NRC0016 - Visit Nepal 2020 - Have we managed to get our priorities straight?

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Synopsis

Understandably, there is a national fixation on undertaking grand infrastructural projects, also reflected in the Joint Statement between Nepal and China released during the Chinese President Xi Jinping’s state visit, in various sectors including those in the tourism sector. Although, basic infrastructure such as street lights, tourist hotlines, decentralized tourist help centres, reliable payment systems, wi-fi access in tourist areas, better safety arrangements for locals and tourists, should not be discounted in making Visit Nepal 2020 (VN2020) a success or a disappointment. Since time of essence to get things right before the year-long campaign commences in less than two months now, this commentary recommends 5 immediate interventions that would improve tourist’s overall experience in Nepal.

The third edition of a year-long tourism campaign

Visit Nepal 2020 (VN2020) is preceded by ‘Visit Nepal 1998 – A World of its Own’ and Nepal Tourism Year 2011. In 2018, 1,173,072 tourists visited Nepal and the daily average spending per tourist was USD 54. VN2020 aims to bring in 2 million tourists and increase the average spending per tourist per day to over USD 75.

Grand plans call for grand implementation too

The two following consideration could come handy to guide implementation. First, making sincere efforts to reduce ambiguity related with national plans among entities within the state apparatus. Sure, there is no well-defined path to neither planning nor implementation and governance is usually based on ballpark assumptions. During President Xi’s visit the entire state apparatus worked together to make it a success, and that it would be unfair to acknowledge these efforts. Similarly, given that numerous institutions-government entities and beyond- would be required to be mobilized for successful implementation, a top-down approach should be expected to do poorly.
A simple exercise for logical planning. Stakeholders that are responsible to plan and implement will benefit with the following simple exercise. They can ask themselves, “what are the basic things I would need while visiting a foreign country?” This question could be asked keeping in mind the journey that starts at the international airport through the entire trip.

**Tourism infrastructure**

What does tourism infrastructure really entail? It includes a “large number of services, necessary to meet the needs of tourists and increase satisfaction during their stay at the destination”. The relation between national infrastructure and tourism development has been clearly established. It is only logical that an improvement in national infrastructure increases the capacity of a country to cater to complex suite of needs that tourists expect to be taken care of.

To further understand what comprises tourism infrastructure, it is useful to refer to the numerous indicators that make up the World Economic Forum’s Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI). The TTCI is a global index that benchmarks the “competitiveness of 140 economies and measures the set of factors and policies that enable the sustainable development of the Travel & Tourism (T&T) sector”. The reason why major stakeholders planning and implementing the VN2020 should refer to the index as it would help them identify specific indicators from a vast range that need to be improved, given that the government has limited attention and resources.

![Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index](image)

**Figure 1- Source (The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019)**

**Policy considerations – 5 immediate interventions for Visit Nepal 2020**

Since time of essence to get things right before the year-long campaign commences, this commentary focuses on 5 immediate interventions aimed at improving the tourist experience in Nepal. These interventions give high benefit-cost value. Meaning, they accrue large benefits when compared to the
costs incurred. While the budget for F.Y. 2019/20 allocates NPR 22.68 billion and the National Tourism Strategy 2016-2025 identifies 11 special strategies to develop the tourism industry; it is crucial to immediately consider these five interventions.

1. **Ensuring a pleasant airport experience:**

   Lately, there have been noticeable progress with facilities at the international as well as domestic terminals at Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu. Although, much is yet to be done given that the traffic at the airport is expected to increase. Apart from ensuring that a tourist’s VN2020 experience start with bitter events right after landing at the airport by unnecessary hassle at the immigration desk, mismanaged carriers, luggage claim mechanism, fraudulent transportation, unavailability of money exchange booths (given that it is rare that Nepali currency can be exchanged anywhere else!). It would also be practical to help tourists better understand what the country can offer by providing them with maps, and crucial directions, beyond the airport authorities have limited control over how things unfold.

2. **Improved security infrastructure for tourists:**

   Safety is a primary concern that travelers consider while determining their travel destinations. These considerations become more salient when families travel together. The least that the campaign can aim at doing is to make our guests feel secure. The concerned state authorities could run television campaigns on how tourists, and thus the tourism industry, help Nepal’s sagging economy and that it is the responsibility of each Nepali to be as hospitable as they can.

3. **Tourist hotlines and assistance centres:**

   Lately, one will find excellent response from traffic police call centres at 103. Similarly, the government should introduce a **24-hour dedicated tourism hotline**. Further, assistance centres can be established in most tourist areas. This information could be announced at the airport itself and advertised all over the international airport areas.

4. **Transportation:**

   Car rental services in Nepal is still very immature, even compared with other South Asian countries. Cab drivers charge utterly arbitrary rates, especially if the customer is a foreigner. It is often said that locals don’t get a fair share of pay for service provided. This may be true, but there needs to be a fair arrangement where neither locals nor tourists feel exploited.

5. **Easier and safe payment mechanisms:**

   The recent ATM related scandals do expose the vulnerability of Nepal’s banking sector. Often foreigners are found to be afraid to use their international payment cards with local vendors. It would be a shame if such a mere inconvenience deters tourists from actually spending. It is the lack of basic facilities that either make or break a tourist’s experiences in a foreign country.

**Conclusion**
Nepal evokes an exotic imagination among global tourists that few countries do. Although, even a handful of mishaps can dampen Nepal’s image as an attractive tourist destination. In tourism, the intangible element of image plays an instrumental role.

Right before the official commencement of VN2020, this is the right time for an earnest evaluation of our capacity to cater to 2 million tourists. Further, it is useful to not just fixate on the VN2020, given that tourism competitiveness is a function of an overall infrastructural development in the long term. If services actually improve for the locals, it will inadvertently improve for the tourists too. Installing street lights, improving tourism security and the other aforementioned factors may look lesser grand for the government but will prove to be equally important in making VN2020 a success. The tagline of VN2020 is “Lifetime Experiences”. Why let minor inconveniences occurring due to lack of basic facilities translate to a lifetime bad experience to a tourist.

Reference

ABOUT NIPORe
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