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## ADVANCING RESPONSIBLE TOURISM-IMPLEMENTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL TARGETS IN TOURIST DESTINATIONS

BY

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**Abstract.** The tourism sector holds a central role in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as it generates jobs and income and contributes to economic growth. Factors such as globalization, changes in transportation, population growth, technological advancements, digital platforms, and increasing communication channels contribute to its development. This study aims to explore the convergence between responsible tourism and the SDGs, focusing on popular tourist destinations. It seeks to identify successful strategies and new approaches for promoting responsible tourism, focusing on poverty reduction, environmental protection, cultural heritage preservation, and inclusion. The paper also presents case studies from different destinations and offers concrete suggestions for policymakers, tourism stakeholders, and community members on how to incorporate fair tourism concepts into their strategies. The findings have implications for policy actors, stakeholders, and professionals involved in tourism management and sustainable development. A better understanding of the economic and environmental dimensions of tourism enables stakeholders to

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develop informed strategies to maximize the benefits of tourism while mitigating its negative impacts on the environment and local communities.

**Keywords:** economic development, environmental conservation, SDGs, sustainability, tourism impact

## 1. Introduction

The world's tourism sector is one of the most important contributors to the economy, as well as a complex and multidimensional contributor to sustainable development. Although it provides great opportunities for economic growth, job creation, and cultural exchange (UNWTO, 2023a), it also brings significant problems such as environmental damage, socio-cultural disruption, and economic losses (Honey, 1999; Mejjad *et al.*, 2022). This duality demands a shift towards responsible tourism practices with a commitment to sustainability and a contribution to the long-term socio-economic and environmental well-being of destinations and local communities (Ramkissoon, 2020). Not only is this transformation a desirable outcome, but it is equally an important imperative in light of the United Nations SDGs. These goals provide a framework for understanding and addressing the interconnection between tourism and broader sustainability challenges.

Over several decades, responsible tourism has transitioned from limiting negative impacts to maximizing positive ones (Cohen, 1972; Godwin, 2016). As presented in Fig. 1, such co-creation is imperative, as the efforts towards sustainable tourism can never rest on a single sector and reinforce the benefits of coordinated and combined efforts (Font *et al.*, 2021; Nguyen *et al.*, 2018). Tourism planning and management need a greater commitment to community involvement and empowerment (Ashley and Roe, 2002; Khalid *et al.*, 2019), ensuring the involvement of the local population in the decision-making process and the appropriate distribution of tourism benefits (Mak *et al.*, 2017; Wearing, 2001).

The implementation of sustainable practices in tourism has been driven by the adoption of the SDGs, as they represent a collective global effort to eradicate poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people prosper and live in peace and prosperity by 2030 (UN, 2015). This means linking tourism sector operations to the targets identified for each relevant SDG. Achieving this alignment requires a holistic assessment of how tourism intersects with multiple spheres of sustainable development (Khizar *et al.*, 2023; Rosato *et al.*, 2021). For example, promoting decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) in tourism requires quality jobs, fair wages, and support for local businesses (Giousmpasoglou, 2024; Peña-Sánchez *et al.*, 2020). Also, ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns (SDG 12) further stipulates the need to reduce waste generation, minimize energy and water consumption, and promote

sustainable supply chains through the tourism sector (Buhalis and Leung, 2018; Prados-Castillo *et al.*, 2023). Initiatives that reduce waste and improve energy and water conservation in tourism leverage environmental engineering approaches, emphasizing the connection between responsible tourism policies and technical solutions for resource conservation. In Europe, the aim is to shift from exclusively quantitative development practices to sustainable, inclusive growth. EU Member States are increasingly emphasizing the role tourism plays in achieving sustainable development goals, promoting sustainable practices in order to minimize negative environmental and social impacts in the long term, with local communities benefiting from economic growth at the same time (European Commission, 2022).

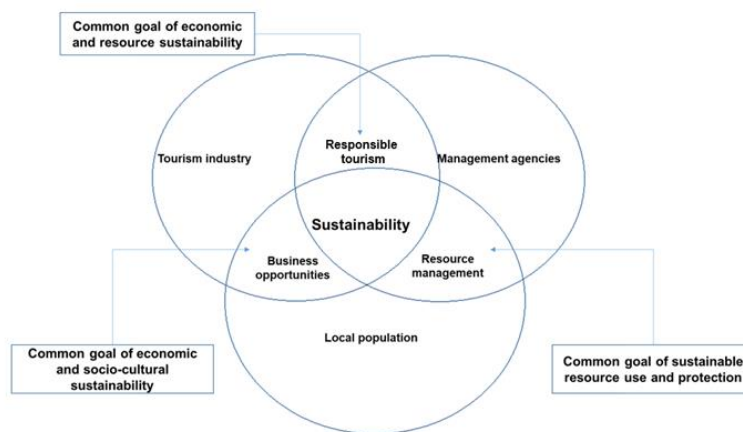


Fig. 1 – Major participants in tourism development (adapted from Nguyen *et al.*, 2018).

