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Comments on ministerial consultations on tourism from a West Asia perspective

By The Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon

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TOURISM FROM A CIVIL SOCIETY PERSPECTIVE

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The equation of conserving environment and natural resources versus promoting tourism investments that are environmentally friendly is difficult. Such an equation requires strong cultural, awareness and scientific investments prior to investing in policies and funds. Nevertheless, there are many tools that governments can adopt in order to mesh tourism, biodiversity and socioeconomic economic development. Each country needs to decide on the appropriate policies, strategies, programmes and tools that are valuable for its economy, environment and societies. West Asian countries are called to adjust their development policies, strategies and programmes, protect and value their cultural heritage, redirect human resources and local economies towards social, economic and environmental sustainability of tourism. Tourism products shall be innovated. Public-private partnerships shall be encouraged. Local communities and their needs shall be considered in the context of alternative or responsible tourism benefits sharing. Sustainable local practices leading to direct or indirect economic returns should be encouraged against unsound economic returns, which occur as a result to nature degradation. Local populations and tourists shall be mutually taught and educated on respecting and conserving reciprocal cultures, customs and natural resources by providing them with essential knowledge.

West Asian countries are characterised by their wealthy natural, cultural and historical tourism features. Since many of these countries are still endowed with urban and rural heritage, a mixture of civilisations, stones and beliefs, they witness nowadays a growing tourism demand. This tendency is coupled with impacts potentially positive on socioeconomic conditions and adversely affecting culture and environment, as is the case in the majority of countries worldwide. Tourism is a key economic sector in particular for countries "under development" or "in transition" with restricted industrial or agricultural opportunities. There is no doubt that the more countries enter their development phase, the more they are affected by the rising tourism demand generally, and unconventional tourism trends in specific, whether this alternative form may be known as rural tourism, ecotourism, agro-tourism or nature-based tourism. These forms of tourism draw their strengths from the principle of biodiversity and cultural conservation against all kinds of deliberate or unintentional defacement. Hence, public, private and civil institutions maintain their relevant contributions and responsibilities in curving biodiversity and tourism into either allies or opponents in the process of achieving (or not) sustainable development.

Most West Asian countries are imminently at risk of responding to the requirements of the tourism industry: (i) competitiveness and haste towards exerting a pull on most of tourists; (ii) offering the requisites in terms of new alluring tourism products, an issue that compels governments to progressively condone the impact of tourism on the country's natural environment. The tourism industry consequently induces radical changes in ecosystems and habitats that may pressurize the sustainability of local tourism, which represents the crucial appeal of the tourism demand nowadays. The situation in our countries results from the choice of national priorities, the criteria adopted for setting these priorities as well as the mechanism for institutionalising them in the context of national and sectoral policies, strategies and programmes. Priorities as they are perceived seem mono-oriented and do not

reflect their repercussions, interactions, interferences and impacts on issues that may seem marginal at today, but turn into serious priorities later, as was the case of desertification.

It is assumed that governments are committed to the protection of natural resources through adopting and ratifying environmental agreements and conventions (e.g. biodiversity protection, combating desertification, fighting illegal trade of fauna and flora, climate change, cultural and natural heritage conservation). However, natural resources abuse prolong in reality and are halted merely as short-lived consequences that come as a response to pressing circumstances, for instance the hunting ban due to the propagation of the bird flu virus. Birds are referred to in this context since bird watching is a significant economic tourism activity which attracts millions of birders throughout the world searching for endemic, threatened bird specie or migration spectacles. Wild shooting in parallel is practiced without indiscriminately and targets both game and protected species. It is to note that most of our countries lie along migratory bird routes, and due to unwise investment in this sector, these countries lose the economic advantage prospects both nationally and locally. Bird watching is one of infinite actions that mould alternative tourism, although contrasted at the national level with the economic impetus created by hunting itself.

