



72nd CEU

UN Tourism Commission for Europe

St. Julian's, Malta, 12 – 14 May 2026

CONFERENCE

**“Driving Tourism Towards the Future We Want:
A Dialogue on Policies to Balance Growth,
People and Planet”**

On the occasion of the 72nd UN Tourism Commission for Europe
14 May 2026 | St. Julian's, Malta

Organised in collaboration with the t-Forum and hosted by the
Government of Malta and the Malta Tourism Authority



Table of Contents

The Conference

Main Takeaways

Opening Remarks: Setting the Context

One-to-One Dialogue: From Knowledge to Policy

High-Level Panel: Policies to to Balance Growth, People and Planet

Interactive Co-Creation Session: Shared Challenges, Collaborative Solutions

Closing Remarks: A Commitment to Action

Looking Ahead

The Conference

Held in St. Julian's, Malta, on 14 May 2026, within the framework of the 72nd UN Tourism Commission for Europe, the conference **“Driving Tourism Towards the Future We Want: A Dialogue on Policies to Balance Growth, People and Planet”** brought together ministers, European Union officials, industry leaders, academics and destination managers from across the region to discuss how tourism can grow in a way that works for people, places and the planet.

The conference was structured in three main sessions:

1) a one-to-one dialogue on linking knowledge and policy, 2) a high-level panel on tourism governance to balance tourism growth, and 3) an innovative co-creation session on managing tourism flows. Together, they created a space for exchange, practical insights and policy approaches to shared challenges.

Main Takeaways

Resident well-being must become the defining measure of tourism success

Tourism cannot be assessed only through visitor numbers, expenditure or GDP contribution. Its success must also be measured by the quality of life of host communities, their tolerance thresholds, their participation in decision-making and their capacity to benefit from tourism.

Balancing tourism growth is a governance challenge

There is a need for stronger coordination across ministries, public authorities, destinations, communities and the private sector. Tourism intersects with housing, mobility, infrastructure, labour markets, climate resilience and urban planning. Managing it requires whole-of-government approaches and national/local coordination.

Tourism concentration goes beyond overcrowded hotspots. It is shaped by connectivity, transport, seasonality, public space, accommodation regulation, access and marketing. Effective dispersal requires integrated policy design, targeted regulation, adequate infrastructure and strong cooperation across sectors and levels of governance.

Rural and lesser-visited destinations can benefit from tourism when communities lead

Tourism can create new opportunities for rural communities when it is connected to local livelihoods, agriculture, culture and village-based development. However, dispersal must not simply move pressure from one place to another; it must be planned with communities and supported by capacity.



Data matters, but action matters more

Evidence, measurement and monitoring are essential to understand destination challenges and guide decision-making. Yet data alone is not enough. Issues such as tourism concentration, resident well-being and fragmented governance call for practical, coordinated responses that move beyond diagnosis and translate evidence into concrete action.

Academic knowledge must become more usable for policymakers and industry

Research must be more accessible, actionable and relevant to the needs of policymakers and industry. Bridging the gap between academic knowledge and practical decision-making is essential to strengthen tourism governance and support more effective policy responses.

Knowledge exchange is key in a connected world

Connected challenges require connected solutions. By sharing knowledge, experience and innovation, destinations can respond more intelligently, adapt faster and advance sustainable tourism together.

Artificial intelligence is becoming a practical tool for destination management

Artificial intelligence is a powerful tool to visitor behaviour analysis, demand management and destination marketing. Its growing role calls for destinations to build the capacity to use digital tools responsibly, strategically and in ways that support better management decisions.

Climate resilience must be integrated into tourism policy

Climate change is a central issue for tourism planning and destination management. Building resilience must therefore be embedded in tourism policy and treated as a core component of destination stewardship, ensuring that destinations can adapt, respond and remain sustainable over time.

Opening Remarks: Setting the Context

The opening session set the tone by bringing together national, European and global perspectives on tourism governance.

H.E. Dr. Ian Borg reflected on Malta's reality as a small island destination of 600,000 inhabitants receiving over four million international arrivals annually, calling for careful, resident-centred management when destinations approach their natural and social limits.

