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Accessing Slow Food Earth Markets: Barriers and Enablers

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ABSTRACT

This research evaluates the accessibility of Slow Food Earth Markets and proposes a model for its improvement. The qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews with sixteen Earth Market organisers from nine countries across the world. The results show that the main accessibility barriers for Earth Markets are related to convenience, consistency, communication, and customer psychological factors; these barriers are influenced by the availability of resources from both the supply and demand sides. The study also offers a framework for enabling access to Earth Markets, identifying actors, resources, activities, and desired outcomes. This research contributes to the understanding of how Earth Markets can be used as a platform for developing more accessible events and consequently more sustainable destinations. The results show that balancing authenticity and accessibility will remain a challenge for Slow Food Earth Markets.

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Slow Food; sustainable destination development; farmers' markets; event accessibility

Introduction

Slow Movement has gained momentum in recent years both among stakeholders and academia (Klarin et al., 2024). Underpinned by slow philosophy, it originated from the Slow Food movement that was born in Italy in 1986 and became an international movement in 1989. Slow Movement has developed as a response to fast living, eating, and consuming that technological advances have brought to modern societies (Heitmann et al., 2011).

Slow Movement has also gained recognition in the context of tourism as tourists are increasingly looking for sustainable tourism experiences; the slow philosophy provides a framework for sustainable destination development (Serdane, 2020). An example of this is slow events, which add value for destination stakeholders as they support local businesses and help to preserve local traditions thus facilitating sustainable destination development (Werner et al., 2020).

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Among the possible initiatives and events related to Slow Movement, Slow Food Earth Markets (further in the text—*Earth Markets*) is a product that stands out globally. Founded in 2004, Earth Markets is "an international network of markets that work in accordance with the principles of Slow Food" (Slow Food, 2024b), which celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2024. Earth Markets play a vital role in the preservation of local biodiversity and the development of local communities and also contribute to sustainable forms of tourism, including slow tourism (Meriç, 2016).

The literature increasingly highlights the relevance of events based on local food events, both to attract tourists and local audiences (Chung et al., 2018; Jung et al., 2015), in a connected way that contributes to the sustainability of destinations. In fact, slow food events can be used to move a destination up the value chain in responsible rural tourism practices (Folorunso Adeyinka-Ojo & Khoo-Lattimore, 2013).

Beyond promoting the development of sustainable tourism for the destination, Earth Markets aim to fulfil the goal of Slow Food by "ensuring everyone has access to good, clean and fair food" (Slow Food, 2024a); hence, accessibility is at the core of Earth Markets and the Slow Food movement.

Although Slow Food was not originally aimed at tourism, it can impact tourism by influencing a destination's development and its image through the quality reputation of the "slow" brand (Heitmann et al., 2011). Plus, recent initiatives such as Slow Food Travel acknowledge the power of Slow Food as a travel motivator and provide a new tourism model that could help local areas to become quality gastronomic destinations (Slow Food, 2024c).

Previous literature shows that the capacity of the Slow Food movement (which can be represented and studied through the Earth Markets) to contribute to the development of sustainable tourism has not been sufficiently explored, and even less so aspects related to the real possibilities of use and/or accessibility of these markets and events by both tourists and the wider public.

These aspects are important given that the movement is often criticised for being inaccessible due to a number of barriers. Many authors acknowledge that produce and activities under the Slow Food label are only available for those who have financial means to afford it (Clancy, 2015; Simonetti, 2012). Slow Food has also been criticised for its limited reach being mostly organised for people in the West (Mintz, 2006; Sassatelli & Davolio, 2010). While the main barriers to accessing Slow Food are related to income and social class (Labelle, 2004), authors also mention other barriers such as the physical accessibility of Earth Markets (Sassatelli & Davolio, 2010) or information available for tourists about them (Hatipoglu & Inelmen, 2021).

Understanding the barriers (e.g. physical, social, cultural, financial, and informational) for accessing Earth Markets can help to find ways to overcome them and also to address social inclusion while supporting the environmental and economic sustainability of the destination. This is especially relevant in the global context where there is a call for agri-food markets to be more sustainable and to address food security which is still a challenge in many parts of the world (Borsellino et al., 2020).

Addressing the accessibility barriers of Earth Markets can also contribute to more sustainable tourism development. This research also addresses the call for investigating slow movements globally (Klarin et al., 2024).

This study answers the following questions: (1) how is accessibility understood in the context of Earth Markets; (2) what are the main accessibility barriers for Earth Markets; and (3) how can the accessibility for of Earth Markets be improved.

Literature review

Earth markets

Earth Markets are farmer's markets, accredited by Slow Food International, where small-scale farmers, producers, and artisans regularly set up stalls in a designated space to promote local and seasonal food to consumers (Slow Food, 2024b). They are also gathering places where communities come together to enjoy healthy and nutritious food and celebrate life.

The Slow Food Earth Market project started in 2004. The very first Earth Market opened in Montevarchi, Italy in 2004, and others followed around the globe. Earth Markets in Mexico and Chile opened in 2010, in Turkey in 2011, in Mozambique in 2013, in Australia in 2017, and in Canada in 2019 (Slow Food, 2024b).

The markets are found in urban (e.g. Barcelona, Spain) and rural settings (e.g. Straupe, Latvia) and are often set up in public spaces, with some on private property. Some Earth Markets can be found in Cittaslow towns (e.g. Horn Earth Market, Austria) since the Cittaslow (or Slow Cities) movement, started in 1999 in Italy, was entirely inspired by Slow Food, extending the slow philosophy to cities. However, there is no correlation between Earth Markets and Cittaslow as being in Cittaslow is not a requirement for Earth Markets and most markets are not in Cittaslow towns.

