

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Social tourism in Europe

(2006/C 318/12)

On 19 January 2006, the European Economic and Social Committee, under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on: *Social tourism in Europe*.

The Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 26 July 2006. The rapporteur was **Mr Mendoza Castro**.

At its 429th plenary session, held on 13 and 14 September 2006 (meeting of 14 September), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 138 votes to two, with four abstentions.

A. PART ONE: ANALYSIS OF CURRENT SITUATION

peace. For such a strategic industry as tourism in Europe, these challenges — and many others — are a necessary step towards a better quality of life for all.

1. Introduction

1.1 To tie in with the various opinions it has been drawing up as a contribution to the framing of a European tourism policy, the European Economic and Social Committee has decided to draft an opinion on social tourism, analysing its origins, development and current situation in Europe, the experiences of different Member States and the values it represents. In particular, the opinion will make recommendations aimed at public and private institutions with a view to enhancing social tourism in Europe and making it accessible to all. This opinion also contributes to the current debate on European tourism policy by looking at social tourism as an integral part of the European tourism model.

1.2 **Tourism in Europe:** state of play and future challenges. There have been various studies, reports and opinions discussing the situation of tourism from a wide range of angles: the economic, social and environmental aspects; the high importance of tourism in the European and various national economies; its positive contribution to wealth and employment in Europe. All of these factors combine to create a picture of strong potential, stability and growth. However, it is also pointed out that tourism brings with it various internal and external problems and threats in the short, medium or long term: seasonality, the use or abuse of natural resources, poor appreciation of cultural heritage and the local environment, and concerns over terrorism affecting the safety of local people and tourists. These factors mean that tourism raises some major challenges that will need to be addressed if it is to follow the path of sustainable development. These challenges include the accessibility of tourism to all, its real contribution to the development of many undeveloped countries around the world, environmental sustainability, respect for the Code of Ethics for Tourism, job stability and quality, and a contribution to world

1.3 **Tourism policy in the European Union.** On 6 April 2005, the European Economic and Social Committee adopted an opinion on **Tourism policy in the enlarged European Union**, which analysed in detail both current tourism policy, in the light of the Constitutional Treaty, and the repercussions of the present and future enlargement. The opinion welcomes the role of tourism as supporting, coordinating and complementary to other European policies. For example, tourism has strong links with employment and social policy, the improvement of quality, technological research and development, consumer protection, environmental policy and other very diverse policies. In particular it should be pointed out that the present opinion aims to pinpoint and analyse the contribution of social tourism to employment and social policies. The EESC, in the context of various opinions on tourism, is promoting European policies that focus on creating a European tourism model based not necessarily on legislation but on values. Social tourism and the values associated with it could form a key part of this model, and help to establish and disseminate it.

1.4 **The challenge of the Lisbon agenda and social tourism.** Attention should be given to the challenge that the Lisbon agenda raises for tourism, especially social tourism. As the strategic objective of the agenda is to make Europe **'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustained growth, growth providing more and better jobs and greater social cohesion'**, it will be necessary to analyse whether social tourism contributes effectively and positively to this goal, how it achieves this, and how its contribution could be enhanced. As will be explained in the course of this opinion, the EESC believes that while this contribution is real, it could be strengthened. Measures will therefore be proposed for the various players involved in social tourism.

1.5 **Background to the opinion.** There is a wide variety of background material to this opinion, both in terms of theory (studies, reports, journals) and practice (actual examples of social tourism initiatives in Europe). There have been a great many contributions from public and private institutions; among these, it is worth mentioning the EESC's opinion of 29 October 2003 on **Socially sustainable tourism for everyone** which includes social tourism among 100 initiatives (point 5.5.2); also worth citing is the opinion of 6 April 2005 on **Tourism policy in the enlarged EU**, which includes the European social tourism project as a potential pilot project for European institutional cooperation.

2. The concept of social tourism

2.1 **The right to tourism as a keystone of social tourism.** Everyone has the right to rest on a daily, weekly and yearly basis, and the right to the leisure time that enables them to develop every aspect of their personality and their social integration. Clearly, everyone is entitled to exercise this right to personal development. The right to tourism is a concrete expression of this general right, and social tourism is underpinned by the desire to ensure that it is universally accessible in practice. Thus social tourism is not marginal or extraneous to tourism in general, which is a major industry in the world, in Europe as a whole and in various Member States in particular; on the contrary, it is a way of putting into practice this universal right to participate in tourism, to travel, to get to know other regions and countries — the very foundation of tourism. It should be highlighted that this right is enshrined in Article 7 of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism approved by the World Tourism Organization in Santiago de Chile on 1 October 1999 and adopted by the United Nations on 21 December 2001.

