

Inciting tourist accommodation managers to make their establishments accessible to people with disabilities

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to report on the research carried out in Québec as part of a master's degree for the IÉSEG School of Management on behalf of Kéroul, an organization whose mission is to make tourism and culture accessible to people with disabilities. Established over 30 years ago and active largely in Québec, Kéroul has observed a lingering reluctance on the part of tourism industry operators to meeting the needs of disabled visitors. In the research, we set out to answer the following question: how can Kéroul encourage tourism establishments to develop accessibility? In light of the hotel industry's key role in tourism, exploratory research was conducted with 30 Québec hotel managers through extensive individual interviews.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The exploratory research took the form of in-depth interviews with hotel managers. The sample was selected after conferring with Kéroul and a Québec hotel association. As a first step, a jointly written letter was sent to managers who were association members, inviting them to be interviewed.*

Findings – *Some respondents showed an interest in accessibility, seen as a means of attracting group bookings; others confirmed that accessible rooms rented well to guests from all categories. Nonetheless, most were skeptical about the economic value of the disabled market. They were also poorly informed about this type of clientele, the concept of accessibility and the facilities "barrier-free" tourism requires.*

Originality/value – *Until now, the literature on accessible tourism has generally accentuated the needs of disabled consumers and analyzed their behavior with regard to tourism. Arguments to demonstrate the market potential of tourists with disabilities have ensued. The need to meet this demand was expressed while highlighting the low degree of consideration given to the disabled market by tourism professionals at present. However, few publications treat accessibility as a viable business opportunity. The study reveals the concerns and views of tourism industry professionals vis-à-vis accessibility and is all the more relevant, given the current context in Québec.*

Keywords *Tourism, Accessibility, Disability, Hospitality, Accessible tourism, Sustainability in tourism*

Paper type *Viewpoint*

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1. Introduction

Until now, the literature on accessible tourism has generally accentuated the needs of disabled consumers and analyzed their behavior with regard to tourism. Arguments to demonstrate the market potential of tourists with disabilities have ensued. The need to meet this demand was expressed while highlighting the low degree of consideration given to the disabled market by tourism professionals at present. This study reveals the concerns and views of tourism industry professionals vis-à-vis accessibility and tries to understand the disaffection of this industry with regard to accessibility. It aims at giving a number of possible drivers for the development of accessible tourist accommodation.

2. Purpose

The population of people with disabilities today is more than one billion worldwide (World Health Organisation, 2011), and between 2000 and 2050, the percentage of people aged 60 years or over will double, knowing that there is a well-established link between disability-related needs and aging (World Health Organisation, 2007). Given these observations, several authors have already expressed the need to respond to this demand as soon as possible (ex: Darcy, 2010; Kéroul, 2011). Moreover, if today's "baby-boomers" have a significant purchasing power and show a need to stay active, demanding products, and services that are adapted to their needs (Donovan, 2013), it has also been underlined in the literature that tomorrow's seniors will travel more than ever (Pochet and Schéou, 2003).

A number of destinations have already observed growth in this market: in the UK, a recent VisitEngland study has shown the value of accessible tourism to have increased by 33 percent in four years, or three times the growth of the domestic tourism market (Calladine, 2014). So both now and in the future, the market for tourists with disabilities or reduced mobility would appear to be key. However, according to Darcy (2010), Pagán (2012), and Bizjak *et al.* (2011), tourism establishment owners and managers turn away from these customers, and only few authors have tried to explain this phenomenon. Some wrote about professionals being afraid of this market: afraid of making mistakes with these customers (Office for Disability Issues, 2012), or afraid of having to deal with too many people with disabilities and not being able to handle the situation (Phillipps, 2002). These fears seem to be fed by three main factors: widespread communication about legal compliance but only few messages linking accessibility with business opportunities (Office for Disability Issues, 2012); a general concern regarding accessibility's possible related costs (Darcy, 2010); and current research practices that do not link diversity or sustainability principles with enhanced shareholder value (Donovan, 2013). Darcy (2010) puts forward the fact that hotel customers would not like to rent accessible rooms, which can refrain managers from investing in them. Wang (1992) goes even further and describes a general resistance to fully include people with disabilities within the society.

