

**SPEECH BY DR. KENNETH OMBONGI, PRINCIPAL,
KENYA UTALII COLLEGE AT THE OPENING OF A
ONE-DAY WORKSHOP ORGANISED TO MARK THE
2009 WORLD TOURISM WEEK AT KISUMU ON
FRIDAY 25TH SEPTEMBER, 2009.**

- Stakeholders in the hospitality and tourism industry,
- Resource persons invited for this workshop,
- Members of the UN-WTO World Tourism Week Organising Committee,
- Ladies and gentlemen:

I'm happy to join with you today in this occasion which is part of the many activities lined up to mark this year's world tourism week.

This occasion, ladies and gentlemen, is important in a number of ways. First, it provides the much needed forum to meet the true owners of the tourism industry - investors, managers, and workers in the sector in general.

It is out of such interaction, as we have today, that we are able to share aspirations, views and visions which are pertinent in planning for the development of the industry.

Secondly, such an occasion enables us to see, for ourselves, the potential that abound for the sector in various parts of the country. This first hand experience is extremely rewarding, indeed very vital. From it we can learn how best to re-orient our energies, our goals, to promote investment in the sector. The efforts to promote investment will undoubtedly yield maximum benefits, for us, individuals, corporates and, of course, Government.

Ladies and gentlemen:

Kenya's tourism has been associated for too long by too many with sand and sun in the coastal beaches of Lamu, Malindi and Mombasa. Equally, it has always conjured images of the wildlife in the Mara, the Tsavo, Amboseli, Samburu and the Mount Kenya region.

True, these areas are known for their superb game parks and reserves, diverse fauna and flora, the unmatched avian creatures, or birds. But, Kenya offers more than that. And that more is here; here in Kisumu, Bungoma, Kakamega, Eldoret and Kisii.

I come from this part of Kenya, Nyanza to be particular. I was born here; I was bred and educated here. And therefore I know the tourism potential of this region.

From the undulating densely populated hills of Kisii, the inexhaustible soapstone of Tabaka areas, the fascinating rocky structures of Kakamega, the ancestral homeland of the President of the most powerful and mightiest nation on earth, K'ogelo, the breath-taking expansive Lake Victoria to the natural splendour provided by Mount Elgon and the Nandi Hills make the Western region of Kenya unbeatable, indeed unrivaled, as a tourist destination. All we need now to do is to tap this great potential to enable us make money out of it; let us make money; and a lot of money, indeed.

Ladies and gentlemen:

I'm happy to note that the making of riches out of our tourism potential in this region is becoming a reality. The Government through an array of reforms and deliberate moves to develop and open up the western tourist circuit is already yielding dividends. We are now looking at tourism as a viable economic activity, with the full potential to improve our livelihoods and the livelihoods of our children and their children.

And therefore there is gladness in our hearts that we have witnessed a significant rise in the number of tourists, both local and international, to the region.

But we are, also, well aware that a lot remains to be done to ensure that the sector benefits the communities in this region fully and profitably.

The Government has gone over drive to diversify the country's tourist products with a special focus on cultural tourism. This makes a strong case for the growth of tourism here.

Specifically, Ladies and gentlemen, we encourage that the legendary sites such as the Kit-Mikayi in Kisumu, the Weeping Stone of Kakamega, Lake Simbi Nyaima in Kendu Bay, Got Ramogi, the mythical birth place of the Luo people, the Luanda Magere rock in the Kano Plains, the grave of the legendary chief Nabongo Mumia in Mumias and the birth place of the gallant Nandi Warrior, Orkoyoit Koitalel Kimnyole Samoei, who faced the British with courage, should all be packaged and profitably managed as community based tourism projects.

This region is, also, home to the Kakamega forest. This is the only rain forest in Kenya with more than 380 different plant species; it is home to more than 400 species of butterflies.

The Kakamega forest is just a short distance drive from Africa's second largest fresh water Lake, Victoria, just near here, with its numerous activity-packed islands including the now famous Migingo.

Ladies and gentlemen:

For any ingenuous investor in tourism, the controversy surrounding the Migingo Island is a great business opportunity to harness. The island, in my view, should be marketed as a-must-visit tourist site for local and international guests so that they can see a small rocky piece of land, hardly 1km², pitting two neighbouring countries against each other. This is a development that is newsworthy to attract Western journalists and other adventurers with dollars to spend here.

