

Ambitious plans for boosting tourism

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President Cyril Ramaphosa acknowledged the importance of tourism to our economy in his State of the Nation Address. He also set an ambitious target of raising tourism numbers to 21-million per annum by 2030. The challenge is now to put his encouraging words into action, and to flesh out his broad goals with meaningful investment.



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By the broadest definition, South Africa currently receives about 10-million tourists per year. Seeking to double that in about a decade is a massive target. However, the president's role is to inspire, to lead and to set ambitious goals.

In that sense, his speech is to be applauded. But it will require concrete plans and real investment to bring his ambitious vision to fruition.

Infrastructure investment

Despite some perceptions, tourism requires infrastructure investment. The sector has great job creation potential, but this must be facilitated by spending on roads, for instance, or by practical interventions like streamlining our visa process, or simply providing tourism information.

Ramaphosa's promise to introduce e-visa processes is an encouraging example of a concrete plan to improve our tourism

service. Unfortunately, this alone will not double our visitor numbers. E-visas are now a tourism must-have, global best practice, and we simply have to offer them.

Further concrete action is required. Despite assurances that the birth certificate requirements will be simplified for people travelling with children, this appears not to have been physically implemented at Home Affairs.

These challenges are endemic of a siloed approach to tourism. Tourism requires a multidisciplinary strategy and support from across our departments.

If infrastructure is not in place, tourists will not be enticed to visit our country. This means that departments like transport and public works need to approach their work with a tourism lens, if the full job-creation and growth-enhancing potential of tourism is to be realised.

Boosting the budget

Global tourism grew at 6% last year, whereas South Africa's visitor numbers are somewhere around 2%. Our country has vast excess capacity. South African Tourism does a good job with the resources at its disposal, but to make a fundamental difference, tourism needs to be prioritised on a national level.

Many of the national challenges that discourage tourists from visiting South Africa will require action beyond the remit of the tourism department to address. These include the perception and reality of crime; the idea that we're hard to visit at short notice; and the belief that South Africa is not family friendly. Even land expropriation has been cited as an unfavourable development.

Despite the encouraging talk about tourism, we need to fix several problems in other parts of our national government for tourism to really reach its full potential.

Boosting the national tourism budget is a necessity, if we are to meet our target. However, most tourism happens at local level, where tourism department budgets have often been cut to zero. This can deal a mortal blow to the sector.

Holistic approach

The cross departmental approach should extend to local municipality level, where road improvements in strategically important routes and permit fast tracking can have a material impact on jobs in this sector. Tourism is also highly SMME based, and a natural fit for support by the department of small business development.

The 1996 Tourism White Paper says that tourism is "government led, private-sector driven and community based". Therefore, it is vital that government continues to lead and not leave the development of the sector in the hands of the private sector. Private enterprise is more than willing to continue investing in the industry, but a holistic approach to tourism requires a coherent approach from government.

We look forward to the budget speech for more detail on the government's plans to boost the sector.

Job creation

It's worth remembering that spending to support tourism does not take place to the detriment of South Africa citizens, as it creates jobs and economic opportunities. Most importantly, spending on infrastructure that makes our country more appealing will make it a desirable destination for tourists.

Tourism is uniquely people focused. It requires few hi-tech digital skills. It calls for friendliness and hospitality. In the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which threatens job losses through automation, tourism is a beacon of labour-intensive opportunity for our people, naturally hospitable as we are.

South Africa's greatest tourism moment was the 2010 Fifa World Cup. It saw all South Africans working together across industries, sectors and government departments to get things done.

To regain that level of tourism success, perhaps we need another clear, national strategic vision that everyone can work towards. A vision of South Africa as a world-leading tourist destination. We've done it before – we can do it again! But it must be driven by a broad, holistic plan by our government.

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