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Sustainable development

Sustainable tourism and sustainable development in Central America

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, submitted in response to General Assembly resolution [74/211](#) on sustainable tourism and sustainable development in Central America, provides an update on the advances made since the release of the previous report on the subject ([A/74/208](#)), issued in July 2019.

* [A/76/150](#).



I. Introduction

1. In its resolution [74/211](#) on sustainable tourism and sustainable development in Central America, adopted in December 2019, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit to the Assembly at its seventy-sixth session, in collaboration with the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and other relevant United Nations entities, a report on the implementation of the resolution. As the specialized agency of the United Nations system responsible for the promotion of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism, UNWTO prepared the present report.

2. Exchanges at a meeting held on 29 April 2021 between UNWTO and the ministers of tourism of the Central American Tourism Council, inputs submitted by Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama on new developments and advances made in sustainable tourism and sustainable development since the previous report ([A/74/208](#)) and contributions received from international organizations, as well as research conducted by UNWTO, form the basis for the progress made and presented in the present report.

II. Recent developments on the global sustainability agenda

3. The present report was prepared in the context of a major global focus on the response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Mobility restrictions and containment measures taken in response to the pandemic have had profound impacts on economic activity around the world. One of the most noticeable effects is the almost total paralysis of international passenger flows, affecting in particular the global tourism sector, which suffered its greatest crisis on record in 2020, as a result of the unprecedented health, social and economic emergency caused by the outbreak of the pandemic.

4. The impact of the COVID-19 crisis is expected to be greater in the Central American Integration System region, as a large part of its population lives in poverty and experiences high socioeconomic vulnerability. In addition, all of the countries in the region except Costa Rica have extremely weak and fragmented health and social protection systems. Furthermore, given that their economies are characterized by high levels of informality and extreme dependency on foreign trade and tourism, with many also dependent on family remittances, the impacts will be felt more quickly and have a greater impact on those countries than in the rest of Latin America.¹

5. Countries have adopted economy-wide stimulus packages and job support measures to respond to the crisis, in many cases supported by international and regional institutions. At the time of writing the present report, the tourism sector was showing clear signs of recovery. In addition, according to the most recent progress report on the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns ([E/2021/56](#)), tourism was the sector with the highest proportion (34 per cent) of sustainable consumption and production policies and implementation of activities reported by Member States around the world for the period 2013–2019. That factor is especially relevant, as the pandemic has clearly highlighted the need to reshape policies and practices that drive production and consumption patterns,

¹ Plan for the recovery, social reconstruction and resilience of Central America and the Dominican Republic, 2020–2040, approved on 26 November 2020 by the heads of the various social cabinets of the Central American Integration System region that are part of the Council for Social Integration.

placing tourism in a position to lead the transformation necessary to build back better and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. The pandemic has had a major impact on progress towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals. A total of 47 countries presented their voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum on sustainable development in 2020, which was held in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the Central American countries, Costa Rica, Honduras and Panama presented voluntary national reviews in 2020. The reviews contained descriptions of the health, social and economic effects of the pandemic and an outline of a wide variety of policies and measures being implemented to realize the Sustainable Development Goals amid the crisis. Furthermore, Guatemala and Nicaragua were among the 44 countries expected to present their voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum, held on 6 to 15 July 2021.

7. On 12 December 2020, the United Nations, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and France, in partnership with Chile and Italy, co-hosted the Climate Ambition Summit 2020, held virtually, to mark the fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Paris Agreement. The event provided a global platform for government and non-governmental leaders to showcase commitments aimed at tackling climate change under the three pillars of the Paris Agreement: mitigation, adaptation and finance commitments. From Central America, Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama were among world leaders highlighting the steps they are taking to reach the goal of net-zero emissions. The event was a major step on the road to Glasgow, United Kingdom, where the twenty-sixth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is scheduled to be held, from 1 to 12 November 2021. Scaling up efforts to address climate change is critical and requires, among other things, increased political will, greater efforts and partnerships. UNWTO, as the leading international organization in the field of tourism, is committed to accelerating progress towards the development of low-carbon tourism by accelerating the decarbonization of tourism operations and engaging the tourism sector in carbon removal, as well as by strengthening the measurement and disclosure of carbon dioxide emissions in tourism.

8. The summit on biodiversity, convened at the level of Heads of State and Government by the President of the General Assembly at its seventy-fifth session, under the theme “Urgent action on biodiversity for sustainable development”, was held at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 30 September 2020 and provided a unique opportunity to demonstrate the ambition to accelerate action for sustainable development in the face of threats to biodiversity, which are growing at an unprecedented rate. The event also contributed to, and provided momentum for, the development and adoption of an effective post-2020 global biodiversity framework at the fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, to be held in October 2021 in Kunming, China. The framework and its implementation are expected to place nature on a path to recovery by 2030, so as to meet the Sustainable Development Goals.

9. A United Nations common approach to biodiversity was approved by the High-level Committee on Programmes at its forty-first session and endorsed by the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on 4 May 2021. Through that document, the United Nations system expresses a shared recognition of the urgency to act and commits itself to mainstreaming biodiversity and nature-based solutions for sustainable development into the United Nations policy and programme planning and delivery, thus catalysing collective action to address the drivers of biodiversity loss and restore biodiversity, with a view to achieving the 2050 vision of living in harmony with nature adopted in 2010 by the Conference of the Parties to the

Convention on Biological Diversity. The approach builds on the work of the United Nations Environment Management Group, which, in September 2019, established a consultative process on biodiversity, with representatives from 51 international agencies, including UNWTO, who actively worked together to draft a report on a United Nations system commitment for action to assist Member States in delivering on the post-2020 global biodiversity framework.