Recent studies have investigated the use of different frameworks and tools for localizing SDG targets in tourism destinations. Such examples are sustainable tourism indicators (Antoli *et al.*, 2024; Elgin and Elveren, 2024; Spencer and Sargeant, 2022), destination management systems (Arici and Koseoglu, 2025; Allen and Scott, 2018; Lukoserviciute *et al.*, 2024; Reinhold *et al.*, 2023), and stakeholder engagement platforms (Hall, 2007; Hall, 2019; Mandić *et al.*, 2024). In addition, a wide variety of studies exist with regard to technology and innovation in the promotion of responsible tourism (Boes *et al.*, 2016; Gretzel *et al.*, 2015; Mattila *et al.*, 2025; Pasanchay and Schott, 2021). The increasing use of digital platforms, data analytics, and innovative smart tourism initiatives presents opportunities to improve destination management, enhance visitor experiences, and promote sustainable tourism practices (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2015; Xiang *et al.*, 2010). Responsible tourism practices adopted in the European Union include the promotion of destinations that prioritize environmental protection, cultural preservation, and community well-being, while projects are

supported through the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), which encourage tourism development concerning the SDGs, thus encouraging innovation in sustainable services and products (European Parliament, 2021). Also, several tools and resources have been developed within the EU to help destinations measure and monitor their sustainability performance, such as the European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS) (European Commission, 2016).

However, translating the vision of responsible tourism and the aim of the SDGs into concrete action is still a challenge. While the ambition to embrace sustainable tourism development exists, many destinations face a lack of resources in terms of funding, institutional capacity, and willingness to implement effective sustainable tourism practices (Aas *et al.*, 2005; Sharpley, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has also revealed the fragility of the tourism industry and created a demand for resilience and sustainable paths to post-COVID recovery (Hall *et al.*, 2020; UNWTO, 2023b). The pandemic has also presented an opportunity to rethink tourism development and accelerate the transition towards a more responsible and sustainable model (Bosone and Nocca, 2022; Palazzo *et al.*, 2022).

This research aims to address the critical need for a deeper understanding of how to effectively implement SDG targets in tourist destinations. It will explore the various dimensions of responsible tourism, examine the challenges and opportunities associated with SDG implementation, and identify best practices for achieving sustainable tourism development. By drawing on a comprehensive review of the literature and incorporating recent advances in the field, this research aims to contribute to the knowledge on responsible tourism and provide practical guidance for stakeholders, destination managers, and tourism businesses.

## 2. Methodology

We used a multi-method approach, analyzing policies and examining multiple case studies. In our investigation, we explored the European Union's (EU) tourism policy frameworks and carefully analyzed three case studies on tourist destinations. In the first phase, official EU strategy documents and reports were examined to understand how SDGs were integrated into tourism strategies at a large-scale perspective. After that, three case studies (Viscri in Romania, Dubrovnik in Croatia, and Benidorm in Spain) were selected to provide local-level insights on responsible tourism practices in diverse contexts. There's a different type of tourism in each case study, as visitor preferences tend to vary, with the first one referring to a rural cultural heritage destination, the second to an urban heritage site dealing with overtourism, and the last case study presenting a mass tourism destination that adopts smart technologies, which allowed for a comparative analysis between different conditions.

The data used in the case studies was collected after a comprehensive review of existing literature, including academic publications, sustainability reports, as well as tourism statistics (e.g., WTTC, Interreg Europe, Eurostat). In each destination, tourism efforts and outcomes were correlated with relevant SDG goals, using the SDG framework as an analytical tool. This approach ensured that EU-level policy considerations were linked to local practices, aligning broad economic policies with microeconomic implementation.

### 3. Addressing sustainable development goals in tourism within the European Union

Travel and tourism play a significant role in driving economies across the European Union (EU) countries and around the world. The tourism industry has been a contributor to economic growth and job creation in many countries (Budeanu, 2005), particularly during periods of economic downturn, although its potential negative impacts on the environment and local communities cannot be overlooked (Anderson, 2025). Moreover, the hospitality sector has faced challenges due to the impact of COVID 19 in recent times. The European Union's tourism sector has a decisive part in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The sector's role in the EU's sustainable development agenda is highlighted in Fig. 2, illustrating its complex interconnections. This section examines the specific context of addressing the SDGs within the EU tourism sector, further exploring the opportunities and challenges shaping its sustainable development trajectory.



Fig. 2 – Connections between the tourism sector and the Sustainable Development Goals (adapted from Buhalis *et al.*, 2023).

### 3.1. The EU tourism sector and its connection to the SDGs

The primary contribution of tourism is its economic influence. Global statistics show that tourism generates substantial sources of revenue, often contributing significantly to a country's GDP. The many coastal resorts and urban destinations, as well as rural landscapes and cultural heritage sites, make the EU tourism sector diverse. There are both opportunities and challenges in this variety for the implementation of the SDGs. The economic importance of tourism within the EU is substantial, as reflected in its contribution to GDP (Fig. 3) and employment. The data presented by WTTC (2023a) demonstrates the role of the tourism sector in the global economy, i.e., it directly contributed with 7.6% to the global GDP, this contribution being also reflected in related industries (e.g., transportation, manufacturing).

