

THE CRAFT SECTOR IN TOURISM



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 such as Arts and Crafts, Music, Dance and Cuisine which are often specific to a particular country, community or social grouping.

Tourist's appetite for local and hand made ethnologies is widely recognised and continues to be prevalent in the various sub-sectors of the industry. 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, which has driven the growth of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), many of which are skills-based service enterprises. These range from entertainment services related to cultural art forms and expressions, to the production of arts and crafts, local gastronomy and cuisine and traditional skills such as hair braiding and basket weaving. 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 as well as visitors eager for "local" culturally-linked and indigenous products.

Despite this potential, market research conducted by Aid to Artisans (ATA), an international non-profit organisation serving the arts and crafts sector, indicate that 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 evident 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 conducted by the ACS in an exercise to evaluate the needs and challenges of the Region's Artisan sector, revealed inter-alia that local Artisans are constrained by limited information about buyer interests, consumer standards and purchasing practices; and also lack capital and the assistance needed for innovation in product design and development, to expand production, as well as market effectively to a fragmented and globalized supply sector.

The Directorate of Sustainable Tourism (DST) and the Directorate of Trade, Development and External Economic Relations (DTDEER) of the ACS are leading a Regional multi-dimensional project that seeks to address these limitations and bridge the gaps in the contribution of tourism to local economics. This project, Entrepreneurial Strengthening in the Tourism Sector: Opportunities for Women Project includes aspects of capacity-building, knowledge-enrichment and the delivery of training and tools, with a specific focus on enhancing the opportunities for trade and entrepreneurship generated by Tourism for women. This approach corresponds to research which indicated that in the countries of the Greater Caribbean, the vast majority of local Artisans are women and additionally, that most of the micro, small and medium enterprises servicing the Tourism sector are owned and/or operated by women.

As the first step in the implementation of this project, the ACS in collaboration with project partners hosted a Regional Workshop in Cartagena de Indias, Republic of Colombia, October 23-24, 2014. This workshop gathered a pilot group of twenty-one (21) women artisans and entrepreneurs representing a cross-section of 15 ACS Member Countries from the four geographic sub-regions. Among the main outcomes the participants committed to forming a Regional Network of Artisans of the Greater Caribbean for ongoing networking, co-operation and dialogue, and made an appeal for a Regional Fair to be organised, to showcase and promote the Region's Arts and Craft to international buyers. The workshop was highly productive and will inform the next steps as it relates to the development of strategies and future activities to support the productivity and growth of the Region's Artisans.

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 industry leverages business growth in a variety of related sectors, from raw material supply, manufacturing, and agricultural production to transportation, retail outlets and export management. It also

strengthens cultural traditions and entertainment offerings, contributing to the strength of a country's overall tourism product.

The ACS recognises the important role and contribution of the Craft Sector, both to the sustainability of the Region's Tourism Industry, and as a conduit for social and economic growth. '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 as such it is imperative, that it be fully representative of the authenticity of place and innate cultural heritage.

The ACS in its approach is focussing efforts on the Region's Craft to strengthen the linkages with the Tourism Industry, as a strategy for employment creation and poverty reduction. The aim in this regard is to raise awareness of the critical role and challenges being faced by the sector, generate market opportunities for regional culturally linked products, and contribute to increased business for local Artisans and craft enterprises. In fulfilment of the goals and objectives of this endeavour, the co-operation, participation and support of the Region's private and public sectors are essential in order to guarantee the success and longevity of the approach and the related initiatives.

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