2.2 **Definition of social tourism.** There are many ideas about what social tourism really is, making it difficult to define the concept precisely. While the various institutions that have covered the topic use widely differing methods (such as the identification of content, expected results, aims, ideas and beliefs), they always base themselves on one tenet: everybody, including the least privileged, has the right to rest, relaxation and time off from work on a daily, weekly and yearly basis. According to the International Bureau of Social Tourism (BITS), social tourism is *'all the concepts and phenomena resulting from the participation in tourism of low-income sectors of the population, made possible through well defined social measures'*. BITS is currently in the process of revising this definition, expanding it to include the contribution tourism makes to development and solidarity.

2.2.1 According to the European Commission ⁽¹⁾, *'social tourism is organised in some countries by associations, cooperatives and trade unions and is designed to make travel accessible to the*

⁽¹⁾ The different concepts of social tourism: the evolution of supply and demand, Directorate-General XXIII, Tourism Unit, 1993.

highest number of people, particularly the most underprivileged sectors of the population'. This already dated definition is being revised in the wake of the technical meetings held in recent years. The EESC does not believe that either definition is precise enough; however, as is often the case in the social sciences, an exact definition is less important than the identification of specific features.

2.2.2 Consequently — and without any intention of giving a precise definition of social tourism, but starting from the premise that tourism is a general right which we should try to make accessible to everyone — we can say that an activity constitutes social tourism whenever three conditions are met:

- Real-life circumstances are such that it is totally or partially impossible to fully exercise the right to tourism. This may be due to economic conditions, physical or mental disability, personal or family isolation, reduced mobility, geographical difficulties, and a wide variety of causes which ultimately constitute a real obstacle.
- Someone — be it a public or private institution, a company, a trade union, or simply an organised group of people — decides to take action to overcome or reduce the obstacle which prevents a person from exercising their right to tourism.
- This action is effective and actually helps a group of people to participate in tourism in a manner which respects the values of sustainability, accessibility and solidarity.

2.2.3 Ultimately, just as tourism in general is an integrated activity involving various sectors, branches of activity and spheres of development, social tourism subsumes all those initiatives which make tourism accessible to persons with special needs, at the same time generating social and economic benefits for various sectors, activities and groups.

2.3 History of social tourism

- Although the emergence of social tourism activities as we know them today is not clear, they may have originated in the organisations that specialised in holidays based on physical exercise in the mountains, which arose at the beginning of the 20th century, or the holiday camps for children from underprivileged families that emerged in Switzerland and France.

- The public authorities began to get involved in the early forms of social tourism after the Second World War. This involvement was connected with workers' movements, with some European countries (France, Italy, Portugal and Spain) organising social tourism activities, while others (UK, Netherlands) simply adopted a non-interventionist attitude.
- It was in the 50s and 60s that efforts to promote social tourism really took off and many organisations, associations and coordinating bodies emerged, including the Brussels-based International Bureau of Social Tourism (BITS), which still carries out extensive promotional and representative work today.

2.4 Basics of social tourism. According to BITS, social tourism is based on five criteria:

2.4.1 The right of the majority to enjoy tourism. It is perhaps the desire to make this right a reality that justifies and underpins most strongly the various social tourism initiatives. The number of people who today benefit from a period of holiday has grown considerably as a result of the spread of tourism throughout society, but there are still many groups which, for various reasons, have no access to holidays. Lack of funds is the most common factor preventing this right from becoming universal. It is unlikely that the public authorities could or would use public funds to guarantee the right to tourism or holidays. Different countries respond to the issue in a variety of ways: some are more committed for social reasons, while others are less proactive in addressing a situation which prevents holidays from becoming accessible to all. It is important to stress that social tourism can or should in no way be equated with tourism of an inferior quality or type; quite the contrary, the hallmark of social tourism activities must be the greatest concern for overall quality as regards both facilities and service.

2.4.2 The contribution of social tourism to social integration. Tourism is a powerful driver of social integration, fostering contact with other cultures, places, customs and, especially, people: without travel, holidays and tourism, it would be impossible for people to meet, talk and acknowledge one another as fundamentally equal, yet culturally different. This cultural exchange and enjoyment of leisure time is an important means of personal development, both for tourists and for those who receive them in their local environment. The cultural exchange generated by tourism is especially valuable for young people, enhancing their intellectual development and enriching their view of the world. In the EU's case, social tourism could be effective in helping to build the Citizens' Europe. It is important to stress that the general opinion is that social tourism holi-

days should not be differentiated from tourist holidays in general, but should help with social integration. General tourist holidays should provide social tourism groups with suitable conditions for enjoying their holiday and not the other way round. Clearly this implies that an effort has to be made not only as regards facilities, but also the type of service and hence the special training that workers in the sector should receive.

