FINAL SUMMARY REPORT

International Conference on Sustainable Tourism in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS)

December 2025

Note:

1. **The report was completed in collaboration with the Swiss Tourism for Sustainable Development (ST4SD) Project**

2. **Author: Dr. Lê Tuấn Anh, Dr. Le Tuan Anh, Dean of the Faculty of Tourism Management and International Languages, Hanoi University of Culture, ST4SD consultant**

Purpose

Consolidate key insights and feedback from the forum, and propose mechanisms, policies, and recommendations to promote sustainable tourism in Viet Nam and in GMS collaboration.

Primary audiences

Government agencies (Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism - MoCST, Vietnam National Authority of Tourism - VNAT, line ministries, provincial Department of Tourism - DoTs), GMS National Tourism Organizations - NTOs and Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office - MTCO, development partners, private sector, communities, academia.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The International Conference on Sustainable Tourism in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), held in Ninh Binh, Viet Nam, brought together policy-makers, tourism authorities, regional organisations, private sector representatives, community-based tourism (CBT) actors and academics from across the subregion. In the context of post-COVID recovery, growing climate risks and changing market expectations, participants agreed that sustainability is no longer a niche add-on, but the foundation of long-term competitiveness, resilience and community well-being in the GMS.

This Final Summary Report consolidates the main messages and feedback from the conference and translates them into practical mechanisms, policy directions and recommendations. It draws primarily on the keynote presentation by Prof. Dr. Fabian Weber on global trends and Swiss experience, and on Panel Discussions 1 and 2, which showcased GMS country experiences and explored how to operationalise the GMS Tourism Strategy 2030. The report focuses on two levels of action: (i) national-level measures for Viet Nam as host country and regional frontrunner; and (ii) subregional initiatives for GMS collaboration.

Key insights from the conference discussions include:

- Tourism in the GMS needs to move **beyond "doing less harm" towards positive-impact and regenerative models**, where tourism activities actively support environmental quality, cultural vitality and local livelihoods rather than merely minimising negative impacts.

- **Community-based and inclusive tourism** are central to this transformation. They offer strong potential to distribute benefits more fairly, preserve cultural heritage and diversify products, but they require clearer policy frameworks, stable governance arrangements and long-term technical support to be sustainable.

- **Sustainability standards, indicators and data systems**, supported by appropriate digital tools, are essential to build credibility with markets, provide transparency and enable evidence-based management of destinations, including visitor flows and carrying capacity.

- **Digital transformation and data use** were recognised as key enablers: from marketing and visitor information to monitoring and adaptive management, digital solutions can help destinations implement sustainability in practice if tools and approaches are adapted to the realities of Micro-, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises - MSMEs and rural areas.

- **Regional cooperation within the GMS** can add significant value by aligning frameworks, developing cross-border products, sharing knowledge and strengthening a shared sustainability-oriented brand that no country can build alone.

Building on these insights, the report proposes a set of mechanisms, policies and recommendations for Viet Nam:

- **Strengthen policies, planning and investment frameworks** by embedding sustainability and climate resilience into tourism strategies, plans and regulations, and by applying tools such as zoning, carrying-capacity concepts and environmental and social safeguards, particularly in sensitive destinations.

- **Enhance institutional and governance arrangements**, including a national multi-stakeholder mechanism on sustainable tourism, stronger coordination between national and provincial levels, and more integrated destination-level management structures.

- **Develop a coherent support framework for CBT and inclusive models**, with clear definitions and criteria, guidance on governance and benefit-sharing, and tailored technical and market support services for community-led and community–private initiatives.

- **Design and implement a national programme for sustainable tourism standards and indicators**, using a tiered approach that is accessible to MSMEs and communities and aligns with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations - ASEAN and Global Sustainable Tourism Council - GSTC references, and establish a core set of sustainability indicators integrated into the national tourism statistics system.

- **Accelerate digital transformation and strengthen branding**, through guidance on tourism data and digitalisation, support for destinations and MSMEs to adopt user-friendly digital tools, and integration of sustainability and positive-impact narratives into Viet Nam's national tourism brand.

- **Launch and document pilot "green destinations"**, such as Ninh Binh and other representative sites, as learning laboratories for integrated approaches combining CBT, standards, data systems and digital tools.

At the subregional level, the report outlines complementary mechanisms and recommendations for GMS collaboration:

- **Reaffirm sustainability and resilience as core principles** of GMS tourism and translate the GMS Tourism Strategy 2030 into a concise, prioritised regional action agenda.

- **Develop a shared GMS sustainability framework and a core set of indicators**, compatible with ASEAN and GSTC references, and integrate these into regional reporting and decision-making processes.

- **Promote convergence and mutual recognition of sustainability standards** and create a light regional recognition mechanism for enterprises and destinations that meet agreed criteria, thereby signalling quality and sustainability to visitors and partners.

- **Design and promote cross-border thematic circuits and a sustainability-oriented GMS brand narrative**, highlighting Mekong River experiences, heritage corridors, nature-based and CBT products, and jointly marketing them under a shared identity while respecting national distinctiveness.

