

“ Tourism can make a difference in rural communities ”

The World Tourism Organisation (UN Tourism) seeks to raise the potential of rural regions for job creation and economic growth while simultaneously relieving regions suffering from overtourism. Its recently launched Tourism for Rural Development Small Grants Programme is also designed to promote entrepreneurship – with a special focus on youth and women.

Sandra, why is UN Tourism campaigning for rural areas?

More than 80 per cent of people in poverty actually live in rural areas. So for us as a United Nations agency, when we look at tourism as a driver of development, we look at two sides. One is the opportunities the sector holds because it is a growing sector, a sector where people are looking for new destinations. But at the same time, we look at how these areas can develop economic activities. We know that in many regions, agriculture is facing challenges, and that in terms of accessibility and connectivity, these areas often lack infrastructure and services. So our campaign is really about how we can make tourism help rural communities find alternative economic options that actually support them in developing, in retaining population and improving their well-being.

What role do rural areas play in the tourism industry?

It's quite difficult to have a global estimate on this topic because not all countries have the respective information at national level. But for us, it's also important to think about rural areas as object of diversification of demand, because one of the challenges that countries have is concentration of tourism in certain destinations. So by promoting regional development, the countries can support tourism demand being spread in the territory and thus also taking excess pressure off some destinations.

Do you feel that the potential of tourism is sufficiently considered in development cooperation?

No, it is definitely not. We have long been criticising that the budget allocated to tourism is so small. We know that the allocations to other sectors, such as infrastructure, also benefit tourism, but projects related to tourism make up less than one per cent of the Official Development Assistance. This is a pity because it is a multiplier in many countries and regions.

And that's why back in 2021, UN Tourism created the programme "Tourism for rural development" ...

Yes, exactly. Rural tourism and development have long been seen as separate issues, but we really wanted a focus on them together, with a wider impact of the sector in terms of overall development.

What experiences have you so far made with the programme?

There are various initiatives which we have initiated in the context of the programme. One is the "Best Tourism Villages", with which we recognise villages world-wide that are committed to sustainability in economic, social and also environmental terms. Being recognised as Best Tourism Village obviously gives a village visibility and opportunities to get support in its own country. But beyond this, we actually have a network that continues. Every month we have online activities with the villages, we do master classes with them, we take them to international events to provide them with exposure ... It is very interesting to see how the countries create their own networks and how, with this being done, completely different regions of the world get connected to each other.

A few days ago, you launched the Small Grants Programme. What is the notion this is based on?

In the context of our work, we identified challenges which rank higher for these destinations – one of them is access to finance. With this programme, we are aiming very much at civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations on the ground which will actually have access to specific funding for projects. But we also want to stimulate entrepreneurship with it.

The Programme aims at ensuring that projects can have an impact on women and youth ...

Yes, because we know that, on the one hand, the demographic challenge in many of the rural areas is very significant. Let's take the example of the "Colourful Cultures" small grants initiative we recently launched with TUI Care Foundation, which aims to empower local artisans and artists in selected African coun-



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Photo: UN Tourism

tries. Often tourism exists in these destinations, and the creative component is also there, but there is no effective link between them. So we do hope that the small grants will help to create that connection and give more opportunities to young artisans and artists who are already active in that destination to actually be part of tourism development in a more consistent way.

And why women?

There is still a big, big gender gap, and that gap is especially related to access to financing. We want to facilitate that access. Women make up more than 50 per cent of the workforce in tourism, so we can create opportunities for them in this sector – not only as employees but also as entrepreneurs.

You also mentioned the benefits for communities ...

For us it is very important that the communities are at the centre of development, whether it be in an urban setting or in a rural setting. But in the latter, it is even more important because at the end of the day, if you empower the communities, not only will they be able to remain important guardians of traditions and resources; you are also contributing to a country which is more inclusive because you can diminish the differences between rural areas and urban areas in terms of income and access to services.

Sandra Carvão was interviewed by Silvia Richter.
For full-length interview, see: www.rural21.com