

Policy Recommendations Adopted by 34th Session of the COMCEC

- **Establishing/Empowering a central body (i.e. DMO) to position the destination at a desirable place among the competing destinations, to create the brand image of the destination, and to promote the destination through utilizing such tools as social media, digital marketing, trade fairs, public relations, and fam-trip organizations.**

Rationale: Destinations are composed of different stakeholders and possess different tangible and intangible resources. Tourists create their own experiences by interacting with these stakeholders and resources, thus every destination might offer different experiences and have some characteristics that might help compete other destinations. As dynamic systems, destinations require complex and sophisticated structures to design and implement their marketing strategies. Such a holistic view of destination marketing can be available at national (NTO) and regional (DMO) tourism organizations. In order to use their competitive advantages, destinations need a holistic approach in identifying these resources, converting them into products and unique selling propositions. A DMO can also create a marketing communications strategy and brand image for itself while matching these resources and desirable target markets.

Because the destination offers an overall experience, individual experiences with stakeholders and their marketing communications should also be aligned and consistent with the position of the destination and its brand image. Once the shared image is created it should be reinforced consistently by joint marketing activities such as Fam-trips, attendance to fairs and exhibitions, advertorial in traditional media, social marketing and web presence. Public relations activities (e.g. international news and event) should also support the shared brand vision of the destinations. In addition to their own marketing efforts, DMOs should also encourage individual marketing efforts of the stakeholders such as offering a percentage of selected marketing activities (e.g. attendance to fairs).

- **Encouraging new product development (i.e. events, festivals and other suitable products) to mitigate the adverse effects of seasonality and the risks related to dependence on one product or a single market.**

Rationale: The products and services offered at the destination and their quality are major factors that satisfy or dissatisfy tourists. Considering the importance of their loyalty and their potential in promoting the destination, it is important to design the products based on the needs and expectations of target markets. Destinations should be selective in targeting rather than trying to be everything for every one. On the other hand, while doing this, destinations should not focus on only one market but rather on various suitable markets. In this framework, based on tangible and intangible resources at the destination (e.g. alternative tourism, events and festivals), the products and services provided need to attract different tourist markets, thus the seasonality and possible negative impacts of crises can be minimized.

- **Managing and regulating existing distribution channels, developing new distribution channels to prevent dependency and minimize power asymmetry between destination stakeholders as well as international intermediaries, and establishing strategic alliances with external stakeholders that would create synergies for the destination and other collaborators (i.e. airlines, event organizers etc).**

Rationale: Many destinations in the OIC Region are too much dependent on international tour operators and intermediaries (e.g. booking.com). Due to this dependency and in the absence of a representative body to organize and regulate collective responses of stakeholders against these distribution channels, these international platforms can try to improve their position and profits at the expense of the destination itself. Thus, DMOs can regulate stakeholders and set price bases as well as ceilings for commission rates. Besides, DMOs would also empower local and regional intermediaries and promote direct reservations by introducing new distribution channels along with destination webpages. DMOs might also establish strategic alliances with external stakeholders such as airlines (e.g. joint promotion, lower landing fees), event and festival organizers (i.e. venue provision), production companies (e.g. movie sponsorships) to pull direct demand to the destination.

- **Promoting collection, storage, analyses and dissemination of market data on visitor characteristics, seasonality, distribution channels performance, source markets, trends etc., while respecting confidentiality and privacy of individuals, to improve the marketing effectiveness of the destination stakeholders as well as DMOs.**

Rationale: Tourists provide remarkable information and data for the destination starting from the reservation process, to customs, location based services, credit card expenditures, satisfaction surveys and so on. Yet, the information collected by individual stakeholders is not usually effectively used, because majority of the OIC destinations do not provide the necessary infrastructure to upload and import these data from individual suppliers. On the other hand, this data is invaluable to create a central marketing intelligence about the characteristics of demand, the image of the destination, quality of the products, visitor loyalty and recommendation etc. Thus a central data collection and processing unit can also be suggested at the destination level.

