

Agenda item 2
Communication of the Chair

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Message of the Chair of the 118th Executive Council
His Excellency Ahmed Al Khateeb, Minister of Tourism, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

H.E. Mr. Zurab Pololikashvili, UNWTO Secretary-General,
H.E. Siandou Fofana, First Vice-Chair of the UNWTO Executive Council, Chair of the UNWTO Commission for Africa, Minister of Tourism and Leisure of Côte d'Ivoire,
H.E. Louis Steven Obeegadoo, Second Vice-Chair of the UNWTO Executive Council, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Housing and Land Use Planning and Minister of Tourism of Mauritius,

Distinguished Members of the Executive Council, Fellow Colleagues, Ambassadors, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to begin by expressing my utmost appreciation to His Excellency the President of the Dominican Republic, Luis Abinader, and His Excellency the Minister of Tourism, David Collado, for making this important meeting possible in Punta Cana. Thank you for your warm and exceptional welcome.

I would also like to express my sincere thanks to His Excellency the UNWTO Secretary-General, the UNWTO Secretariat, and the Vice-Chairs of the Executive Council, with whom we have collaborated to ensure the success of this session.

Additionally, I would like to take a moment to express my deep gratitude for the support provided by the UNWTO to make the Best Tourism Villages 2022 Awards Ceremony, hosted in AIUla last March, a great success. This prestigious ceremony has greatly contributed to the global recognition of the UNWTO as a credible international tourism organization. This achievement would not have been possible without the unwavering support of the Secretary-General and UNWTO Secretariat. The Best Tourism Villages Awards now stands as a testament to the potential of this initiative to drive sustainable tourism development and celebrate the commendable efforts of communities across the globe.

I am deeply grateful for the extraordinary opportunity you have bestowed upon me as Chair of the Executive Council for 2023. As I embark on this role, my primary objective is to serve and represent the needs of all Member States inclusively. I pledge to ensure that your voices are heard, your concerns are addressed, and your interests are advocated for in the most beneficial way possible.

Today, I would like to touch upon several key points that are crucial for the progress and growth of the tourism sector. Firstly, I will discuss the current state of the sector and the vital role that UNWTO plays in driving it forward. Secondly, I will outline the proposed guiding principles and roadmap for this year's Executive Council chairmanship, and tentatively for the future, to promote multilateral engagement, collaboration, and coordination among Member States. This approach will be essential for advancing UNWTO's mandate globally, fostering a culture of sharing best practices and enabling collective action to address common challenges and achieve common goals. Thirdly, I will provide key updates on past Executive Council agenda items to ensure continuity on ongoing efforts. Finally, I will discuss the way forward and outline how we can better advance the mandate of the UNWTO.

I. Current State of the Tourism Sector and UNWTO's Role in Driving the Sector Forward

First and foremost, I would like to reiterate the importance of the tourism sector and UNWTO's role in driving the sector forward. Prior to the pandemic, the tourism sector's direct output alone accounted for about 4.1% of global GDP. However, the sector faces several risks, such as natural disasters, pandemics, political instability, climate change, over-tourism, and economic downturns. These issues require constant alignment, adaptation and resilience from stakeholders across the sector.

Thankfully, the tourism sector is experiencing a fast post-pandemic rebound. Based on UNWTO's forward-looking scenarios for 2023, it is predicted that international arrivals could reach 80% to 95% of pre-pandemic levels.

Today, more than ever, the tourism sector is evolving, and innovative topics related to technology and digitalization are emerging. These advancements have the potential to transform the sector and enhance the overall visitor experience, such as virtual reality's ability to showcase destinations and attractions in new and immersive ways, and blockchain technology's capacity to improve transparency and security in booking and payment processes. As the UNWTO, it is imperative that we remain up to date with these emerging trends and provide guidance to Member States. It is also a critical moment to shape our collective vision for the future of tourism by embracing innovative ideas to ensure a sustainable, resilient, and inclusive tourism sector that benefits all stakeholders. By proactively identifying emerging tourism topics, we can better understand and anticipate the needs of travelers and stay ahead of the curve.

