Redefining Tourism as an Export and Development Opportunity

The Issue: Tourism is a service export and, for developing countries, it has the potential of becoming a major component of the national export mix. By the year 2020, for example, an estimated 1.6 billion people will travel internationally, nearly three times as many as do today.

Of equal importance is the tourism sector’s potential contribution to national development goals, particularly the creation of employment opportunities, the stimulation of micro-enterprises and the reduction of poverty.

Yet, the development of the tourism sector’s export capabilities is often excluded from national export strategy. It should not be.

The Proposition: Sustainable tourism should be a key element on national export strategy of the majority, if not all developing and transition economies.

Strategy should address three specific areas:

- Commercial development, with specific reference to value addition and retention, and maximization of the sector’s contribution to import substitution (i.e. catering to the local population’s tourism demands);
- Long-term development
- Sustainability, with particular reference to the sector’s environmental and social impact.

At the commercial level, the key to success is “differentiation”. “Best practice” may, therefore, require a distinctive branding strategy.

Focus of the Debate: We propose that the debate focus on the following:

1. What should the key elements of an export-oriented tourism strategy be and what is strategy design “best practice”?
2. Are the sector’s commercial, developmental and sustainability objectives in conflict and, if so, what type of strategy best resolves such conflict.
3. Can least developed countries afford the investment needed to establish a unique national brand and are there alternative approaches to differentiation?