



UN Tourism

The Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism

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<https://www.unwto.org/tourism-statistics/measuring-sustainability-tourism>



Background

Tourism has the potential to propel socio-economic development, foster cultural exchange, and contribute to peace building while motivating environmental protection and sustain the basis for future prosperity and well-being. In 2019, tourism constituted approximately 4% of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), a figure comparable to that of agriculture.

Tourism stakeholders have been concerned with the sustainability of the sector for decades. A polluted beach or a congested city center are hardly competitive destinations, and so it is clearly in the interest of the sector itself to sustain the basis for its prosperity.

These concerns have been exacerbated in the face of global challenges including the recovery from the pandemic, the climate emergency, and geopolitical conflicts. In tourism and beyond, there is increasing awareness of the ability of tourism to advance – or even deter – progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon. It relies on and has an impact on the economy, the natural and built environment, the local population at places visited and on visitors themselves. Owing to this range of impacts and the wide spectrum of stakeholders involved, there is a need for a holistic approach to tourism measurement. However, the existing international statistical standards for measuring tourism: the [International Recommendations for Tourism Statistics and the Tourism Satellite Account: Recommended Methodological Framework](#) are largely focused on the economic dimension.

There is a need to expand the scope of tourism statistics into the social and environmental dimensions, while also rethinking the economic measurement of tourism through the lens of sustainability.

Against this backdrop, the World Tourism Organization Committee on Statistics launched in 2016, a program of work on Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism (MST) that integrates economic, environmental and social measurement and across relevant spatial levels (global, national and subnational). In partnership with leading countries, the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and others, MST became a co-design and consensus building process for more meaningful, comparable metrics on a key sector.

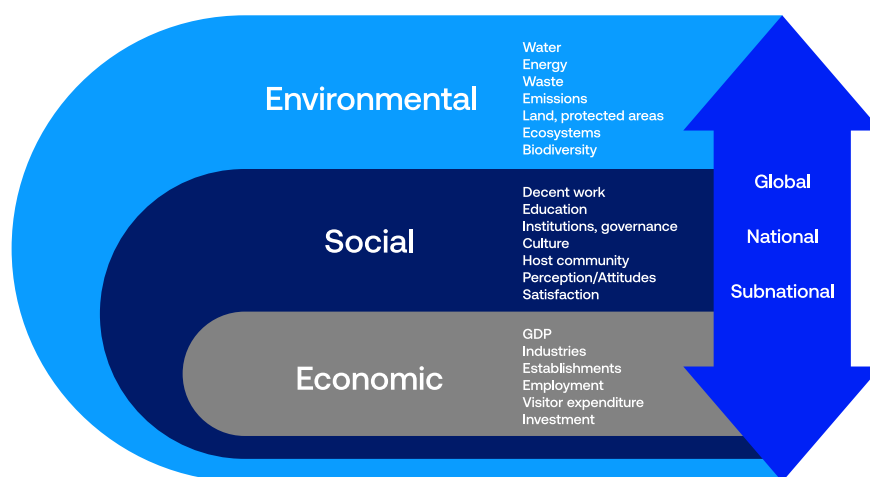
MST includes five inter-related lines of work:

- **Developing the Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism (SF-MST);**
- **Engagement and consensus-building among key stakeholders and disciplines with the view to present SF-MST to the UN Statistical Commission for its endorsement;**
- **Supporting the piloting and implementation of SF-MST in countries;**
- **Developing a set of indicators derived from SF-MST for international comparability purposes;**
- **Setting up a global dataset and country data reporting processes.**

The Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism (SF-MST)

SF-MST provides an integrated framework to describe the main concepts, definitions and data organization structures to guide the production of data on the economic, social and environmental sustainability of tourism at the global, national and subnational levels.

The development of the statistical framework builds on and is coherent with other well-established statistical frameworks such as the [International Recommendations on Tourism Statistics, the Tourism Satellite Account: Recommended Methodological Framework, the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting, the System of National Accounts](#) and ILO statistical manuals.



“The World Tourism Organization’s Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism will offer us more data and a better insight into challenges we are trying to solve”

Mr. Csaba Körösi

(President of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly)

“Measuring the sustainability of tourism is fundamental to improve policy action for sustainable development, and will promote one common statistical language which can be compared across countries and different economic sectors, and make tourism’s voice heard when addressing key decisions.”