In fact, the legal framework is insufficient to drive the development of accessible tourism. In Québec, legislation enacted in 2001 requires all new and renovated hotels to make 10 percent of their rooms accessible to people with reduced mobility. However, tardy application of the law combined with a blatant lack of sanctions have led to breaches (Trudel, 2012). In the fall of 2014, an investigation into 60 Montréal hotels conducted by popular Québec television show *La Fracture* concluded that none respected the law. This situation is far from being unique if we are to believe Donovan (2013), who stipulates that for companies in general, even the risk of litigation fails to raise much concern about compliance with disability laws and regulations.

Kéroul, a nonprofit Québec-based organization dedicated to making tourism and culture accessible to people with restricted physical ability, is testament to the problem. Our research was conducted as part of a master's degree at the IÉSEG School of Management (Lille and Paris, France) with a view to helping Kéroul address the issue.

Kéroul is the sole body mandated by the Québec government to assess and certify accessibility in the tourism industry, including accommodation establishments. Indeed, accommodation plays a key role in the industry, considering that the World Tourism Organization (2000) qualifies visitors as "tourists" if they spend more than one night in a given location. By the same token, the scarcity of accessible accommodation essentially makes it impossible for people who need adapted rooms to become tourists. After 35 years of working with the public and private sectors to develop accessible tourism in Québec, Kéroul estimates that only 5.2 percent of tourist accommodation there is fully or partially accessible^[1]. The organization bears witness to the fact that despite legal progress, tax incentives and the many arguments proving the potential of this clientele, accessible tourist accommodation remains significantly underdeveloped. To better understand the situation and detect issues underestimated or even overlooked by Kéroul – issues that are highly likely to be encountered in and outside of Québec – we consulted a number of tourist accommodation managers in the province. Our study lays the groundwork for reflection on the concrete actions Kéroul could take both at present and in the future.

3. Approach

Our exploratory research took the form of in-depth interviews with hotel managers. The sample was selected through traditional access, after conferring with K eroul and a Qu ebec hotel association[2]. As a first step, a jointly written letter was sent to the 600 managers who were association members, inviting them to be interviewed. Only 36 of them responded to that request. Considering this low participation rate and the immensity of the province of Qu ebec, we decided not to conduct face-to-face interviews but telephone interviews. In fact, interviewing on the phone at a time chosen by every participant would make each of him or her more likely to complete the interview, while saving the interviewers a great amount of time spent on the road.

Finally, we interviewed a total of 30 managers, the majority of whom were directors, general managers, and owners, as shown in Table I.

The average interview lasted 40 minutes and began with the following explanation of our objectives:

- to better understand the relationship between hoteliers and disabled guests with a view to facilitating the work of the former, improving service delivery and further developing accessibility in hotels;
- to better understand the challenges faced by hoteliers in terms of offering adapted facilities; and
- to underline facts that are likely to have an impact on the managers' will to develop accessibility.

Our interview consisted of both open-ended and closed-ended questions and addressed three main topics: the accessibility of the hotel concerned, its clientele and the difficulties in making the establishment accessible. We chose to use a mixed methods design to place the responses into the context of each concerned establishment. We could then compare facts and statements, enhancing the meaning of the participants' affirmations. For example, it allowed us to underline that 20 percent of interviewees talked about their establishment as "accessible" whereas closed-ended questions proved them wrong.

Extending that thought, we came to the conclusion that drawing a picture of the concerned establishments was more relevant than analyzing the socio-demographics of the interviewees. The overall establishments picture was composed of a homogeneous sample in terms of geographic distribution and size, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

Once all interviews were completed, we transcribed them and structured our analysis thanks to a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software. We began by analyzing answers to the closed-ended questions to bring out quantitative data for the entire sample. Then, we selected some interviews for a qualitative study. This selection was based on whether the interviewee advanced arguments in favor of accessibility that were new to us (either with respect to the literature or K eroul's knowledge), or shared positive experiences with regard to accessibility. Finally, ten interviews were selected and collected on the software to sort the managers' statements by themes. We analyzed this information as sorted in Table II.

