



**Mapping and Performance Check of the Supply of
Accessible Tourism Services
(220/PP/ENT/PPA/12/6491)**

Case Study 5

Lousã, Accessible Tourism Destination, Portugal

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**European Commission
Enterprise and Industry Directorate General (DG ENTR)**

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Executive Summary

This case study presents the project “Lousã, Accessible Tourism Destination” and focuses on the efforts in creating a fully accessible tourism destination in this Portuguese town and region in 2008-2011.

The project was an important first step of providing accessible tourism services from a destination perspective in Portugal and sought to develop a model for other towns to follow.

One of the key aspects of the project was the collaborative approach that sought to include a diverse range of stakeholders in order to make the entire tourism supply chain accessible. This approach engaged the local authorities, private consultancies, organisations for people with disabilities as well as private businesses in different sectors of the tourism market. The organizational aspects of the projects were highly innovative and well-suited for creating an unbroken supply chain. In particular, the project produced an innovative approach to networking between different actors who both compete and collaborate with one another.

The key driver for this project was to exploit the economic potential of accessible tourism at a destination that was well-suited for nature, rural and sports tourism. In addition, the town had a long-standing tradition of including people with disabilities into society and was one of the first towns in Portugal to appoint an Ombudsman for Disabilities. Accessibility was in this vein a well-known concept already at the start of the project, which is believed to have had a positive influence on the project development and outcomes.

It is difficult to evaluate whether the project was successful in achieving its main goal of harnessing the market potential of accessible tourism. In particular, the economic crisis seems to have a major impact on the demand from tourists with accessibility needs, while from a supply perspective many of the planned adaptations works by both public and private sector actors have been put on hold.

Nevertheless, the project has been instrumental in raising the importance of accessible tourism in Portugal as well as having developed some interesting approaches on how to encourage the development of an accessible destination.

1.0 Introduction

This case study focuses on the pilot project undertaken in the small Portuguese town of Lousã, which is said to be the first attempt in the country to implement an accessible tourism destination.

The town with approximately 17, 000 inhabitants is located in the central region of Portugal, 180km from the capital – Lisbon, near the Serra da Lousã. The town is known for its beautiful landscapes and mountainous areas laying the basis for conditions suitable to nature-, rural- as well as adventure tourism.

In 2008, in the municipality of Lousã, a handful of local authorities, enterprises and institutions embarked on a pilot project to implement the first accessible destination in Portugal. Accessible tourism had, in general, at that point, not had a strong uptake in Portugal. The main reason for this related to the lack of awareness of the tourism sector to avail itself of the market opportunities generated by accessible tourism and Portugal was believed to be lagging behind the development of other EU Member States in this area.

The decision to develop an accessible tourism destination was largely driven by the untapped economic potential of this market. However, it was also underpinned by a sense of social responsibility. According to stakeholder interviews, the key to the successful implementation of the project was the longstanding attitude of the community to include people with disabilities and the open culture towards tourists with access needs.

As accessible tourism had at this point been a relatively unknown subject in Portugal there was a lack of general infrastructure but also a significant gap in skills level of how to adequately cater to people with accessibility needs. It was recognised early on that an unbroken chain of accessible tourism services depended on the collaboration and cooperation of all stakeholders relevant to the destination such as tourist suppliers, travel agents, local authorities and other public sector agents, as well as institutions relating to social care and organisations representing people with disabilities.

Whereas several factors such as the onset of the economic crisis have inhibited the development of Lousã as an accessible destination there are several good practices and lessons that can be learnt from this experience.

2.0 Overview and background information

The following section describes some of the organisational features and drivers of the project which had a bearing on the development of an accessible destination in Lousã.

One of the key features of the project was the emphasis on collaboration and networking between a very diverse set of stakeholders which included local authorities, disability organisations, businesses as well as the local population. The project organisers argued that there needed to be a very close relationship and network between the different links in the supply chain, much closer than in the provision of mainstream tourism services for the endeavour to succeed. Evidently, this is a considerable challenge given that the tourism market is comprised of many different sectors impacting, competing and collaborating with each other. However, in this respect the small size of Lousã was believed to be an advantage in attempting to create an accessible destination as the links in the value chain were shorter and localised.

It is important to note that there was already a very inclusive society existing in Lousã, whereby disabled people were strongly integrated into society. All stakeholders interviewed argued that the spark to create an accessible destination in Lousã and the positive attitude towards people with disabilities relates to the work of ARCIL, one of the main stakeholders in the project.