For sports tourism, this region is the home of football if we remember the good old days of Gor Mahia, A.F.C. Leopards, Rivatex and Shabana FC. This is not to forget the all captivating bull fighting of Western Kenya. Not only that, the region has produced some of the country's finest and fastest athletes, good footballers, the best fighting bulls, name it.

Ladies and gentlemen:

In a word, this region's tourism potential is great; it promises to be greater with:

- The on-going upgrading of Kisumu airport to international standards;
- The election of the Right Hon. Raila Amolo Odinga to the Premier's post;
- The election of Hon. Musalia Mudavadi to the Deputy Premier's post;

- The increasing of Eldoret's reputation as the home of long distances runners;
- And above all, the election of President Barack Hussein Obama of America which has put his father's ancestral village of K'ogelo on the international map and recognition.

Therefore, the time to exploit all these opportunities is now. I beseech you as investors, entrepreneurs, hotel managers, hotel workers, to seize these opportunities and do it now. I'm convinced, beyond reasonable doubt, that if there was a time to make money from the tourism sector in this region, it is now; not next month; not next year!

As the region gears up for more business in tourism, there is need to think of how to develop facilities to take care of this enhanced status as a new tourist hub.

While we are happy about the envisaged good tidings ahead, a cursory survey will reveal that in good times, the region cannot cope with a large number of visitors looking for accommodation, looking for entertainment, looking for leisure.

We need more and international-standards hotel facilities; we need better managed night entertainment establishments, which are to take care of the visitors' night life; yes, we need more sophisticated, modern, boutiques, malls and markets to take care of the visitors' shopping needs.

It would make no business sense, whatsoever, for visitors to come to our region and fly back to either Nairobi or to the Mara because there are no good facilities here.

Moreover, as the Ministry of Tourism's Strategic Plan, and Vision 2030 stipulate, Kenya is gearing towards being a high-end tourist destination. This means that our hospitality and tourism facilities as well as service must be of the highest international standards, that they can be, to attract good earnings from the sector.

As a trainer, Kenya Utalii College would like to underscore the role of training in the development of tourism. A highly-trained, well-informed, warm and courteous service provider is an automatic incentive to any visitor who would want to spend money here.

We have no choice but must disabuse ourselves of the notion that hospitality services can be provided by anyone with or without training. For far too long we have been over shadowed by the erroneous notion that cheap, unskilled, untrained, labour is good for business. It is not; it has never been. I can say that again, it is not and it has never been!

An unskilled and poorly paid service provider is the source of poor service. And a customer poorly treated is a customer lost; a customer lost is money lost!

Kenya Utalii College will continue to work with the national and regional tourism associations to help in uplifting the standards of service not only in this region but in the entire country.

We have vigorously embarked on reviewing our course programmes, particularly the short in-service courses. Early this month we traveled to Kakamega and held fruitful discussions with hoteliers in Western Province explaining to them our mandate, programmes and how they can benefit from the courses we offer as a College.

Now than ever before, ladies and gentlemen, we have resolved that Utalii College has to move out of Nairobi, away from Thika Road, and meet the people it serves, the people who fund it, in their hotels, in their establishments.

You have come to us for too long; it is now us to come to you, understand your challenges and tailor our courses to meet those challenges. Yes, it is important for 'Moses' to go the 'mountain'; but there comes a time when the mountain has to go to 'Moses'. That is the way to go for us in Utalii College – we anticipate the needs of the people we serve, we go to them, discuss those needs and come up with training programmes that suit them and their circumstances.

In our current Strategic Plan, 08-012, we want to open four satellite campuses of Utalii in the major towns in the country. I wish to assure you that one of the schools will be in this region. And I hope with that we will be able to be closer, to serve you better, and to enable you make money. If you make money, as a hotelier, that is good news for us because the 2% levy will come and come quickly to us.

Equally, if you make money, and good money for that matter, it is obviously good news for the investor. It will help you move and move quickly, from survival to stability, from stability to success and from success to significance, to use Zig's words.

And now Ladies and gentlemen it is my pleasure, indeed a great honour, to declare this workshop officially open.

Thank you; thank you very much!