Putting sustainable and resilient tourism at the heart of an inclusive recovery

High-Level Thematic Debate

Wednesday, 4 May 2022, 10:00am – 6:00pm
General Assembly Hall, UN Headquarters, New York

CONCEPT NOTE

Background

Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals: Tourism is a major driver of economic growth and development, providing direct and indirect livelihoods for hundreds of millions of people. Prior to the pandemic, in 2019, tourism contributed directly to 4% of world GDP, representing USD 3.5 trillion.¹ For many developing countries, including Least Developed Countries (LDC), Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and countries in Africa, tourism is a major source of employment, foreign currency earnings and tax revenues. In SIDS, tourism represents over 30% of exports, and in some, reaches as much as 80% of their exports.²

Given the multi-faceted nature of tourism and related consumption, the sector has strong backward linkages and corollary economic impact on many other sectors, making it a powerful engine of economic growth, poverty eradication, reducing inequalities through inclusive job creation, and community and rural development. In many countries, micro, small, medium, enterprises (MSMEs) are a significant component of the sector, where women and young people tend to concentrate.

Tourism is explicitly included in targets under SDGs 8, 12, and 14. However, tourism effectively contributes towards all the SDGs, providing livelihoods and a source of empowerment for local communities, women, youth, and indigenous peoples, and serving as a vehicle for cultural exchange, tolerance, and peace building. Tourism, if well-managed, can help address climate action, protect biodiversity, making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable, promoting human rights.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic: Tourism is one of the sectors most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts have been severe. The toll on national economies, livelihoods, and development prospects has been staggering. The COVID-19 pandemic cut

¹ World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), UNWTO World Tourism Barometer, Volume 20 • Issue 2 • March 2022, UNWTO, Madrid
tourism direct GDP by more than half in 2020, reducing it by USD 2.0 trillion, to 1.8% of world GDP with a cumulative loss for 2020 and 2021 of US$ 3.6 trillion in tourism direct GDP. This represents approximately 70% of the overall decline in world GDP\(^3\) in 2020 as compared to pre-pandemic values. The number of international tourist arrivals declined by 84 per cent between March and December 2020 compared with the previous year, leading to unprecedented direct losses on foreign currency earnings, GDP, and jobs. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimates that up to 120 million direct tourism jobs were at risk in 2020, which, for the worst affected countries, could translate into a rise in the unemployment rate for unskilled workers by up to 17 per cent\(^4\).

Local communities, including indigenous populations, women and young entrepreneurs have been severely impacted. The tourism sector consists of over 80% of micro, small, medium, enterprises (MSMEs), a share that in some countries can reach 98%, employs around 54% of women and a high share of young people. In LDCs and SIDS, informality in the sector is among the highest.

The pandemic has not only highlighted the vulnerability of the sector to the effects of extreme weather, health and economic-related events, but has also underscored the need to simultaneously boost the resilience, sustainability, and inclusion of the tourism sector in response to the triple planetary crisis: climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.

The recovery of the sector globally presents an opportunity to rethink and transform tourism to maximise its contribution to the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement on climate change and other internationally agreed frameworks and agreements. As investments are made to increase resilience of tourism infrastructure and systems to future shocks, it is an opportunity to ensure these are fully aligned with Agenda 2030. Concerted and coordinated efforts by national governments, regional and sub-regional entities, UN agencies, multilateral development banks, the private sector and civil society can help accelerate transformation towards a more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient tourism sector globally.

**Objective**

It is in this context that the President of the General Assembly is convening a High-Level Thematic Debate on the theme “Putting sustainable and resilient tourism at the heart of an inclusive recovery” in close collaboration with UNWTO, UNDP, UNEP, and UNCTAD. The event provides the opportunity for Member States, and other relevant stakeholders to discuss strategies, share best practises and experiences in three high-level thematic roundtables on the following topics.