Table I Distribution of interviewees by profession

| | <i>No. of interviewees</i> | <i>Overall sample percentage</i> |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Manager | 4 | 13.33 |
| Executive director | 8 | 26.67 |
| Chief executive officer | 2 | 6.67 |
| Owner | 7 | 23.33 |
| Director | 9 | 30 |
| Total | 30 | 100 |

Figure 1 Distribution by location of the establishments represented by the study volunteers

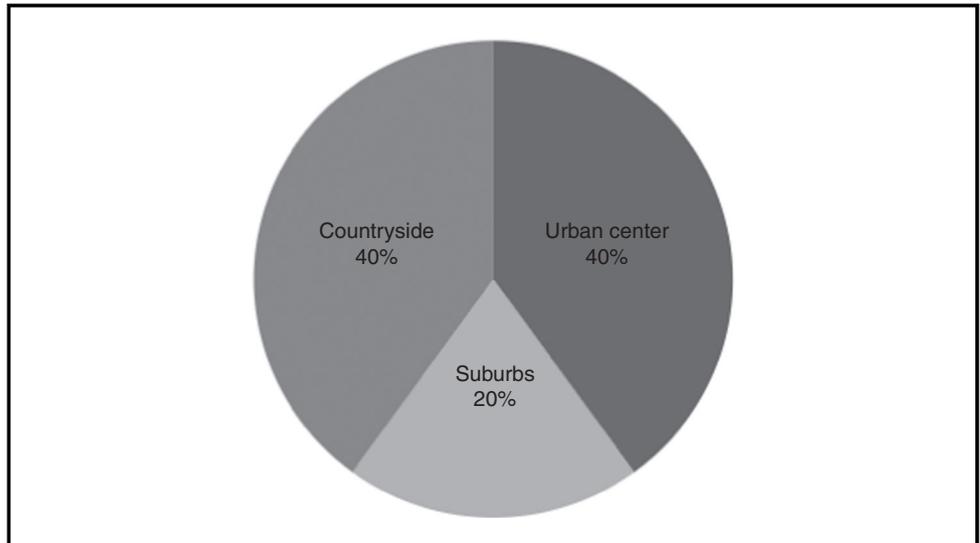
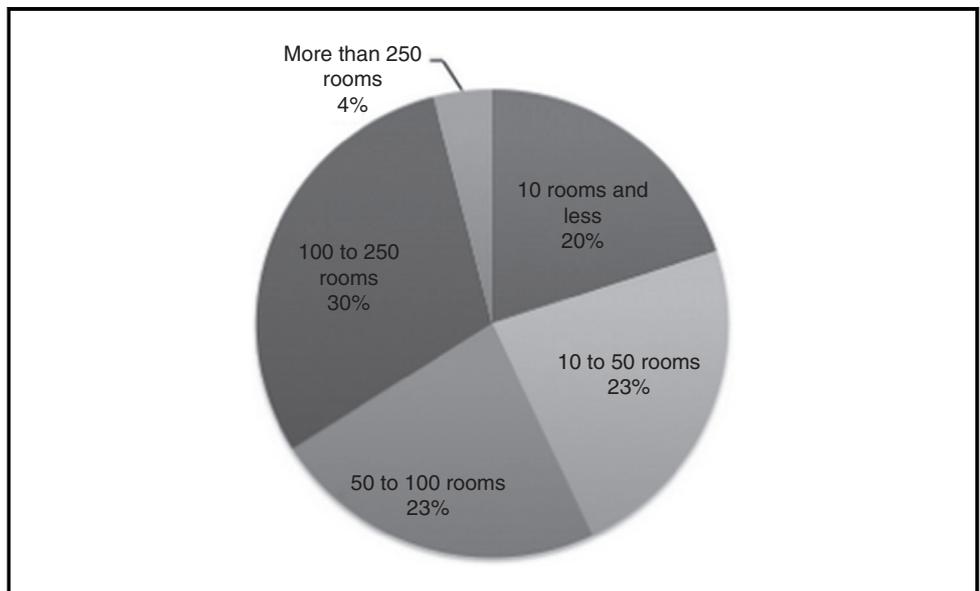


Figure 2 Distribution by size of the establishments represented by the study volunteers



4. Findings

Three key observations

The results have yielded two particularly encouraging findings. First, more than 60 percent of respondents whose establishments had accessible rooms stated that those rooms were also rented to guests who did not necessarily need special facilities; 16 percent also said that adapted rooms had their own advantages (particularly regarding space) and were appreciated or even explicitly requested by guests with no apparent accessibility needs. This runs counter to the idea that accessible rooms are difficult to rent, as mentioned in the literature review. This goes against the idea that overall clients have an aversion toward accessible rooms. The essential similarity between adapted and standard rooms could be a facilitating factor and was even mentioned as such by certain respondents. Relatively speaking, our results suggest that the design of adapted

