

Tourism: the future's green

INTERVIEW WITH LUIGI CABRINI

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LUIGI CABRINI joined the United Nations in 1982 and UNWTO in 2002 as Regional Representative for Europe. In June 2007 he was appointed the Director of the UNWTO Sustainable Development Department, whose mission is to promote the sustainable development of tourism with special focus on the Millennium Development Goals. The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) is the United Nations' specialised agency for tourism. As such, it is the principal worldwide forum for matters concerning tourism policy and a practical source of technical knowledge and statistics on the sector.

The Commonwealth includes a large proportion of developing economies. To what extent do you believe that tourism can be used as a tool for development in these countries?

If you look at the trends in international tourism over the past 20 years, you will see that the rate of growth in developing countries far outstrips that of higher-income countries. For example, tourism in developing countries grew from 113 million international tourists arrivals in 1990 to over 250 million in 2007. If you look at international tourism receipts, an even stronger indicator of growth, they went from US\$43 billion in 1990 up to US\$250 billion in 2007. It is an indication that tourism is indeed growing faster in developing countries and if it is well managed, it can be a strong tool for development and economic growth.

For the 50 least developed countries (LDCs), tourism is normally their first or second source of foreign exchange earnings in most cases, with only oil usually exceeding income from tourism.

What role can the larger industrialised Commonwealth nations such as the UK play in this process?

Major Commonwealth countries could support specific projects. Currently, UNWTO is leading an initiative called 'Sustainable Tourism – Eliminating Poverty (STEP)'. Over 70 projects have already been implemented under this scheme and a further 80 are in the pipeline. These projects, though usually small, have the elimination of poverty as their main objective.

These pilot schemes may then be replicated by other governments and adapted to their own requirements. I also believe that there are other areas where a developing country may need support: for example by providing financial support to adapt to and to mitigate climate change. I think that tourism investments should be left to the private sector to be developed with this broader support that can be given through development aid or similar channels.

Can you give us any examples?

Yes, we have several, although most are small in nature. In Guatemala, for example, we are training guides on what is called 'the coffee route', which is a tourist route that is developing through community-based tourism.

We are also gaining support for developing selling points for handicrafts and in addition we are

training women to produce local food that can be used by hotels and restaurants on the way. Although small-scale projects, they are really focused on empowering the local community to develop their own tourism initiatives.

So you support a bottom up rather than a top down approach?

I think that both are essential, of course, but bottom up is useful to demonstrate that it is possible to develop community-based tourism and create the capacity to be reproduced at a broader level within the countries themselves. This does not mean that you will not need the injection of foreign investment but both initiatives can go in parallel.

What role do you see NGOs playing in the growth of sustainable tourism?

Many of the initiatives I mentioned, and in particular the STEP projects, are in fact implemented in the field by NGOs together with representatives of the national tourism administration. NGOs have also got a broader role to play in the push for sustainability – for example, pursuing a greener agenda and encouraging climate-friendly activities within the tourist sector – or engaging in global challenges, such as climate change, which also affects tourism directly. They also have a role to play in a broader partnership comprising the public and private sector.

One of the main criticisms of the tourism industry is the effects of mass transportation and, in particular, air travel on the environment but many developing nations rely heavily on air transportation for the majority of their tourist arrivals. How can the environmental impact of tourism be reduced without damaging the development prospects of these countries?

This is a question that has been historically addressed by UNWTO and with special intensity over the past two years. We prepared a study in 2008 on climate change and tourism which includes the impact of the tourism industry on global warming. The tourism contribution of CO₂ was calculated for the first time, and the result is 5 per cent of the total global production of CO₂ from all sectors. There is room for reducing energy consumption through improving

technology, improving management and sometimes a shift in mode of travel – travelling by train and bus for journeys of less than 600-800 kilometres instead of by plane, rationalise the use of private cars, and so on. We do not think that the right way is to penalise only long-haul travel because it will go against the objective of reducing poverty. Many developing countries are reducing poverty through tourism so targeting only long-haul flights will be a blind response to the issue of climate change.

Many Commonwealth nations are small island states on which climate change is forecast to have a major effect over the next century. What steps could these countries take now to safeguard the future of their tourism industries and how can the tourism industry protect itself?

This is indeed a major issue for small island states. Countries like Maldives, or the Caribbean islands, which are of course of close interest to the Commonwealth nations, are under threat of the consequences of climate change. It is not only sea-level rise, but also coastal erosion, and the increase in intensity and frequency of hurricanes and tornadoes. UNWTO is participating and, indeed, pushing for a strong adaptation agenda in those countries and is fully involved where the tourist sector is concerned. We have held a number of capacity-building events based around tools that we have developed. Several of these events have included the participation of the Caribbean islands.

What kind of tools are you proposing?

The study I referred to before proposes a methodology of how adaptation can be implemented in the tourist sector, taking a broad approach involving some central and local governments and there are a number of actions that are required: water management, for example, requires a pricing policy for water; reservoirs need to be built, user-information is required – it is a whole chain where every party has to be involved. UNWTO does not finance technical co-operation projects, it is not part of our mandate, but we do implement some and support others, like CARIBSAVE, which addresses the impacts and challenges of climate change, tourism, the environment and the economic development of this vulnerable region.