"Tourism pressure in a small island destination should be understood not as a crisis, but as a governance responsibility that demands careful, resident-centred management"

**H.E. Dr. Ian Borg,
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister
for Foreign Affairs and Tourism of Malta.**



H.E. Dr. Ian Borg, Deputy Prime Minister / Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism of Malta

H.E. Ms. Shaikha Al Nuwais underlined that tourism is navigating deep change, shaped by climate pressures, geopolitical uncertainty, labour market shifts and artificial intelligence, and called for long-term policies centred on people and communities. Her message was clear:

"Connected challenges require connected solutions — and tourism policy must place people and communities at the heart of long-term decision-making"

**H.E. Ms. Shaikha Al Nuwais,
Secretary-General of UN Tourism**



H.E. Ms. Shaikha Al Nuwais, Secretary-General, UN Tourism

H.E. Mr. Apostolos Tzitzikostas placed the discussion within the wider European context, noting that Europe welcomed 583 million visitors in 2025 and highlighting the European Commission's work on a new strategy for a resilient and competitive tourism sector.

"Europe's tourism resilience must be matched by preparedness, cross-border cooperation and stronger crisis coordination mechanisms"

**H.E. Mr. Apostolos Tzitzikostas,
European Commissioner for Sustainable Transport and Tourism**



H.E. Mr. Apostolos Tzitzikostas. European Commissioner for Sustainable Transport & Tourism (video message)

One-to-One Dialogue: From Knowledge to Policy

Led by Ms. Cordula Wohlmuther, Director a.i. of the Regional Department for Europe at UN Tourism, the one-to-one dialogue with Professor Jafar Jafari, founder of the t-Forum and UN Tourism Ulysses Prize laureate for his outstanding contribution to the creation and dissemination of innovative knowledge in tourism, explored one of tourism’s recurring challenges: how to bring academic knowledge closer to policy and practice.

The exchange presented the t-Forum as a bridge between research, policymaking and destination management, helping ensure that knowledge is connected to the real decisions shaping destinations.

Balanced Tourism?

Professor Jafari noted that there is no single universal definition of “balanced tourism”. Instead, he proposed a people-centred view rooted in anthropology and community experience: tourism is balanced when host communities remain satisfied with its presence and when the relationship between hosts and guests remains positive.

He also cautioned against relying too heavily on the term “overtourism”, favouring instead the idea of “under-capacity development”. This shifts the focus from blaming tourism demand to asking whether destinations have the infrastructure, governance and social readiness to host visitors sustainably.



Main Messages

Tourism success begins with the host community. Resident satisfaction and community well-being must be placed as core indicators of success.

Words matter. Moving from “overtourism” to “under-capacity development” changes the policy conversation from blame to preparedness, planning, management and governance.

Knowledge must move closer to action. Academic research has greater value when it is translated into tools, evidence and insights that policymakers and industry leaders can use.

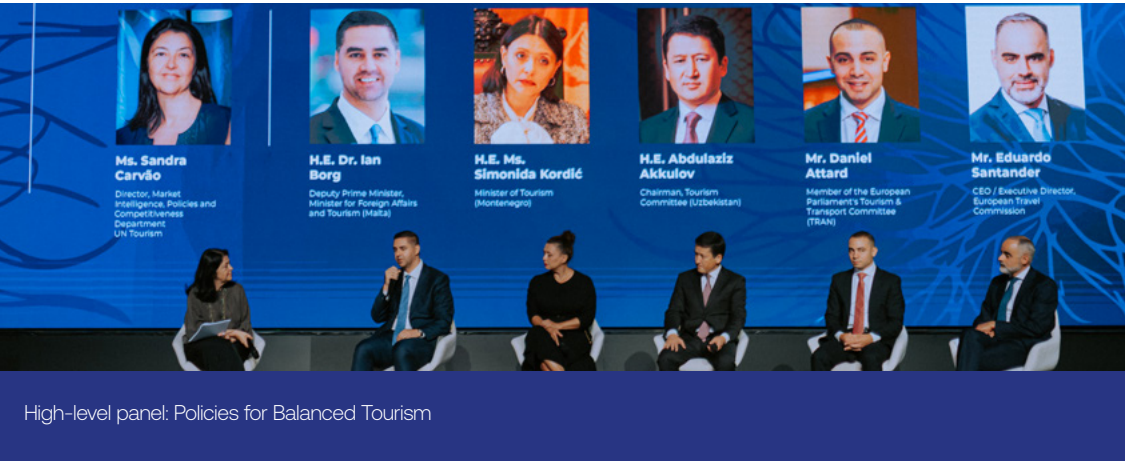


High-Level Panel:

Policies to Balance Growth, People and Planet

Moderated by Ms. Sandra Carvao, Director of Market Intelligence, Policies and Competitiveness at UN Tourism, the high-level panel brought together the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism of Malta, the Minister of Tourism of Montenegro, the Chairman of the Tourism Committee of Uzbekistan, a Member of the European Parliament’s Tourism & Transport Committee and the CEO/Executive Director of the European Travel Commission.

The discussion focused on governance, the democratisation of tourism benefits and the policy tools available to manage tourism in a more balanced, inclusive and sustainable way.



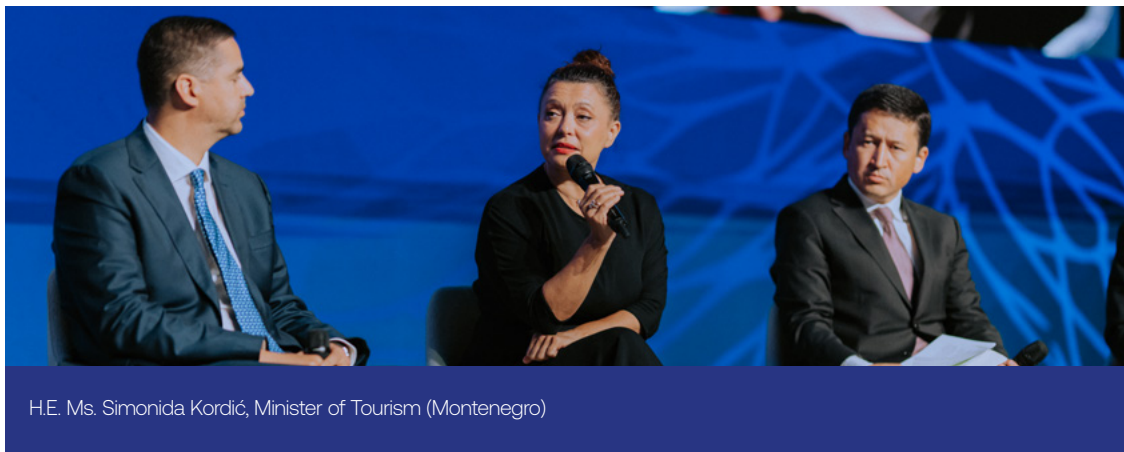
Resident-centric Policy and Management

H.E. Dr. Ian Borg, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism of Malta, reaffirmed Malta’s commitment to resident-centred policymaking, stressing the need to manage the impacts of tourism on housing affordability, traffic, noise and quality of life. He explained Malta’s policy approach including visitor caps at Comino Island’s Blue Lagoon; accommodation regulation reforms or the noise monitoring pilots in Valletta. The message was clear: the aim is not to curtail tourism, but to manage it — in time, in space and socially— more effectively.



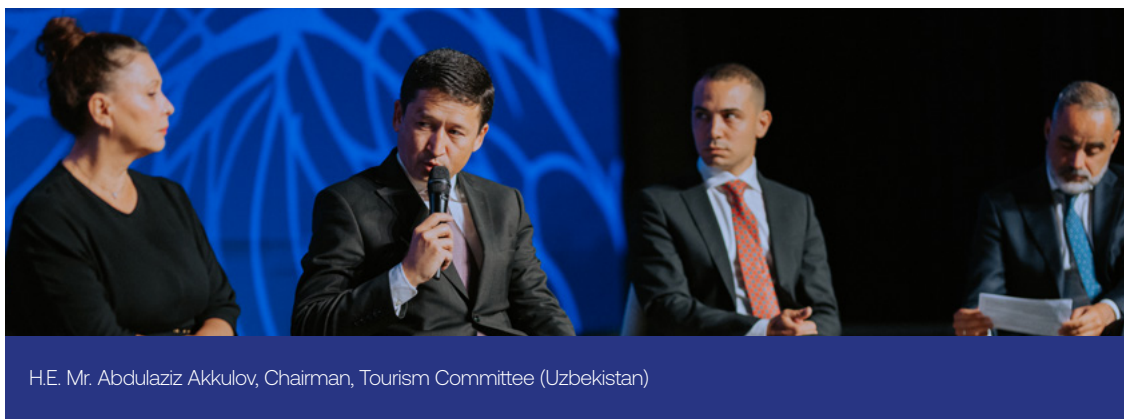
Regional Dispersal and Rural Communities