Table II Organization of the analyzed meta-themes and themes

| <i>Meta-themes</i> | <i>Themes</i> |
|---|---|
| Adverse opinion on accessibility | Regarding the budget needed Regarding insufficient benefits Due to a particular context Linked to the amount of work required An adapted room has a negative impact on overall customers |
| Statements in favor of accessibility, in accordance with the literature | Companions mean more revenue These clients tend to be more and more active Disabled people have money to spend in leisures The aging of the population requires accessibility |
| Statements in favor of accessibility already underlined by Kéroul | Accessibility is not more expensive if part of construction or renovation works Accessibility profits to more people than disabled people only Accessibility is a social responsibility |
| New arguments in favor of accessibility | Impact on the image of the establishment Impact on all clients Economic interest Interest for groups Accessibility is an integral part of customer service The accessibility market represents a significant number of clients |
| Understanding of accessibility | Needs and expectations of disabled people Understanding of the accessibility arrangements Available information about accessibility |

rooms is not in itself a barrier to implementing accessibility, particularly when such rooms do not differ greatly from regular guestrooms. It could be interesting to promote this concept, for example, by disseminating photographs of establishments where the design is standard for both adapted and regular rooms.

The second finding of interest is the relevance of accessibility for any establishment wishing to attract group bookings. Indeed, 10 percent of our respondents reported developing accessibility in their establishment to better accommodate conference attendees, wedding parties and other family gatherings. They also said that doing so had yielded significant benefits. Such groups, who often seek to accommodate everyone in the same establishment, are likely to include at least one person in need of an adapted room. Ultimately, accommodation will be chosen based on the establishment's ability to adequately serve the needs of the entire group. This finding represents a key argument against the skepticism expressed in the literature regarding the low profitability of accessibility.

The third finding emerged from the observations of one respondent: if a feature is seen as essential for improving tourist accommodation classification (whose levels are often characterized by a given number of stars), the investment required to implement that feature will be seriously considered. According to Kéroul, accessibility accounts for just five of the 1,000 points in the establishment evaluation grid used by the Corporation de l'industrie touristique du Québec (CITQ). Giving accessibility significant weighting in the tourist accommodation classification is certainly a lever to be considered by Kéroul, currently in talks with the CITQ on the matter. Given that room rates are directly related to the number of stars awarded to an institution, represents a strong argument for managers as it links accessibility with the business opportunity sought through classification.

Doubts regarding market potential and profitability

Our sample expressed a certain skepticism regarding the economic value of accessibility. For example, 16.7 percent of respondents considered the short- to medium-term profitability of

accessibility amenities improbable if not downright impossible. However, when incorporated into a new construction or renovation, adapted facilities often entail no additional major expenses, since accessibility primarily involves organizing the space to make each element usable by all.

Likewise, few respondents saw accessible tourism as a promising market. Only 10 percent mentioned the aging population as factoring into increased accessibility needs; a scant 6.7 percent reported that people with disabilities were active and inclined to travel; and just 16.7 percent said that adapted facilities could serve guests other than disabled visitors. Lastly, the fact that tourists with disabilities rarely travel alone and have proven loyal to accessible facilities was mentioned by only one respondent. Such notions thus appear to be little known among hotel industry professionals, who would probably address accessibility differently had they had a more complete knowledge.

The potential of this clientele was also questioned by 16.7 percent of our sample, who believed that travelers with disabilities accounted for only a small part of the market. Similarly, 20 percent of respondents said that adapted rooms were mostly rented to guests who did not necessarily have specific needs. These notions are questionable, given that the health problems associated with a disability can be invisible, as highlighted by the World Health Organisation (2011). In fact, according to Magnus Berglund, accessibility director for the Scandic hotel chain, 70 percent of all disabilities are invisible. As a result, it is difficult for an establishment's staff to judge whether or not someone who has booked an adapted room has a real need of it to be able to fully enjoy their stay. Furthermore, it came to our attention that guests who clearly need adapted rooms are not systematically counted for statistical ends by tourist accommodation establishments, which throws into question any estimates as to the scope of this clientele. The use of adapted rooms is therefore difficult to measure.