The tourism sector generates numerous employment opportunities in various sub-sectors, from accommodation and transportation services to local artisans. According to Eurostat statistics (Eurostat, 2024), more than 11.2 million people were employed in various tourism-related economic enterprises in the European Union, representing 20% of those employed in the services sector. The tourism sector accounted for about 9% of total employment in the non-financial business economy as a whole. Greece recorded the highest share (25.7%), followed by Cyprus and Malta with 17.5% and 15.0% respectively (Fig. 4). Sustainable tourism practices emphasize employing local workforce, providing equitable income and skills development, promoting inclusive economic growth and addressing gender dynamics in the workforce, thus ensuring equal opportunities and contributing to social sustainability (SDG 8).

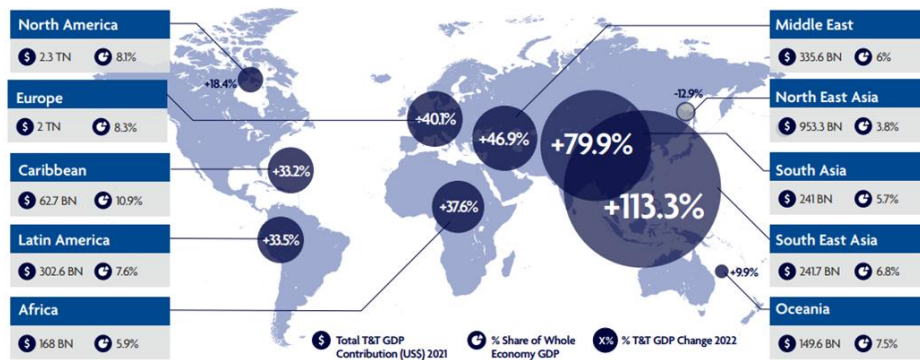


Fig. 3 – Regional performance of Travel and Tourism in 2022 (statistical data according to WTTC, 2023b).

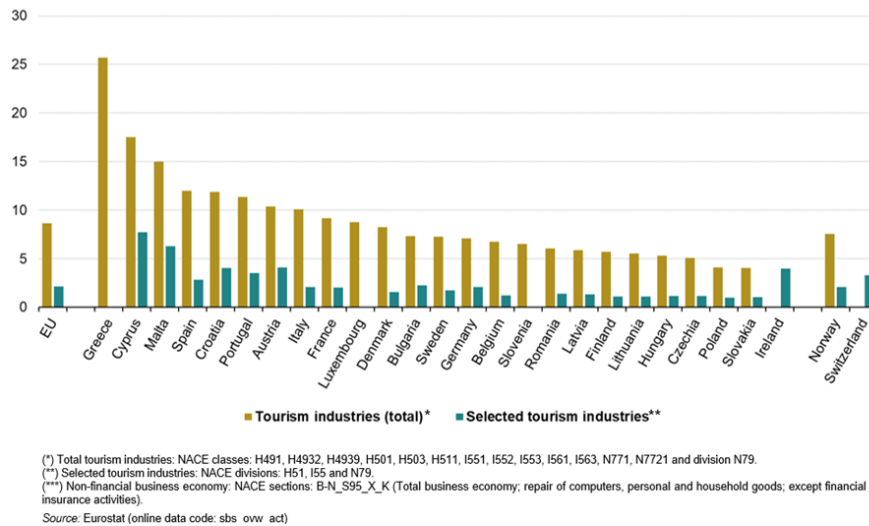


Fig. 4 – Employees in total tourism industries and in selected tourism industries as a share of persons employed in total non-financial businesses in the economy in 2021 (%) (adapted from Eurostat, 2024).

Table 1 shows additional insights on the main economic indicators, highlighting the sector's importance for the EU economy. This economic strength emphasizes tourism's capacity to be a potential driver for sustainable development, as long as its growth is managed responsibly.

According to Eurostat data from 2024, 58% of the workforce in the hospitality sector in 2023 was represented by women, which is significant (Fig. 5). Most of them, 63%, work either in travel agencies or tour operators, with a high percentage also found in the accommodation sector, 59%. In terms of working hours, most women work full-time (42%), although according to the data presented in Fig. 5, it can also be observed that more and more women work part-time. In South-Western European countries (e.g. Luxembourg, Malta), women account for less than half of the jobs, whereas in North-Eastern European countries (e.g. Estonia, Latvia, Romania), more than 2/3 of the employees in the hospitality sector are women.

The tourism sector has the potential to generate significant investments in basic infrastructure, including accommodation, transportation, and communications. Destinations that want to ensure long-term sustainability (SDG 9) prefer to promote responsible tourism, taking into account social and environmental impacts, thus managing to reduce negative impacts on the area over time. The expenditures made by EU residents (Fig. 6) contribute to poverty reduction (SDG 1), support the local economy, and also directly and indirectly support local enterprises and small businesses.

