How a municipality can become a driver of sustainable tourism

HANDBOOK

UST

UST

UPSKILLING MUNICIPAL STAFF COMPETENCIES IN PLANNING AND MANAGING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Co-funded by
the European Union

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The project in short

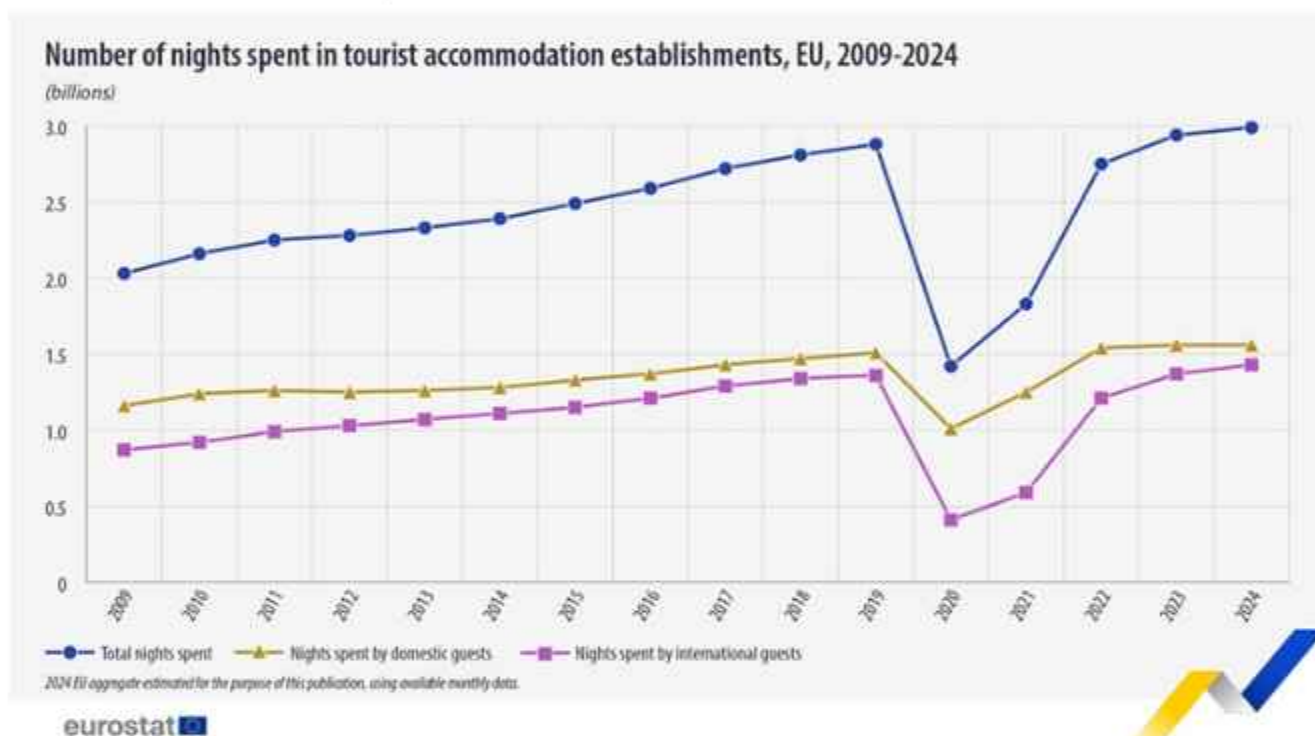|	
Acronym	**UST**
Title	Upskilling municipal staff competencies in planning and managing sustainable tourism
Funding programme	ERASMUS+
Duration	2022 - 2025
General Objective	*The general objective of the project is to strengthen the development of sustainable local tourism and increase the attractiveness of medium-sized municipalities through up-skilling the staff of municipalities*

Specific Objectives The specific objectives are:

1. To increase knowledge and competencies of local authorities staff in sustainable tourism planning and management;
2. To develop innovative local strategies to define the city's territorial marketing to promote the cities as a tourism destination, boosting the active participation of local stakeholders;
3. To promote sustainable local tourism that takes into full account current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts.