Accessibility: a poorly understood notion

Our study has revealed that raising awareness about the concept of accessibility makes sense, given the apparent lack of understanding about it. In fact, more than 20 percent of respondents rated their establishment as "accessible" when in fact it was not, which we were easily able to verify through simple questions about the essential features of accessible accommodation (e.g. doorway width or the free space next to the toilet known as the "transfer zone").

Others said that a disabled person was usually accompanied by a helper (which in their eyes compensated somewhat for the lack of adapted facilities) or argued that guests with disabilities easily adapted to accommodation that was "non-accessible."

In parallel, they also said that accessibility required too many amenities or that the boundary between adapted accommodation and hospital rooms was relatively difficult to establish. Finally, some respondents representing establishments with the accent on outdoor activities did not necessarily see the interest in developing accessibility, saying this clientele was less able to participate in such activities. Similar to the idea that disability systematically prevented physical activity, other prejudices were expressed by two respondents: one cited the need to be served by adapted public transport to be accessible to persons with disabilities; the other believed that proximity to a hospital was essential. A percentage of our respondents therefore had clearly erroneous notions of accessibility and disability, which led them to draw false conclusions about this clientele.

A shortfall due to errors

During our interviews, we observed cases where, despite a clear will to make accommodation accessible, the amenities provided fell short of actual needs. In all, 30 percent of our sample admitted making errors with regard to these amenities, while just over half (56.7 percent) reported knowing where to find the information they needed to adapt their facilities. The various situations encountered were as follows:

- some respondents (13.3 percent) said that they had assumed their architects, designers, suppliers, and/or interior decorators were aware of the standards to apply;
- some (6.7 percent) said that the construction or renovation professionals they had hired did not have the information required, resulting in inadequate facilities;

- only one respondent reported feeling sufficiently informed (by an architectural firm specializing in such facilities); and
- lastly, 10 percent said they became aware of their errors only after construction was completed and attributed the mistakes to having been guided by the building code only.

The construction or renovation professionals hired by the establishments studied struck us as being poorly informed. Yet their status had given them credibility with their clients, who assumed that their work automatically took into account access for people with disabilities. In addition, the Régie du bâtiment du Québec building code appears to be lacking in information regarding accessibility: it takes into account only the building and not the layout of furnishings, a crucial consideration. This is a problem, since the building code was mentioned by just over 23 percent of our sample as a source of information on implementing accessibility. We can see here a legal frame that is too weak to sustain full accessibility, as mentioned in the literature.

Our sample clearly expressed difficulty in accessing the right information: expressions describing the information as “hard to find,” “unclear,” or “not standardized” sum up the situation. This leads to errors that are detected too late, during use or in the course of an evaluation by Kéroul. Moreover, 38.9 percent of respondents with accessible units reported considering the comments of guests with disabilities regarding the accessibility of their facility and making changes afterwards. This approach takes on its full meaning when the lack of benchmarks for making hotels accessible is noted. Without the right information, even operators who are willing to welcome this clientele fall into error, which constitutes a shortfall in the development of accessibility. Modifying existing facilities is far more expensive than including them in the construction or renovation process, which may quite understandably lead some hoteliers to refuse to retrofit their establishments after considering the additional budget this would take. Kéroul must therefore promote technical information in relation to its accessibility standards so that this information can be received by operators before the work begins.

Difficulties related to older buildings

Managers of older buildings appear especially hard to convince, since old buildings often lack the space required to ensure an appropriate result. Complicating attempts at modification is the fact that some are also subject to heritage protection programs. Moreover, 16.7 percent of respondents said that old buildings are particularly difficult to make accessible to persons with disabilities. It is undeniable that such cases are challenging in terms of both costs and fittings. Still, there are remarkable examples of world heritage sites that have been made accessible, including Athens’ historical center and various initiatives by the National Trust (UK) and ONCE Foundation (Spain). Such examples prove that making historic buildings accessible is far from impossible. In our view, the prime incentives for encouraging their managers to embark on accessibility modifications are funding opportunities and tax breaks. In Québec, a hotel and tourist facility tax deduction allows operators to deduct 100 percent of the costs of making their establishments accessible. Yet none of the 30 respondents even mentioned knowing this exists. This constitutes another tangible economic argument that would be useful to communicate.

