5th Asia Euro Conference 2014

Tourism planning and a nation's vision: A review of the tourism policy of Sri Lanka

Zilmiyah Kamble[a],*, Frederic Bouchon[a]

[a]School of Hospitality, Tourism and Culinary Arts, Taylor's University, No.1, Jalan Taylor's, 47500 Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia.

Abstract

As tourism is a vector of development, governments try to coordinate planning with national development objectives. In Sri Lanka, a post-war country, tourism has been perceived as a tool for post-war reconstruction and reconciliation. A blueprint document; the 'Sri Lankan Tourism Development Strategy 2011-2016', whose objectives are to distribute national economic benefits through tourism to economic development and national social cohesion, is guiding tourism development. Can it really be a bridge for reconstruction? This conceptual paper aims to assess the tourism reality in post-war Sri Lanka in the light of the blueprint document, by reviewing the policy with regards to; public or private tourism development, domestic or international tourism, special interest or mass tourism, tourism supply or resources focusing on the distribution of benefits. It concludes identifying gaps between the government tourism strategy, socio-economic and political situation. It contributes to the literature on Sri Lankan tourism development post-war, notably to review the tourism blueprint in its recognition and helps to build a body of knowledge on understanding tourism policy in the context of national reconstruction and social cohesion.

1. Introduction

According to Chaudhary (2009), the development of a sector is influenced by the political system of a country, its socio-economic environment and the policy framework. Tourism policy has been discussed and defined by many authors as a statement of intent of a set course of action agreed upon by public body or agency such as the government or a private organization such as airlines or travel operators with regards to aspects of tourism, which

---

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +6-011-264-88432; fax: +6-035-629-5001.
E-mail address: zilmi@hotmail.com

would act as a reference point for accomplishment (Dye, 1992; Wilkinson, 1999; Mason, 2008; Chaudhary, 2009). As per Hall (2008), policies are studied for mainly three reasons such as; to be aware of the influence of policy decisions and their impacts; to offer feedback useful to be considered into the policy process about practical problems with the policy; and to appreciate the positives and principles concerned in the policy and planning process. As for tourism policies, it is important to study them owing to their practical and theoretical significance especially with regards to the significant role played by the government in the tourism industry of any country. This is stressed by Elliott (1997) who indicates that, *"it is only governments which have the power to provide the political stability, security and the legal and financial framework which tourism requires. They provide essential services and basic infrastructure. It is only national governments which can negotiate and make agreements with other governments on issues such as immigration procedures or flying over and landing on national territory"* (p.2). For developing countries and especially those developing countries that have gone through war or crises, the policy choice or decisions have usually been made in the middle of acute scarcity, especially with regards to infrastructure, facilities, trained and skilled tourism professional and capital (Jenkins & Henry, 1982). Policy choices made in such countries are by and large different from each other and largely depends on the type of crisis, political and socio-economic conditions of the individual country. Nevertheless, as pointed by Liu (2003) the policies need to be well defined, theoretically sound and feasible practically for the purpose of implementation of sustainable tourism plan.

Located close to the Southern part of India, Sri Lanka is an island country blessed with natural beauty consisting of tropical forests, fine biodiversity and varied landscapes, culture and heritage, making it a compact tourism destination. Sri Lanka is also a multicultural island of many ethnicities, religions and languages. The ethnic distribution of Sri Lanka as per census (2011) consists of Buddhist Singhalese majority (82%), a large minority of Sri Lankan Tamils (4.3%), Indian Tamil (5.1%), Muslim Moors (7.9%) and smaller communities of Malays (0.3 %), Burghers (0.2%) and others (0.2%). A complex intertwining of ethnic, class, political allegiance and external pressure made the conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealem (LTTE) and government a long and 'dirty' war of over 30 years with more than 136,000 refugees (UNHCR, 2014) in 65 countries worldwide. It begun with the demand for autonomy by the rebel group LTTE (consisting of a few Tamil Hindu minorities), a globally recognised brutal terrorist network and the governing Singhalese majority, yet the war was restricted to the North and some part of the Eastern provinces, basically LTTE controlled areas. The extensive civil war in Sri Lanka ended suddenly in 2009, with the death of the LTTE leader and the declaration of more than 4000 LTTE soldiers (Coleman, 2012). Hence the conflict was a military one but not politically or economically settled. Even in 2013, the common wealth meeting held in Sri Lanka was boycotted by Mauritius and Canada which hosts large number of Tamil refugees. The current government in Sri Lanka, who are also the winners of the war; is from the United People's Freedom Alliance party, wherein majority Singhalese and few Muslims have been represented, however still less Tamil representation; although, one or two Eastern LTTE militants, who surrendered have also been included in the government. Even though the country faced fierce civil war, it did not deter tourists from visiting its Centre, West and Southern parts. Tourism sector in post-war Sri Lanka saw increased tourist arrivals in 2010, highlighting it as a significant sector that would aid the country's economic growth. Nonetheless, even during the war, the tourism sector was making its share of revenue though tourism was restricted to the government ruled and protected areas of Sri Lanka. Interestingly the state of tourism in Sri Lanka during the war was more of a rollercoaster with tourist inflow picking up in the 1990s, with the effective image building campaigns by the government and the war being confined to restricted areas of the country. Then 1995 and 1996 saw terrorist attacks in Colombo affecting two five star hotels in the city, namely Hotel Ceylon intercontinental and Galadari; yet Sri Lankan tourism was successful in picking up well quickly until 2001 with more image building campaigns and the fact that the country had diverse tourism products to offer. Yet once again, in 2001, LTTE launched an attack on the Colombo international airport, killing many people including tourists and destroying many passenger aircrafts and for tourism to pick after that was a huge challenge even with never ending peace talk attempts between the government and the terrorist group in 2002 (Beirman, 2003). Jenkins (1987) points out that planning is needed at this post war stage, with clear objectives in place, policies can be formulated which will help in avoiding situations where emergency actions have to be taken and provide stability for any future decisions and operations

Two years, after the war ended in 2009, a Blueprint document was published by the government in 2011. The 'Sri Lankan Tourism Development Strategy 2011 – 2016', a five year master plan, wherein the following key areas have been identified and approved by the cabinet as necessary for tourism development: the policy framework, the