**Table 1**  
*Key economic indicators for the tourism industries in the European Union in 2021*  
*(adapted from Eurostat, 2021)*

<b>Tourism industry</b>	<b>Enterprises (number)</b>	<b>Net turnover (million €)</b>	<b>Value added (million €)</b>	<b>Persons employed (number)</b>
Land transport	418,360	89,088	50,718	1,438,717
Water transport	11,456	14,536	4,331	91,540
Passenger air transport	5,047	62,287	9,664	255,736
<b>Total transport related</b>	<b>434,863</b>	<b>165,911</b>	<b>64,713</b>	<b>1,785,993</b>
Hotels and similar accommodation	144,000	100,000	50,000	1,660,000
Holiday and other short-stay accommodation	204,060	20,480	8,207	390,000
Camping grounds, recreational vehicle parks and trailer parks	15,400	8,000	4,200	84,000
<b>Total accommodation</b>	<b>363,460</b>	<b>128,480</b>	<b>62,407</b>	<b>2,134,000</b>
Restaurants and mobile food service activities	920,000	225,000	100,000	5,200,000
Beverage serving activities	500,000	51,100	21,000	1,600,000
<b>Total food and beverage</b>	<b>1,420,000</b>	<b>276,100</b>	<b>121,000</b>	<b>6,800,000</b>
Renting and leasing of cars and trucks	44,415	100,000	56,451	174,675
Renting and leasing of recreational and sports goods	18,000	2,548	1,100	33,837
<b>Total car and other rental</b>	<b>62,415</b>	<b>102,548</b>	<b>57,551</b>	<b>208,512</b>
Travel agency and tour operator activities	64,439	49,515	10,800	291,422
Other reservation service and related activities	33,000	6,328	2,267	70,700
<b>Total travel agency, tour operator reservation service and related activities</b>	<b>101,198</b>	<b>55,844</b>	<b>13,067</b>	<b>363,122</b>
<b>Total tourism industries</b>	<b>2,378,177</b>	<b>728,883</b>	<b>318,738</b>	<b>11,290,627</b>
Tourism industries (mainly tourism)	432,946	240,283	82,871	2,681,158
Tourism industries (partially tourism)	1,945,231	488,600	235,867	8,609,469



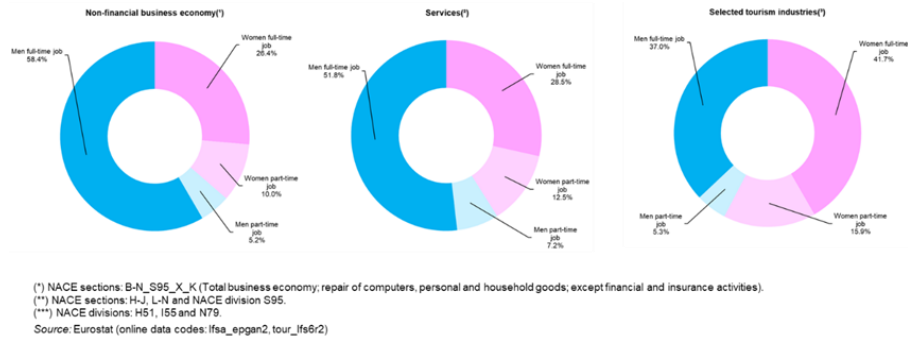


Fig. 5 – Employment rates by gender, economic activity, and full-time/part-time in EU in 2023 (adapted from Eurostat, 2024).

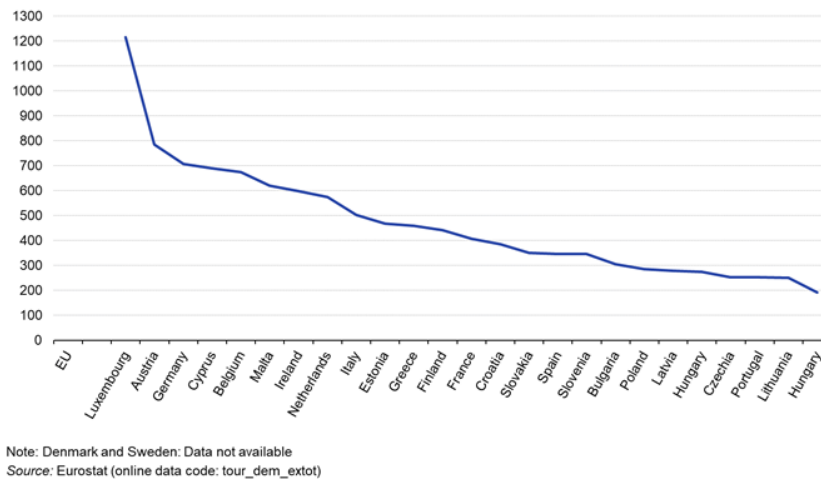


Fig. 6 – EU residents' average tourism expenditure per trip in 2023 (€) (adapted from Eurostat, 2025).

### 3.2. Incorporating sustainable development goals into European Union tourism policies

The European Union (EU) is committed to integrate the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals into all its policies, including tourism. This has led to a shift in the EU's tourism agenda, with a focus on sustainable and responsible tourism, smart innovation, and green transition. The European Commission realigned its tourism policy priorities at the end of 2019 to align with the Green Deal, focusing on decarbonizing travel, low-carbon transport modes, and energy efficiency in the hospitality sector (ECA, 2021). The EU adopted the European Agenda for Tourism 2030 in December 2022, which outlines five

priority areas: green transition, digital transition, resilience, inclusion, and skills development. The agenda advocates for policies and governance that integrate economic, social, and environmental sustainability in destinations, promoting sustainable mobility for tourists and circular economy practices. The EU has also launched a Transition Path for Tourism in 2022, identifying key areas for action to help the tourism sector recover from COVID-19 and move towards sustainability and digitalization. The EU has created platforms to monitor progress on sustainability indicators and to facilitate knowledge sharing between destinations, reinforcing an evidence-based approach to the implementation of the SDGs in tourism policy (Interreg Europe, 2025).

