

Climate Change: Challenges and Opportunities Presented to the Southern Africa Region

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Climate change is here and now. It is not an approaching hazard that we can ring alarm bells about and try to make good our escape. That is why leading minds in this area have determined that we can only confront this challenge through two major ways, adaptation and mitigation, which we are all now familiar with.

I find it quite notable that the challenge of climate change compels all mankind to have a unity of purpose. This demand brings to the forefront the fact that all mankind are indeed one. It brings to center stage the need for harmony between man and nature, which has been the greatest preoccupation of human thought of all time and all cultures, including the Bantu or African thought of our region.

Indeed, almost all folklore – original, traditional and/or indigenous – has narrative about how there was a huge flood, or huge fire, or some big bang followed by some major environmental change of one form or another. Fire and water feature very large in man's conception about his Creator (about God).

I find it a very sobering thought that at this stage of human history, with its great advancement in technology, mankind is being reminded that he can only survive within the context of one broad international agenda. Not only the absence of war is demanded for mankind's survival, but also the promulgation of a common agenda for survival.

This is an agenda that must be dominated by actions that lead to adaptation and mitigation. Because tourism contributes to the emission of greenhouse gases (GHG) through its air-travel and accommodation activities, it has the responsibility to respond to the challenge of climate change.

For us in Africa, we must be pleased that the identified critical challenge for the tourism sector is to de-link the projected massive growth of the sector from increased energy use associated with GHG emissions, and ensure that growth contributes to the reduction of poverty amongst our people.

The identified major climate-change impacts affecting the Africa region are: warmer summers, water scarcity, land biodiversity loss, marine biodiversity loss, increase in disease outbreaks and political destabilization.

It is the coupling of our response to the challenges of climate change to the programs of poverty reduction that led me to take the position (that besides looking at the obvious and clear challenges of climate change, which are now well known and defined and

quantified) that we must also, in this region, be preoccupied with what opportunities climate change presents to us.

I must highlight my satisfaction with the fact that the challenge of poverty, and the suffering it brings on our people, is ranked together, and at par with, the challenges of climate change, and that in addressing one we must address the other. I must also, humbly, applaud the observation by our former UNWTO Secretary-General Francesco Frangialli that tourism is an important element in both climate-change and poverty alleviation, and herein lies some massive opportunities for our region.

These are opportunities that we are best advised to exploit in a regionally integrated manner, and this I must emphasize to fellow Minister, Madame Namugala, Zambia's Minister of Tourism, and to other tourism ministers in the region. This regionally integrated approach augurs well, not only for the reigning and desired peace between our two countries and peoples, but also makes for sound strategy for the sustainable development of our region.

For our region, southern Africa, I believe, with people like Achim Steiner of the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), that far-sighted plans and action by our sector will send important signals to our government colleagues and private sector partners that mitigation and adaptation to the climate-change challenge makes economic and environmental sense. We must show the kind of leadership that can demonstrate that beside the challenges and problems associated with climate change, there are also abundant opportunities to alleviate our people's poverty through universally accepted adaptation strategies.

The leading opportunity offered to southern Africa's tourism by climate change is that the region currently enjoys what is regarded as very attractive climate and weather conditions. Zimbabwe has been judged, by leading international climate bodies, to be the country with the most attractive climate in the world. This must surely apply, to some measure, to countries that are adjacent to it. Climate conditions in Zambia, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa are not that different from those of Zimbabwe. We are therefore entering the climate-change era from a relatively strong position in relation to other regions.

The current, comparatively attractive, climate conditions that we enjoy have not been fully exploited to attract international visitors to our region. One reason for this is that most of the countries in the region cannot, as individual destinations, justify the huge travel costs that must be incurred by long-haul travelers from the globe's major tourism source markets.

The obviously most constructive response to this is the putting together of regionally integrated tourist products and packages. Visitors coming to the magnificent Victoria Falls must be given the opportunity to visit the beautiful beaches of Mozambique's Indian Ocean coastline, for example.

Visitors visiting the ancient city of Great Zimbabwe, cynically referred to as the Zimbabwe Ruins in the past, must be afforded the opportunity to visit the historically related Mapungubwe of South Africa.

The second factor offered to our region as an opportunity by climate change is the variation of climate-change impacts affecting the different tourism destinations of the world. As has been observed by others, what constitutes challenges and hazards in some places will actually amount to opportunities in other places.

Yet another factor regarding the nature of climate change in different parts of the world is that the developed countries of the world have already mounted a massive damaging assault on their natural environments, with disastrous consequences for global climate change, whilst the under-developed countries, particularly those of Africa have continued, in large measure, with the original natural and complementary co-existence between mankind and nature, thereby preserving natural environments in their original, pristine conditions.

Again when we look at various climate-change impacts that affect our region, we find that they are all amenable to mitigation and adaptation. The warmer summers will not get intolerable for a while, because we do not currently suffer conditions of extreme heat or the kind of heat waves that occasionally hit other regions. Water scarcity is another impact felt by our region; however, this is usually associated with periodic droughts, which tend to affect different parts of our region, and even our countries, with varying intensity. We therefore have the potential to both capture and store water during good rainfall seasons, and to move water from regions receiving surplus rain to those affected by drought.

One of the areas that the region should jointly research and invest in is the technology to store and transfer water, amongst others. We must be encouraged by the ability of countries in the Middle East to mount projects that draw and convert seawater to domestic and industrial use, and reclaim land from the sea.

