

International Conference on Religious Tourism
**“Fostering sustainable socio-economic development in host
communities”**

15 and 16 June 2015 - Bethlehem, State of Palestine

**Amr Abdel-Ghaffar, Regional Director for the Middle East,
World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)**

Good afternoon, your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Now that the proceedings of our conference are reaching their end, it is my great pleasure to wrap up the main conclusions and recommendations.

These conclusions and recommendations were prepared by the UNWTO Secretariat in the form of a **draft declaration, in consultation with the moderators** of today’s four sessions. The declaration intends to capture the gist and wealth of the issues raised first, last evening by the distinguished speakers at the opening session, as well as the extremely valuable insights and experiences shared by the panelists and the participants throughout the four working sessions of today, as well as the inspiring closing remarks of Her Excellency the State Undersecretary of Culture and Tourism of Italy.

The **declaration** consists of **two parts**: A **first** part that highlights a number of **basic principles** that are shared by all the participants and which are essentially inspired by the UNWTO **Global Code of Ethics** that can be used as a reference for the development of

religious tourism. As many of you know, the Code of Ethics is a set of policy guidelines for the **development of sustainable and responsible tourism**, approved by the UNWTO General Assembly, back in 1999 and subsequently endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly.

The **second** part of the declaration advances a set of **actionable recommendations** on the issues highlighted by the conference.

My **colleagues** Mr. Jin Woo, our Secretary-General's Advisor on Tourism and Culture, and our Chief of Communications, Ms. Sandra Carvao, were, together with the **moderators** of today's working sessions, Kiran Shinde, John Eade, Alisson Hilliard and Gede Ardika, **instrumental** in preparing this draft.

This **draft will be circulated** among all registered participants in the conference early next week and will remain **open till the end of June** to integrate any observations you may have on it. The final text of the declaration will be posted on the Organization's website, in English as well as in an Arabic, as of the 1st of July.

Now let me briefly **run you through** the text of the declaration.

The text starts by pointing out that *"the understanding and promotion of the ethical values common to humanity, with an attitude of tolerance and respect for the diversity of religious, philosophical and moral beliefs, **are both the foundation and the consequence of responsible tourism**"*.

It then recalls that the Code **highlights the necessity of associating local communities** *with tourism activities to ensure that they equitably share in the economic, social and cultural benefits that these activities generate*. The Code also emphasizes

the need for tourism professionals to “contribute to the cultural and spiritual fulfillment of tourists and allow them, during their travel, to practice their religions”.

Furthermore, the declaration points out that *Religious Tourism can make an important contribution to the socio-economic development and empowerment of local communities* and that it can combine several market segments, making it **more responsive to market needs and requirements** and more **resilient** to influences by exogenous factors.

The text moves on to recognize that *the sustainable development of religious tourism requires* to strike a balance between the development and diversification of its product base, on the one hand, *the **protection and preservation of religious and cultural assets** by all stakeholders, on the other, “mindful of the pressing environmental, sociocultural and economic challenges that exist along pilgrimage routes and sacred sites as a result of increased demand by tourists and visitors”.*

Now in its **operative** part, the declaration advances a set of 12 recommendations:

First, *To recognize that **religious tourism is a continuum of products and experiences** with no rigid boundaries between the religious and the secular and between the spiritual, the cultural and other tourism market segments.*

The conference also recommends *to **advance research** to improve knowledge about the characteristics, motivations and trends of different forms of religious tourism, as well as on its impacts on host communities;*

The **second** recommendation is *To develop policies that protect and preserve religious sites, respect the social, cultural and ethical values of host communities, promote their full inclusion in the tourism value chain, while taking into account the special nature, characteristics and motivations of different religious tourism activities;*

Thirdly, the conference recommends *To **incentivize** religious tourism business models that uphold the **authenticity** of religious sites as well as the cultural, religious and ethical values of host communities and support their socio-economic **empowerment** through tourism;*

Four, *To raise **awareness** and **promote** the valuable contribution of religious tourism to **intercultural and interfaith dialogue** and understanding, universal respect for the spiritual values of humanity and socio-economic development;*

The **fifth** recommendation is *To develop a network to foster cooperation and exchange of information and good practices on tourism management in religious sites, to ensure that the needs of pilgrims, visitors and host communities are met.*

The **sixth** recommendation is *To **encourage** new policies and approaches to the development, management and promotion of tourism in religious sites, seeking **sustainable and inclusive models** that enable the **participation of host communities**, enhance the socio-economic benefits at the local level and provide a balance between the needs of religious tourists and those of tourists visiting religious sites for other purposes.*

The **seventh** recommendation is *To **promote entrepreneurship** in local communities by providing them with the necessary **knowledge and skills** to develop and manage innovative tourism services, activities and experiences that **diversify and broaden** the religious tourism product base.* Good illustrative examples regarding product development and diversification, the use of digital technology, education and skills development and the sharing of best practices at the local, national, regional and international levels, were given particularly by the third panel

The **eighth** recommendation is *To develop **religious tourism routes**, cross-country **pilgrimages** and **networks** of religious tourism destinations, as effective means to foster regional development and integration, cross-cultural exchanges and understanding, as well as self-education and learning.*

The **ninth** recommendation is *To foster **public-private coordination and cooperation** as well as the engagement of **civil society**, particularly through non-governmental organizations, in the development and management of religious tourism at the local level;*

The **tenth** recommendation is *To enhance **visitor experience** - spiritual and material - at religious sites and create opportunities for tourists to become aware and tolerant of other faiths;*

The **eleventh** recommendation is *To assist in **maintaining the spirit of place** that bestows sites with religious significance and sacred value while providing resources for tourism;*

And lastly, the **twelfth** recommendation is *To promote closer **coordination** between relevant **Government administrations**, tourism, cultural and religious **organizations**, **private sector***

stakeholders and civil society, with a view to ensuring the sustainable development of religious tourism

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, the declaration expresses the **sincere appreciation and heartfelt gratitude** of all the participants in the conference to Your Excellency, Madame Minister, and to your very able team of collaborators in the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities of the State of Palestine, for the **warmth of your hospitality** - which made our stay in your country a memorable one - the **outstanding organizational arrangements** - which were instrumental for the success of this conference - and for the **fundamental contribution** you have made to advancing the Organization's religious tourism development agenda and enhancing its economic, cultural and social benefits to host communities.

I cannot conclude without a **special word of thanks to our moderators and speakers**, who enabled us to meet the **expectations** you have shown by your active participation in our proceedings throughout the day.

For those of you who are leaving, I wish you a **safe and pleasant trip**, and for those who will stay, enjoy the **unique beauty and spirituality of Palestine!**

Thank you very much.