- **Strengthen the role of MTCO as a regional knowledge and data hub**, hosting a GMS Sustainable Tourism Knowledge Platform, promoting data harmonisation and shared dashboards, and supporting the dissemination of good practices and tools.

- **Promote regional capacity for implementation through peer learning**, including GMS-wide exchanges and communities of practice among destinations, CBT networks and tourism administrations working on sustainability and regenerative approaches.

The way forward suggested by the conference and this report emphasises action and learning. In the short term, Viet Nam and other GMS countries are encouraged to validate and prioritise the recommendations, integrate them into existing strategies and plans, and identify a small number of pilots "Green Destinations" and cross-border routes to demonstrate the benefits of sustainable and regenerative tourism. The GMS Tourism Working Group and MTCO are invited to agree on a focused regional roadmap and clarify roles, while development partners can support design, piloting and scaling of frameworks, standards, data tools and knowledge platforms.

If these steps are pursued in a spirit of partnership and continuous learning, the International Conference on Sustainable Tourism in the GMS will mark not only a successful dialogue, but a turning point towards a more sustainable, inclusive and resilient tourism future for Viet Nam and the Greater Mekong Subregion.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and context

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), contributing significantly to jobs, income generation and regional integration. At the same time, the subregion's competitive advantage is rooted in precisely those assets that are most vulnerable to unsustainable and poorly managed tourism: unique ecosystems, rich cultural heritage, and diverse local communities.

Globally, tourism is undergoing a structural shift. As highlighted by Prof. Dr. Fabian Weber, sustainability has evolved from a niche marketing proposition into a megatrend and, increasingly, a market entry requirement. Visitors and regulators alike expect tourism businesses and destinations to demonstrate real contributions to environmental protection, climate action, community well-being and cultural preservation, not merely to "do less harm". This shift is reflected in emerging models of positive-impact tourism, growing attention to carbon-neutral or low-carbon travel, and the rapid spread of technology (AI, data analytics, digitalisation) to optimise resource use, improve transparency and support informed decision-making.

Within the GMS, this global context intersects with a critical post-COVID recovery moment. The pandemic exposed vulnerabilities associated with over-dependence on a few markets and overcrowded destinations but also opened a window to "restart, reform and rebalance" tourism on more sustainable foundations. The GMS Tourism Strategy 2030 and the accompanying vision for Sustainable and Resilient Tourism position sustainability, resilience and community well-being at the centre of the subregion's tourism pathway, calling for more even distribution of visitor flows and benefits, practical support for local communities, and enabling conditions for businesses to choose green options.

Viet Nam, as host of the International Conference on Sustainable Tourism in the GMS and a key tourism leader in the region, is already pursuing a green transformation agenda through initiatives such as the Green Tourism Program 2023–2025, the development of a Viet Nam Tourism Development Index and partnerships to promote rural and community-based tourism. These efforts, aligned with the GMS Tourism Strategy 2030, aim to enhance resilience, promote inclusive growth, and safeguard cultural and natural assets while leveraging technology and innovation.

Against this backdrop, the International Conference on Sustainable Tourism in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), held in Ninh Binh on 18 November 2025, was conceived as a focused platform to bring together global perspectives, regional strategies and country experiences under one roof.

1.2. Objectives and expected results of the conference

The conference was designed around three interlinked objectives:

Share global and regional knowledge and experiences in sustainable tourism development - including models such as community-based and eco-tourism, national and

regional standards, innovative financing, and the use of digital tools and data systems. Session 1 aimed to connect global trends and Swiss experience with practical lessons from GMS countries.

Clarify and reinforce the regional vision and strategic directions for sustainable tourism in line with the GMS Tourism Strategy 2030, including its four strategic directions (building sustainable destinations, developing human capital, strengthening stakeholder engagement, enhancing destination marketing) and cross-cutting priorities of digital transformation, environmental sustainability and resilience.

Identify concrete mechanisms and collective actions to move from vision to implementation at both national and regional levels with a focus on:

- Measurable sustainability frameworks and indicators;

- Support for community-based and inclusive models;

- Regional branding and joint product development; and

- Strengthened coordination through MTCO, development partners and networks such as Asian Ecotourism Network (AEN) and Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA).

The expected results of the Conference were therefore to:

- Build shared understanding of international trends and fit-for-purpose tools (e.g. the Swiss "Swisstainable" tiered standards);

- Capture diverse GMS experiences and lessons in a structured way;

- Generate a prioritized set of recommendations for Viet Nam and for regional cooperation; and

- Provide an evidence-based foundation for follow-up programming, particularly through the Swiss Tourism for Sustainable Development (ST4SD) project and partners.

1.3. Purpose and added value of this Final Summary Report

This Final Summary Report is one of the main outputs of the conference. It has three specific purposes:

- **Consolidation** to synthesise the key messages, insights and feedback emerging from the keynote presentation, panel discussions, and facilitated exchanges with particular attention to the contributions of Prof. Dr. Fabian Weber, GMS country representatives, MTCO, ST4SD, AEN and PATA.

