

ETLC Position Paper on Sustainability in the Tourism Sector

November 2002

Introduction

Tourism, which came about as an elite activity, has become a mass phenomenon. In recent years, in Europe and worldwide, it has been one of the economic sectors with the highest rates of development.

Tourism is a complex economic and social sector; besides the aspects associated with the organisation of the trip, the welcome, the accommodation and catering and the facilities for tourists a direct part is played by transport and commerce, but also museums, parks, cultural events, music, etc and, indirectly, all those activities that produce goods and services for tourism.

The countries of the European Union as a whole represent the world's number one (incoming) tourism destination and are also a major source of outgoing tourism. Sustainable development must be identified in the continuing search for a correct balance between the social dimension, economic dimension and environmental dimension of development. These are values that take on an even greater importance in tourism, dependent as it is on tranquillity and security, on the loading capacity of destinations, on the quality of the environment, on cultural difference and customs, on the quality of work and therefore the quality of the offered.

In general, the sustainable dimension of tourism development must also be assessed on the basis of how much of the revenue generated by tourism remains in the destination, and on how this income is shared within the local community.

The Social Dimension of Sustainable Development in the Tourism Sector

The sustainable development of the European and world tourism sector can only be guaranteed when - together with the economic aspects and those of protection of the environment and cultural differences - the creation of sustainable work in the sector is made a priority.

Quality of service, which in the tourism sector depends to a large extent on the employment conditions, the levels of training of employees and on their motivation, is at risk today, because working conditions in the sector seem increasingly less attractive.

A cooperation of:

EFFAT

European Federation
of Food, Agriculture
and Tourism Trade
Unions

UNI-Europa

Union Network International
– European regional
organisation

ETF

European Transport
Workers' Federation

IUF

International Union of
Food, Agricultural, Hotel,
Restaurant, Catering,
Tobacco and Allied
Workers' Associations

UNI

Union Network
International

ITF

International
Transport Workers'
Federation

In the tourism sector, e.g.

- prevails a high percentage of temporary work (seasonal or fixed-term), often combined with unsocial working hours - people often work at night and during weekends and holidays - impeding a normal social life;
- career possibilities are limited;
- it is increasingly difficult, particularly in the hospitality sector, to find qualified personnel, and even more difficult to retain such personnel in the sector;
- salaries are on average 20% lower compared with other sectors;
- the presence of undeclared work and underpaid work is shocking, especially in the hospitality industry.

The main objectives for a tourism in Europe that is socially sustainable are:

- freedom of association, recognition of trade union organisations and collective bargaining
- acceptable working conditions, not inferior to those of other sectors
- fair pay, reflecting the quality of the service provided
- the possibility of professional and career training
- equal opportunities
- quality work

In this context:

- the tourism sector should be increasingly understood in terms of its role in the production sector (bringing the various producers closer to the final user) and of the local tourism system, which provides goods and services in an integrated manner;
- a major role must be claimed by the public authorities, beginning with the European Union and the national and regional authorities, starting with the swift and generalised application of Agenda 21;
- social dialogue must be promoted in every sphere of the sector; broader negotiating relationships must be developed, the effects of which, involving the whole sector, go beyond the confines of the European Union, also having positive consequences on tourism destinations, especially those of the Third World. The objective of this, as well compliance with the Conventions and Recommendations of the ILO, is the recognition of fundamental human rights, such as the absence of discrimination, the social clause, freedom of association and collective bargaining;
- proper accounting practices and social responsibility on the part of companies must be promoted, beginning with the transnational companies; trade unions must play a predominant role in planning, implementing and assessing such practices;
- incentives must be given to encourage quality certification, favouring the collective participation of trade unions and workers' representatives in the definition and management of control systems, giving precedence to forms of certification that provide not only for indicators that are useful for the control of products and processes, but also for indices for environmental and social protection.

