and development of inclusive tourism in Russia in recent decades are discussed by Levinskaia (2015), Temiakova (2017), Moskvichev and Ivanova (2020), and Petrova (2020).

The review of relevant sources suggests the following conclusions:

- The concepts of sustainable development, sustainable tourism, and inclusive tourism are objects of research interest studied in various aspects;
- The scientific understanding of sustainable development and sustainable tourism is preceded by an international regulatory and legal platform;
- The concept of inclusive tourism is actively discussed in research; Russian scientists are analyzing the theoretical and practical experience in the implementation of inclusive products accumulated by international colleagues.

METHODS

The established research goal predetermined a set of empirical and theoretical research methods.

Statistical analysis of data from the Federal State Statistics Service (Russia) was used to assess demand for tourist trips among people with disabilities.

The degree of coverage of the research problem in the scientific community and correlations between the concepts of sustainable development, sustainable tourism, and inclusive tourism were examined through the methods of generalization and abstraction.

The most popular organizational forms of inclusive tourism were identified via the empirical method of tracking the research object. This involved monitoring the Russian market for inclusive tourism and investigating and summarizing current experience in the implementation of inclusive tourism projects. Monitoring was also employed to analyze relevant submitted and approved applications to the Presidential Grants Fund. Visualization and comparison were used to present and summarize the obtained information.

Current State of Inclusive Tourism in Russia

The analysis of open sources in the subject area of the study indicates that the development of inclusive tourism in Russia is in its early stages.

The niche of organizing travel for people with disabilities in Russia is almost free. Regrettably, inclusive tours are predominantly organized by enthusiasts.

Among such enthusiasts are the creators of the Globe4all project, which offers routes for people with disabilities. With the onset of the pandemic, Globe4all's business, focused on foreign travel, switched to domestic tourism. The entrepreneurs joined the accelerator of the Moscow Innovation Cluster and the Moscow Travel Hub program "Factory of Travel Products and Services." Today, the selection of Globe4all tours is divided into four categories:

- for people with musculoskeletal conditions;
- for deaf and hard-of-hearing tourists;
- for visually impaired tourists;
- inclusion.

Of the 4,293 tour operators registered in the Unified Federal Register, only two consistently organize recreation for disabled people – the Liberty Travel Company (Liberty Travel Company, n.d.) and the ANEX Tour tour operator (the Rest Without Borders program) (Tour operator "ANEX Tour", n.d.). How can this situation be explained? First, there is the common belief that people with disabilities are a minority in the market, and this segment requires significant investment with low returns and profitability (Burnett, Baker, 2001).

Operators tend to want tangible evidence of the benefits this market can bring before committing to present such a product (Card et al., 2006; Stankov et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, there are several promising socially-oriented projects related to inclusive tourism that have been successfully implemented in various regions of Russia and deserve attention.

Here, it is worth considering inclusive tourism centers as a popular form of involving people with disabilities in tourism activities. Several constituent entities of the Russian Federation are developing this model, and it has successfully proven itself. To draw the necessary theoretical conclusions based on real data, we will characterize several examples.

The pioneer in this model was the Autonomous Non-Profit Organization (ANO) Center for Inclusive Tourism and Social Adaptation for People with Disabilities "Without Borders." The organization was registered in 2019. Without Borders ANO has developed several projects that received support from the Presidential Grants Fund (Presidential Grants Fund, n.d.) – "Roads of Good," "Inclusive All," and "Roads of Good: New Routes." These projects are designed for people with disabilities and their families and present a system of events aimed at developing inclusive tourism in the Belgorod region.

Notably, Without Borders ANO is the only organization in Belgorod that professionally and systematically provides tourist services and creates adapted tours for people with disabilities. Grant funds make it possible to provide people with disabilities with free adapted travel services.

The content of the projects includes virtual and inclusive tours for the target group, as well as training seminars for cultural workers and specialists in the tourism and excursion sphere. An important component in the work of the Without Borders inclusive tourism center is the development of a guide to the Belgorod region for people with disabilities, which was created in 2020.

The Sverdlovsk region inclusive tourism center is a project of the Ural Center for the Development of Civil Initiatives and Social Partnership, the winner of the 2nd competition of the Presidential Grants Fund in 2017. The main activities of the organization include investigating the accessible environment of the Sverdlovsk region; developing excursions for people with disabilities; organizing and holding inclusive excursions to the sights of the Sverdlovsk region; posting about places of recreation and leisure for people with low mobility on the official website of the project (www.inclusionekb.ru) and developing an accessibility map for the Sverdlovsk region; and holding round tables to discuss and develop tourist routes.

As a result, the center has organized 16 field trips around the region and 12 excursions to Yekaterinburg, held 12 round tables, and developed and printed information materials, including 1,000 brochures on "Accessible environment in inclusive tourism."

Another notable organization is the autonomous non-profit organization to support the development of adaptive tourism and sports for families with disabilities, AIST. Registered on September 11, 2019, in Moscow, it provides services in tourism, recreation, rehabilitation, social adaptation, sports, and health improvement for citizens with disabilities and special needs, retirees, and their families. At the heart of AIST's work is an algorithm for adapting standard travel services to the needs of people with disabilities with different travel experiences.