10. The Sustainable Tourism Programme of the One Planet network is led by UNWTO, with the Governments of France and Spain as co-leads. The Programme, which is an implementation mechanism for Sustainable Development Goal 12, promotes multi-stakeholder collaboration and supports the transition towards a circular economy as a pathway for the sustainable development of tourism. It comprises activities such as the Global Tourism Plastics Initiative, launched in January 2020, led by UNWTO and the United Nations Environment Programme in collaboration with the Ellen MacArthur Foundation. The Initiative unites the tourism sector behind a common vision to address the root causes of plastic pollution, enabling businesses and Governments to take concerted action, leading by example in the shift towards circularity in the use of plastics. Currently, almost 100 tourism organizations, including organizations from Central America, have become signatories to the initiative and have made commitments to eliminate single-use and problematic plastics, integrate reuse models and collaborate with suppliers and waste managers to minimize plastic pollution from tourism.

11. Created by UNWTO in 2004, the International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories has grown steadily in size, expertise and influence, with 31 observatories worldwide having joined the Network by June 2021. That number includes one in the Central America region, the Antigua Guatemala Sustainable Tourism Observatory in Guatemala. Observatories focus on the systematic measurement and monitoring of tourism sustainability and follow a participatory approach, engaging local actors to steer tourism development in their respective destinations through the systematic monitoring of tourism performance, resource use and impact. In 2020, as its members helped to guide the recovery of tourism from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Network has met, virtually, twice since the start of the crisis.

III. Recent developments and progress towards sustainability at the national level

A. Strengthening tourism policies within a broader framework of sustainable development policies

12. The new national tourism plan of El Salvador 2030 was drawn up with broad participatory involvement of all tourism stakeholders. The plan includes a framework for reorienting efforts and positioning the country as a competitive tourist destination that integrates all areas of sustainability (economic, sociocultural and environmental), through the effective management of tourism supply and demand, by strengthening the institutional framework of the sector and promoting socioeconomic development that generates jobs and income and improves the conditions and quality of life of the population, thus guaranteeing the valuation and conservation of the historical, natural and cultural heritage of the destination, as well as a satisfactory and comprehensive live experience to the visitor. The plan is expected to lead the tourism sector on the path to sustainable development, positioning the sector as an important driver of the national and regional economy.

13. One of the first public policies promoted by the new authorities of the Ministry of Tourism of El Salvador, starting in 2019, was the creation of the Tourism Cabinet, covering 14 ministries, including those responsible for the economy, public works, natural resources, public security, health and territorial and other interior and policy development, as well as such institutions as the General Directorate of Migration and Alien Affairs and the Salvadoran Development Bank, which operate under the same vision and commitment to economic and social development.

14. Parallel to those efforts, El Salvador developed its national tourism policy of with an emphasis on surfing, with the objective to develop tourism destinations dedicated to the sport, from the improvement and consolidation of a basic infrastructure, which allows all stakeholders to have the tools necessary for a competitive, innovative and sustainable tourism offer that contributes to the structural development of the country. The authorities have prioritized surfing for the reactivation of tourism in the country, with a focus on the “new normal”, through the launch of its SurfCity programme, aimed at turning El Salvador into a world-class surfing destination. One of the first actions carried out was the preparation of a strategic road map for the reactivation of the sector, post-COVID-19. The road map has four pillars: (a) liquidity; (b) biosafety; (c) infrastructure; and (d) market information and promotion. Lines of action and indicators are planned in such a way as to ensure that the sector finds opportunities to recover, take advantage of the crisis and position the country as the new destination to visit.

15. In recent years, Nicaragua has consolidated its strategy to position itself as a sustainable tourism destination by strengthening and diversifying its products at the national, regional and international levels. Likewise, actions have been developed that contribute to strengthening and developing human talent, in accordance with the axes of its national human development plan for the period 2018–2021 and the country’s plan to fight poverty for the period 2021–2026. The main lessons learned from those actions are related to the need to coordinate and share responsibilities among the main actors, especially in the public and private sectors and academia, and to encourage the participation of local communities in tourist destinations.

16. The Panamanian sustainable tourism master plan for 2020–2025 was updated in 2020 through a participatory and open process that benefited from the multisectoral intervention of public institutions, such as the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Culture; scientific and academic institutions such as the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute; non-governmental organizations; tourism industry businesses; and local communities. In the midst of an uncertain global environment, the plan serves to reactivate the country’s strategy on tourism, conservation and research and positions Panama at the forefront of conservation and sustainability efforts in the region. On the basis of the plan, the country’s vision for 2025 is to be recognized as a world-class sustainable destination, thanks to the richness and diversity of its cultural and natural heritage and the quality of its services.