As part of the several MOU's that we sign in the tourism sector, the region needs to establish expert, collaborative inter-country task forces to work on specific areas related to tourism and climate change

It is very fortunate that most of our region is not characterized by extreme events, except for the occasional cyclone and wild fire, and we must exploit this fact to the fullest. The land bio-diversity loss that characterizes our region will, at its current rate, be quite amenable to mitigation.

The biggest negative impact on our region's tourism will be from the increase in the cost of air travel as increasing mitigation policies will force prices up in a bid to lower carbon emissions of air travel; however, programs that increase the perceived value of the region's tourism product, particularly wildlife, can counter this.

Climate defines the length and quality of tourism seasons and plays a major role in destination choice and tourist spending. Our region's ideal year-round climate, our diverse natural resources, our freedom from extreme events and our still-thriving diverse, local, indigenous cultures, clearly give us a great advantage over other tourism hot spots.

It has been noted that climate is a principal resource for tourism, as it co-determines the suitability of locations for a wide range of tourist activities, is a principal driver of global seasonality in tourism demand, and has an important influence on operating costs, such as heating, cooling, snowmaking, irrigation, food and water supply and insurance costs. Our region is spared all this.

The length and quality of climate-dependent tourist seasons of other tourist destinations, give our destination, with its year-round good climate, a considerable advantage over them. This advantage is set to grow with the ongoing climate change.

Thus, whilst some studies indicate a likely shift of attractive climatic conditions for tourism toward higher latitudes and altitudes, I believe that such analysis does not take full account of Africa's competitiveness, under certain conditions, and the continent has the potential to be the globe's tourism "high ground" of the future.

This is largely attributable to the fact of the established vulnerability of current leading destinations, as a result of climate change. There are huge costs attached to snowmaking, for instance. Southern Africa cannot celebrate the projected negative increase of weather extremes in some destinations, but it is a fact that the resultant increase in cost of repairing increased infrastructure damage, additional infrastructure damage and additional emergency-preparedness requirements, will all add a shifting competitive advantage to regions like ours.

Anticipated increased mitigation policies and increased efforts at adaptation will have an impact on tourism mobility that creates several opportunities for the tourism economy of the southern Africa region. Such policies are bound to seek to reduce carbon emissions. This will lead to an increase in transport costs of air travel and it will foster environmental attitudes that will benefit the future of our tourism prospects in two major ways.

First, it will make the cost of long-haul travel so unattractive that the huge Africa region will be forced to pay greater attention to intra-continental domestic tourism. Such tourism can thrive without too much dependence on air travel. Intra-continental domestic tourism can rise on the back of transport modes like coach and rail that have a lot lower carbon-emission rates.

Such a scenario not only makes economic sense for our region, but also presents us with unlimited opportunities for regional integration, with its many critical socio-political advantages for our region and its people; these include the peace and security and the singularity of purpose that the region needs in order to cohere and thrive.

However, as has been indicated elsewhere, there are some large knowledge gaps in this area and systematic regional-level assessments must be conducted to produce a more definitive statement on the net-economic and social impacts on the region's tourism economic sector.

Secondly, as the world seeks to grow its adaptive capacity, tourists themselves will have the greatest adaptive capacity with relative freedom to avoid destinations that currently impact, or in their construction have impacted, on climate change. Tourists can also simply avoid destinations with unfavorable climate conditions, or those that impact negatively on climate change in their mitigation efforts.

All this augurs well for southern Africa's under-developed tourism sector, which, in its development, has the opportunities to learn from the lessons of the developed world, and avoid trajectories that lead to negative climate change.

Africa has low levels of development of fixed immovable tourism assets, and this makes it possible for the continent to adapt to climate change as these can be developed with climate change in mind.

The continent's vulnerability is in the price of incorporating the huge costs of adaptation and mitigation into the development of new tourism infrastructure. This is where I believe Africa must impress, on the developed nations in particular, which have by far the largest carbon imprint on our planet, that the responsibility of incorporating climate-change adaptation and mitigation measures into its future tourism infrastructure/development strategies must not lie with the individual countries of the region alone. The West should carry part, if not most of the burden.

In this regard, I must say some of us are rather dismayed with the West's half-hearted commitment to the Kyoto Protocol. Nor are we fully convinced about the carbon-emission-offsetting arrangement, whereby the developed industrialized countries literally "buy" their right to continue with their nefarious GHG-emitting activities for purposes of protecting their so-called rights to current levels of comfort.

I am for the "common but differentiated responsibilities" for reducing greenhouse emissions. This principle is indeed contained in the Kyoto Protocol, which places greater responsibility on industrialized countries such as the United States and those in the European Union, while making allowances for the fact that other countries are still developing.

Going forward, therefore, the African region must do all in its power to ensure that, as the world addresses the challenges of climate change, it does not in any way take away from its commitment to poverty alleviation. The poverty of our people and its associated suffering is a great indictment of our generation of Africa's leadership. We need to address it urgently.

Finally, I must, in conclusion, highlight the important role of the region's media in all these efforts. It has been observed that international perception of future impacts of climate change are likely to play the central role in the decision-making of tourists and tourism investors alike, as perceptions of climate conditions or environmental changes are just as important to consumer choices as the actual conditions.

Since perceptions of climate change in the southern Africa region will be heavily influenced by the nature of media coverage, the region's media operatives might therefore need special orientation for their coverage of the issues I have covered. It is important that they put an accent on the glowing opportunities that climate change offers the region, without, of course, overlooking the very real substantive challenges that we face. I believe that when all pertinent factors are taken into account, our region has the potential to become the "high ground" constituted by Noah's ark during the biblical ages.