ARCIL (Associacao para a Recuperacao de Cidadaos Inadaptados da Lousa – the Association for the Rehabilitation of people with special needs of Lousã) is an association providing assistance and promoting the integration for individuals (children and adults) with different types of disabilities into society and the labour market. The organisation was founded in 1978 and started in the late 1970s to integrate children with disabilities into the day-care centres or crèches with able-bodied children. This is believed to have fostered an open-minded and inclusive culture for people with disabilities in the community.

Another distinguishing feature of Lousã was the presence of a Disability Ombudsman, which was one out of five existing in Portugal at that time. In addition, there was already a label existing in Lousã regarding accessibility –

“Selo Lousã Acessível” (Accessible Lousã Seal). The “seal” aimed at identifying all accessible establishments open to the public and to increase the awareness of the importance in eliminating architectural barriers as a mean of promoting a better quality of life for all residents, but in particular for those individuals with disabilities. The objective was to encourage public venues to improve accessibility and reward those that already had implemented accessibility conditions in order to make them attractive to all types of customers. In 2009, there were 143 accessible tourism establishments which were certified by the Accessible Lousã scheme. In this vein, Lousã already had a strong-tradition of accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities which laid a suitable foundation for improving accessible tourism.

The initial driver of implementing the project and increasing the town’s accessible tourism offer was the financial need of the social support and rehabilitation sector to become self-sufficient. For example, ARcil was dependent on financing from the state and on donations, however, the goal was to become financially independent and the provision of accessible tourism services was believed to be one way of overcoming the dependence on subsidies.

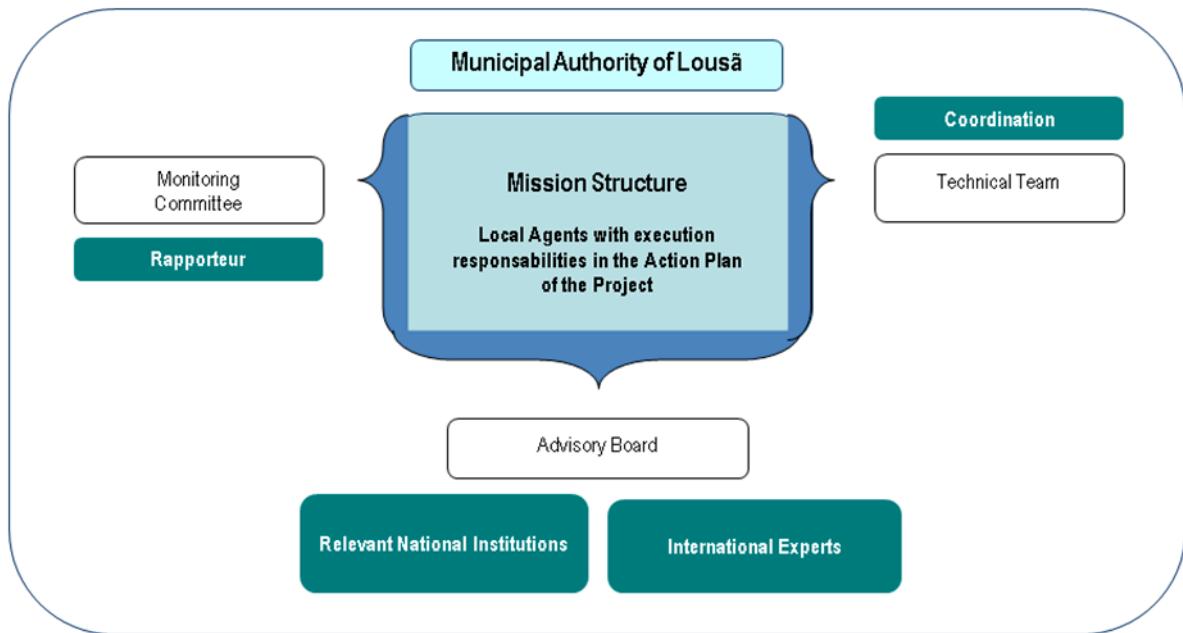
In 2007, the first congress on Accessible Tourism in Portugal was held in Lousã. The outcome of the congress was the initiative for different participating stakeholders to come together to jointly seek the funding required. During more than four years of execution, the Project "Lousã, Accessible Tourism Destination" was granted resources from the European Social Funds (ESF) for a total amount of approximately 700 000 euros. The project also received additional funding through the Portuguese government amounting to 300 000 Euros.

