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Background document
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Items for discussion and decision: Environmental-economic accounting

Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism (MST): Current state of play

Prepared by the World Tourism Organization

I. Introduction

Tourism a social, cultural and economic phenomenon that relies on and has an impact on the economy, the natural and built environment, the local population at the 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 development, management and monitoring. This approach is supported by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in order to formulate and implement national and local tourism policies¹.

Tourism stakeholders are concerned with the sustainability of the sector itself, especially in the face of challenges like climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. Increasingly, in tourism and beyond, stakeholders are also concerned with how tourism may support or deter efforts towards sustainable development more broadly. Indeed, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have three Goals (Goal 8, 12 and 14) that explicitly mention sustainable tourism (under targets 8.9, 12.b and 14.7).

The need for statistical data to monitor the sustainability of tourism is clear. However, the scope of existing international statistical standards for measuring tourism is largely economic. Hence, in 2016 countries and other stakeholders called upon the UNWTO Committee on Statistics to initiate a programme towards Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism (MST). MST was launched with the strong support from countries and from international organizations like the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) and International Labour Organization (ILO), acknowledging the long-term goal to propose international statistical standards and SDG indicators.

Through the Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting (UNCEEAA), progress on MST has been conveyed regularly to the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC). This included a [background paper prepared for UNSC's 52nd session in March 2021](#). That paper gave a broad overview of the MST project since its inception covering issues of:

- governance, including the role of the UNWTO Committee on Statistics and the Working Group of Experts on MST;
- preparation and consultation processes concerning the Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism (SF-MST), including the [provisional table of contents for SF-MST](#);
- high level acknowledgement of MST, in particular the 2017 [Manila Call for Action on Measuring Sustainable Tourism](#) adopted at an international conference convening over 1,000 ministers, chief statisticians and representatives from international organizations (ILO, UN, OECD, Eurostat), private sector, civil society and other stakeholders;
- activities on piloting and implementing MST, some of which were compiled into the 2020 publication [Experiences from Pilot Studies in Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism: A synopsis for Policy Makers](#);
- the development of tourism sustainability indicators particularly in relation to reporting on the SDGs; and
- plans for future work, including the finalisation of the SF-MST.

¹ United Nations and World Tourism Organization, *International Recommendations for Tourism Statistics 2008* (IRTS 2008), (New York, Madrid, 2008): https://unstats.un.org/unsd/publication/seriesm/seriesm_83rev1e.pdf

Subsequently, the 52nd Session of the UNSC took the following [decisions](#) related to MST:

“Welcomed the update provided on the statistical framework for measuring the sustainability of tourism, and, noting the interest from countries in this work, agreed to the finalization process for the document, including the [UN] Committee [on Environmental Economic Accounting]’s review prior to final consideration by the World Tourism Organization Committee on Statistics for its subsequent presentation to the Commission” (52/108(j)), and

“Requested the [Inter-Agency and Expert] Group to work with relevant custodian agencies to develop and test a methodology for indicators on sustainable tourism, in preparation for submission at the 2025 comprehensive review, as this indicator is of particular importance to the least developed countries, landlocked least developed countries and small island developing States” (52/101(e)).

The present document provides a summary of key developments since March 2021 concerning the MST program of work and hence provides background to the short summary of progress on MST presented in the [Report of the Committee of Experts on Environmental Economic Accounting to the 53rd Session](#) (paragraph 18).

II. Summary of Key MST developments

Engagement

As the world—and certainly the tourism sector—is emerging from the pandemic with ambitions to build back better, support for the development and implementation of MST has grown. MST has been recognized in, for example, the following policy frameworks:

- the **AIUla Framework for Inclusive Community Development through Tourism** endorsed by the G.20 Leaders,
- the **Pacific Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework** that has an accompanying Statistics Strategy based on MST and as part of which MST is being implemented in several countries in the region, and
- the **European Parliament** resolution on establishing a strategy for sustainable tourism.

