



Speech of the Secretary-General of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Mr. Taleb Rifai

“Accessibility: A Competitive Advantage for Tourism Destinations”

31 January 2013, FITUR Madrid

Your Excellency, Ms. Liliam Kechichian, Minister of Tourism and Sport of Uruguay,

Ms. Ana Larrañaga, Director of FITUR,

Mr. Andrés Ramos, President of the ONCE Foundation for Latin America,

Honourable Ministers,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to open this landmark event at FITUR. I must thank our partners, especially the ONCE Foundation for joining us in making this event possible, as well as the ACS Foundation for their steadfast support.

Tourism is undeniably one of the most significant and influential sectors in the world today. The sector's exponential growth has brought with it both not only seemingly boundless opportunities, but also significant challenges. Alongside concerns for tourism's economic and environmental sustainability, we must remember that tourism attractions and services are not always equally enjoyed by all segments of society.

I refer to the **rights and needs of persons with disabilities**, who should actively take part in tourism with as much freedom and enjoyment as any other traveller. This conviction is one of the many enshrined within UNWTO's core policy document, the **Global Code of Ethics for Tourism**. A roadmap for the development of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism, the Code champions fundamental universal values. Endorsed by the General Assembly of UNWTO in 1999, and that of the United Nations in 2001, Article 7 of the Code explicitly calls for the encouragement and facilitation of tourism by all persons – including those with disabilities.

UNWTO believes that facilitating travel by persons with disabilities is a vital and transversal element of any responsible and sustainable tourism policy. **Accessibility should be regarded as an integral part of the service sector and be integrated into all tourist facilities, products, and services, ideally from their very inception or through the adaptation of existing tourism assets.** This should be done not only in the interests of human rights and equal opportunities, but also in light of the economic advantages entailed therein.

According to the World Health Organization as many as 1 billion people worldwide – 15% of the global population – suffer from some form of disability. They face serious impediments to travel, and so their potential as tourists remains largely untapped by the industry.

Providing reliable, accurate information to travellers with disabilities, shaping and marketing tourism destinations according to universal design principles, and offering better access at tourism sites – these can make the difference between winning and losing visitors for both tourism companies and destinations.

To help mainstream disability issues across our sector, in September 2011, UNWTO signed a landmark agreement with the ONCE Foundation (Fundación ONCE) and the European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT). Aimed at enabling universal access to tourism facilities and services, the agreement entails a series of initiatives. These range from awareness-raising to providing stakeholders with advice on policy-making, embarking on training and capacity building projects, and the labour insertion of persons with disabilities.

Another key agreement was signed between UNWTO and the ACS Foundation (Fundación ACS) in April 2012, to enhance a central output of our collaboration with ONCE and ENAT: a **Manual on Developing Universal Accessibility in the interests of "Tourism for All"**, which will be presented later on in this event.

This Manual, which we are in the process of finalising, outlines existing legal and technical regulations on accessibility, and features a compilation of international good practices on this issue. It is our hope that, through this joint initiative, tourism's key-players will have new tools and resources with which to make their destinations, facilities and services ever more accessible.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Alongside political will, which is undoubtedly crucial, strong partnerships are needed between policy makers, the private sector, and organisations representing persons with disabilities, if accessible tourism is to become a comprehensive reality in our sector.

But the first step, the step that will truly make a difference, is the change in attitudes of service providers and destinations towards travellers with disabilities. I trust that the discussions of this event will help to bring us ever closer to achieving this goal.

Thank you.