**Roundtable 1 - For People: Leaving no one behind through inclusive tourism**

Tourism can help advance the empowerment of women, local and indigenous communities, generate opportunities for the youth and engages them in actions for creating more resilient and peaceful societies. In the context of the recovery, Roundtable 1 will discuss ways and means by


\(^4\) Ibid.
which Member States, the private sector and other stakeholders could enhance inclusion and participation in tourism policy and decision-making processes, incorporating gender responsive policies, community empowerment and capacity building opportunities at local level, and supporting growth and sustainability of micro-businesses and local creative industries.

**Roundtable 2 - For Planet: Accelerating a climate friendly transformation**

CO2 emissions from tourism are forecasted to increase by 25% by 2030 from 2016 levels, against the current ambition scenario. Therefore, the need to scale up climate action in tourism remains urgent as emissions could rapidly rebound once operations restart. The pandemic has underscored the need to simultaneously boost the resilience and sustainability of the tourism sector, including tourism infrastructure. It has highlighted the vulnerability of the sector to the effects of extreme weather and health related events and further made evident the need to protect the natural environment. The links between pandemic risk and biodiversity loss highlights the need for an inclusive, transdisciplinary, and cross-sectoral approach. Roundtable 2 will discuss ways and means by which Member States, the private sector and other stakeholders can adopt integrated and socio-economically-sound strategies that can rebuild the sector making it a key driver for a sustainable and climate friendly transformation, generating millions of green jobs while reducing its climate and environmental footprint.

**Roundtable 3 - For Prosperity: Re-invigorating investments in sustainable tourism**

The impact of COVID-19 has reinforced the need to diversify economies and boost investments in circular and low carbon and inclusive business models and policies. The pandemic has resulted in the acceleration of digital transformation, innovation and an uptake in adoption of technology throughout the tourism value chain. At the same time, the recovery process is unequal, with developing countries not having enough fiscal space to fully support the recovery and having already borrowed to support their economies during the pandemic. Roundtable 3 will discuss ways and means by which Member States can unlock innovative financing to promote sustainable investments across the tourism sector.

**Format:**

The High-level Thematic Debate will comprise an opening segment, three high level thematic roundtables and a closing segment.

The three thematic roundtables will consider how tourism can advance recovery for people, planet, and prosperity, including cross-cutting aspects of financing, and digitalization. Governments, other public and private actors will share best practices, case studies and lessons learned based on their experiences over the past two years. Speakers and presenters will include high-level government officials, experts and representatives from the private sector, non-governmental organizations and international financial institutions, among others.

In addition to Member States and Observers of the UN General Assembly, the meeting will be open to the organs and agencies of the United Nations system and relevant stakeholders.

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**Outcome:**

The High-Level Thematic Debate will aim to renew political commitment to support tourism as a driver of a more sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. It will strengthen dialogue among governments, the private sector, local communities and other stakeholders on opportunities for transforming the sector while rebuilding from the effects of the pandemic.

A President’s summary of the deliberations will capture the discussions, key recommendations, best practices, and case studies, and will be widely circulated and made publicly available.

**Provisional Programme**

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<th>Time</th>
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<tr>
<td>10:00 – 10:45</td>
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| 10:45 – 11:40 | INTERACTIVE PANEL  
*Context Setting session including speakers from Member States, UN entities, private sector, and other relevant stakeholders* |
| 11:40 – 1:00  | ROUNDTABLE 1  
*For People: Leaving no one behind through inclusive tourism*  
*Keynote addresses followed by interventions from Member States, UN entities, private sector and other relevant stakeholders* |
| 1:15 – 2:45  | Lunch break                                                                               |
| 3:00 – 4:20  | ROUNDTABLE 2  
*For Planet: Accelerating a climate-friendly transformation*  
*Keynote addresses followed by interventions from Member States, UN entities, private sector and other relevant stakeholders* |
| 4:20 – 5:40  | ROUNDTABLE 3:  
*For Prosperity: Re-invigorating investments in sustainable tourism*  
*Keynote addresses followed by interventions from Member States, UN entities, private sector and other relevant stakeholders* |
| 5:40 – 6:00  | CLOSING SESSION                                                                             |