Outputs

- **SELF-ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK**: a self-assessment tool that will help the Municipalities understand where the knowledge and practice gaps are in key areas of tourism.
- **ONLINE TRAINING COURSE:** new training content for civil servants and managers working in the field of tourism responding to essential competencies for the staff of the Municipalities.
- **FINAL HANDBOOK:** a collection of good practices and concrete examples of sustainable tourism at the European level.

Lead partner	SveDest (Svensk Destinationsutveckling) (SE)
Other partners	SERN (Sweden Emilia Romagna Network), Municipality of Scandiano (IT); Municipality of Falköping (SE); CARDET (CY), Municipality de Xixona (ES)
Website	https://ustproject.eu/
Facebook page	https://www.facebook.com/ust.project/

Introduction

Our journey begins here

Tourism is once again one of the world's fastest-growing economic engines. In 2024, the estimated number of nights spent in tourist accommodation establishments in the EU reached 2.99 billion, exceeding the previous year by 53.4 million, or 2%. To that, incalculable day trips should be added. Those visitor flows create jobs and local pride, but they also put pressure on land, water, housing, transport and cultural assets. There is strain on local infrastructure, a risk of widening social gaps and erode the landscapes and way of life that attracts visitors in the first place.

Number of nights spent in tourist accommodation establishments, EU, 2009-2024
(billions)

— Total nights spent — Nights spent by domestic guests — Nights spent by international guests
2024 EU aggregate estimated for the purpose of this publication, using available monthly data.

eurostat

Europe and the global outlook

Tourism is global. Not everyone goes everywhere, but the travel trend of everyone going somewhere is very clear and rising.

Global tourism closed 2024 with about 1.4 billion international arrivals, 11 % more than 2023 and virtually back to 2019 volumes. However recovery was not uniform:
- **Middle East**: 95 million arrivals, 32% above 2019 and 1% up on 2023.
- **Africa**: 74 million arrivals, 7% above 2019 and 12% over 2023.
- **Europe**: 747 million arrivals, 1% above 2019 and 5% over 2023. European tourism is driven by strong intra-European travel. All sub-regions beat pre-pandemic levels except Central and Eastern Europe, where the Russian aggression against Ukraine continues to dampen demand.

- **Americas**: 213 million arrivals, 97% of 2019. The Caribbean and Central America are already ahead of their 2019 baselines.
- **Asia and the Pacific**: 316 million arrivals, still 13% below 2019, yet up 33% on 2023 which translates to an extra 78 million visitors in a single year.

> "In 2024 global tourism completed its recovery from the pandemic and, in many places, tourist arrivals and especially earnings are already higher than in 2019. Growth is expected to continue throughout 2025, which recalls our immense responsibility to put people and planet at the centre of development."
>
> *UN Tourism Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili*

Shifting tourism spend

International tourism receipts reached 1.6 trillion USD in 2024, 4% more than 2019 in real terms and 3% above 2023. Add passenger transport and total tourism export reach a record value of 1.9 trillion USD.

Average spending per international arrival is gradually normalising. Behind the headline figures lie big spending winners: Kuwait (+232% in receipts over 2019), El Salvador (+206%), Saudi Arabia (+148%), Albania (+136%), Serbia (+98%), Republic of Moldova (+86%), and Canada (+70%).

On the outbound side, households in Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, Italy, and France all spent at least 11% more abroad than in 2019. Indian travellers spent 81% per cent more during the first half of 2024 alone.

THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

This development has brought many aspects also in a European context.

The EU's tourism ecosystem is highly diverse and complex, covering globalised and interconnected value chains. It comprises businesses in several sectors, including food and beverage services, online information and services providers (e.g. tourist offices or digital platforms), travel agents and tour operators, accommodation suppliers, destination managing organisations, attractions and passenger transport (such as airlines and airports, trains, busses and boats).