Action plan

Our study revealed a number of possible drivers for Kéroul to encourage the development of accessible tourist accommodation. First, so that the efforts to render a site accessible result in adequate amenities and to prevent any more errors, Kéroul must intervene from the earliest stages of the work. Early knowledge of projects to build or renovate tourist accommodation would let Kéroul transmit the requisite information to the various stakeholders involved. We believe municipalities would be able to inform Kéroul of any such projects since they are the ones who issue the construction permits. The fact that the building code is inadequate in terms of accessibility is a further source of errors. Kéroul could conceivably propose reviewing the code to rectify any shortfalls in facilities designed for people with disabilities.

The profitability of accessibility was also discussed by our respondents. The many economic arguments in favor of this clientele appeared to be as yet unknown among industry professionals.

We have identified several that would be good to submit to all decision makers in the tourism sector:

- People with disabilities represent USD \$1.7 trillion in annual revenues worldwide (Donovan, 2013).
- The aging of the population tends to increase the percentage of people with disabilities worldwide. The World Health Organization predicts that by 2050, the percentage of the population aged over 60 years will have doubled compared to the year 2000 and that there is a well-established connection between aging and increased accessibility needs (World Health Organisation, 2007; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004).
- Tomorrow's seniors will have traveled far more than their predecessors over the course of their lifetimes and continue to do so until a very advanced age (Pochet and Schéou, 2003).
- Two sectors in particular appear to have implemented accessibility: luxury hotels and the cruise industry. The latter enjoys unprecedented popularity among travelers with disabilities; 12 percent of people with disabilities take cruises, compared to 10 percent of people without disabilities (Golden, 2013).
- This clientele shows a preference for destinations that are able to respond to their needs (Burnett and Baker, 2001; Kéroul, 2013).
- The length of stay of persons with disabilities is relatively longer than other tourists (Kéroul, 2013).
- Disabled tourists usually travel with a friend, relative, or an aid worker, thus increasing the number of guests (Donovan, 2013). The author also believes that these companions alone represent 2.2 billion potential customers and assesses their annual revenues added to those of people with disabilities at a total of US\$8 trillion.

Outside of these arguments, other more tangible aspects may encourage the development of accessibility. Our research suggests two: the fact that accessible rooms can be just as pleasant and comfortable as other rooms; and the fact that an establishment that is accessible to people with disabilities is better able to take group bookings. A third major argument would be if accessibility eventually acquires a significant weighting in tourist accommodation classification (such as the allocation of the number of stars to hotels). This possibility can only be realized via the corporation managing this classification and with whom we urge Kéroul to collaborate.

Tax breaks and financial aid represent another tangible incentive. Québec currently offers a tax deduction that deserves to be better known. However, no financial assistance for making tourist accommodation accessible to disabled people exists as such. It would be of considerable interest to approach the Ministère du Tourisme about developing support of this kind, including establishments that are difficult to adapt (such as old buildings).

We have also reported on the skepticism of our sample regarding the usefulness of making accessibility improvements. Our recommendation for changing this over the long term is education. For example, accessibility needs should be fully explained to accommodation managers. It is also important to clarify that the purpose of an adapted room is not to provide care to its occupants but to facilitate their stay by providing the space needed for freedom of movement and easy use of the facilities. Adapted rooms are therefore particularly useful for the disabled guests (to whom they afford maximum autonomy) but equally available to the general public.

5. Originality

While few publications treat the accessibility issue from an industrial point of view, our study reveals the concerns and views of tourism industry professionals *vis-à-vis* accessibility. Through this research, we understood accommodation managers as well as construction and renovation professionals to have a biased notion of accessibility and the disabled clientele. Thus, we underlined a need for them to be better informed about accessible facilities and their usefulness, as well as on the potential people with disability represent. To be able to do so, further research to seek the communication channels through which these professionals should be reached to address these issues would be relevant.

In a world where sustainable development lies at the heart of many considerations, it is absolutely imperative to raise awareness about accessibility issues. In fact, sustainable development takes into consideration not only economic and environmental considerations but also social concerns linked to long-term challenges. Disability is indeed referenced in various parts of the United Nations (2015). So, a development that does not take into consideration an important part of the current and future world population cannot be qualified as durable (Kéroul, 2015).

Notes

1. As of February 2, 2015, the Corporation de l'industrie touristique du Québec (CITQ) reported 7,509 listed tourist accommodation establishments. Kéroul only counted 391 fully or partially accessible establishments.
2. This association's mission is to inform its members and Québec hotel industry players, represent and defend the interests of hoteliers with industry stakeholders, and foster the sharing of knowledge and innovation.

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