

# THE PLACE OF TOURISM IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AT NATIONAL LEVEL

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## ABSTRACT

Tourism can play a significant role in achieving the objectives of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN Agenda 2030) and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Tourism has been explicitly mentioned in only three out of the 17 SDGs: SDG 8 (promoting decent work and economic growth), SDG 12 (promoting responsible consumption and production) and SDG 14 (protecting marine resources). However, as the United Nations World Tourism Organization and the United Nations Development Programme underline, tourism has the potential to contribute, directly or indirectly, to all 17 SDGs. In the context of the annual United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, on a voluntary basis the Member States of the United Nations (UN Member States) have carried Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of their progress in the implementation of the UN Agenda 2030 and of its 17 SDGs. The present paper explores the place currently dedicated to tourism in the most recent VNRs, identifying the SDGs that UN Member States most frequently associate to tourism. A review of the most relevant literature on the relation between SDGs and tourism is followed by the analysis of the VNRs which were submitted by 38 UN Member States in 2023, as well as of the VNRs submitted by the same UN Member States in the previous years. The results show a growing relevance of tourism in the implementation of the SDGs at national level; it also emerges that promoting decent work and economic growth as well as responsible consumption and production are considered by the UN Member States as crucial policy areas and actions to boost the development of sustainable tourism in their territory. Further research also looking at the VNRs which will be submitted in the coming years is finally recommended.

*Keywords:* SDGs, sustainable tourism, Agenda 2030.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are at the very heart of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (hereinafter, UN Agenda 2030). They apply to both developing and developed countries and target different but interconnected areas: poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality, clean water and energy, decent work and economic growth, just to mention the first half of the list.

With the adoption of UN Agenda 2030, the Member States of the United Nations (hereinafter, UN Member States) have committed to implement the SDGs at national level; on a voluntary basis, they are reporting on their progress through Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs).

As highlighted among the others by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) [1], tourism can provide a major contribution to the achievement of the SDGs, given that it relates to all the areas that the SDGs are addressing.

By starting from a review of the most recent VNRs, the present paper explores the relevance currently given to tourism in the implementation of the SDGs at national level. Through the identification of the most frequent SDGs associated to tourism, the paper aims to point out the policy areas and actions which UN Member States regard as crucial to boost the development of sustainable tourism in their territory. A review of the most relevant



literature on the relation between SDGs and tourism is followed by the analysis of the VNRs which were submitted by 38 UN Member States in 2023, as well as of the VNRs submitted by the same UN Member States in the previous years. The findings from each VNR are reviewed and compared and some general conclusions are drawn.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

After a brief overview of the process that led to the definition and adoption of the SDGs, the literature review will focus on the content of the SDGs and on the opportunities and challenges that their implementation brings about for the tourism sector. Particular attention will be paid to how the UN Member States have been reporting on the implementation of the SDGs at national level, notably through the VNRs.

### 2.1 The SDGs

The process that led to the definition and adoption of the SDGs started in 2012 at the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development. The conference was organised 20 years after the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, which promoted through Agenda 21 the three pillars – i.e., the social, the economic and the environmental one – of sustainable development. Three years after the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) would have also reached their end, and it was therefore time for the international community to start defining their successors [2].

To be achieved by 2015, the eight MDGs were intended to guide development cooperation and development aid towards eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating diseases like HIV or malaria, ensuring environmental sustainability and establishing a global partnership for development [3]–[5]. Although underscoring that ‘the Millennium Development Goals are a useful tool in focusing achievement of specific development gains as part of a broad development vision and framework for the development activities of the United Nations, for national priority-setting and for mobilisation of stakeholders and resources towards common goals’ [6, V.B.245], the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development underlined the need to strengthen the environmental component in a broader and more global agenda for sustainable development. This approach led to the identification and approval, during the 2015 United Nations Summit on Sustainable Development, of the SDGs. The SDGs are at the hearth of the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and their scope and ambition apply to both developing and developed countries, with connections and implications for all the sectors of the economy [2], [3].