2.4.3 Creation of sustainable tourism structures. In reality, infrastructures in tourist destinations and areas cannot always be called sustainable, particularly since tourism has often developed under conditions of short-term profitability, abuse of natural resources and occupation of the best areas — usually coasts and mountains. Social tourism, which focuses more on the social conditions than the economic aspects, can help to build or rehabilitate tourist destinations while meeting economic, social and environmental sustainability criteria. The way in which the various kinds of social tourism are managed is a key factor in the sustainability of tourist destinations and areas. If sustainability is, essentially, the balance between various aspects of human activity, then social tourism is a sustainable development tool for many less developed countries which see tourism as a source of economic activity that can lift them out of poverty.

2.4.4 Contribution to employment and economic development. Tourism is possibly already and will certainly one day become the most powerful global industry, and one of the greatest contributors to employment, development, wealth and quality of life in its beneficiaries. While social tourism contributes to this economic strength, it is not yet sufficiently aware of its own power, its economic importance and, indeed, its ability to make the choice of destinations conditional on sustainability. Social tourism companies and bodies need to look beyond economic criteria when developing their activities. One criterion that should be used is the creation of stable, high-quality employment, which is key to the sustainable development of a tourist destination. In particular, social tourism's contribution (whether it be great or small) to combating seasonality is a basic criterion when aiming for quality and stability of employment, and should form an integral part of the European tourism model. Public-private partnerships in the management of social tourism can serve as a useful instrument and indicator for meeting this criterion.

2.4.5 The contribution of social tourism to global development. It has been mentioned above that tourism, particularly social tourism, can provide many communities with an escape route from underdevelopment or industrial crisis and the

collapse of mining, industrial or farming activities. The conditions required for the development of social tourism are the same as those needed for an area and its inhabitants to see tourist activity as a driver of development. Insofar as communities can earn their livelihood from tourist activity, the local economy and social stability will be strengthened. As recommended by many international bodies, tourist activity is a good antidote to wars and disasters of all types. Tourism signifies welcome, exchange, the enhancement of local assets, friendship and communication between people, as opposed to war, which represents aggression, invasion and the destruction of nature. If one only loves what one knows, then tourism can encourage people to become closer and learn about each other, thus promoting peace, harmony and development. Social tourism can and should be reinforced, and should help to promote the conditions of equality, justice, democracy and well-being that enable the mutually-supportive development of all peoples around the world.

2.5 Principles and conditions of social tourism and its management. It is important to analyse the factors and criteria that characterise social tourism and the way it is managed so as to distinguish those aspects that can and those that cannot be labelled 'social'. In line with BITS, we can indicate some of the criteria that determine the general concept of tourism:

- the basic aim should be to increase the accessibility of tourism to all groups for whom such tourism is difficult, or to one particular group;
- it should be open to a wide variety of user groups and sectors. It should also be open to different forms of management and social tourism practitioners;
- groups at which activities are aimed should be properly defined: social categories, age groups, persons with disabilities, and always meeting the criterion of non-discrimination on the grounds of race, culture or social situation;
- initiatives and objectives should be included that are humanist, educational, cultural and relate to personal development in general;
- there should be transparency in the economic side of the activity, with profits reduced to the level necessary to meet the social objectives;
- the tourism product should add non-monetary value;

- there should be a clear desire to integrate the tourist activity into the local environment in a sustainable manner;
- human resources should be managed in a way that promotes job satisfaction and integration, focusing on the quality of employment of social tourism organisation employees.

These and similar criteria can be used as guidelines for action by those managing social tourism, and to identify the activity.

2.6 Company profitability and social tourism. Social tourism is, quite rightly, an economic activity (although not exclusively so), and it should be governed by the basic principles of return on investment and the profit necessary to pursue and achieve its basic goals. Only businesses which are competitive and profitable in the broadest sense can operate effectively, safely and with guarantees for consumers. The varying situation of social tourism today shows that the businesses and organisations devoted to this activity are profitable once they have established their structure and have the right market and appropriate prices. It is worth noting that social tourism organisations create jobs both throughout the year and during low-occupancy periods, thus helping to provide employment for the workers affected.