Despite the notable disparities between EU countries, tourism represents an important part of the EU's overall economy. In 2019, it represented nearly 10% of the EU GDP and accounted for around 23 million jobs in the Union.

Just like for the other ecosystems, the update of the EU industrial strategy underlined the need to accelerate the green and digital transitions further and increase the resilience of EU tourism. To that end, the European Commission proposed to co-create a transition pathway with industry, public authorities, social partners and other stakeholders. On 4 February 2022, the Commission published the transition pathway for tourism. The

report identifies 27 areas of measures for the green and digital transition and for improving the resilience of EU tourism. The Pathway is structured on building blocks developed by the Industrial Forum Task Force 2 and gathers elements identified by stakeholders and structures from over 30 meetings and workshops.

On 1 December 2022, the Council of the European Union adopted the European agenda for tourism 2030. The agenda is based on the Commission's transition pathway for tourism and includes a multi-annual work plan with actions to be taken by the EU countries, the Commission and tourism stakeholders.

With this data it becomes clear that the tourism business will continue to grow and will demand stronger policies among all those civil servants working with these issues, regionally, nationally and on a local level.

Why sustainable tourism is now a necessity

When the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development reminds us that prosperity must stay "within planetary boundaries" the tourism conversation spotlight usually falls on a familiar cluster of goals: decent work (SDG 8), sustainable communities (SDG 11), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), climate action (SDG 13) and the protection of land and sea (SDGs 15 and 14). Yet in a municipality, where policy meets everyday life, all 17 goals come into play.

Decisions about housing or mobility touch poverty and inequality (SDG 1 & 10). Local food traditions link to zero hunger (SDG 2), energy choices invoke affordable clean power (SDG 7) and strong institutions and partnerships are needed for thoughts and ideas about sustainable tourism to reach everyday life (SDGs 16 and 17). Seeing tourism through this full SDG lens turns sustainability from a specialist topic into mainstream governance where budgets, permits, procurement, land-use plans and cross-sector alliances all influence whether we leave a place better (or worse) than we found it.

Opening up this very broad lens comes with its own set of problems. If sustainability is everything then there is a real risk that it becomes nothing.

The many roles a municipality plays

Local governments are never "just" tourism offices. According to The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKR) the municipalities juggle four overlapping roles that shape every visitor experience:

- **Attractor**: Building or curating reasons to visit, from cultural festivals to cycle trails.
- **Service provider**: Ensuring smooth, safe stays via mobility, signage, waste, water and digital services.
- **Regulator**: Setting and enforcing rules on zoning, safety, conservation and taxation so benefits are shared and harms contained.
- **Enabler**: Amplifying local stories, mobilising business support and brokering partnerships that keep value in the community.

Promoting sustainable tourism through policy

Strategic planning of tourism is a complex issue. There are many interests and different views that need to act together in some type of unison. The starting point of a touristic development of an area is usually through an enthusiastic entrepreneur or a group of entrepreneurs that have found a trend or a market need that can be satisfied through activities in the local area. It can also be a result of enthusiasts' effort of creating a determined sports or any other event. The destination may have a historical, gastronomic, natural or any other unique highlight that someone has discovered and want to communicate, spreading the word.

Once the influx of tourists begins, the need of strategic planning is getting crucial. Local politicians are to a higher extent judged by the electors of how they cope with tourism and how the benefits of it can reach all inhabitants of the destination: maybe some groups find the development of tourism harmful towards other businesses or their daily life. The speed in which tourism develops is way faster than traditional business and since the main asset often is the destination and the people living there, this can easily create unease and misunderstanding between locals, tourism businesses and politics. It takes for instance much longer time to create the infrastructure for a certain amount of visitors than to attract and convince the same amount of visitors to come to visit a place.

Hence, tools are needed to embed sustainable practices already from the beginning of the strategic planning of tourism.
Tourism cannot be treated as a produced export product that only needs to be efficiently produced since this way of thinking quickly deteriorates the main asset itself, the Destination.

The unique sameness of European municipalities

Municipalities around Europe work differently with the same issues, most of them feeling alone in their unique challenges and failing to see similarities with other European counterparts.