In fact, the UNWTO is in an excellent position to steer the sector's recovery and stay abreast of these emerging trends. The UNWTO has developed strategic and programmatic priorities to enable a proactive response, and seeks to fulfill its mandate by focusing on five programmatic priorities:

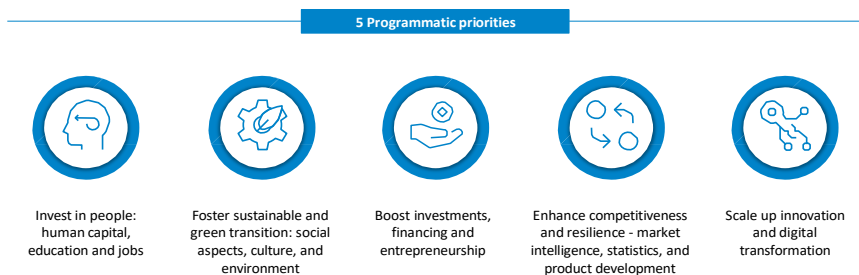


Figure 1. Programmatic Priorities of UNWTO

We are here today not only to build on UNWTO's significant efforts and priorities, but also to continue pushing the boundaries of tourism sector development. The resurgence of the tourism sector, despite previous setbacks and volatility, is an excellent opportunity for all Member States to actively shape our collective vision for the UNWTO.

Hence, as Chair of the 2023 Executive Council, I am here to serve the UNWTO, and Member States' priorities based on the following guiding principles:



Figure 2. *Chair's Guiding Principles*

II. Overview of the Roadmap for the 2023 Executive Council Chair

I am honored to have collaborated closely with the UNWTO Secretary-General, the Secretariat, and beyond, to develop a comprehensive roadmap for the 2023 Executive Council Chairmanship. This strategic analysis will act as a compass to ensure that current and future Executive Council sessions are focused on meeting the needs and priorities of Member States and the organization.

Conducting Online Preparatory Information Sessions that provide all stakeholders with the opportunity to voice their opinions and ideas is one of the fundamental components of our proposed roadmap. This approach ensures that our decision-making process reflects the diverse needs and priorities of all Member States. By holding these sessions before the Executive Council meetings, we can allow sufficient negotiation and discussion time to reach consensus on the most pressing issues. Ultimately, this approach fosters a more inclusive, collaborative decision-making process, leading to more effective outcomes for the UNWTO and its Members.

I would like to express sincere gratitude to Member States for their full attendance and success during the online preparatory sessions held on May 10 and 11. The overwhelming participation showcased unwavering commitment, enriched discussions, and ensured a comprehensive and inclusive approach.

III. Updates on Past Executive Council Sessions

In reference to previous Executive Council sessions, I would like to review four topics of importance: the Redesigning Tourism for the Future Task Force, the Regional and Thematic Offices, World Tourism Day, and the Affiliate Members.

Redesigning Tourism for the Future Task Force

The establishment of the "Redesigning Tourism for the Future" Task Force was officially approved during the 24th General Assembly of the UNWTO. Subsequently, on March 1st, 2023, the UNWTO distributed the Draft Decision and proposed Rules of Procedure for the Task Force to the Member States of the Executive Council. The Office of the Legal Counsel, through an independent report, reaffirmed the Task Force's compliance with the UNWTO rules and legal framework.

Taking on the role of Chair of the Executive Council, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has diligently engaged with all Member States to build consensus on the Task Force's Rules of Procedure, demonstrating their commitment to an inclusive and collaborative approach. The valuable engagement, input, and feedback received from Member States have been instrumental in shaping the inclusive Rules of Procedure, ensuring the Task Force is well-equipped to tackle the challenges of the future.

Across two Online Preparatory Sessions on May 10th and 11th, held prior to the Executive Council, and inviting all members of the Executive Council, Member States engaged in fruitful discussions and helped strengthen consensus on the Rules of Procedure for the "Redesigning Tourism for the Future" Task Force. These Preparatory Sessions were attended by 34 Member States from the six UNWTO Regional Commissions, as well as the UNWTO Secretariat, with a total representation of over 85 participants. The points below represent highlights from those discussions:

1. **Types of Chairs (Officers) of the Task Force:** Discussed having either two Co-Chairs or one Chair and one Vice-Chair. Although there are benchmarks across the UN system establishing Co-Chairs as a UN practice, it was discussed that the default approach in UNWTO subsidiary bodies is to have one Chair and one or more Vice-Chairs. This discussion was welcome, and we are confident we will find rapid consensus at the Executive Council session.
2. **Access to internal documents:** Recognizing the importance balancing transparency and adherence to the Legal Office's advice, the Task Force rules have been revised such that access to internal documents of UNWTO will be subject to UNWTO's Public Information Disclosure policy, which is added as an annex to the Task Force Rules of Procedure. UNWTO has clarified that this rule will not prevent the Task Force from requesting UNWTO reports or information that will allow it to function effectively and make value-adding recommendations.