H.E. Ms. Simonida Kordić, Minister of Tourism, shared Montenegro's efforts to diversify tourism beyond coastal hotspots and towards inland areas, rural communities and agritourism. Targeted policy support helped increase registered tourism homestays from approximately 56 in 2019 to 368 by the time of the conference, creating new opportunities for communities previously dependent on agriculture. She also highlighted a cross-border initiative involving nine South-East European countries to position the region as a single long-haul destination.



Tourism must Translate into Inclusive Growth

H.E. Mr. Abdulaziz Akkulov, Chairman of the Tourism Committee of Uzbekistan, presented Uzbekistan's rapid tourism growth since the launch of reforms in 2017, with international visitor arrivals rising from 2.7 million to 11.7 million by 2025, tourism contributing 3.5% of GDP and generating USD 4.8 billion in service exports. Beyond growth, he emphasized decentralisation, village-based ecotourism and livelihood creation, highlighting the example of Sentob, recognised by UN Tourism as a Best Tourism Village in 2023.



Governance and connectivity

Mr. Daniel Attard MEP, Member of the European Parliament's Tourism & Transport Committee, called for connectivity to be treated as an essential service, comparable to energy or water. He cautioned against confusing hotspot overcrowding with overtourism, noting that 80% of European tourism is intra-European mobility. According to him, spreading tourism depends on creating accessible routes to less-visited destinations, supported by more flexible EU rules and stronger action on short-term rental regulation.



Mr. Daniel Attard MEP, Member of the Tourism & Transport Committee (TRAN), European Parliament

Semantics, Strategy and the Balance of Scales

Mr. Eduardo Santander, CEO/Executive Director of the European Travel Commission, reflected on the evolution of tourism discourse from sustainability to regeneration to balance. He highlighted three structural priorities: attracting visitors to off-the-beaten-track destinations; addressing seasonality, which affects 96% of European destinations; and involving local populations meaningfully in governance. He also called for greater flexibility, agility and cooperation in a polycrisis environment, stressing the value of learning from one another.



Mr. Eduardo Santander, CEO / Executive Director, European Travel Commission

Main Messages

Tourism requires inclusive governance and proactive management. Destinations must manage visitor flows and tourism-related externalities through a resident-centred lens.

Inclusive growth must be visible in everyday lives. Tourism's success needs to be measured not only in arrivals and exports, but in livelihoods, rural development and community opportunity.

Dispersal can create opportunity. Rural and lesser-visited areas can benefit from tourism when policies support local participation, infrastructure and market access.

Connectivity is a policy issue. Access to less-visited destinations depends on transport, regulation, investment and coordination.

Cooperation requires commitment. True cooperation goes beyond visibility and goodwill; it requires shared investment, shared responsibility and long-term planning.



Interactive Co-Creation Session:

Shared Challenges, Collaborative Solutions

Facilitated by Professor Godfrey Baldacchino, Former Pro-Rector and Professor of Sociology at the University of Malta, the co-creation session moved the conversation from diagnosis to action through interactive polling and collaborative exchange.

Using a live digital polling tool, participants were asked to vote based on eight pre-identified challenges related to tourism flow management, selecting the three they considered most pressing. The results served as a basis for the expert discussion and informed the subsequent co-creation segment.

Existing Challenges

Data and monitoring

Limited or fragmented data on visitor flows, behaviour, carrying capacity, data on resident sentiment and environmental impacts can constrain evidence-based decision-making.

Governance and whole-of-government approaches

Tourism flow management often requires coordination across ministries, agencies and policy areas beyond tourism, including, culture, environment, housing, transport, urban planning and regional development.

