

LINK, STRENGTHEN, AND DIGITALIZE: Tourism in the New Normal

By Madhurjya Kumar Dutta

The COVID-19 pandemic is reshaping the development, marketing, and promotion of the tourism industry in the Mekong region, as governments and industry prime movers are working to deliver innovative practices, safety protocols, and the overall reinvention of services to spur inbound tourism.

In support of this, Mekong Institute (MI) and its partners, have been strategizing to strengthen resilience of the tourism industry, including small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam under the **Sustainable and Smart Tourism Development in the Mekong Region** project.

SMEs take up a large portion of the sector, substantively contributing to livelihood, employment, and economic growth. However, given that most business enterprises in the tourism sector are small in scale, concerted and measured approaches are necessary to help them better absorb the impacts of prolonged international travel bans, safety protocol restrictions, limited accessibility to supplies, and reduced consumer consumption.





As we celebrate this year's World Tourism Day, we are placing a spotlight on the merits of promoting connective value chains, helping tourism stakeholders adapt to the new normal, and advancing digitalization as keys to help the tourism industry cope and thrive in the current landscape for a more balance and inclusive economic recovery.

Linking the Tourism Value Chain

The optimization of gains rests on the interconnectedness of the tourism value chain. By linking the cross-cutting range of services, products, and goods in the Mekong region, governments and the private sector will help diversify markets and boost revenue streams. This will invigorate the region's tourism ecosystem because a connected value chain will improve customer services; enhance the quality of goods; foster inclusivity, and increase the consumption of goods and services, which will be locally sourced. Thus, equitably distributing greater economic and social benefits to more people in the region.

Strengthening Adaptive and Responsive Capacities

To sustain a connected and robust value chain, representatives from government agencies, business enterprises, and communities will need to be equipped in adapting their tourism services, strategies, and products to cater to protocols that will guarantee the safety and security of tourists and employees.

In addition, strengthening capacities of a wider pool of tourism national and local stakeholders will help advance the proactive management of crisis preparedness, which in turn will contribute to long-term tourism governance that is more cohesive and responsive.

Advancing Digitalization

Digitalization is the way forward to more efficient and safe tourism operations. From facilitating connectivity, building wider market access, providing immediate public health information, and stimulating demand via promotional campaigns, accessible digital platforms and applications are tools to send clear, transparent, and consolidated messages to consumer markets of the status of travel businesses and destinations to change perceptions and restore travelers' confidence.

Ultimately, how we plan and effect these measures will shape the future of tourism in the Mekong region. It is in working together that we can deliver the structural transformation needed to realize a stronger, more sustainable, and resilient tourism industry.■



Mr. Madhurjya Kumar Dutta is MI's Director for Trade and Investment Facilitation. He is the lead of the Sustainable and Smart Tourism Development in the Mekong Region project. The three-year project, which is supported by the Mekong-Republic of Korea Cooperation Fund, aims to enhance the capacities of tourism-related organizations in the promotion and practice of sustainable and smart tourism. For more information, please visit <https://cutt.ly/5f1OziF>.