European Union Member States have incorporated the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into their tourism policies, many of which focus on socio-economic, environmental, and land sustainability (Interreg Europe, 2025). These policies are increasingly aligned with the UN's 2030 Agenda and shared EU priorities. Spain is preparing a sustainable tourism strategy for 2030, which aims for long-term growth, job creation, cultural preservation, and carbon reduction. Other countries, such as Germany and France, have integrated the SDGs into their national sustainable development strategies and have promoted sustainable tourism through national initiatives and certifications (Interreg Europe, 2025). Smaller EU states and regions like Slovenia have also integrated the SDGs into tourism through responsible tourism guides, community projects, and rigorous sustainability monitoring systems (Interreg Europe, 2025). However, the degree of implementation varies from country to country, and challenges remain in ensuring that ambitious targets are matched by effective implementation and industry uptake. EU monitoring helps to maintain momentum and exchange best practices between countries.

#### **4. Case studies on integrating the SDGs in tourism destinations**

Tourism, a key driver of economic growth and cultural exchange, can also contribute to environmental integrity and community well-being. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognize tourism's potential to advance sustainable development (Gică *et al.*, 2021). European destinations are aligning their tourism strategies with SDG targets (Appendix 1), addressing poverty reduction, inequality, cultural heritage, and partnerships. This chapter examines three case studies illustrating how tourism can support economic viability, social inclusion, and environmental conservation.

##### **4.1. Viscri village-sustainable cultural heritage tourism in Romania**

Viscri, one of the most beautiful Saxon villages in Romania, emphasizes rural cultural heritage and tourism development. The UNESCO-listed fortified church and its traditional architecture strike a balance between environmental

protection and economic growth, reflecting the area's integrated holistic approach (Ancuța and Jucu, 2023).

In Viscri, the local community stakeholders have implemented sustainability strategies to preserve the village patrimony. These include heritage restoration and community amenities, which have been funded by NGOs and EU programs. The 'whole village' approach has integrated a cultural interpretation center and exhibitions of Saxon and Roma heritage, promoting community pride and generating revenues (Interreg Europe, 2022). Community capacity building has been achieved through the creation of local associations, enabling residents to manage shared heritage landscapes (Vijulie *et al.*, 2024). According to Gherdan *et al.* (2025) study, environmentally-friendly services and supplies have been encouraged through cooperative networks, with local guest houses and ecological farms providing guests with regional products. Tourism authorities have piloted green transport links between heritage sites to reduce car use. These strategies aim to sustain Viscri's heritage and benefit the local community by involving locals in decision-making and linking heritage with livelihoods (Ancuța and Jucu, 2023; Vijulie *et al.*, 2024).

In Table 2, a summarized overview of the main quantitative and qualitative results of these sustainable tourism efforts is presented, demonstrating their economic, environmental, and social impacts as well as their alignment with several of the SDGs.

Viscric village is located in Bunești commune. Bunești's tourism strategy focuses on sustainability by enhancing resource management. The plan includes modernizing potable water supply and sewage systems to ensure reliable access to water and sanitation (Bunești, 2021). Viscric already has a modern ecological water treatment plant, and the strategy includes expanding the water network and capturing more springs. The strategy also promotes energy efficiency through community education and retrofitting public infrastructure, reducing electricity consumption and greenhouse gas emissions (Bunești, 2021). Waste management is strengthened through regular collection and recycling of glass, paper, and plastic. These policies aim to protect Viscric's rural environment and support the sustainable growth of its tourism industry. The strategy aims to protect the rural environment and support the sustainable growth of the tourism sector. The progress Viscric has made in terms of sustainability is largely due to local NGOs and socially conscious entrepreneurs, such as the Mihai Eminescu Trust (MET), that support community development, historic preservation, and environmental conservation. Private entrepreneurs have also created sustainable guesthouses, such as Viscric 125, which blends traditional architecture with modern amenities (European Commission, 2012). These initiatives promote waste reduction, water conservation, and low energy consumption, making it possible for Viscric to welcome thousands of tourists throughout the year, while keeping resource use and waste generation to a minimum.

**Table 2**  
*Sustainable tourism outcomes and SDG alignment in Viscri, Romania*

Category	Indicator	Result	SDG target	Reference
Economic	<b>Business scale:</b> Small, family-run tourism enterprises ( $\leq 5$ staff)	50% of local accommodations in mountain areas are small enterprises	SDG 8.3	Gherdan <i>et al.</i> (2025)
	<b>Local supply chain:</b> Use of local products	62% of tourism businesses source goods locally	SDG 12.7	Gherdan <i>et al.</i> (2025)
	<b>Seasonal occupancy:</b> Peak-season use	80% of surveyed hotels/guesthouses reach full capacity in summer or winter	SDG 8.9	Gherdan <i>et al.</i> (2025)
Environmental	<b>Water efficiency:</b> Adoption of savings measures	74% of tourism accommodations have implemented water-saving systems	SDG 6.4	Gherdan <i>et al.</i> (2025)
	<b>Waste management:</b> Recycling practices	68% of businesses segregate waste for recycling	SDG 12.5	Gherdan <i>et al.</i> (2025)
	<b>Biodiversity:</b> Heritage landscape conservation	Viscrist's community-managed wood-pasture maintains centuries-old oaks and rich biota	SDG 15.1	Vijulie <i>et al.</i> (2024)
Social	<b>Sustainability values:</b> Local stakeholders' views	85% of tourism operators rate sustainability as "important" or "very important"	SDG 12.8	Gherdan <i>et al.</i> (2025)
	<b>Community management:</b> Local governance	Local farmers' association collectively manages Viscrist's heritage grazing lands	SDG 11.3	Vijulie <i>et al.</i> (2024)
	<b>Visitor satisfaction:</b> Tourism experience	Visitor satisfaction with nature/cultural tours was reported <i>very high</i> , with most intending to revisit	SDG 8.9 SDG 11.4	Vijulie <i>et al.</i> (2024)

