

VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

Tourism has developed several new variations overcoming some of its negative features which were highlighted in our Tourism issue. This article, from a UN Publication, highlights experiments towards this attitude.

From an air-conditioned hotel room to an air-conditioned luxury coach with tinted windows, the new-brand colonialist views the sights and sounds of Africa, shielded from ever coming into more than superficial contact with the people. But for the tourist interested in something more than the conventional "sun, sand and sex", an interesting grassroot level project has been set up in Senegal. Simple, village-style complexes built and managed by the local population now exist for the tourist.

The articles on this page describe the background, advantages and pitfalls of such an experiment. They are based on a special feature appearing in the influential Senegalese magazine "Famille et developpement".

One of the biggest obstacles to development—and a principal cause for its failure—has been the lack of popular participation at every level. Development has become something which is done for, to, against, but rarely with the people it most concerns. In many countries, development is a process which is somehow or other directed from the capital with the help of experts, often foreigners, who have little feeling for what the local people value, and bureaucrats for whom going into the bush is a dangerous, unpleasant experience to be avoided.

But development which emphasizes community spirit—a trait that has always characterized Africa, and popular participation, resorts to the people the responsibility for their own lives and future. It can also provide a more efficient solution to the problem of massive urban drift. This project is a promising example of such an approach.

Casamance, a region of Senegal, south of Gambia, can be classed among the most beautiful areas of

Africa: Its coastline dotted with a multitude of small islands and bays ideal for fishing; its paddy fields and abundant palm trees; its forests rich with fruit trees. The beauty of its sites, its landscapes, and the variety of lifestyles and architecture make the region a natural location for tourism.

Formula Invented

Traditional tourism is a complete failure when it comes into contact between people from different cultural backgrounds. Recognition of this led the promoters of this project to create a new formula. Not an "exotic" tourism for the inquisitive but one of discovery where the tourist goes to a village which has had very little contact with foreigners, and is housed in a complex which has been built by the villagers and is run by them. A minimum of comfort is provided: A bed made out of raffia, a mattress, mosquito net, toilet, shower and of course, meals made from the excellent local food.

The project's benefits are twofold: A new, healthy tourism with fruitful contacts between the local people and the tourists; and participation by the people in their own development, since profits made from the project are ploughed back into other activities.

The readiness with which the regional and local administration, as well as the tourist authorities in Dakar, accepted the project has to be underlined. They were willing to take the risks that other countries had refused.

There were of course teething troubles. Whereas the various administrations showed great willingness, in many of the villages the local people, who had already been exploited, displayed wariness if not complete mistrust. At Enampore, one of the project sites, 52 meetings had to be called before the villagers would accept the idea.

For the first complexes, financing had to be found to pay for materials and labour but subsequently the villagers supplied both with the administrative responsible only for providing the plumbing and equipment (petrol lamps, crockery, etc.).

In another village, Elekin, it was the women who forced a decision. After 15 meetings the men were still reticent, so the women took matters into their own hands, told the men that they were interested in the project even if the men were not and started working.

There were many more problems to be overcome. In this region, the Diola people dominate but there are other important ethnic groupings: Mandingos, Manjacks, Bainucks, Peuls, Sereres, Wolofs. Rivalry exists between them, between tribes, even between village communities, and this was the first thing to be dealt with. Then with a great deal of patience the villagers had to be taught to manage the project together and no longer accept orders passively as they were accustomed.

It also needed the untiring dynamism and insistence of Adama Goudiaby, the regional tourism official, an autodidact with a gift for leadership, without whom the project would certainly never have seen the light of day.

The fact that the villagers built the complexes themselves with local materials and were responsible for the management of these centres has produced a number of positive innovations:

—An authentic African style is maintained and conforms to regular standards of comfort. In fact, people are surprised by the coolness of the rooms even at the hottest time of the year. The buildings—usually with 22 to 25 beds—are impeccably clean. Tourists discover to their great amazement that they are perfectly capable of living without all the gadgets they thought so indispensable to their comfort.

—The shocking, even indecent, gap that exists between the traditional, high class tourist hotels and the standard of living of the local people is narrowed. A room costs anything from 10,000 to 12,000 African francs a night (US \$ 12-14 African francs). Senegalese per capita income is about \$ 410—a year's earnings would have been spent in a week at a high-class hotel.