- **Translation into action-oriented guidance** to translate the rich, and sometimes broad, discussion into **operational recommendations and proposed mechanisms** that can be realistically taken forward by Viet Nam and other GMS countries at policy, programme and destination levels.

- **Support to programming and coordination** to provide a reference document for governments, MTCO and development partners when designing or adjusting policies,

strategies, projects and investment pipelines related to sustainable tourism. In this way, the report complements, rather than replaces, official minutes or transcripts: it focuses on the *so what* and *what next* for implementation.

The added value of the report lies in its integrated perspective: it weaves together global trends (e.g. positive-impact tourism, carbon-neutral travel, technology for sustainability), Swiss and other international experiences (e.g. Swisstainable, DASTA), and GMS country realities into a set of coherent directions for Viet Nam and for regional collaboration.

1.4. Methodology for this Report

This Final Summary Report is based on a consolidation of materials and exchanges generated before and during the International Conference on Sustainable Tourism in the GMS. The main information sources include:

- The conference agenda and session concepts, which defined the objectives, themes and guiding questions for the keynote and panel discussions;

- The keynote presentation by Prof. Dr. Fabian Weber on global trends in sustainable and regenerative tourism, the Swiss "Swisstainable" model and the role of standards, data and technology;

- The summary notes of Panel Discussions 1 and 2, capturing country experiences, regional perspectives and proposed directions for implementing the GMS Tourism Strategy 2030;

- Background documents on the GMS Tourism Strategy 2030, Viet Nam's sustainable tourism and green tourism initiatives, and relevant regional cooperation mechanisms.

These materials were reviewed and analysed using a two-step synthesis process. First, key insights, challenges and proposed solutions were identified from the keynote and panel discussions and clustered by theme, including community-based and inclusive tourism; sustainability standards, indicators and data systems; digital transformation and destination branding; regional cooperation, governance and pilot "green destinations". Second, the clustered messages were translated into action-oriented recommendations at two levels:

- For Viet Nam, focusing on policies and planning, institutional and governance arrangements, CBT and inclusive models, standards and monitoring, digital transformation and pilot destinations;

- For GMS regional collaboration, focusing on shared frameworks and indicators, regional standards and recognition, cross-border products and branding, knowledge and data platforms, and mechanisms for peer learning.

Recommendations are highlighted as "key" where they respond directly to issues repeatedly raised by multiple stakeholders or countries, are clearly linked to the implementation of the GMS Tourism Strategy 2030 and Viet Nam's sustainable tourism priorities, offer practical pathways for change, and have potential for replication or scaling across the subregion.

1.5. Target audience and intended use

The report is primarily addressed to:

- **Government bodies in Viet Nam** (VNAT, line ministries, provincial Departments of Culture, Sports and Tourism) responsible for tourism policy, planning, regulation and investment;

- **National Tourism Organisations (NTOs) and relevant ministries in other GMS countries**, who are implementing the GMS Tourism Strategy 2030 and seeking to strengthen sustainable tourism frameworks;

- **The Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office (MTCO)** and the **GMS Tourism Working Group**, as key regional coordination mechanisms;

- **Development partners and donor agencies** (including SECO, Helvetas, ST4SD and others) involved in supporting sustainable tourism, climate action, private sector development and community empowerment;

- **Private sector actors and industry associations**, including tourism enterprises, destination management organisations and business networks;

- **Local communities and civil society organisations**, particularly those engaged in community-based, eco-tourism and heritage initiatives; and

- **Academic and training institutions**, which play a pivotal role in building the human capital and knowledge base needed for long-term transformation.

For these audiences, the report is intended to function as:

- A **strategic reference** when revising policies, strategies and action plans;

- A **programming tool** for identifying priority areas where technical and financial support are most needed;

- A **learning resource** that captures good practices, challenges and potential solutions; and

- A **baseline for monitoring and follow-up**, against which future progress on sustainable tourism development in Viet Nam and the GMS can be assessed.

2. KEY INSIGHTS AND FEEDBACK BY THEMATIC SESSION

The International Conference on Sustainable Tourism in the GMS generated a rich set of ideas, examples and proposals. Drawing primarily on the keynote presentation and the two panel discussions, this section organises the key insights and participant feedback into thematic areas that cut across country and stakeholder perspectives.

2.1. Community-Based Tourism (CBT) and Inclusive Tourism Models

Participants consistently underlined that sustainable tourism in the GMS must be community-centred and locally grounded:

- **CBT as a pillar of inclusive growth:** Community-based tourism was recognised as a core model for ensuring that tourism benefits reach local people, preserve cultural identity and reduce economic leakage. Experiences from several GMS countries illustrated how CBT can diversify products, extend length of stay and spread visitors beyond established hubs.

- **From participation to empowerment:** Stakeholders emphasised that communities should not only "participate" in tourism but be empowered to make decisions about tourism in their areas, including product design, visitor management and benefit-sharing mechanisms. This requires clear roles, legal recognition where appropriate, and access to information.