2.7 Social profitability of tourism. Although social tourism is an economic activity, it is also clearly a social activity, bringing benefits in this field. Visitors benefit on their holidays, tourism workers benefit in their work, and society as a whole gains. In the EU's case, social tourism is having an increasing impact on the construction of the Citizens' Europe and will surely continue to do so. Travel within Europe by as many citizens as possible can only lead to greater knowledge, understanding and tolerance.

2.8 Concepts and views of social tourism in Europe. Social tourism today means different things in the different EU Member States that operate such programmes, but there are three points in common:

- the real ability to have free time to go on holiday;
- the financial ability to travel;
- the existence of a channel, structure or instrument making these rights accessible in practice.

2.8.1 Thus, social tourism would include all travel and activities organised by trade unions, for family reasons, for religious reasons, organised by companies for their workers, organised by public institutions, for people with disabilities, young people or senior citizens with low incomes, and various other situations.

2.9 **Social tourism bodies.** There are also various bodies which work in and manage social tourism throughout Europe, including:

- national federations or consortia;
- public establishments, focused on social tourism or with activities relating to it;
- social tourism, sporting or cultural associations;
- cooperation bodies;
- trade unions;
- joint enterprises.

3. *Social tourism players and their roles*

3.1 **The European institutions.** The European institutions are displaying a growing interest in social tourism, as illustrated by the various studies, opinions, reports and conferences being organised, promoted or coordinated by the Parliament, the Commission and the EESC. Essentially, their activity focuses on gathering, classifying and circulating the wide range of experiences acquired by European countries. In particular, the role being played by the Commission is to promote new experiences in each country, and to bring together those responsible in the various countries with a view to cooperating on transnational initiatives. At present, the Commission's role does not seem to include acting as general coordinator of social tourism experiences at EU level. It is worth noting the recent survey conducted by the Tourism Unit of DG Enterprise, which looked at EU citizens' participation in holidays and the reasons why some 40 % of them do not take part in tourist activities. It does not seem unfeasible that the Commission might one day take on the role of general coordinator for a social tourism platform at European level. This role would not necessarily call for financial contributions from the European institutions in order to develop such a joint transnational platform.

3.2 **Member States' governments.** As pointed out above, the involvement of Member States' governments in social

tourism activities varies greatly for historical, ideological and social reasons. In some countries, the government, whether national, regional or local, provides significant financial aid. These funds are often aimed at various groups: young people, senior citizens, people with disabilities, underprivileged people, etc. Governments are currently taking steps to go beyond the national limits of their social tourism programmes with various types of transnational exchanges.

3.3 **Employers.** It is important to note that there are initiatives such as 'holiday vouchers', whereby employers contribute financially to help facilitate holidays for their staff. Furthermore, as mentioned, it should be borne in mind that social tourism is a major economic activity with great potential and, as such, attracts entrepreneurs from the tourism sector who see it as a means to boost their activities as service providers or intermediaries. One noteworthy initiative is the Spanish company Mundo Senior ('Senior World') which comprises various large tourism companies and was set up originally to manage the social tourism programme of the Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs, and which has expanded its social scope and activity by offering specialised tourism products for senior citizens. Clearly, the competitiveness criterion is not hindered by the social nature of this activity. In the future, there will need to be public-private partnership initiatives to develop profitable social tourism programmes both within Member States and between different countries.

3.4 **Workers.** Ever since social tourism first emerged, trade unions, as the bodies which defend workers' rights, have had a strong presence in tourism, as a means of obtaining benefits for their members. This presence is illustrated through support for physical infrastructure, holiday complexes, guest houses, etc. and for specialised services. Experiences and commitment levels vary from country to country, but in almost all countries there is some kind of social tourism activity stemming from trade unions. It is worth mentioning the trade union organisations of the newest Member States, which are seeking a valid model for social tourism and relations with more experienced bodies. It is also worth mentioning an interesting study that was carried out by BITS in May 2005, relating to various trade unions' tourism activities for workers and listing one by one the activities currently existing in the 25 EU countries. It is a useful source of information and analysis about the current state of play.

3.5 **Specialised associations.** These associations include the consumer cooperatives that in certain countries (Italy and the UK) have extensive networks of agencies organising social tourism, together with the youth and environmental organisations operating in this field, and the associations belonging to the social tourism bodies themselves, such as the BITS, which carries out important support, coordination and promotion work.

3.6 Groups involved directly and indirectly in social tourism. Evidently, the beneficiaries themselves are the main players in the various social tourism programmes and activities. It is they who benefit first from the economic advantages that enable them to enjoy their leisure time and holidays, taking part in the sporting or cultural activities that appeal to them. Secondly, they benefit from tourism that is respectful of geographical resources, heritage and the environment, and the relationship between the beneficiaries and the inhabitants of the host areas. Together, these activities help to foster mutual knowledge, relaxation and well-being. Local communities in which social tourism is practiced also benefit from employment, economic activity and development.

