

THE IMPORTANCE OF AMENDMENT OF THE ACCOMMODATION AND CATERING STANDARDS CRITERIA HIGHLIGHTED BY EATP

INTRODUCTION

- Tourism is among the East African Community's (EAC) major economic sectors. It is a major foreign exchange earner for the countries, employing millions of people and accounting for most of the region's global trade.
- Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism sector across East African economies contributed an average of 8.1% to GDP and 17.2% to export earnings and accounted for 7.1% of jobs created. The sector provides 1,278,000 direct and 1,981,000 indirect jobs in the EAC partner states.
- Prior to the pandemic to date, the EAC has advocated for developing high-quality standards for accommodation and catering establishments in the region through the EAC's Standards Criteria for Classification of Hotels, Restaurants and Other Tourist Facilities.
- Created after a series of regional panel meetings in 2001 and conscious of the different stages of development of the EAC Partner States and their respective accommodation and catering facilities, the EAC Standards Criteria provides a wide range of options – from Guidelines for 'Approved' establishments to criteria for attaining five (5) star rating.
- The classification system brings out different aspects of service delivery essential for customer satisfaction. It covers physical and tangible characteristics of accommodation establishments such as location, room sizes, bathroom supplies and frequency of change of linen, as well as non-tangible elements such as style, elegance, comfort, finish and luxury. In addition, the system covers social contact in aspects such as staff grooming and communication skills.

GRADING CRITERIA FOR ACCOMMODATION AND CATERING ESTABLISHMENTS WITHIN THE EAC

- In the current EAC standards criteria, the East African tourism industry has a tool that facilitates the offering of products and services that consistently meet the expectations of tourists in the region. The criteria cover various aspects of establishments that offer various products and services, which sum up the grading and rating standards.
- However, there is a need to review the system to include the latest innovations in the industry, cater to improved hygiene standards that have been developed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and adapt to the latest industry trends innovations. Below are some of the issues that need to be addressed:
- When you look at the approved guidelines for hotels, some categories are not considered for classification. They include boutique hotels, ecotels, heritage hotels, boatels, country hotels and spa hotels.
- In addition, some categories of the establishments in the criteria are classified as one instead of being graded separately. For example, a lobby should be graded

separately from a lounge area as the services offered are different.

- There have been claims by some stakeholders that the classification was being conducted by the government without representatives of private sector operators.
- Some stakeholders cited high fees being charged to be awarded a star grading, and the higher the star, the higher the fees, which could reach up to US\$1,000. Many private sector players in the country find this inhibitive, hindering the use of the criteria with many operators opting to downgrade their facilities in order to pay lower fees.
- While the grading is meant to be done by the governments, business owners in some partner states are able to obtain it from other sources. This leads to a mismatch between the rankings awarded and the quality of some of the tourist facilities.
- There is also the challenge of the low number of hotel assessors, which slows down the exercise. According to the 2017 Sectoral Council Report on Tourism and Wildlife Management, there were only 71 trained assessors translating to an average of 12 assessors per partner state.
- Some items in the criteria have even become obsolete and are no longer required when assessing the standards of an establishment. For example, hotels no longer need to provide a public telephone.
- Since there are now three official languages in the EAC, the classification criteria need to be translated and accessible in Swahili, French and English. The three languages should be weighted equally and assessed independently in the criteria.
- The assessment criteria should be digitized to allow businesses to view their performance/data history and upgraded to current international best practices.
- Lastly, the criteria need to be more innovative and employ modern assessment methods such as mystery clients and online reviews to give establishments satisfying grading results.

PARTING SHOT

- To promote the safe re-opening, uphold quality standards in hospitality establishments in line with the promotion of the EAC as a single travel destination, the EAC must upgrade the grading criteria for accommodation and catering establishments.
- EAC countries must align on their grading systems and fees in the new criteria for assessing accommodation and catering establishments.
- This would mainly include working with the businesses in the sector to develop assessment criteria tailored to spur the growth of their establishments.
- With this fast-tracked at a regional level, the EAC will be able to position itself as a leading tourism and hospitality hub for the continent and the world.

About the EATP:

The East Africa Tourism Platform is the apex private sector body for Tourism in East Africa. The EATP Mission promotes intra and inter-regional tourism through advocacy, marketing, skills development, research and information sharing. The East Africa Tourism Platform was established in 2011 and is supported by Trademark East Africa. The Platform, under the leadership of key tourism leaders in the region, motivates and defines private sector participation in the emerging EAC policies and behaviour. It makes the private sector's voice heard and relevant in the regional integration process, pursuing a

common agenda as a sector.

Since July 2020, The Rwanda Chamber of Tourism has contributed to providing technical and operational support to the EATP, which includes hosting the EATP Secretariat. The Rwanda Chamber of Tourism is the private sector pillar of the Rwanda Private Sector Federation, which is dedicated to promoting and representing the interests of the Rwandan tourism and hospitality business community.

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