B. Economic development, social inclusion and poverty reduction through sustainable tourism

17. The tourism sector is an important source of foreign income, employment and investment for Central American economies. It generates earnings from foreign exchange, distributes wealth and alleviates poverty. However, as an activity that is inherently dependent on the movement and high interaction of people, the tourism sector has been one of the sectors hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the May 2021 issue of the UNWTO *World Tourism Barometer*, international tourism receipts in the Americas declined by 60 per cent (in real terms) in 2020 as

compared with the previous year. Data for the first quarter of 2021 showed a decline of 71 per cent, with a stronger impact in Central and South America. Although the weight of tourism in the economies and employment of Central American countries is not homogeneous and the impact of losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic therefore differs from country to country, it is estimated that the income generated by the sector represents about 20 per cent of total exports of goods and services by Central America.

18. Tourism has a huge effect on economic activity and employment. It creates jobs and opportunities for productive insertion with regard to gender equity, articulating production linkages and favouring social and economic activities; its impact therefore transcends the direct results of the activity. The COVID-19 crisis has naturally more severely affected the economies that are most dependent on tourism for export revenues. In that regard, according to information provided by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean for 2020, losses associated with tourism activities in Panama were estimated at approximately \$4,289 million, a drop of 2.3 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP); in Costa Rica at around \$2,933 million (2 per cent); in El Salvador at \$1,104 million (1.6 per cent); in Honduras at \$626 million (a 0.9 per cent decline); in Guatemala at \$1,193 million (0.7 per cent); and in Nicaragua at \$230 million (0.7 per cent).

19. In the first quarter of 2020, Honduras, like the rest of the world, experienced one of its most difficult times. Among other actions, Honduras had to declare a state of emergency following the first reported cases of COVID-19 in the country, forcing the population into confinement and causing considerable losses throughout the country's productive apparatus, with tourism being one of the sectors most affected by the situation. According to estimates by the Honduran Institute of Tourism, 669,273 visitors arrived in Honduras in 2020 reflecting a 71 per cent drop compared with 2019. It is estimated that visitor arrivals in 2020 generated foreign exchange income from tourism of \$156.2 million, reflecting a 72 per cent decrease compared with 2019.

20. In April 2020, a study was conducted in Honduras to analyse companies' reactions to the crisis and its possible short- and medium-term effects, in order to define strategies for, and coordination between, public and private sectors that would allow the tourism sector to face up to the situation and recover. According to the study, 27 per cent of tourism companies reported commercial activities in the month of April, with the microenterprises being the most affected. The findings of the study showed that 60 per cent of employees had to be furloughed; one in four was furloughed and one in twenty was laid off. Some 34 per cent of the companies surveyed had access to financing; of those, 90 per cent indicated that they needed more financing to be able to recover. Overall, 94 per cent of the tourism companies are expected to recover from the crisis, with cooperation and a favourable business environment being the determining factors.

21. In order to support the private tourism sector in such a crisis, the Ministry of Tourism and the Honduran Institute of Tourism reformulated its objectives for fiscal year 2021, with a view to gradually reactivating tourism activity in the country, preparing the private sector to face the challenges brought about by the new normal, identifying a new traveller profile and regaining the confidence of national and international visitors through the implementation of biosecurity protocols.

22. The current Government of El Salvador promotes tourism as a strategic sector of national economic development, as it contributes substantially to improving foreign exchange earnings. The participation of the tourism sector in the national economy is extremely important; for 2019, it was 6.5 per cent of the annual total GDP and corresponds to a capture of \$1,761,000 in tourism income. On the other hand,

according to data from the Salvadoran Social Security Institute, the average volume of employment in the tourism sector in 2019 showed growth of 3.8 per cent compared with the same period for the previous year, (57,179 jobs, as compared with 55,086 in 2018).

23. Sustained economic growth in Nicaragua has been accompanied by considerable progress in terms of social indicators. The results of a survey to measure living standards conducted in October 2016 showed that general poverty had declined from 29.6 to 24.9 per cent compared with 2014, extreme poverty had fallen from 8.3 to 6.9 per cent and the Gini coefficient had dropped from 38 to 33 per cent. In terms of the impact of that progress on the Nicaraguan labour market, 47,206 direct jobs were generated in 2019, and 47,449 in 2020. Of the total employment generated, 94.8 per cent came from micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises dedicated to tourism.

C. Enhancing the protection of biodiversity, cultural heritage and community development

24. The impact of COVID-19 on tourism has placed further pressure on biodiversity protection, on heritage conservation in the cultural sector and on the cultural and social fabric of communities, in particular indigenous people and ethnic groups. Many challenges remain and efforts must be intensified if the objective of placing countries in the region on a path of sustainable growth and development, both individually and collectively, is to be achieved in a balanced manner, in both urban and rural areas.

25. El Salvador is actively developing tourism destinations on the basis of the potential of its territories and market demands, with a new vision of the importance of environmental issues as a cross-cutting theme in tourism and for biodiversity conservation. Axis No. 1 of its national tourism plan for 2030 consists in preserving the country's sociocultural and natural heritage and encompasses a series of efforts as part of a comprehensive territorial project aimed at raising awareness among the general population, communities and sector stakeholders, including resource guardians, technical personnel, tour operators and guides at tourist destinations, to encourage them to value their national heritage and feel that they are an integral part of their country's economic development through sustainable tourism.

