THE PRINCIPAL ELEMENT FOR A GLOBAL QUALITY TOURISM SERVICE: TRAINED HUMAN RESOURCES

In consideration of the preponderance and rapid development of Tourism in the Greater Caribbean, as more and more countries are turning to the Sector, it is clear that the quality of the human resources in the tourism sector will impact on the competitive advantage of the Region as a whole. Therefore, education and training play a vital role in the development of personnel with the professional skills needed to ensure that the Region meets expected international standards for productivity and services delivery. The Association of Caribbean States (ACS), through the Sustainable Tourism Directorate and with the valuable support of the French Development Agency (AFD), has undertaken the project of assessing current training levels and educational opportunities. Toward that end, it will gather data in the short term on the aforementioned and in this way, provide an updated assessment that would allow future support from strategic partners involved in the sector. It will also develop a regional plan to strengthen human resource capabilities and training, based on the needs of each of the subgroups of the Member and Associate Member Countries of the ACS. It is intended that this will raise its level of competitiveness on the world stage so that the benefits redound to the development and strengthening of the Sustainable Tourism Zone of the Greater Caribbean. Convinced that positive impacts on employment and generally on the competitiveness of the Caribbean destination will depend on the skill level and professionalism of the workforce, this project is designed as a proactive approach to produce documentation and provide recommendations for strategies and procedures to strengthen regional human resource capacities in cross-cutting areas necessary for a sustainable and competitive industry. The tourism service in the Greater Caribbean, more specifically in Small Island Developing States (SIDS), can be one of the competitive elements that further differentiate them in the international market. In light of this, it becomes a priority to develop a culture of quality service, where essentially the customer is the main focus throughout the value chain. In order to obtain positive feedback where a visitor evaluates his experience as exceptional, human resource involvement in the tourism activity must be well trained. Tourism has provided the Greater Caribbean with a tremendous opportunity to further contribute to its social and economic development. The great competitive advantages afforded to its countries, as a result, would help achieve goals, more specifically at the global level, as it relates to plans outlined for this millennium inter alia poverty reduction and employment generation. In order

for this Region to benefit from tourism development, in addition to the human resource training, it is necessary to have several components in place that will ensure tourist safety, comfort and satisfaction. High quality infrastructure would guarantee the safety and comfort of tourists through state of the art airports and accommodation facilities. It is also important to have attractions that stimulate interest and allow visitors to have a learning experience through their visit to said region. This includes showcasing the cultural and natural patrimony and the availability of complementary services and amenities to be visited and enjoyed. However, all these components of the tourism product are of no value if the persons providing the service are not involved in every aspect. In that respect, Tourism is characterised as being an intensive sector in employment generation with the human element being the pivotal factor of the activity. In this "equation," the common denominator is human beings, as both enjoy satisfaction, whether in providing or receiving a good service, depending on their role in the tourism activity. Additionally, Tourism also possesses a series of characteristics that classify it as one of the most inclusive socioeconomic activities in terms of gender, education and age. It also requires the shortest periods for training and certification in job positions such as room attendants, waiters, porters, receptionists, to name a few. The training periods, for which, can be 40, 80 to 100 hours in order to be incorporated into the sector's workforce. In this regard, there currently exist many varying concepts and methodologies that allow human resource training to be carried out. Nevertheless, it needs to be clearly understood that within the Tourism sector, this training should not be solely theoretical (knowledge) but should also contain a highly practical component (know-how) and a final element that is the key to its success - attitude toward service (being). The aforementioned elements, in spite of the manner in which they are acquired, are referred to as 'Competency Standard,' a concept widely used by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which has proven to be an effective method for the development of employees. As a result, this model has been successfully implemented in various countries of the Greater Caribbean such as Mexico, Colombia, Costa Rica and Guatemala. Regardless of the destination, be it a developed country, a developing country, a large city or a community, the visitor always expects to receive high quality service. This does not necessarily mean that he/she anticipates luxuries or perfection, but essentially that the promise made when the service was sold would be honoured. The objective should be what is received in exchange for what is paid satisfies visitor's needs and or possibly exceed visitor's expectations. In order to achieve the foregoing, it is crucial that the following elements always come into play: • Customer Service - make the visitor feel like the most important person at all times. • Effectiveness - satisfy the need of the person receiving the service. • Initiative - be passionate about the service and offer it without waiting for it to be required by the visitor, when it is recognised that there is the need and opportunity to provide it. According to the famous European businessman Richard Branson, Founder of Virgin Group, it is important to put the customer before the financial returns generated by the service provided to him/her. Branson maintains that this will produce a loyal customer, who will constantly return to the company, demanding the special treatment that sets one apart from the other competitors in the sector. In order to accomplish that, it is necessary to strengthen human resource capabilities in tourism to include one fundamental point, "Customer Service." Taking into account the above considerations, the completion of the study on the current situation and training needs in the Greater Caribbean is the first step of many. The ACS will implement regional human resource training based on international standards that would allow the region to raise its quality and position itself as a premium tourist destination. Julio Orozco is the Director of Sustainable Tourism of the Association of Caribbean States. Any correspondence or feedback can be sent to feedback@acs-aec.org