Vertical coordination

Aligning national, regional and local tourism priorities can be challenging, particularly when responsibilities, mandates and resources are distributed across different levels of government.

Public-private partnerships

Managing tourism flows requires coordinated action between public authorities and private-sector stakeholders. However, differing priorities, limited data sharing and uneven incentives can make collaboration challenging.

Demand management and visitor flows

Destinations may need to influence when, where and how visitors travel for a more balanced distribution of tourism benefits, minimized impacts and enhanced visitor experience, while also encouraging responsible behaviour.

Regulatory frameworks

Existing regulatory instruments may not always be sufficiently agile, integrated or adapted to the fast-paced emerging tourism pressures, business models and territorial contexts.

Resident and community engagement

Ensuring that residents and local communities are meaningfully involved in tourism planning and decision-making is essential to maintain social acceptance and ensure shared benefits.

Capacity for policy implementation

Even when policy objectives are clear, destinations may face limitations in financial resources, technical expertise, institutional capacity or enforcement mechanisms.



Three Priority Challenges Identified by Participants

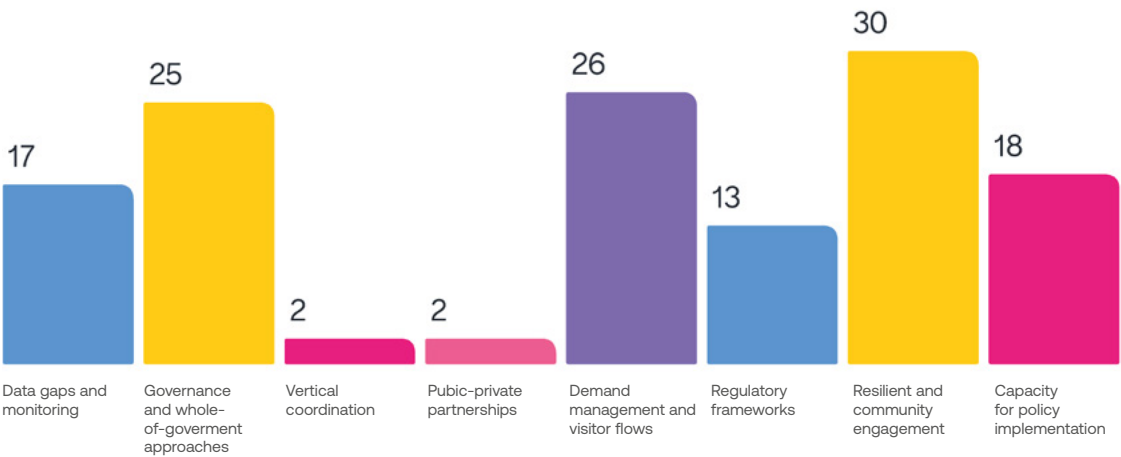
The polling results highlighted three priority challenges, reflecting participants shared concerns around:

Resident and community engagement: This result reaffirmed that community legitimacy lies at the heart of tourism governance debates, underscoring the importance of meaningful resident participation in shaping tourism policies.

Demand management and visitor flows: The second challenge highlighted the complexity of managing tourism demand and influencing behaviour in ways that balance benefits, impacts and the visitor experience.

Governance and whole-of-government approaches: The third challenge reflected concerns about fragmented institutional landscapes and pointed to the need for stronger coordination across sectors and levels of government.

