

THE ACS, ILO AND OAS JOIN FORCES TO ESTABLISH THE REGIONAL NETWORK OF ARTISANS OF THE GREATER CARIBBEAN



The participation and advancement of Small and Medium Enterprises (SME's) in the global economy are incorporated as part of the Development Agenda of International Organisations working in the region. It is recognised that SMEs are a significant element in the business economy, but also suffer from the lack of business skills, and opportunities for training and market access needed to improve and expand their business. Within this group, the Craft or Artisan sector comprises a substantial number, and similarly that these enterprises are both generated by and serviced by tourism business activity.

With the aim of enhancing the entrepreneurial opportunities and other benefits generated by tourism, and in efforts to enhance the connectivity between Tourism and Culture, and also support efforts aimed at the formalisation of the informal sector, the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), the Organisation of American States (OAS) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) have partnered to support the establishment of the Regional Network of Artisans of the Greater Caribbean, also with the recognition of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO). The network has been conceived as a private-public partnership forum which will engage in activities to support capacity-building and business skills enhancement for artisans, through opportunities for training, networking and the exchange of knowledge and best practises to contribute to business and professional development.

The initiative to establish the Regional Network of Artisans of the Greater Caribbean stems from a 2 day Regional workshop and symposium which was organised by the ACS and held on October 23-24, 2014 in Cartagena, Republic of Colombia, in collaboration with the OAS, the Regional Port Society of Cartagena and the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism of Colombia, at which the ILO was also in attendance. This workshop was targeted to women artisans and Entrepreneurs operating in the Tourism sector, and was attended by twenty-one (21) participants, representing a cross-section

of 15 countries across the region.

The workshop entailed an exercise to document the needs and challenges affecting the growth and productivity of artisans and SMEs in the region, which revealed inter-alia, that there was need for more hands-on training in business management and product development, that the artisans faced challenges to obtain financing to grow and/or improve their business; and that they desired more direct access to sales opportunities particularly related to regional and international craft fairs and trade markets. The desire to increase linkages with other artisans from the Region for the trade of goods, for the purchase of raw materials and for joint manufacturing and/or promotion efforts was listed among the top priorities.

Towards this end, the participating artisans committed to forming a Regional Network of Artisans of the Greater Caribbean, and appealed to the ACS and its partners to provide the necessary technical assistance and support for its establishment.

In fulfilment of this mandate, the ACS, OAS and ILO have joined forces to explore the modalities to formalise the Network. As a first step in this regard, the First Meeting of the Regional Network of Artisans of the Greater Caribbean, will be held in Montego Bay, Jamaica, on March 23rd, 2015. This meeting will seek to define the institutional framework for the network and initialise a plan of action, to strengthen the network and support future activities. Participants in this first meeting will be limited to a pilot group of 9 artisans who participated in the workshop in Cartagena with due regard to having geographic representation from each of the sub-regional groupings. Participants will be tasked to support the development and subsequent implementation of the Work plan for the first 2 years of operation of the network, and will also be required to provide input to the institutional framework (norms, composition and structure) for the Network.

Following the Inaugural Meeting of the Network, network participants as well as a pilot group of artisans and SME's from Jamaica will benefit from a 3 day Entrepreneurship Training Workshop, which will provide practical and hands-on training based on the framework and methodology developed by the International Labour Organisation. The workshop will be conducted as part of an ongoing project to deliver training and capacity-building tools to SMEs in Jamaica, geared towards business skills development to support the strengthening and growth of the SME sector and contribute to the formalisation of the informal economy.

The ACS and its partners in this approach, recognise the role of SME's in contributing to the social and economic development of the countries of the Region. The importance of craft, being a direct expression of the local culture of the country/community and created by its people, tells the story of the place, its people, their history, traditions and even folklore. It is an important element of a tourist destination uniqueness and thus key in maintaining authenticity and competitiveness. Through the establishment of this Regional Network, the aim is to strengthen linkages within the Tourism industry and increase opportunities for trade and entrepreneurship as a strategy for job creation and therefore, poverty reduction. Furthermore, these efforts seek to generate market opportunities for cultural products to increase business for local entrepreneurs, particularly women

from indigenous and rural communities who predominate the production chain.

The Network once established will facilitate on-going cooperation and dialogue among the Region's Arts and Craft sector, fostering cross-sectoral collaboration to ensure that artisans, who, while responsible for producing an integral part of a territory's artistic culture, and very often are citizens of meagre financial resources, receive the necessary support in order to improve the productivity and viability of their business enterprises, taking into account the information collected on needs, challenges and recommendations garnered through previous research and analysis.

Julio Orozco is the Director of Sustainable Tourism and Amanda Charles is the Advisor of Sustainable Tourism. Any comments or feedback should be sent to feedback@acs-aec.org