



Improving social inclusion and active participation of people with disabilities through improved access to historical and cultural heritage

The League of Historical and Accessible Cities (LHAC) is a pilot project of the European Foundation Centre aimed to improve the accessibility of historical towns for elderly and people with disabilities promoting at the same time sustainable tourism development.

The project is being simultaneously implemented by eight foundations in four different countries across Europe, each of them in partnership with the local authorities of the historical town of their choice.

The project includes several key innovative aspects:

- It stimulates new forms of collaboration at local and national level. The LHAC is creating new public-private partnerships between different organisations in an effort to foster social inclusion of people with disabilities. A wide range of local key stakeholders such as municipal authorities, NGOs, associations representing people with disabilities, organisations of architects and city planning experts are taking part in the realisation of the itineraries. Another remarkable aspect of the project is its focus on the beneficiaries, which are constantly involved – through their representative associations – in the development of the solutions.
- The LHAC is based on a philosophy that believes in the strength of mutual learning as a way to overcome difficulties. The network acts as a hub for good practice and know-how exchange among the foundations and the cities involved in the project. The project is therefore focusing not only in the development of innovative solutions, but also in the creation of new forms of interactions and open organisation to tackle a relevant and complex social issue such as the equal and full participation of people with disabilities in society.
- To coordinate efforts and avoid fragmentation of responses to people with disabilities' diverse needs, a holistic methodology has been provided by a specialised consultancy firm. This ensures that all aspects of accessibility are simultaneously faced and considered. As a result, the project will produce improvements in four main areas:
 - Built environment and public spaces
 - Transport and related infrastructures
 - Information and communication, including information and communication technologies (ICT)
 - Public facilities and services

- Even though a common methodology has been agreed, the LHAC remains an open platform, encouraging the participants to find the approach best suited to the city of their choice. This enables to create customized and local-based solutions rather than global solutions that would be remote from the local community. As a result, the way in which each individual country is implementing the project varies enormously.
- As disability is conceived in its broadest sense - including both sensory and physical impairments and disabilities - and that the project is following the Universal Design criteria, improvements to accessibility are conceived for the long-term benefit of all visitors, residents and tourists. The project is therefore expected to foster tourism, contributing in the overall development of the city.
- In order to maximise the impact of the project and ensure its long-term sustainability, the LHAC is putting forward innovative accessibility solutions which allow people with disabilities to fully enjoy cultural and historical heritage (i.e. making creative use of new technologies to improve urban mobility and access to information), that not only can serve as an inspiration for other foundations, local authorities and stakeholders, but that can also be disseminated and transferred to different contexts.

In conclusion, the League of Historical and Accessible Cities project responds to the three broad interdependent categories in which social innovations can be schematically classified¹:

- Firstly, it represents a grassroots social innovation that responds to a **pressing social demand** not addressed by the market and is directed towards a vulnerable social group. The LHAC's overall objective is indeed to fight isolation and discrimination and to promote social inclusion of people with disabilities.

- Secondly, it helps addressing a **societal challenge** and is therefore directed towards society as a whole. Considering the ageing of Europe's population and that the number of people experiencing some kind of impairment will growingly increase (by 2020, 25% of the population will be over 60 and the 80+ population is expected to double before 2050), the LHAC is working to develop an "accessibility culture", to increase the sensitivity of the society to the needs of elderly and people with disabilities, to stimulate the process of inclusion of all people living in Europe, improving their everyday life and leisure time.

- Finally, the full participation of people with disabilities in society promoted by the LHAC is expected to produce a broader **fundamental change** in people's attitudes and values, contributing to empower vulnerable groups and to reshape society as a more friendly and participative arena including all.

For more information: www.lhac.eu

¹ Source: http://www.net4society.eu/media/Social_innovation_europe.pdf