

# TOURISM MUST ADAPT TO CLIMATE CHANGE

***Sustainable tourism development aims at promoting the nexus between societal wellbeing, economic prosperity and environmental integrity protection.***

**By Dr JOSEPH NJOROGÉ**

Early in November, I came across an article in a local daily of a family that woke up one morning after camping in one of the national parks to find water at their doorstep. They called the hotel, which advised them to pack up their luggage and move to higher grounds. No sooner were they evacuated than the whole campsite was enveloped in flood water. Some campers were not too lucky as their luggage got wet and muddy.

Climate change is posing a major challenge to tourism viability according to the United Nations Tourism Organisation (UNWTO). Tourism is seen as a victim and a vector of climate change.

As a vector, tourism is said to contribute about five per cent of global green house gases, contributing to anthropogenic climate change or that which originates from human activity. On the other hand tourism is seen as a victim of changing climate both directly and indirectly because of rise in cost of insurance, rise in heating and cooling costs, changes in the length and quality of vacation, alteration of key destination environment affecting its attractiveness (for example, glacier reduction, biodiversity, destruction of tourism infrastructure, outbreak of water borne diseases, among others).

## **Adaptation strategies**

In order to respond to climate change, adaptation and mitigation are considered. Adaptation to climate change refers to adjustment in natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli or their effects, which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities. Mitigation is an intervention to reduce the sources or enhance the sinks of greenhouse gases.

## **Sustainable adaptation**

It has been argued within tourism research that tourism adaptation has been forged with business-as-usual approaches. In this regard adaptation has been viewed as a means to reduce vulnerability of the tourism sector with the focus of the economic viability of tourism businesses at the expense of the society and environment. Considering that tourism exists in complex systems of social, economic and environment, it is prudent to ask: "Are our adaptation actions sustainable since not every adaptation is a good one?"

Tourism researchers have attempted to interpret sustainability within tourism development. Early thoughts and contention include two extremes: the 'tourism-centric' to include the ones advancing the economic sustainability of tourism and those who view sustainable tourism development as a means to better livelihood for the society and protection of environmental integrity.

## **Defining sustainability**

The World Tourism Organisation defines sustainable tourism development as one that meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future. Therefore, sustainable tourism development aims at promoting the nexus between societal wellbeing, economic prosperity and environmental integrity protection. Since tourism is already considered as a strategic sector in achieving Millenium Development Goals there is the

need to rethink tourism development especially now as the industry is already facing serious consequences of climate change.

Threats to tourism in Kenya range from sea level rise affecting hotel sea fronts, high tidal waves eroding the beach and threatening the safety of both human and properties, coral bleaching affecting sea biodiversity which is important for scuba diving tourists, flooding affecting lives and properties, loss of biodiversity, drought exacerbating human animal conflict in range lands, among others.

Sustainable adaptation is informed by the nexus between climate change and poverty reduction as sustainability is about continuity while adaptation includes strategies aimed at 'reducing vulnerability' and 'enhancing long-term resilience'.

A critical issue to be considered is the heterogeneous players at all levels from local to global and from the origin region, transits region and to destination. For sustainable adaptation to be achieved, there is a need for wide consultation and inclusiveness in the decision making process. Tourism also highly depends on natural resources. However these resources are not exclusive to tourism. Ecological services are as important for the local communities. When biodiversity is under threat, most destinations are under threat and the local communities that depend on these ecological services face dire consequences.

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