One of the distinguishing organisational features of the town’s pilot project included the setting up of a “Mission Structure” which formed the basis for the collaborative approach characteristic of the Lousã project. The mission structure was comprised of the different stakeholder in the project, which included:

- The Municipal Authority of Lousã;
- Private sector:
 - Accommodations:
 - Boutique Hotel “Meliá Palácio Lousã”;
 - Movijovem / Youth Hostel of Lousã;
 - B&B "Quintal Além Ribeiro";
 - B&B "Casa do Vale Linteiro";
 - Camping of Serpins;
 - Restaurants:

- Restaurant "O Burgo";
 - Restaurant "Casa Velha";
 - Restaurant "Travessa com Tapas".
 - Animation and activities:
 - Tourist Animation Agent "Montes D'Aventura";
 - Tourist Animation Agent "TurisLousã";
 - Shopping:
 - Tourist Shop "Catraia do Candal";
- NGO:
 - Association for the Recovery of Unadapted Citizens of Lousã (ARCIL);
 - Social Institution "Santa Casa da Misericórdia" of Lousã;

Figure 1: The Governance of the Project “Lousã, Accessible Tourism Destination”.



Source: Essentia Consulting, 2007.

In the core of the governance structure was the technical team which was charged with the execution of the project. The plan was outsourced to a consultancy – Essentia Consulting – whose first task was to prepare the “action plan” for the development of the destination.

The Action Plan of the project was based on the principles of a systemic and participative approach including a broad scope of activities and tasks:

- i. **Promotion of a accessibility culture in the local community**, including the ordering of studies and diagnosis to improve the available knowledge about accessibility issues in the municipality of Lousã, the promotion of regular discussion meetings and the organisation of educational visits to other municipalities in Portugal and abroad;
- ii. **Improvement of talents and skills**, including and the organisation of awareness sessions to key publics in Lousã, the preparation and realisation of training sessions and the planning and conducting of a cycle of coaching actions;
- iii. **Improvement of urban accessibility**, including the planning on accessibility, the realisation of public works of urban adaption and requalification and the adaption of public tourist attractions (riverside beaches, museums, etc.);
- iv. **Accessible destination management**, comprising the setting of a program for the development of accessible tourism in Lousã, including

a broad range of activities concerning the assessment of the local tourist units, the realisation of small interventions in those private tourist units (hotels, camping, restaurants, etc.), the mapping of skills and jobs related with accessible tourism and, finally, the communication, marketing and animation for launching the accessible tourist destination;

v. **Assessment and certification of the accessible tourism destination**, led by an international team of experts.

In addition to the action plan, the initial phases of the project included an evaluation and analysis of the underlying conditions for Lousã to develop as an accessible destination. It examined how accessibility best could be implemented. This was considered particularly important as very little material and studies existed at this point on accessible tourism in Portugal. Thus, these studies were situated and adapted specifically to the economic and social conditions of Lousã. In particular, the studies also focused on how disabled people could be integrated into the labour market through the provision of accessible tourism services.

The project also drew on International expertise provided by ENAT (the European Network for Accessible Tourism) as well as technical expertise provided by the specialist tour operator “Accessible Portugal”.

According to stakeholders, it was imperative that the Municipality of Lousã joined in the project. Accessible tourism impacts on many different sectors and businesses, however, it is impossible for individual enterprises to remedy barriers in the outdoor public environment or coordinate marketing and informational efforts by themselves. In particular, many attractions, transportation and urban spaces which make a destination attractive are often under the competences of local authorities. Thus, in order to implement the needed general improvements in accessibility the support of the local authority was crucial.

In order to engage the private sector and the local community, the project team emphasised awareness-raising activities and a specific Action Plan for awareness, training and coaching activities set out the following actions:

- First, it promoted several **awareness sessions** directed towards the local community. For instance, sessions were specifically targeted to local schools and local media.
- Second, the Action Plan launched a **cycle of training actions** aimed to tourism professionals and entrepreneurs, rehabilitation professionals, health technicians and local officials.

- Third, a **cycle of coaching actions** specially designed for the local tourism stakeholders was organised. The project team set out a partnership with a national Tour Operator (TO) for coaching purposes. The aim was to test an array of tourist proposals and itineraries especially designed to serve tourists with different access requirements. This training model was a major asset not only for the tourist agents involved in the delivery of tourist services, but also for the Technical Team, which had been directly involved in the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the "simulated tours".