The physical accessibility of the market is considered during the application process. Ideally, the markets should be reached by both public and private transports; yet, it is not always feasible. It is important that the location can be reached by cars so that producers can deliver goods, and it is accessible for various customer segments (e.g. people with disabilities, families, and the elderly). Access by soft mobility or public transport is a plus but not a prerequisite (Slow Food International representative, personal communication).

The produce sold at Earth Markets has to meet Slow Food Earth Markets selection criteria (Slow Food, n.d.); but there is no requirement for any formal certification. Generally, the products have to comply with the "good, clean, fair" principle, which is at the heart of Slow Food. Better taste and knowledge encourage the enjoyment of good food; minimising the negative environmental effects of food production ensures a clean environment and better health for producers and consumers, and offering fair prices and protecting the rights of the farmers and their workers ensures a fairer society.

The markets also encourage customers to be mindful about food consumption practices—to buy less but good quality products—thus reducing food waste, challenging excessive resource consumption, and supporting the degrowth principle (Nelson & Edwards, 2020).

The frequency and operating hours differ for each market. For example, while some are offered twice a week (e.g. Sile Earth Market, Turkey), others may open twice a month (e.g. Maitland Earth Market, Australia). The days of the market also vary: many take place on the weekend (e.g. Bouctouche Earth Market, Canada), while some take place on a weekday (e.g. Mangulwa Earth Market, Tanzania).

Stall owners at the Earth Markets must agree to sell locally produced products. Each Earth Market is free to define its locality, as contextual factors will determine its needs (e.g. urban vs. rural setting). For example, in Sile Earth Market (Istanbul, Turkey), the suitable radius for farmers to attend the market is 40 km, whereas in Maitland (Australia), it is 100 km. Similarly, based on the number of producers interested participating and the Earth Market's available space, the market committee decides on the number of stalls that can be hosted in each market.

Often, the local Slow Food network members and volunteers collaborate to set up a market committee together with local governmental agencies, farmers, and producers. The organisers often receive support from the Municipality or Council to run the markets. The fees received from the stall owners, donations, and fundraising activities are the events' primary income (Hatipoglu & Inelmen, 2021). The volunteers, farmers, and producers run paid and non-paid educational activities, market demonstrations, and festivals as part of the event.

Running the markets regularly is a challenge for the organisers. Some may appoint a full-time or part-time market manager or a coordinator who can oversee and coordinate the market and create local employment (Slow Food International representative, personal communication).

There were 96 accredited Earth Markets in 22 countries across the globe at the end of 2023 (see Table 1) (Slow Food International representative, personal communication).

Italy saw the biggest increase in the markets in the given time period (+27 markets), followed by Turkey (+4 markets) and Mexico (+4 markets). Italy also saw the largest number of market closures (−8 markets), followed by Lebanon (−2 markets). The market closure dynamics should be treated with caution; in many cases, the markets have been inactive for a few years before they have been officially registered as "closed". The most common reasons for market closures were the lack of volunteers, producers, and products as well as issues with the market location (Slow Food International representative, personal communication). Despite this wide acceptance of the markets globally, more than half remain in Italy (50 markets).

Farmers' market accessibility barriers

Accessibility can be understood and interpreted in a number of ways. It is often linked with disability and consequently the whole-of-life approach to tourism, accessible tourism (Darcy & Dickson, 2009), and more broadly with inclusive tourism (Gillovic & McIntosh, 2020). Yet, there is a call to consider accessibility from various perspectives—physical, social, cultural, economic and even political (Finkel & Dashper, 2020).

According to Finkel et al. (2019, p. 2), "accessibility can be understood in terms of the measures put in place to address participation by those with impairments, both permanent and temporary, as well as both physical and mental, including perceived class and

Table 1. Earth Market dynamics 2020–2023.

Year	2020	2021	2022	2023	Change from 2020
Markets opened	+8	+11	+18	+16	+53
Markets closed	−3	−5	−4	−8	−20
Overall number of markets	68	74	88	96	

cultural barriers". Hence, access is defined through the barriers that limit individual's participation in an activity or event. For the purpose of this study, an accessibility barrier is understood as anything that limits or prevents an individual's participation in an event, in this case—Earth Market.

Although there is little published data specifically on the accessibility barriers of Earth Markets, many studies have investigated the accessibility barriers of farmers' markets. For example, Grace et al. (2007) found that barriers to farmers' market accessibility included issues of transportation and opening hours, unfamiliarity with farmers' markets, and a perception of items being sold at higher prices leading to an inability to attract low-income shoppers. The authors recommended that potential barriers could be addressed through building relationships between customers and market vendors, and securing funds for the markets to attract low-income customers.

Fang et al. (2013) suggest that farmers' markets are confined by some operational realities such as prices and lack of incentives, limited hours of operation both weekly and yearly, and limited availability of suppliers (farmers) to meet the demand of the farmers' market. Other barriers noted were around customers' perceptions of the farmers' market and a lack of awareness among disadvantaged communities about the products sold there.

Cole et al. (2013) explored barriers to participation among vendors at farmers' markets. They found that issues of transportation, location of the market, and language were the most common barriers.

The study of Shi and Hodges (2016) showed that the spatial accessibility of the farmers' markets in Florida, USA had an impact on consumer purchasing decisions i.e. the easier it is to access the farmers' market the higher the probability that customers will visit them. However, proximity to the markets was more important for urban residents; rural residents were less affected by distance to the farmers' markets.

The study of Ritter et al. (2019) investigated the perceived barriers to farmers' market access among the low-income population in Washington State, USA. The authors grouped the barriers into five categories—convenience, financial, awareness, comfort, and other barriers. Interestingly, financial viability was only the second most important barrier for accessing farmers' markets for the low-income population; the top barrier for accessing farmers' markets was inconvenience, i.e. location of the market, availability of transport, operating hours, and selection of products.