They may have different economic needs, different starting points and also different political/public policy.
Moreover, the steering tools may organizationally be in hands, usually in isolated silos, that are not directly involved in the actual result which can cause frustration and hopelessness among the civil servants to actively work with these issues strategically.

Another issue regarding the civil servants is the fact of not being aware or sufficiently aware of sustainable practices and how small but coherent changes in policy has great impact for visitors and local inhabitants alike.
So, when speaking about sustainable tourism we need a common ground of discussion and start from there.

Welcome to the handbook

The UST-project aims exactly at this: making everybody within the municipality to feel comfortable discussing sustainability and improve the work, no matter the starting point.

The UST tools make it possible for any municipality (or the stakeholders of a committee for a yearly event) to start looking inside the organisation to assess where they are with promoting their sustainability work and what is feasible to improve. The self-assessment-tool made in a workshop format is excellent for bringing out the challenges and the strengths that the municipality has. Often it shows that we are already doing many sustainable things under the radar, but if put in a context of a continuous improvement the medium-long term value of it for all involved in the destination, the tourism will become more and more regenerative.

Throughout this handbook you will see how the UST partner municipalities balance these roles, depending on context and capacity. What matters is not choosing one role, but recognising how they reinforce each other and contribute to a whole. Promoting sustainable tourism through thoughtful policies and regulation can free up private engagement, good services make place-branding credible and strong partnerships feed fresh ideas back into policy.

CLICK HERE!

Click here to learn more about the UST project with Johan Cavallini from SveDest, the lead partner of the project.

Click here to discover how the UST handbook can support your municipality, with insights from Johan Olofsson of SveDest, the project's lead partner.

CLICK HERE!

Interpreting sustainability: tools and mindsets

Sustainable Tourism refers to the development of a model of tourism that can assure different and long-term benefits for all the involved subjects: the community and the local environment, the tourist operators and the tourists.

Sustainable tourism is built around a set of key principles designed to ensure that tourism development is a positive experience for local people, tourism companies, and tourists themselves. These principles help to minimize negative social, economic, and environmental impacts while enhancing the cultural integrity and ecological conservation of destinations.

What sustainable tourism means in practice

The sustainable tourism in practice depends on how municipalities choose to manage it. Promoting sustainable tourism provides municipalities with an opportunity to create lasting positive impacts for both residents and visitors. It's not just about managing visitors, it's about nurturing a relationship between tourism and the community that is mutually beneficial and can last for a long time.

Through strategic planning, collaboration, and concrete action, municipal officials can ensure that tourism contributes to vibrant, inclusive, and resilient communities while protecting biodiversity and the natural environment. When municipalities work together with businesses, residents, local organisations, they can create a sustainable future for tourism that benefits everyone.

LOCAL REFLECTIONS: SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN PRACTICE

Sustainable tourism is not a fixed blueprint or a set of ready-made solutions—it is a dynamic and evolving process that must be rooted in the unique realities of each place. Across Europe, municipalities face different challenges, priorities, and opportunities as they strive to integrate sustainability into their tourism strategies. Yet, beneath these differences, common patterns emerge: the need for cross-sector collaboration, the importance of long-term planning, and the responsibility to balance the interests of visitors, residents, businesses, and the environment.

To bring this complexity to life, the UST project partners invited reflections from municipal leaders and practitioners who work with these issues on a daily basis. Their insights reveal the practical realities behind the principles of sustainable tourism—how sustainability must be included into spatial planning, how political and administrative continuity can shape outcomes, and how the public sector plays a key role in ensuring that tourism development supports community well-being rather than undermines it.

These examples are not only inspiring but also offer valuable lessons for other municipalities. They make it clear that every community—no matter its size, location, or resources—faces its own set of challenges in the journey towards sustainable tourism.

Importantly, they remind us that sustainability is not a state to be reached once and for all, but a continuous process of reflection, learning, and adaptation.

