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Workshop No. 2

Sustainable and Regenerative Tourism Strategies in the Gulf after COVID-19

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2. Abstract

This workshop aims to explore sustainable and regenerative tourism initiatives and practices in Gulf countries in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Tourism is considered the most inclusive sector and directly and indirectly benefits many sectors, including manufacturing and services, at various stages of development. Tourist expenditures create value across tourism activities, including hospitality, transport, retail, entertainment, and cultural activities. Indirectly, tourism contributes to income in other sectors, such as telecom and financial services. However, tourism was one of the worst-hit sectors globally and in the Gulf region by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lock-down measures and travel restrictions slashed domestic and international tourist arrivals and earnings from the sector. While tourist inflows decreased significantly in 2021 and 2022, the demand spurred considerably in 2023 and 2024. The increase in tourist arrivals was perceived as a positive phenomenon. Yet, the increased inflows have led to over-tourism in specific locales, thereby creating adverse effects on the local ecosystems. This questioned the sustainability of tourism activities in these destinations. Against this background, the proposed workshop focuses on sustainable and regenerative tourism opportunities in Gulf countries after COVID-19. More specifically, the workshop will represent a platform to collect and share ideas about future sustainable and regenerative strategies for tourism development in the Gulf countries.

3. Context

Tourism is considered the most inclusive sector and directly and indirectly benefits many sectors, including manufacturing and services, at various stages of development. Tourist expenditures create

value across tourism activities, including sectors such as hospitality, transport, retail, entertainment, and cultural activities, and others. Indirectly, tourism contributes to income in other sectors, such as telecom and financial services. Tourism also drives construction (infrastructure and accommodation) and the meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions industry. Demand for goods also increases as tourists become more familiar with the products of their destinations. Makochekanwa (2013) studied tourism as an engine of economic growth in the Southern African Development Community member states. The study found that the contribution of tourism to GDP, employment, export receipts, and investment is significant. The author concluded that a 1% increase in tourism receipts causes a 0.16% increase in GDP per capita. According to Fitch Ratings (2024), the GDP contribution from tourism in the GCC is expected to increase from around \$130 billion in 2023 to more than \$340 billion by 2030, which would be more than 10% of GDP in the region.

However, tourism was one of the worst-hit sectors globally and in the Gulf region by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdown measures and travel restrictions slashed domestic and international tourist arrivals and earnings from the sector (Gupta and Das, 2023). According to United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2023) estimates, international tourist arrivals decreased globally by 1 billion for a loss of around \$1 trillion in total export revenues from international tourism in 2021. The lockdowns and travel bans caused significant job losses and economic distress to Gulf economies.

While tourist inflows came down significantly in 2021 and 2022, the demand has spurred significantly in 2023 and 2024. For instance, a sample of GCC airports showed that traffic in 2023 was 8% above 2019 levels and was up by about 20% from 2022 levels (Fitch Ratings, 2024). The consumer behaviour towards tourism destinations has also changed post-COVID-19. Tourists prefer to visit destinations that allow instant/ready-to-go visits. The visa policies allowing visa-free travel, visa on arrival, and e-visa have become very important in this context. Tourism industry offerings have also changed after COVID-19. The focus has been shifted from mass offerings to value and niche tourism. Digital tools have also been incorporated in these offerings by the service suppliers.

While increase in tourist arrivals is a good phenomenon, the increased inflows have led to over tourism in certain places, thereby creating adverse effects on the local ecosystem. This questioned the sustainability of tourism activities in these destinations. This has compelled policymakers to focus on regenerative tourism, which adds value to the local ecosystem while extracting resources from tourist destinations.

In broad terms, regenerative tourism has been identified as a form of tourism going beyond sustainable tourism due to its propensity to not only minimise negative environmental and socio-cultural tourism impacts, as sustainable tourism contemplates, but also for its active role in repairing and restoring ecosystems and local communities affected by tourism (Dredge, 2022). There are multiple ways through which tourism regenerative practices could benefit GCC countries. From an environmental perspective, for example, regenerative tourism may contribute to marine conservation in the Red Sea and Arabian Gulf and thus align with current eco-friendly projects like Saudi Arabia's Red Sea Project and other various biodiversity protection activities implemented in the UAE. Moreover, it may support existing initiatives to combat desertification and water scarcity, which affect all GCC countries. This could be achieved by promoting eco-friendly forms of tourism that educate travellers about responsible forms of tourist behaviour. From a cultural viewpoint, regenerative tourism could support cultural and heritage preservation by offering authentic travel experiences whereby tourists can engage with traditional cultures, such as Bedouin and Islamic traditions.

Overall, the tourism sector is witnessing significant changes after COVID-19 with increased focus on sustainable and regenerative tourism. However, such changes and their implications for government policymaking, business decisions, and consumers are under-researched, especially in the Gulf economies. Therefore, the tourism sector needs to be researched and analyzed from a new lens in the aftermath of COVID-19. The proposed workshop aims to fill this research gap for the Gulf.