Slow food-related accessibility barriers

As we have shown, there is a paucity of studies exploring accessibility barriers for Earth Markets; yet, there are a few studies exploring those barriers from the Slow Food perspective.

Slow Food has been widely criticised for its **socio-cultural** accessibility. Many note that Slow Food is aimed at upper-class or middle-class customers (Chrzan, 2004; Davolio & Sassatelli, 2016; Donati, 2005; Gaytán, 2004; Germov et al., 2011). Appreciation of Slow Food requires education in taste (Laudan, 2004; Sassatelli & Davolio, 2010) which is linked to people with high social and cultural capital (Pietrykowski, 2004, 2018).

Some authors even describe Slow Food as being elitist (Frost & Laing, 2013; Laudan, 2004) while others note that the tone of voice in Slow Food messages and communication is aristocratic (Pietrykowski, 2004) and indicates bourgeois appeal (Germov et al., 2011).

Another widely discussed aspect of Slow Food is its **financial** accessibility. Produce under Slow Food umbrella is usually small-scale quality offering which comes at a price (Germov et al., 2011; Laudan, 2004). Hence, Slow Food is accessible for people with economic means (Frost & Laing, 2013) and not everyone can afford it (Labelle, 2004). Slow Food can be also regarded as an ethical consumption practice that justifies higher prices via "a social premium" (Clancy, 2015, p. 21)

In addition, slow food-related activities such as learning about food (Labelle, 2004), spending time at the table and building relationships with producers take time (Simonetti, 2012) and hence are available for those who have availability of leisure **time**.

Some authors also indicate that Slow Food is available for customers who predominantly are in the developed countries or the West (Davolio & Sassatelli, 2016; Mintz, 2006; Sassatelli & Davolio, 2010) implying that there are **physical** accessibility barriers in terms of location where people can obtain Slow Food produce.

Finally, there is a lack of information about Earth Markets for tourists (Hatipoglu & Inelmen, 2021), indicating the **information** accessibility barrier for some market segments.

However, Slow Food has reportedly undertaken several initiatives to improve its accessibility and broaden its appeal. These include expanding its presence in developing countries (Davolio & Sassatelli, 2016), developing projects in Asia, Africa, and Americas as well as reducing membership fees for members in developing nations (Donati, 2005). Slow Food has also reconsidered its outlook on industrial food; once dismissed as junk food, not it is regarded as "the new frontier to make SF ideas more accessible" (Davolio & Sassatelli, 2016, p. 100).

Materials and methods

This study adopted an inductive approach within an interpretivist paradigm to get an empathetic understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Jennings, 2001). This is because reality is socially constructed through human interactions and experiences in a given context (Saunders et al., 2009). The accessibility of Earth Markets has not received much attention in the literature, and the researchers sought an understanding of accessibility in the context of Earth Markets and insights into the main accessibility barriers and enablers. Methods used by qualitative researchers to understand social phenomenon can include interviews and observations (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016).

The empirical data for this research was collected using semi-structured interviews to gather data from Earth Market organisers who have been involved in the market organisation for at least three years. Earth Market organisers and producers have a role to play in the accessibility of communities to Slow Food in nations around the world. Collaboration among stakeholders is important (Hall, 2019; Movono & Hughes, 2022), this is more so for Slow Food tourism as these are usually community members who come together to achieve a common goal.

Earth Markets were chosen from different geographical regions to provide global perspective and to represent countries that are at different stages of their economic development (see Appendix 1).

The participants for the study were selected using purposive sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The researchers used the Slow Food website https://www.

fondazioneslowfood.com/en/what-we-do/earth-markets/ to search for the relevant countries and markets, to get the contacts of potential participants. The researchers also consulted a representative from Slow Food International to get advice on active markets.

The researchers aimed to get at least two (2) interviews per market to strengthen the data. However, this was not always feasible due to the limited number of people involved in the market organisation and their availability. Altogether, sixteen Earth Market organisers from ten markets across nine countries took part in the study. Table 2 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the study participants.

For the data collection, the researchers employed a semi-structured interview. The data collection took place after receiving the ethical approval from the first author's affiliated institution (ethics application No: ETH2324-0079). Most interviews were conducted using MS Teams and Zooms platforms; one interview was carried out face-to-face. The data collection took place in January-March, 2024.

The interview questions were developed from the literature review and designed to understand the accessibility barriers that Earth Markets face and possible solutions to overcome them. The questions also covered practical details, e.g. the location of the markets, their target audience, and available produce (see Appendix 2).

Interviews were conducted in English, Latvian, Spanish, and Turkish. These were audio and/or video recorded, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The interviews lasted between 25 min and 1.5 h.

The research is a cross-language research, and the researchers also undertook the role of translators (Zhu et al., 2019). English was chosen as the targeted research language that all the researchers were familiar with. All transcribed interviews in non-English language were translated into English using Google Translate for further analysis. The researchers then edited the translated text to ensure conceptual equivalence, i.e. that the text is not only technically but also conceptually as close to the original meaning as possible (Jandt, 2003).

Table 2. List of study participants.