4. *The reality of social tourism in Europe today*

4.1 Theoretical, legislative and planning context. In Europe, the theoretical, legislative and planning framework for social tourism is not very extensive at present; however, there are a number of studies and reports that aim to inventory and carry out comparative analyses of the various examples of social tourism in Europe. Some of these are listed as technical and documentary references in Part D of this opinion.

4.2 Various practical experiences in Europe. As indicated above, during the course of the study group's work, at the hearing held in Barcelona on 4 and 5 May 2006 and from the information on experiences described at the conference 'Tourism for all' organised by BITS and the Commission, it has been possible to single out and become familiar with many practical initiatives in Europe which may be described as manifestly successfully. It is not for this opinion to study these experiences in detail, but we do consider it appropriate to mention some of the most important which will undoubtedly help to raise the profile of social tourism and can serve as a guide for others working in the social tourism sector, or for those states or areas that, for various reasons, do not have programmes in this field.

4.2.1 The French Agence Nationale pour les Chèques-Vacances (ANCV) [National Holiday Vouchers Agency] had a turnover estimated at around EUR 1 billion in 2005. It was set up in 1982 as a 'public body with industrial and commercial character' and after more than 23 years of activity it remains a useful social policy tool for tourism.

4.2.1.1 Its objectives are threefold:

— to help the maximum number of people possible to go on holiday, especially those on low incomes;

— to provide free use through an extensive network of tourism professionals able to respond efficiently to all requests;

— collaborate in the development of tourism, helping to achieve a more even spread of tourism across the regions.

4.2.1.2 It should be mentioned that holiday vouchers are received annually by some 2.5 million people and benefit some 7 million travellers. The ANCV has more than 21 000 affiliated organisations which participate in its financing and some 135 000 tourism and leisure practitioners are involved in providing services.

4.2.1.3 In addition, its programme helps to provide holidays for especially underprivileged groups, groups of disabled people, young people, etc. by means of holiday grants to the tune of EUR 4.5 million. The Agency also invests considerable sums in the modernisation of social tourism amenities.

4.2.1.4 Overall it would appear that the programme's continuity and profitability is assured; economic studies will, doubtless, show that the impact of its economic activities enable it to recoup the financial outlay.

4.2.1.5 The Agency's objectives for the next few years are to continue extending and disseminating its services among users and tourism practitioners. Perhaps these objectives could include a transnational dimension to the programme by means of agreements with European countries; the benefits would undoubtedly be mutual, exemplary and of great economic and social importance.

4.2.2 The IMSERSO social tourism programme in Spain has similar aims but uses a different approach and instruments. It helps more than one million people annually to go on organised trips, in groups, in the low season, and especially older people. The Spanish State invests about EUR 75 million annually in the programme, but through various tax mechanisms (VAT, tax on commercial and professional activities, corporate profits and income of physical persons), increased revenue from social security contributions and savings on unemployment benefits, the programme brings in some EUR 125 million and is therefore economically highly profitable. The social and economic profitability of the programme is clear as it has enabled broad sections of the elderly population to travel for the first time, to get to know other cities and places, broaden their social relations on an equal footing, improve their physical fitness — and the quality and user satisfaction is reasonable.

4.2.2.1 Furthermore costs are recouped at a rate of EUR 1.7 for every EUR 1 invested in the programme.

4.2.2.2 Mention should be made of the impact of this programme on employment, estimated at about 10 000 workers who would otherwise be unemployed in the low season as the hotels and other establishments and businesses remain open.

4.2.2.3 The programme is constantly expanding and evolving, seeking out new forms of social tourism with greater cultural, health and social value, such as stays in spas, undoubtedly successful, or cultural tours and events.

4.2.2.4 As in the case of France, there is broad scope for expanding the programme, not only within the country but also abroad. At present the Spanish Inmerso has already reached an agreement with its Portuguese counterpart on an exchange of tourists and is studying doing the same with France. This could be an exportable model of great value for the rest of Europe.

4.2.3 **Other experiences.** Besides these two major social tourism programmes in Europe, there are other good examples, perhaps more limited, targeted more at more clearly defined users, but no less valuable for that. Such is the case of the example analysed at the Barcelona hearing, namely the **Plataforma Representativa Estatal de Discapitados Físicos (PREDIF)** [Representative State Platform for Physically Disabled People] which focuses on a very specific group but successfully manages a programme of holidays for this group.