At the “**High-Level Discussion on Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism**” **Side Event** held in the margins of 52nd Session of the UNSC, high level officials from national statistical offices, ministries of tourism and private sector discussed the need for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism in all its dimensions—economic, social and environmental— and presented experiences in implementing the MST Statistical Framework.

UNWTO staff have also made a range of presentations on MST including to: the London Group on Environmental Accounting (hosted by Germany), the UNCEEA (hosted by UNSD), the International Statistical Institute’s World Statistics Congress (hosted by the Netherlands), the Eurostat Working Group on Tourism Statistics, and the MOVE 2021 International Conference on the Subnational Measurement and Economic Analysis of Tourism (hosted by Colombia) as well as in various bilateral meetings with UNWTO Member States.

In December 2021 the UNWTO General Assembly, the highest decision-making body globally in tourism, issued the following resolution (A/RES/732(XXIV)):

“Reiterates the crucial policy need for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism (following UNWTO GA resolutions A/RES/714(XXIII) and A/RES/684(XXII)) and supports the efforts of the [UNWTO] Committee on Statistics and the Working Group

of Experts on Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism towards the finalization of the much-needed Statistical Framework on Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism”.

Capacity building

UNWTO and the Department of Tourism of the Philippines organized recently a workshop on MST for countries in the Asia Pacific Region funded by the Government of Korea. This is the second workshop on MST that has been held in the region, the first having taken place in December 2019 in partnership with the UN Economic and Social Council for Asia and the Pacific and UK Aid.

These workshops aim to introduce the SF-MST, go over the the main concepts and definitions of sustainability in tourism and to discuss strategies on strengthening the data support for the compilation of MST indicators. Moreover, these workshops provided the wider opportunity to test-run UNWTO capacity building on MST and inform the strategy agreed by the UNWTO Committee on Statistics to encourage implementation of MST during the finalisation of the statistical framework to ensure its practical relevance.

UNWTO has requests to hold workshops/events on MST in 2022 in Europe and the Middle East potentially involving the provision of direct support to MST pilot countries. Further, some countries are requesting direct technical assistance to develop MST pilots or MST based projects. With this in mind, UNWTO is exploring the potential to test-run UNWTO technical assistance on MST, with the view to develop a structural offer to countries.

MST pilot activities

From the outset of the MST programme of work, there have been countries interested in piloting various parts of the statistical framework. The Annex provides an up-to-date list of the 55 countries that have implemented, plan to implement or have expressed interest in undertaking an MST pilot. These country efforts obtain support from UNWTO through guidance materials (e.g. questionnaires for country self-assessment, a “Designing Pilot Studies” template) and recommendation of experts or direct technical assistance services.

Beyond the compilation of statistics, it is noted that a project has recently begun in Sri Lanka, to assess the impact on tourism of the recent X-Pearl oil spill disaster using the MST framework as a basis for the organisation of the underlying information and framing of the connections between the environment, local communities and the economy.

A second edition of the MST pilots publication [*Experiences from Pilot Studies In Measuring The Sustainability of Tourism*](#) is planned for 2022 to further showcase the additional pilots and progress on early work.

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

The planned steps to finalise the SF-MST are listed in the table below². Highlights are that (i) the membership and activities of the Working Group of Experts and the Editorial Board will be revived in the coming months; (ii) an updated version of SF-MST will be issued in March 2022 for review by relevant expert groups; (iii) a Global Consultation is expected to take place in mid-2022 whereupon (iv) a final version could be submitted for the consideration by the UNSC.

In essence, the intention of SF-MST is to demonstrate how a range of existing statistical standards and guidelines can be integrated to support the organisation of tourism related data at national and sub-national levels and, in turn, support decision making on tourism's sustainability across environmental, economic and social dimensions. Based on the feedback received to date on the SF-MST, the coverage and general approach to measuring sustainability is considered to be well-established.