- 3. Funding and voluntary contributions:** UNWTO and some of the Member States made clear that to best serve its mandate, the Task Force would likely incur some costs, not only related to holding meetings, but also related to involving experts to conduct analyses and produce recommendations about the long-term strategic direction for UNWTO and the tourism sector. Hence, Member States who are interested to become members of the Task Force are encouraged to consider making financial contributions, which can be earmarked for the Task Force as per the standard Financial Regulations and Rules of UNWTO. We consider this a sign of shared commitment and investment in the future of tourism. UNWTO also explained that since 2017, financial contributions made to UNWTO count as official development assistance (i.e., foreign aid), which is publicly tracked and ranked by the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC). Hence, by contributing to UNWTO, countries also progress toward their annual development aid targets set by their ministries of foreign affairs and finance. It was suggested that Member States' ministries of tourism consult with their ministries of foreign affairs to align on this benefit. As the Chair, I strongly encourage all Member States to consider making voluntary contributions to support the growth and development of this organization. These contributions are a sign of shared commitment and investment in the future of tourism.

The journey to establish the Task Force commenced two years ago and involved extensive consultations with various stakeholders. Now, as the Task Force draws closer to commencing its vital work, the next step is to finalize the Rules of Procedure and let the Task Force get to work. We look forward to seeing the Task Force facilitate essential discussions on redesigning tourism for the future by addressing key challenges and capitalizing on opportunities.

Regional and Thematic Offices

At the 117th Executive Council meeting in Marrakesh, we delved into the scope of Regional and Thematic Offices, addressing key concerns such as financial and budgeting mechanisms, structure, governance, privileges, and immunities, as well as the criteria for selecting and establishing these offices. A critical point raised was the need to distinguish between regional and thematic offices in terms of their responsibilities, operations, governance, and geographical reach.

Recognizing the importance of extensive consultative efforts amongst Member States, we advocate for the creation of an expert-level technical working group, under the auspices of the Executive Council if deemed appropriate, to facilitate discussions and align on draft decisions for Regional and Thematic Offices. In fact, during the online preparatory sessions held on May 10th and 11th, the topic of special working groups was discussed, and it is important to note that these groups were endorsed by the majority of States. This approach will reinforce the Secretariat's efforts in creating and maintaining efficient and sustainable offices.

The Regional Office in Riyadh, established through a cooperative agreement between the UNWTO and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, has made significant headway in human resource deployment and capacity building. With a team of 21 personnel members, including staff, service contract holders, and domain experts, the office has successfully executed various activities aligned with the UNWTO's policies and vision. Moreover, the Regional Office has actively participated in talent development initiatives, focusing on nurturing young graduates, and fostering professional growth. To further enhance the office's capacity to address the growing regional demands and

challenges, Member States are encouraged to contribute additional human resources and expertise through Official on Loan and Junior Professional Officer mechanisms.

The Regional Office in Riyadh, with its achievements in advancing sustainable tourism and cultural exchange in the Middle East, serves as a potential benchmark for future offices. Therefore, I urge Member States to collaborate and share their insights to maximize the benefits of the Riyadh Regional Office, as well as future offices that will be established.

World Tourism Day

I would like to underscore the significance of elevating World Tourism Day by providing it with greater visibility and exposure as a celebrated annual global event. I urge all UNWTO Member States to actively promote and participate in this momentous occasion, recognizing the vital role that tourism plays in fostering economic growth, mutual understanding, and sustainable development.

Affiliate Members

As you are aware, Affiliate Members of the UNWTO are companies, educational and research institutions, destinations, and NGOs. The network of Affiliate Members provides a platform for these tourism companies and institutions to connect with each other and collaborate on the sector's development.

The UNWTO Affiliate Members have the potential to be a formidable force in the travel and tourism sector, given there are more than 450 Affiliate Members. The power of the private sector, in partnership with the public sector, cannot be overstated. As such, we should strive to continue elevating the role of Affiliate Members.