4.2.3.1 Different, but also very interesting and worth mentioning is the shared initiative of three organisations, one from the UK (**Family Holiday Association**), one from Belgium (**Toerisme Vlaanderen**) and one from France (**Vacances Ouvertes**) which coordinate to facilitate 'tourism for everyone' in their three countries.

4.2.3.2 Social tourism activities can also be found in other European countries, including **Portugal, Poland and Hungary**, where the trade unions play an important role, and in **Italy** where the programme is sponsored by the consumer co-operatives. To conclude, it can be stated that the variety of initiatives, user numbers and diversity are on the increase throughout Europe.

4.2.3.3 Similarly, it must be noted that some regions and municipalities are developing social tourism initiatives in one form or another, e.g. the **Autonomous Community of the Balearic Islands** with its Plan OCI 60.

4.2.3.4 At regional level too, the government of Andalusia (Spain) is developing the **Residencias de Tiempo Libre**

[Leisure Time Guest Houses] programme, along with the **Conoce tu Costa** [Know Your Coast] programme, which involves cooperation between the regional administration and local councils to encourage tourism by older people within the Autonomous Community.

4.2.3.5 Mention should further be made of the presence of social tourism on the European Union's tourism portal, www.visiteurope.com, which is intended as a consultation site for all tourist activity in Europe, including social tourism.

4.3 **General assessment of social tourism.** Social tourism brings many values to European society, including:

- satisfaction for beneficiaries, not just through the direct activity of taking a holiday, but also through the 'special' nature of this leisure activity;
- the human dimension and values of the activity;
- improvement in the well-being and personal development of beneficiaries and the hosting community;
- profitability and economic gain for the tourist industry, particularly by extending the high season;
- benefits from the creation of stable, high-quality employment year-round;
- maintenance of sustainability in host areas;
- enhancement of the local environment and its natural, social and cultural resources and heritage;
- boosting of knowledge and exchange between EU countries.

4.3.1 This whole set of values, together with the successes that social tourism has already achieved, the prospects for growth, and the research into and introduction of new products, all make for a highly positive general assessment of social tourism in Europe from all angles.

4.3.2 Such an all-round positive assessment means that we can dub social tourism a 'miracle' in that all the practitioners and users obtain all kinds of benefits: economic, social, health, employment, European citizenship ... no one is harmed by this activity ... the bottom line is that it would be difficult to find a human economic activity that is so universally recognised and supported.

4.3.3 Accordingly it is not difficult for this opinion to warmly commend proposals and formulas which would (i) consolidate and improve existing programmes and (ii) extend their benefits to broader sections of the population.

B. PART TWO: PROPOSALS

5. Towards a European social tourism platform

5.1 **Prerequisites.** It has been shown above that, regardless of the definition given of social tourism or how it is financed or managed, it is a powerful, profitable and stable economic and social factor, which meets its objectives whilst satisfying its beneficiaries, contributing to employment and reducing the seasonal nature of tourism. Indeed, it is an activity that is of great value throughout the world, particularly in Europe. The aim, therefore, is to examine how the beneficial effect of social tourism can be extended more widely to individuals, companies and society as a whole.

5.1.1 It is not easy to subsume under a single name a Europe-wide social tourism action: we can speak of a platform, project, project, initiative ... and although these terms do not necessarily signify the same thing they all allude to an organised activity, with clear objectives, of supranational European scope. In this opinion, given that it is intended as a general proposal, these terms are used interchangeably in the hope that the work of this future platform will suggest a suitable name.

5.1.2 Nevertheless, it is clear that tourism in Europe does suffer from various shortcomings and medium-term threats, such as:

- the serious, growing phenomenon of seasonality in the tourist industry, both in northern and central Europe as well as on the Mediterranean coast, where areas are deserted during low season and adequate year-round infrastructure is lacking;
- under-use of human resources during low and shoulder seasons;
- significant growth in the working population due to emigration, which makes it necessary to increase economic activity in order to maintain the same standard of living;
- difficulty for the tourism industry to maintain sufficient year-round price and occupancy levels in order to maintain profitability in the medium term;
- objective limits to the number of bedspaces that can be utilised for the purpose;
- for development to be sustainable in the tourism industry, it is necessary to increase the added value of each tourist area throughout the year: increasing the quality (and, as a result,

the price) or average annual occupation by increasing the season during which tourist establishments are open;

- the emergence of numerous tourist destinations throughout the world offering competitive and innovative products and services. This new competition should, above all, serve to stimulate quality and competitiveness.

