

# Swedish-Norwegian regional cooperation increases access to outdoor recreation for people with disabilities

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Along the North Sea Coast Line in the West Coast Region of Sweden and in counties along the Oslo fjord in Norway, the 'Coastal Path' was established already in 2006. The path was regrettably not accessible for all. Approximately 20 % of the population has a diagnosis of a disability restricting their everyday life. "Disability" is here in general terms sorted into five different categories: Difficulties with sight, difficulties with hearing, difficulty with moving parts of your body, cognitive and mental problems, and finally difficulties with allergy or related problems. It has also been established that physical inactivity is linked to many physical problems such as blood pressure problems, risk of diabetes, different cancer forms and other types of illnesses (Barton & Pretty, 2010).

People with a diagnosis of disability, are more often in low mood and have generally a lower self-esteem. This in turn affects the immune systems negatively. For this category of people, green environment provides a very important health service. A significant improving effect on mental health has been shown even at short durations of green exercise such as five minutes (Barton & Pretty, 2010). Studies of the linkage between the mental health and 'Green Exercise' are recently analyzed in more depth. For instance, it can be shown that exercise in green environments improve mood and self-esteem. The presence of water gives greater effects than sites in inland areas (Barton & Pretty, 2010).

Improving general health standards for persons with disabilities was only one of the reasons for Uddevalla Municipality to initiate a project to follow up the earlier Coastal Path project. A second goal was to promote outdoor recreation tourism since tourism volumes to the area increases every year and give increasing job opportunities. A third aim was to make outdoor facilities known to people with less experience of outdoor recreation, for instance immigrants and young people. The project was named "*Outdoor activities accessible for all*" and combines resources and efforts of fifteen municipalities and seven regional organizations in the counties Västra Götaland (Sweden), Östfold and Akershus (Norway), facilitated by economic support from the European Union Cross-border Interreg Programme.

## The freedom to roam and the freedom to choose

Unique conditions in the Scandinavian countries give opportunities for creating access to outdoor recreation:

"The Freedom to Roam" or Right of Public Access is the ancient right for the general public to access most public and private land for recreation and exercise. This right is very closely linked to public responsibility for nature values and agricultural production in the landscape. As the project proceeded, it was clear that the autonomy or freedom to participate in the outdoor leisure activities of your own choice is perceived as being very important. To be able

to maintain a certain level of functional independence in your activities in life means having an identity and a human dignity (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). The project manager made a strong recommendation that our upgraded outdoor facilities should have a toilet and a parking place for disabled persons situated as close as possible. Another important service enhancing independency is public transportation.

A pilot survey with 9 young persons with sight disorders detected the importance of creating places where it is natural to have social contexts. Why? Because the municipalities which joined the project are situated in a region dominated by small sized towns and countryside areas and in such municipalities it is very difficult to find friends in the same situation as yourself, especially if you are young. Job and study opportunities are primarily found in the larger cities.

The experiences made from asking people were supported by scientific publications (Hall, 2005). This made us to rethink the strategy of the project, using more effort on carefully select the sites where improvements should be done. The results are shown In Table 1, where a comparison is made to the scientific study of demand and constraints to outdoor recreation participation in Sweden (Romild et al., 2009). In this table it is shown that our sites are situated at places which are also by the general public perceived as popular places. The only important exception is biking because the landscape in our region consists of low cliffs and hills.

## Results

The project will finalize in 2013 and the main outcome will be the internet data base "Tillgänglighetsdatabasen" including close to 70 accessible sites and the publication of an atlas on the sites, including descriptions of accessibility. The atlas will be published as a physical book, but also for downloading free of charge and as a Daisy book for people with sight disorders. The result is due to be published in the spring 2013.

## Lessons learnt

- A governance group and effective working groups should be set up and invited to regular meetings at Day one of the project.
- Managing 22 partners in two countries need the attention of a full time coordinator. The municipalities are too small to have enough expertise in the areas covered. Some of the problems included solving matters which involve land owners, construction permits, nature reserve regulations and internal misunderstandings.
- Internal Information and communication must be efficient.
- Quality matters are essential. Quick feedback of problems in the field should be assured to ensure that

Table I. Activity types chosen for access improvement works by the municipalities of the project “Outdoor Activities Accessible for All” in Swedish and Norwegian coast municipalities -in comparison to general popularity of outdoor activities in Sweden (Source: Romild et al. 2009)

|                           | <b>% of planned sites<br/>(N=147)</b> | Participating at least one time last 12<br>months (ranking), % of respondents |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Walking/trekking          | 25.9                                  | 92  |
| Beach                     | 18.4                                  | 73–80   |
| Rest site                 | 15.6                                  | 22–80   |
| Grilling site             | 8.2                                   | 22  |
| Fishing site              | 6.1                                   | 39  |
| View site                 | 4.8                                   | 38  |
| Boat Landing-stage        | 4.1                                   | 36  |
| Outdoor Learning site     | 2.7                                   | 38  |
| Canoe Landing-stage       | 2.7                                   | 12  |
| Bird watching site        | 2.7                                   | 38  |
| Outdoor Historical museum | 1.4                                   | -   |
| Horseback Riding Site     | 1.4                                   | 7   |
| Historical site           | 1.4                                   | -   |
| Sculpture park            | 1.4                                   | -   |
| Botanical garden          | 0.7                                   | -   |
| Geological site           | 0.7                                   | -   |
| Biking road               | 0.7                                   | 73  |
| Beach-volley ground       | 0.7                                   | -   |
| Sauna                     | 0.7                                   | -   |

maintenance is up to date. In this case the inventory system and the database of Tillgänglighetsdatabasen ([www.t-d.se](http://www.t-d.se)) is used.

- Financial issues and the dissemination of instructions to follow EU regulations are taken well care of within the municipality administration, where staff is professional and well trained.
- Maintenance issues for future continuity should be a part of the project result. Contacts with local target group associations and individuals should be kept during all stages of the project. This ensures that mistakes are corrected.

- Reporting should be regular and sufficient competence for analyzing results should be present. A broad competence of the project leader is crucial for a successful result
- The marketing of the sites should preferably be done by inviting individuals in the target groups to expert group meetings and workshops at an early stage. Specially adapted guided tours for different parts of the target group should be arranged, according to the demand from target group representatives.
- Future needs – well this is easily analyzed: Society needs more of the same.

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