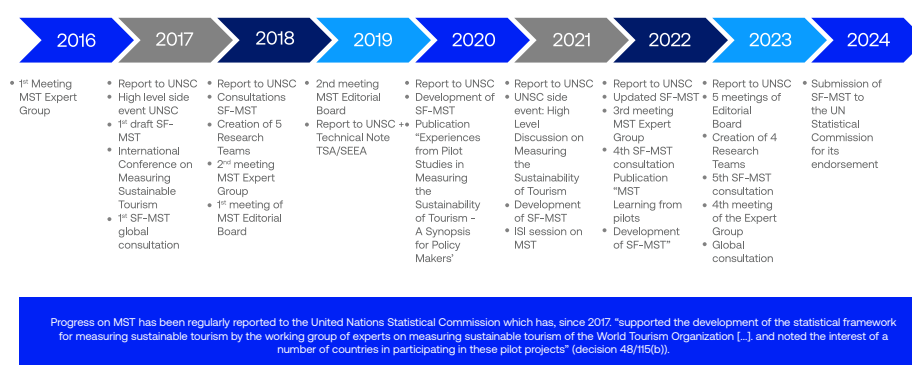
Mr. Zurab Pololikashvili

(World Tourism Organization Secretary-General)

Process

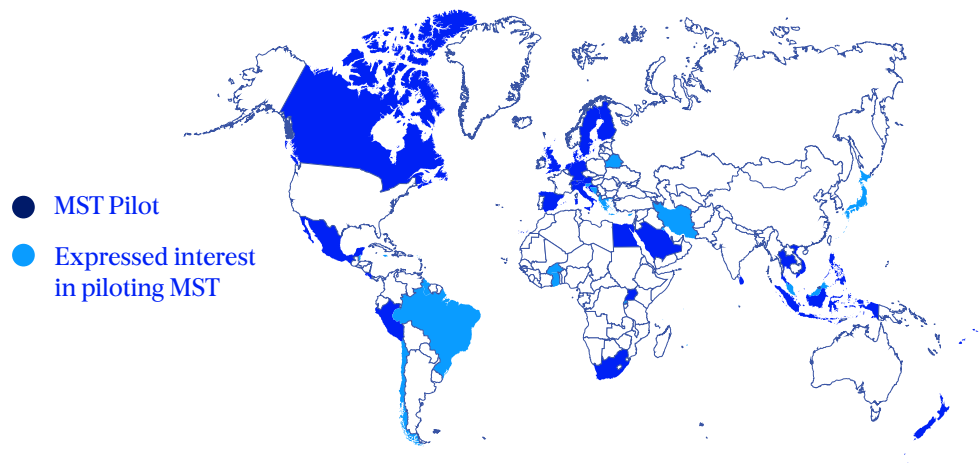
As a program of work, Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism follows the established UN process for the development of statistical frameworks and their implementation. With respect to the development of Statistical Framework for MST, a multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder Expert Group was tasked with leading its development. The group, set up under the auspices of the World Tourism Organization Committee on Statistics and in close coordination with the Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting (UNCEEA), is chaired by Austria. The Expert Group is composed of representatives of national statistical offices and ministries in charge of tourism in 40+ countries covering all world regions, as well as representatives of 30+ international and regional organizations, subnational authorities, academic institutions and the private sector.

The development of SF-MST benefited from wide engagement and a transparent, consultative and consensus-building process. With the support of an Editorial Board and several research teams, the Expert Group took into account the experiences of numerous pilots and comments from various rounds of consultation.



Pilots

An essential strategy for advancing the development of SF-MST has been through pilots in various countries. Pilots contributed real-world lessons that tested the conceptual direction presented in the framework from the perspectives of both policy relevance and technical feasibility. Over the past years, 29 pilots have been carried out.



Pilots have been implemented in a stepwise and modular approach, whereby different pilots focused on implementing different parts of the MST framework and at different territorial scales, in line with priorities and circumstances.

All in all, these experiences show that it is possible to measure in a comparable way the full breadth of elements that comprise the sustainability of tourism within a single integrated framework.

The outcomes of some of these pilots have been summarized into two publications: *Experiences from Pilot Studies in Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism – A Synopsis for Policy Makers* and *Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism – Lessons from Pilots*.

The MST process at a glance



Recognition in Policy

The Statistical Framework for MST has been recognized in national, regional and international strategic policy frameworks across the globe, including the European Parliament, the Pacific Tourism Organization and the G20.

Moreover, it was unanimously adopted by the World Tourism Organization General Assembly in October 2023 in a historical consensus among the tourism policy community and with the view to its presentation to the statistical community at the 55th session of the United Nations Statistical Commission for its endorsement.