- **Utilizing digital platforms, mobile applications and allocating special attention on social media channels for improving tourist experience, information credibility and interaction among visitors in destination marketing**

Rationale: Internet has dramatically changed destination marketing, branding and image formation and rapidly emerging digital economy is challenging the relevance of the existing marketing practices. Digital platforms have become widely used instruments in destination marketing. DMOs use internet as a central part of their marketing strategy. In this respect, there is a need to adopt digital marketing approaches and improve the capacity of the relevant personnel in this new area. Social media platforms, which emerged as dominant digital communications channels as tourists increasingly engage with destinations on mobile devices, can also be utilized for this purpose.

- **Establishing/strengthening local and regional public-private DMOs through assigning responsibilities related to destination development marketing and management in coordination with local stakeholders.**

Rationale: Considering various actors and factors involved in creation of the overall tourist experience, destinations need a holistic approach in planning, development, marketing and management that would coordinate and lead various stakeholders and integrate their efforts effectively. Existence of a governing body (i.e. DMO) to create, lead and implement destination wide strategies is considered important for destination success.

Destinations also have different characteristics and their development, marketing and management should be customized to local needs. Besides a central governing body (e.g. NTO); creating, facilitating and empowering regional and local tourism governance structures (e.g. DMOs) lead to a more effective and efficient use of scant resources. Decentralizing tourism authority through local DMOs also improve stakeholder engagement and participation, internalize external costs and create synergies between different actors.

A public-private legal structure of a DMO make it possible for all stakeholders to be represented, which allows for pooling of knowledge and expertise as well as encouraging cooperation and communication among stakeholders, which ensures better coordination and avoids duplication of efforts. A purely public DMO managed by central governments (community DMO) may not have the necessary efficiency, funding, expertise and outcome orientation whereas a purely private DMO (corporate model) might focus on short-term gains while neglecting sustainable development, the needs of locals and environmental costs associated with tourism activity. Thus a combination of two approaches; public private partnership (PPP) DMO, managed by private sector and audited by public authorities, might create necessary efficiency while ensuring sustainable and transparent development.

- **Developing and promoting shared vision of destination through DMOs, planning supply and demand, identifying and monitoring KPIs and taking measures to ensure sustainable tourism development at the destination.**

Rationale: Traditionally, DMOs mainly focus on destination promotion, however in developed destinations their role has expanded to cover product development, stakeholder coordination, as well as monitoring, evaluation, ensuring sustainability and resource stewardship.

Stakeholder engagement, carried by local and regional DMOs, requires coordinating various stakeholders, which include local tourism companies, public attractions and facilities, government bodies, professional associations and universities, in addition to tourists and the local community. Since the interests of stakeholders differ, it is important for the DMO to balance addressing the needs of the different stakeholders without compromising those of others. To coordinate collaborations that benefit the destination, the DMO should create platforms that facilitate engagement, such as stakeholder meetings and seminars, and possibly a digital portal. It should also allocate staff to manage stakeholder relations, planning and representation of destination as a whole.

Countries seeking to attract more tourists often overlook the risk it imposes on natural and cultural resources, as well as its negative effect on the quality of life of the locals. In order to preserve natural environment and economic benefits and to distribute the latter equitably, tourism must be planned, developed and managed within step-by-step, ranging from the local to the territorial or provincial, to the national, and even to the international level. The responsibilities at each level of the hierarchy must be clearly identified and implemented. Majority of OIC countries, have national public governance structures yet, very few operationalize DMOs at regional level. Planning supply and demand, carrying capacities and conducting impact analysis at the local level will help avoid overuse of shared resources and prevent underutilization during stagnant periods. Destinations at the introduction and growth stage of their life cycle should therefore prepare master plans defining their vision of desired future state while preserving resources at the destination. Mature destinations on the other hand are recommended to diversify their products and manage supply and demand at optimum prices

in order to avoid overcrowding and low per tourist spending. DMOs should also encourage local participation, entrepreneurship and employment in tourism to minimize leakages to improve value chain. Equity, participation, accountability, responsiveness, transparency, monitoring and control are important features of effective local DMOs. Key performance indicators (e.g. average spending, occupancy levels, average length of stay, amount of leakages, level of environmental degradation, extent of community participation) should be established.

