Artisans: Impact on the Tourism Industry

The Tourism industry has long been regarded as one of the primary vehicles contributing to the social and economic development of the countries of the Greater Caribbean. Tourism generates income, investment, employment and provides opportunities for diversifying local economies. The industry has also driven the growth and development of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), many of which are skill-based service enterprises that are serviced primarily by women and youth in indigenous and rural communities. These range from entertainment services related to cultural art-forms and expressions, to the production of arts and crafts, local cuisine and traditional skills such as hair braiding and basket weaving, among others.

The local culture in its myriad forms and expressions is an important element of a destination's uniqueness and appeal, often differentiating one destination from another, and thus contributing to destination competitiveness. This differentiation is increasingly more important for destinations seeking to maintain and grow their market share, given the increase in competition globally, as well as the changing consumer partners impacting tourism supply and demand. Among the most direct and tangible expressions of culture are the local patrimonies of Arts and Crafts which are often specific to a particular country, community or social grouping. 'Craft' is evocative of the local history, culture and tradition, and thus is inextricably linked to the tourism product and experience of the locality from which it originates. The craft tells the story of the place and its people, thereby generating interest and potentially repeat visits. It is the article or 'memory' exported from the 'destination' following a visit, and should therefore be representative of the uniqueness of place and cultural heritage.

Tourist's appetite for local and hand-made ethnologies is well-documented and provides a means of channelling revenues from tourism back into national and local economies. For many Member Countries of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), the vast and multi-faceted tourism industry provides a frequent influx of cultural enthusiasts, adventure-seekers, history buffs and world-

heritage aficionados eager for “local” culturally-linked and indigenous products. For small entrepreneurs including cultural performers, vendors and producers of handcrafts, furnishings, soaps, specialty foods and many other hand-made products, the tourist market offers unlimited sales opportunities, with a diverse range of sales venues.

Research indicates that despite this potential, the region has been largely unable to capitalize on the economic growth opportunities created by tourism and thus the full socio-economic potential of the industry in generating linkages which leads to growth in ancillary sectors, remains under-utilised. This is most prevalent in the market for arts and crafts and souvenirs, where currently, the majority of products available for purchase are sourced from foreign nations. In many vendor’s stalls across the region, it is common to find souvenirs, trinkets and other ‘local’ paraphernalia personalised with the country’s name, flag or other insignia, which are not made in the country of origin. This ability of international suppliers to provide inexpensive, generic product have severely impacted and diminished business opportunities for local craftsmen, both threatening the livelihoods of the Region’s Artisans and the viability of the sector. More importantly this practise, if it is allowed to continue unheeded, has the capacity to undermine the sustainability, value and relevance of local arts and craft, as well as inherent skills and art forms, contributing to an eventual loss of heritage and traditions.

Research produced by the Caribbean Tourism Organisation, indicate that a large percentage of the local businesses found within the tourism industry are classified as SMEs, also that the Craft or Artisan sector comprises the vast majority of the region’s SMEs, and these enterprises are both generated from and serviced by tourism business activity. As tourism continues to grow throughout the Region, the connectivity between Artisans/SME development and Tourism becomes even more important in order to construct wide reaching and enduring inter-sectoral linkages supported by a tourism industry bridge.

Recognising this vital role of the craft sector as a conduit for social and economic growth and its contribution to Tourism product development; and seeking to leverage the opportunities for trade and entrepreneurship generated by the Tourism industry for the Artisan sector, the ACS has partnered with the Organisation of American States (OAS) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to support the establishment of a Regional Network of Artisans in Tourism of the Greater Caribbean. The network has been conceived as a private-public partnership forum for ongoing networking, co-operation and dialogue among the Artisans and other stakeholders related to the sector, and will support training and the exchange of knowledge and best practises to contribute to business skills development and the professionalisation of the Artisan sector in the Greater Caribbean.

The initiative to establish the Regional Network of Artisans of the Greater Caribbean stems from a 2 day Regional workshop and symposium which was organised by the ACS and held on October 23-24, 2014 in Cartagena, Republic of Colombia. This workshop was targeted to women Artisans and Entrepreneurs operating in the Tourism sector, and was attended by twenty-one (21) participants, representing a cross-section of 15 countries across the region. The workshop entailed an exercise to document the needs and challenges affecting the growth and productivity of Artisans in the region,

which revealed inter-alia, that there was need for more hands-on training in business management and product development; that the Artisans were constrained by limited information about buyer interests, consumer standards and purchasing practices; they faced challenges to obtain financing to grow and/or improve their business; and desired more direct access to sales opportunities particularly regional and international craft fairs. The desire to increase linkages with other Artisans from the Region for the trade of goods, for the purchase of raw materials and for joint manufacturing and/or promotion efforts was listed among the top priorities. Towards this end, the participating Artisans appealed to the ACS and its partners to provide the necessary technical assistance and support.

The First Meeting of the Regional Network of Artisans of the Greater Caribbean was held in Montego Bay, Jamaica, on March 23rd, 2015 with a pilot group of 9 participants representing each of the four geographic sub-regions, identified as leading Artisan Entrepreneurs based on nomination by their countries. The meeting resulted in the development of a Work Plan for the first 2 years of operation of the network, and agreed on the initial functions, composition and structure of the Network. Following the network meeting, an Entrepreneurship Training Workshop was held from March 24 – 26, 2015 for a total of 24 Artisans, who received training on the process to develop, grow and manage a successful business as well as capacity-building tools for business and entrepreneurial skills development.

The participation and advancement of SMEs are incorporated as part of the Development Agenda of International Organisations working in the region. It is recognised that SMEs are a significant element in the business economy, but also suffer from the lack of business skills and opportunities for training and market access needed to improve and expand their business. Within this group, the Craft or Artisan sector comprises a substantial number.

For the countries of the Greater Caribbean, sales of locally made products to tourists and tourism businesses offer an important source of international exchange and a means of channelling revenues from tourism back into national and local economies. Additionally, a successful handcraft sector leverages business growth in a variety of related sectors, ranging from raw material supply, manufacturing, and agricultural production to transportation, retail outlets and export management. It also strengthens cultural traditions and entertainment offerings, which in turn contribute to the diversity and authenticity of a country’s overall tourism product. However, the region has yet to fully capitalize on the economic growth opportunities created by the tourism industry as the Region’s Artisans lack capital and the assistance needed particularly for innovation in product design and development, to expand production, and market effectively to a fragmented and globalized distribution chain.

The ACS and its partners have been working to address these limitations in order to bridge the gaps in the contribution of tourism to local economies, as a strategy for job creation and poverty reduction. The establishment of the Regional Network of Artisans in Tourism of the Greater Caribbean offers an opportunity to access and therefore enhance cooperation and linkages with the Arts and Craft sector in the Region, fostering cross-sectoral collaboration to ensure that Artisans, who, while responsible for producing an integral part of a territory’s artistic culture, and are very

often citizens of meagre financial resources, receive the necessary support to enhance their productivity and improve the viability of their business enterprises. A significant objective and expected benefit of this initiative is to generate market opportunities for regional culturally linked products, and contribute to increased business for ‘small’ entrepreneurs, particularly women from indigenous and rural communities who predominate the production chain.

Taking into account the recommendations garnered through previous research activity and the information collected on the needs, challenges and the priorities of the sector, the Association continues to lead efforts in the establishment of the Regional Artisan Network, with its Directorate of Sustainable Tourism, functioning as the ‘Technical Secretariat’. Ongoing in this regard, are discussions on the modalities to expand the Network and support implementation of the plan of action.