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**Understanding the Role of Visas in Travel to Developing Destinations:  
The case of Suriname**

Visa policies are among the most important governmental formalities influencing international tourism, yet they are still regularly mentioned as inadequate and inefficient, and thus, regarded as an obstacle to tourism growth (UNWTO/WTTC 2012). This research note explores the opportunities that facilitating visa policies present to national governments. Key areas for further research are identified for the government of the Republic of Suriname, which like many other developing or emerging tourist destinations, has few institutionalized policies for destination management and regulation of tourism. Arguably, these destinations might prove more receptive to implementing more facilitating visa policy reform decisions than other, more developed and well known, vacation destinations.

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## **Introduction**

Suriname, part of the Guyana Shield Region in the Amazon Rainforest, has been a pioneer in nature conservation since the 1950s. Having one of the lowest population densities in the world in its tropical and pristine forests, the country has conserved large tracts of unspoiled nature, of which the Central Suriname Nature Reserve (CSNR) was named a UNESCO world heritage site. The young Surinamese tourism industry is undergoing many challenges, but has the potential to develop into a well-ordered, community-driven sector that contributes generously to the conservation of its natural and cultural heritage, and provides economic advantages to the country and its people (Sijlbing 2010).

But the government of Suriname, who has always emphasized the element of sustainability in tourism development, has a significant role to play if Suriname's economy is to truly flourish from its tourism sector. Hannam and Knox (2010) write that governments can often be relatively ambivalent about their role in regulating and promoting tourism, preferring to allow the market to have a greater say or to devolve decision making to specialist agencies and local layers of governance. The authors explain that tourism development has now become a key part of many supranational, national and regional State strategies, particularly as governments recognize the impact that tourism has on the environment;

‘It is only governments which have the power to provide the political stability, security and the legal and financial framework which tourism requires. They provide essential services and basic infrastructure. It is only national governments which can negotiate and make agreements with other governments on issues such as immigration procedures or flying over and landing on national territory.’ (Elliot, 1997)

## **Travellers to Suriname**

It has been estimated that as many as 89% of all visitors that travel to Suriname make independent travel arrangements. This market is not homogenous but includes a number of identifiable segments, with differing interests and needs. Suriname's attraction as a tourist destination lies in its offer of:

- Pristine rainforests
- Extraordinary nature and genuine cultural heritage sites
- Small friendly, welcoming communities
- Rural, remote areas, away from the beaten track
- Good conditions for a flexible itinerary
- A wide range of outdoor activities

Still being a relatively unknown tourist destination, Suriname is one of the few countries that can still draw on the attracting 'power of mystery'. Independent Travelers are often among the first 'real' tourists to be drawn to what is considered a developing destination; a relatively unknown or remote area, off the beaten track, offering its visitors a genuine and unique experience. The majority of Suriname's nature based tourism product that appeals to the 'real' tourists is located within its nature reserves and other protected areas. It is evident that policies must serve the protection of these natural and cultural heritage sites. The connection between developing or emerging destinations and the backpacker or independent traveler's culture is emphasized in this note, to make the point that governments of developing destinations, such as Suriname, must understand the composition of its primary markets and seriously consider their travel behavior, needs and wants when policies and procedures affecting the tourism industry are developed. Furthermore, the impact of implementing these policies can only be measurable if the particularities of a country's various target groups are

recorded, and changes in consumer patterns in reaction to policy reforms are systematically documented. Differentiation of its public services to visitors offers national governments opportunities to capitalize on the specific characteristics of segmented key markets.

### **Travel regulation and policies**

Travel and tourism – or more correctly stated, rights to travel and tourism – are often taken for granted in the globalized world, not only by individual travelers, but also by scholars... Although in many countries people may believe that they have an intrinsic right to travel, no such legal rights exist under international law (Coles and Hall 2011). Declarations of organizations such as the UNWTO with respect to a Global Code of Ethics for Tourism or the Tourism Bill of Rights and Tourist Code, carry little weight in international law and they are generally characterized as ‘soft law’ (Hall, 2008a, 2008b). Soft law refers to regulatory conduct that, because it is not provided for in a treaty, is not as binding as hard law, although the term is sometimes also applied to treaty law in which there are no enforceable sanctions for non-implementation (Coles and Hall 2011).