- **Identifying tourism resources, assessing their potential, investing on infra-structure, creating tourism products including events and festivals through local DMOs.**

Rationale: Physical accessibility of the destination, transportation networks, infra-structure (e.g. roads, sewerage, safety and security), human resources, super-structure (e.g. hotels, travel agencies, attractions), product development and diversification (e.g. MICE, shopping tourism, golf, events and festivals), improving both quality and quantity of demand, central marketing communications are important functions of DMOs. Due to a narrow perspective merely focusing on the physical product and lack of coordination among different stakeholders at the micro level, a large amount of resources are wasted. Thus these functions and strategies should be planned and implemented by a DMO representing stakeholders at the local level and developing potential products by collaborating with different actors in the destination.

Activities can include special events such as food, music, and art festivals, or sporting events, in addition to experiential activities such as food tours, biking, kayaking, hiking, photography tours, walking tours, and so on. Activities and events can also be linked to existing attractions. A biking tour can be offered focusing on key attractions in a destination.

Engage with the entertainment industry with its offerings from theater, operas, live shows and circuses as it adds to the appeal of the destination. Especially countries with low levels of natural attractions need to develop events and activities which become the source of attraction to the destination. For all countries, developing events and activities should be the focus of DMOs as these have become modern-day tourist attractions, and are as essential as inherited historic attractions.

- **Promoting destinations in the OIC through forming intra-OIC country collaborations to establish intraregional DMOs.**

Rationale: Complimentary OIC cross-border destinations (e.g. National parks, cultural routes) should pool resources and efforts to promote the region as a whole, even create an umbrella DMO focusing on a specific shared travel theme such as Islamic tourism heritage corridors, nature based tourism trails, mountain climbing, desert safaris, silk road and so on. OIC countries may also sign agreements to cross-promote each other's destinations, which would allow them to promote their destination with limited expenses to tourists visiting other complimentary OIC destinations.

- **Cooperating with different external actors and creating strategic alliances.**

Rationale: DMOs can also form strategic alliances with external stakeholders (e.g. national airlines, sports federations, retail outlets (as in the case of shopping festivals)), trade organizations, professional associations, for joint projects that would create synergies and win-win for all. For example, Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing formed a

strategic alliance with Emirates Airlines to promote the destination. They implemented joint advertising campaigns such as “Hello Dubai” and joint familiarization tours for influencers and journalists. They also jointly offered special promotions aimed at attracting tourists to Dubai, including special airline ticket fares from certain destinations as well as complimentary products such as visas, room nights, and theme park tickets. They also jointly developed “My Emirates Pass” which offers discounts to tourists for various activities and attractions simply by using the airline’s boarding pass at the different outlets.

- **Promote self funding of DMOs in the long term and ensure transparency in utilization and management of finances.**

Rationale: Funding of DMO activities is a major challenge, yet DMO budget is considered as an important indicator of destination success. Although most of the OIC member countries are using public funds to finance local DMOs, private funding emerged as a desired feature of successful destination governance. When DMOs are encouraged to create their own funds (e.g. membership fees, commissions, marketing contributions, sponsorships, ticket sales, project grants, revenues from attractions and convention centres), not only ROI increases but also requirement for public funds decreases. Government incubation funds might be utilized during the establishment stage of DMOs for several years. Yet, DMOs should be able to fund some of their activities in the long run. The government funding should also be tied to private funding (e.g. matching a percentage of total spending) and should also be linked to major KPIs (e.g. tourism tax revenues). Yet, it is imperative to stress that DMO is not a profit organization, it should aim to facilitate increased sales and improved sustainability of the region rather than concentrating on improving its own revenues. Therefore, transparency and fair use of funds raised also needs to be audited.