

Building a Partnership in Tourism

A FIRST IN SOUTH AFRICA.
REFLECTIONS ON THE TOURISM
CONFERENCE
Edwin Siphon Rihlamvu

Skills development, retention and transfer in the tourism sector involve a wide range of public, private and civil society actors. Success in skills development requires these actors to work in a commonly agreed direction and properly coordinated manner. These were collective voices that chimed at the first ever National Tourism Skills Development Conference that was held in Muldersdrift, Gauteng, South Africa in October 2006.

Theme

The conference, which was subtly themed; BUILDING A PARTNERSHIP IN TOURISM was organized under the auspices of the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) in partnership with the Tourism Hospitality and Sport Education and Training Authority (THETA) and the National Business Initiative (NBI).

Addressing the 600 – strong conference that attracted a maze of respected industry players, politicians, senior governments officials, private sector community, academics, trade unionists, non-governmental organizations and international delegates including those from the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Mr Marthinus van Schalkwyk, Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism insisted that the entire industry needed to address the lack of skills in the tourism sector in order to provide efficient services to tourists.

We recognize the efforts by larger business to invest in skills development in spite of the difficulties they have experienced in accessing training incentives. However, the challenge in general is to find ways to improve the institutional responsiveness to skills demands of domestic and foreign investors,” said Van Schalkwyk referring to the fact that about 90 percent of the scarce skills in the tourism sector are in the high-skills level band.

Benefits

Tourism is a nationally recognized sector that can contribute to economic growth and transformation, and the reduction of poverty. That is why tourism is being deliberately positioned to benefit from South African government’s massive investment of R370 billion on infrastructure development, which will greatly improve the country’s offering to tourists.



However, despite the growth and apparent robustness of the tourism sector, local and international thinking show that this spiraling process requires systematic, coordinated and constant review

of markets and the dynamics of skills demand. This because the skills required today may not be the same, as those required ten years from now.

Sports Tourism

Gauteng Premier Mbhazima Shilowa said his province had prioritized skills development in the sector especially in view of the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup.

“We need to ensure that the training we provide to marshals during the world cup goes beyond them marshalling crowds.

They must be able to give advice to supporters when they ask where to find entertainment after a match,” challenged Mr Shilowa recalling the fact that one of the most critical achievements for Germany was that they had officials who were conversant in all 32 languages of the participating countries at all the entrance to the stadiums and at the airports.

In terms of language training, the Tourism Branch within the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) has led processes, which resulted in the training of black tourist guides from across the country in French, Spanish and most recently Chinese. Commenting on the rationale for that undertaking Dr Patrick Matlou, Deputy Director General for Tourism said: “We strongly believe that tourist guides are the first point of contact between tourists

and South Africa and thus should be able to speak their language proficiently while understanding their cultures. Furthermore, the cultural, religious, historical and strategic affinity between our country and those of our tourist’s itself makes language training important in the context of Africa’s renewal positioning”.

These training programmes are so intense such that the tourist guides are expected to undergo experiential training in the countries where those languages are spoken! And also, there is an in-principle understanding between the tourism industry and DEAT to absorb tourist guides as soon as they complete foreign language training.

Meanwhile, preparations are afoot to train historically disadvantaged tourist guides on languages of foreign nationalities that are likely to descend to South Africa’s shores for the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup: Italian, Russian, German, Portuguese and Japanese.

“Markets change and so do the responses of competitors to changing demand. International competition does not rest and neither can South Africa’s commitment to understanding market change and the development of robust response underpinned by world-class tourism personnel,” said Ms Patience Molokoza, Director – International Tourism Relations.

Ms Molokoza was referring to interventions that were championed by her Directorate, which resulted in the training of numerous national and provincial officials by the UNWTO on relevant areas such as tourism destination marketing, information and knowledge management as well as creating opportunities for officials to attend practicum that are organized by the UNWTO, Commonwealth and other acclaimed international training institutions.

The Managing Director of the Southern Sun Group Mr Helder Pereira said poaching of staff in the industry was rife and had a negative impact on the industry. “South African hotel managers are highly sought after, especially by developed countries as they are highly regarded,” said Mr Pereira. According to him, one of the major challenges in the industry was not only to provide training to upcoming entrepreneurs who are starting businesses such as guesthouses, but also to provide them with business opportunities.

“We cannot be satisfied that we

have trained a certain number of people while we do not give them business or recommend them to visitors when our hotels are full. Otherwise what happens after we have trained them, where are they now going to get business to enable them to survive if we do not assist them with getting it?” he asked. Mr Lulamile Stuurman, Director - Tourism Human Resources Development and project manager for the organizing committee of the Conference called on the business sector to support the government’s national strategy on skills development. This he said would address the problem of skills development in the tourism sector. “It may often appear that government, business, labour and communities have competing interests but we have a powerful common interest when it comes to developing skills and people. There is a lot that we can achieve by aligning our goals and efforts. Consensus building is never an easy process, but it results in more robust solutions” said Minister Marthinus van Schalkwyk, cementing the BUILT PARTNERSHIP IN TOURISM - A FIRST IN SOUTH AFRICA.

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