The findings of Gherdan *et al.* (2025) and Vijulie *et al.* (2024) demonstrate sustainable development in the field, with high rates of water saving and waste recycling, majority support for sustainability in small, local businesses, and participatory management of Viscrist's cultural landscapes, demonstrating progress towards SDG12, inclusive growth, and decent work.

#### 4.2. Dubrovnik - Overtourism management and heritage conservation in Croatia

Dubrovnik, a UNESCO World Heritage destination in Croatia, has been overcrowded due to its popularity. According to GSTC (2021), a million cruise passengers visited in 2013, and up to 10,000 tourists crowded the Old Town. The city has faced negative international attention and warnings from UNESCO about the possible loss of its heritage status. In response, authorities launched the "Respect the City" program in 2017 to restore sustainability and protect the city's heritage through better tourism management (GSTC, 2021). Table 3 illustrates the main results of the "Respect the City" initiative.

**Table 3**

*Sustainable tourism outcomes and SDG alignment in Dubrovnik, Croatia (adapted from GSTC, 2021)*

Indicator	Outcome	SDG target
Visitor flow management	Max 2 cruise ships in port at once, with visitor numbers capped at 4,000 in Old Town simultaneously. Peak crowding reduced by ~50%	SDG 11.3, SDG 12.b
Cultural heritage protection	Maintained UNESCO World Heritage status. Increased investment in restoration and enforcement of heritage protection laws	SDG 11.4
Economic and local benefits	Short-term revenue loss is accepted for long-term sustainability. Local businesses benefit from longer tourist stays and an emphasis on quality	SDG 8.9
Environmental impact	Traffic congestion eased; waste and air pollution were reduced through better management and planning. Smart monitoring in place	SDG 11.6, SDG 13.2
Stakeholder engagement	Over 70 stakeholders were consulted in the sustainable tourism action plan. Continuous collaboration with cruise lines and community groups	SDG 17.16, SDG 17.17

The economy of Dubrovnik is mainly driven by tourism, which accounts for 80% of GDP and 90% of employment (European Commission, 2025). Dubrovnik implemented a program for sustainable tourism to address issues related to water, energy, and waste in the sector (GSTC, 2019). The plan includes the construction of a new water purification plant, the implementation of a smart network for real-time consumption monitoring, and investments in energy efficiency upgrades. The city aims to prioritize the renovation of energy-intensive buildings, ensuring adequate wastewater treatment for the growing tourist population (GSTC, 2019). The municipal administration has implemented rigorous regulations to reduce single-use plastics and improve solid waste management, acknowledging the significant increase in waste generated by tourism (Plastic Smart Cities, 2021). The city council approved an action plan to reduce plastic pollution in 2021, with the goal of reducing plastic waste by 30% by 2022 and 55% across the city by 2025 (Plastic Smart Cities, 2021). The city has upgraded its waste collection program, introduced marine debris skimmers, and improved infrastructure to ensure that the tourism industry uses less water and energy per visitor and generates less waste (GSTC, 2021; Plastic Smart Cities, 2021). Additionally, efforts in responsible tourism are influenced by NGOs and the private sector. The city joined the WWF's Plastic Smart Cities program in 2020, with the goal of reducing plastic waste by 30% in two years (WWF, 2019). By 2021, many hotels and restaurants had switched to paper or bamboo alternatives. Large hotels have adopted sustainability practices such as energy-saving technologies and waste management (WWF, 2019). Until 2023, nearly all 4- and 5-star hotels in the city have adopted LED lighting, efficient air conditioning systems, and water conservation initiatives (Šlogar and Hrvatin, 2023). Even though it had a record number of overnight stays before 2019, the city had 3.885 million overnight stays in 2023 and welcomed 526,414 visitors who came on cruise ships (European Commission, 2025). Therefore, these responsible tourism management measures in this destination were essential to minimize the impact of this sector on the environment.

Dubrovnik's tourism policy is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by implementing policies on the safety of public spaces and protection of cultural heritage, addressing environmental impacts and reducing emissions (GSTC, 2021). The strategy also uses data and partnerships to promote responsible tourism management.

Implementing responsible tourism in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is vital for the development of tourism destinations (Gică *et al.*, 2021). The experiences of tourism destinations in the EU demonstrate how strong leadership, community involvement, continuous monitoring, and global targets can turn tourism into a catalyst for sustainable development (Aguirre *et al.*, 2023; Gică *et al.*, 2021). As more and more destinations adopt holistic approaches, the tourism sector can contribute to achieving the SDGs by 2030.