Participant ID	Country	Earth Market name	Gender	Age	Involved in the market organisation since
AU01	Australia	Maitland Earth Market	Female	65	2017
CA01	Canada	Bouctouche Earth Market	Female	57	2015*
CL01	Chile	Región de Coquimbo Earth Market	Female	59	2014
CL02	Chile	Región de Coquimbo Earth Market	Female	61	2019
ES01	Spain	Barcellona Earth Market—Mercat de la Terra di Barcelona	Female	39	2015
ES02	Spain	Barcellona Earth Market—Mercat de la Terra di Barcelona	Female	52	2015
LV01	Latvia	Straupe Earth Market	Female	66	2008*
LV02	Latvia	Straupe Earth Market	Female	51	2008*
MX01	Mexico	El 100 Earth Market	Female	30	2011
MX02	Mexico	El 100 Earth Market	Male	36	2013
MX03	Mexico	Mérida Norte Earth Market	Male	69	2009*
MX04	Mexico	Mérida Norte Earth Market	Female	30	2021
TR01	Turkey	Sile Earth Market	Male	50	2015
TR02	Turkey	Sile Earth Market	Female	62	2015
TZ01	Tanzania	Mangulwa Earth Market	Male	39	2017
UG01	Uganda	Mukono-Wakiso Earth Market	Male	34	2015

* The person was involved in market organisation before it became a Slow Food Earth Market

To analyse the data the researchers employed the thematic analysis approach involving six stages, including familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, a search for themes, a review of themes, defining and naming themes, and the production of a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

After familiarising with the data, the researchers developed an initial codebook; it was refined after the first round of coding. A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding was used to code the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Some codes were based on the literature review (i.e. theory-driven deductive coding), while others were developed from the data itself (i.e. data-driven inductive coding).

The data gathered through semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to look for patterns and meanings that emerge from the participants in the study (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). The first round of coding involved a combination of In Vivo coding and descriptive coding; the second round of coding involved pattern coding (Saldaña, 2009).

The researchers colour-coded the interview transcripts in Word documents. Separate Word documents were created for each code to facilitate further coding. The researchers independently coded the data which was then reviewed by another researcher to ensure the intercoder reliability (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Results

Four key themes were identified: understanding accessibility, buyers, accessibility barriers, and accessibility enablers (see Table 3). The results section is structured around these four themes and their sub-themes.

Understanding accessibility

The first research question in this study sought to identify how accessibility is understood in the context of Earth Markets. Respondents were asked to define what they understand by the term "accessibility" in their own words. The majority of respondents reported that accessibility in the context of Earth Markets is an opportunity to participate in the market, both from the producer and consumer perspective:

> […] accessibility … To belong and to be able to sell or reach the market. To be able to be part of it. (MX03)

Many noted that Earth Markets are places where customers have an opportunity to access food that is healthy, nutritious, and meets the Slow Food criteria of good, clean, and fair.

Table 3. Key themes.

Theme	Subtheme
Understanding accessibility	
Buyers	
Accessibility barriers	Customer-related barriers
	Organiser-related barriers
	Situational barriers
Accessibility enablers	Actors
	Resources
	Activities
	Earth Markets as a platform
	xOutcomes

A few respondents mentioned the importance of the physical access to the Earth Markets in terms of their location and the financial accessibility:

> Talking about the accessibility, we are looking at the location but also affordability so that they can be able to buy for the fair price. (TZ01)

Some respondents also emphasised that Earth Markets provide direct access to food meaning that consumers can buy the food directly from the producer without intermediaries which makes it more affordable and hence accessible.

Buyers

When talking about the audience who can access Earth Markets, the respondents indicated that they are very inclusive and open to anyone:

> We, as Slow Food, believe that healthy eating, healthy nutrition is a right, therefore, there shouldn't be a specific audience we would like to reach. If the idea is always to have fair prices and an affordable price for everyone, with the intention that the product reaches everyone, that we don't have a single target audience. (CL01)

However, the respondents acknowledged that while they are targeting anyone, the markets tend to attract audience that is more likely to be middle-aged, with medium to medium-high income, educated, and knowledgeable about food. The respondents noted that their customers are not necessarily affluent, but they are people who care about their health, sustainability, and environment.

The customer base varied quite significantly across the markets from local, indigenous to "global" customer base. Many respondents reported that the vast majority (80–90%) of their customers are local residents from the close vicinity and nearby communities. Others indicated that their customer base is quite diverse and includes not only residents but also national and international visitors, expats, and "seasonal" residents.

> We have these waves of foreigners who come. They stay for seasons, which is the cold season, the hot season they leave, and during this season they live here and many of them are our customers. Even some already have knowledge of what a slow market is. (MX04)

The markets that were located in the downtown area reported that they attract people working in the vicinity, e.g. office workers as well as local residents.

The respondents also noted that they have seen changes in the customer profile either from season to season or year to year. The respondents from half of the markets reported that they have seen a changing customer profile throughout the year, especially in the summer when locals go on holiday and more tourists visit the markets. While local customers generally account for 80–90% of the visitor numbers, the proportion of tourists in the holiday season can reach up to 50% of the market visitors in some markets.

Generally, the respondents acknowledged that tourists are welcome. However, there were opposing views about targeted promotion for tourists. Some respondents were cautious about targeted marketing communication to attract more tourists:

> We're not the ones pushing it to tourists, but it's more like they have to look for it themselves. (ES02)

> [N]ot long ago there was like a "we should also do it in English" thing because there are many foreigners. And I strongly refused. Because I don't want to continue promoting the idea that

> it's for another type of people, for another audience. I mean, I want local people to eat from there, you know, that it's free for them to enter. (MX01)

Contrarily, a few respondents stated that they would welcome more tourists and are looking into purposefully targeting them. Two of the markets were even working with the local authorities to attract more tourists:

> [W]e are also looking into how to start getting into the tourism sector. There's a proposal for the medium term, where all the northern parts of the city, all the attractive points in the north of the city, we are going to collaborate to start bringing tourism here. Currently, tourism is concentrated in the downtown area. The historical part is beautiful, but it's also very saturated, and the downtown area is chaotic. So, looking at how we can put forward the proposal, and seeing how we can get support from the municipal government to help decongest that area of the city, which is currently congested. (MX04)

The respondents from some of the larger markets mentioned that they have reached a customer saturation point while others noted that they would welcome more customers.

Accessibility barriers

The second research question of this study aimed to answer what are the main accessibility barriers for Earth Markets. The analysis identified three main subthemes that are used to organise the following section.

