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AFRICA ATTRACTING MORE TOURISTS

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SENEGAL, IDRC --- The optimistic view of tourism and development is summed up by M.D. Davis, a World Bank expert, who said in 1966 that "for developing countries, tourism represents the true motor of development, much like industry was for Europe in the 19th century." And certainly, tourism was a factor of economic growth between 1960 and 1973.

In Africa, tourism's increase of 250 percent between 1962 and 1972 was also matched by increases in revenues of 224 percent. And despite a drop in 1973-74, the world tourism industry has continued to grow.

In 1979, some 5.3 million tourists arrived in Africa. Buth this number is only 2 percent of the world's total of 270 million leisure travellers, and it is very unevenly distributed: 62 percent of visitors to Africa went to the North, 22 percent to East and South Africa, 11 percent to West Africa, and 5 percent to Central Africa.

Africa's $1.8 billion share of world tourism revenues, at 2.4 percent of the world total, is equally small.

But if these numbers are low compared to Europe and North America which host 85 percent of the world's tourists and claim 80 percent of the revenues, they at least point to Africa's future potential in the development of the industry.

A number of benefits are expected to accrue from the development of the industry. First, tourism contributes to improving the balance of payments by bringing in much needed foreign exchange. And unlike other export sectors, tourism is not subject to deteriorating terms of exchange. The state is the main beneficiary of tourism, as 20 percent of revenues are collected by governments through taxation.

The tourist industry also creates employment and stimulates various sectors of the economy such as agriculture, construction, and handicrafts. A joint 1979 Unesco and World Bank publication (Tourism: passport for development) indicates that tourism is responsible for between 3 and 10 percent of jobs both directly through hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, etc., and indirectly in related industries such as transport. Women and young people benefit most from these employment opportunities and incomes generally rise as a result.

But in most African countries, the tourism industry is not capable of bringing about rapid economic growth, nor can it contribute significantly to integrated national development. Some economists even consider that the benefits of tourism are lower than the investments required.

In a study carried out for Unesco in 1978, Senegalese economist Elimane Fall stresses the essentially "flexible and fluctuating" character of tourism. In fact, he says, the tourist flow can be turned aside or stopped at any moment following political, economic, or social events in the host country. And it is this uncertainty that makes it difficult to integrate the tourism sector in long-term plans.

Moreover, tourism in Africa suffers from incomplete and inadequate planning.

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The Unesco-World Bank study noted that planners in most African countries did not assess whether the needs of tourism corresponded to the particular geographical and resource characteristics, economic development levels, political and administrative institutions, or traditions of the areas where facilities were implanted.

Moreover, because of the low level of development in African countries, the tourism industry cannot be exploited solely by individual national efforts. The structure of the industry, the high levels of capital needed, and the human capabilities required are such that the product and its management are often under the control of foreign enterprises. In fact, of the world's 2500 tour operators, Africa has only 92, and only 533 of the world's 30 000 travel agencies. Thus, much of the foreign exchange never arrives in the host country.

Investment codes in African countries, particularly in West Africa, grant special tax exemptions to encourage tourism, but in spite of these encouragements only 20 percent of tourism's revenues actually remain in the host country.

Some economists further estimate that large-scale development of the tourism industry can contribute to inflation in a little-developed economy and that, because of the weak services sector, it cannot foster development generally. This was shown in a study carried out by the Development Centre of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that also concluded that the net effect of tourism on national and individual incomes was negative, except in some countries like Kenya and the Bahamas.

Tourism can have potentially devastating effects on culture and social equilibrium. Cultural shock often results in changes of values and attitudes in receiving countries - a break with traditional means of production, degradation of national culture, exacerbation of social differences, falsification of folklore and artistic activities. Nevertheless, tourism has sometimes contributed to strengthening national identity and culture in some countries, as museums and craft centres were established, historical sites preserved, and artistic activities encouraged.

Whether tourism becomes a base for the development of non-industrialized countries and meets the development objectives set for it depends on its inclusion in a dynamic set of export industries. The African Regional Conference organized by the WTO and the African Economic Community in The Gambia in 1978 set guidelines for the development of the industry on the continent. The 35 participating countries recommended a better definition and control of the "African tourist product".

The Conference also insisted on the need to promote inter-African tourism as a potential tool for achieving autonomy in Africa. In fact, while the number of tourists who do not stray far from home is estimated at 86 percent in Europe, it is only 12 percent in Africa. The extension of this travel would open up new perspectives for tourism in Africa.

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