This networking and the connections between the different actors impacting on the successful integration of an accessible supply chain was one of the most innovative solutions developed as part of the project and was believed to be well-suited to the small size of Lousã.

3.0 The integration of the supply chain

One of the key objectives of the case in Lousã was to create a seamless chain of accessible tourism services. The small size of the municipality and the involvement of a diverse range of stakeholders impacting on the supply chain were considered important assets in this endeavour. The main challenge for Lousã was "...to go from being a destination with accessible offers to becoming a fully accessible destination", as the Disability Ombudsman described it.

In general and according to the "Mission structure", the emphasis was mainly put on:

- **Redesigning the urban infrastructure;**
- **The acquisition of specialised equipment** to encourage nature and sports tourism for all and irrespective of disabilities; and
- **Raising skills needs** for the management and proper reception of guests with disabilities¹.

With regard to the private sector, improvements were made primarily in accommodation and restaurants to increase accessibility as well as in the tour or activities sector. The project focused on those establishments which had already received the Accessible Lousã Seal.

Under the study "Diagnosis of Accessibility and Mobility of Tourist Establishments in Lousã" the project team provided a set of recommendations to enterprises on how they could improve accessibility. This was integrated in the Action Plan as to improve private sector services and facilities.

¹ See the case study on Lousã related to the European Commission study on skills and training needs.

As part of the external monitoring and evaluation of the Lousã project, the Toegankelijkheidsbureau (TGB), Belgium, had the task to develop a special certification programme for the assessment of the accessible tourism destination. This certification programme entitled **Accessible Tourism Destination Certification Program (ATDCP)** involved assessment meetings with destination managers, coupled with on-site audits and document analysis by external auditors, aiming to build a picture of the capacity and level of achievement of Lousã as an accessible destination.² It should be noted that the documentation and the assessment related to the audit are confidential and not publicly available.

The certificate was described as

“an objectively verifiable procedure for measuring the systems and performance of the tourism providers, for providing an accessible environment and tourism offer based on specified criteria, taking into account the access needs and requirements of a wide diversity of visitors, including persons with disabilities, older people and others who are in need of good access³”.

This certification was intended to be renewed every two years meaning that Lousã had to continue its improvement efforts in this field. In addition to merely providing a certificate the TGB aimed at providing a roadmap of accessibility that the destination management could follow as providing indicators to measure progress. Thus, the certificate also related to advising on how to achieve a strategic vision of accessibility. In this vein, the TGB developed a completely new tool to help DMOs continuously improve accessible tourism offerings. However, for reasons explored further below, there has been no attempt on part of the Municipality to renew the certification since it was first awarded in 2011.

4.0 Provisions for cross-impairments

The pilot project and the external evaluation from the certification process emphasised a “Design for all” approach whereby all different impairments should be taken into consideration for creating an accessible destination.

A consultancy was hired to develop a “Plan on Integrated Solutions for All” with the main objective to create spaces usable by as many people as possible regardless of age, ability or physical situation coherent with the approach of Design for All. This approach resulted mainly in removing physical obstacles for those with reduced mobility, while there was less

² See ATDCP description at:

http://www.accessibletourism.org/?i=enat.en.enat_projects_and_good_practices.1191

³ Quote taken from “Design for All” – a publication of Design for All Institute of India.

emphasis on other disabilities such as vision impairments, hearing impairments or other hidden disabilities such as long-term health conditions, allergies and asthma.

The Municipal project office was active in acquiring and distributing equipment that was needed to improve activities and offers for visitors with different types of access requirement. Most of the equipment was geared to assist those with reduced mobility to enjoy rural, sports and nature tourism.

5.0 Business approach – building a business case for accessibility

The economic crisis seems to have hit just as the pilot project was in its peak phases. It is believed that this had a substantial impact on the project outcomes and the demand for accessible tourism services, both domestically and internationally.

In addition, the economic crisis slowed down the progress of improving accessibility. The municipalities, businesses and other stakeholders involved have been more cautious in proceeding with the different costly parts of the project. In particular, the local authority of Lousã suffered significant budget cuts in the last years due to austerity measures in the Portuguese public sector. The initial investment plans have had to be reviewed and the expensive works for adapting public spaces in urban centres and for natural treks, for the most part, have had to be postponed. Thus, the investments made in studies, planning and training of officials and entrepreneurs will take longer to recover.

