

PROPOSAL 4th IIPT African Conference – Success Story

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Title: ViaVia Arusha: An African example of successful sustainable tourism development

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Abstract:

This paper presents ViaVia Arusha, a successful African branch of a remarkable transnational tourism network that actively promotes peace through tourism. Strategically located at popular destinations around the globe, ViaVia Travel Cafés are vibrant meeting places that stimulate intercultural contacts between tourists, expatriates, and locals. Apart from serving an eclectic mix of food and drinks (usually on the tunes of world music), the restaurant-bars provide a variety of tourism-related services. In June 1995, the first ViaVia Travel Café opened its doors in Leuven (Belgium), followed by Yogyakarta (Indonesia), Dakar (Senegal), Antwerp (Belgium), Catalonia (Spain), Copán (Honduras), Arusha and Zanzibar (Tanzania), León (Nicaragua), Kathmandu (Nepal), Buenos Aires (Argentina), and Mopti (Mali).

The ViaVia cafés belong to the Living Stone Group (LSG), a broader tourism-related network that started in Europe in the 1970s and has now become a prime model of an integrated local-global network. The aim of LSG is to facilitate encounters between the different cultures of the world, or to remove existing boundaries between peoples or cultures. The group's philosophical vision is based on four pillars: (1) wonder, (2) openness, (3) contact, and (4) respect. It is LSG's conviction that, as knowledge about and contact with 'the Other' increase, so do comprehension and tolerance. This allows people to detach themselves from old-fashioned thinking patterns and stereotypes and gives them a broader view on the world. This vision is concretized in the diverse member organizations that make up the group. The different entities, representing an interesting mix of profit and non-profit interests, are not mutually exclusive and can be situated in four major fields of operation: (1) tour guiding, (2) tour operating, (3) development aid, and (4) travel cafés.

The ViaVia in Arusha became operational in 1999. Using local building techniques, a restaurant-bar was built in the garden of the National Natural History Museum, in the style of an African village with little huts. The unique location created the opportunity for an ongoing cultural collaboration between the café and the museum. "ViaVia The Meeting Place" is officially registered as a Tanzanian NGO. Its main targets are: (1) to stimulate cultural exchange; (2) to promote and stimulate Tanzanian art and artists; (3) to promote the National Natural History Museum of Arusha; and (4) to stimulate awareness of cultural identity (e.g. through the support of cultural tourism). The ViaVia in Arusha regularly organizes exhibitions and workshops, giving local artists the opportunity to show or to perform their artwork while interacting with other artists, community members, and visitors. The bar-restaurant generates modest working means, enabling the NGO to become more independent from external sponsoring and assuring its long-term financial sustainability.

Since 2000, the following activities have been developed: city-walks in Arusha (including an exploration of the local nightlife); daytrips to Maasai settlements and markets, and various nature walks to the lakes and hills surrounding the city; Swahili for beginners; courses in cooking, batik painting, and African drumming; a drum making workshop; and a weekly program of performances at the big open-air stage next to the restaurant. The guides for the ViaVia tours are students or alumni from the local Professional Tour Guide School (PROTS). From 2002 until 2006, ViaVia assisted three local NGOs in the four-year Arumeru Holistic Empowerment and Development Project (AHEAD). This income generation and poverty reduction program linked the Arusha platform of NGO activities to four nearby villages and supported art and cultural activities. Every year the project operated in another village. ViaVia focused on art and crafts by organizing a theatre-for-development training, a training in performing dancing and drumming, and a batik painting training. These activities, which helped villagers appreciate their own culture and stimulate creativity, directly benefited around 25 people in each village and indirectly fortified the social network of the village.

Discussing and evaluating ViaVia Arusha as a best practice model, this paper offers deeper reflections on what ‘successful tourism’ is and what lessons can be drawn from this example for African tourism in general. Since global tourism is highly dynamic, a successful project can carry the seeds of its own destruction. Tourism is a multifaceted phenomenon involving the provision of a range of interrelated goods and services by both public and private sectors. Identifying and understanding the interplay and interrelationships between these different elements and sectors is essential for successful planning. Substantial financial backing coupled with well-planned mixed development often help to assure sustainability. In addition, constant monitoring is needed to assure the right balance between the conservation of natural and cultural heritage and openness for socio-economic development and cultural change. The right external conditions need to be in place as well: successful tourism requires political stability and the absence of war, terrorism, and internal strife.

Through its employment of local staff, the setting up of community capacity building projects in villages around Arusha, and intense collaboration with a Tanzanian tour guide school, the ViaVia clearly contributes to sustainable tourism development and poverty reduction. The unique combination of for-profit and non-profit activities guarantees the economic sustainability of all projects. The various tours and courses on offer are all aimed at increasing intercultural contact and the understanding of the daily life of people living in the Arusha region. The ViaVia is a fine example of the “small is successful” principle. While the wider network has grown substantially over the years, the secret of its success is the fact that its member organizations remain committed to small-scale activities. There is a constant stream of new initiatives instead of the existing programs becoming bigger (and harder to manage). Being successful, however, is not equal to being without problems. The case study shows that sustainable tourism development takes vision, planning, and a lot of work and dedication to assure that projects that were successful at one stage remain so in the near future.

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