Recognizing this helps municipalities approach their own efforts with patience, openness, and a willingness to evolve.

MUNICIPALITY OF TIDAHOLM

ANNA-KLARA BÖRJESSON
Director of the Culture and Leisure Administration, Municipality of Tidaholm, former Director of tourism, Falköping Municipality

1 **What are the main challenges you face in your municipality when working with sustainable tourism planning?**

→ *One of the main challenges we face in our municipality when working with sustainable tourism planning is integrating tourism-related issues into long-term spatial and societal planning processes. This challenge persists regardless of changes in political leadership or among municipal officials. Sustainable tourism requires a cross-sectoral approach, yet working across administrative boundaries within the municipality can be difficult. To ensure consistent support from the public sector, it's crucial that the municipality has a clear mandate and shared understanding of how tourism should be addressed strategically. Without this, tourism risks being treated as a separate or secondary issue, rather than as an integrated part of sustainable community development.*

2 **What achievement are you most proud of?**

→ *One of the achievements I am most proud of is the cross-departmental collaboration we established in Falköping, particularly regarding the municipality's work with hiking trails. We developed a clear structure that defines responsibilities—both within the municipality and in relation to external stakeholders. This included setting up agreements that ensure long-term maintenance and management of the trails, whether by the municipality itself or by external partners. These efforts resulted in a more strategic and sustainable approach that is now embedded in the municipality's routines. I am also proud to have contributed to the work around Lake Hornborga, which was selected as a national model area for sustainable place-based development through tourism. We succeeded in broadening the understanding of what sustainable tourism development requires from the public sector. However, sustaining this progress over time requires continuous efforts—especially in passing on knowledge to new politicians and civil servants.*

3 **Why are these issues important?**

→ *These issues are important because sustainable tourism development requires clear public responsibility. The public sector must ensure that tourism evolves in a way that respects the carrying capacity of the place—its nature, wildlife, and the people who live and work there. We should not promote tourism if it negatively impacts the environment or local communities, or if the public sector is not prepared to take long-term responsibility for the consequences of that development.*
We need to shift the perspective from focusing solely on marketing and product development to integrating tourism into broader spatial and community planning.

At the same time, tourism businesses must take responsibility for their impact, and visitors need to respect the places they visit. Sustainable tourism is a shared responsibility that must be grounded in long-term thinking and local conditions.

MUNICIPALITY OF KALMAR

SYLVIA NYLIN
CEO of Destination Sigtuna, former CEO of VisitKalmar

1 *What are the main challenges you face in your municipality when working with sustainable tourism planning?*

➔ *Our biggest challenge is time. Initially, it takes time to familiarize ourselves with the issues and to build competence in how sustainability is reflected in our work. It also requires time to understand and implement different tools—for example, this year we are using *GreenTime* for the first time in connection with Kalmar City Festival. GreenTime is a tool for certifying sustainable events.*

2 *What achievement are you most proud of?*

➔ *We are particularly proud of the destination strategy we were tasked with by the political leadership to develop. It includes a decision to work according to the GSTC – the Global Sustainable Tourism Council's international standard for developing sustainable destinations. The fact that the strategy has been approved by the municipal council shows there is strong political backing for this work.*

3 *Why are these issues important?*

➔ *For us, sustainability is naturally integrated into everything we do. By working with all three dimensions of sustainability, we create better conditions for the tourism industry to run viable, year-round businesses. We also improve accessibility so that everyone can enjoy our destinations and experiences. Last but not least, we safeguard cultural heritage and natural environments for future generations.*

Key principles

The key principles of sustainable tourism according to the main international institutions are:

MINIMIZING ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT
Reducing pollution, waste, energy consumption, and water use to protect natural habitats and preserve landscapes.

SUPPORTING LOCAL ECONOMIES
Encouraging the use of local services and goods to ensure that tourism benefits are widely distributed, particularly by creating jobs and generating income for local businesses.

CONSERVING CULTURAL HERITAGE
Respecting and preserving the destination's cultural heritage and traditions, including supporting the preservation of historic sites and encouraging cultural exchange and understanding.

