

# Introduction

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## ***Why a book reflecting on social tourism around the world?***

The importance of holidays and travelling for human well-being has been formally recognised since 1948, with the recognition by the United Nations of holidays as a basic human right for individuals. This importance has since been reiterated by several governments that have recognised the right to paid holidays over the years (Hall and Brown, 2006). As stated by Richards (1999), holidays away from home (tourism) mitigate two constraints of daily life – time and place, creating conditions for individuals to dedicate themselves to their personal and social fulfilment.

Despite the recognition of tourism as an important part of present-day life, today's society is also marked by a worsening of social inequalities, even within developed countries. Consequently, a significant part (not to say a majority) of the population still doesn't have access to tourism. There are several constraints to the practice of tourism, among which the low level of income stands out as one of the most important.

In order to combat this inequality of access to tourism, the development of tourism programmes aimed at disadvantaged social groups is a possible measure to provide individuals who do not have access to tourism the opportunity to participate in this activity. Existing studies, although it is recognised that there is no unique definition, consensually consider that social tourism (ST) is related to initiatives that aim to include groups in tourism activities who are otherwise excluded from it. This measure, despite already arousing the interest of various entities (such as the European Economic and Social Committee, several private social tourism organisations and some governments around the world), has not yet received extensive and effective recognition or investment (either regarding financing or scientific studies).

As mentioned before, this is a topic that has only received more attention from researchers in recent years: only from 2008 did the number of publications start to grow significantly (according to a search performed on the Scopus database with “social tourism” as keyword and limited to studies with this expression on the title, abstract or keywords), even though the first published article, to our knowledge, dates from 1951.

Most of the authors in the field recognise the positive effects of ST for its participants and society (e.g. McCabe *et al.*, 2010; Minnaert, 2006; Minnaert *et al.*, 2009; and Smith and Hughes, 1999).

The results of most studies stress the importance of social tourism for its participants, in terms of well-being and quality of life improvement, and also emphasise benefits for learning and development of social behaviour. These results seem to indicate that encouraging tourism for disadvantaged groups may facilitate social inclusion, encouraging social solidarity and collective cohesion and leading to a decrease in poverty and exclusion. Another common conclusion of most studies is the recognition of the need for public intervention in ST initiatives and the challenges which this fact represents, in a period with important financial restrictions for most governments, are commonly recognised (Lima and Moura, 2017).

Reflections on social tourism, both conceptual and empirical, still seem to be necessary as a starting point for designing efficient strategies to promote what is now considered a basic right of individuals and a dimension that characterises modern society and quality of life – access to tourism. Existing research provides solid ground to develop further research, but there is indeed a window of opportunity for significantly improving knowledge on this topic.

In this sense, it is important to stress again that further research work is required, calling for more wide-ranging and transnational comparisons. Consequently, the opportunity to bring together conceptual chapters and others with practical examples from all around the world and analysing different targets inspired us to produce this book.

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