Visa costs, procedures and requirements are often mentioned as the ‘hard law’ elements that are of more influence on the Independent Traveler’s choice for their next destination. Often times, even more so in making individual travel arrangements than with group travelers or bookers of package trips, because in those cases the travel agent can act as an intermediate in visa-application procedures. The travel agent will usually either offer the ‘hassle-free’ destinations, or ‘knows the ropes’ of visa-application to more stringent destinations.

In Suriname it is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that is responsible for the development of these policies and the processing of visa applications. The Ministry of

Transport, Communication and Tourism and the Suriname Tourism Foundation (STF) are important institutions that assist in the development and implementation of visa and other tourism related policies and procedures. Traditionally the reasons of the Government of Suriname to amend or develop new policies regarding visitor entry have been based primarily on issues of security, the principle of reciprocity, and direct earnings for the government. But the realization that visa facilitation can also be central to stimulating economic growth and job creation through tourism, brings with it a another urgent consideration for seeking improvement of ‘cumbersome visa procedures’; maximization of the use of information and communication technologies is key to governments that seek to improve visa procedures for the benefit of increasing the number of international visitors to its country, and subsequently facilitating increase of overall tourism industry revenues. The idea is not to develop more but ‘smarter’ regulation.

### **Brief overview of visa policies in Suriname**

In its current policies Suriname reserves its sovereign right to determine who is allowed to enter its territories without a tourist visa. It is mandatory that a visa request by a foreign national is made prior to setting foot on Surinamese territory. Visa applications can be processed only through the country’s Embassies, Consulates or the consular department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Suriname. Visas can be obtained only in person at either the consular department of the Ministry of Foreign affairs (applicable for subsequent visits only), an Embassy or Consulate or in selected cases, upon arrival at the airport. Types of visa available to travel to Suriname are the tourist visa, business visa, diplomatic visa, transit visa or permissions for long term stay. In November of 2011 the option of a tourist card was introduced to travelers from 9 countries. The tourist card is cheaper than a regular visa, less

documentation is requested from the applicant, and applications via email are accepted. Although it is still mandatory to pick up the tourist card in person, it can be acquired on the same day of application. In march of 2013 the list of nationalities that were permitted to request the ‘less-hassle’ tourist card, were extended to a total of 37.

### **Main areas of development**

Key findings in the Suriname Green Project<sup>1</sup> suggest that by 2020, under ideal conditions, and comparing growth rates to analogous countries, Suriname could have a tourism market that consists of;

- ✓ 543,000 overnight arrivals
- ✓ 1.7 billion SRD in visitor expenditure
- ✓ 54,000 employees

However, growth in tourism arrivals to Suriname has been relatively stagnant for the past few years. Issues of customer awareness, business incentives and insufficient sector coordination have been identified as the main deterrents of growth in the Suriname Green Project Report.

An industry survey conducted in 2010 among Surinamese tourism businesses revealed that the sentiment of the private sector was that the national government does not support tourism businesses and activities adequately. This identified need for more coordination in the tourism sector to be provided by national government, and can be further specified in three important areas in which a government can and should contribute to stimulate/facilitate sustainable growth in emerging destinations;

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<sup>1</sup> The Suriname Green Project (2010) was a cooperative effort between Conservation International, a team of UCLA/Anderson MBA graduate students and the Suriname Tourism Foundation. The aim of the project was to understand how to maximize the sustainable use of Suriname’s natural resources under emerging international economic and developmental opportunities, while protecting the country’s status as the ‘Greenest nation on Earth’.

- a. the establishment and/or facilitation of an effective PPP-mechanism to (self-) regulate the sector, i.e. a tourism board which (with or without government subsidies);
- b. develops some form of a tourism master plan and destination management & marketing strategy; and,
- c. development of effective policies for visitor visa requirements and procedures.