26. In an effort to revive its tourism, conservation and research strategy begun in 1998, on 28 September 2020, the Government of Panama signed executive decree No. 598, by which it created a dedicated alliance (Alianza Turismo-Conservación-Investigación) to develop, promote and support the execution of a national plan for the development of sustainable heritage tourism in the country, under the guidelines established in its master plan for sustainable tourism. The strategy was inspired by a 20-year-old model, in which an alliance was proposed between the tourism, conservation and research sectors to promote economic and human development in the country.

27. The tourism, conservation and research alliance consists of the Ministry of the Environment, the Ministry of Culture, the National Secretariat for Science and Technology, the Secretariat of the Tourism Cabinet and the Panama Tourism Authority. The alliance represents the commitment made to ensuring that Panama is recognized as a world-class tourist destination, establishing actions that strengthen the fight against poverty through the generation of jobs and supporting actions for the conservation of and research in the distinctive heritage of Panama and the sustainable development of its tourism sector. The alliance consolidates the conservation system, based on the premise of systematically integrating and mutually reinforcing the natural and cultural importance of the country's heritage.

28. As part of the tourism, conservation and research approach, heritage routes are under development as a network of circuits that showcase the extraordinary richness and diversity of the natural and cultural heritage referred to as part of the country's vision for 2025. The updated heritage routes strategy now includes three focus areas: cultural heritage, green heritage and blue heritage. Composed of 19 circuits through which the stories of Panama are told, the master plan for sustainable tourism was developed through detailed analysis and research conducted in multiple workshops with the help of local and international consultants, the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, the academic team of the Biomuseo (Museum of Biodiversity), the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Culture, the Panamanian tourism industry and other key organizations.

29. The aim of the Panamanian master plan for sustainable tourism for 2020–2025 is to generate jobs and combat poverty and inequality in Panama by taking advantage of natural and cultural resources, protecting and regenerating forests and coral reefs and recognizing the value of ancestral knowledge. All those elements are recognized as key for the design, implementation and commercialization of the heritage tourist routes, which feature as pillars the country's green heritage (forests, mountains, waterfalls and rivers), blue heritage (oceans and their ecosystems, including coral reefs and mangroves) and cultural heritage (its people and their ancestral knowledge, including ethnobotany).

D. Environmental protection, natural resource management and climate change and adaptation policies

30. The COVID-19 pandemic underscores the urgency of addressing the biodiversity crisis alongside the climate change crisis, as well as the need for transformative change. It also highlights the importance of the relationship between people and nature, for which an inclusive and interdisciplinary and intersectoral approach is essential. Through various actions and initiatives, Central American countries have been making real efforts to protect, rehabilitate and sustainably manage natural resources and protect the environment. Resilience is seen as an essential element for sustainability and sustainable tourism development.

31. In addition to the coordination of actions by the Tourism Cabinet of El Salvador, in 2019, the Ministry of Tourism and its related institutions, the Salvadoran Corporation of Tourism and the Salvadorian Institute of Tourism, together with the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources, signed a letter of commitment to eliminate the single-use plastics, which includes the gradual integration of green criteria in public procurement.

32. Since 2019, the "Live Whale" ("Ballena Viva") project has been promoted, in conjunction with the Ministry of the Environment, in the protected natural area and designated Ramsar site, Los Cóbano, in Acajutla, Sonsonate Department. The main actors in the project are local fishermen who have been trained as cetacean watching guides, promoting local employment and the application of responsible tourism practices. In addition, a manual was developed for responsible whale watching in El Salvador, which teaches protocols for responsible tourism to both tour operators and visitors.

33. In terms of the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 12, the concept of sustainable consumption and production is promoted in conjunction with other regulatory bodies such as the Salvadoran Standardization Organization and the Salvadoran Consumer Protection Office, as well through environmental education for responsible tourism through the reduction of waste in streets and natural areas. The tourism and environment administrations are promoting a nationwide communications

campaign and clean-up days in the country's main tourist destinations, and a network of environmental education volunteers has been formed with university students to promote "door-to-door" waste management and material reuse practices in tourist establishments. In coordination with the country's Solidarity Fund for Health, the issue of pollution from cigarette butts in tourist destinations is also being addressed.

34. Within the framework of the SurfCity programme, the Ministry of Tourism of El Salvador promotes, jointly with companies in the coastal marine zone, the management of environmental permits as part of a plan on safe operations in accommodation and food services. The promotion of SurfCity El Salvador International Surfing Association World Surfing Games 2021 and the application of biosafety measures during the event enabled it to become a benchmark in the organization of biosafe events in the Central American region. The Ministry of Justice and Public Security, through its General Directorate of Penal Centres, as part of its "I Change" ("Yo Cambio") programme, and in conjunction the Ministry of Public Works, carries out intense cleaning campaigns in rivers, lakes, beaches and roads to beautify tourist destinations.

35. Nicaragua is working towards strengthening human talent for tourism service providers, in order to improve tourism services and products, with an emphasis on micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises and public officials. Since 2019, 11 workshops on social tourism have been conducted, with the participation of 180 tourism sector stakeholders; 29 workshops on renewable energy and recycling, rural tourism and sustainability, with the participation of 511 tourism sector stakeholders, who were then given sustainable tourism certificates; and 78 workshops on knowledge and care of the natural and cultural heritage, waste management, ecotourism and sports tourism (species management), attended by 1,607 tourism sector stakeholders. In addition, sustainability and good practices have been promoted through four meetings, held under the slogan "Sustainable entrepreneurship in Nicaragua", in which 104 stakeholders from different territories exchanged experiences and shared examples of successful rural and community-based tourism.

