

Tourism: an opportunity for young people and entrepreneurs

Concept Note 6

OBJECTIVE

Tourism offers immense potential for youth employment and entrepreneurship, providing pathways for economic inclusion, skills development, and local rootedness. With strong support structures, young people can become drivers of innovation and of sustainable tourism models that strengthen local economies while addressing social and environmental challenges. This session will examine how regional governments can promote enabling environments for young people and entrepreneurs to thrive in the tourism sector, thereby creating meaningful opportunities that reduce forced migration and build prosperous and resilient communities.

CONCEPTUALIZATION

Youth unemployment is one of the most pressing challenges faced by regions worldwide, particularly in emerging economies where demographic growth strains job creation. Tourism, as a labour-intensive and highly diverse sector, encompassing hospitality, transport, cultural services, adventure and excursion activities, and digital platforms, offers unique opportunities for young people to enter the labour market and develop careers close to home.

The tourism sector is especially conducive to entrepreneurship, with relatively low barriers to entry for small businesses such as tour operators, accommodation services, craft enterprises, and experience providers. Young entrepreneurs bring fresh

perspectives, technological proficiency, and innovative approaches to sustainability and community engagement that can differentiate regional tourism offerings in highly competitive global markets.

However, young people face significant obstacles in accessing tourism opportunities. These include limited access to start-up capital and financing, insufficient technical and business management skills, lack of mentorship and professional networks, limited knowledge of tourism markets and consumer behaviour, and regulatory barriers that favour established operators over new entrants.

Regional governments have multiple tools to unlock youth potential in tourism. Investment in targeted education and vocational training programs aligned with sector needs can equip young people with skills in hospitality management, tour guiding, digital marketing, sustainable tourism practices, and cultural interpretation. These programs should combine classroom learning with internships and apprenticeships in collaboration with tourism businesses.

Access to finance remains a critical bottleneck for young entrepreneurs. Regional authorities can establish dedicated credit lines, seed funding programs, and guarantee schemes tailored to youth tourism entrepreneurship. Incubators and accelerators focused on tourism innovation can provide not only capital but also mentorship, business development services, and connections to markets and investors.

Digital transformation presents enormous opportunities for youth in tourism. Young people's familiarity with technology places them in an ideal position to lead in areas such as online booking platforms, virtual tourism experiences, social media marketing, mobile applications for visitor services, and data analytics for destination management. Regional governments should invest in digital infrastructure and digital literacy programs that enable youth to leverage these tools effectively.

Sustainable and responsible tourism offers particularly attractive opportunities for youth entrepreneurship. Young people increasingly value environmental protection and social impact and can drive initiatives in ecotourism, community-based tourism,

cultural heritage preservation, and accessible tourism services that generate benefits beyond economic profit.

Regulatory frameworks must adapt to facilitate youth entry into the tourism sector. Simplifying licensing procedures, reducing administrative burdens for microenterprises, and implementing youth-friendly public procurement policies can lower entry barriers. Regional governments can also create spaces for innovation, such as tourism innovation zones or temporary tourism districts, where young entrepreneurs can test ideas with reduced risk.

Partnerships are essential for success. Collaboration among regional governments, tourism industry associations, educational institutions, youth organizations, and international development agencies can generate comprehensive support ecosystems. Peer-to-peer learning networks, in which young tourism entrepreneurs share experiences and advice, can strengthen resilience and foster innovation.

Gender considerations are fundamental, as young women often face additional barriers in tourism entrepreneurship, including limited mobility, family responsibilities, and discrimination. Targeted support for young women entrepreneurs, including safe working environments and flexible business models, can unlock significant untapped potential.

Successful youth employment and entrepreneurship in tourism can significantly reduce push factors that drive migration. When young people perceive viable futures in their regions of origin, with opportunities for income generation, skills development, and social recognition, they are more likely to remain and contribute to local development. This generates multiplier effects, as successful young entrepreneurs become role models and job creators.

This approach aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), recognizing that tourism should be an instrument of inclusive development that empowers youth to shape their own future.

QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS

- What specific skills and competencies should regional governments prioritize in youth-focused tourism training programs?
- How can access to financing for young tourism entrepreneurs be improved through innovative mechanisms?
- What role can digital technologies play in democratizing youth tourism entrepreneurship?
- How can regional tourism strategies address the specific challenges and opportunities facing young women entrepreneurs?