In the private sector, the economic situation is also a major constraint and some stakeholders have argued that a diminishing tourism demand has severely hampered the further development of accessible tourism. According to other studies made in Lousã⁴, some businesses have been reluctant to get involved in the project as they are worried that the emphasis of Lousã on accessible tourism may deter other able-bodied tourists to visit the sites. However, this picture is conflicting with the stakeholder interviews conducted as part of this study, who argue that the open mentality of businesses was one of the key factors in the success of the project.

Lousã is still known in Portugal as an accessible destination and it is promoted, by among others, Accessible Portugal for its accessible offers. In particular, Lousã has been marketed for its downhill bike rides and for the

possibility to engage in adventure and nature tourism. The town also puts on many cultural festivals relating to arts and gastronomy. These are, according to stakeholders, highly accessible where people from all over Portugal come to visit. For example, the first accessible festival was held in Lousã showcasing “Arts for All” in July 2011.

However, it is unclear from interviews whether the destination was able to capitalise on the improved investment and whether for example, it led to increased visitor numbers, higher satisfaction etc. It seems that the economic crisis did erode many of the objectives set out in the course of the project.

One of the weaknesses identified through the stakeholder interviews was shortcomings in terms of marketing efforts. Some argued that marketing was the least developed part of the project plan, whereby Lousã's tourism office was not integrated into the project, despite efforts made in this direction. This may be partly explained by a gap in responsibilities, whereby no organisation or agent was charged with the development of a global marketing and communication plan. One of the key improvement actions set out for the town was the information section where it was assessed that more material – online and offline – would be needed to increase the destination's accessibility. As a result of the above changes in market conditions, and the limited international promotion of Lousã, it seems today that the destination is mainly geared and promoted to domestic visitors rather than the international accessibility market.

6.0 Evidence of impact

Lousã set out to be the first and the leading Portuguese destination which was fully accessible, integrating a seamless supply chain of accessible services and offerings.

The activities developed in the field of accessible tourism related to improving service levels through training and awareness, adapting the physical environment and the acquisition of different tools needed to include people with disabilities in sport and rural tourism activities. Overall, according to stakeholders, the initiative did have a great impact on raising the profile of accessible tourism not only locally but also nationally. This fostered a feeling of local pride that helped substantially in the implementation of the scheduled activities. Moreover, the positive media exposure and the recognition in tourism circles have granted to Lousã a positive image, which was also perceived by the stakeholders of the project. There were also a lot of scholarly interest in Lousã which resulted in academic studies by researchers at the University of Coimbra and others in the disciplines of sociology and tourism management, as well as books and articles on the town's initiative.

Many project stakeholders have been investing in small interventions in their businesses to also serve customers with accessibility needs. In addition, some stakeholders now offer adapted tourism services, if and when requested. ARCIL, identified as one of the driving organisations behind the initiative, is starting an inbound tour business on accessible tourism in the region.

In addition to the impact felt in the local community, external recognition was also a result of the project. The specialised tour operator "Accessible Portugal" together with the Lousã municipal chamber was awarded the *European Enterprise Award* by the European Commission for the project, 'Internationalization of Lousã, Accessible Tourist Destination', under the category 'Supporting the Internationalization of Business'. The European Enterprise Award recognises and rewards outstanding regional entrepreneur initiatives and partnerships between businesses and local administrations. In Portugal, Lousã was awarded a prize for its *Excellence in Quality Customer Service* – which according to interviewees, can be attributed to the training and development of skills in receiving guests with access needs.

Moreover, the website of the municipality of Lousã has incorporated a link to "accessible tourism" giving more information about the destination and accessible offerings, which is believed to be unique for municipal websites in Portugal.

However, as pointed out above, Lousã seems to remain a destination mainly marketed to domestic visitors. Statistics are not available as to the numbers of international visitors. In addition, the project drivers were highly dependent on political will and with the crisis it is believed that the project has been forced to step aside as other actions are given higher priority.

7.0 Conclusions

In conclusion, this case study has examined the pilot project implemented with EU-funding in Lousã, Portugal. This project was the first major step in providing accessible tourism services through a holistic destination perspective in Portugal.