—A project can be set up with a modest investment—the village complex costs approximately 80,000

African francs in comparison to 8 million African francs for a first class hotel. The often substantial profits from the project can be directly redistributed to the villagers. At the same time, there is saving for the State Equipment for a luxury hotel (furniture, appliances, machines) is almost entirely imported; the cost of running such establishments is high, including as it does salaries for European cadres for the most part sent from overseas, imported foods, etc.

—The villagers learn about collective management. This is perhaps the most important aspect of the project. Run entirely by the villagers, the complexes are constituted into co-operatives. An administrative council is selected and is responsible to the village for the smooth running of the complex as well as for the permanent staff—manager, cooks, gardeners.

—Funds can be released to start other economic and social activities—market gardens, fruit cultivation, animal breeding, fishing, handicrafts, dispensaries, maternity clinics etc. This in turn gives the villagers confidence in their own abilities.

—More authentic contact is made possible between tourists and villagers. This is where most progress has to be made since problems continue to exist. The tourist must be willing to overcome prejudices and really want meaningful contact. A complete education for tourists and villagers alike must be undertaken, even going as far as a selective screening of the tourists to be received. Proof that a valid contact is possible has already come from remarks made in the visitors' books and by passing tourists, Europeans and Africans.

Shift in Focus

It is also important that the project offers a chance to Africans, including Senegalese, to discover the riches of their own continent. Traditional tourism caters almost entirely for people from industrialized countries—the Afro-American nostalgically looking into his African roots, the tan-in-a-week Scandinavian. Since the major objective of most tourist agencies is maximum profits in

minimum time, they tend to focus their promotional activities in Europe and North America. Africans having difficulty in making ends meet—and this probably applies to 95 per cent of the population—are obviously not a target group for these agencies. An what modest civil servant or African student could afford a trip when the hotel room costs 3,000 to 12,000 African francs? However, in the village complexes, the room costs 600 African francs, and midday and evening meals 500.

This changes the dimensions of the problems radically. By paying a share in a minibus, a dozen teachers can now afford a voyage of discovery. What was once an impossible luxury, has suddenly become a concrete possibility.

Obstacles en Route

Famille et developpement carried out a nine-day survey during two different seasons, first accompanying a group of tourists, then travelling with one of the project leaders. Any new experience inevitably encounters difficulties. Here are some of the principal ones that the survey pinpointed.

Management Difficulties

Self-management cannot be learnt from one day to the next, especially when the people concerned have "forgotten" what traditional collective management was like.

In several cases, the price of food shot up. The farmers believed they would be selling directly to the tourists. The lure of profit—"I can sell my chicken for 700 African francs because a new bunch of tourists has arrived at the complex"—is stronger than the idea of collective interests. The realization that "the complex is us" and that profits made should benefit everyone is missing.

More serious still are the rivalry and jealousy between different groups. These often have serious implications for the running of the complexes, especially when confidence is not placed in the managers. If this problem is not solved

rapidly, the project's very future is at stake.

This experiment goes far beyond the framework of Senegal. It is of interest to the whole of Africa since it means finding out whether grass-root communities can learn economic democracy, or rather how they can learn it.

The Problem of Certain Tourists' Behaviour

This is a problem that it is absolutely essential to solve. Take the various forms of "undress". These have a far more serious impact in the villages than in the towns. Then there are the tourists who distribute sweets and loose change in great handfuls, or take snapshots of all and sundry with a total lack of consideration.

Therefore, the tourist must be educated. Ideally, this should take place before departure and be carried out by the foreign promoters (tourist agencies, etc.). If they were shrewd they would realize that this education is as much in their interest in the long run as it is in that of the host country. Increasing numbers of snapshot tourists risk provoking rejection, even open hostility. But since it is the immediate financial profit that counts, there is little chance that tourist agencies will envisage such measures. Therefore, it is up to the host countries to undertake this education.

Women's Participation

Although women were involved in the running of the complexes, it was mostly as cooks, cleaners, etc. and not in the decision-making about management and use of profits.

Lessons to be Learnt from the Tourists

This applies to all countries with a tourist trade, not only this project. The tourist must not be regarded as a rare zoological species. The villagers must realize that the tourist also has a lot to contribute. (Courtesy: *Development Forum*)