

## Prospects for the Development of Inclusive Tourism in Uzbekistan

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**Abstract:** Inclusive tourism, which focuses on providing accessible and equitable travel experiences for all individuals, regardless of their physical, cognitive, or socio-economic limitations, has become an essential aspect of the global tourism industry. In Uzbekistan, a country rich in historical and cultural landmarks, the potential for inclusive tourism is significant, but remains underdeveloped. This article examines the current state of inclusive tourism in Uzbekistan, explores the challenges and opportunities, and outlines the steps required for its growth. The aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of how inclusive tourism can contribute to both the country's tourism industry and its socio-economic development.

**Key words:** Inclusive tourism, accessibility, sustainable tourism, Uzbekistan, tourism development, socio-economic impact



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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the social policy of Uzbekistan has been aimed at ensuring equal opportunities for people with disabilities and the abolition of any forms of discrimination in various spheres of life. The solution to this global problem is directly related to creating conditions for ensuring the unhindered advancement of citizens in the social and labor spheres, as well as expanding

opportunities for full participation in society. A barrier-free environment is extremely important in this regard. Today, we can say with confidence that the development of an inclusive society is one of the priority trends in the formation of the social policy of the Uzbek state.

However, so far, much has been done to implement the state program and the concept for further improvement and development. The so-called "no-step" architecture is gradually appearing in Uzbek cities. Despite this, goods and services that meet the needs of people with disabilities are not widely available. A large proportion of children with disabilities, people with sensory impairments, and health problems do not participate in social life, and their access to education, health care, and a variety of cultural, sports, and leisure activities is limited. At the same time, it is obvious that positive changes in realizing the potential of people with disabilities largely determine the level of social development of society and the state as a whole. Within the framework of the research, we will focus on the possibility and prospects for developing inclusive representatives of the tourism industry of Uzbekistan.

## **BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE**

Uzbekistan's newly adopted Development Strategy sets ambitious targets for its future, aiming for higher living standards, an inclusive economy, and an open society, and a nation that has taken its rightful place among the most developed countries in the world. To achieve this, Uzbekistan must use its environmental resources more efficiently, developing sustainable green growth, creating an environment that enables rapid growth not just for Uzbeks, but for the millions of tourists seeking to experience the country's rich natural and cultural heritage, and making sure that, although growth is rapid, the country's natural treasures still provide benefits for future generations. While over-tourism is a growing problem in many destinations, many tourists are now seeking unique and natural experiences beyond the beaten track, and such experiences are among Uzbekistan's competitive advantages in the global tourism marketplace. To capitalize on that potential, create new opportunities for local communities and small and medium-sized enterprises, and safeguard the country's unique wildlife and cultural heritage, the government of Uzbekistan joined forces to develop a strategy that would enhance Uzbekistan's position to provide the sort of sustainable, inclusive tourism experiences these discerning travelers are seeking.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Inclusive tourism is an emerging concept within the global tourism industry that emphasizes equal access and participation for all individuals, regardless of their physical abilities, age, or other socio-economic factors. As the tourism industry grows, more emphasis is placed on creating an accessible and inclusive environment that allows individuals with disabilities and other special needs to fully engage in tourism experiences. While inclusive tourism remains underdeveloped in many

parts of the world, recent research sheds light on the importance of creating accessible destinations, the challenges that prevent inclusion, and the potential benefits for local communities and economies.

**The Global Shift Toward Inclusive Tourism:** The global discourse on inclusive tourism has gained momentum in recent years, with scholars and industry professionals emphasizing its potential to foster sustainable development, social inclusion, and economic growth. Richards (2019) highlights that inclusive tourism is no longer just a niche sector but an essential aspect of the future tourism industry [1]. Richards suggests that accessible tourism provides opportunities for various marginalized groups, including people with disabilities, senior citizens, and families with young children. Furthermore, Khan (2020) emphasizes that accessible tourism can reduce social barriers and improve the quality of life for disadvantaged groups by fostering greater participation in cultural, recreational, and social activities. According to Gao and Zhang (2021), inclusive tourism also plays a crucial role in the broader framework of social sustainability. The authors suggest that accessibility improvements in tourism infrastructure can contribute to a more inclusive society by ensuring that marginalized communities are not excluded from social and economic opportunities [2]. They further note that inclusive tourism promotes intercultural exchange, encourages diversity, and helps create a more tolerant and accepting society.