- **Balancing authenticity and market demands:** Panellists noted that international markets increasingly seek "authentic" experiences, but that authenticity must be protected from excessive commercialisation. Carefully designed interpretation, capacity-building for hosts and visitor education were highlighted as ways to maintain cultural integrity.

- **Need for long-term support:** Many CBT and inclusive tourism initiatives remain fragile, especially after COVID-19. Participants stressed the need for stable support structures (technical advice, market linkages, access to finance) rather than short, project-based interventions.

2.2. Sustainable Tourism Standards, Certification and Quality Assurance

Standards and certification were seen as essential enablers of credibility and market access, but also as an area where more pragmatic approaches are needed:

- **Alignment with global and regional frameworks:** GMS countries increasingly reference ASEAN standards and GSTC criteria. Aligning national frameworks with these references is viewed to build credibility, access responsible markets and ensure a common language on sustainability.

- **Tiered approaches to standards:** Drawing on the Swiss "Swisstainable" experience, participants highlighted the value of tiered standards: an easy entry-level commitment for all, with higher levels recognising more advanced practices and existing credible certifications. This approach lowers barriers for MSMEs and community enterprises that cannot immediately meet stringent certification requirements.

- **Integration rather than proliferation:** Rather than creating new labels, panelists favoured integrating and recognising existing schemes within national or regional programmes. This reduces confusion, avoids duplication and leverages investments already made by businesses.

- **From "labels" to management tools:** Standards were discussed not only as marketing labels but as practical management tools that help businesses and destinations measure their performance, identify gaps and plan improvements over time.

2.3. Digital Transformation, Data and Destination Branding

Digitalisation was recognised as both an opportunity and a gap in GMS sustainable tourism:

- **Digital tools for management and transparency:** Participants highlighted the potential of digital platforms and apps to manage visitor flows, provide real-time information, promote lesser-known destinations, and increase transparency (for example on environmental performance or community benefits).

- **Data for evidence-based decisions**: The importance of robust, harmonised data and indicators was repeatedly emphasised. Moving beyond counting arrivals and receipts, panellists called for systems that capture environmental, social and cultural impacts, and that can inform adaptive management at destination and regional levels.

- **Bridging the digital divide**: While some destinations and enterprises are advanced in using digital tools, others lack connectivity, skills or resources. Supporting MSMEs and communities to adopt basic digital marketing, booking and storytelling tools was seen as a priority for inclusive development.

- **Branding around sustainability:** From the marketing perspective, regional and national tourism organisations stressed that sustainability should be embedded in branding narratives, not as a niche but as a core part of the GMS value proposition, differentiating the region in a competitive market.

2.4. Regional Cooperation and GMS Partnerships

Sustainable tourism challenges and opportunities in the GMS are inherently regional, calling for stronger cooperation:

- **Operationalising the GMS Tourism Strategy 2030**: Participants agreed that the Strategy provides a solid framework but stressed the need for a clear operational roadmap with prioritised actions, responsibilities and timelines, particularly on sustainability and resilience.

- **Unified sustainability framework and indicators:** There was strong support for developing a common GMS sustainability framework with a core set of indicators that all countries can use, facilitating comparison, joint reporting and targeted support.

- **Pilot "Green Destinations":** One concrete proposal was to identify and support at least one GSTC-aligned green destination per GMS country by 2027, acting as demonstration sites for regenerative tourism, CBT, data-driven management and regional learning.

- **Regional branding and joint products:** Networks such as AEN and PATA underlined the benefits of a unified but flexible GMS brand that highlights shared values and sustainability, while allowing each country to maintain its distinct identity. Cross-border thematic routes (e.g. heritage corridors, river-based experiences, CBT networks) were seen as high-potential areas for joint development and marketing.

- **Coordination and partnerships:** MTCO's role as a regional coordinator was widely recognised, but participants emphasised that successful implementation will require

strong partnerships among governments, the private sector, communities, and development partners, with clear roles and communication channels.

2.5. Cross-cutting Issues from Plenary Discussions

Across all themes, several cross-cutting messages emerged:

- **Sustainability as a foundation for competitiveness and resilience**: Rather than a constraint, participants viewed sustainability as the foundation of long-term competitiveness, risk management and crisis recovery in the GMS.

- **From "less harm" to positive impact**: The keynote and panels converged on the idea that tourism must shift from simply reducing negative impacts to creating net positive outcomes for nature and communities, including environmental restoration and climate action.

- **"You can't manage what you don't measure"**: There was broad consensus that effective management requires measurable indicators and transparent reporting, both at destination and regional levels.

- **Partnerships and shared responsibility:** Government, private sector, communities and development partners all share responsibility for the transition. No single actor can drive sustainable tourism alone; collaboration and co-creation are essential.

- **Action-orientation**: Finally, participants stressed that many of the necessary concepts and tools are already known; the urgent task is to move from vision and dialogue to implementation, with pilot initiatives, learning loops and scaling pathways.