Select the 3 most pressing challenges



Diverse Perspectives on common challenges

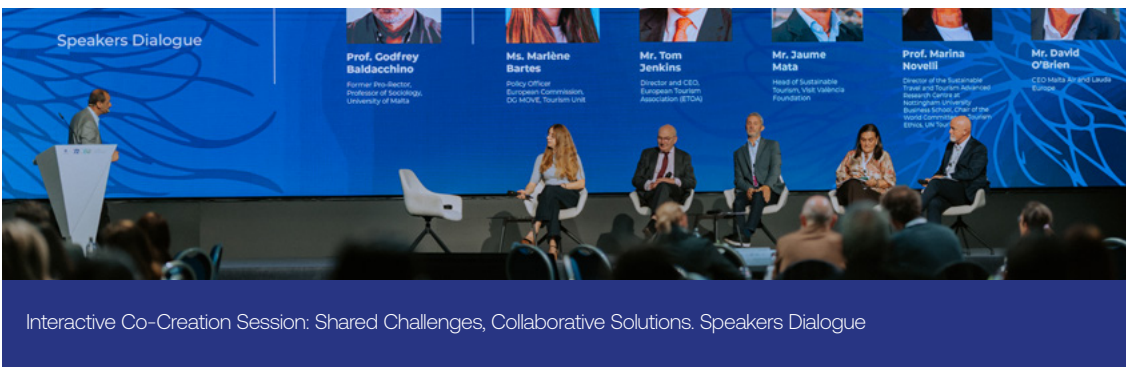
A panel, composed of Mr. David O'Brien, CEO of Malta Air and Lauda Europe; Mr. Tom Jenkins, Director and CEO of the European Tourism Association (ETOA); Prof. Marina Novelli, Chair of the UN Tourism World Committee on Tourism Ethics; Ms. Marlène Bartes, Policy Officer at the European Commission (DG MOVE); and Mr. Jaume Mata, Head of Sustainable Tourism at the Visit València Foundation — offered diverse perspectives and reactions to the challenges. Mr. Jenkins argued that tourism is driven by individual consumer choices, not by top-down planning, making it difficult for governments to direct tourists where to go. Using Venice as an example, he noted that even decades of efforts to redistribute visitors away from overcrowded areas have largely failed, showing how challenging it is to manage tourism flows effectively. Mr. O'Brien challenged the framing of "overtourism" as a spatial problem, arguing instead that airport governance structures — particularly concession monopolies — create systematic barriers to dispersal by preventing price competition and route development in secondary airports. He advocated for enabling mobility rather than controlling it.

Prof. Novelli took a structural counterpoint, arguing that redistributing tourists without addressing the root causes of excessive demand, governance gaps and carrying capacity limits will not solve the underlying problem. She called for limits of acceptable change to be formally put into practice and for a shift from spatially based to structurally based solutions.

Ms. Bartes underscored that the identified challenges are deeply interconnected. Referring to Eurostat data, she noted that, in the European Region¹, one third of tourism stays take place in July and August, while 80% of demand is concentrated in only 20% of destinations. She further highlighted that travel decisions are largely shaped by cost and safety considerations and emphasized that effective governance remains one of the greatest challenges.

Mr. Mata underlined the need to include the environmental dimension in strategies to balance tourism flows, as recent events in Valencia have demonstrated how extreme weather events can dismantle well-laid tourism strategies overnight.

¹ European Union (EU) Member States, candidate and EFTA countries https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Seasonality_in_the_tourist_accommodation_sector#Seasonality_at_country_level



Main Messages

Tourism flow management requires more than redistribution. Destinations must address the structural drivers of pressure, including excessive demand, governance gaps, define carrying capacity and the limits of acceptable change.

Visitor behaviour is difficult to direct through planning alone. Tourism flows are shaped by individual choices, cost, safety and destination appeal, making demand management a complex and long-term policy challenge.

Connectivity shapes dispersal. More balanced tourism flows depend not only on destination strategies, but also on transport access, airport governance, route development and the enabling conditions that connect visitors to lesser-visited places.

Governance is the central challenge. The concentration of demand, seasonality and diversity of territorial needs require coordinated responses across sectors, levels of government and policy areas.

Environmental resilience must be embedded in tourism planning. Climate-related risks can rapidly disrupt tourism strategies, making sustainability and resilience essential to the management of visitor flows.



Co-Creating Solutions

The second part of the session was designed as an interactive co-creation exercise focused on exploring how European destinations can better manage tourism flows in ways that benefit residents, visitors, businesses and the environment.

Through expert discussions, audience participation and collaborative exchange, participants identified key challenges, shared practical responses and discussed policy approaches aimed at balancing tourism growth with social, cultural and environmental sustainability.



Interactive Co-Creation Session: Shared Challenges, Collaborative Solutions. Co-created Solutions Session



Challenge 1: Resident and Community Engagement

Proposed approaches:

- Participatory planning from the start of destination strategy development.
- Longitudinal measurement of resident sentiment across time.
- Formal consultation processes linked to specific action plans and monitoring.
- Local ambassador programmes to maintain community connection to cultural and natural heritage.
- Engage the private sector in local community projects.
- Awareness campaigns about the importance of tourism combined with the engagement of local communities in the decision making.