Customer-related barriers

One of the main customer-related barriers was related to **communication**; the lack of information about the market or incorrect information about the market. More than half of the respondents indicated that some people associate Earth Market as an expensive, elitist market with high prices. This perception was reported from participants in seven different markets across different continents indicating that this is a global issue, not just regional.

> I think that some of the people who shy away from the Slow Food market may have a preconceived notion that it is an exclusive market where everything is very expensive. [...] They never come and try; they just have this stereotype. (LV02)

> People are thinking that the local food in the organic one is very expensive so that they cannot afford. (TZ01)

No doubt, **customer financial resources** can be issue for some people in any society as a few respondents have acknowledged. However, although price plays a role in customer buying behaviour, it was also not the main aspect that deters people from coming to the market as many respondents pointed out:

> So the price and the accessibility of all of that almost seems to be, like I said before, secondary because you see the value, not just monetary, but you see it in other areas in your health and in your community and you know, spending money locally - [it] stays in the community as well, so it's a choice. (CA01)

Often, the respondents talked about **customer psychological factors** that prevented them from coming such as the "perceived affordability", i.e. customer perception of whether they felt they can afford the products. Some noted that such customers prioritise buying lots of cheap produce that leads to the food waste:

> They go to the store, they buy too much because it's cheap, there's a sale, they buy more than they can eat, and they throw it out. But they are used to the fact that they can buy a lot, and it is important for them to buy very cheaply. That principle of Slow Food - more friendly to nature, and for farmers and also for the consumers themselves. You buy less. Buy only as much as you can eat. You eat little, but high-quality [product], and you don't throw it out. This is something that people will, I don't know, learn for a long, long, long time. (LV02)

Another widely mentioned barrier linked to the customer psychological factors was their priorities and interests. The respondents mentioned that some customers prioritise spending money on other things rather than food.

Finally, location and operating hours of the markets were mentioned as the main barriers linked to the **convenience** of attending the market. Earth Markets are open only a few days per month (see Appendix 1). There are also limited numbers of Earth Markets; sometimes, there is just one in the country. In many markets, customers drive for 20 min; some spend even up to an hour to get to the market, indicating that the catchment area for many markets is quite large.

Organiser-related barriers

Similar to the customers, one of the main organiser-related barriers was related to **communication**. Many respondents noted the lack of relevant, frequent promotional activities and acknowledged that there is room for improvement.

The majority of respondents said that they carry out the marketing communication activities themselves; some organisers even had a marketing background. Yet, in a couple of cases, the marketing communication, especially communication on social media was outsourced to an external agency which prepared the content that was then reviewed by the organisers.

Social media was mentioned as the main marketing communications channel. A few respondents mentioned the need to produce different content for different audiences, especially on social media which can be challenging:

> On one hand, we can't just abandon X/Twitter because we have an audience there, right? I mean, that's our oldest audience and then it goes through Facebook, Instagram until it reaches TikTok. […] TikTok is giving us a bit of trouble right now because it seems to me that it's for very young people. So, it's giving us a bit of trouble finding the type of content that the platform needs. So, if our audience is very broad in terms of age. (MX01)

Some organisers acknowledged that they do not use social media themselves but there is a designated internal person who does it for them.

The majority of respondents noted that they do promotion only in one (local) language due to the availability of resources and personal preferences. Only in two cases did the respondents report using two languages - admitting that it is time consuming.

While most of the communication was carried out via social media, the respondents pointed out that not all the customers are on social media and digital marketing activities need to be supplemented by marketing communication offline to reach wider audience.

Another barrier that the organisers encountered was linked to **convenience**, i.e. the factors affecting convenience for customers. Many respondents noted that they have issues with parking space that are difficult to solve.

These barriers were linked with the lack of **resources**—both human and financial:

> I perceive that it's a bit difficult for us to manage because, as I said, everything is done voluntarily. We all have other obligations or tasks or work, either from our own business, or we work in something else and have some time to spare for the market. (CL02)

> [W]e organise it voluntarily, and there is simply not enough time to research anything. All that remains is time to organize. (LV01)

The lack of financial resources was mentioned in relation to paying someone for promotion or solving the parking issues.

Situational barriers

Two main barriers that were related to situational factors were convenience and consistency.

The **convenience** barriers were related to the location of the market as mostly organisers are using public space provided by a council or local municipality or the markets are held on a private property that organisers do not have control over.

Some respondents mentioned that it is difficult to get to the market with the public transport for those customers who would like to use it. Others indicated that there was limited parking space for customers, sellers or even tour buses which prevents them from stopping at the market.

The **consistency** barriers were linked to the weather, seasonality, and producers. A few markets reported reduced operating hours or even closures during cold winter months, hot summer months or the rainy season. There were also occasions when markets had to close because of drought. Weather conditions had an impact on the availability of produce and also the customer numbers. The respondents noted that the Earth Markets offer seasonal products which means that certain products like fruit and vegetables are not available throughout the year. Hence, some sellers participate in the market on a seasonal basis.

In terms of producers, many respondents highlighted the limited availability of the producers who would meet Slow Food criteria as one of the main consistency barriers. The respondents pointed out that the producers who meet Slow Food criteria are usually small-scale which impacts the availability of products available throughout the year:

> [I]t could be that people miss us on the days they expect us and want to come but can't find us. […] It also has to do with the possibilities that each producer has to have the product or food available to put it in the market permanently because we are producers or I, in this case, an artisan, but we don't have a big production thing, but it's a small or reduced production, let's say. So there are also seasonal things that influence so that I have production, as well as for every day. So I think that's what could prevent greater accessibility. (CL02)

> […] the government, because they normally say that yes, you are promoting local indigenous food. Do you think that is self-sufficient food that can help most of them, can help the majority of people? Is the production enough for them to do that? (TZ01)

As the last quote shows, due to the small-scale nature of the producers, Earth Markets sometimes are viewed with scepticism from the local authorities that are more concerned about the food security.

