

SADC countries reiterate unity, shared vision for tourism growth

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9 May 2011

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries, home to about 280 million people, contribute a modest 2% to the global tourism market despite boasting amazing tourist destinations and having 'solid' marketing strategies in place.

The Regional Tourism Organisation of Southern Africa (RETOSA), a permanent SADC body tasked to develop tourism in the region through effective marketing, met in Durban, South Africa, during the 2011 Tourism Indaba to plot the way forward in removing barriers hampering tourism growth and development in the region.

Job creation through tourism

RETOSA executive director Francis Mfuné reminded member states, represented by their high-ranking officials, that sharing a common vision and working together in harmony are imperative if they aspire to achieve the region's fundamental goal, which is to improve the lives of their people by boosting job creation through tourism.

"We have huge unemployment levels in the region, and the pressure is huge to uplift the social and economic conditions of our people," Mfuné said.

As the majority of member states have limited resources and budgets for destination promotion, Mfuné said a profound collaboration was needed to benefit from the opportunity of joint marketing through RETOSA.

RETOSA, which claims it is working towards harmonising the region's product quality and systems to better serve travellers and investors to the region, said its roadmap includes marketing facilitation in the form of branding management, information and databases, and media and stakeholder relations.

Mfuné, who lamented the slow progress of tourism in the SADC region and its 'modest' contribution to the global tourism arena, reiterated that a stronger tourism region will benefit all members.

Striving to enhance

He stressed that his organisation has been striving to enhance capacity building, brand visibility and improve communication lines between member countries and stakeholders (private sector, media, tourists and communities).

Some analysts believe that, despite RETOSA's 'good intentions', the lack of political will by certain governments to build a conducive environment in which tourism can thrive and create job opportunities constitutes a major obstacle towards achieving that common goal.

Some observers believe that some SADC countries are suffering from a 'bad reputation' syndrome due to, among others, bad governance, safety and security concerns, underdevelopment, human rights violations and political instability - factors which led to these countries being 'blacklisted' by most foreign tourists.

The list of these countries include Zimbabwe (Mugabe and Zanu-PF's 'reign of terror'), Swaziland (King Mswati's oppressive style of leadership), DRC (massive state corruption, lack of basic infrastructure and unending armed conflict in the eastern 'paradise'), Madagascar (political stalemate), and lately Malawi (diplomatic row with Britain).

The onus is now on the leaders to apply an urgent rebranding exercise to 'cleanse' their places and get rid of any negative perceptions.

Nation branding

Branding expert Robert Havik, MD of Switch Branding and Design, said: "Nations or regions don't brand themselves. It's public opinion that brands destinations. Nation branding is a useful way to help governments understand the value and complexity of external reputation and internal cohesion.

"Most people know very little about nations other than their own. Where they know anything at all, it is formed from myth, rumour and anecdote," he added.

Havik, who insisted that any joint strategy must include a dedicated and committed leadership from the top, as well as integrity and consistency, pointed out that the most successful national brands are not simply invented. "They are based upon a current reality, which they encapsulate and then promote, consistently and coherently."

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Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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