A growing feature of the tourism industry is the extent to which businesses and governments work together either to manage the impacts of tourism or to promote or develop tourism in particular destinations (Holloway, 1998). Sijlbing (2010) writes that Suriname has plentiful prospects regarding sustainable tourism development in relationship with nature protection, stating that several conditions should be created to maximize its performance; Organizational issues related to the cooperation between governmental conservation agencies and the tourism sector, are among the basic ones, while partnership development between community-based organizations, public, and private sector should be fostered energetically. Of equal importance is the treasuring of the indigenous and Maroon communities, of which the last represent unique social, historical, and cultural assets in the Amazon region. The scope of this research note does not allow for elaboration on all of these issues. Further analysis is continued with a focus on discussing development opportunities relating to item c.

In a joint UNWTO/WTTC study<sup>2</sup> case study examples are given in which the impact of facilitating visa policies in G20 tourist destinations is quantified and assessed. This joint UNWTO/WTTC report, identifies five main areas of opportunity for a government to stimulate increasing tourist arrivals, through innovation of its visa policies and procedures:

1. Improve delivery of information,

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<sup>2</sup> The report 'Visa facilitation: Stimulating economic growth and development through tourism' is a joint research carried out by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the World Travel and Tourism Council

2. Facilitate the process to obtain visas,
3. Differentiate treatment to facilitate tourist travel
4. Institute eVisa programs, and
5. Establish regional agreements

Examples of measures taken in various G20-destinations are used to support the argument made in the joint report, that implementing any or a combination of these measures can yield substantial economic returns in terms of visits, tourism receipts and jobs for the G20 economies. Based on the fact that the criteria for identifying these areas of opportunity follow from the global standards and general expectations in the international travel industry of today, rather than host country's differences, it can be stated that the same argument holds true in developing and emerging destinations. Implementing these visa facilitation policies, might even prove to be more easily applicable in emerging destinations, where government policies and laws in the tourism industry are often less stringent than in the more established destinations, providing more flexibility to amend and innovate procedures. The enhanced security measures, new visa regimes, restrictions of cabin baggage and luggage contents in especially G20 destinations, in response to biosecurity hazards such as the Swine Flu pandemic in 2009 and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, might prove much harder to relax at will.

#### *Improve delivery of information*

Clear and up to date communications regarding visa requirements, processes and timelines need to be made available to ensure that potential travelers who need visas are not deterred from the outset. Information applicable to either independent or group travelers should be made available to individuals as well as travel organizers through various media and agents.

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(WTTC) in 2012. It provides an initial attempt to quantify the impact of visa policies through case study examples of tourist destination in G20 countries.



Some destinations have lost out on sales because travel agents either perceived difficulties in obtaining visas for the destination or were unaware of facilitation efforts and therefore preferred to book other destinations. The joint UNWTO/WTTC study reports that Canada found this to be the case for one source market and has made increased efforts to educate the travel trade in that market. Examples in the EU and Australia show that increased information sharing among (and within) governments Visa Information Systems enables the creation of ‘expected movement records’ against which actual movements (check-in, arrival, departure) can be cross-checked to facilitate the arrivals process, reduce airport congestion, improve entry/exit management and reduce visa overstays. Suriname has a system of pre-entry immigration forms, gathering similar information as in the EU and Australian system. The information from the immigration forms is gathered by the STF, but there is no system in place to link, retrieve or match data stored at the STF with the database at the Ministry of Foreign affairs, where the visa-application information is collected and stored.

Websites which provide information on visa and border entry procedures play an important role for travelers. User-friendly, multilingual websites and mobile platforms are now the standard for delivering this valuable information.

#### *Facilitate current processes to obtain visas*

More often than not, required documentation for visas is perceived to be too costly or time consuming. This has a negative effect on the attractiveness of a vacation destination. Mandatory personal interviews can be perceived to require too much time and effort, especially when travel is involved to reach the embassy or consulate. Travelers from Europe have three locations to choose from to apply for a visa to Suriname the Netherlands, Brussels or since 2011, France. On-line submission of applications, pre-screening through centralized

databases, and the use of biometric information are methods that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Suriname is considering to improve the efficiency of visa issuance.

