

A question of human rights

Some time ago, I was asked whether tourism could improve the world. The answer was a clear “Yes!” Perhaps a “Yes, but ...” would have been more appropriate. For it is not branches of industry but people who can change the world, and there is hardly another branch that is based so comprehensively on “people business”.

Yes, travelling does educate. It was the German satirist and writer Kurt Tucholsky who already pointed out that travelling promotes cosmopolitanism three quarters of a century ago when he recommended that each of his “bigoted compatriots” be given an additional 500 Marks (the German currency of the time) to get rid of many a prescribed, narrow-minded view. Travellers with a heart and with reason, with inquisitiveness and open eyes for a glance behind the scenes for tourists in a tourism whose makers have internalised sustainability and social responsibility as a principle of thought and action can indeed improve the world.

However, tourism is one of the world’s biggest employers and most important branches of industry. Taking the informal sector into account, nearly 240 million people work in what is sometimes referred to as the “white industry”. Around 60 percent of those employed in tourism are women, earning, on average, almost a quarter less than their male colleagues for the same amount of work. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the working conditions across the board in tourism are worse than in many other branches of industry: low wages, long and irregular working hours. In many places, a lack of social insurance and protection against wrongful dismissal complete this picture. It hardly comes as a surprise that the conditions in major tourist companies and resorts are better than in small companies, since this corresponds to experience from other branches of industry.

And what is left when the most pleasant weeks of the year are over? In the palm-fringed canals and lagoons in southern India’s Kerala, kerosene and oil from the houseboats inhibit rice-growing, while aqua parks aggravate drinking-water problems; environmental organisations have called the construction of further golf links in Cyprus a twofold crime: while they use up agricultural space and harm biodiversity, their extreme water demand requires additional problematic desalination plants. In Dubai, the burden of the

tourism boom rests on the shoulders of many migrant workers who, given weak industrial law and an insecure human rights situation, are denied basic work standards.

The future of tourism is also going to depend on whether it can be transformed to the benefit of humans and in harmony with nature and the environment. For this to succeed, tourism needs binding rules, too – the human rights framework provides them.

The issue of human rights and tourism is by no means new. For many years, it has been the object of education, information and sensitisation activities aimed at sustainable tourism, especially from the angle of whether, how and under what conditions travelling to countries with a problematic human rights situation and tourism is possible and morally justified. Above all the debate on the sexual exploitation of minors in the environment of tourism and the development of preventive measures has shown that tourism itself is part of the violation of human rights from which commitments arise for an active assumption of responsibility for human rights.

Human rights must systematically become guiding concepts for developments in tourism. Governments are also obliged to observe human rights in the context of developments in tourism, and to protect them and promote their realisation. And here, it is not only the states and the travellers themselves who are called to account; rather, it is in particular the companies themselves that need to take far-reaching measures to prevent human rights violations as a result of their business activities. Here, the Guidelines on Business and Human Rights approved by the UN Human Rights Council in June 2011 are of key significance. Due diligence stands for a concept of a special obligation to exercise care on the part of businesses in tourism, as well, to rule out human rights violations in their service chain.

Human-rights-based tourism goes significantly beyond what voluntary initiatives and the corporate social responsibility strategies of tourist companies are able to perform. Elementary, globally valid rights of human beings are at issue. This is why rules are needed for what has so far been a largely unregulated business area so that tourism can become a fair business for everyone involved.



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For more information, see also Tourism watch special issue on human rights (2011) at: http://tourism-watch.de/files/Alles_was_Recht_ist.pdf (in German) or http://tourism-watch.de/files/eed_tourism_human_rights_shortversion_2011_en.pdf