
Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism (MST):

Towards a list of SF-MST based indicators for international comparability

**Concept note prepared for discussion
at the 21st meeting of the Committee on Statistics**

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1. Introduction

Feasible, relevant, and reliable data and indicators are increasingly necessary to understand the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of tourism's role in sustainable development. These measures need to be produced in a harmonized manner across countries and destinations to effectively communicate progress, benchmark performance, identify best practices, and strengthen the role of tourism in sustainable development policy.

The Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism (SF-MST) is an integrated framework that describes the main concepts, definitions, and data organization structures to support the production of internationally comparable data on the impacts and dependencies of tourism on the economy, society, and the environment. The United Nations Statistical Commission endorsed the Framework at its 55th session (27 February – 1 March 2024, New York), following its adoption by the UN Tourism General Assembly at its 25th session (16-20 October 2023). The SF-MST thus constitutes the third statistical standard for tourism, following the International Recommendations for Tourism Statistics and the Tourism Satellite Account: Recommended Methodological Framework.

The Statistical Framework for MST supports the organization of data at international, national and subnational scales, in view of the important interlinkages between these scales in understanding the sustainability of tourism.

Tourism is an inherently territorial phenomenon, with interlinkages between international, national and subnational scales that are important for considering the sustainability of tourism. The Framework, therefore, supports the organization of data at these different scales through agreed concepts, definitions and data organization structures, providing a valuable starting point for deriving harmonized indicators for international comparability.

Indeed, the SF-MST recognizes that, while many indicators can be derived from the data it organizes, the determination of an agreed set of indicators for international comparability purposes is a complementary process that must consider both the relevance of the indicators and the feasibility of their measurement.

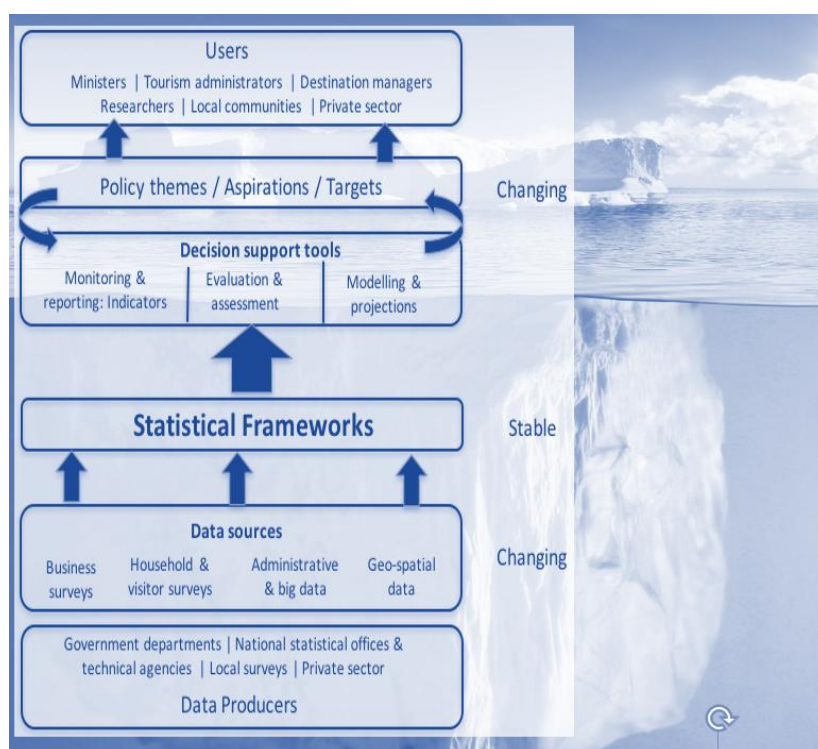
This concept note aims to outline the process for developing a core set of SF-MST-based indicators for international comparability including key steps, timeline, and potential stakeholders.

2. Role of the Statistical Framework for MST in the identification of sustainable tourism indicators

Statistical standards play a critical role in providing a common language for measuring tourism in a consistent, comparable, and credible manner. They establish the internationally agreed concepts, definitions, and data organization structures that guide the production of tourism statistics. These frameworks enable the derivation of key indicators, which in turn support the interpretation and analysis necessary for building knowledge and informing decision-making.

Although statistical frameworks themselves remain largely invisible to the public, they underpin widely used indicators. For example, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is universally known, yet its source framework—the System of National Accounts (SNA)—is less recognized. In the same way, the Statistical Framework for MST underpins the development of sustainable tourism indicators.