Part of the reason behind the strong adherence to consumptive tourism patterns is the absence of awareness and information of both decision makers and the public. It is noticed that the communication and advertisement programmes of private and civil institutions and the media focus on conventional tourism and its components. Environmental and economic aspects are dissociated in such speeches, with stress on environmental damage as pure environmental problems (violations) on the one hand and economic activities on the other. There is a clear need to bridge the knowledge gap in terms of linkages between socio-economic matters and their relation with environmental issues. At another level, most public administrations lack easily accessible databases on economic components related to natural resources that are supposed to help shape sound decisions having an impact of national economy. Another reason supporting conventional tourism projects lies in the collusion of individual and national economic interests, and many instances where personal interests overcome national ones. This comes out clearly in the execution of projects that do not give much consideration for environmental impact assessment. It is worth noting that our countries are endowed with important legislation and regulations however outdated in some cases and inapplicable in terms of control of violations in some other. The “polluter pays” principle is almost absent, and the right of citizens to access public properties is inexistent as well.

Urban planning and use lacks despite the availability of urban plans; consequently human agglomerations intertwine with industrial cities and green areas, which make it hard for eco-tour operators to propose clean “green” tourism products that are increasingly requested by tourists eager to discover pristine places. Large scale tourism projects consume large spaces of lands; they are developed in sensitive environments such as establishing golf fields in arid, semi-arid or in coastal areas. These interests in conventional tourism activities are often temporary and subject to trendy changes. It should be highlighted that most West Asian countries are located in arid, semi-arid or desert areas. Due to increasing socioeconomic pressures and associated rising demands related to life requirements, these countries face an acute shortage in water resources. Despite this, most tourism projects extensively rely on water resources as a necessary commodity, for aesthetic and leisure purposes even in case of water shortage or scarcity. As a result, local citizens are encouraged to save on water only to provide enough waters to tourists. On the other hand, the tourism sector produces variable degrees of pollution depending on the volume and extent of tourist activities in a certain area.

It materializes in the production of various solid and liquid wastes, and the non abidance by technical, sanitary and environmental procedures which are intended to alleviate pollution and its impacts on public health and natural resources. Despite the recognition of countries of the significance of the “polluter pays” principle, it is rarely applied. Nonetheless, the construction of tourism projects in fragile ecosystems will undoubtedly lead to land degradation, habitat damage, biodiversity loss, and natural landscapes destruction. Alternative tourism needs in addition to conserve all previously mentioned items to respect and abide by locally based traditions, beliefs and practices.

The role of civil societies does not restrict to awareness raising as it is thought being the main role attributed to them, but NGOs can lobby towards ensuring the implementation of policies and laws, and make sure that the private sector is committed towards respecting the principles of tourism locally. Another key role of NGOs is to put in place a local human capacity framework that is suitable to go along with alternative tourism, in addition to disseminating information of environmental, developmental and economic dimensions. There should be highlighted that governments cannot succeed without real partnerships with civil societies, therefore everybody is required to contribute towards building its part of a realistic and sustainable bridge that make effective the sustainable development. As a consequence, governments need to play a pilot part in implementing the following recommendations in order to reach national consensus when setting integrated policies, strategies and programmes:

At policy, regulatory and planning level

- To instate policies, strategies and programmes intended to increase the quality of tourism;
- To update existing and draft new legislative texts pertaining to sustainable tourism, these texts are to be coupled with adequate and regular monitoring;
- To promote and enforce integrated management, programming and planning of coastal areas since these areas constitute the spotlight for the majority of mass tourism;
- To ensure synergies among various sectors affecting or affected by the tourism industry such as agriculture, trade, and transport;
- To encourage ecotourism and agro-tourism in the framework of an integrated rural development strategy that advocates for locally based tourism activities and conserves biodiversity and culture;