In the transport sector, the liberalisation under way, the administrative mistakes of the major airline companies and the companies that manage the major airports, the limited planning, the failure to co-ordinate resources and activities, which has led to an enormous increase in costs rather than being faced in a structural manner, have been shifted onto the reduction of maintenance, reduced safety, increase in risks to the health of workers and travellers, reduction in manpower costs and the professionalism of staff, further compression of the conditions imposed on the chain of local suppliers, especially those of the Southern countries, the multiplication of “low cost” companies, etc., with a consequent further worsening of safety conditions and quality of work for employees. These are aspects that are not only more evident in the civil aviation sector, but increasingly present also in land transport, both urban and extra-urban, and in maritime transport.

Sustainability in the development of tourism, both European and worldwide, depends not only on spreading tourist presence over the longest possible period of time during the year, lowering the seasonal peaks that congest destinations, services and infrastructures, but also on a different and more balanced distribution of tourist arrivals.

Concentration in the European Tourism Market

The sustainable development of European tourism is also threatened by the rapid advancement of the process of concentration by a few transnational companies, organised and integrated both horizontally and vertically. These companies manage the whole process, from the scheduling, to the sale of the holiday, to the transport, to the hotel arrangements, etc., exploiting their dominant position to put pressure on prices, to shift and “invent” destinations, with predictable consequences on suppliers and on the local communities that receive tourist flows. The immediate consequence of this policy is translated into a general drop in prices.

In tourism, which is a labour-intensive sector, this pushing down of prices has a dramatic impact on working conditions, often threatening the autonomy of collective bargaining.

Sustainable tourism that is not only economically feasible but also environmentally compatible and socially responsible cannot only aim at lowering costs. It is against these principles that the attitudes of companies must be measured, especially those of transnational companies, beginning with the tour operators, who are asked to improve their procedures to ensure proper accounting practices and social responsibility, also increasing the opportunities for negotiation with the workers’ trade unions.

The Social Responsibility of Companies

Companies can contribute to sustainable development only when the systems of correct environmental management and correct social practices are an integral part of their management objectives and there is a full and proper involvement of workers and their representatives. It is in this framework that certifications, proper accounting practices and commitments to social responsibility must be made, including e.g. the OECD Guidelines on Multinationals, GRI (Global Reporting Initiatives) and the consequent Tour Operators Initiative Project, EMAS, ISO (the International Standards Organisation), etc.

The Responsibilities of the European Union in ensuring Socially Sustainable Tourism

Europe has a global responsibility in the area of the sustainable development of tourism, both because it is the number one world tourism market and because it is here that the head offices of many of the transnational companies in the sector are located; yet it must be stressed that the European Union continues to deny tourism the status of a sector for which funding must be set aside.

Public subsidies for the projects of companies in the tourism sector must only be granted to initiatives that make explicit reference to respecting the social clause, that undertake to develop forms of qualified employment, to apply collective bargaining and to operate giving precedence to the participation of workers and their free trade union representation.

In particular, initiatives by the Commission tending to distort the tourism market and create competition between the different regions within a situation of worsening employment conditions must be avoided. On the other hand, precedence must be given to those initiatives that move the competition into the area of quality of service. As the tourism sector is labour intensive, this would also translate into the improvement of the professional quality of the work of those employed in the sector.

Before any possible provision for the liberalisation of the market involving the tourism sector that the Commission intends to support (for example, in the context of the GATS negotiations), an in-depth analysis must be made of the effects that any liberalisation would have on the whole tourism sector, particularly on working conditions.

Which Trade Union Initiatives are needed?

Sustainable development cannot be realised without the involvement of workers and trade union organisations, both in the sphere of social dialogue in the sector, and at the level of the individual business, as well as in the field of negotiation of collective agreements, both national and territorial.

In particular, negotiations must be developed on sustainable development with the transnational companies of the tourism sector, starting with the European ones, and with a view to such negotiations yielding positive results beyond the confines of the European Union, particularly in relation to the populations of the destination countries of outgoing tourist flows, increasingly often found in the countries of the South.

Networks to monitor the accounting practices and social responsibility of companies must be developed and managed within the international trade union organisations, and between the trade union organisations of the various countries.

Sustainable development must be the object of information and consultation within European Works Councils.