

Towards Sustainable Tourism in the Maritime and Coastal Regions of Europe

Perspectives on the recovery from the Covid-19 crisis and beyond

07.07.2020

Summary of insights and key reflections

The following reflections constitute the outcome of the online seminar co-organized by the [Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions](#) and the [Travel Foundation](#) in the framework of the [Seas, Rivers, Islands and Coastal Areas Intergroup](#) of the European Parliament that involved more than 200 stakeholders from different EU maritime and coastal regions. They are conceived as a contribution to inform and feed the debates of the EU summit on tourism called by the European Commission for the last trimester of 2020.

Situation analysis: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Global travel and tourism has been abruptly halted by the COVID-19 lockdown and is one of the most impacted economic sectors. Although restrictions are now beginning to ease across Europe, it is unlikely that the situation will return to “normal” anytime soon. Tourism facilities and operators must now apply a number of controls and safety measures, while facing an unprecedented economic crisis with up to 6.4 million jobs at stake across the EU¹.

Tourism in Europe employs around 22.6 million people, accounting for 11% of total EU employment and nearly 10% of EU GDP in 2019². However, for coastal regions and in particular for islands, it accounts for as much as 30-40% of GDP, putting coastal and island communities into an even more vulnerable position. A significant reduction in tourism income means even less resource to deploy for economic survival and recovery strategies. A very real and alarming prospect is that too many businesses - mostly small and family run - will go bankrupt, inhabitants will leave, and recovery will cease to become viable: economies may collapse. Scenarios for recovery in the long term are still uncertain.

A new model for tourism

The current crisis, devastating as it is for coastal regions and islands, is also an opportunity to rebuild tourism differently. The traditional tourism model has been mostly extractive, based on high volumes and low margins and poorly managed growth, leading to significant concerns regarding overcrowding, economic leakage, and seasonality, which have been damaging for the environment and, in some cases, have created conflict with local communities.

The report [Destinations at Risk: the Invisible Burden of Tourism](#) describes the full range of impacts created by tourism (for instance, costs to upgrade infrastructure to meet peak visitor demand), which are not accounted for and are therefore borne by host communities, or are left unpaid, resulting in cultural and environmental degradation.

¹ [Communication on tourism and transport in 2020 and beyond, European Commission \(COM\(2020\)0550\)](#)

² [World Travel & Tourism Council \(WTTTC\)](#), 2020

Recovery can be an opportunity to accelerate the transition to new business and participatory and multilevel governance models that support well-managed growth and prosperity while contributing to the new EU Green Deal outcomes of improved quality of life, healthier places, and a thriving natural world, alongside our international climate obligations.

To support this, policies and practices are needed that provide, at a regional and local level, for:

- Financing and investment to cope with the impact of the pandemic, ensuring employment, survival of the business sector and competitiveness but also tied to sustainability needs and outcomes, to facilitate the shift from high-volume, low-value tourism to other forms of sustainable and cultural tourism that can promote the co-evolution of human activities and natural systems.
- Increased community engagement, better cooperation and a shared agenda for destinations supported across all relevant departments, agencies, and private organisations.
- Smarter data focused on holistic accounting of tourism's costs, benefits and impacts.
- Skills development, both to manage tomorrow's destinations, and to ensure communities benefit from new opportunities provided by tourism.
- Strengthening of diverse local and regional supply chains.

A connected response from international to local level

The new model should put host communities and thus the regional and local authorities at the heart of travel and tourism planning and decision-making. Territorial communities, including all stakeholders, are in urgent need of support and are best placed to advocate for their needs and concerns. We can draw upon the authenticity, genuineness and creativity of our communities to find innovative solutions to the diverse challenges they face.

As a cohesive policy and package of support is developed at EU level through to national level, it is critical that the focus is on support and delivery at the regional and local level, in order to address those concrete needs, and to realise the added value and opportunities this can bring. Funds must reach the territorial level without delay, particularly in areas that are dependent on the visitor economy and are most at need. Short-term financing is needed to avoid job losses and bankruptcies. Regions need to be directly involved in decision making processes and the management of funds.

Investing in a smarter recovery

Financing mechanisms are needed to enable the transition to new tourism models which respect our environment and communities.

EU financial support can reflect the importance of promoting sustainable tourism, with investments that incentivise and deliver Green Deal outcomes, for instance by supporting the development of green infrastructure, digitalisation, and a diverse portfolio of high-quality tourism products and experiences that are resource-efficient and encourage more evenly spread visitation (for example, at low season or to less crowded places and attractions).

The EU recovery plan can be a concrete response to the current crisis but there is a need for complementary short term measures for the immediate survival and competitiveness of businesses,

especially in the most affected and fragile areas during the 2020 summer season, while protecting travellers' and workers' health and restoring the trust of tourists, operators and hosting communities.

With a longer-term vision, the European Parliament called for a dedicated budget line for sustainable tourism in the 2021-2027 EU budget³. This could be considered part of a "Marshall Plan" for tourism, combined with other innovative finance mechanisms that blend public and private investment for social and environmental (as well as financial) returns. The EU can provide proportionate funding opportunities to finance a long-term strategy for recovery of tourism-dependent economies that puts competitiveness, resilience, and sustainability at its core. Key existing investment policies at EU level, such as Cohesion Policy, can keep supporting regional economies strongly dependent on the tourism and cultural sectors in their recovery.

Towards a new European strategy?

The recent [European Parliament resolution on transport and tourism in 2020 and beyond \(2020/2649\(RSP\)\)](#) supports the development of a 2050 roadmap towards a sustainable, innovative and resilient European tourism ecosystem ('European Agenda for Tourism 2050').

The European Commission's proposal to organise a European tourism summit to advance this, and Tourism [Commissioner Breton's call for a Marshall Plan](#) to support the transition to a green, digital and resilient economy, is most welcome. With the right model in place, with the right funding and resources, and a new vision for tourism, it will be possible to build a better future.

In connection with this vision, the recently formed Future of Tourism Coalition, together with a network of hundreds of supporting organisations within the tourism sector, is promoting [13 guiding principles for the future of tourism](#) which any new European strategy can adopt and align to.

³ [European Parliament resolution on transport and tourism in 2020 and beyond \(2020/2649\(RSP\)\)](#)