The 17 SDGs and their 169 targets address different but interconnected areas and challenges: ending poverty (SDG 1) and hunger (SDG 2), ensuring healthy lives (SDG 3) quality education (SDG 4) and gender equality (SDG 5), promoting clean water (SDG 6) clean energy (SDG 7) and decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), building resilient infrastructure and promoting a sustainable industrialisation through innovation (SDG 9), reducing inequality (SDG 10), making cities and communities inclusive and sustainable (SDG 11), promoting responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), fighting climate change (SDG 13), protecting marine resources (SDG 14) as well as terrestrial ones (SDG 15), and promoting peace and justice (SDG 16). By working in partnership (SDG 17), governments, the private sector and the civil society from both developed and developed countries are asked to take actions to implement these goals, fully acknowledging their strong interdependence [2], [7], [8].



## 2.2 The SDGs and tourism

The UNWTO and the UNDP highlight that, although being explicitly mentioned in the targets of only three out of the 17 SDGs – i.e., SDG 8, SDG 12 and SDG 14, tourism ‘can and must contribute – directly and indirectly – to the achievement of all 17 SDGs, from generating inclusive growth and eradicating extreme poverty to combatting climate change, from fostering gender equality to conserving marine and terrestrial ecosystems, and from promoting dialogue among diverse cultures to enhancing mutual understanding and peace’. [1, p. 18]. The same UNWTO and UNDP point out the challenges that the tourism sector must face in order to effectively contribute to the implementation of the SDGs and the UN Agenda 2030: among the others, the development of integrated and co-created policies that fully reflect the cross-cutting nature of sustainable tourism and the variety of its stakeholders, the creation of an enabling environment for private sector investments and the launch of innovative financing mechanism that go beyond development cooperation [1].

The academic literature as well underlines that tourism is related and has the potential to contribute to most, if not all, of the SDGs [9]–[14]. Some in-depth studies have also been carried out on the potential contribution, sometimes not fully acknowledged, of tourism to specific SDGs, like SDG 12 on responsible consumption and production [15] or SDG16 on peace and justice [9]. While recognising tourism’ potential in the context of the SDGs, scholars and researchers highlight that, in order to be able to effectively contribute to the ambitious objectives of UN Agenda 2030, the tourism sector has to address a number of challenges. From a more conceptual point of view, there is the need to integrate sustainable tourism within the broader framework of global development and sustainability goals, which also implies the exchange and cross fertilisation of knowledge between the tourism sector and the other sectors of the global economy [11]. In this context, it is key to mobilise and engage tourism and hospitality companies and make sure that their business strategies are aligned with the global priorities outlined in the SDGs [10]. The call for an active involvement of tourism businesses is linked to another challenge, which is an SDG in itself (i.e., SDG 17): the establishment of effective tourism partnerships that in their composition structure and functioning make it possible for institutions, communities, organisations and, more broadly, stakeholders to cooperate and deliver on the SDGs [16]. To assess the impact of these partnerships and, more in general, to ensure that tourism policies and initiatives are indeed sustainable and meet both the needs of stakeholders and the objectives and targets of UN Agenda 2030, an additional challenge for the tourism sector is the identification and development of appropriate indicators and monitoring strategies. In this context as well, it is important to bear in mind that all the 17 SDGs are closely interconnected, which implies that that a siloed approach has to be avoided when drafting reports on the implementation of the SDGs [13], [17].

## 2.3 Reporting on the implementation of the SDGs at national level

Since the adoption of UN Agenda 2030, the United Nations have been emphasising the importance of monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the SDGs at national level. This is why the UN Member States have been encouraged to perform VNRs of the implementation of the SDGs within their borders and to present their progress in this area at the annual meetings of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) held under the auspices of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) [18]–[20]. Countries from different regions of the world have acknowledged the challenge of both incorporating global objectives in their national policy and providing comprehensive



reports on their achievements in this direction; to this purpose, international entities like, among others, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) or the World Bank Group have provided guidelines and tools on how to monitor progress with a focus on the adaptation of global targets to the domestic sphere as well as on systems thinking [17], [21].