PROVIDING MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES FOR TOURISTS
Offering tourists an insightful, rewarding experience that fosters a greater understanding of local environmental and cultural issues.

ENSURING SOCIAL EQUITY
Making sure that tourism development contributes to social equity and wellbeing, including accessibility for all, fair labor practices, and contributing to community infrastructure and services.

EDUCATING TOURISTS AND LOCALS ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY
Raising awareness among both tourists and local communities about the importance of sustainable tourism practices.

PLANNING FOR THE LONG TERM
Employing a long-term perspective for sustainable tourism development, including careful planning and management of resources to avoid over-tourism and ensure that development is sustainable over time

References for further readings: The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) provides a wealth of information on sustainable tourism, including guidelines and policies aimed at maximizing tourism's socio-economic contributions while minimizing potential negative impacts. Visit their official site: **UNWTO - Sustainable Development**. The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) manages global standards for sustainable travel and tourism, offering criteria and indicators for sustainability practices. Their resources can be found here: **GSTC Criteria The International Ecotourism Society (TIES)** offers insights and educational resources on ecotourism, a sub-set of sustainable tourism focused on ecological conservation and educating travellers on the natural environment.

Introducing Place Development – through a new perspective

In an age of climate uncertainty, growing social divides, and rapid transformation of both rural and urban life, how we understand tourism—and its role in shaping places—needs to evolve. Place development is one such evolution. It moves beyond the idea of tourism as a goal in itself and instead positions it as a tool—a means to strengthen local communities, build resilience, and support a broader sustainable transition.

To help us make sense of this shift, the UST project invited two leading external experts to contribute their perspectives: Kristina Lindström, researcher at the University of Stavanger and specialist in destination and place development, and Joakim Forsemalm, associate professor in ethnology and cultural geographer focusing on organizational change, spatial practices, and sustainability.

Kristina Lindström brings with her a deep understanding of the paradigm shift from destination marketing and tourism promotion to integrated place development. In her work, tourism is no longer the sole purpose of development strategies, but one of many tools municipalities can use to achieve long-term societal goals. In particular, she draws attention to the importance of aligning tourism with local governance, civil society, and environmental responsibility.

Joakim Forsemalm approaches sustainable tourism from a different angle. He reminds us that every action we take is shaped by a lens, a perspective rooted in our values, professional identities, and lived experiences. By recognizing these lenses, and the ways they influence our decisions, we open up to new possibilities for cooperation and change. Forsemalm urges us to "mind the gaps", meaning the disconnects between departments, between levels of governance, and between long-term visions and everyday practices. By "minding the gap" we get to see those gaps as spaces for learning, reflection, and reconnection.

> "The foundation of societal sustainability is organisational sustainability. And the foundation of organisational sustainability is personal sustainability"
>
> *Joakim Forsemalm*

This dual perspective, strategic and reflective on one hand and systemic and personal on the other, has been central to the development of the UST project. By combining practical tools like self-assessment frameworks and stakeholder mapping with theoretical guidance from fields like destination studies and cultural geography, the project supports municipalities in taking their next steps toward more inclusive, sustainable, and future-focused place development.

Interpreting sustainability

There are many different ways of working with sustainability in tourism. Many municipalities have policies in place and have made progress, but there is no single right way to do it or established method that handles this multi-faceted field.

Within the UST project different partners started with different perspectives on sustainability, some leaning towards social issues of community, some leaning toward green initiatives. The one of the main goals of the project was to develop and utilize a self-assessment questionnaire designed to assess and understand the work of municipalities in the field of sustainable tourism development in a non-prescriptive way. This meant giving guidance to thinking about sustainability without having to rely on a single framework – a one size fits all – that would hinder learning rather than promote it.

