

**Ad-hoc Expert Group Meeting on Sustainable Tourism:
Ecotourism, Poverty Reduction and Environmental Protection
United Nations Division for Sustainable Development
29-30 October 2013**

Opening Remarks by Mr. Nikhil Seth, Director, Division for Sustainable Development

It is my great pleasure to welcome you today to this Expert Group Meeting on Sustainable Tourism, Ecotourism, poverty Reduction and Environmental Protection.

I am very pleased to see so many familiar faces, but also happy to make new acquaintances. *(see from list of participants – incl. possible representative from Samoa)*

I am grateful for the support of the Government of Morocco in the preparation of this Meeting and deeply appreciate the close collaboration of our UN sister entities, in particular the UN World Tourism Organization and the UN Environment Programme, in the organization of this meeting.

We are gathered here for two days to discuss the important contribution that tourism can make to sustainable development, if managed and designed properly, and to make recommendations for how to facilitate such proper management and design by all relevant stakeholders.

It was the message coming out of Rio+20, that sustainable tourism has the potential to contribute to a green and inclusive economy, creating jobs and generate trade opportunities and income, hereby contributing to poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

But it was also highlighted that in order to enable such positive synergies, one must build capacity for sound tourism management, promotion of environmental awareness, and understanding of the impacts on local communities, on the conservation of biodiversity, flora and fauna, wildlife and ecosystems, of tourism activities.

The General Assembly at its last session (67th) adopted a resolution concerning the promotion of ecotourism for poverty eradication and environmental protection. It is an important resolution which elaborates on the close linkages and potential for ecotourism to contribute to poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

In the resolution, the UN-system among others was invited to create capacity for well managed ecotourism with minimal negative environmental and cultural impacts, through dissemination of good practice, tools and guidelines. We have taken up this challenge and convened this meeting in the spirit of the resolution.

We must also recognize that the sound tourism management require the strong engagement of a multitude of professional disciplines, the private sector as investors and business owners, of local governments, of communities, of innovators and product developers, scientists,

engineers, artists and architects. Holistic and sustainable solutions require broad reaching partnerships and engagements. I believe we have managed to gather a good variety of stakeholders here and look forward to the contribution that each and every one of you can make to our discussions.

It is estimated that international tourists have surpassed the 1 billion mark in 2012, with a close to doubling forecasted (1.8 billion) by 2030. One in eleven jobs on average are related to the tourism sector, a sector which contributes to an estimated 9 percent of global GDP (directly, indirectly and through induced impacts) and accounts for 6 percent of world exports. These are indeed staggering numbers which illustrate the significant contribution as a driver of growth and contributor to alleviation of poverty, the tourism sector represents. In fact, tourism has proved one of the leading ways for the least developed countries to increase their participation in the global economy.

International tourism can boost foreign exchange earnings while reducing domestic unemployment and lifting individual incomes. And by supporting traditional economic sectors such as textiles and local crafts, it can play a significant role in cultural preservation.

The market share in international tourism of emerging economies is expected to reach 57 percent by 2030, equivalent to over one billion international tourist arrivals. Over the past 60 years, tourism has continuously expanded and diversified becoming one of the largest and fastest growing economic sectors in the world. Even in light of the global crises faced in the last 5-10 years, growth has been virtually uninterrupted. The strongest growth can be seen in Asia and the Pacific, followed by Africa and Latin America.

For some, such as the Small Island Developing States, tourism represents the main, if not sole, income generator for the country. It is a strength but also vulnerability. Tourism has an enormous potential to drive development, social progress and fuel growth. The willingness to pay for cultural insights, remoteness and pristine environments is high, but these factors are easily jeopardized if not properly managed. Sustainable tourism management become a matter of long term survival of these nations.

But for all countries with such growth it also comes with a significant responsibility, a responsibility to ensure that this growth is inclusive, equitable and takes into consideration the need to protect our natural environment. It will require a significant change in our behaviour, our patterns of consumption and production. Likewise, protecting our natural environment, is a fundamental condition for sustaining the continued growth of the tourism sector and our economy.

Rio+20 recognized the importance of sustainable consumption and production and adopted the 10 year framework of programmes elaborated at the 19th session of the Commission for Sustainable Development. Sustainable tourism feature prominently in this framework, as we will hear more about from our UNEP representative.

Sustainable consumption and production (SCP) has also been recognized as critical by the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, which will take up the issue of

SCP in its January 2014 session, illustrating its centrality to the global sustainable development agenda as we move beyond 2015.

I therefore urge you to use these two days productively to discuss options, ways and means to promote sustainable and eco-tourism that is economically viable, socially beneficial and environmentally benign; propose recommendations of good practice; identify priority areas of intervention in order to address unsustainable trends in tourism development and propose potential areas for international cooperation and partnerships.

Your discussions here will help inform the intergovernmental deliberations related to sustainable development, and will be of great value to countries aiming to develop sustainable tourism and eco-tourism potentials.

It will also contribute to the preparations for the Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States, which will be convened in September 2014, in Apia Samoa.

I wish you successful deliberations. Thank you.