



ISSUES CONCERNING THE ROLE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGIES (ICT'S) IN DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

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ICT's are transforming the global economy and are creating new business linkages and opportunities that cross business sectors, cultures and distances.

Access to these technologies remains difficult in many parts of the world especially in the Least Developed Countries (LCD's) – this inequality is referred to as the “digital divide”

Often the “Digital Divide” is a reflection of social and economic inequity between and within developing countries.

Developing countries have a necessity to proactively integrate themselves into the ICT Society in order to avoid remaining on the periphery of the global economy – this is particularly true of the tourism sector.

Tourism is an information intensive sector and ICT's are a key driver for developing countries in organising and marketing their tourism products.

No sector has been more affected by the “technology revolution” than Tourism – ICT;s have totally changed the historical trading structures of the industry – and of these technologies possibly the commercialisation of the Internet has resulted in the most dramatic changes.

Not only have ICT's made it easier for developing countries to market and distribute their products and increase their customer base, but they have also made it easier for stakeholders to access market and management data, to share information and build trading partnerships.

Encouraging the development of e-business practices in a developing economy makes it easier for countries to share information and to encourage co-operation among stakeholders.

Moving into the e-business arena has provided opportunities for tourism stakeholders to offer fully developed web portals as comprehensive Destination Management Systems (DMS) that include booking and transaction facilities – thus promoting the opportunity to increase sales and to generate more revenue into a local economy.

ICT's have become one of the most effective tools for addressing the imbalance between competing destinations in the global market. Indeed for many tourism market sectors and tourism products, marketing and selling via Internet is fast becoming the accepted and preferred method.

Because of the costs, plus lack of local ICT providers and facilities, the practice in many developing countries has been for much of the off-line and on-line marketing and distribution services to be provided by service providers based in developed countries.

As with the provision of investment capital, air services, and certain skills and expertise the provision of ICT's has become another vital dependency that some developing countries do not have totally within their own control and may affect their ability to achieve sustainable tourism development.

In addition to the importance of e-business solutions, the importance of ICT's in times of major natural disasters and acts of terrorism and crime has now become vital . In these circumstances ICT's have becomes an essential tool as a means of anticipatory warning and post impact crisis management and in controlling their harmful effects on tourism.

Understanding the opportunities brought about by ICT's in the tourist sector and implementing effective e-business solutions has, in many developing countries, become a priority for tourism providers and public authorities at national regional and community levels.

Policy makers and tourism enterprises today need to understand the implications of ICT developments and the importance of their role in developing and maintaining a strong sustainable tourism industry.

Making ICT and e-development strategies an integral part of policy planning is now essential in order to support the necessary human and physical infrastructure and to introduce and adopt measures to ensure equitable access and widespread capability to make maximum use of ICT's.

These ICT and E-Development strategies need to take into account the following issues:

- Access and Use
- Enabling Environment
- Human Capacity
- Global and National Governance Issues
- New Tourism Markets and Practices and Strategies for growth

Policy Implications include

- E-tourism strategies should be integrated within the broader framework of national ICT Policies
- The role and contribution of Public Authorities in providing infrastructure and human capacity and encouraging the use of ICT's relevant to tourism.
- Identify and include tourism niche products in national tourism development plans that can be easily and cost effectively marketed and managed using ICT's, in order to increase the attractiveness, competitiveness and uniqueness of the destination
- Support ICT's use by SME's, and consumers, including remote areas, by providing easy and low cost access to ICT solutions.
- Organise regular consultative meetings and share knowledge with other destinations in order to define appropriate ICT strategies and implementation plans and timetables.

Developing countries need to adopt ICT's and associated business processes and management skills in order to remain competitive in the constantly changing and increasingly competitive global tourism market.

The positive effect of ICT's on the tourism industry in a developing country depends on a national enabling ICT environment that relies on multiple factors including:

- Access
- Infrastructure
- Education
- Capacity Building
- Legal Framework

Without governments understanding these opportunities and challenges, and failing to address these issues in the form of tourism policies, and by not adopting pro-active implementation the tourism sector will fail to take advantage of the opportunities to improve product and market share in tourism markets, and is unlikely to develop a tourism industry that will be sustainable in the longer term

The Sustainable Tourism Workshop will discuss some of these issues, matters and policy implications

Notes.

References include:

UNCTAD - ICT & Tourism for Development – September 2005

Dr Susana Fiquelievich – ICT and Economic Development in Latin America and the Caribbean – December 2003

UNDP – Information and Communications Technology (ICT) for Development - October 2001

Prof Simon Milne & others - ICT Adoption in New Zealand's Tourism SME's --2003