5.1.3 There are also factors that represent clear opportunities in terms of the viability of a possible European social tourism platform or project:

- gradual increase, in absolute and relative terms, of citizens who are not working but have pensions and a sufficient standard of living in Europe;
- gradual increase in life expectancy of Europeans;
- increase in the average amount of leisure time that a person has throughout their life, particularly when they are older;
- reduction in transport costs due to the boom in low-cost airlines, which favours mobility and tourism;
- growing cultural awareness level which encourages responsible, sustainable tourism;
- good and successful experiences with social tourism programmes throughout Europe;
- accession of countries to the EU, which increases the market and the possibilities and opportunities for travel.

5.2 A European social tourism platform could have various **objectives:**

- to generalise and extend existing programmes and number of users of social tourism throughout Europe, until every country has its own programme;
- to harness the transnational nature of existing programmes through bilateral or multilateral cooperation programmes;
- to establish the conditions for designing and implementing a European social tourism platform, in which the potential beneficiaries are European citizens who can visit other countries in an affordable and sustainable manner; in this context, it would be useful to find out how many Europeans have never visited another European country, as this group would probably be quite numerous and would underpin the programme;
- to promote the gradual implementation of European-scale social tourism in which as many states as possible participate.

5.3 Players and groups involved in the European social tourism platform. The groups or players that could be involved include:

- organisations that currently manage social tourism programmes in the various countries;
- trade union organisations and cooperatives interested in the development of the programme;
- employers in the tourism sector (in its broadest sense) interested in improving the sustainable profitability of their establishments;
- national, regional and local governments interested in taking action in the field of tourism, its improvement, and the personal and social development of their citizens;
- the EU and its institutions, interested in boosting and promoting employment, economic activity and European citizenship; given the supranational dimension of the platform, the EU institutions should also have the task of coordinating and monitoring the conditions under which the programme is developed, including heading up its establishment;
- social tourism organisations, especially BITS.

5.4 Key aspects of European Social Tourism. In order for a European social tourism platform to be socially and economically viable, it must meet the following criteria:

- It must be aimed at the most economically, territorially or socially underprivileged groups, or groups with disabilities, particularly those with a physical or mental disability, or which find it difficult to travel for geographical reasons (such as Europe's islands). This means being responsible for partial, fair and equal financing, irrespective of the length of the holiday and stays, as a way of compensating for the situation of the underprivileged in the broadest sense.
- Overall, it must be economically and socially profitable in the short, medium and long term, at both public and private levels.
- It must create stable, high-quality employment throughout the year. Centralised management and an effort to maximise stays in tourist establishments would be necessary to meet the employment objective.
- It must be implemented during low occupancy seasons.

- It must be sustainable and ensure personal and social enrichment both for beneficiaries and host communities.
- It must maintain high-quality services commensurate with the objectives.
- It must take the form of public-private cooperation.

If these conditions were met, social tourism would doubtless become a key component of the European tourism model.

5.5 Public-private cooperation in the project. The feasibility of the programme may well be dependent on — but could also benefit from — effective public-private cooperation in its planning, design and management. It would seem at least possible, although not easy, to find organisations and businesses in Europe that are willing to undertake the development of a European social tourism platform.

6. *Effects and results of a European social tourism platform*

6.1 On growth and employment. Should this platform be implemented in its various phases, the effects on growth and employment would be major, and would surely help to achieve the objectives of the Lisbon summit. The IMSERSO programme undertaken in Spain, for example, clearly shows the beneficial impact of social tourism on safeguarding and creating jobs during the low season.

6.2 On the effective right to access tourism. Although, according to the statistics available, around 40 % of the population do not currently go on holiday, the European social tourism platform would aim and no doubt help to reduce this percentage substantially and make tourism for all a reality, as well as helping the peoples of Europe to get to know each other better.

6.3 On the European tourism model. In its various opinions on tourism, the EESC has expressed its belief that it is possible to build a European tourism model based not on legislation, but on widely accepted and applied values. One of the values that could be included in this model is undoubtedly universal access to tourism — tourism for all. The European social tourism platform could significantly help to boost the European tourism model.

7. *Contribution of tourism, particularly social tourism, to the construction of a European identity and dimension*

7.1 In recent years it has become evident that the European venture is not a short or easy task, and even today there are still many uncertainties and difficulties to overcome. Social tourism could be a powerful tool to boost information and understanding between individuals and solidarity between peoples. It could help to build the Citizens' Europe not through sacrifice or struggle, but through the enjoyment of leisure time, travel and holidays. Young people, especially, are a group that are likely to travel more during high season — a period when student residences are unoccupied and could temporarily play host to tourist initiatives similar to the Erasmus programme.

