Minister’s Speech – CAF Meeting

Secretary General of the UNWTO, Mr. Zurab Pololikashvili
Chair of CAF,
Colleague Ministers
Delegates from the CAF member states
Representatives of international organizations, experts, stakeholders
Ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

I wish to express my profound gratitude and appreciation to the UNWTO-CAF for the opportunity accorded to me to address you this morning. It is our sincere regret that the meeting could not be held in Seychelles in light of the current situation, but we remain hopeful that the opportunity will avail itself again.

Over the past five years, tourism has continued to enjoy uninterrupted growth as one of the world’s fastest growing economic sectors and engine of wealth creation. The trend was set to continue in 2020 with the World Tourism Organization forecasting that the number of international arrivals will increase by 3 to 4% and growth in Africa expected to average 3 to 5% over the same period. Tourism had become an important economic sector for most African countries in the last two decades with increased investments in product development and enhancement, aggressive marketing coupled with appropriate business-friendly socio-political reforms.

However, the worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 brought the world to a standstill, with tourism now being the worst affected of all major economic sectors. The devastated impact of the pandemic resulted in no African country being spared and Seychelles as an example recorded a total of 11 positive cases of which thankfully all have fully recovered and zero deaths recorded. In fact, with community transmission mitigated, the Seychelles continue to report some of the lowest confirmed cases in the Indian Ocean region.

The global tourism industry is facing challenging and unchartered waters at the moment which calls for strategies to cope including preparedness and rapid development. With over more than 169,000 confirmed corona cases across the African continent, many are imposing a wide range of prevention and containment measures against the spread of the pandemic. With travel from the rest of world at a halt, the African market will decimate thereby calling for us to find ways around it. Whilst we have shared many benefits in the past, we now need to work together to share the burden and find a solution.
Having faced public health crises before such as SARS and Ebola, it is important to emphasize on tourism’s proven resilience and stand ready to support the recovery. This will necessitate measures to be adopted not only as an individual nation but also regionally in order to reassure the future growth of tourism on the entire continent.

Seychelles, as a small island state greatly relies on tourism as a pillar of our economy, and it is imperative that any future decisions regarding tourism is rightly implemented and take into consideration the threats of this pandemic. For this reason, we are continuing with preparations and plans for a second wave as well as the worst case scenario. Seychelles’ preparedness measures led to its ability of controlling the spread of the virus. This began with closing of our borders and the implementation of restriction of movement regulations.

As the country gradually eases restrictions especially in regards to travelling, and we start focusing on resuming operations with robust planning, we strive to ensure that adequate measures are in place and that the safety of the Seychellois people and visitors are maintained.

The Seychelles, as a tourism destination has implemented guidelines and protocols which will aid in our efforts to recommence tourism activities in the country. The gradual ease of restrictions is being implemented under the three pillars: Vigilance, Physical distancing and Hygiene. All visitors coming into Seychelles will be required to have a certified PCR test report before travelling and may be subjected to a rapid antigen test upon arrival. Strict adherence to such measures will be required as it otherwise will result in deportation.

Guidelines are also geared towards Tourism Accommodation establishments and other tourism products such as tour operators, tour guides and maritime based activities. Under these guidelines, operators of tourism related activities will be required to develop Standard Operating Procedures in order to prove their ability to safeguard the health and safety of clients and staff. Upon fulfillment of these requirements, such operators will receive the safe criteria certification and only then, may commence operations.

Dear colleague Ministers, in these difficult and unprecedented times, it is important not to dwell on the opportunities lost but to grasp the ones on offer by using these unforeseen events to reinvigorate our tourism sector. By taking advantage of the ‘new normal’ and seizing the opportunity to reformulate tourism in Africa, links can be created between different sectors that will provide future visitors with new experiences.
The pandemic has proven that reliance on international visitors can be costly to the economy of our nations. However, whilst we develop measures and until such time that we are able to rebuild tourist confidence, domestic and regional tourism will have to be the first point of call. These will necessarily have to start from a deep understanding on how to further encourage regional tourism, which although will not compensate for the decline of international tourism flows, will nevertheless be crucial to boost the economy. Country-to-country arrangements for letting in travelers from countries with low Covid-19 infection rates can be assessed, provided that multiple layers of measures are in place to ensure passengers do not carry the virus when flights resume. This shall in turn, assist to stir the economy in the right direction as well as further strengthen community support for tourism.

Additionally, it is important not to overlook the manner that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world and the ways in which most travelers think. We are to expect a world where everyone is more careful in his or her actions and things are no longer taken for granted. Ultimately, travelers will be more focused on the value travel experiences offer and will evaluate prices on that basis. It is essential therefore that focus is placed on re-evaluating their product and pricing strategy accordingly. In this new landscape of tourism post COVID-19, the global tourism industry is likely to head towards quality-oriented tourism. Tourism industry operators need to show strong, creative and resilience skills so as to put in place innovative solutions to rebuild a sustainable tourism industry. Entrepreneurial ideas, for products and sales and in general for new business models will be key to help the sector mitigate the impact of the pandemic and kick start effective recovery efforts.

The kind of post-crisis marketing should also consider clearing misconceptions about the scale of the pandemic in Africa. This should include the number of infected persons and how these members compare to other destinations outside the continent. This will help restore confidence and even project African countries as potential holiday destinations.

In the coming months, proactive leadership will be crucial. It is paramount for member states to use the COVID-19 outbreak to improve crisis management strategies and strengthen regional coordination mechanisms and mutual learning across regions and tourism sub-sectors. This will therefore enable a more sustainable and resilient tourism system to respond united to any future shocks.

To conclude, allow me to say that whilst no post-health disaster response and recovery experience has equipped the tourism industry for a global pandemic, it is essential that member states apply a new perspective on tourism development. In order to mitigate the current and future impact of this pandemic, the willingness and commitment of all member states is imperative in order to bring about tangible results. To emerge stronger after the COVID-19 crisis, members should continue to strengthen collaboration.
Bottom line remains that the tourism industry is very resilient. We’ve faced many challenges over the years especially in Eastern and Southern Africa but have always come through in the end. This unprecedented pandemic stands to offer an opportunity to question regional tourism, allowing us to rethink a new start for the tourism industry and allow us to review unsustainable practices. I remain hopeful that Africa will bounce back and the tourism industry will emerge better and stronger.

Thank you for your attention.