4. Workshop Focus/Objectives

This workshop aims at exploring sustainable and regenerative tourism initiatives and practices in Gulf countries. The objectives of the workshop are to understand the current state of affairs for the tourism sector in various Gulf countries and the changes happening in the sector in the aftermath of Covid-19, especially with respect to sustainable and regenerative tourism. The workshop will also explore other related developments happening in the tourism sector, such as digitalization, and how they are linked to other economic activities in GCC countries. Specifically, it aims to explore research contributions on the following themes: Tourism Strategies in the Gulf; Post-Covid Changes in Tourism in the Gulf; Digital Tools and Tourism Strategies; Sustainable and Regenerative Tourism in the Gulf; Cultural and Heritage Tourism in the Gulf; and Tourism Linkages with Other Sectors in the Gulf.

5. Papers Focus/Topics

The workshop invites original research papers on the following indicative themes pertaining to the tourism sector in the GCC countries. Research papers on any other issue related to tourism in the GCC region are also welcome.

- I. Theme 1: Tourism Strategies in the Gulf
 - a. How has the tourism sector contributed to the individual Gulf economies?
 - b. Are there systematic differences in the tourism policies adopted by various Gulf countries?
 - c. Tourism as an employment generator in Gulf economies
 - d. Cross-comparison of domestic and international tourism within and between Gulf countries
 - e. Tourism strategies: Role of WTO and Free Trade Agreements
- II. Theme 2: Post-Covid Changes in Tourism in the Gulf
 - a. How has inbound tourism changed in Gulf countries after Covid-19?
 - b. How has outbound tourism changed in Gulf countries after Covid-19?
 - c. Is Dubai heading towards over-tourism?
 - d. What policy responses were adopted by Gulf countries to tackle the adverse impact of Covid-19 on tourism arrivals?
 - e. Implications of the Gulf as a 'Common Area' for international tourism
- III. Theme 3: Digital Tools and Tourism Strategies
 - a. Digitalisation of tourism sector in Gulf: Key challenges
 - b. Impact of social media on tourism industry in Gulf
 - c. Use of artificial intelligence and machine learning in tourism
- IV. Theme 4: Sustainable and Regenerative Tourism in the Gulf
 - a. What are the current sustainable tourism initiatives in Gulf countries?
 - b. What is the future path of sustainable tourism in Gulf countries after Covid-19?
 - c. What are the current regenerative tourism initiatives and practices implemented in Gulf countries?
 - d. What are the future regenerative tourism opportunities for Gulf countries after

COVID-19?

- V. Theme 5: Cultural and Heritage Tourism in the Gulf
- a. How have Gulf countries balanced the promotion of cultural heritage tourism with the preservation of their traditional customs and sites?
 - b. What role does cultural heritage tourism play in the economic diversification efforts of Gulf countries, particularly in reducing reliance on oil revenues?
 - c. How do Gulf countries use cultural heritage tourism to shape their global identity and soft power in the international arena?
 - d. What challenges do Gulf countries face in developing sustainable cultural heritage tourism, considering environmental, social, and cultural impacts?
- VI. Theme 6: Tourism Linkages with Other Sectors in the Gulf
- a. How is the manufacturing sector affected by tourist arrivals?
 - b. How international tourist inflows affect merchandise exports of Gulf countries?
 - c. Do import restrictions have any role in Gulf countries in the context of the tourism sector?

6. Paper Structure, Referencing, and Format

Authors should refer to the [GRM Paper Guidelines](#).

7. Publication Plans

The papers selected for the workshop will be published either as an edited volume by a reputable publisher or as special issues of a high-quality tourism journal. The tentative focus of special issues would be on first, regenerative tourism and second, tourism strategies in post-Covid era. Both workshop directors have significant experience of publishing edited volumes and publishing and reviewing journal articles.

Papers that cannot fit in with the joint publication will be considered for publication individually in a journal or as a GRC paper, under the guidance of the workshop directors.

8. References

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9. Directors' Bio Notes

Dr. Paolo Mura is a Professor in the College of Communication and Media Sciences at Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, UAE for the past several years. He holds a PhD in Tourism from the University of Otago, New Zealand. His research areas explore tourist experiences and behavior, including gendered experiences and representations in tourism, traveling subcultures, expressions of art in tourism, and critical and qualitative approaches to research. He is the co-editor of a book series entitled *Perspectives on Asian Tourism*, published by Springer, and one of the managing editors of *Tourism Management Perspectives*. Dr. Paolo enjoys supervising postgraduate students and has supervised to completion 10 PhD students and over 20 master's students. Dr. Paolo has authored several research papers on tourism related issues published in quality journals. Dr. Paolo also serves as managing editor and member of editorial boards of a number of highly rated tourism journals.

Dr. Pralok Gupta is currently working as Associate Professor at the Centre for WTO Studies, Indian Institute of Foreign Trade, New Delhi. He is also a Policy Leader Fellow of the European University Institute, Florence and a certified Fintech and Regulatory Innovation professional from the Judge Business School, University of Cambridge, UK. Dr. Gupta has a Ph.D. in Economics and Social Sciences from Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Bangalore. Dr. Gupta has been actively engaged in policy making by the Ministry of Commerce and Ministry of Finance on various trade and macroeconomic issues. He is also an expert member of India's delegation on services trade negotiations for various free trade agreements. Dr. Gupta has conducted a number of research studies on the tourism sector. Dr. Gupta is a prolific writer and his articles on contemporary trade issues get published in international journals, books and business newspapers on a regular basis.