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Thematic discussion: The Role of Tourism Routes in Fostering Regional Development and Integration¹

I. Introduction

1. Tourism routes create opportunities for transboundary cooperation, collaborative destination marketing, product development, public-private partnerships, and safeguarding of natural and cultural heritage.
2. Tourism routes can be developed over large distances, namely crossing more than one country, or over relatively short ones within a same region or country. In common, they will share a theme or activity that drives the interest of tourists as well as complementary services and experiences characterized by elements and values of physical and intangible nature.
3. The development of tourism routes has gained particular relevance in recent years as it responds to the objectives of dispersing demand all year round and throughout the territory while addressing the new market trends emerging from travellers seeking enriching experiences which entail more flexibility, discovery, learning and contact with local people and their traditions.
4. Routes thus offer important opportunities for sustainable tourism development as they have the potential to:
 - (a) spread tourism demand and income all year round and over the territory, thus supporting the regional distribution of wealth, reducing pressure on key attractions, and contributing to addressing seasonality;
 - (b) create new and innovative products and add value to existing ones, therefore increasing visitors' satisfaction, length of stay and spending;
 - (c) open new destinations and/or revitalize destinations in decline;

¹ Sources: UNWTO/ETC Handbook on Product Development; Dorothea Meyer, Tourism Routes and Gateways: Key issues for the development of tourism routes and gateways and their potential for Pro-Poor tourism, Overseas Development Institute.



- (d) create a pulling factor that attracts new market segments, as well as repeat visitors, particularly special-interest segments and individual travellers, which often have higher-yield spending;
- (e) foster public-private partnerships and stimulate entrepreneurship;
- (f) promote coordination between local, regional and national authorities;
- (g) protect and promote natural and cultural heritage, not only tangible but also intangible heritage, by generating income for preservation and providing economic viability to activities which otherwise may be “lost”, particularly those related to more traditional sectors such as agriculture or handicraft;
- (h) generate funding and more attractive conditions for private sector investment; and
- (i) develop cultural understanding and strengthening the cultural links between people at the local, regional, national or/and international levels.

5. It is widely recognized that intraregional trade and tourism exchanges play a significant role in accelerating economic growth. In this regard, tourism routes can also play a fundamental role in promoting regional development and integration as they:

- (a) create networks within a region or linking various regions and/or countries thus maximizing the potential of cooperation as opposed to competition between various players in a region or various regions;
- (b) create opportunities to generate jobs and business opportunities in less favoured regions and thus their socioeconomic regeneration and development;
- (c) fight rural desertification and migration to urban areas by creating job and business opportunities notably for youth; and
- (d) strengthen economic linkages, social cohesion and cultural understanding.

6. Along with the potential benefits of tourism routes, there are also major challenges that need to be addressed when building a successful tourism route. These include:

- (a) Leadership and the creation of effective coordination mechanisms and governance structures among disperse stakeholders;
- (b) Effective management with a comprehensive and sustainable approach to the conservation of the route;
- (c) Integrated product development approaches and the effective clustering of services and attractions along the value chain taking into account the tangible and intangible values of the route;
- (d) Marketability, including a clear understanding of target segments, and commercial viability;
- (e) Integrated marketing and promotion and the development of a common and truly “shared” brand;

- (f) Infrastructure planning, development and financing;
- (g) Engagement of local communities in the design, operation and interpretation of routes and the fair and equal distribution of tourism benefits at the local level; and
- (h) Proper inclusion of tourism cooperation and routes development in regional cooperation agreements and processes.

7. Although a booming phenomenon in recent years, tourism routes are not new. The year 2014 marks the 20th anniversary of the Samarkand Declaration on Silk Road Tourism, a milestone document subscribed by 19 countries, together with UNWTO and UNESCO, which calls for “a peaceful and fruitful rebirth of these legendary routes as one of the world’s richest cultural tourism destinations”.

8. The establishment within the UNWTO Secretariat of a specialized Silk Road Programme in 2010 reinforced the Organization’s commitment to developing sustainable tourism growth along the Silk Road. This highly collaborative programme focuses on three key areas: (a) marketing and promotion to stimulate cooperative campaigns and partnerships between public and private sectors; (b) destination management and capacity building to promote quality experiences, and increase length of stay and yield and; (c) travel facilitation to promote easier border crossing and visa procedures.

9. UNWTO has gained significant experience in enhancing cooperation among Member States through its Silk Road Programme, as well as through other initiatives such as the collaboration with the European Institute for Cultural Routes and the Amber Route or the preparation of the upcoming UNWTO International Conference of the Spice Route (Kerala, India, July 2014) and the First International Congress on Pilgrimage and Tourism (Santiago de Compostela, Spain, September 2014).

10. There are important regional and national experiences among Member States, which opens a good opportunity for the Organization to work further on the topic of tourism routes for the benefit of all Members.

II. Guidelines for discussion

11. For the purpose of a fruitful and lively participation in the discussion, the Secretariat invites delegations to share their experiences in the development of tourism routes during the thematic discussion. The Secretariat kindly requests delegation to focus their interventions identifying key success factors and challenges in developing tourism routes by covering the following areas:

- (a) Accessibility, namely in terms of infrastructure development, transportation and visa facilitation in the case of transnational routes;
- (b) Product development, including successful strategies for integrated product development as well as the role of innovation and the use of new technologies;
- (c) Joint promotion and marketing, including the creation of the “route” brand;
- (d) Governance models, including public-private partnerships, public-public coordination and the creation of networks;
- (e) The role of national tourism administrations in promoting the creation and development of tourism routes; and

- (f) The inclusion of tourism routes as a fundamental component of regional development integration processes.

III. Actions to be taken by the Executive Council

12. The Executive Council is requested:

- (a) To recognize that the development of tourism routes can play a fundamental role in fostering regional development and integration at the national and international levels; and
- (b) To encourage the Secretary-General to expand the action of the existing UNWTO Special Field Programme (Silk Road) to tourism routes in a broader sense, with the aim of defining recommendations, exchange experiences and exploring the potential of working on new international or regional tourism routes.