The global economic downturn has damaged the tourism industry worldwide. Do you believe it has had a greater impact on developing nations or in the developed world?

We don't have hard data to substantiate that. We issue a 'barometer', which is a short-term evaluation of trends in the tourist sector. If you look by continent, for example, in the first half of 2009, the number of arrivals

in Europe went down 8 per cent, in Asia Pacific it went down 6 per cent and in the Americas 7 per cent. But in Africa, tourist arrivals actually went up 4.5 per cent. The crisis is having a deep impact on all industries, not just tourism, and our sector has comparatively shown higher resilience than others.

Do you see any silver linings or opportunities arising from the current challenges faced by these countries?

Yes, in fact we have developed what we call a 'Roadmap for Recovery', which is composed of three elements for the tourist sector: resilience, stimulus and the green economy. We see an opportunity for the tourist sector to benefit from the large investment packages which have been developed by some countries to inject money in to their economies to develop employment and so on. Tourism has proved to be resilient to major crises – 9/11, SARS, the Asian crisis in the late nineties – and has been able to recover in a relatively short time. We want to make tourism part of the green economy, through the use of renewable energy, energy efficiency and so on, and the current situation gives us a chance to do that.

What steps in particular would you like to see the developed countries, with large, advanced tourism industries, taking to make their respective industries more sustainable?

The road to sustainability is long and hard. At the UN summit in Johannesburg in 2002, for the first time tourism was "officially" recognised as a tool for development. I think that there is probably not a single tourism strategy today that does not include the concept of sustainability in it. However, I see difficulties in putting the principle into practice because sustainability has yet to be fully understood and its

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UNWTO's 'STEP' (Sustainable Tourism Eliminating Poverty) initiative in action



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UNWTO wants to make tourism part of the 'green economy' by encouraging the use of renewable energy sources

implementation faces several obstacles. At UNWTO we define sustainability as not only environmental but also social and economic, and it is not only for small, niche destinations but has to be applied in all tourism segments including mass tourism destinations.

Has the downturn led to a greater interest in sustainable tourism from investors and tourists themselves?

We still don't have the evidence to support this. The green economy drive is meant indeed to elicit interest and also to show what kind of environmental and economic benefits can be gained. There needs to be investment in renewable energy rather than traditional fossil fuels, for example, and I am confident that this will happen.

Many developing countries find that traditional ways of life can quickly be eroded by a large influx of tourists. What measures could be taken to prevent this and what incentives and assistance programmes exist to support traditional communities?

The STEP initiative that I mentioned earlier is very much community focused. One of the risks of unmanaged tourism development is creating social conflict or developing a model that does not give enough financial help to communities. So, we have in operation a number of studies; for example, we have developed a full set of indicators to be used and applied when developing a tourism project in a community which should then enable the planners to know whether or not that project is on the right track. To develop a sustainable tourism project requires a blend of policy tools at the government level and an acceptance by the industry that sustainable tourism pays off better than

tourism in the traditional way. Also, travellers are more sensitive to the environment these days and demand a product which is more sustainable than before.

As you say, more people profess to be concerned about the environment than ever before, but are you seeing this concern reflected in the spending habits or behavioural trends of visitors to the countries where UNWTO operates?

There is evidence now more than ever that tourists are ready to spend a little more to practise a tourism that is more environmentally friendly, but to what extent it is difficult to say. Price will, of course, always have an impact on a choice but only a few years ago it would have been unthinkable that someone would be prepared to pay more just to ensure that a certain hotel manages water or treat waste or cooperates to conserve biodiversity in a way that is compatible with the environment. In fact, it's not necessarily more expensive to introduce more sustainable practices and it may also pay off in terms of additional clientele.

Are the tourism industry leaders rising to the challenge in your view? What progress is being made towards making large-scale tourism more ecologically sound?

We have a mixed panorama. The focus on climate change, which has been very strong in the past few years, has put a higher responsibility on both government leaders and leaders from the private sector, and we do see a much increased sensitivity and responsibility to deal with these issues. There is also a much stronger commitment now at the senior level of the industry, so I think we are on the right track.

What actions would you like to see arising from the forthcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Trinidad in November?

Well, it is a tremendous opportunity, first of all for an exchange between the more developed countries that have a strong tourism industry, like Canada and Australia, and developing countries. The Caribbean islands are vulnerable and in need of support; and assistance in technologies and capacity building for adaptation would, of course be, something extremely useful. In addition, an agreement on a common tourism policy in line with the requirements of the new climate change agenda coming out of a group like the Commonwealth would send a strong message to countries everywhere. So, I think it will be a good opportunity to enforce the sustainability agenda. We know that countries of the Commonwealth have already demonstrated considerable interest in these issues and the summit could be a further opportunity to strengthen this agenda.