#### *Differentiate treatment to facilitate tourist travel*

Selected nationalities can be allowed to cross a country's borders without obtaining a visa or visa can be issued on arrival, if the visitor is already holding a visa of a trusted region or State. Suriname issues the option of visa on arrival to foreign nationals of Surinamese origin only, although exceptions are made on occasion for group travel or to facilitate official delegations. The issuance of visas on arrival can decrease the costs of obtaining a visa for travelers while allowing for control over who enters the country and for their length of stay. This particular strategy can decrease the costs of governments for traditional visa programs and is currently pursued by Costa Rica, Croatia, Ireland, Mexico and Turkey, among others. Another successfully implemented measure is the visa waiver scheme, often used to allow cruise passengers to disembark the ship without visa, provided they meet certain conditions.

#### *Institute eVisa programmes*

Perhaps the most well-known opportunity, certainly the most cited in the joint UNWTO/WTTC study, to facilitate travel is eVisas. Suriname has not yet fully explored possibilities of implementing procedures with this level of automation and integration. Of the opportunities presented, eVisas come the closest to maintaining, if not exceeding, the functions of paper visas. With eVisas no label or stamp is needed in the passport, is it mandatory to be physically present to obtain them. The US and Australia are examples of countries where eVisa programs have been instituted with great success. Applications can be submitted through travel agents, airlines or directly through a dedicated website of the Australian government.

### *Establish regional agreements*

Regional agreements allow travelers to move freely within signatory countries, after having already entered the borders of another member state. These agreements lower the costs of obtaining visas for multiple destinations and encourage travel across a broader region, thus stimulating long-haul travel. Long-haul travel is often characterized by longer duration of stay and higher total in-country expenditure. Suriname applies a comparable strategy for CARICOM nationalities and Brazil.

### **Recommended further research and concluding remarks**

Visa facilitation forms a central part in government efforts to stimulate economic growth and job creation in tourism. The government of Suriname has already reached the point of acknowledgment that its visa policies and procedures need to be reviewed. The introduction of i.e. the tourist card shows that the process of reform has already started. Government authorities understand that decisions on continued reform are not to be based on mere speculation and must protect against excess and overconsumption. The impact of ‘old’ versus improved procedures needs to be made quantifiable. Developing tourist destinations like Suriname need a thorough understanding of the composition of their target markets in order for government authorities to be able to do their fair share to facilitate growth and sustainability in this sector.

To adhere to the need expressed by tourism providers in Suriname for increased coordination in this sector, the government of Suriname has a number of choices on how to get involved in facilitating growth in its tourism sector. Innovation of visa policies and procedures provides significant opportunities in which the Government of Suriname can influence the flow of visitors to its country. Further research is warranted to determine the

exact impact that current visa policies in Suriname have on arrival numbers. Consideration of future scenarios could provide a basis for deciding which would be the optimal combination of measures (opportunity sets) to stimulate substantial and sustainable sector growth.

Government decisions on visa policies impact visitor decisions on whether or not to visit, length of stay and total accumulated in-country expenditure. Visitor movements and decisions, in turn, can have significant socio-economic spin-off effects that penetrate deeply into various economic sectors. Possibilities for development of certain visa types, which would allow i.e. for more favorable conditions for independent travelers to participate in community service jobs or work exchange programs, also deserve more detailed study.

Developing destinations often experience difficulty in finding (adequately trained) hospitality staff, or specialized staff, locally. Considerations of policies that promote special work visas geared at this specific group of travelers, fall outside the scope of our subject of tourist visas, but are worth mentioning to reinforce a final thought; visa policies can not only be useful tools to make a country more attractive for potential tourists, but are also powerful measures to populate areas in the national labor market, that could not be otherwise catered to through local labor supply.

Hannam and Knox (2010) appropriately point out that we need to pay attention to not just the regulatory frameworks that tourism operates in and with, but also how the structures of tourism (regulation) are often actively resisted. Hall and Coles (2011) advocate that public policy in the area of travel and tourism motilities would benefit from a more nuanced understanding of how rights and regulation play out. Rights and regulation can shape the possibilities for travel and tourism (Hall and Coles, 2008); as importantly, they can also restrict them too (Hall, 2008).

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