These insights and feedback form the basis for the consolidated findings (Section 3) and the recommendations for Viet Nam and for GMS regional cooperation (Sections 4 and 5).

3. CONSOLIDATED FINDINGS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

While the previous section organised insights by thematic area, this section brings them together into a set of cross-cutting challenges and opportunities that characterise sustainable tourism development in Viet Nam and the wider GMS.

3.1. Policy and regulatory challenges

Despite clear political commitment to sustainable tourism, policy and regulatory frameworks still tend to prioritise growth in arrivals and investment volume over long-term environmental and social performance. Key issues include:

- Limited integration of sustainability and climate resilience into core tourism laws, planning regulations and investment criteria.

- Incomplete use of tools such as zoning, carrying capacity assessments and systematic environmental and social safeguards for tourism projects.

- A tendency for sustainability provisions to remain at the level of general principles rather than concrete, enforceable requirements.

This creates a gap between strategic aspirations and the everyday decisions that shape how destinations develop.

3.2. Institutional and coordination gaps

Tourism is inherently cross-cutting, yet institutional arrangements often remain fragmented:

- Responsibilities are spread across multiple ministries and agencies (tourism, environment, culture, transport, planning, finance) with limited mechanisms for coordination.

- Vertical coordination between national and subnational levels is uneven, with some provinces moving faster than national frameworks, and others waiting for central guidance.

- Multi-stakeholder engagement platforms are emerging but not yet fully institutionalised or endowed with clear mandates and follow-up mechanisms.

As a result, good initiatives risk remaining isolated, and synergies between sectors (e.g. tourism and conservation, tourism and rural development) are not fully leveraged.

3.3. Gaps in standards, monitoring and data

There is broad recognition of the importance of sustainability standards, indicators and data systems, but several gaps persist:

- Fragmentation between different labels and standards, leading to confusion among businesses and visitors.

- Limited uptake of certification schemes by MSMEs and community enterprises, due to cost, complexity and lack of tailored support.

- Data systems that still focus mainly on arrivals and receipts, with limited systematic tracking of environmental, social and cultural impacts.

This constrains the ability of destinations and countries to measure progress, demonstrate achievements and manage adaptively.

3.4. Digital divide and unequal market access

Digital tools are transforming tourism globally, but benefits are unevenly distributed:

- Larger operators and urban destinations tend to be better equipped to use digital marketing, online booking platforms and data analytics.

- Rural destinations, small enterprises and community groups often lack connectivity, equipment, skills or time to engage effectively in the digital space.

- At regional level, data architectures are not yet fully harmonised, limiting the ability to analyse trends, manage flows and coordinate marketing efforts across borders.

If not addressed, this digital divide risks reinforcing existing inequalities, with a few destinations and businesses capturing most of the value.

3.5. Key opportunities identified

Alongside the challenges, the conference highlighted a set of strategic opportunities that Viet Nam and GMS countries can leverage:

- **A strong political window for green transformation**: The post-pandemic context, combined with global and regional agendas (Sustainable Development Goals - SDGs, GMS Tourism Strategy 2030, National Green Growth strategies), creates a favourable environment for embedding sustainability more deeply in policies and investments.

- **Existing models and success stories:** Swiss experience (e.g. the tiered "Swisstainable" model), Thai examples (e.g. DASTA), and numerous CBT and eco-tourism initiatives across the GMS provide concrete references that can be adapted and scaled.

- **Growing demand for responsible and authentic experiences:** Market trends show increasing interest in low-impact, nature-based and community-centred tourism, which aligns well with the strengths of GMS destinations.

- **Potential for regional positioning and joint products:** The GMS's shared river systems, heritage corridors and biodiversity hotspots offer strong foundations for cross-border routes and a distinctive sustainability-oriented brand.

- **Availability of development partner support**. Projects such as ST4SD, along with other bilateral and multilateral initiatives, can provide technical assistance, seed funding and facilitation to test and scale innovative mechanisms.

- **Rapid advances in technology**. Digital tools, if made accessible and user-friendly for smaller actors, can support better resource management, storytelling, transparency and market connection.

Taken together, these opportunities suggest that the GMS, and Viet Nam in particular, are well-positioned to move from incremental improvements to a more ambitious, positive-impact approach to tourism. The following sections translate these consolidated findings into strategic recommendations for Viet Nam (Section 4) and for GMS regional cooperation (Section 5).

4. PROPOSED MECHANISMS, POLICIES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VIET NAM

Building on the conference insights and consolidated findings, this section proposes a set of mechanisms, policy directions, and priority actions for Viet Nam. They are designed to be realistic next steps that can be implemented progressively, with support from national stakeholders and development partners.

4.1. Policy and regulatory directions

Embed sustainability and climate resilience in core tourism policies and strategies

- Update national tourism strategies, master plans and related legal documents to state clearly that tourism growth must be low-carbon, resource-efficient, culturally respectful and socially inclusive.

- Integrate climate risk assessment, adaptation and disaster-risk reduction into tourism planning, particularly for coastal, riverine and mountainous destinations.