The following figure aims to illustrate the relation between standards and indicators:



The visible tip—the data and indicators—rests on a vast, unseen foundation below the surface: the statistical standards. It is this hidden structure that ensures the data we rely on is robust and meaningful.

These frameworks serve as the bedrock for harmonized and meaningful data, although they generally do not prescribe a set of indicators for reporting purposes.

There are three types of indicators that are considered in Statistical Framework for MST: (i) totals and aggregates (e.g. total visitor numbers, tourism direct GDP); (ii) structural statistics (e.g. share of inbound visitors of total visitors, proportion of tourism employment in total employment); and (iii) ratio indicators (e.g. number of visitors compared to local population; energy use per visitor).

3. Process to develop a core set of SF-MST-based indicators for international comparability

3.1. Governance

The development of SF-MST was guided by a dedicated Expert Group, under the auspices of the UN Tourism Committee on Statistics, which serves as the global intergovernmental body on tourism statistics.

The UN Tourism Committee on Statistics supports the fulfillment of UN Tourism's official mandate on tourism statistics, as recognized by the UN: "to collect, to analyse, to publish, to standardize and to improve the statistics of tourism, and to promote the integration of these statistics within the sphere of the United Nations system"¹.

The Committee on Statistics reports both to the international tourism community—represented at its highest level by the UN Tourism Executive Council and General Assembly—and to the international statistical community—represented at its highest level by the United Nations Statistical Commission, which in turn reports to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

As agreed at the 6th International Conference on Tourism Statistics ²and subsequently recognized by the UN Statistical Commission³, the mission of the Expert Group on MST comprised several interrelated lines of work:

- (a) Developing the technical content of the Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism;
- (b) Engaging and building consensus across statistical and tourism communities with a view to presenting the statistical framework to the Statistical Commission for its endorsement;
- (c) Supporting countries in piloting and implementing the Statistical Framework;
- (d) Developing of a core set of indicators derived from the Statistical Framework for international comparability purposes;
- (e) Setting up of a global data set and processes for country data reporting.

Following the endorsement of the Statistical Framework for MST by the United Nations Statistical Commission, the Expert Group on MST is now focusing on supporting its implementation worldwide including through the development of a core set of SF-MST-based indicators for international comparability purposes⁴, corresponding to lines of work c) and d) above.

The core set of indicators will play a central role in guiding SF-MST implementation worldwide. The indicators will subsequently be integrated into the UN Tourism Statistics Questionnaire for country reporting, feeding this new information from countries worldwide into the UN Tourism Statistics Database (line of work e)) and enhancing the availability of consistent, comparable, and policy-relevant tourism data at the global level.

¹ Agreement between UN and UN Tourism whereby UN Tourism became a UN Specialized agency; United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/58/232

² 6th International Conference on Tourism Statistics: Measuring Sustainable Tourism, held in June 2017, in Manila, the Philippines (<https://www.untourism.int/archive/asia/event/6th-international-conference-tourism-statistics-measuring-sustainable-tourism>)

³ Report of the World Tourism Organization E/CN.3/2024/17, available at: https://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/statcom/session_55/documents/2024-17-TourismStats-E.pdf

⁴ 5th meeting on 1 October 2024 at UN Tourism Headquarters in Madrid, Spain

To advance efforts in the development of a core set of indicators, the Expert Group on MST agreed to establish a dedicated Task Team under its leadership. The list of volunteer participants in the Task Team to date is available in Annex I.

3.2. Approach agreed by the Expert Group on MST

The aim is to design a single core set of around 10 to 15 indicators, covering the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of tourism in a balanced way.

These core indicators are intended to:

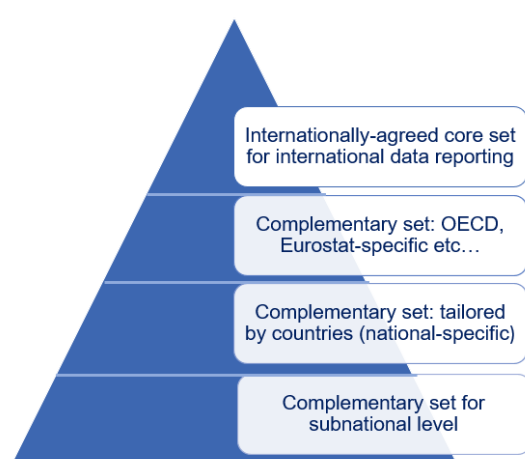
- enable international comparability, ensuring that countries can measure and report in a consistent manner.
- expand UN Tourism's global statistical database, making information more widely available and comparable across countries.