Prescriptive frameworks for sustainability often have a destination perspective rather than a municipal perspective. By using the full set of SDGs, the self-assessment questionnaire helps identify good practices, areas of improvement and blind spots from each municipality's unique situation while acknowledging the greater SDG framework that many all municipal governance has a relationship to. The overarching aim is to use the self-assessment questionnaires to pinpoint upskilling opportunities for the stakeholders in each of the partner municipalities and make the framework available for others to use by creating clear policy and strategy changes that promotes actions with a high degree of organisational and situational fit.

How the SDGs have been interpreted in the project

With different lenses and different context for sustainability as well as for tourism the partners set out on a journey to define common denominators for self-reflection and self-assessment. With the broader scope the municipalities involved their stakeholders to use local good practices to design stakeholder dialogue around sustainable tourism. The result is the self-assessment questionnaire. It is not designed to be prescriptive, as that is not the intention of the SDGs, but to inspire local action, policies and initiatives.

Each SDG was given a broad definition to inspire conversation. Building on that, the self-assessment applies a methodology that allows municipalities to evaluate their communal understanding and identify gaps to address. Through this process the partner municipalities and their stakeholders gained a much deeper understanding of sustainable practices and with the framework in place it's easy to identify exactly what aspect or nuance of an SDG you want to focus on developing.

The self-assessment framework gives you this broader understanding to develop with your own stakeholders. This will create a set of sustainability results that are unique to you but where comparability makes benchmarking easier.

This approach captures the triple-bottom-line that all partner municipalities were searching for but through stakeholder engagement they added a fourth pillar: good governance.

How to work with sustainability and stakeholders
A destination has a multitude of different stakeholders from governance actors like a municipality or a regional body to small businesses and associations of not-for-profit actors. Sustainability work has the ambition to include all of these stakeholders in the conversation about sustainable tourism and its contribution to the SDGs.

If you are a representative of a municipality your organisation has probably already thought about the SDGs and what impact you would like to have on them through the work you do as a municipality. It is however possible that you have missed out on the opportunities to include tourism in your toolbox to improve the outcome of your efforts. This toolbox requires you to engage the tourism ecosystem, which is sometimes easier said than done. The **self-assessment tool** is a great way to start having the conversation about the SDGs. As you discover the potential to use large stakeholder groups for the greater good you will also start to form relationships and build trust within your tourism eco system.

Start by gathering your internal stakeholders. These would be your colleagues within different parts of the municipal organisation. It is important not to limit your stakeholder group to the people you normally work with, like your closest colleagues, but try to keep a manageable group size for the first discussion. The section 1 General Question are aimed at you to get started and gain valuable understanding of where the municipality stands on the different governance approaches to sustainable tourism. Once you have completed the General Questions you should have a better understanding of you strong areas and areas with room for improvement from a governance perspective.

In order to inform your decision making, strategic planning and inspire collaboration for the Sustainable Development Goals you can now invite a broader group of stakeholders into the conversation. Your tool now is Section 2 where you can approach the SDGs from a holistic perspective or narrow down your efforts to specific SDGs for discussion. As part of this process the UST project has provided an e-learning platform where you can get inspiration on both the basic and advanced level on four of the SDGs through the lenses of the project partners and their work with promoting sustainable tourism. The e-learning platform provides you with another self-assessment tool to highlight where your strong areas and areas for improvement lie.

Most importantly, you need to understand and accept that sustainable tourism is a marathon not a sprint, but there are some low hanging fruits to enjoy along the way – some easy early wins. Some inspiration for these have been provided on the advanced level but your goal should be to highlight your own achievements and see where the next step can lead you. By combining the strengths of different parts of the tourism ecosystem you should be able to take steps towards a more sustainable tourism in your municipality no matter at what level you start.

Here is some inspiration to get you thinking about your stakeholders.
They could be hospitality businesses like a hotel and bed & breakfast. They could be event organisers like a music or food festival. They could be community leaders like the local football club or chamber of commerce. They could be local or incoming tour operators big and small. They could be your local rural development cluster. They could be agricultural actors, local producers of food and drink or artisanal products. They could be local safety actors like the police or rescue services. Try to think outside the box and invite your stakeholders to suggest other stakeholders to include!

