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REPORT ON WORKSHOP 2: New Instruments, Innovative Partnerships

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Europe as a destination is receiving more and more competition from other regions in the world. Moreover, the European tourism industry must permanently adapt to the constant evolution of consumer behaviour. Europe's tourism industry must thus use its professionalism, creativity, tradition of service quality and innovation to boost its competitiveness versus other regions and keep it sustainable as a destination.

Cooperation and partnerships at different levels between the different stakeholders and in different fields are needed to reach this goal. Financial instruments are important incentives to speed up the introduction of innovation in European tourism. But, as the European tourism industry largely consists of small and medium-sized enterprises, better communication of these possibilities is absolutely required. Trade associations play an essential role in this field.

The aim of this workshop was to investigate how stakeholder partnerships and better utilization of financial instruments can contribute to improve the competitiveness of the tourism industry.

Although financial instruments are very important, it is essential that stakeholders do not limit themselves to this field but also take into consideration the complete range of their business activities. They must also be proactive and show a wide sense of innovation.

The measures to be recommended must address the following fields:

- Funding: tourism must absolutely remain one of the fields of intervention of the structural funds. Information at local level about access must be optimized ;
- Taxation: the level of taxation in the European Union is too high and presents too much differentiation in the Member States. Although this is not the sole element to be taken into account for improving the competitiveness of the European tourism industry, it must be avoided that taxes and charges not related to tourism are imposed by the authorities at all levels;

- Qualification of manpower: service quality is important for competitiveness and qualification plays a major role to reach this aim. The experience on the field shows that the lack of training is often felt as one of the main obstacles for full efficiency of the projects;
- Level playing field: it is essential that all actors in the EU as well in the social as in the fiscal domains are treated in the same way.

To bring concrete benefits to the tourism stakeholders, partnerships must be concluded at all levels and with all actors. From a geographical point of view, this means as well transnational as transregional or even local partnerships. It is also important not to forget the social partners. Sharing the knowledge is also an essential element. In this field it may be recommended to set up a list of best practices.

Despite the numerous available information sources about existing financial instruments, different interventions showed that the knowledge by the final users needs to be improved. Among the new instruments available from 2007, JEREMIE can be quoted as a new tool directly conceived for SMEs. The role of trade associations towards micro SMEs has been recognized as essential. Improvements are urgently needed in this field especially from a facilitation point of view. Communication as well top-bottom as bottom-top is required whereby attention must be given to the contents, the linguistic diversity and the transparency.

Conclusions

The experience of the Austrian Bank for Tourism Development clearly indicates that all initiatives to improve the competitiveness of the European tourism industry must be carried out by persons who are tourism minded. This is a *conditio sine qua non* to ensure the success of new instruments or innovative partnerships. Moreover it is essential to keep in mind that the European tourism industry consists of a myriad of micro SMEs which need a specific approach where trade associations must fulfill a major role.