TRAINING FOR STRENGTHENING TOURISM IN THE GREATER CARIBBEAN REGION

Based on reports from different organizations related to tourism it has been emphasised that this industry has grown in the Greater Caribbean Region covering a range of sectors such as hotel chains, restaurants, airlines, recreational complexes, convention centres, tourism operators and travel agencies, among others, which, depending on the season have recorded growth of such a magnitude that tourism is now considered one of the major sources of employment in the Greater Caribbean Region.

The continued growth of businesses associated with the tourism industry requires the strengthening of capabilities and the training of leaders in the most crucial sectors. Thus, the human resource of the tourism value chain requires greater vocational training for the Twenty-first Century as to allow it to be prepared to successfully lead one of the most dynamic and complex economic activities in order to generate increased competitiveness of the Region's destinations.

Without a doubt, training or instruction continues to be an on-going challenge for companies interested in providing a good service and placing themselves in specialised tourism segments, especially when adapting to the new Hospitality and Gastronomy trends. Additionally, taking technological changes into consideration, tourists' requirements warrant the development of vocational training of a higher quality.

The foregoing becomes a necessity since tourism calls for strict control in terms of service quality, taking into account essential elements such as: hygiene, ambience, customer care, and other factors that are fundamental to choosing a destination.

Over the years, the countries that constitute the Greater Caribbean have promoted a series of initiatives in the area of tourism education through specialised schools, such as the Caribbean Tourism School in the Dominican Republic, among others, which is making inroads in offering technical degrees, diplomas, courses and workshops geared toward training technicians and professionals with a clear and complete perspective of the reality of the industry. In that regard, in May 2014 and November 2015, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Inter-American Centre for Knowledge Development in Vocational Training (CINTERFOR) received support from the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) in holding training workshops for vocational tourism training in the Region, attended by more than ten Greater Caribbean countries.

Along this same course of action and cognizance of the pivotal role played by education and training in tourism, the ACS developed a study with the support from the French Development Agency (AFD, acronym in French), in executing the Project "Training for Careers in Sustainable Tourism" - Study on Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Tourism (TVET) in the Caribbean - whose goal was to identify the current needs and trends pertaining to training in tourism careers in the Greater Caribbean. The results of this project were presented in July 2015 and highlighted the proposal for a Regional Framework for Technical Vocational Training that was agreed to on November 12, 2015 in Panama City, via a Consultation Workshop on Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET), attended by the key players involved in tourism and training in the Greater Caribbean region, among them: CTO, CANTA, AFD, SITCA, OECS, and CONPEHT, to name a few.

In the area of language learning and conscious of the need to eradicate language barriers for the development of the tourism sector, in December 2015, with the support from the Guadeloupe International Centre for Language Learning (CIGAREL), the ACS organised the first Greater Caribbean Student Exchange, in which there was participation from thirty-six students and three coordinators from each of the countries selected, namely Costa Rica, Dominica and Guatemala. During this exchange which included participants who work in the tourism sector, the students improved their proficiency in the French language, in a ten day immersion programme in the island of Guadeloupe.

Furthermore, bearing in mind the importance of the tourism industry and its impact on development for the Region and the relevance of training people who will provide great service quality to this industry, on April 21, 2016, in Barranquilla, Colombia, the ACS signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Pan-American Confederation of Hospitality and Tourism Schools (CONPEHT), an institution whose objective is to improve the tourism sector's education system, with tourism, culinary and hospitality training programmes.

The ACS and CONPEHT have decided to pool their efforts to establish a close relationship in support of training, exchange of information, experiences, best practices and new strategies in sustainable tourism. Both organisations are willing to work together to promote cultural, educational and scientific cooperation for the benefit of all the countries belonging to the Greater Caribbean Region.

Lastly, as follow-up and genuine commitment to the tourism sector and training, the ACS is currently organising the Meeting of the Special Committee on Sustainable Tourism of the ACS, the Workshop entitled "Importance of linking the academia to the tourism sector to Strengthen the Tourism Service Quality in the Greater Caribbean Region" which will be held on July 8th of this year, in the

Republic of Nicaragua. At this Workshop participants will be presented with successful cases on tourism training and its positive impact on the industry, with the expectation of producing a Plan of Action that will boost the integration of the training and education sector with tourism activity in the Region.

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