The respondents also mentioned that the producers sometimes participate in other conventional markets, which impacts the availability of produce that they could offer at Earth Markets.

As the market offers local, seasonal, and fresh produce, it is difficult to maintain consistent product availability, which also impacts convenience for customer.

Accessibility barriers—bringing it all together

In summary, the main barriers for accessing Earth Markets can be grouped in four main overreaching categories—convenience, consistency, communication, and customer psychological factors.

These barriers are influenced by the availability of resources from both the demand side (i.e. customer) and the supply side (i.e. organisers and producers). Figure 1 graphically presents the accessibility barriers for Earth Markets.

Accessibility enablers

The third research question of this study sought to examine how accessibility for of Earth Markets could be improved. Five main subthemes were identified that are used to organise the following section.

Actors

The accessibility of Earth Markets is enabled firstly by the people who devote their time to run the market—**organisers**. The vast majority are volunteers who do not receive any financial benefits for their work; yet, they are committed, eager to contribute, and

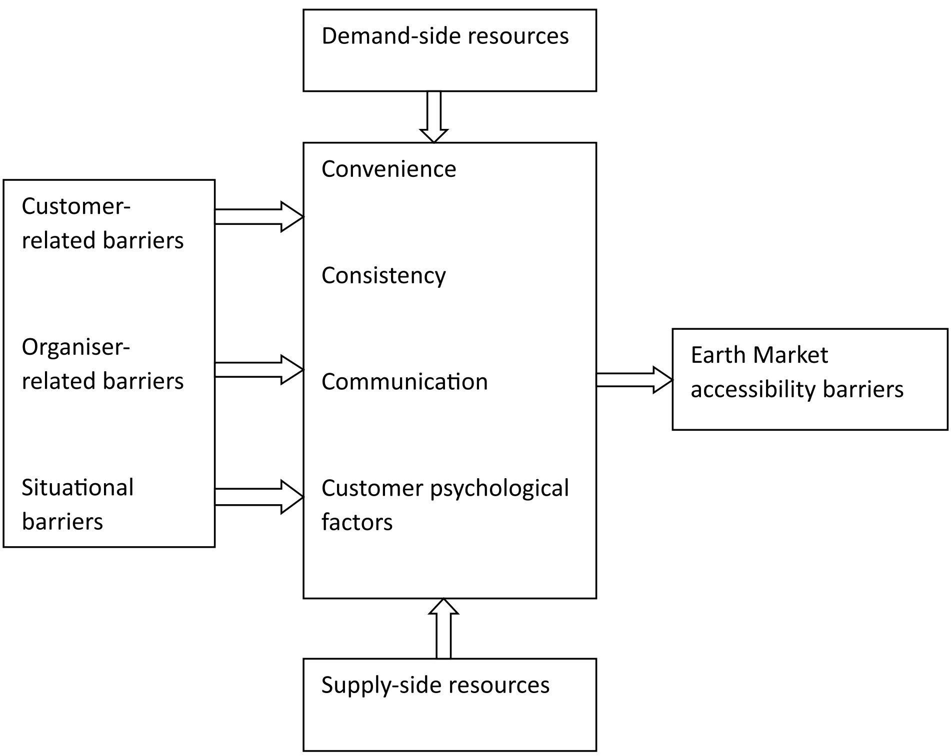

Figure 1. Earth Market accessibility barriers.

enthusiastic. Most of the respondents emphasised the importance of volunteers as a key success factor for Earth Markets:

> Volunteering is really, I think, going to be a key component for our future growth and to become sustainable. (CA01)

The respondents noted that it is crucial to form a strong and stable core team of volunteers in order to facilitate the market organisation. Often, the organisers were also socially and politically active, which helps to improve the visibility of the markets.

Another important actor who plays role in Earth Market accessibility is **producers** who work according to the Slow Food principles:

> [T]he most important ones are the producers, the producers who are part of this project. I think that's the key to the success of this project. (MX02)

The respondents noted that it is possible to organise the markets only if there is a sufficient number of producers in the vicinity; a few respondents expressed a willingness to have more producers who could take part in the markets.

Many respondents stated that the market organisation should be a shared responsibility by all the market members rather than just a responsibility of a few.

Finally, the support from stakeholders such as a **municipality** or local government contributes to the accessibility of Earth Markets.

Resources

Earth Markets offer customers **produce** that meets good, clean, and fair criteria. In addition to these Slow Food criteria, the respondents described the produce as being agroecological, fresh, seasonal, environmentally friendly. The respondents mentioned that such produce has not only additional nutritional value but is healthier and also tastes better.

Earth Markets offer a diverse range of products from everyday food items such as bread, eggs, fruit, and vegetables to special items such as wine, sauces, ostrich meat, and home-made sweets. Although the main focus of the markets is on food, it is often possible to find non-food items as well such as plants and crafts that are linked to food or produced using traditional methods (for more detail see Appendix 1).

The respondents also noted that they are selective which products to allow in the market as they want the overall offering to be interesting for the customers.

A few respondents mentioned that they try to reintroduce and revive "forgotten" or "old" products such as swede or sour cherry thus saving them from extinction.

Although the markets are non-commercial projects run by volunteers, they do require certain amount of **financial resources** to cover, e.g. rent, utilities, and promotional materials. One source of income is market fees that the producers pay; the respondents pointed out that they are very democratic due to the non-commercial nature of the market. Other sources of income included grants, funding through different projects and donors, and selling merchandise.

Activities

There are a number of activities that are carried out by stakeholders to enable the accessibility of Earth Markets. One of the most important activities besides the practical market organisation is **communication** about the market. This includes different promotional activities that are both online (e.g. social media, website) and offline (e.g. physical banners, flyers, printed calendars). The respondents mentioned using a variety of communication tools such as newsletters, interviews on radio, participation in TV shows, and articles in press. In addition, the organisers used events as an important part of their communication strategy such as different thematic market days, anniversary celebrations, and tastings. Many of the events were free for the customers to attend.

