Child Rights Impacts in Travel and Tourism

Beth Verhey

The tourism industry has huge potential to positively impact children’s rights. That the sector accounts for one in every eleven jobs is just one reason why tourism features in three of the new Sustainable Development Goals, the success of which will determine outcomes for children all around the world from now until 2030. To truly achieve the potential of the sector, a concerted effort by companies is needed to understand how children living in tourist destinations are affected – positively and negatively – by their business operations and supply chains.

As set out by the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the Children’s Rights and Business Principles, understanding such impacts involves engagement of human rights expertise and meaningful consultation with potentially affected groups. This means talking to the individuals and groups that represent children and even talking to children directly in some cases.

There have been considerable efforts globally in regards to child sexual exploitation in the context of tourism. However, continued vigilance is needed for mitigation measures by companies, such as staff codes of conduct and training staff, and more attention is needed to child safeguarding measures related to direct staff conduct. Importantly, recognition of a broader range of impacts of the tourism sector on child rights is growing.

Wage Levels

Tourism employs over 100 million people worldwide and as many as 265 million people directly and indirectly. ILO highlights the prevalence of migrants and women in this workforce and that half are age 25 or under. But decent work provisions are a significant challenge and average wages in tourism rarely constitute a living wage, meaning that workers don’t earn enough to cover their own basic needs and that of their families. For children, this often means missing out on medical treatment or nutritious meals and can, in some cases, contribute to children looking for ways to support family income.

Opportunities for young workers

More could also be done to encourage appropriate formal work or training for 15-17 year olds. That depends on businesses receiving a clear list from Government of the tourism-related jobs that 15-17 year olds could do safely.

Working conditions for mothers

Women make up the majority of the tourism workforce yet tend to be concentrated in the lowest paid, lowest status jobs with inadequate maternity protections. Children are particularly affected by rotating schedules and irregular working hours that are common in the sector. A more flexible approach to working hours for young mothers would be one way to address this, and companies could also support the best start in life for children by offering a place to breastfeed and/or express milk. It’s difficult to think of a business better-suited to providing an appropriate room for employees to breastfeed than a hotel.

The provision of child care and after-school activities

Children whose parents work long and irregular hours and cannot access or afford child care may have to look after themselves and/or their siblings, leaving them extremely vulnerable to injury, neglect and abuse. These risks can be heightened for children living in popular tourist destinations that suffer from higher levels of alcohol consumption, prostitution, gambling, drug abuse, noise, and crime. Companies can help create safe environments for the children of their employees by supporting efforts to subsidise the cost of day-care, providing a company crèche to staff or increasing investments in local youth and sports clubs.

The root causes of child labour

According to the International Labour Organisation, there are 13-19 million children working in an occupation tied to tourism – from selling goods on beaches to carrying the luggage of holidaymakers at transportation hubs or working as waiters in local restaurants. Child labour, however, also exists in the sector’s vast and complex supply chains, such as in contracted services and food sourcing. Ensuring decent work for adults, developing tourism activities that improve the livelihoods of local people and working with local authorities to strengthen child protection systems are key actions that can help address the root causes of child labour.

Voluntourism

There are indications of a growing trend of tourism activities featuring visits to local schools and orphanages, or businesses arranging short-term volunteer opportunities. In some cases children are deliberately separated from their families and placed in orphanages so they can be
used to attract fee-paying volunteers and donors. While volunteers are generally well-intentioned they often do not realize they inadvertently cause harm to children. More child sensitive approaches are needed by tourism businesses amidst the growth of tourism in emerging markets, so that community investment efforts support best practice child protection systems.

**Land, Water and the Environment**

As tourists seek new and ‘exotic’ locations, business operations expand, and often involve the acquisition of land for the construction of hotels or tourist attractions. Families and communities affected by land acquisitions in the name of tourism may have their livelihoods and property ownership rights undermined and can face difficult and unfair resettlement processes. Tourism development, including infrastructure growth, increased air traffic to a destination, insufficient sewage systems and the use of chemicals impacts the environment and basic services at the destination, and consequently the health of local families and their children.

As one of the largest and most dynamic sectors in the global economy, tourism has the potential to improve the lives of millions of children. Ensuring the sustainability of the destination, not just the visit, is a sector imperative.

Beth Verhey is Senior Advisor on Child Rights and Business with Unicef.

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