Collaboration in practical way with host structur and local community like a local ambasador of cultutal and natural heritage .(local products in hotels).

Cooperational tourism bussines/local community projects.

Formal, structured consultations, followed by specific topical Workshops leading to an Action Plan or strategy plus Monitoring Make sure all stakeholders are involved.

Leave it the local democratic process, but this process has to be informed by intelligent discussion and consultation.

Enforcement of rules (noise, housing, etc.). communication, measurement of resident sentiment.

The future of tourism depends on achieving a healthy balance between economic growth, environmental responsibility, and the wellbeing of local communities. Important residents feel respected&involved.

Make communities able to shape solutions & correlate different data linking tourism with water, garbage, and others indicators ensuring its GIS based consistently.

Awareness of the importance of tourism by the local population: engaging residents (in decision making, tourism offer); spreading (across time & space, through events in shoulder season, mobility).



Challenge 2: Demand Management and Visitor Flows

Proposed approaches:

- Digital tools and artificial intelligence for visitor management.
- Carrying capacity and cost-benefit analysis.
- Dynamic pricing and time-slot access systems.
- Public transport investment as an alternative to private vehicles.
- Diversification of tourism products across seasons and destinations.
- Implementation of behavioural tools.
- Regulation or limitations applicable to high-demand tourism experiences.
- Improvement of infrastructure combined with diversification strategies.

Train AI to display content you want to see for your destinations - use digital solutions for visitor management and payment of entrance fees - make public transport attractive to decrease no. of cars.

Design tourism products for other seasons 2. Enhance capabilities for people to travel all year round.

Carrying capacity & cost benefit analysis; data-driven & technologically-backed (smart) management of flows; coordination between transport providers, accommodation & policy makers.

Managing experience of visitors, for cases of severe overcrowding, there must be discussions about restrictions/limitations; communication to potential second-time visitors for less-known places;

Diversification of trip proposals.

Improve infrastructure (connectivity, water and waste management) & diversify the destinations and niche experiences in marketing.

Apply behavioural "nudging" tools (real-time info, dynamic pricing, time-slot). Promote secondary destinations and off-peak travel. Embed responsible behaviour framework.



Challenge 3: Governance and Whole-of-Government Approaches

Proposed approaches:

- Stronger interdepartmental coordination, including taskforces at national, destination and regional levels.
- Integration of tourism into urban planning and mobility strategies.
- Greater prominence for tourism in national political agendas and placing cross cutting issues at a high-level mandate.
- Stronger implementation capacity, especially where tourism intersects with housing, transport, environment and spatial planning.
- Strengthening open communication channels, data, public-private partnerships and smart destinations.

Manage the tourism flow by national and transfrontalier initiative - like the Swiss national project and TicinoTicket (Ticino Region) proposal collaboration in Switzerland.

Raise the importance of tourism in the political agenda. As it's a trans sector industry it's splitted between different ministries. Jointly with the private industry.

Placing cross cutting issues such as tourism with a high level mandate including mandatory inter ministerial mechanism or agency.

Tourism departments need to have good knowledge of other relevant departments/ministeries - co-create and engage with them for joint solutions -try to find a common agenda - Build trust, hierarchy matters.

DMOs inc. all stakeholders, hospitality, transport, CCIs, policy makers. Accessibility. Resilience. Open line communication. Data. Digital transition, public-private partnerships, Smart destinations.

Create permanent interdepartmental Tourism Flow Taskforces at destination or regional level, with decision-making authority. Embed tourism flow considerations into urban plans, mobility strategies, etc.



Climate Change emerges as Key Challenge

At the conclusion of the co-creation segment, participants were invited to identify additional challenges that had not been addressed during the session but should be considered in future tourism policy discussions focused on balancing growth, people and environmental sustainability.