**Tourism Infrastructure and Accessibility:** In recent studies, the need for accessible infrastructure has been identified as a key factor in the development of inclusive tourism. Murray and Cudmore (2020) argue that physical accessibility, such as the availability of ramps, elevators, and wheelchair-friendly public transportation, is essential for attracting tourists with mobility challenges. These authors also stress that many tourist destinations still lack such infrastructure, making it difficult for people with disabilities to participate in tourism activities [3].

Poria et al. (2010), in their study of accessible tourism, argue that physical barriers are not the only impediments; attitudinal barriers also play a significant role in exclusion. They emphasize the importance of creating an inclusive tourism culture by training tourism operators, educators, and policymakers to recognize and address the diverse needs of tourists with disabilities [4]. Similarly, Kumar et al. (2021) point out that infrastructure improvement, while essential, must be complemented by an inclusive mindset within the tourism industry. This includes educating the staff at hotels, restaurants, and cultural sites on how to provide better services to people with disabilities, seniors, and other vulnerable groups.

**Inclusive Tourism in Developing Countries:** In the context of developing countries, including Uzbekistan, Swain (2022) highlights that the development of inclusive tourism faces significant challenges due to limited resources, underdeveloped infrastructure, and a lack of awareness. Swain argues that many developing countries prioritize mass tourism and often overlook the specific needs

of individuals with disabilities or other challenges. However, Swain also notes that there is an increasing recognition of the value of inclusive tourism as a driver for sustainable development, especially in areas with rich cultural or natural assets.

Similarly, Jha and Pandey (2021) provide a detailed analysis of inclusive tourism in South Asia and highlight similar challenges faced by countries in this region. Their study underscores the role of government policies in promoting inclusive tourism, particularly through initiatives that focus on accessibility standards and regulations. The authors argue that the successful development of inclusive tourism depends on a strong commitment from both the public and private sectors to create inclusive environments for all tourists [5].

**Economic Impact and Social Inclusion:** The economic impact of inclusive tourism is another area of focus in recent research. Blichfeldt et al. (2019) found that inclusive tourism has the potential to bring significant economic benefits, particularly for local communities. The authors suggest that by catering to a broader range of tourists, including those with disabilities, destinations can tap into a previously underserved market, resulting in increased revenue for businesses and the creation of new jobs [7]. The increased participation of people with disabilities in tourism also contributes to greater social inclusion, which is essential for reducing inequality and promoting social cohesion. Fletcher and Lee (2021) support these findings by demonstrating that inclusive tourism creates a ripple effect, benefiting not only tourists with special needs but also the broader community [8]. They argue that inclusive tourism initiatives improve local economies by promoting job creation, improving local infrastructure, and enhancing the social fabric of communities. Additionally, these initiatives provide opportunities for local businesses, such as restaurants, hotels, and transport services, to diversify their customer base.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This section provides an in-depth analysis of the current state of inclusive tourism in Uzbekistan, including data collected through various surveys, interviews with stakeholders, and secondary research sources. We assess key factors such as infrastructure, public perceptions, government support, and the broader economic impact of inclusive tourism. Through this analysis, we aim to identify areas for improvement and propose recommendations for developing an inclusive tourism environment in Uzbekistan.

### State of Infrastructure

One of the major challenges facing inclusive tourism in Uzbekistan is the lack of accessible infrastructure. This includes physical barriers that prevent people with

disabilities, seniors, and other marginalized groups from fully participating in tourism activities. The country's infrastructure, such as hotels, transportation, and tourist sites, is still in the process of becoming more accessible. According to a **2023 report from the World Bank**, only **15%** of Uzbekistan's major tourist sites meet basic accessibility standards for people with disabilities.

To understand the extent of these limitations, an evaluation of the accessibility of 50 major tourist attractions in Uzbekistan was conducted. The evaluation measured factors such as wheelchair ramps, elevators, accessible bathrooms, and public transportation options. The results are summarized in **Table 1** below:

***Table 1: Accessibility of Major Tourist Sites in Uzbekistan (2023)***

<b>Tourist Site</b>	<b>Total Number of Accessible Features</b>	<b>Total Number of Features</b>	<b>Accessibility Percentage (%)</b>
Registan Square (Samarkand)	3	15	20%
Bukhara Historic Center	2	12	17%
Khiva Historical Sites	1	10	10%
Tashkent City Parks	5	20	25%
Fergana Valley Tourism Sites	2	8	25%
Chimgan Mountains	4	18	22%
<b>Overall Accessibility</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>20.48%</b>

The table clearly shows that there is a significant gap in accessibility across major tourist sites, with the overall accessibility rate at only **20.48%**. These results indicate that there is a pressing need for improvements in accessibility at Uzbekistan's major tourism destinations.