36. Furthermore, the 43 tools used for classifying and categorizing tourism companies in Nicaragua have been updated, and a module on environmental adaptability to the effects of climate change has been added. The module includes questions on technological innovation, energy diversity, changes in consumption habits, waste management, environmental protection of biotic resources and the management of non-hazardous waste (organic, biodegradable and recyclable). Although the questions are optional, they serve to encourage and guide tourism entrepreneurs in the application of good practices that contribute to the care and preservation of the environment. To date, inspections and authorizations using the module have been carried out with 15,525 companies nationwide. In addition, 11 technical assistance sessions have been provided to tourism companies that implement good sustainable practices.

37. Two tools for classifying and categorizing rural tourism activities are being adjusted by piloting them in companies that provide nature-adventure services and rural agroecotourism activities, in order to adapt them to the realities of the country and incorporate the activities into the national tourism registration system, which will allow Nicaragua to guide entrepreneurs in the development of rural tourism in an orderly and sustainable manner.

38. In coordination with the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources, Nicaragua is working on the categorization and classification of tourism activities carried out in protected areas, promoting sustainable tourism in conservation areas as an economic alternative that contributes to poverty reduction. In addition, through the same Ministry, Nicaragua has developed a national network of 206 private wildlife

reserves, with a focus on conservation and sustainable tourism and clear commitments to restore degraded landscapes, which allows for ecological connectivity.

39. Public use plans in protected areas in Honduras were developed in 2019 to strategically plan the development of services and facilities for visitors and the management of sites and activities, in order to reduce the impact of visits and achieve the conservation objectives of each area.

40. Environmental entrepreneurship has been developed through the sustainable management of biodiversity, by reproducing fauna in captivity as an economic alternative for Nicaraguan families and for the preservation of species. To date, 207 zoos have been certified for such species as the green iguana, black garrobo, white-tailed deer, lowland paca, agouti, rabbit, quail and red-eyed frog. In addition, Nicaragua has developed 44 management plans for protected areas that address critical elements of conservation, and 22 management plans are being updated and developed, incorporating community tourism actions aimed at improving the livelihoods of the inhabitants of those areas.

41. Nicaragua increased its conservation areas and biological corridors by more than 30,000 new hectares through its declaration on municipal ecological parks and wildlife reserves. A national awareness and sensitization campaign has been developed, in addition to an environmental education programme for the protection and conservation of sea turtles, “Together, we conserve our sea turtles” (“Junt@s conservamos nuestras Tortugas Marinas”), promoting sustainable rural tourism through the sighting of sea turtle arrivals and the release of turtles, which allows for greater community income. In addition, the sighting of wild fauna (mainly birds) has been encouraged, through the promotion of tourism packages that strengthen the offerings of declared wildlife reserves.

42. Nicaragua has a national policy on climate change mitigation and adaptation. The main lines of work established through the policy include the promotion of climate actions and good environmental practices to ensure production, consumption and trade under adequate social and environmental standards. Strategies have been developed that are aimed at increasing the renewable energy matrix. Nicaragua has currently a renewable energy generation matrix of 81.51 per cent, encouraging the use of solar panels for small hotels and businesses in the tourism sector. Regulations have been developed for the sustainable management of waste, linked to beach cleaning campaigns with local communities. Nicaragua also encourages efforts to prevent pollution, with the delivery of 52 environmental guarantees to base recycling cooperatives and collection centres.

43. At the end of 2020, the Ministry of the Environment of Panama created a national “Reduce Your Footprint” programme (“Programa Nacional Reduce Tu Huella”) for the management and monitoring of low-carbon economic and social development in the country, with the objective of promoting the transition to carbon neutrality by 2050. The main components covered by the programme are: (a) a sustainable system of national greenhouse gas inventories; (b) a registry of emissions and mitigation actions; (c) a registry of means of implementation; and (d) a national system for monitoring and updating the national strategy for low-carbon economic and social development and the mitigation component of the country’s nationally determined contribution, which was created by the Ministry as a management tool for monitoring low-carbon economic and social development in Panama, in compliance with the Paris Agreement. In addition, in 2020, the Ministry of the Environment established a national climate transparency platform, associated with the Ministry’s national environmental information system, to host the national instruments and initiatives under the Reduce Your Footprint programme.

44. Moreover, the Panama Tourism Authority, in conjunction with the Inter-American Development Bank, carries out activities and tasks aimed at generating information and diagnostics on the territorial system in order to obtain sufficient knowledge to interpret the reality of the destinations and thus identify problems (economic, social, environmental and impacts of climate change) in the area, opportunities and challenges for territorial development from an agricultural environmental perspective and their tourism potential.

45. Non-carbon benefits are understood as the positive socioeconomic, biocultural and/or environmental effects of activities developed in forests that are well governed. A project on institutionalizing local non-carbon benefits in national climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies in the forests of Bolivia and Panama is being implemented by the Geoversity Foundation in conjunction with the Ministry of the Environment, under the forests, biodiversity and ecosystems component of the Euroclima plus programme. It will be included in the report of Panama on its nationally determined contributions for 2024.

