

Corporate Social Responsibility: Responsible Tourism

Since the 1960s, the travel industry has been one of the fastest growing industries in spite of crises and strained political relations. To date, developing countries have not profited much. Tour operators, however, are increasingly paying attention to issues of corporate social responsibility.



The industrial countries still benefit from tourism most. Europe is the home of more than half of all international tourists – and it accounts for the bulk of the revenues they generate. Europe is also the continent that records the most incoming tourists.

Due to the global financial crisis, the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) registered a 4.3 % downturn in foreign travel in 2009 and a 5.8 % fall in tourism revenues. However, the UNWTO believes that the industry will soon return to rapid growth. Worldwide, the sector provides jobs for more than 200 million people.

The UNWTO forecasts that the number of international arrivals will soon pass the one billion mark. Asia is expected to benefit more in the future, but Africa will probably only receive little more than four per cent of global tourism revenues in the coming decade.

Growing numbers of tourists visit developing countries and emerging markets, but this does not

automatically lead to improved standards of life in the places concerned. In the case of large tourism schemes, the big question is how much of the profit remains in the country – and in whose pockets. Relevant issues worthy of debate include whether the wider public benefits in some way and what the environmental impacts are.

Diverse Options

Criticism of tourism is as old as the industry itself. When rich people merely use poor people as cheap service providers, neo-colonialism is an appropriate term. Sex tourists are not the only ones to ruthlessly exploit socially disadvantaged people. In the era of climate change, environmentalists question whether air travel is justifiable for purposes of pleasure and recreation. The core issue is always responsibility – that of the individual tourist as well as of the tourism operators.

The travel industry undoubtedly has a huge responsibility. In the long run, social justice and environmental sustainability are in its own interest. The industry needs environmentally sound travel destinations and hospitable local communities.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a buzzword in mainstream tourism. It stands for a whole range of concepts travel companies embrace to make tourism sustainable and fit for the future. A lot remains to be done, however. Companies' actions are often spasmodic; their CSR programmes are convoluted and non-transparent. In these respects, the tourism industry is lagging behind.

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things to different travel companies: some engage in cultural sensitization of tourists, others introduce labour standards for employees and yet others set up not-for-profit foundations or social projects for

children. By definition, CSR goes beyond merely fulfilling legal obligation. The idea is that a company should rise to social and environmental challenges voluntarily.

Independent Certification

CSR is a controversial concept, moreover. There always is the suspicion that CSR programmes are only about public image. If companies interpret CSR that way, they will not derive lasting benefit, however. Real added value can only arise from external monitoring and independent certification.

In Germany, the TourCert initiative has introduced a “CSR–Tourism certified” label. TourCert is a private–sector company, the shareholders of which include Germany’s Bonn–based Protestant Church Development Service (EED) and Nature Friends International, Vienna.

TourCert’s label is geared to acknowledge and reinforce processes of dynamic change in small and medium–sized tourism companies. The label is not awarded for aid projects or social sponsoring. The goal is to improve the core business of tourism. Companies that use the label have to commit to continuously improving their operations in terms of environmental sustainability and social equity.

TourCert works with experts from the industry as well as from universities, environmental protection agencies, development cooperation and politics. Members of TourCert’s certification council are appointed for two years. They decide on guidelines and procedures. The council also assesses experience and adjusts the certification principles accordingly. It is in charge of appointing evaluators and, based on the evaluators’ work, granting companies the right to use the “CSR–tourism certified” label.



The base for all assessments is reporting by the companies themselves. They must draft reports according to a TourCert guideline. The fundamental principles are to

- travel in an environmentally acceptable way,
- choose accommodations diligently,
- carefully assess destinations,
- involve local communities,
- pay fair and appropriate fees,
- respect labour standards,
- operate in a culture of partnership and
- make matters transparent.

Companies that want to use the label can rely on TourCert providing training to their staff. Moreover, they are given software that helps to check the relevant criteria of sustainability as well as to publish the results of these assessments. Every company must draft a “Development and Improvement Plan”, which also serves as the basis for re-appraisal two years after the use of the CSR label is first granted.

Travellers' Power

Tourism is not an isolated economic sector. The travel patterns of European consumers are as unsustainable and unfit for the future as Western economic life in general. However, many people are reconsidering their lifestyles.

For an individual tourist, responsibility may lie in travelling less often, travelling less by air, staying at destinations longer and insisting that tour operators provide transparent information about the environmental and social background of their “products”.

Travel companies need to recoup the cost of CSR programmes. Put in a different way, this means that tourists, to the extent that they are willing to pay for social and environmental efforts, have an impact on the industry's performance.

As the market-research firm GfK discovered in 2009, a third of all German households with an interest in tourism consider corporate social responsibility relevant. Many are prepared to pay around eight per cent more for a holiday, provided that CSR principles are observed. Three quarters of all German tourists think that environment and human rights are important.

The surging demand for fair trade products and organic-farm produce are further evidence of this trend. In 2007, the EED and the travel-research outfit FUR (Forschungsgemeinschaft Urlaub und Reisen) conducted a representative survey. The result was that 1.5 million Germans would be prepared to pay more for a fair trade holiday. The situation is hardly different in other European countries.

For all the criticism, one must not forget that travel educates people, thus broadening their horizons and resulting in lasting memories. These benefits need to be weighed against environmental costs and possible social shortcomings. The chance for tourism lies in respect for nature, environmental sustainability and social standards. None of this necessarily means less comfort – to the contrary: concern and respect for a foreign culture enhances travel experiences. What ultimately matters is the attitude of the individual traveller.

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