

# Expert Group Meeting on Sustainable Tourism: Ecotourism, Poverty Reduction and Environmental Protection

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## Conclusions and Recommendations

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The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), held in June 2012, emphasized in its outcome document “The Future We Want” (paras 130-131) that “sustainable tourism, well managed and designed, can make significant contributions to sustainable development”. In addition, the UN General Assembly, at its 67th session (2012-2013), adopted a resolution on the promotion of ecotourism for poverty eradication and environmental protection, which further elaborated on the close linkages and potential for ecotourism to contribute to poverty alleviation and sustainable development. The resolution, which was sponsored by a record 105 delegations, was entitled “Promotion of ecotourism for poverty eradication and environment protection”, and called on UN Member States to adopt policies that promote ecotourism highlighting its “positive impact on income generation, job creation and education, and thus on the fight against poverty and hunger”. It further recognized that “ecotourism creates significant opportunities for the conservation, protection and sustainable use of biodiversity and of natural areas by encouraging local and indigenous communities in host countries and tourists alike to preserve and respect the natural and cultural heritage”.

In this regard, the United Nations Division for Sustainable Development convened the above mentioned ad-hoc Expert Group Meeting which was attended by representatives of the UN system and other relevant international organizations, the public sector, private companies, academic and non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders. The meeting aimed to create capacity for well managed tourism with minimal negative environmental and cultural impacts, through dissemination of good practice, tools and guidelines.

The participants delivered many cutting-edge presentations to highlight the on-going initiatives, best practices, challenges and opportunities that sustainable tourism and specifically ecotourism offers to reduce poverty and to enhance environmental protection. The discussion that followed the presentations revealed valuable viewpoints of the experts on the work in progress. It highlighted possible future priorities whilst providing pragmatic insights to the understanding and interpretation of the concept of sustainable tourism. The detailed proceedings of the EGM have been published on the Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform webpage<sup>1</sup> The following brief summary was prepared by a team of rapporteurs and reviewed by participants with a view to summarize some of the main conclusions and recommendations emanating from the discussions:

- **Strong global engagement for tourism:** Tourism industry is steadily growing in spite of the recent world economic crisis. In 2012, tourism and travel industry contributed to over 9% of the global GDP. However, it was underlined that more efforts are needed from international stakeholders to recognize the growing importance of tourism to the global economy and to step-up the environmental protection and poverty reduction measures through more sustainable forms of tourism, such as ecotourism.
- **Increasing demand for sustainable tourism:** The participants agreed that sustainable tourism has enormous potential and the demand by consumers to visit natural places is increasing. This was evident from the presentations made by government representatives as well as by speakers of the private sector and civil society groups. However, the participants also noted that it remains as a challenge for the industry and destination

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<sup>1</sup> <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=12&nr=481&menu=243&event=472>

authorities to find ways to attract tourists who are willing to change their behaviour and identify those who can pay bit more for a low-carbon sustainable holiday.

- **Ecosystem services and options for enhancing a “greener” economy:** Participants called for more efforts by researchers, governments and destination authorities to assess and to value the ecosystem services and to propose more sustainable approaches to tourism management. The participants suggested various priority areas, including analysing the behavioural patterns, supply chain of tourism and allied industries, life cycle analysis of products and tourism practices, and identifying ways to improve sustainable consumption and production.
- **Local public participation in sustainable tourism development:** Tourism development and investment projects must take into consideration of the local viewpoints, employ locals as much as possible, and be profitable to the local producers and suppliers in order to actually create jobs at the local level. It was advocated that Public (State) – Private – Population (Local community) – Partnerships can provide a useful basis for tourism development projects.
- **Foreign investments in developing and least developed countries:** It was emphasized that a policy framework and business environment that encourages investment is essential, in particular in less and least developed countries, for the flow of foreign direct investment in tourism, as well as for the mobilization of both local investments and remittances.
- **Small Island Developing States:** The participants reflected on the special opportunities and challenges facing the sustainable development of tourism in SIDS. The participants took note of the upcoming Third International Conference on SIDS (1-4 Sept 2014). They presented the risks and impacts of natural disasters, climate change effects and called for the need to mobilise global support in terms of capacity building and financial assistance to projects focussing on the SIDS.
- **Developing countries with emerging economies:** Underlining the importance of sustainable consumption and production, the experts also discussed the growth and potential of outbound and domestic tourism opportunities in the emerging economies including China and India. The UNWTO<sup>2</sup> guidebook ‘Sustainable Tourism for Development’ was highlighted and commended.
- **Need for indicators, user-friendly monitoring and evaluation:** The need to encourage many more destinations to embark on sustainable practices and to provide them with tools to make better tourism policies was emphasised. User-friendly methods for data collection and analysis were presented and discussed. A systematic collection of data is a prerequisite for monitoring relevant indicators and for measuring impacts and progress with regard to sustainable development, including job creation, income generation, poverty reduction and the general well-being of the population. The efforts of the EU and UNWTO in relation to indicator development projects were appreciated.
- **Proposed launching of consultative processes towards a declaration of 2017 as International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development.** The participants formed an *ad-hoc* working group with a view to promote consultations towards a United Nations resolution to declare 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. UNWTO was recommended to prepare the draft and coordinate follow-up initiatives with Member States present and with other stakeholders involved in Sustainable Tourism.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unwto.org/ebook/sustainable-tourism-for-development/>