7.2 Tourism could be a good way to build the Citizens' Europe. The various groups involved, the tourism industry and local communities could together bring their interests into line, in a way that is pleasant and accessible to all.

C. PART THREE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8. *Conclusions*

8.1 A first general conclusion to be drawn from this opinion's analysis of the situation of social tourism in Europe today is that it is an environmentally, economically and socially sustainable activity, and an activity of the first order in each of these three spheres.

8.2 The economic, social, health and integration benefits that all the users and practitioners participating in the programmes gain are widely acknowledged and of considerable added value.

8.3 The various social tourism user groups and in particular people with a disability and/or reduced mobility get an enormous boost towards their full integration as individuals.

8.4 On the ground, social tourism in Europe is characterised by a wide variety of practitioners, forms of development, public objectives, financial instruments, etc. which enrich it, diversify it and contribute to its development and evolution.

8.5 In particular we can conclude that the profitability of social tourism is compatible with and positively linked to economic profitability.

8.6 It is economically feasible and socially desirable for each European country to develop a national social tourism programme with a diversity of approaches and management forms.

8.7 It is economically feasible and socially desirable to establish a transnational European social tourism platform.

8.8 Every social tourism activity should incorporate a set of sustainability and job-creation values in line with the Lisbon strategy.

8.9 Social tourism can be highly valuable tool for the creation of a Citizens' Europe, embracing all citizens; the role of young people is particularly important in this process.

8.10 Social tourism is an activity that displays some of the values which can be incorporated into the European tourism model.

8.11 All local communities throughout Europe could benefit from social tourism, due to its contribution to the protection of cultural and local heritage.

8.12 In conclusion, social tourism today is a mature activity practiced in many of Europe's Member States, with good management and organisational structures. It is ready to progress towards implementation in all countries, making its services transnational and thus increasing the quality and quantity of its objectives.

9. *Recommendations*

9.1 The basic recommendation for potential users of social tourism programmes is clearly to encourage them to participate in an activity such as tourism, to which they have a right but to which they may not have had access for a whole host of reasons. Social tourism clearly promotes integration, greater knowledge and personal development, and as such participation in its activities is desirable.

9.2 With regard to the wide range of practitioners who are involved in managing the various social tourism programmes, first we should acknowledge the benefits of their work, their dedication to their organisation's mission and the care they put into providing an accessible but high-quality service to users. But we should also encourage them to go on improving their products and services, investing in improvements to infrastructure, innovating with new products, especially with a transnational dimension. The coordination of programmes and formation of associations between the organisations responsible are a good way of improving and exchanging experiences.

9.3 With regard to businesses in the tourism sector, we would recommend that they take part wholeheartedly in social tourism activities. The values of social tourism are compatible with good business management, competitiveness and profitability, in the short term but particularly in the medium and long term, and make it possible to secure the jobs of many workers over the whole year.

9.4 With regard to national, regional and local institutions and governments, we would advise them to establish social tourism programmes on account of their social but also economic benefits. The additional revenue from taxes and contributions, the savings on unemployment benefits, are clear incentives to provide fair subsidies to economically, socially or physically disadvantaged groups, in the certainty that the costs will be recouped with interest.

9.5 Our recommendation to the European institutions is to bear in mind that social tourism is an important activity which shares objectives with tourism and social policy, is an activity which merits recognition, development, specialised technical assistance, support and incentives (not necessarily economic). Guidance, technical coordination, dissemination of experience and a forum for concluding transnational agreements are among the tasks that the Commission especially, through its tourism unit, can provide with its own resources in order to set up an effective European social tourism platform. The Commission's leadership in these aspects of promoting social tourism would undoubtedly be a valuable tool for achieving the objectives and monitoring initiatives.

9.6 All institutions should consider boosting their policies to eliminate all types of barriers in communications infrastructures and in accommodation and tourism service infrastructures. The case of Europe's islands clearly illustrates how their geographical situation strongly affects mobility and access to tourism for their citizens.

9.7 Given its political, social and economic dimensions, the European Parliament should launch initiatives to promote a debate and resolutions encouraging social tourism in Europe.

9.8 The EESC concurs that this opinion should be known, published and distributed as the Barcelona declaration on social tourism in Europe, and serve as its contribution to the 2006 European Tourism Forum and this year's World Tourism Day.

D. PART FOUR: TECHNICAL AND DOCUMENTARY REFERENCES

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