A guiding principle is feasibility: indicators should be achievable by a majority of countries in the world. Proxy indicators may be used where direct measurement is not yet possible.

Alongside the global core, complementary indicator sets may be developed to respond to specific regional or thematic priorities (e.g. OECD, Eurostat, Pacific), as well national and subnational contexts. These can allow for greater detail, disaggregation, or a specific policy focus, while the global core will ensure international comparability and strive for balanced feasibility and relevance for the majority of countries worldwide.

The approach — a globally comparable core set and flexible complementary sets — strikes a balance between standardization, ensuring a common language for international statistics, and adaptability, allowing countries and regions the space to innovate and adapt to their unique circumstances.

The following figure aims to illustrate the approach:



This approach seeks to ensure alignment and coherence between different indicator initiatives, notably those of Eurostat, OECD and UN Tourism.

An informal coordination meeting was hosted by Austria's Federal Ministry of Economy, Energy and Tourism, together with Statistics Austria, in Vienna on 2–3 September 2025. The meeting brought together representatives from Austria, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, and Slovenia, the European Commission (DG MOVE, Eurostat, Joint Research Centre), OECD, and UN Tourism. Participants reaffirmed the approach agreed by the Expert Group on MST and emphasized that the core set will constitute a common indicator set between Eurostat, OECD, and UN Tourism, while still allowing flexibility for each organization to produce complementary indicators as considered appropriate in light of their mandate and constituencies.

3.3. Current developments

A first proposal for discussion by the Task Team is being prepared by the Task Team leads: IN2destination, Government of Andalucía and University of Málaga. This initial proposal aims to presents a short selection of indicators addressing economic, social and environmental perspectives, enabling countries to report comparable data. It builds on previous work, notably:

- The [Proposal of indicators for measuring the sustainability of tourism for policy decision making in line with SF-MST](#) prepared by Andalusia, IN2destination and the University of Malaga for the 5th meeting of the Expert Group on MST (1 October 2024, Madrid, Spain)
- The paper [Proposals for a set of indicators](#) prepared by UN Tourism for the 4th Meeting of the Expert Group on MST (19-20 September 2023, Marbella, Spain)
- The paper [Towards an international dataset for MST](#) prepared by UN Tourism for the 2nd meeting of the Expert Group on MST (24-25 October 2018, Madrid, Spain)

The proposal also takes into consideration the latest developments from Eurostat and OECD.

Each indicator may include one or several metrics, which will be developed by the Task Team. While it is recognized that some indicators may not yet be available across all countries, they remain highly relevant for policymaking and sustainable destination management—thereby ensuring the indicator set also maintain an aspirational quality.

In cases of limited data availability, proxy measures will be proposed that countries may choose to report on while further statistical developments take place. For example, within the economic dimension:

Key indicator: Tourism Direct GDP as a percentage of total GDP

Proxy: Tourism Direct Gross Value Added as a percentage of total Gross Value Added

The following selection of potential themes have been identified:

Within the **General Dimension**:

- Length of Stay
- Seasonality
- Tourism Concentration

Within the **Economic Dimension**:

- Visitor expenditure
- Employment in tourism
- Visitor Dependency
- Tourism Economic Performance

Within the **Social Dimension**:

- Decent work
- Host community perception
- Visitor satisfaction

Within the **Environmental Dimension**:

- GHG emissions
- Energy flows
- Solid waste flows
- Water flows
- Visitation to protected areas

3.4. Timeline

Year 2025	
November	Creation of the MST Task Team. The MST Task Team will review existing material, including the Eurostat and OECD work, to come up with approx. 10-15 indicators
December	Technical work of the MST Task Team (refinements of indicators, disaggregation options, proxies, metadata, etc...)
Year 2026	
January	Coordination meeting on MST-based indicators with Eurostat, OECD and UN Tourism, as agreed in the Vienna meeting.
January - March	Continuation of the technical work of the MST Task Team (refinements of indicators, disaggregation options, proxies, metadata, etc...), to propose a common core set of indicators that are acceptable to Eurostat, OECD and UN Tourism.
April	Presentation of the core set to the MST Expert Group, OECD Working Party on Tourism Statistics and Eurostat Working Group on Tourism Statistics, for review and approval.
May - June	Incorporation of comments + testing in selected countries
June - October	Further refinements and consultation + finalization of the proposal
October - November	Presentation to the UN Tourism Committee on Statistics for approval. Preparation of UN Tourism's report to the UN Statistical Commission
Year 2027	
March	58 th session of the UN Statistical Commission

Annex I

Provisional list of volunteer participants in the MST Task Team

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