Concerning the VNRs, there are two important elements that need to be pointed out. First, as mentioned above, the UN Member States have only been encouraged to perform and submit VNRs, which means that there it is not compulsory for them to carry out and share their reviews, nor is there an obligation to report on an annual basis. Second, there is no binding structure and format for the UN Member States to follow; therefore, there might be significant differences in the content and information provided in each individual VNR, and reviewing and comparing all the VNRs submitted in a given year and across a number of years might prove to be challenging [22]–[24].

Bearing in mind the limitations which have just been illustrated, the VNRs may represent a valid source of information to see how the UN Member States are considering and addressing the different policy areas that are connected with the implementation of the UN Agenda 2030, tourism being one of them.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

VNRs have been reviewed by scholars and researchers with the purpose of examining how UN Member States have been addressing different thematic areas, including tourism, as part of the implementation at national level of the SDGs [1], [17], [18], [22]–[26].

In order to understand the place currently dedicated to tourism in the implementation of the SDGs at domestic level, the present study has reviewed the most recent VNRs submitted by the UN Member States and compared them with the VNRs that the same group of countries had submitted in the previous years.

At the time of carrying out the study, 2023 was the most recent year for which all the VNRs submitted by the UN Member States in that particular year could be downloaded from the dedicated online VNR database available in the HLPF's website [20]. As mentioned above, the submission of VNRs is not compulsory. This explains why in 2023 only the following 38 UN Member States submitted their VNR: Bahrain, Barbados, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brunei Darussalam, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Canada, Central African Republic, Chile, Comoros, Croatia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Fiji, France, Guyana, Iceland, Ireland, Kuwait, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Maldives, Mongolia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Rwanda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Slovakia, Tajikistan, Timor Leste, Turkmenistan, the United Republic of Tanzania, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and Zambia. Apart from Saint Kitts and Nevis, all the other 37 UN Member States from this group had already submitted a previous version of their VNR in the years going from 2016 to 2020, depending on the country. In the case of Chile, two VNRs had been submitted before 2023, the first one in 2017 and the second one in 2019, and both versions have been taken into account in the context of this study. For the sake of completeness, it must be mentioned here that in 2023 the European Union as well submitted its first VNR. Aiming the present study to examine the relevance of tourism in the implementation of the SDGs at national level, it was deliberately decided not to examine the European Union's VNR and to focus exclusively on the reports submitted by the UN Member States.

A two-step analysis was applied to both the VNRs submitted in 2023 and the VNRs submitted before 2023 by the same group of UN Member States. As first step, a search by the keyword 'tourism' – 'tourisme' in those VNRs available only in French and 'turismo' in the VNR available only in Spanish – was performed to examine whether tourism is covered

in each individual VNR downloaded from the HLPF's website [20]. For those VNRs in which the keyword search had led to zero matches, an in-depth analysis of the VNRs was carried out to check whether tourism had still been addressed in the document but in a more indirect way, for instance by mentioning hospitality or leisure. As second step, the VNRs in which tourism had been covered were further reviewed to identify the SDGs which had been most frequently associated to tourism. For the purpose of this study, a link between an individual SDG and tourism was recorded every time tourism was mentioned in the section of a VNR related to a particular SDG, with no need to have tourism-related targets explicitly developed for that particular SDG. For the purpose of facilitating the reporting of results, every time tourism was put in relation to an individual SDG, a *connection* was logged.

#### 4 FINDINGS

The results of the analysis are presented in two separate sections: the first one reports on the inclusion of tourism in the VNRs submitted in 2023 (first batch of VNRs) as well as in those submitted before 2023 (second batch of VNRs); the second one focuses on the SDGs associated to tourism in both batches of VNRs.

##### 4.1 VNRs and tourism

All the 38 VNRs submitted by the UN Member States in 2023 include tourism among the areas covered by the implementation of UN Agenda 2030. All VNRs explicitly mention the word 'tourism', with the exception of France's VNR, where the word 'tourism' – more correctly, 'tourisme', as the document is available only in French – cannot be found; nevertheless, the document still addresses the sector of leisure ('loisirs', in French), which is related to tourism. In addition to covering tourism, the VNRs from the following ten UN Member States also include a generally short section specifically dedicated to tourism, and tourism-related initiatives: Bahrain, Barbados, Brunei Darussalam, Burkina Faso, Croatia, Fiji, Maldives, Saint Kitts and Nevis, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia.