#### **4.3. Benidorm-Smart technology boosting sustainable urban tourism in Spain**

The Spanish city of Benidorm, known for its seaside tourism, has managed to attract millions of tourists annually by promoting mass tourism. This approach has proven unsustainable over time, with this tourist destination facing numerous challenges such as traffic congestion, high seasonality, and high demand for water and energy resources (Aguirre *et al.*, 2023). The municipality decided that a change in the local approach to tourism was absolutely necessary, and in 2018, tourism in the destination reinvented itself, with local actors harnessing the available resources with the use of technology, thus improving the tourist experience and the quality of the local population, while becoming a smart, sustainable destination. This circular model has been realized in line with the Smart Destinations Agenda in Spain, based on the Spanish UNE 178591 (Smart Tourism Destination management system) standard, receiving co-funding from EU regional development funds (Aguirre *et al.*, 2023; Enertic, 2022). Thus, Benidorm became the first city to be certified as a smart tourist destination in 2022, using an integrated Smart City digital platform to collect real-time data on tourism and urban systems, enabling evidence-based decision-making and ensuring governance, innovation, technology, accessibility, and sustainability (Enertic, 2022). Table 4 presents the applied tourism strategy, highlighting improvements in resource efficiency, visitor management, and innovation partnerships, and their alignment with the SDGs.

The city has been recognized as a European pioneer in smart tourism for 2025 due to its ambitious sustainability strategy, which includes a 95% efficient urban water cycle and gray water recycling, resulting in an 18% reduction in water consumption (European Commission, 2025). Benidorm successfully manages solid waste through public policies and seasonal campaigns, working with local NGOs (Benidorm, 2023). The city won the Green Flag for its region in 2022, due to increased glass recycling. The city tourism plan, launched in 2022 with EU NextGeneration funding, introduces more green zones and facilities to reduce vehicle traffic and reduce air conditioning needs (Benidorm, 2024). The plan's green transition pillar addresses the city's water footprint and urban heat island, demonstrating that conserving water and energy in tourism improves climate change resilience (Benidorm, 2024). The city also participated in the "Sustainable EU Tourism" project to improve its sustainability and tourism resilience (European Commission, 2025). According to the European Commission (2025), a survey was conducted involving over 200 destinations in order to identify best practices in 50 of them. Benidorm, which faces water shortages, has implemented innovative water management practices such as separating rainwater from wastewater, composting sludge, and generating biogas from wastewater (European Commission, 2025).

**Table 4**  
*Sustainable tourism outcomes and SDG alignment in Benidorm, Spain (adapted from Enertic, 2022)*

Indicator	Outcome	SDG target
Smart certification	The first globally certified Smart Sustainable Tourism Destination (UNE 178501) has been established.	SDG 9.1, SDG 11.3
Resource efficiency	Smart water management has been implemented to minimize losses and improve energy efficiency in public and tourist buildings.	SDG 6.4, SDG 7.3
Emissions and mobility	Smart parking is being implemented to reduce traffic and improve air quality, in line with the climate plan.	SDG 11.6, SDG 13.2
Tourist experience	Real-time beach/attraction monitoring has improved safety and satisfaction, while reducing crowding.	SDG 12.b, SDG 3.9
Innovation and partnership	The development of local tech partnerships and the implementation of open-data innovation platforms have significantly contributed to economic and sustainability.	SDG 17.16, SDG 8.2

This destination's Smart Sustainable Tourism initiative focuses on sustainable cities, innovation, and responsible consumption. It integrates environmental management into the city's infrastructure, reducing negative environmental impacts per capita by improving air quality and waste and water management (Aguirre *et al.*, 2023; Enertic, 2022). The strategy based on the development and implementation of tools to monitor the impact of sustainable development on responsible tourism aligns with SDG 12.b, while the emphasis on energy and water efficiency aligns with SDGs 7.3 and 6.4. The city council also emphasized the need to build resilient infrastructure and encourage innovation, these aspects cover SDGs 9.5 and 17 (Enertic, 2022). The municipality's collaboration with local entrepreneurs and institutions exemplifies Goal 9.5 and SDG 17 by joining public and private sustainability efforts (Enertic, 2022). The responsible management of tourism activities and the transition to sustainable tourism from mass tourism bring benefits to local health and well-being, emphasizing the link between smart cities and responsible tourism.

## 5. Conclusions

The study therefore implies that tourism can significantly improve the economic and social well-being of the EU through aligning industry practices with the Sustainable Development Goals. Managed responsibly, tourism can support economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection. However, without careful management tourism can lead to ecological



degradation or cultural commodification. Responsible tourism, focused on maximizing benefits and minimizing harm, underlies the SDGs as a key concept, aiming for decent employment for local people, cultural preservation and inclusive economic benefits.

The study used a multi-method approach, combining qualitative case studies and policy analysis to examine sustainable tourism practices in Europe. The evidence from the three case studies showed that responsible tourism has been successful in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and they were selected to cover diverse European contexts. In Viscri, Romania, community-based rural tourism projects preserve traditional heritage and provide livelihoods, promoting decent work, community development and ecosystem conservation. In Dubrovnik, Croatia, high visitor pressure has led to regulatory measures aligned with sustainable urban development and protection of the marine environment. In Benidorm, Spain, initiatives focus on energy efficiency, waste reduction and off-peak tourism, reflecting responsible consumption, climate action and economic resilience.

