

Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States “Charting the Course Toward Resilient Prosperity”

Antigua and Barbuda, May 27-30, 2024.

Conference Briefing Notes

1.0 Title of Briefing Paper

Accelerating Transition to Sustainable and Tourism Models for Pacific SIDS

2.0 Background information on Issue

Tourism is a vital economic sector for most Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the Pacific, contributing substantially to GDP, employment, foreign exchange earnings and government revenues. For many SIDS, tourism accounts for over 25% of GDP and job opportunities. The sector relies heavily on the region's rich natural assets like beaches, coral reefs and biodiversity which attract visitors.

However, SIDS' tourism industries face existential threats from climate change impacts. Sea level rise is causing coastal erosion and inundation of low-lying areas. Coral bleaching from ocean warming and acidification is degrading the marine ecosystems that are major tourist attractions. More frequent and intense cyclones, floods and droughts are damaging critical infrastructure like hotels, airports and roads.

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the vulnerability of SIDS economies that are overly reliant on tourism. As we rebuild this vital sector, we have an opportunity to chart a new path - one that enhances resilience, prioritizes sustainability, and unlocks tourism's potential as a driver of secure and prosperous societies.

3.0 Current Situation and Known Regional and Global Issues

Pre-pandemic, rapid tourism growth in SIDS strained local infrastructures, services and ecosystems through overcrowding, pollution, and coastal development. Climate change is exacerbating these pressures while threatening the natural assets that attract visitors.

As tourism revives, SIDS face challenges re-establishing air connectivity and supporting operators recovering from the pandemic's economic impacts. However, reviving tourism also presents opportunities to catalyse a shift towards more sustainable, climate-resilient, locally-driven and innovative models.

Globally, "sustainable tourism" has emerged as a leading policy priority through frameworks like the Global Sustainable Tourism Council Destination and Industry Criteria, the Glasgow

Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism, and the One Planet Vision for a Responsible Recovery. But operationalizing these requires overcoming gaps in data, capacity, governance and sustainable investment in most SIDS.

Transitioning to truly sustainable tourism models will need intensive regional cooperation, multi-stakeholder partnerships and a whole-of-society approach to enhance environmental management, ensure climate resilience, and safeguard the natural/cultural heritage underpinning the sector.

4.0 Regional Progress and Actions Needed.

In 2021, the Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO) launched the Pacific Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework through 2030 with four focus including Economic Prosperity, Thriving and Inclusive Communities, Visible and Valued Cultures and Healthy Islands and Oceans. Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) and SPTO, as both members of the Council of Regional Organizations of the Pacific (CROP), have shared mandates across a broad range of areas including environmental sustainability and climate resilience. This collaboration has also extended to governments, operators and research institutions and has been actively supporting Pacific SIDS in transitioning towards sustainable and regenerative tourism models through various initiatives including:

- **Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs):** SPREP has developed regional EIA guidelines for coastal tourism development, providing a framework for assessing and managing the environmental impacts of tourism projects. Training and capacity building on EIAs have been conducted for government officials and industry stakeholders.
- **Sustainable Tourism Standards:** SPREP and SPTO have collaborated on developing guidelines, standards for sustainable tourism operations, such as environmental auditing of accommodations, managing marine tourism activities, and minimizing climate impacts.
- **Ecosystem-based Adaptation and Conservation Financing:** SPREP has promoted ecosystem-based adaptation approaches and explored innovative financing mechanisms like conservation fees and blue carbon credits to support sustainable tourism and ecosystem protection.
- **Plastic Pollution and Waste Management:** Under the Pacific Ocean Litter Project, SPREP is partnering with SPTO to develop standards and certification for single-use plastics reduction in the tourism sector.
- **Research and Innovation:** SPREP supports research initiatives exploring innovative models like "regenerative tourism" that promote environmental stewardship and cultural continuity through partnerships with institutions like the University of Newcastle and Griffith University.
- **Strategic Partnerships and Policy Alignment:** SPREP's work aligns with regional frameworks like the Pacific Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework, and the 2050 Blue Pacific Continent strategy, fostering collaboration on cross-cutting issues such as climate change, biodiversity and waste management.

While progress has been made, a more comprehensive regional, and in fact global approach is needed to realize a sustainable and resilient tourism paradigm in Pacific SIDS. Key priorities include:

- Mainstreaming sustainability across tourism value chains through standards, financing and capacity building.
- Enhancing climate resilience of tourism facilities, services and coastal infrastructure.
- Accelerating the transition to circular and tourism models centered on natural and cultural assets.
- Investing in digitalization, innovation and human capital development for sustainable tourism.
- Prioritizing local community participation, ownership and equitable distribution of tourism benefits.

By leveraging its expertise and partnerships, SPREP is well-positioned to support Pacific SIDS in achieving these priorities and unlocking tourism's potential as a driver of resilient prosperity, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific Continent.