46. The project has a duration of two and a half years, from April 2019 to December 2021. In the first year, the project included training and awareness-raising on climate change and on the concept of, and identification of priorities on, non-carbon benefits with key stakeholders, aimed at mitigating or adapting to climate change at the local level. In the second year, initial support was foreseen for prioritized activities at the local level and the development of a monitoring, reporting and verification system for non-carbon benefits. In the third year, the project provides for the incorporation of non-carbon benefits into national strategies and the presentation of a non-carbon benefits proposal for forest, peasant and indigenous contexts at the international level, with focal points for the Euroclima plus programme. Pilot sites in Panama include four communities in the Mamóní River Valley and seven Emberá communities linked to the Chagres National Park and the Emberá Ējuā So Territory. It has 400 people as beneficiaries, including leaders, community authorities, female and male grassroots community members and young people from indigenous territories.

47. On the basis of the results of the non-carbon benefits project seen to date, it is in the interests of Panama to position local communities and indigenous peoples as protagonists in the fight against climate change. Therefore, in collaboration with the Guna and Emberá peoples, the Geoversity Foundation has established an action plan on non-carbon benefits. That action plan includes a project led by seven Emberá indigenous communities in the Panama Canal basin, with the objectives of protecting the Chagres, San Juan de Pequení and Boquerón Rivers, which are essential for the operation of the Panama Canal; ensuring communities sustainable access to drinking water; implementing a system to bottle water for sale to visitors and tourists; and documenting and disseminating information on the cosmovision of the Emberá and their role as guardians of water.

48. The Central American Integrated System of Quality and Sustainability awards a regional seal for tourism companies aimed at raising the quality of tourism services through the three principles of ecological, social and cultural and economic sustainability. Since 2019, with human resources trained in the System, Honduras has provided technical assistance to strengthen the technical capacities of the certification committee of the delegation of Nicaragua, as well as its advisors and auditors, which allowed for the harmonization of processes and standards for compliance with regulatory instruments at the regional level. The restaurant Mi Viejo Ranchito, in Catarina, Nicaragua, successfully obtained the highest level of the System's quality seal in June 2020, becoming the first Nicaraguan company to receive that distinction.

49. The Certificate for Sustainable Tourism standard is a technical tool aimed at strengthening sustainable tourism activity in Costa Rica. It is a recognition of

excellent management by companies and organizations that actively work to mitigate the impacts of their operations. The certification enhances the strengthening of social, cultural, environmental, economic and developmental work in tourism destinations. It is valid for two years, voluntary and free of charge. The Global Sustainable Tourism Council has recognized the Certificate for Sustainable Tourism standard, thus placing it at the level of the most important sustainability standards in the world. By May 2021, 409 companies in Costa Rica had been certified in accordance with the standard.

50. The Blue Flag ecology programme is a tangible example of efforts by Costa Rica to be a sustainable destination, reinforcing the positioning that the nation has achieved in the international arena as a country that preserves nature. By establishing itself as an incentive for promoting the organization of local committees with the participation of civil society leaders, such as tourism entrepreneurs, municipalities, local chambers of tourism, non-profit organizations, tourist police and regional health directorates, the programme allows them to be involved in diagnosing their own coastal communities, to carry out actions that counteract identified weaknesses or needs and to contribute to the fulfilment of international agreements and national commitments on climate change, with a view to turning the country into a low greenhouse gas emissions economy. There are currently 138 registered beaches in Costa Rica.

51. The Blue Flag programme has also been expanding in Honduras since 2019, through tourism development and the implementation of climate change mitigation and adaptation measures, which have been generated and linked to the national strategy for sustainable tourism. Advice is given to companies incorporating best practices on energy efficiency, energy- and water-saving measures and solid waste management, and the competitiveness and sustainability of companies is strengthened through the provision of technical assistance and guides to good environmental practices focused on the tourism sector.

E. Fostering the socioeconomic empowerment and inclusion of women, youth, indigenous peoples and local communities through sustainable tourism

52. For women, rural communities, indigenous peoples and many other historically marginalized populations, tourism has been a vehicle for integration, empowerment and the generation of income in the Central American region, in a sector in which women make up between 60 and 70 per cent of the food and lodging workforce in countries such as Guatemala and Panama.

53. Since 2019, Honduras has been processing applications for the benefits set out in its Act for the Promotion of Tourism, in order to encourage and promote the country's tourism sector, in line with the expected impacts and indicators projected through a national programme for the generation of employment and economic growth, Honduras 20/20, and with regional jurisdiction through second-generation incentives.

54. The Sofia network (Red Sofia) in Costa Rica promotes gender equity in the tourism industry, as well as good tourism safety practices, and encourages the entry of women as tourists and their pleasant stay at their destination. The programme was created within the framework of an institutional support agreement signed on 22 March 2021 between the Costa Rican Tourism Institute and the National Institute for Women, with the support and participation of the national tourism safety commission (CONSETUR).

55. The objective of the Sofia network is to instil a commitment in each person involved in the tourism community with regard to the importance of promoting gender

equality in the tourism industry, minimizing violence against women and promoting safe environments for women tourists as a pillar of responsible, sustainable and inclusive tourism. A training course is available to all persons and organizations wishing to be part of the network and make use of the seal as a distinctive and differentiating tool. The affiliation of organizations with the programme is a free and voluntary process; the seal is available to all companies and organizations in the tourism sector once 80 per cent of their staff has been individually trained through the virtual course. The programme was expected to begin in July 2021.