Strengthen planning tools for sustainable destination development

- Systematically apply zoning, carrying-capacity concepts and cumulative impact assessments in tourism development plans at national and provincial levels.

- Require tourism projects in sensitive areas (heritage sites, protected areas, coastal zones) to demonstrate how they will avoid, minimise and offset environmental and social impacts.

4.2. Institutional and governance mechanisms

Establish or strengthen a national multi-stakeholder mechanism on sustainable tourism

- Create (or reinforce) a national platform or council on sustainable tourism under Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, bringing together key ministries, provincial representatives, private sector associations, academia and community organisations.

- Mandate this body to coordinate policy, review progress, advise on investment priorities and serve as a forum for dialogue and conflict resolution.

Enhance vertical coordination between national and provincial levels

- Encourage provinces to develop or update destination-level sustainable tourism plans aligned with national frameworks.

- Provide guidance and templates so that provincial Departments of Culture, Sports and Tourism can integrate sustainability indicators and green tourism actions into their annual plans.

Promote integrated governance at destination level

- Support the formation or strengthening of Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) in key tourism areas, with clear roles for local authorities, communities and private sector actors.

- Encourage joint planning between tourism, conservation, rural development and infrastructure authorities in priority destinations.

4.3. Support framework for community-based and inclusive tourism

Develop a national framework or guideline for CBT and inclusive tourism

- Clarify definitions, eligibility criteria and quality standards for CBT and other inclusive models (e.g. community-private partnerships, cooperatives).

- Provide guidance on governance structures, roles and responsibilities of community groups, local authorities and private partners.

Institutionalise benefit-sharing and community rights

- Promote model regulations or agreements on benefit-sharing that ensure fair distribution of income, reinvestment in community priorities and protection of cultural heritage.

- Strengthen mechanisms for free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) when tourism projects affect community lands, resources or cultural assets.

Create tailored support services for CBT and inclusive models

- Establish or designate technical support units (e.g. within VNAT, provincial departments or partner projects) to provide hands-on assistance in product design, quality improvement, storytelling, market access and business management.

- Facilitate partnerships between CBT groups and responsible tour operators to secure stable demand and joint marketing opportunities.

4.4. Standards, certification and monitoring

Design a national sustainable tourism programme with tiered standards

- **Inspired by international experience (e.g. "tiered" sustainability programmes), develop a national framework that:**
  - Offers a basic entry-level commitment for all tourism businesses;
  - Recognises higher levels of performance through progressively more stringent criteria;
  - Accepts and integrates existing credible certifications (e.g. ASEAN, GSTC-aligned) rather than creating parallel systems.

Make standards practical for MSMEs and communities

- Provide simple tools (checklists, self-assessment forms, templates) and training materials that help small enterprises and CBT groups understand and meet sustainability requirements.

- Offer targeted technical assistance or small incentives to encourage uptake of standards in rural and emerging destinations.

Develop a national indicator framework for sustainable tourism

- Define a core set of indicators covering environmental (e.g. resource use, waste, biodiversity), social (e.g. local employment, gender, community satisfaction) and economic dimensions.

- Integrate these indicators into the national tourism statistical system and encourage provinces to collect and report data regularly.

- Use the data to produce periodic "State of Sustainable Tourism in Viet Nam" briefs to inform policy adjustments and public communication.

4.5. Digital transformation and branding

Provide policy guidance and standards for tourism data and digitalisation

- Develop national guidelines on tourism data collection, sharing and protection, including minimum data standards for destinations and enterprises.

- Promote interoperable data systems that allow VNAT and provinces to analyse trends and monitor sustainability indicators.

Support destinations and MSMEs to adopt digital tools

- Implement digital literacy and e-marketing programmes targeting small enterprises, CBT groups and local officials, focusing on low-cost, user-friendly tools (online booking, social media, digital storytelling).

- Encourage the development of digital platforms that feature sustainable products, CBT experiences and lesser-known destinations.

Integrate sustainability into Viet Nam's tourism brand

- Update national branding and promotion to position Viet Nam as a sustainable and positive-impact destination, highlighting nature conservation, cultural heritage protection and community benefits.

- Use storytelling, visuals and campaigns to showcase real examples of regenerative tourism, green practices and empowered communities.

4.6. Pilot initiatives and learning mechanisms

Designate and support pilot "green destinations" in Viet Nam

- Select a small number of destinations (including Ninh Binh and other representative sites) to serve as pilots for integrated sustainable tourism models, combining CBT, standards, data systems and digital tools.

- Develop destination-level roadmaps with clear targets, roles and support packages, and document lessons in a way that can be replicated elsewhere.

Create learning loops and knowledge-sharing platforms

- Establish a mechanism (online platform, periodic workshops) for destinations and enterprises to share experiences, challenges and innovations in sustainable tourism.

- Encourage collaboration between Viet Nam and other GMS countries in documenting and exchanging case studies, tools and training materials.

Taken together, these mechanisms and recommendations provide a practical roadmap for Viet Nam to operationalise its commitment to sustainable and positive-impact tourism, while positioning itself as a regional leader in the GMS. The next section translates similar principles into recommendations for GMS regional cooperation.