At regulatory and socioeconomic tools level

- To develop, implement and maintain the applications of analytical tools, such as Environmental Impact Assessment, Strategic Environmental Assessment, in addition to the analysis of ecological, social and economic carrying capacity of tourism;
- To promote regulatory and economic tools (such as market-based incentives, eco-taxes) to support alternatives to conventional tourism to achieve a better sustainability;
- To develop and comply with tools and practices related to socioeconomic incentives, information access and sharing, best practices, management, education and learning, as well as the promotion of pilot initiatives;
- To undertake cost-benefit analysis of competitive activities e.g. hunting versus conservation and their respective contributions to national economies. The same would apply as well to destructive activities such as mining and quarrying that impede the landscape values cherished by nature-based tourism. This would require a holistic view of the economy as well as a sound understanding of green budgeting;

- To diversify tourism destinations based on a better exploitation of the cultural and natural heritage. Such diversification shall take into account the comparative advantages of regional tourism destinations;

At the protection of nature and natural resources level

- To protect natural areas and landscapes by improving national, regional and local land use planning, protecting coastal areas and their resources, and preserving local architecture;
- To protect natural resources, whether terrestrial, coastal, marine or freshwater ones, by designing, applying and monitoring integrated treatment schemes and plants related to wastewater reuse, solid waste reduce, reuse and recycling, as well as the promotion of sustainable transportation systems;
- To identify and protect environmentally sensitive areas as well as areas of special natural importance, such as the migratory birds' corridors;
- To put into place limitations to access sensitive areas and areas of natural significance on the basis of the carrying capacity calculation of these areas;

At education, awareness raising and capacity building level

- To raise awareness of the media by developing information strategies aiming towards halting misleading marketing effects of unsustainable tourism patterns and trends;
- To support non governmental initiatives aiming towards changing consumption patterns (both demand and supply) as well as the establishment of code of conducts to be applied by both local populations and tourists;
- To develop education and capacity building programmes that may push local communities forward to take part in and benefit from ecotourism. This would assist in expanding sustainable tourism opportunities to contribute towards changing trendy behaviour into long-lasting practices;
- To build capacities of small and medium tourism enterprises through specialised or generic programmes and information access with the objective to harmonise local tourism potentials and sustainable development;
- To support public-oriented initiatives and measures aiming to raising awareness, building capacities and information sharing related to sustainable tourism;
- To encourage private and public educational institutions to develop curricular and extra-curricular activities this may help in enforcing pillars of biodiversity conservation;
- To strengthen the capabilities of local governments to enable them to effectively conceive and implement their policies, planning programmes, enforcement of locally operational tourism industry, through capacity building and exchange of best practices and lessons learnt nationally, regionally and internationally;

At cooperation and partnerships level

- To increase and strengthen centralised and decentralised cooperation mechanisms as a prerequisite to make financial and moral incentives available as well as to abide to policies and regulations related to environment and development;
- To promote cooperation in the framework of the tourism industry to embrace national and local authorities, non-governmental organisations and citizens in order to initiate sustainable management of resources within existing regional and local tourism destinations;

At Regional and international cooperation level

- To develop a West Asian best practices' network on sustainable tourism, which objective is to share and exchange information, best practices, lessons learnt, expertise and resources related to alternative forms of conventional tourism;
- To campaign for ratified lateral and multilateral conventions and agreements. These conventions intended towards protecting natural resources and activating sustainable tourism are of significance only provided that these are accompanied with supporting executive tools.

Questions:

- 1- **What pragmatic and resourceful mechanisms are needed to valorise environment and natural resources as indissociable components of the national, regional and international economic wheel?**
- 2- **What sort of enabling framework and incentives are needed to ensure that long term goals and planning associated with sustainable development are not impeded by short-term political drivenness?**
- 3- **What are the economic incentives that governments may provide to support the private sector in abiding by national laws? To what extent are voluntary systems adopted by the private sector rewarded by market-based mechanisms linked to the level of awareness of individual tourists?**
- 4- **What role should governments play in meeting the challenges described above, with particular reference to governance structure and policy implementation tools?**