The study used a multi-method approach, combining qualitative case studies and policy analysis. It examined EU tourism strategies and thematic developments from conceptual frameworks to concrete examples. The methodological approach produced valuable insights, but limitations included focusing on three case studies and relying on qualitative data. The organizational structure, structured according to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) themes and EU vs. local levels, effectively linked macro policies to micro practices. However, the focus on EU examples limits transferability. However, documented sustainability practices and technical solutions, such as smart energy systems, waste recycling programs, and eco-certifications, can be a source of inspiration for tourism development in other parts of the world with similar socioeconomic and environmental conditions or related sustainability goals. The overall approach of the study allowed for a balanced analysis. Through comparing sector case studies under different conditions, a solid basis for understanding common principles and adaptations specific to the context of sustainable tourism in the EU was provided. It should be emphasized that in all three case studies, strategies were implemented to reduce water and energy consumption and improve waste management, as these are areas where tourism planning intersects with environmental engineering in order to optimize resource management.

In order to foster sustainable tourism in EU destinations, it is recommended to integrate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into planning and development strategies. This includes addressing objectives such as ecosystem conservation, cultural heritage preservation and social inclusion. In addition, multi-level governance coordination between EU, national, regional and local authorities should be pursued to ensure coherence and avoid policy fragmentation. This can be achieved through collaboration between national tourism boards, regional bodies and municipalities.

To encourage sustainable tourism, it is essential to invest in training programs for public employees, tourism businesses and local communities. These programs should focus on sustainable practices and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Providing incentives for green investments, such as subsidies for renewable energy installations or funding for improved water and waste management systems, can encourage green practices. In addition, strategies can be implemented to manage visitor numbers and spread demand, such as promoting alternative destinations, supporting off-season events and using digital tools to inform tourists about crowding. Performance indicators based on the SDG targets should be developed to monitor the impact of tourism, with transparent reporting at destination and national level. Supporting innovation and diversification in sustainable tourism can be achieved through research and pilot projects, reducing reliance on mass market segments. Collaboration with technology providers and academic institutions can accelerate the achievement of the SDGs and maintain competitiveness.

## Appendix 1

**Table**  
*Explanation of the SDG targets*

<b>SDG target</b>	<b>Goal title</b>	<b>Target description</b>
SDG 3.9	Good health and well-being	By 2030, substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination.
SDG 6.4	Clean water and sanitation	By 2030, substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater to address water scarcity.
SDG 7.3	Affordable and clean energy	By 2030, double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency.
SDG 8.2	Decent work and economic growth	Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation.
SDG 8.3	Decent work and economic growth	Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation.
SDG 8.9	Decent work and economic growth	By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products.
SDG 9.1	Industry, innovation and infrastructure	Develop quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure to support economic development and human well-being.
SDG 11.3	Sustainable cities and communities	Enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management.

SDG 11.4	Sustainable cities and communities	Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage.
SDG 11.6	Sustainable cities and communities	By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management.
SDG 12.5	Responsible consumption and production	By 2030, substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse.
SDG 12.7	Responsible consumption and production	Promote public procurement practices that are sustainable, in accordance with national policies and priorities.
SDG 12.8	Responsible consumption and production	Ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature.
SDG 12.b	Responsible consumption and production	Develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products.
SDG 13.2	Climate action	Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning.
SDG 15.1	Life on land	By 2020, ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services.
SDG 17.16	Partnerships for the goals	Enhance the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources.
SDG 17.17	Partnerships for the goals	Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships.

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PROMOVAREA TURISMULUI  
RESPONSABIL - IMPLEMENTAREA OBIECTIVELOR DE DEZVOLTARE  
DURABILĂ ÎN DESTINAȚIILE TURISTICE

(Rezumat)

Obiectivele de dezvoltare durabilă (ODD) constituie o preocupare globală de la introducerea lor de către Organizația Națiunilor Unite în 2015. Sectorul turismului deține un rol central în atingerea acestor obiective, întrucât generează locuri de muncă și venituri contribuind la creșterea economică. Expansiunea industriei este atribuită unor factori precum globalizarea, schimbările în domeniul transportului, creșterea populației, progresele tehnologice, platformele digitale și extinderea canalelor de comunicare. Acest studiu își propune să exploreze convergența dintre turismul responsabil și ODD-uri, concentrându-se pe destinațiile turistice cunoscute. Se urmărește identificarea strategiilor de succes și a metodelor noi de promovare a turismului responsabil, în special prin reducerea sărăciei, protecția mediului, conservarea patrimoniului cultural și incluziune socială. Lucrarea prezintă, de asemenea, studii de caz din diferite destinații și propune recomandări concrete pentru factorii de decizie politică, părțile interesate din domeniul turismului și membrii comunităților cu privire la modul de încorporare a conceptelor de turism responsabil în strategiile lor. Concluziile au implicații pentru factorii de decizie,



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părțile interesate și profesioniștii implicați în gestionarea turismului și dezvoltarea durabilă. O mai bună înțelegere a dimensiunilor economice și de mediu ale turismului permite părților interesate să elaboreze strategii informate pentru a maximiza beneficiile turismului, atenuând în același timp impactul negativ al acestuia asupra mediului și comunităților locale.