The respondents noted that there are no language barriers when interacting with tourists; either the producers speak some foreign language or customers know the local language (e.g. Spanish). Producers also helped each other with translation. In some cases, tour guides were used to facilitate the communication between the producers and tourists.

The respondents emphasised the number of **educational** activities that are carried out either at the market or outside it. There were workshops for the producers about the Slow Food philosophy, starting a business, setting the price, or developing tourism offering. There were also different workshops and events for the customers and policy-makers about nutrition, agricultural product or Slow Food. The respondents mentioned taste education activities through physical cooking demonstrations or printed cookbooks.

The majority of respondents acknowledged that learning takes place informally through face-to-face conversation between organisers or producers and customers where the former can explain the market philosophy, explain the products and the price:

> [P]eople really take advantage of the opportunity to talk to the producer himself. Consequently, they become knowledgeable, because they can ask absolutely anything there. They stand face to face finally with the man who grows it and who prepares it. I think that is the greatest value of all. They develop a better understanding of what it is. (LV02)

The direct interaction between producers and customers helps to **build relationships,** which is another Earth Market accessibility enabler. The respondents also talked about various **community building** activities through events since local community is an important stakeholder for the market.

Quality control of the producers and their products was mentioned by a few respondents to ensure that they meet the Slow Food criteria; some respondents made inspection visits to producers.

Finally, the respondents listed a number of activities that **address convenience** aspect of market accessibility. These included adding more market locations to reach different audiences, adding additional market times, and even offering home sales and online delivery.

Earth markets as a platform

Many respondents acknowledged that Earth Markets serve as a platform for various access enabling activities such as education, capacity building, community building, promotion, learning, and connecting producers and customers:

> [I]t's not only about selling or buying, but they have discussions, just to tell, like the producers can tell a story of why they are selling. And at the end the consumer is learning or is having someknowledge on a particular product they are buying. Whereby they also share contacts and at the end they can even interact even beyond the marketing days. (UG01)

Earth Markets are not merely places where transactions take place; these are places where a variety of different activities are carried out that enable the access to these markets. This sets Earth Markets apart from other farmers' markets and offers opportunity to differentiate.

Outcomes

As a result of the activities carried out by the actors with the help of the resources, there are several outcomes that enable the access to Earth Markets. One of the main aspects is **fair price** of the produce. As the respondents noted, the price is competitive; it might be slightly higher than supermarket prices, but usually lower than prices in similar markets.

> We have a bit of everything. We have products that are a bit higher in price, but the vast majority are very similar to prices in the conventional market. I mean, as a market, we try to reach a fair price, and that fair price not only has to be towards the consumer, but also for the producer. (CL01)

Plus, the availability of different types of products (everyday vs. special), a possibility to negotiate the price, low market fees for producers, and the elimination of middle-man commissions make the products affordable to many people. The educational activities carried out by the organisers allow the producers to learn about how to set fair prices, and the communication between the producers and customers allows producers to explain how the price is formed.

The availability of **quality produce** was mentioned as another aspect that encourages customers to participate in the market.

The respondents also mentioned the **positive market image** that helps to spread word-of-mouth and attract the customers. The markets were described as friendly, welcoming, cool places with a pleasant atmosphere and with strong sense of community. As one respondent noted, the image of Slow Food has changed over the years and it is more inclusive now:

> [I]t felt like more like an exclusive club, you know that you belong to you. But now I find it more accessible and it's more user friendly in terms of like who can belong and why you would belong because there's so many different issues that they talk about now that I think it'll gain the interest of anyone even if you're interested in climate change or if you're interested in social justice or if you're interested in you know how things are grown and so. I just find now being at the barriers, at the stigmas around that, you know it being a fancy group of people. I think all of that's pretty much gone. I think you can tell that the change towards that, the grass roots. (CA01)

The positive market image was related to the welcoming **physical environment**; the respondents mentioned a variety of strategies to make the market space look attractive, such as being consistent with style, colours, logos.

The market accessibility was also enabled by **convenient market location and opening times** that benefit both the customers and producers.

Finally, the respondents noted that **trust** in producers, their produce, and Earth Market in general make the customers come back and often become loyal patrons for the market. Customers could build trust in producers through direct interaction at the market.

Accessibility enablers—bringing it all together

As the above results show, Earth Market accessibility is enabled by actors who implement Slow Food principles with the help of financial resources by carrying out a variety of