## Tourist Perceptions and Demand for Inclusive Tourism

A survey conducted in **2023** aimed to understand the perceptions of both local and international tourists about the inclusivity of Uzbekistan's tourism sector. The survey focused on tourists with disabilities, seniors, and families with young children. The key findings of the survey are shown in **Table 2** below:

**Table 2: Survey Results on Demand for Inclusive Tourism in Uzbekistan (2023)**

Survey Question	Yes (%)	No (%)	Not Sure (%)
Do you believe Uzbekistan is an inclusive tourist destination?	29%	54%	17%
Would you be more likely to visit if accessibility were improved?	62%	18%	20%
Do you think the government is doing enough to make tourism inclusive?	23%	69%	8%
Should tourism staff receive training on accessibility?	84%	8%	8%



As the data shows, only **29%** of respondents felt that Uzbekistan is an inclusive tourist destination, with the majority (**54%**) expressing dissatisfaction with the current state of accessibility. Furthermore, **62%** of respondents indicated that they would be more likely to visit Uzbekistan if accessibility were improved. This suggests a latent demand for more inclusive tourism offerings in the country. Interestingly, **84%** of respondents believe that tourism staff should receive training on accessibility, underlining the need for greater awareness and capacity-building within the tourism sector.

### **Government Support and Policy Initiatives**

The Uzbek government has recognized the importance of inclusive tourism and has taken steps to address some of the challenges. According to a report from the **Ministry of Tourism of Uzbekistan (2023)**, **\$10 million** has been allocated toward upgrading the infrastructure in major tourist areas. This includes building accessible ramps, elevators, and improving public transportation systems.

However, **interviews with stakeholders** revealed that the implementation of these initiatives has been slow, and there is still a lack of coordination between government agencies and private stakeholders in the tourism industry. Some tourism operators have expressed frustration with the lack of clear guidelines and incentives for making their services more accessible.

### **Local Community Engagement and Training**

In terms of local community involvement, there is growing recognition of the need for training and awareness-building among tourism service providers. A survey conducted among **100 tourism businesses** (hotels, restaurants, transportation services) revealed that:

- **40%** of tourism businesses had no experience or knowledge of accessible tourism.
- **60%** of the businesses reported that they would be willing to invest in accessibility improvements if training was provided.
- **18%** of employees in the tourism sector had received any formal training on how to accommodate tourists with disabilities.

These statistics highlight a significant gap in the understanding and capacity of local businesses to cater to tourists with disabilities. This is a crucial area for intervention, as training can improve the quality of services provided and foster a more inclusive tourism environment.

## Economic Impact of Inclusive Tourism

Inclusive tourism has the potential to create significant economic benefits for Uzbekistan. Research by **Blichfeldt et al. (2019)** suggests that inclusive tourism generates positive economic outcomes, particularly in underdeveloped regions. In the case of Uzbekistan, inclusive tourism could diversify the tourist market, drawing visitors from the disability community, senior citizens, and families with young children. This would, in turn, help to generate increased revenue and create job opportunities for local businesses.

To quantify the economic impact of inclusive tourism, a hypothetical model was developed based on the assumption that the implementation of accessibility improvements could increase the number of visitors by **20%** over the next 5 years. The estimated additional revenue generated from tourism is shown in **Table 3**.

Year	Projected Increase in Visitors (%)	Projected Increase in Revenue (\$ Million)
2023	5%	03.фев
2024	7%	04.июн
2025	10%	06.мар
2026	15%	09.апр
2027	20%	12.май
2028	20%	15.0

**Table 3: Projected Economic Impact of Inclusive Tourism in Uzbekistan (2023-2028)**

According to the model, if Uzbekistan were to improve its accessibility infrastructure and services, the tourism sector could see an additional **\$15 million** in revenue by **2028**. This would not only benefit tourism-related businesses but also contribute to broader economic development in both urban and rural areas.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates that inclusive tourism in Uzbekistan holds significant potential for economic growth and social inclusion. However, there are considerable barriers to the development of this sector, particularly in terms of infrastructure, lack of awareness, and inadequate training for service providers. The government's efforts to invest in infrastructure improvements are commendable but need to be expanded and better coordinated to meet the needs of tourists with disabilities. To fully unlock the potential of inclusive tourism, Uzbekistan must continue to prioritize the development of accessible infrastructure, raise awareness about the



importance of inclusivity, and invest in capacity-building for local businesses and tourism service providers. By doing so, Uzbekistan can not only attract a more diverse range of tourists but also create a more equitable and sustainable tourism sector that benefits all members of society.

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