5. PROPOSED MECHANISMS, POLICIES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GMS COLLABORATION

Building on the shared challenges and opportunities identified during the conference, this section sets out proposed mechanisms and policy directions to strengthen subregional collaboration on sustainable tourism under the GMS Tourism Strategy 2030. The aim is to move from high-level aspirations to a focused set of joint actions that GMS countries and partners can realistically pursue together.

5.1. Regional policy directions and alignment with the GMS Tourism Strategy 2030

Reaffirm sustainability and resilience as core principles of GMS tourism

- Explicitly restate, through a GMS Tourism Working Group (TWG) decision or joint communiqué, that sustainability, climate resilience and community well-being are non-negotiable foundations of GMS tourism development.

- Ensure that these principles guide the selection and design of regional initiatives, not only national actions.

Translate strategic directions into a concise regional action agenda

- Under the GMS Tourism Strategy 2030, identify a limited number of priority themes for joint work (e.g. sustainability standards, green destinations, cross-border products, data & indicators).

- For each theme, define objectives, indicative outputs, lead/co-lead countries and an indicative timeframe (e.g. 2025–2027).

5.2. Common GMS sustainability framework and indicators

Develop a shared sustainability framework for GMS destinations

- Agree on a concise, common framework capturing key environmental, social, cultural and economic dimensions of sustainable and regenerative tourism.

- Ensure compatibility with internationally recognised references (e.g. GSTC) and with existing ASEAN frameworks, while avoiding duplication.

Establish a core set of GMS sustainability indicators

- Define a small set of core indicators that all GMS countries commit to monitor (e.g. resource use, waste management, local employment, community satisfaction, conservation outcomes).

- Encourage countries to supplement this core set with additional indicators tailored to their context.

Integrate sustainability indicators into regional reporting

- Incorporate the agreed indicators into regular GMS tourism reports, alongside traditional statistics (arrivals, receipts), to track progress and guide support from development partners.

5.3. Regional standards and mutual recognition

Promote convergence and mutual recognition of sustainable tourism standards

- Map existing national, ASEAN and international sustainability standards used in GMS countries.

- Identify areas where criteria can be harmonised or where mutual recognition of certifications is feasible, thereby reducing costs and confusion for businesses.

Develop a GMS "umbrella" sustainability recognition scheme

- **Create a light regional mechanism (e.g. "GMS Sustainable Tourism Partner" recognition) that:**

  o Acknowledges enterprises and destinations meeting agreed standards or recognised certifications;

  o Allows diverse national approaches while signalling a shared baseline of good practice to the market.

Embed standards into regional promotion

- Give priority visibility in joint campaigns and roadshows to enterprises and destinations that meet agreed sustainability criteria, creating a clear market incentive for participation.

5.4. Cross-border products, circuits and joint branding

Design and promote cross-border thematic routes

- Identify thematic circuits that cut across GMS borders, such as:

  o Mekong river and wetland experiences;

  o Heritage and culture corridors;

  o CBT and rural tourism networks;

  o Nature and protected area routes.

- Involve local communities, SMEs and DMOs in co-design to ensure authenticity and local benefit.

Develop a GMS sustainability-oriented brand narrative

- Refresh or refine the GMS tourism brand to emphasise sustainability, authenticity and positive impact, while allowing each country to highlight its distinct identity.

- Ensure that branding materials communicate concrete examples of conservation, community empowerment and regenerative practices.

Coordinate joint marketing and distribution

- Use regional and international tourism fairs, digital platforms and media partnerships to jointly promote the selected cross-border products under the shared GMS brand.

- Encourage tour operators and online platforms to create "GMS sustainable itineraries" featuring certified or recognised products.

5.5. Regional knowledge, data and digital platforms

Strengthen the Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office (MTCO) as a knowledge hub

- Mandate MTCO to host and maintain a GMS Sustainable Tourism Knowledge Platform, including case studies, tools, training materials, and data on sustainable tourism initiatives and indicators.

- Encourage countries and partners to contribute regularly updated content.

Promote regional data harmonisation and sharing

- Develop guidelines for compatible data collection and reporting across GMS countries, building on the common indicator framework.

- Pilot shared dashboards or visualisation tools that allow comparison and analysis of sustainability performance across destinations.

Leverage digital tools for responsible travel and management

- Explore joint digital tools (e.g. apps, web portals) that:
  - Provide responsible travel information to visitors;
  - Highlight sustainable and community-based products;
  - Support visitor management and feedback collection at sensitive sites.

5.6. Governance and implementation arrangements

Clarify roles within the GMS tourism architecture

  - Reaffirm the roles of the GMS Tourism Working Group, MTCO and national tourism organisations in leading and coordinating the implementation of the sustainable tourism collaboration agenda.

  - Identify focal points in each country for key thematic areas (e.g. standards, data, CBT, finance) to facilitate communication and follow-up.