IV. Way Forward

Esteemed representatives,

As we embark on this exciting journey toward shaping the future of the UNWTO, it is crucial to acknowledge the importance of voluntary contributions by Member States. These contributions play an indispensable role in enabling the UNWTO to effectively respond to the needs of its Member States and implement its programs and activities. These contributions also demonstrate our collective commitment to promoting sustainable and responsible tourism.

As esteemed members of the UNWTO Executive Council, we urge each and every one of us to contemplate augmenting our voluntary contributions to the organization. Every contribution, regardless of its size, can make a significant difference in the UNWTO's positive impact, while also counting toward countries' official development assistance and foreign aid targets tracked by OECD. As we continue our deliberations, let us also focus on developing a comprehensive and sustainable long-term plan and strategy for the next ten years. The Program and Budget Committee plays a crucial role in providing recommendations on the program of work and financial management of the UNWTO. Therefore, it is imperative that we, as member states, work together to further elevate its potential by providing strategic guidance on the future direction, priorities, and initiatives of the organization.

Furthermore, to ensure a smooth and efficient Executive Council session, it is essential that all member states debate draft decisions prior to the meeting. We commend the success of the online preparatory information sessions held on May 10th and 11th, where collaborative and productive debates took place, leading to stronger consensus on the decisions before us. The contributions made by member states in these sessions are invaluable in shaping the future of the UNWTO in an inclusive and sustainable manner.

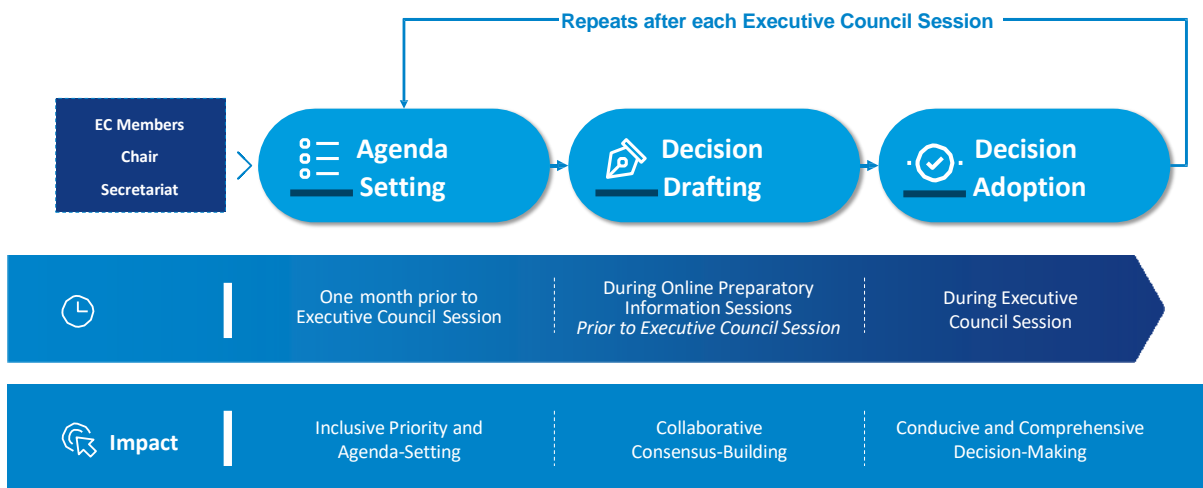


Figure 3. Proposed Three-Step Process for Effective Decision-Making and Collaborative Consensus Building for the Executive Council of the UNWTO

Moving forward, we propose a three-step process to enhance collaborative consensus-building and effective decision-making. Firstly, we suggest inclusively setting the agenda by encouraging member states to contribute their ideas. Secondly, we recommend holding online preparatory sessions for debating amendments and forging consensus. Finally, we propose reviewing, holding final deliberations on, and adopting the draft decisions during the Executive Council meeting.

I encourage all member states to actively participate in this process, utilizing platforms such as the online preparatory information sessions, to maximize collaboration, ideation, and value-add for member states. Together, we can identify innovative solutions and build a brighter future for the tourism sector.

In closing, I express my heartfelt gratitude to each one of you for your commitment to the 118th Executive Council and the UNWTO. Your contributions and support are vital to our success, and I look forward to continuing our work together toward advancing the mandate of the UNWTO.

Thank you, and I eagerly anticipate a productive session in which we collectively adopt decisions that will further enhance the impact and relevance of our organization.