Tourism is also covered by the majority (35 out of 38) of the VNRs submitted before 2023 by the same group of UN Member States (with the exception, as mentioned above, of Saint Kitts and Nevis). As for the three pre-2023 VNRs (i.e., the VNRs from Liechtenstein, Slovakia, Uzbekistan) that did not explicitly address tourism, a check was performed to verify if any related aspect, such as hospitality or leisure, was still considered; the result of the check confirmed that tourism was not covered in any of the three VNRs, except for a very marginal mention of tourism in the context of Slovakia's international development cooperation. As for the VNRs submitted before 2023 that explicitly address tourism, in comparison to 2023, fewer – 7 versus 10 – are the UN Member States that opted to include a short section specifically focusing on tourism in their VNR: Brunei Darussalam, Burkina Faso, Croatia, Iceland, Saudi Arabia, Singapore and the United Republic of Tanzania. As one may observe in the case of the VNRs submitted in 2023 as well, the choice to include a short session dedicated tourism appears to be more common for those UN Member States where tourism ranks among the most important sectors in terms of contribution to national GDP.

##### 4.2 VNRs and tourism-related SDGs

If the VNRs submitted in 2023 are considered all together, the 17 SDGs have been associated to tourism 168 times, with each individual SDG having been put in relation to tourism at least twice. As it was indicated in the methodology session, each time tourism was linked to any of the 17 SDGs, a *connection* was logged. Therefore, 168 connections were logged in the



case of the 38 VNRs submitted in 2023. SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) is the SDG to which tourism is most frequently associated to, with 28 connections (i.e., 16.7% of the total number of connections), followed by SDG 12 (promoting responsible consumption and production) with 19 connections (i.e., 11.3% of the total); SDG 9 (building resilient infrastructure and promoting a sustainable industrialisation through innovation) and SDG 14 (protecting marine resources) are the third-highest ranked ones, each of them being associated to tourism 16 times (i.e., 9.5% of the total number of connections). The SDGs which have been least frequently put in relation to tourism are SDG 2 (ending hunger) with four connections (i.e., 2.4% of the total), SDG 7 (clean energy) with 3 connections (i.e., 1.8% of the total) and SDG 16 (promoting peace and justice) with two connections (i.e., 1.2% of the total).

Differently from what has just been observed in the case of the VNRs submitted in 2023, not all the 17 SDGs are associated to tourism if one considers all the 38 VNRs submitted by the same UN Member States in the years going from 2016 to 2020. Individual SDGs have been linked to tourism 100 times in total, corresponding to a total of 100 connections. SDG 8 ranks first with 23 connections (i.e., 23% of the total number of connections), followed by SDG 12 with 18 connections (i.e., 18% of the total) and SDG 14 with 13 connections (i.e., 13% of the total). At the opposite side of the ranking, SDG 1 (ending poverty) and SDG 3 (ensuring healthy lives) have been linked to tourism only once each (i.e., 1% of the total number of connections), while SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 16 have never been put in relation to tourism.

Looking at the SDGs which have been linked to tourism by the 37 UN Member States that submitted their VNRs both in 2023 and before 2023, it is worth pointing out that for the majority of these UN Member States (20 out of 37, i.e., 54.1%) the number of SDGs associated to tourism in the most recent VNRs has increased, which an average increase of 3.6 percentage points; nine out of 37 UN Member States (i.e., 24.3%) have decreased the number of SDGs linked to tourism in their most recent VNRs by an average 1.4 percentage points; the remaining eight UN Member States (i.e., 21.6%) have associated tourism to the same number of SDGs in both their most recent and least recent VNRs.