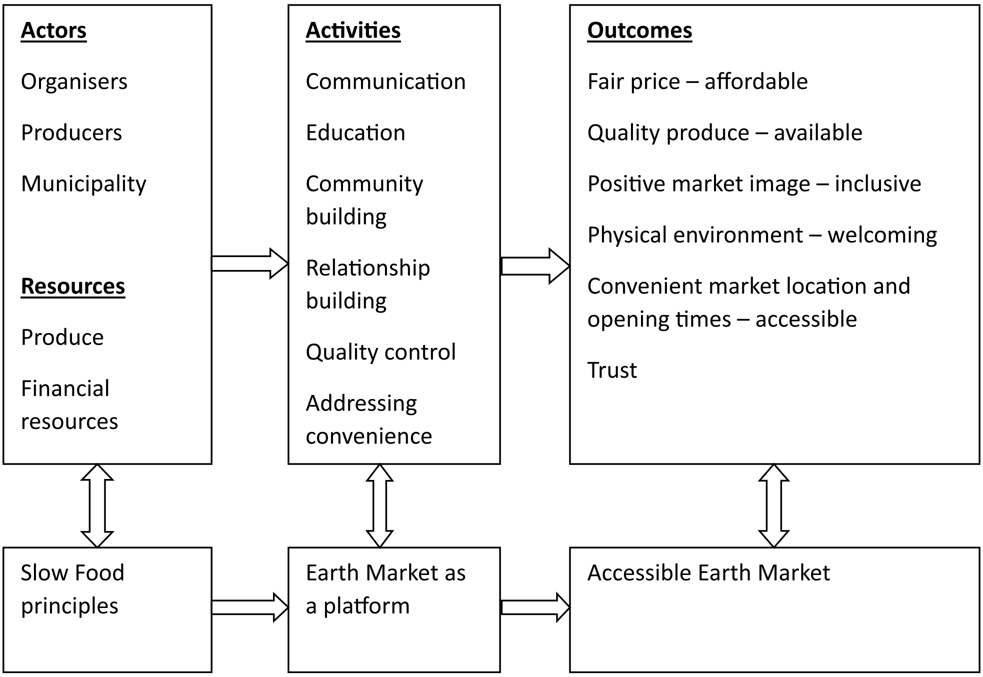

Figure 2. Earth Market accessibility enablers.

activities using Earth Markets as a platform. Figure 2 summarises the key Earth Market accessibility enablers.

Discussion

This study provides a better understanding of the main accessibility barriers for Earth Markets and provides a model for accessibility improvement.

The results show that the main accessibility barriers for Earth Markets are related to convenience, consistency, communication, and customer psychological factors; these barriers are influenced by the availability of resources from both the supply and demand side.

Many of the accessibility barriers identified for Earth Markets were similar to the ones faced by the conventional farmers' markets such as inconvenient location and operating times (Ritter et al., 2019), customer perception of farmers' markets (Grace et al., 2007), and availability of suppliers (Fang et al., 2013). However, the study also showed that price was not the main barrier for visiting Earth Markets as previously suggested (Davolio & Sassatelli, 2016; Frost & Laing, 2013); the financial barriers were found as being of secondary importance.

The results highlight the importance of communication-related barriers for Earth Markets i.e. the lack of information or incorrect information about the markets. Often customers are not aware of the basic principles of Earth Markets such as its underpinning Slow Food philosophy, the fair price approach, and the fact that customers can buy directly from producers without intermediaries. There is also a prevailing stereotype of Earth Markets being expensive, elitist markets with high prices. Addressing this misconceptioncan help to differentiate Earth Markets from conventional markets and tackle stereotypes associated with it. Earth Market organisers can do more to emphasise non-profit nature of the markets and affordable quality produce in their marketing communications.

The study also identified factors enabling the accessibility of Earth Markets, including the actors and the resources needed to achieve it. Earth Markets serve as platforms where different activities are executed that enable the access to these markets, including communication, education, community building, relationship building, quality control, and addressing convenience. This allows Earth Markets to offer quality produce at fair, affordable price, create positive market image and welcoming physical environment, offer convenient market location and opening times, and build trust between the stakeholders resulting in enhanced market accessibility.

While the accessibility enabling factors identified in the study are universal, the actual mechanisms identified to reduce barriers (e.g. to address convenience by improving the physical accessibility to reach Earth Market) must be contextualised according to the place where the Earth Markets and the existing resources in the area are located.

The results show that one of the main challenges for Earth Markets is its changing customer base and need to cater for various audiences, i.e. residents and visitors. Farmers' markets serve primarily as community events; however, their role as tourist attractions is growing. Balancing the tensions between the dual roles of farmers' markets can pose challenges for any farmers' market organisers (Thompson, 2020), and also Earth Market organisers.

Earth Markets often neglect tourists and tourism businesses either due to the lack of time or interest, and their tourism potential is often not fully recognised by local authorities (Hatipoglu & Inelmen, 2021). At the same time, Earth Markets are becoming recognised by visitors both nationally and internationally (Hatipoglu et al., 2016), which reinforces the importance of facilitating access to these other audiences, in addition to the local population, in a sustainable way.

Residents and visitors exhibit different purchasing preferences; residents are more motivated by purchasing produce and the availability of local foods, while visitors are more likely to purchase ready-to-eat food (Dodds & Holmes, 2017). This requires Earth Markets to offer different produce meeting not only Slow Food principles but also needs of different audiences.

Earth Markets are attractive tourism products offering authentic experiences that are key for people who want to engage in slow tourism (Meng & Choi, 2016). Authenticity is a key characteristic of a slow event and slow movement in general (Werner et al., 2020). As the role of Earth Markets in tourism development will likely increase in future, the question remains how can Earth Markets remain authentic while also being inclusive and accessible to a variety of audiences. Accessibility in the context of Earth Markets is an opportunity for everyone to participate in the market.

From a theoretical perspective, the study offers a framework that illustrates the accessibility barriers for Earth Markets (Figure 1). The study also provides a conceptual framework that brings together the accessibility enablers for Earth Markets (Figure 2). From the practical perspective, both figures can be used as practical tools to assist Earth Market organisers and can be used by the industry.

Limitations & further research

This study focused on Earth Market organisers' opinions about what deters people from visiting Earth Markets. As these opinions are subjective in nature, a further study could add evidence from other sources, e.g. comparison of the prices of the products offered in Earth Markets and large stores.

Stakeholders' (supply side) understanding and interpretation of Earth Market accessibility barriers might slightly differ from customers' (demand side) perspective, as shown in the study of perceived barriers to farmers' markets access (Ritter et al., 2019). Further research could explore the Earth market accessibility barriers and enablers from a customer perspective using quantitative research methodologies.

Further studies could also investigate how to best integrate Earth Markets with sustainable tourism development policies.

This research identified several accessibility barriers for Earth Markets; convenience, consistency, communication, and customer psychological factors. Further quantitative study is welcome to test their relative importance.

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