

World Travelers Must Help Local Communities, Says Counterpart President

2006-12-21

Nations around the world must ensure that tourism, which represents the greatest voluntary transfer of wealth in the history of humankind, benefits communities which host tourists, says Lelei LeLaulu, president of Counterpart International.

Delivering concluding remarks at the huge World Tourism Forum for Peace and Sustainable Development in Porto Alegre, Brazil - which Counterpart helped organise this month - LeLaulu, invoking the parable of the Good Samaritan, said travelers to the developing world can make a huge difference in the quality of life of the people and communities they visit. "If you help the people at the destination, you are a pilgrim, otherwise you're merely a traveler. By ensuring our tourism offerings benefit people at destinations we become pilgrims to peace, to prosperity."

Action was needed quickly to ensure the largest funnel of money in history from the richer countries to the developing world was used in a way which improved the wealth, health, education and enhanced culture in destinations. "In four years we will see a billion international arrivals and we have to ensure these visitors and their resources are used to alleviate poverty in the destinations - otherwise non-sustainable tourism poses a major threat to many vulnerable parts of the planet."

"Tourism promotes dialogue between people and states, it improves their knowledge of each other and it helps them recognize the importance of valuing and respecting their differences," UNWTO Secretary-General Francesco Frangialli said at the World Tourism Forum.

Tourism is one of the most responsive sectors - cross border travel is usually a first reinforcing element of peace accords. Frangialli said "the direct contacts between visitors and host communities are irreplaceable: how can we feel enmity towards someone we know personally, someone whom we have received or who has received us? Destinations and tour operators in the same regions are linked by common interests and by a common destiny, around shared development projects."

LeLaulu told the Forum, which comprised entrepreneurs, professionals, scholars and students, representatives of governmental agencies and NGOs, about the importance of investing in infrastructure, such as roads, highways and airlines - "aerial highways" needed to transport tourists and to enable communities to send goods and services to the global markets. "If we do not get the World Bank and the world's financing institutions to start recognizing airlines as "aerial highways" of the developing world, we will not have the infrastructure to take advantage of this the greatest transfer of wealth in history. Without investment in aerial highways much of the developing world will be backwaters of the global economy."

The US government, he added, spends US\$11 billion subsidizing its airlines, including small unprofitable routes to rural parts of America, "because they recognise the critical importance of airlines as part of its infrastructure to keep them rich."

He called for the incorporation of innovation and creativity into tourism infrastructure. "One step beyond sustainability is resilience, the ability to get back up after being knocked down," he said, recommending young people be continually engaged as tourism policies are crafted. "We must ensure that the best and brightest of our youth select tourism as their first - and not last - resort," he said. LeLaulu paid tribute to the Government of Tanzania for investing in the intellectual future of its country by teaching tourism in the first year of school.

Sergio Foguel, president of the Tourism for Peace and Sustainable Development Foundation, reminded that, from the outset three years ago, the Forum had already brought together approximately 300 cases, 10,000 people and 100 countries. 'More importantly than collecting cases, our biggest gain is the ability to bring people together and multiply experiences,' he reflected.

About Counterpart International

Since 1965, Counterpart has given people a voice in their own future through smart partnerships, offering options and access to tools for sustained social, economic and environmental development. Operating on five continents, Counterpart is supported by the generosity of its corporate and individual donors, foundations, host countries, multilateral institutions and several US government agencies. For further information, visit www.counterpart.org.

For further information about the World Tourism Forum for Peace and Sustainable Development, visit www.desti-nations.net.

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