Another inclusive tourism project is Udmurtia BezGranichnaya, which focuses on creating conditions for domestic inclusive tourism in the region and received support from the Presidential Grants Fund. This project involves the development of routes for travelers with disabilities, training for relevant specialists, and the creation of accessible environments at tourist facilities. It proposes a trip around the Republic along five tour routes of various directions in the format of weekend routes. The cultural, educational, industrial, and ecological forms of tourism are reflected in visits to national centers, museums, eco-farms, ethno-parks, and Orthodox churches and monasteries. The target audience includes people with disabilities aged from 14 to 60.

Support from the Presidential Grants Fund was also given to the Inclusive Hospitality School (Hakassia).

The All-Russian project "Development of inclusive tourism" was launched in 2023 with the support of the State Duma of the Russian Federation. The project aims to increase the accessibility of tourist facilities and services and raise demand for domestic tourist routes for people with disabilities and other low-mobility population groups.

Analyzing inclusive tourism practices existing in Russia today, we observe a predominance of the model of inclusive tourism development through inclusive tourism centers. Summarizing the obtained information, we can highlight the following functions of such organizations (Figure 3).

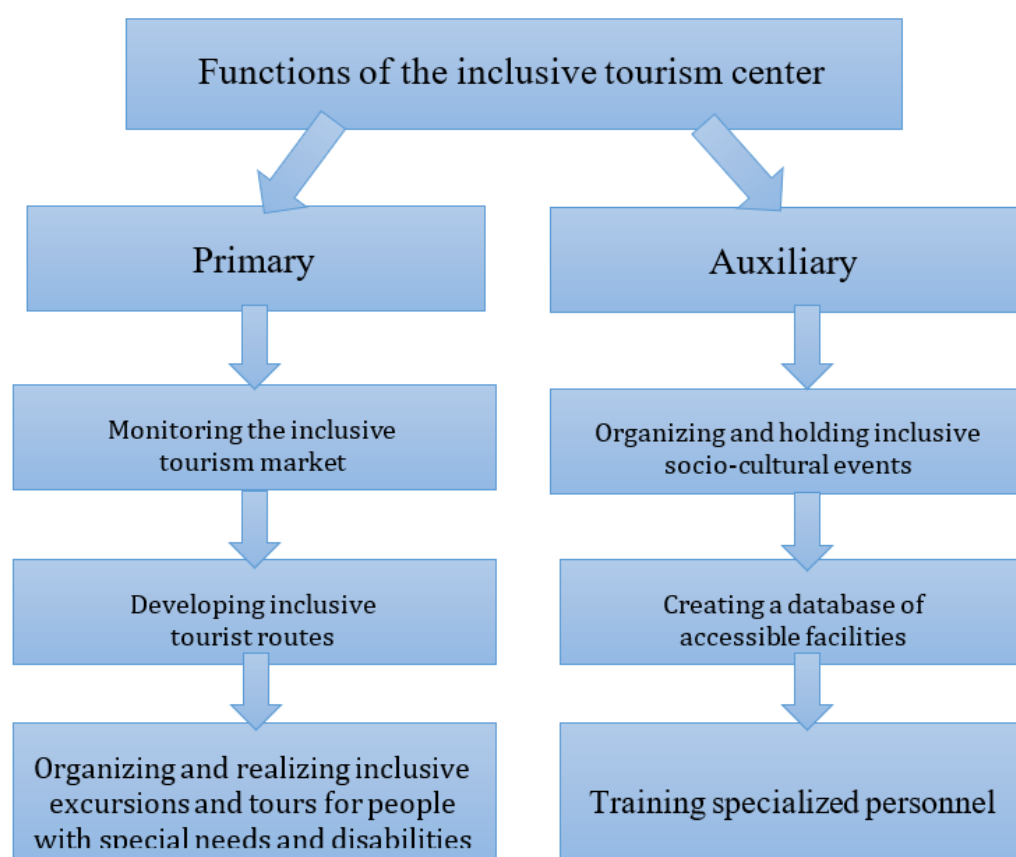


Figure 3: Functions of the inclusive tourism center

Apart from inclusive tourism centers, there are many other organizational forms of inclusive tourism, such as the so-called service-type organizations that, in addition to developing and organizing tourist and excursion routes, perform several service functions (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Functions of service-type inclusive tourism organizations

The Russian Federation does have some examples of such organizations. For example, in Moscow, a service technology for tourists with disabilities was developed and tested based on the Barkhatnoe Solntse project. The Special Tourism Bureau is another model for the development of inclusive tourism. It is Moscow's first service for tourists with special needs that offers social rehabilitation services in addition to tourist and excursion products. In this type of inclusive tourist practice, the main emphasis is placed on the service component.