Adopt a phased regional roadmap

- Agree on a phased roadmap (e.g. short-term 0–2 years, medium-term 3–5 years) outlining priority actions, milestones and indicative responsibilities.

- Focus initial efforts on a small number of high-impact initiatives (e.g. sustainability framework and indicators, pilot Green Destinations, one or two cross-border routes) to build momentum and demonstrate results.

Monitor progress and adjust course

- Integrate sustainable tourism collaboration into existing GMS monitoring arrangements, with periodic reporting to the Tourism Working Group and higher-level GMS forums.

- Use annual or biennial reviews to take stock of achievements, identify bottlenecks and adjust priorities accordingly.

Taken together, these mechanisms and recommendations aim to help GMS countries act collectively on sustainable tourism, complementing national efforts and leveraging the region's shared natural and cultural assets. In combination with Viet Nam's domestic actions (Section 6), they provide a coherent pathway towards a more sustainable, resilient and inclusive Mekong tourism future.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD

6.1. Summary of key messages

The International Conference on Sustainable Tourism in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) has confirmed a strong and shared understanding that sustainability is no longer optional. It is the foundation of long-term competitiveness, resilience and community well-being. Across the keynote presentation and the two panel discussions, participants converged on several core messages:

- Tourism in the GMS must move beyond "doing less harm" towards positive-impact and regenerative models, actively restoring ecosystems, strengthening culture and improving local livelihoods.

- Community-based and inclusive tourism are central to this transformation, but they require clearer frameworks, long-term support and fair benefit-sharing to thrive.

- Standards, data and technology are critical enablers: they provide credibility in the market, support evidence-based management and help manage visitor flows and impacts.

- Regional cooperation through the GMS framework offers important added value on shared standards, cross-border products, indicators, knowledge and joint branding that no country can achieve alone.

These messages underpin the recommendations formulated for Viet Nam (Section 4) and for GMS collaboration (Section 5).

6.2. Strategic implications for Viet Nam and the GMS

For Viet Nam, the conference outcomes reinforce the strategic choice to pursue a green, inclusive and digitally enabled tourism pathway. This implies:

- Deepening the integration of sustainability and climate resilience into policies, planning tools and investment decisions;

- Building robust governance mechanisms that connect national and provincial levels, and bring government, private sector, communities and academia around the same table;

- Investing in standards, data systems and human capital that make sustainable tourism measurable, manageable and marketable.

For the GMS, the discussions point to an opportunity to position the subregion as a leading sustainability-oriented destination by:

- Agreeing on a common sustainability framework and indicators;

- Piloting GSTC-aligned "Green Destinations" in each country as learning laboratories;

- Developing cross-border products and a shared GMS brand narrative that put sustainability and authenticity at the centre.

Taken together, these moves can help ensure that tourism in the GMS contributes meaningfully to the SDGs, national green growth agendas and the GMS Tourism Strategy 2030.

6.3. Immediate next steps

To maintain momentum, several short- to medium-term steps can be prioritised:

National follow-up in Viet Nam

- VNAT and relevant ministries/provinces review the recommendations in this report and identify a first set of actions to integrate into existing strategies, plans and programmes (e.g. green tourism initiatives, CBT support, data and indicator systems).

- Selection and design of one or more pilot "green destinations" in Viet Nam, with clear objectives, partners and support packages.

Regional follow-up under the GMS Tourism Strategy 2030

- The GMS Tourism Working Group and MTCO validate a concise regional action agenda on sustainable tourism, focusing on a limited number of themes (standards and indicators, green destinations, cross-border products, knowledge and data).

- Identification of focal points in each GMS country for these themes, to facilitate coordination and information exchange.

Programming and support by development partners

- The ST4SD project and other partners use this report as an input to refine their portfolios, prioritising pilot interventions that can demonstrate scalable models (e.g. tiered standards, CBT support mechanisms, data tools).

- Joint development of concept notes or project ideas for regional financing facilities, technical assistance and capacity-building programmes.

6.4. A learning and partnership agenda

Finally, the conference showed that sustainable tourism in the GMS is not a fixed blueprint but a learning journey. As countries and destinations experiment with different models, several principles can help keep this journey on track:

- **Start small, learn fast, scale wisely:** Pilot initiatives, whether at destination, product or policy level, should be designed with clear learning objectives, feedback loops and pathways for scaling or replication.

- **Invest in relationships and trust:** Effective collaboration among governments, businesses, communities and development partners depends on sustained dialogue, transparency and mutual accountability.

- **Keep communities and nature at the centre**: Decisions on tourism development should be guided by their contribution to community well-being and ecosystem health, not only by short-term economic gains.

- **Communicate success and challenges openly:** Sharing both achievements and obstacles will strengthen collective learning within Viet Nam and across the GMS, and will help attract responsible investors, partners and visitors.

If these principles guide follow-up actions, the International Conference on Sustainable Tourism in the GMS will mark not just a discussion milestone, but a turning point: from vision and commitment towards concrete steps that make tourism a genuine driver of sustainable, inclusive and resilient development in Viet Nam and across the Greater Mekong Subregion.