

LEAP: Full Support for Tourism Development

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The “Linden Economic Development Programme” (LEAP) is a seven-year project designed to diversify the Region 10 economy after the collapse of the bauxite industry during the late nineties with the ultimate aim to create 1,700 sustainable jobs until the end of its term in 2009. The Government of Guyana and the European Commission jointly undertake this programme and have commissioned this task to TRANSTEC Consulting Ltd. from Brussels as the implementing agency.

LEAP is a multi-faceted development project providing assistance to local business people, to national and international investors, to retrenched miners and jobless citizens, and to key stakeholders and communities in the region. Its intervention methods range from business advice and incubator services, various training programmes for the above mentioned target groups, infrastructure services, small loans through the “Linden Economic Advancement Funds” (LEAF), over inputs in national and international consultancy know-how, agricultural advice, to linkage to other specialised institutions in Guyana, and to institutional strengthening.

Since its inception, LEAP supported the “Region 10 Tourism Development Association” (RTTDA) which acted as a committee of the Linden Chamber. A handful of dedicated people some of whom were not even tourism professionals but students and interested citizens developed ideas about improving the attractiveness of tourism destinations in and around Linden. A brochure about the Waterwheel, Linden’s historic symbol, and preparatory works to establish a museum were the main achievements. However, RTTDA eked out its existence far away from the region’s headlines despite regular meetings and backstage promotional efforts meant to achieve a higher recognition of this sector.

When LEAP conducted a PACA exercise (“Participatory Appraisal of Competitive Advantage”) in June 2005 aiming at the identification of comparative and competitive advantages of various economic sectors in Region 10, the tourism group was among the most active ones. New members joined the group and boosted its capacities. Different tourist destinations were identified (Butooba up the Demarara River, sleepy creeks, sandy beaches, the “Blue Lake” in Wismar, bird watching possibilities on Gluck Island off Rockstone including two small lakes with the *Victoria Regia*, the national flower), a Linden tour guide service was established and boat operators got organised. These developments motivated LEAP to search for intensive back-up by a qualified tourism consultancy over a 10-month period. Mr. Donald Sinclair has been selected, and he is currently collaborating closely with RTTDA and other national stakeholders in the tourism industry (THAG, MINTIC, Tourism Authority).

While following its major objective of employment creation all over Region 10, LEAP identified some tourism development potential on Gluck Island around bird watching activities. Specialised consultants visited the island and confirmed a large variety of local and migrant birds. A four-day assessment is planned in the near future to quantify and qualify these findings. Positive results would encourage us to actively look for tourism investors willing to link with the Rockstone community for the sake of setting up attractive tourist destinations.

The announcement of the Linden Town Week 2006 (instead of a Town Day) coupled with the organisational take-over by the Kashif & Shanghai management and Linden

Fund America's organisational support to ensure the visit of more than 150 Diaspora Lindeners in this event provided the starting whistle for hectic movements in the dormant tourism sector. LEAP saw its task in further enhancing the organisational capacities of the RTTDA and in backing a totally new sector to make a virtue out of necessity: bed & breakfast. Tourism peak events in Linden always showed an alarming shortage of accommodation facilities, so that the provision of B&B facilities is the right answer to this problem. More than 140 households got registered over a period of barely one month; almost 100 have been assessed and categorised (1 to 4 diamonds) to provide an orientation to tourists in terms of quality and comfort that could be expected during their visit.

Assistance was provided to RTTDA to organise meetings with different tourism sub-sectors such as hoteliers, restaurant owners, and taxi operators who are all expected to benefit from increases in tourist visits. Only if tourism operators in Region 10 can get organised in a professionally managed institution, a self-propelled and long-lasting development will take place. The idea of the "Linden Office for Visitors" with the charming abbreviation "LOV" to act as the tourist reception desk within the vicinity of the Museum is a convincing strategy which needs to be backed up by some start-up funds to cover initial costs, an attractive web page with direct booking possibilities for tourists and convincing promotional material informing visitors about tourist destinations in this region.

The planning of an increasing number of tourist events (such as the Rockstone Fish Festival in September 2006, the K&S Football Tournament in December 2006, the set-up of a recreational area around the band stand) will turn Region 10 in general and Linden in particular into a more attractive destination for short-term visitors. The forthcoming "World Cup Cricket" event will add more opportunities to B&B- and hotel accommodation providers to earn a decent income from tourism activities.

The hey-days of Linden as a party town belong to the past but its development into an event town in future will create several income opportunities and may emerge as one backbone of the region's future economy.