Other Challenges

Skills to implement and manage.	Climate change	Climate change impact	Climate change
Enforcement of regulations	Talent recluitment	Accesible Tourism, Regenerative Tourism, Smart Tourism	Climate change, education
Climate change	Climate change, crisis management, tourism labor shortages	Educational project about cultural and Natural Heritage with local collaboration	Strategic foresight
Lack of manpower in a booming industry	Climate change Carrying capacity Skills	Future proofing of the industry (energy costs, political crises, other viruses)	Travel Visa Agreements for non EU countries

Climate change emerged repeatedly as a pressing tourism-related challenge that must be addressed and prioritised. Participants also raised concerns about skills and talent shortages, accessible tourism in the context of ageing demographics and crisis preparedness and response.



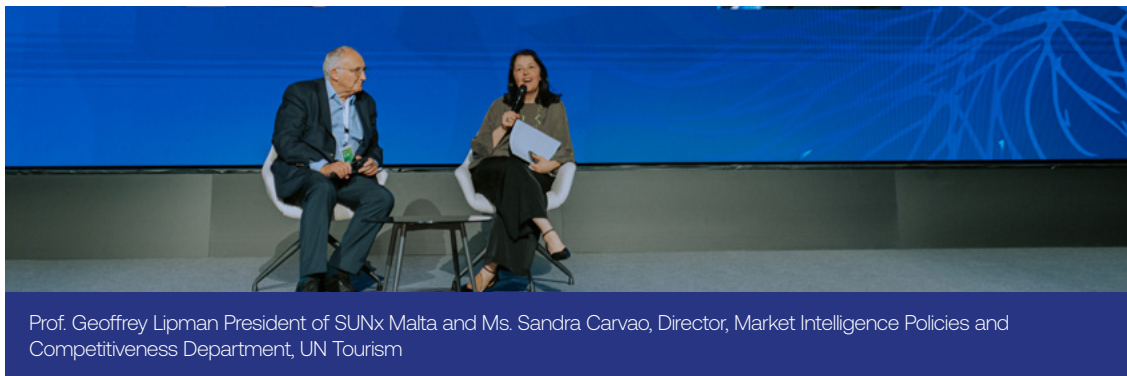
Conclusions of the Interactive Co-Creation Session

The co-creation session concluded with closing reflections delivered by Prof. Geoffrey Lipman, President of SUNx Malta, and chaired by Ms. Sandra Carvao, Director of Market Intelligence, Policies and Competitiveness at UN Tourism.

Prof. Lipman highlighted the complexity of tourism governance, the importance of resident well-being, the need to connect global strategies with local implementation, the role of artificial intelligence in tourism management and the infrastructure challenges affecting sustainable dispersal. He also stressed the need to make academic research more accessible to industry decision-makers.

“Tourism governance must connect global strategies with local implementation”

Prof. Geoffrey Lipman, President of SUNx Malta and former Assistant Secretary-General of UN Tourism



Main Messages

Community legitimacy is now a governance priority. Tourism strategies must be built with residents, not merely communicated to them.

Demand management requires tools and choices. Visitor flows can be shaped through pricing, access systems, transport, product diversification and digital technologies.

Governance fragmentation weakens implementation. Tourism policy must be connected to housing, transport, environment, urban planning and national development agendas.

AI is already part of tourism management. Artificial intelligence is increasingly relevant to visitor behaviour, destination marketing and demand management.

Closing Remarks:

A Commitment to Action

Ms. Cordula Wohlmuther, Director a.i. of the Regional Department for Europe at UN Tourism, reinforced the central message of the conference: stronger destination stewardship requires residents to be placed at the core of decision-making; measurement must focus on what truly matters; and collaboration across sectors, disciplines and levels of governance is essential. She stated that the findings of the co-creation session would help shape the implementation of UN Tourism's Programme of Work.



Looking Ahead

The way forward is clear: tourism must be managed as a long-term, people-centred governance issue. Growth remains important, but the future of tourism will depend on the ability of destinations to balance economic opportunity with resident well-being.

The future we want is not defined by more tourism alone. It is defined by better tourism: tourism that works for people, strengthens places and protects the planet.

UN Tourism will continue working on supporting Member States in this transition, by advancing evidence-based policies, strengthening governance capacities and promoting practical tools that help manage tourism in a more balanced and sustainable way.





UN Tourism



GOVERNMENT OF MALTA
OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER
MINISTRY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS
AND TOURISM



Malta
Tourism Authority

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