



World Tourism Day, An Occasion to Evaluate Promises of Community Development

EQUATIONS

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We, the Tourism Advocacy and Action Forum (TAAF), an alliance of individual tourism activists and representatives of civil society groups from six continents, gathered in Istanbul from 28 to 30 August 2014 to discuss human rights, social justice and sustainability concerns in tourism.

During our deliberations, we noted with concern that the theme for this year's World Tourism's Day is "tourism and community development". We find this theme to be highly misleading about community benefits, since the policies and practices of tourism are heavily weighted in the favour of the industry, and its unchecked growth. At our meeting, we shared research on tourism worldwide – for example, in Hawai'i, India, Palestine, Peru and Tanzania - which confirms widespread and deepening violations of the rights of vulnerable peoples and communities, women, children, and both local and migrant workers. Alarmingly, their vulnerability to tourism is more pronounced than a decade ago, due to the practices of neoliberalism, which commodify people, places and cultures, privatise the commons and undermine people's livelihoods. Today, the heavy, aggregate impacts of tourism on the biosphere threaten community development on an unprecedented scale, globally. Yet populations living in and around tourism destinations generally are excluded from meaningful roles in decision-making about the nature, scale, and regulation of tourism development.

The structure of the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) does not allow for it to alter the harmful patterns of tourism. Although part of the United Nations (U.N.), it is industry controlled and industry oriented. The UNWTO steers by GDP accounting alone. It is totally removed from tourism realities on the ground, in the everyday lives of the people(s) most affected by industry activities. As a result, the UNWTO overlooks the voices of adversely impacted communities and people(s), especially those exploited by the industry. The diversity of community experiences with tourism does not factor into its policy, programmes and activities. Accurate, impartial information on the costs and benefits of tourism, particularly of who bears the costs of tourism, is lacking within its institutional frame.

Given this pro-industry orientation, and the industry templates promoted, it is preposterous for the UNWTO to suggest on this World Tourism Day that it is committed to involving communities in the development process and in decision-making. All along, civil society actors concerned with tourism have been denied access to UNWTO processes through numerous mechanisms such as prohibitive membership fees, exclusive structures, closed consultations, and funding inequities.

A U.N. agency that claims to support community development must be responsive to communities' aspirations, needs, interests, and capabilities. What is needed for responsible tourism governance is a U.N. body that addresses tourism-related issues in a truly democratic way and ensures that its work complies with all applicable international law. Qualitative data derived from peoples' and communities' own knowledge systems, methodologies, and values must take precedence.

We therefore call upon the UNWTO to align its work with the full U.N. framework of human rights instruments, including the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which summarizes minimum standards in international law, plus accompanying law safeguarding cultural diversity and the related Rio Conventions. UNWTO policy, programmes and activities must be grounded in congruent research, emphasizing genuine self-determination not token community participation.

The ideology of tourism as a force for peace as promoted by the UNWTO must be rejected. More often than not, tourism is a cause of conflict, coming as development aggression. During this U.N. Decade of Non-Violence, the UNWTO must hold firm against exploitation in the tourism industry.

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