

THE NEED FOR AN INNOVATION-ORIENTED TOURISM POLICY

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Abstract

This paper raises a few important questions which require innovation oriented solutions initiated by the federal government of Germany. These issues deal with mobility, new information technologies, ageing of the population and sustainability issues.

Tourism policy making system in Germany

A renowned German researcher has studied the megatrends of our societies and their repercussions on tourism. Amongst other things, he analysed changes in the family structures and found that the classic family has been replaced by new types of groups such as: long distance couples, childless couples, homosexual couples, divorced singles, involuntary male singles, panicking female singles, patchwork families, etc.

If you ask me if these types of groups give rise to devising an innovation oriented tourism policy, the answer is NO. The same applies to other mega trends such as “Individualisation”, “Women's New Role” or to expected holiday trends such as “Space Tourism”. All these trends are challenges for the tourism industry, for the creativity of the industry and its ability to develop and offer innovative products.

In Germany, tourism policy does not intervene in areas where solutions could be found by the industry itself. The industry has the know-how and the necessary momentum needed for innovation. The federal government leaves *e.g.* the international tourism marketing activities – certainly an area with the highest requirements as regards innovation – to the tourism industry and/or the German National Tourist Board, an organisation registered under German civil law. The Tourist Board is, however, subsidised by the government as it is considered as an instrument for the promotion of small and medium-sized companies. But the Federal government does not influence the work of the Tourist Board.

The federal structure of Germany restricts the role of the central government and it follows the subsidiarity principle. This makes sense. It should be the federal state of North-Rhine Westphalia and not the remote central government in Berlin that determines how to best use the industrial heritage of the Ruhr area. And the Bavarian government should be primarily responsible for environmental protection of the skiing slopes of the German Alps.

So in view of these restrictions, what role can the federal government play? Does it have a role to play with regard to the organisation of an innovation-oriented tourism policy? Of course it does. The federal government must react to the big challenges and trends of our time. These do not only concern the tourism industry, but also other industries.

Approaches to innovative tourism policies

There are specific questions inherent to the tourism industry itself which require innovation oriented solutions. This note will deal with four issues: a) increasing mobility; b) the role of new information technologies; c) the ageing of the population and d) sustainability issues.

Mobility

Constant road traffic jams and overbooked trains may determine our everyday lives in 20 years time. This requires an urgent search for innovative solutions by policy-makers.

The federal government thus promotes *e.g.* a long-term study on “the future of mobility”. The study will develop two opposed scenarios - a “reaction scenario” and an “action scenario” - for the period until the year 2020; the study will be reviewed and updated periodically.

An integrated and interdisciplinary approach will examine hard and soft factors as well as sociological and technological aspects. The findings will be of enormous importance for the development of an innovative tourism policy as part of a general transport policy.

New Information Technologies

This is a broad area which affects all sectors of the economy, but in particular the tourism industry. The federal government has therefore addressed the question: how can the small and medium sized travel agencies receive help in using the Internet for their work?

The Federal government established a competence centre “E-business in tourism” which offers seminars and workshops as well as training courses for the small and medium-sized travel agencies and agents on a local level over a period of three years.

The need is very important. The programme has been able to help the small and medium sized companies to improve their competitiveness as compared to the big enterprises which have few problems using the opportunities offered by the New Information Technologies in an optimum way.

Ageing of the population

This phenomenon does not only concern the pension system, the health insurance or the labour market. There is also an important tourism policy component which – fortunately – displays some positive features.

A new target group is developing with the senior market. The travelling activities of the seniors are becoming an important economic factor. Senior persons are nowadays physically and mentally fitter than in the past. And they are spending a lot of money. In order to maximise the possible benefits arising from this new market, the tourism industry has to take some innovative actions.

But the government must also do something. There is a growing group of older people who like to travel but have certain physical limitations as to their mobility or who have other disabilities. In Germany, for example, over 8% of the total population (around 6.7 million persons in 2001) is composed of people with disabilities. In Europe, it is estimated that this group is as big as 37 million people (11% of the population). According to demographic trends, almost 30% of the population will be people with a disability in 20 years time... but who are nonetheless able to travel and enjoy it.

For the tourism industry, this represents a significant potential new market. The Federal Government has thus commissioned a study aiming to help the tourism industry to recognise and develop the “economic value of barrier-free tourism for everybody”.

This measure was taken on purpose during the “European Year of People with Disabilities” in order to make it possible to use synergy effects resulting from co-operation with our European partners.

Sustainability

This is also a broad general subject with considerable importance for tourism. For several years now, the Federal Government has been considering the promotion of ecological tourism as an urgent task for an innovation-oriented tourism policy. Here, too, it should be recognised that there is an increasing demand for and a growing interest - on the supply side - in sustainable tourism.

It was therefore clear that targeted promotion measures should be taken in order to use this potential and combine ecological with economic aspects. So, the Federal Ministry of Economics and Labour funded studies, guidelines and workshops in bicycle tourism, hiking tourism and water tourism.

National pilot projects across the 'borders' of the federal states (the *Laender*) have been developed. All projects pursued the same target, *i.e.* to increase product quality and to grant support with regard to the marketing of these products.

The marketing of nature reserves has also been addressed. The idea was to convince the people responsible for nature reserves that they should not be afraid of tourists and to bring this big unused holiday potential to the attention of the tourists.

Conclusions

Many other examples could be listed, like support for a central environmental quality label or the various measures for qualification of staff in companies serving tourists.

The projects financed by the federal government promote networking and joint thinking to raise awareness and identify model solutions. The aim is to have the federal states, the regions, municipalities and the business community co-operating together.

For the federal government, an innovative tourism policy also means the promotion of coherence and synergy effects throughout the tourism industry. There is a huge need for more co-operative activities, but the budget funds that can be used are unfortunately limited. We are thus still far away from satisfying that ambition.