It is difficult to evaluate whether the project was successful in exploiting the market potential of accessible tourism. In particular, the economic crisis seems to have had a major impact on the demand from tourists with accessibility needs. From a supply-side perspective many of the planned adaptations works by both public and private sector actors have been put on hold due to economic uncertainty and austerity measures.

However, one of the more important lessons learnt in Lousã is **the importance of a collaborative approach** which seeks to engage a wide range of stakeholders in the provision of accessible tourism services. The involvement of the municipality is of the utmost importance due to the competences of this authority to remove physical barriers and coordinate many of the other services such as health which also have a bearing on the attractiveness of the destination.

The project also placed emphasis **on engaging the private sector through awareness raising and training**. Other **third sector organisations with disability expertise were engaged and built-into the governance structure of the project**. This approach which intended to facilitate and build a platform for networking seems to be an important step to create accessibility along the value chain. However, it is important to note that **there was already an inclusive community in operation in Lousa** due to the work of ARCIL and the Ombudsman which seem to have facilitated the **readiness of businesses and other stakeholders to engage with this market**. Thus, the notion of accessibility was not an entirely new concept for the inhabitants and entrepreneurs of the region.

Innovative tools and solutions were developed as part of the project. The **external Certification is an interesting tool that should be further explored** to see whether this approach can successfully be applied on other destinations. In addition, **the integration of tour simulations** – to test the readiness of businesses and the destinations to receive different guests with accessibility needs is a good method to evaluate the level of accessibility, before full-scale operations are in place. However, these approaches are perhaps better suited to smaller destinations seeking to improve their tourism services.

Lastly, it is important to note that **the major weakness of the project seems to be the gap in marketing and information on the availability of accessible services**. While attempts were made to remove other barriers along the supply chain such as physical access, the acquisition of specialised equipment and improvements in customer care – the major aspect of marketing seem to have been relatively neglected, lowering the overall attractiveness of the destination for tourists.

8.0 Recommendations

- Given that the provision of tourism services is a vast area encompassing a myriad of competences and industries, it is vital to strengthen synergies and cooperation between local public and private actors. Overall, public sector actors have an important role to play in ensuring physical access, the coordination of information and marketing as well as encouraging increased accessibility in the private sector.
- Skills development and awareness raising of the importance and potential of receiving all guests should be an integral part of any efforts to create an accessible destination. It is imperative to take into account that skills and training must form part in the overall efforts and cannot be separated from other activities such as physical adaptations.
- Information and marketing are the key to fully exploit the potential of an accessible destination. If marketing and information services are not well-integrated into the overall strategy of the destination, removal of physical barriers and skills development will play little role as the destination will not look attractive to tourists who are looking for possible destinations to visit.
- Accessible Tourism Destination Certification Program (ATDCP) is an interesting tool that was developed in parallel to this project as a form of external evaluation. This tool does not only aim to assess to the level of accessibility – but should also work as a quality roadmap for the destination to continue to develop accessible services and facilities. It is important to note that a destination should never be considered finished as accessible – but instead accessibility must continuously be improved. Thus, the investments and human resources made in this tool should not go unexploited and should be further applied to other conditions and environments.

Annex I: Criteria and justification for best practices

Table 1: Criteria and justification for best practice

Criteria	Justification	On track/off track
Relevance	<p>The pilot project carried out in Lousã was an important first step in a country which had very little previous experience in relation to accessible tourism. Whether this project was successful or not is unclear, however, it did raise the profile and awareness of accessible tourism in a country where this was previously a rather unknown topic.</p>	
Transferability	<p>The project format and the mission structure created indicate the importance of involving all stakeholders in the process of improving accessible tourism services. However, the small size of Lousã may have been very beneficial in this respect and may not be equally suited for other larger cities or regions to emulate.</p>	
Efficient & Effectiveness	<p>The project was very successful in attempting creating a positive image around the accessible tourism market and raising awareness around its potential. However, external factors seem to have hampered the uptake and use of the services implemented.</p>	
Sustainability	<p>The project was highly dependent on funding to carry out adaptations in the urban environment, the acquisition of equipment as well as funding different training sessions and festivals. It seems that the destination still has not been able to recover the costs of the work that has been carried out mainly due to the economic crisis.</p>	
Innovation	<p>The project in Lousã design and developed a very innovative approach to accessible tourism and in particular on how to upgrade the skills level and raise awareness among entrepreneurs on the importance of accessible tourism. The creation of networks between tourist stakeholders is an example of these</p>	

	“innovative solutions”.	
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