56. The Code of Conduct Programme for the Protection of Children and Adolescents from Commercial Sexual Exploitation associated with travel and tourism is a responsible tourism initiative that is framed by the sustainable tourism model promoted by Costa Rica. The programme began in 2003 as a private initiative. In 2010, it was formalized as a national strategy through an agreement between the Costa Rican Tourism Institute and the national tourism bureau (CANATUR), when the Paniamor Foundation, a non-governmental organization, took over the coordination of the Technical Secretariat of the Code of Conduct. In 2021, it will be implemented exclusively by the Tourism Institute. There are currently 475 companies affiliated with the programme.

57. In 2019, Costa Rica launched a programme for “social tourism with integrity”, by which the country seeks to encourage companies and organizations to run spaces that facilitate tourism activities aimed at vulnerable populations. The programme is a means for many more citizens to experience tourism, through national programmes that function as facilitators of the activity, thereby improving citizens’ quality of life through enriching experiences in sustainable destinations within the country, in addition to facilitating the opportunity for tourism companies to provide an important social service. Success is found in the equitable and informational development of all its processes under simple schemes, from conception to production and utilization, by seeking differentiation and innovation through simple and sustainable practices, thereby rescuing social tourism activities by means of projects established under the programme and by connecting the client, entrepreneur and destination through various routes and tourist attractions. Costa Rica currently has a total of 32 companies that have been certified through the programme.

58. On 29 May 2021, a meeting was held with the traditional authorities of the seven indigenous peoples of Panama pursuant to Act No. 37 of 2 August 2016, by which the free, prior and informed consultation and consent of indigenous peoples in Panama is required prior to taking any action that may affect indigenous peoples and their territories, to evaluate, jointly with the authorities and their technical team, the potential of the communities in indigenous territories, as well as their needs, with regard to the development of rural community tourism and the “Indigenous Panama” (“Panamá Indígena”) tourism circuit. With the creation of that circuit, and through the country’s master plan for sustainable tourism for the period 2020–2025, Panama seeks to integrate indigenous communities and to highlight the legacy of the great sages of the indigenous peoples as unique and differentiating, in order to connect tourists with the natural and cultural heritage of its destinations.

59. The tourism, conservation and research strategy of Panama is intended to inspire communities to take advantage of their natural and cultural heritage resources for community tourism development through conservation and scientific research. Through the strategy, which involves civil society in general and communities in particular, Panama seeks to identify innovative solutions to climate change by defining mechanisms to identify the benefits of conserving and investigating its natural and cultural heritage. Communities’ motivation to participate in tourism development stems from their obtaining such benefits as improved livelihoods, clean water, access to insurance, a better and safer local economy, food security, new skills and technologies and non-carbon benefits.

60. The main opportunities for working with activities relating to non-carbon benefits in forests in developing countries are found in local communities and indigenous territories. In collaboration with the Guna and Emberá peoples, an action plan on non-carbon benefits is being developed, intended as an innovative mechanism aimed at addressing the needs of communities affected by problems related to climate change. Under the project, agreements are established with key national and international actors to lay down their commitments to incentivize non-carbon benefit activities. Panama is a pioneer in the implementation of non-carbon benefits and is currently working on their institutionalization as part of national strategies for mitigation and adaptation to climate change.

61. The implementation of projects under the non-carbon benefits approach addresses the growing interest in defining mechanisms and methodologies to identify and prioritize non-carbon benefits, with the involvement of civil society and, in particular, forest resource managers, for more ambitious investments in mitigation and adaptation measures. The use of natural resources and the protection of forests for the development of the Indigenous Panama tourism circuit, with a focus on conservation and research, is an example of non-carbon benefits. The provision of access to financing for tourism projects through such benefits represents an opportunity for the Guna people, who have to return to the forest owing to rising sea levels, to adapt to climate change. The story of how the Guna people will use non-carbon benefits as they prepare to return to the forest is an example that can be replicated globally by other nations.

IV. Regional efforts and other initiatives relevant to sustainable tourism

62. The Heads of State of the Central American Integration System region have defined tourism as a strategic and priority sector for sustainable economic and social development at the national and regional levels. In that regard, at the end of 2018 and beginning of 2019, the Secretariat of Central American Tourism Integration carried out the participatory evaluation process of its strategic plan for sustainable tourism development for the period 2014–2018. It is currently in the process of developing its strategic plan for 2019–2023, under the technical direction of the Institute for Public Administration, a body of the Integration System specialized in regional-level public administration.

63. Furthermore, within the framework of the Secretariat of Central American Tourism Integration, there are several initiatives underway, including a regional programme for competitiveness and sustainability for micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises in the tourism sector. Launched in 2018 and designed jointly by the aforementioned Secretariat, the Central American Bank for Economic Integration and the national tourism authorities of Central America and the Dominican Republic, the programme is aimed at promoting the competitiveness and sustainability of the tourism sector by providing access to credit to tourism micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises. The programme's design process involved joint work among the private sector, the Federation of Chambers of Tourism of Central America, the countries of the Central American isthmus and Central American Bank experts. The programme is being implemented gradually in each of the member countries of the region.

