



IMPROVING THE RESILIENCE OF TOURISM IN AL-QUDS: THE WAY FORWARD FOR A COMPETITIVE DESTINATION MANAGEMENT

Al-Quds is a holy city highly recognized by the followers of three monotheist religions and harbors numerous historical and cultural sites and consequently attracts many pilgrims and educated middle class tourists traveling for cultural purposes.

COMCEC Coordination Office implements a special capacity development program focusing on Destination Development and Management for Al-Quds. As the first step of this program, the study “Improving the Resilience of Tourism in Al-Quds: The Way Forward for a Competitive Destination Management” is conducted to analyze the tourism infrastructure in Al-Quds and to develop a tourism destination road map.

The study was initiated before the COVID-19 outbreak but the pandemic further underlined the necessity of restructuring the tourism management in Al-Quds and provided a good opportunity allowing all stakeholders to reconsider their strategies for taking collaborative actions for the advancement of tourism and economy in their city.

The study reviews the tourism trends across the world, in the Middle East and in Palestine, reflects the views of tourists, international tour operators, and local stakeholders, presents an environmental analysis, analyses the tourism value chain in Al-Quds, makes comparisons with benchmarking destinations and concludes with a general assessment of needs, a proposed road map and policy recommendations.

Key Findings of the Study

Ignoring the temporary interruption due to COVID-19 pandemic, the world tourism market continues to grow, and Middle Eastern countries are increasing their shares in the market. Unfortunately, this trend cannot find its reflection in Al-Quds because of various reasons such as the market is mostly restricted to pilgrimage, ineffective promotion and publicity, some deficiencies in tourism and urban infrastructure as well as in some facilities, attractions limited to only historic sites, and most importantly lack of a regulatory body or a collaborative action that will utilize the full potential of the destination.

Tourism businesses usually suffer from heavy taxes and charges, and do not get much support for investing in their businesses especially for renovating their premises. The sector is also in need for high caliber human resources both in terms of staff and managers.

False perception of insecurity, need for improvement in general cleanliness and hygiene standards, inadequate quantity and quality of restaurants, and lack of activities entertaining visitors are also among the major deficiencies in the tourism industry in Al-Quds.

Value Chain Analysis

Value chain analysis revealed that Al-Quds accommodates nearly all relevant actors in a tourism value chain. There are a considerable number of tour operators to organize tours, and a considerable number of media organizations for promotion. CSOs and professional organizations had successful achievements to increase added value of the tourism sector by adopting a common target for the development of tourism sector in Al-Quds. Accommodation facilities which are among the most important actors in the tourism value chain are present and there are a sufficient number of food and beverage serving points. Although decreasing in number, there are Palestinian tour guides in Al-Quds who are friendly and easygoing. Al-Quds can offer several types of local arts and crafts products to visitors. Most popular of them are olive wood, mother of pearl, embroidery, pottery & carpets, and olive oil soap, which are produced and sold by local small – size entrepreneurs.

The actors in the value chain are adequate both in terms of quantity and quality; they are conscious and have a high level of awareness and motivation to cope with challenges and risks. In the past, there have been some efforts to act on a common target / vision by working together under an umbrella to develop the tourism sector. Therefore, it has been determined that all actors are experienced and have the capacity to operate a self-governance structure.

Benchmarking

To draw the lessons learned from the experience of others, three destinations having characteristics similar to Al-Quds in terms of religious / cultural importance, diverse ethnicity, and history of local/regional conflicts have been analyzed. The experience of Shri Badarinath Dhaam (a pilgrimage destination in India), Sri Pada (Adam’s Peak – a holy location in Sri Lanka), and Old

Town of Santiago de Compostela (a holy location in Spain) shows that it is possible to attract a large number of tourists and increase tourism revenues at sustainable levels in spite of ethnic and religious diversities and political tensions by investing in infrastructure, transport, accommodation, and by diversifying tourism activities in addition to belief tourism.

Experience of these regions tells us that the success of these regions is based on an effective Destination Management Organization (DMO) operating over long periods of time, and attracting investors, investing in public infrastructure and involving local people in tourism activities play a crucial role in the development of tourism.

DMOs in these regions play an active role in developing strategies and plans for the improvement of tourism, they are involved in proactive promotion, they financially support activities that are aligned with the tourism development strategy, and they act as a coordinating and governance body with the participation of all relevant stakeholders in the sector as well as the local residents. It is a well-known fact that when local communities do not get much share in tourism revenues, they do not take extra effort to establish good relations with tourists or keep the environment more attractive for them.

Needs Assessment

Based on the above findings, the basic need for developing tourism in Al-Quds is identified as an organizational structure that will holistically coordinate the efforts towards creating a competitive destination. It is also observed that there is a need for investment in physical infrastructure such as renovation of existing hotels and increasing their capacities and/or building or opening new accommodation facilities. Another need is the variety of tourist attractions, especially those that will keep entertaining tourists after sunset. Cultural events, exhibitions, concerts, festivals and street entertainment are needed to be organized. Need for improving skills for employers and employees is also prevalent. In addition to vocational training, there is also an urgent need for tourism employees to receive training on the cultural values and elements regarding to Al-Quds and Palestine in order for them to better inform the tourists. It is also necessary to promote the gastronomic elements of the destination.

Recommendations

As in the case of many tourism destinations around the world and as it was observed during the benchmarking study, a DMO can serve as the organizational structure needed in Al-Quds. The main conclusion of the needs analysis is the need for transforming ATHC into a DMO structure that will coordinate efforts to improve the quality of services and to carry out marketing activities.

Al-Quds Tourism Board

The proposed board should have as much participative structure as possible and should be managed professionally. The board is proposed to undertake various responsibilities from accreditation of tourism facilities to lobbying for visa procedures or promotion of

the destination in target markets. The organization should have the capacity to utilize alternative financial resources and funds and should have good working relations with donor institutions in this regard. The performance of the DMO should be monitored against a set of performance indicators given in the study.

The Board should work under long-term, medium term and short-term strategies to perform the following tasks.

- Review of the “Brand” of Al-Quds and redesign it if necessary.
- Diversification of tourism activities to spread the tourism season to a wider time period and to include different members of the local community into tourism.
- Create new themes for tourism such as solidarity/politics/justice.
- Support for diversification of souvenirs available in the market.
- Extend tourism activities beyond sunset.
- Improve the skills of tourism staff.
- Ensure cleaning and sanitation of public spaces, organize campaigns.
- Establish some accreditation/certification framework for tourism establishments.
- Promote local cuisine.
- Encourage the use of online booking for the facilities in Al-Quds
- Support renovation and refurbishment of facilities.
- Advocate and support the establishment of recreational areas.
- Improve transportation infrastructure, introduce alternative transport such as bicycles.
- Increase the virtual visibility of Al-Quds in social media
- Analyze and discover new markets
- Conduct aggressive marketing campaigns.
- Collaborate with neighboring destinations