The analysis of inclusive recreation practices in the Russian Federation allows us to highlight the following trends:

- Inclusive tourism centers are typically created and developed based on non-profit organizations (often ANOs);
- The work of these centers, and, by extension, the organization of inclusive tourism programs, is funded by grants. Some projects mentioned above were supported by the Presidential Grants Fund. The Fund allocates grants from the President of the Russian Federation for the implementation of socially significant projects by non-profit non-governmental organizations on a competitive basis. Inclusive tourism projects correspond to the category "Social support for people with disabilities, including their rehabilitation using modern technologies, providing access to the services of organizations operating in the social sphere and tourist services." Almost all projects highlighted in the article either provide a basis for the development of initiatives taken or present a continuation of successfully implemented projects.

To investigate this grant competition further, we analyzed the experience of participating socially oriented organizations in the field of inclusive tourism from 2020 to 2023. In total, 97 projects were submitted during this period, and only 17 received support. The distribution of submitted and winner projects by year is provided in Figure 5.

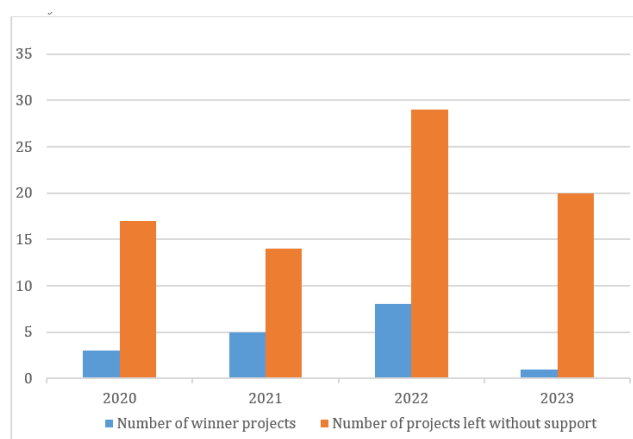


Figure 5: Results of the grant competition of inclusive tourism projects held by the Presidential Grants Fund in 2020-2023

The number of projects that received funding was the highest in 2022 (8). However, this year also stands out with the greatest number of submitted applications, which reached 37. In 2020, 3 out of 20 projects were approved; in 2021, 5 out of 19; and in 2023, only 1 out of 21. In terms of the ratio of grants won to the total number of submitted applications, the best result, 26%, was achieved in 2021.

These results demonstrate that the development of accessible tourism in Russia is in the interest of many actors, in addition to the consumers of inclusive services. Considering the number of applications submitted to the Presidential Grants Fund, the number of initiators of social projects in inclusive tourism has remained stable over the past 4 years, which indicates the interest of various parties in sustainable development, including authorities, the consumers of inclusive services, and social non-profits.

DISCUSSION

Many publications have repeatedly stressed that quality inclusive tourism products are difficult to provide due to the lack of interaction between the tourism sectors and environmental availability (Nyanjom et al., 2018). The accessibility of the territory translates into the ability and extent of the person's participation in tourism. It is not enough to secure one component of travel if other components are nearly inaccessible. Until there are solid examples of good practices, the industry cannot confidently navigate the benefits of offering travel products for people with disabilities (Gillovic, McIntosh, 2020). Some destinations, namely Europe, the United States, and Australia, comply with legal requirements and "actively develop infrastructure, goods, services, marketing and promotion to move beyond tourism and disability to actively pursue accessible tourism" (Darcy et al., 2020, p. 142).

However, it is a confirmed fact that there is no comprehensive approach or coordination among different components in the tourist system. As a result, the environment largely remains inaccessible, and people with disabilities may encounter several barriers (Nyanjom et al., 2018). Among such barriers are typically physical inaccessibility, inaccurate or inadequate information, negative attitudes, and discrimination (Darcy et al., 2020). Some barriers can be overcome, but not all, since they are based on the complicated interaction inherent in the person (McKercher, Darcy, 2018).

Our study of the current state of inclusive tourism in Russia revealed that over the past 5 years, inclusive tourism centers have become a popular form of organization of services for people with disabilities. An inclusive tourism center is a socially constructed, unique tourist environment that can reduce the number of barriers. Unlike tour operators, such centers are multifunctional (Figures 3 and 4) and perform many tasks apart from technological, providing social, psychological, rehabilitation, and support services for people with disabilities. This practice is scaled, has been successfully applied in various regions of Russia, and can be used abroad. However, the experience of its implementation needs to be scientifically and technologically substantiated for each specific territory, which is a promising direction for further research on inclusive tourism.

CONCLUSIONS

The results indicate that the implementation of sustainable tourism principles in their social aspect in Russia is at its beginning stage. Therefore, serious steps are needed to build a worldview consistent with the documents adopted within this framework to protect the rights of people with disabilities and special needs.

The successful development of any tourist destination requires the implementation of sustainable development principles, creating an inclusive environment that is comfortable for every population category, including people with disabilities and low mobility. The search for organizational forms and the most successful practices in inclusive tourism and the dissemination of positive experiences are promising areas for theoretical and applied research. In this context, inclusive tourism centers as a unique format of tourist services for people with disabilities in the Russian Federation can become a subject of serious scientific and professional study. This complex organizational form has many advantages that satisfy the needs of people with disabilities.

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