64. In June 2021, the Subsidiary Body on Implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity approved a long-term strategic approach to mainstreaming biodiversity within and across sectors and other strategic actions to enhance implementation, which is seen as an important contribution to the development of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. In its approach, the Subsidiary Body highlighted the importance of intensified mainstreaming action to achieving the transformational change needed to realize the objectives of the Convention, including

the 2050 vision of living in harmony with nature adopted by the Conference of the Parties, and the central role of that vision in the implementation of the post-2020 framework.

65. Also in June 2021, the secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Linking Tourism and Conservation network jointly organized a webinar, in collaboration with the Alianza Mesoamericana de Ecoturismo, on how to design post-COVID tourism and conservation strategies for champions of the network, with a focus on Central America, to shed light on the risks and opportunities for the sector and the region. Participants concluded that the diversification of products and the engagement of tourists in longer-term support for destination and host communities have helped to keep champions afloat but that times were now challenging. They agreed that some countries had already acquired valuable experience in terms of incentives and technical support for ecotourism entrepreneurs that could be expanded and built upon in the post-COVID-19 recovery period. They also considered that retaining the workforce and keeping natural assets from degradation in times of reduced visitation were critical aspects to consider and highlighted the need for a new strategic and holistic approach that responded appropriately to the risks and the varying forms of crisis that were affecting the region.

V. Conclusions and recommendations

66. The present report provides an overview of the approaches and actions taken over the past two years. Countries in the region have shown numerous positive developments, initiatives and efforts to promote sustainable tourism and sustainable development since the adoption of General Assembly resolution [74/211](#), despite the many challenges they have faced owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, it is expected that the pandemic will continue to adversely affect progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, and disrupt the development efforts of many countries.

67. Progress is being made on the conservation and sustainable use and management of protected areas and of biodiversity. Furthermore, environmental action has been integrated into an increasing number of activities and initiatives in the region. Environmental certification programmes and certification systems for the quality and sustainability of tourism enterprises are contributing to increased private sector participation in and commitment to sustainability and environmental protection. Efforts are also being made to involve youth, including among indigenous peoples, empowering young people by giving them the chance to become more involved in environmental matters and community tourism and to actively contribute to improved preservation, protection and restoration of the environment.

68. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted many vulnerabilities and areas for improvement in the tourism sector, providing an opportunity to rebuild a more resilient, diversified, inclusive and sustainable tourism sector. It has highlighted the importance of global and regional political action and coordination to mitigate the effects of the crisis and support recovery.

69. Some progress is being made in both the recovery and the necessary transformation of the tourism sector towards making it more sustainable and resilient. It is noteworthy that efforts are being made in the region and the sector to protect cultural heritage, promote gender equity and strengthen collaboration with indigenous peoples, making them active participants in the transformational change needed. Countries are also working on improving and diversifying their

existing tourism offer and on developing new and innovative products, while seeking to strengthen intraregional tourism and committing to the promotion of sustainable tourism and corporate social responsibility in the sector.

70. Strategic actions and accelerators to address the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 and to promote sustainable recovery in the tourism sector are essential. Recovery will require countries to make unprecedented financial efforts to achieve a level of well-being similar to that experienced prior to the pandemic. However, the crisis also constitutes an opportunity to transform tourism into a resilient, sustainable and inclusive sector.

71. The spread of the pandemic has seriously hampered social and economic development. Measures to support tourism businesses and safeguard jobs and income have proven to be fundamental for the survival of the sector and are especially important for micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises. Understanding risk and strengthening the financial capacity of tourism enterprises are essential aspects to consider on the road to business resilience, with a view to promoting business innovation, sustainability and competitiveness and safeguarding jobs, while protecting national economies through the incorporation of economic support mechanisms.

72. As States Members of the United Nations prepare to negotiate the new global biodiversity framework, it is critical to develop coherent approaches to better respond to pressing global challenges such as biodiversity loss through the formulation and implementation of sound government policies and the integration and alignment of a wide range of economic sectors, including tourism, based on the premise of the indivisible relationship between people's wellbeing and the well-being of nature.

73. Equally important is for attention to be given to the type of developmental transformation needed for sustainable and climate-resilient development. For Member States in the region, this is a process that will invariably lead them to become part of a highly ambitious commitment to tourism policies that would contribute to a highly ambitious scenario on climate change, one in which the tourism sector moves towards low-emission and highly efficient operations.

74. Upcoming global milestones, such as the fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity and the expected adoption of a post-2020 global biodiversity framework and the twenty-sixth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, present strategic opportunities that Central American countries could exploit to strengthen their contributions to sustainable development and to the advancement of the global biodiversity and climate change agendas.

75. The UNWTO International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories focuses on the systematic measurement and monitoring of tourism sustainability and follows a participatory approach. The initiative continues to welcome new members, because the value generated through measurement is recognized by destinations as helping to solve some of the sector's pressing sustainability issues, confirming a growing trend to support the timely measurement of the impacts of tourism. Governments and tourism stakeholders from the region are invited to consider joining the initiative.

76. Governments, the tourism sector and relevant organizations in the region are also encouraged to join the Sustainable Tourism Programme of the One Planet network, a collaborative platform that brings together and scales up existing initiatives and partnerships, in order to accelerate the shift towards

sustainable consumption and production patterns in the tourism sector, as well as the Global Tourism Plastics Initiative, which provides tourism stakeholders with a common framework for advancing towards a circular economy for plastics in tourism.