## 5 DISCUSSION

The two-step analysis of the VNRs has shown that tourism has been gaining relevance in the implementation of the SDGs at national level. All the most recent VNRs reviewed in the context of this study do cover tourism; this was not the case for the previous batch of VNRs from the same UN Member States, with tourism not being addressed in three of the VNRs submitted before 2023. Another sign of the growing relevance of tourism in the context of the implementation of UN Agenda 2030 is the fact that, if the VNRs submitted in 2023 are considered all together, all the SDGs appear as linked to tourism, with, of course, tourism being more frequently associated to some SDGs (i.e., SDG 8, SDG 12, SDG 9, and SDG 14) than others. As it was highlighted, this was not the case of the VNRs submitted by the same group of UN Member States before 2023, where some SDGs (notably, SDG 5 and SDG 16) had not been associated to tourism.

The results of this two-step analysis appear to confirm what was highlighted in the literature review section. In line with what the UNWTO and the UNDP [1] as well as the tourism literature [9]–[14] have pointed out, tourism has a major role to play in the implementation of the UN Agenda 2030, as it can contribute to most, if not – based on the most recent VNRs – all, of the SDGs. The results also reaffirm the validity in 2023 of the conclusions of two previous studies that analysed the VNRs submitted in 2016 and 2017 [1], [25]: SDG 8 and SDG 12 are the SDGs which are most frequently associated to tourism. This





appears to suggest that promoting decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) as well as responsible consumption and production (SDG 12) are the policy areas and actions which UN Member States regard as most crucial in boosting the development of sustainable tourism in their territory. Other areas and actions like the development of a resilient infrastructure and the promotion, through innovation, of a sustainable industrialisation (SDG 9) as well as the protection of natural resources such as the marine ones (SDG 14) also emerge as very relevant in this context. As the UNWTO and the UNDP strongly highlighted [1], the development of co-created policies integrating inputs and knowledge from all these different areas is one of the challenges that the tourism sector has to face in order to be able to effectively contribute to the implementation of UN Agenda 2030 and its ambitious objectives. To overcome this challenge, as it was pointed out [10], [16], it is important to mobilise and involve all the relevant stakeholders and establish effective partnerships. This seems to be clear to the UN Member States as well: although not being among the SDGs which were most frequently associated to tourism, SDG 17 was put in relation with tourism 11 times in the VNRs submitted in 2023 (i.e., 6.5% of the total number of connections), with an increase of 3.5 percentage points in comparison to the VNRs submitted before 2023, where SDG 17 was linked to tourism three times in total (i.e., 3% of the total number of connections).

## 6 CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that the relevance of tourism in the implementation of the SDGs at national level is growing: tourism has been mentioned in all the most recent VNRs, and some of these VNRs also have a short session specifically dedicated to tourism. The results also confirm that UN Member States perceive tourism as a sector with the potential to contribute to most or even all the SDGs, in line with what both the UNWTO and the UNDP as well as the tourism literature have been highlighting. Furthermore, promoting decent work and economic growth as well responsible consumption and production have emerged as the policy areas and actions which UN Member States regard as most crucial in boosting the development of sustainable tourism.

This study focused on the VNRs submitted in the year going from 2016 to 2023 by a limited number of UN Member States. The possibility for UN Member States to submit their VNRs is always open: at the time of writing, for instance, 37 new VNRs have already been submitted since 1 January 2024 in the dedicated online VNR database available in the HLPF's website [20]. To ensure an effective monitoring of the place of tourism in the implementation of the SDGs at national level, it is therefore important to keep an eye on the VNR database and continue comparing the content of the most and the least recent VNRs. Future studies could also consider a more in-depth and country-specific analysis of the individual VNRs, with the aim, for instance, to identify any potential evolution over time of the priority given by a specific UN Member State to the individual tourism-related SDGs. Further research is also needed to assess the implementation of what is stated in the VNRs: including tourism in their VNRs and identifying the most crucial policy actions to support the sustainable development of tourism does not per se imply that UN Member States are actually taking concrete and effective measures to support the transition towards sustainable tourism at national level.

## DISCLAIMER

All views expressed herein are entirely of the author, do not reflect the position of the European Institutions or bodies and do not, in any way, engage any of them.



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