In terms of content, it is expected that most work will involve further clarification and refinement of the existing draft SF-MST. There are five areas in which such clarification and refinement is most likely:

- Ensuring the text aligns with the content of existing statistical standards and guidelines and that there is an appropriate balance in terms of including content from other standards in the SF-MST itself. The relevant standards and guidelines include the *International Recommendations on Tourism Statistics*, the *Tourism Satellite Account: Recommended Methodological Framework*, the *System of National Accounts*, the *System of Environmental-Economic Accounting* (both Central Framework and Ecosystem Accounting) and ILO guidance on employment statistics.
- Highlighting the links between the organisation of data and the assessment of sustainability including descriptions of the contexts in which application of MST will be most relevant and appropriate.
- Including additional tables that show complementary and extended presentations of data in support of international comparable sustainability assessments and the identification of key indicators.
- Ensuring recommendations for the compilation of data following the SF-MST are clearly articulated and provide a clear base for the development of more detailed compilation guidance.

While most of the focus is expected to be placed on clarification and refinement there are a few substantive areas in which further technical discussion will be warranted. The main areas that have been identified concern: (i) the measurement of tourism gross fixed capital formation; (ii) the recording of greenhouse gas emissions and in particular for transport activities as well as correspondence to United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change reporting; (iii) the development of indicators for the social dimension; (iv) measurement of tourism at the sub-

² Considering the volatility of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism and on UNWTO's programme of work and financial resources, this planned timeline may have to be revised.

national level, in particular for tourism destinations; and (v) incorporating the final outcomes from the adoption of the SEEA Ecosystem Accounting in March 2021.

Table: Approximate timetable of activities for finalisation of SF-MST

Mar 2022	Completion of new draft (2.0) of the SF-MST
Mid Mar	Relaunching of Working Group of Experts on MST + Editorial Board Revision of new draft (2.0) by Working Group of Experts, Editorial Board, UNWTO Committee on Statistics
Apr-May	Incorporate comments and prepare new (3.0) version of SF-MST for Global Consultation Possible meeting of the Working of Experts and Editorial Board
May-July	Global Consultation Review by UNCEEA Technical Committee + presentation at UNCEEA meeting
Aug-Sep	Incorporate comments from Global Consultation into new (4.0) version
Sep-Oct	New (4.0) version to UNWTO Committee on Statistics for endorsement Subsequently, send (4.0) version to UNCEEA for endorsement
Nov	Possible UNWTO Committee on Statistics meeting
Nov 2022-Jan 2023	Submission to the UNSC Secretariat (UNSD) of UNWTO Report and documents to be presented to the UNSC, including the SF-MST framework as a background document
Mar 2023	UNSC consideration of the UNWTO Report and the SF-MST. High level side event on MST on the margins of UNSC

Annex: Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism (MST): Pilot countries

(as of 17 December 2021)

Implemented (16 countries):

- Austria
- Canada
- Egypt
- Fiji
- Germany
- Italy
- Kyrgyz Republic (assessment)
- Maldives
- Mexico
- Netherlands
- Philippines
- Samoa
- Saudi Arabia
- Sweden
- Thailand
- Vietnam

Implementation underway (26 countries):

- Germany – currently expanding their pilot
- Jamaica – MST stakeholders’ assessment currently underway
- Netherlands – currently expanding their pilot
- Philippines – currently expanding their pilot
- Sri Lanka – focused on assessing the impact of natural disasters
- Implementation by Pacific Tourism Organization with support of partners and donors (PARIS21, etc.):
 - o American Samoa, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Nauru, Marshall Islands, New Caledonia, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Rapa Nui, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor Leste, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Wallis & Futuna and the People’s Republic of China.

Expression of Interest (16 countries):

- Albania
- Belarus
- Belize
- Bosnia & Herzegovina
- Brazil
- Burkina Faso
- Chile
- Dominican Republic

- Greece – possible MST pilot as part of a project for the establishment of a Research & Monitoring Centre for Coastal and Maritime Tourism in the Eastern Mediterranean Region
- Guyana
- Iran
- Kuwait
- Mauritius
- Rwanda
- Spain – exploration and fund identification phase
- St Kitts