

Press release

In Ostrava on 11 March 2011

Tourist services keep losing 130 million of disabled customers. They are not accessible.

The twenty-year-old Jiří Mára is the only Czech who has travelled to almost all continents in his wheelchair. This year's journey across the African countries will complete the Mára family's tour round the world. They are a proof that physical disability is definitely not a handicap for travelling. Last week, they shared their travel experiences as well as advice on travel for people with specific needs with the participants of an ATHENA project workshop in Ostrava focused on the promotion of accessible tourism.

Jiří Mára and his son, Jiří, have already been to such countries as New Zealand, Ecuador, Galapagos, Greenland and Japan. "We travel especially to fulfil the dreams of our son, Jirka, and make his uneasy journey through life as pleasant as possible. With our example, we want to prove that disability does not mean the end of one's life, and to motivate the other wheelchair users in the fight for the fulfilment of their own dreams. We strongly believe everything can be managed", said Mára explaining why travelling to remote spots of the planet has become their life-long passion. He shared his story with the participants of the Ostrava workshop whose aim was to share experience in accessible tourism and to discuss what type of barriers are encountered by people with specific needs when travelling, and what needs to be done to improve the accessibility of our region.

The example of the Mára family demonstrated to the workshop participants that people with disabilities have the same desire or need to travel as anyone else. They search for attractive destinations and tourist spots; they do not want to select the place of their holiday just with respect to accessibility. However, tourist service providers have not responded sufficiently to this demand of people with disabilities so far. In fact, according to the ATHENA project manager, Ms. Jarmila Šagátová, people with specific needs are interesting customers even for entirely commercial facilities. "Just the size of the market is immense. Only in Europe, accessible tourism accounts for about 130 million of people. In addition, such people rarely travel on their own – they prefer groups or accompaniment. That multiplies the number of customers as well as sales for the provider", Ms. Šagátová pointed out. Besides the huge quantity of potential customers, tourist facility operators might appreciate that the people requiring barrier-free access do not mind travelling in the low season. Therefore, they can use the facility capacity fully even outside the summer and winter seasons. If the visitors with disabilities are satisfied with the services, they tend to return to the same places loyally in following years.

One of the major barriers making travelling difficult is the inaccessibility of buildings. Practically, there are no thorough inspections checking whether new buildings are accessible as stipulated by law. At present, no authority specialises in accessibility audits. "An institution needs to be established to issue building permits with the same power as the public health authority or fire squad. Consequently, only such projects would obtain building permits that would meet the statutory requirements for barrier-free access", said František Doležal from the National Institute for the Integration of People

with Limited Mobility and Orientation of the Czech Republic. According to him, the institute has so far expressed its opinion on approximately two thirds of the buildings. The remaining third does not care about barrier-free access at all. "In spite of that we have no impact on whether the designers and investors are going to observe our recommendation or not," he added.

Representatives of organizations associating people with disabilities in the Moravian-Silesian Region highlighted the absence of reliable and detailed information on the accessibility of tourist facilities. Frequently, facilities use the wheelchair user pictogram as a symbol of barrier-free access but, as a matter of fact, that very often means only that it is possible to approach the hotel or restaurant by car. "But if wheelchair users want to have a meal in the restaurant, they find out they cannot get over the high thresholds; and the restaurant does not even have suitably adjusted toilets," Ms. Monika Olšaníková from the Centre for Family and Social Care observed. As a result, disabled people often face situations when they cannot be sure whether they can cope with difficulties with the inaccessibility of certain services as soon as they have arrived at the tourist facility of their choice. "When we organise a tour or trip for our clients, it means I have to visit the place at first to check by myself whether it is accessible or not. And this applies even to places where I have already phoned to ask about barrier-free access. The staff does not possess sufficient knowledge to be able to answer my queries," Ms. Jiřina Nevrlá from the Help Klub Havířov emphasized.

According to the participants, sufficient education of the staff in tourism would significantly enhance the situation in tourism as well as in all society. Mr. Mára pointed out, "our trips have been possible only because we have met willing people who knew how to help us." In the Czech Republic, the awareness regarding barrier-free access and travelling of people with specific needs is very low. "Sometimes, even an accessible environment becomes inaccessible as a result of the staff's and users' attitude. We have already recorded several cases when, for example, petrol stations have changed their accessible toilets into storage rooms. If a wheelchair user wants to use it, the attendants have to clear it first", said Ms. Nevrlá. Therefore, educating the general public is assumed to be one of the fundamental conditions that have to be satisfied in order to develop accessible tourism in the Czech Republic and to make it commonplace.

The main aim of the ATHENA project, supported from the European Social Fund by means of the Operating Programme Human Resources and Employment, and the state budget of the Czech Republic, is to enhance the development of human resources and employment in accessible tourism in the Czech Republic while using experience and inspiration from the EU countries. As a result, its activities focus especially on increasing the awareness and understanding of this topic among the employers in tourist industry, public service authorities, and educational institutions as well as among people with disabilities, non-profit organizations associating or employing such people, and in the general public. The project finishes in May 2011 and it is implemented in particular on the territory of the Moravian-Silesian, Hradec Králové, and South-Bohemian Regions and in the capital city of Prague. For more information on the project and its output, visit www.project-athena.cz