How our resources can help you develop your sustainable tourism strategy

1 Assess your municipality readiness in sustainable tourism development

use the Self Assessment Tool

2 Gain knowledge

use the E-Learning Platform for essential competences

Work and engage with stakeholders

Develop a stakeholder management plan

3 Work on your strategy

use the Handbook for support and guidance during these processes

4 achieve your goals in sustainable tourism development

The paradigm shift in practice – what the UST case studies reveal

The UST project invited municipalities to reflect on their role in sustainable tourism—and many have taken steps that clearly align with the paradigm shift outlined by Kristina Lindström and Joakim Forsemalm. The shift is visible in how tourism is no longer treated as an isolated sector, but increasingly seen as part of a wider place development strategy, woven into governance, culture, and community wellbeing.

> ### FROM DESTINATION TO PLACE: XIXONA
>
> In the case of Xixona, the annual Christmas Fair began as an event to attract tourists and stimulate economic activity. But over time, it has evolved into something much more: a platform for local pride, community inclusion, and economic empowerment. Local producers, artisans, and volunteers are central to the fair—not simply as providers of services, but as co-creators of the event's identity. This reflects the shift that Kristina

Lindström describes: tourism as a means to community development, not just an end in itself.

At the same time, Xixona's experience shows that success requires continuous reflection on inclusion and long-term vision. What voices are still missing? What steps are being taken to ensure fair access to opportunity? These are the types of questions that Forsemalm would encourage us to ask by checking our lenses—looking inward to challenge our assumptions and broaden our view of what success means.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS WITH PURPOSE: SCANDIANO

Scandiano's Spergolonga event is another example of the shift. While it celebrates food, wine and landscape, its real strength lies in the networks it builds. Local clubs, environmental associations, businesses, and civil protection services all come together to shape the event. This reflects Joakim's call to work across sectors and mind the gaps —and the municipality's role as an enabler of that ecosystem is key.

Still, there is room to go further. As both Kristina and Joakim highlight, goal conflicts are not to be feared, but should be embraced as opportunities for deeper collaboration. Could Scandiano expand the event's focus to include more direct conversations about sustainability, circular economy, or inclusion? Could stakeholders not traditionally linked to tourism be invited in the strategic work? Invited to co-create sustainable policies/ strategies?

REIMAGINING GOVERNANCE: FALKÖPING

In Falköping, we see one of the clearest examples of cross-departmental collaboration and long-term planning. By working toward SDG 15 (Life on Land), the municipality has adopted a place-based strategy that links tourism to biodiversity, resident wellbeing, and inter-municipal partnerships. This echoes Kristina Lindström's argument that destination development must be aligned with public governance and environmental goals.

However, as Falköping's own reflections show, this work is not without challenges. Creating a "truly sustainable destination" requires political mandate, readiness to act across silos, and the ability to listen and adapt—a theme central to Forsemalm's call for inner shifts as much as external ones.

Self-assessment

The **self-assessment tool** is the most integral part of the sustainability journey of this project. It is the backbone and the way we look at shift in policy, in ways of working and governance as a whole. By regularly using the self-assessment tool to "check in" on our sustainability journey together with our stakeholders the governance grows stronger as does the sustainability network of stakeholder actions that helps promote sustainable practices in businesses, associations and in visitor behaviour.

The self-assessment tool

The Self-Assessment Questionnaire, grounded in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is the first step in identifying strengths, challenges.

The Self-assessment questionnaire, has been tested by the partners and affiliated municipalities and is intended to be a tool that be used by any municipality who is interested in exploring how their governance and greater eco-system of stakeholders is impacted by a municipality's strategy, policymaking, and execution in relation to sustainable tourism development and up-skilling opportunities. The tool is at its best when done in the form of a workshop in with a broad group of key stakeholders and not only municipal staff.

The tool helps shine a light on a municipality's position in regards to the SDGs, while also highlighting hidden strengths like specific policies or strategies, innovative practices, and specific local challenges that might be fairly unique in the details but share common sustainability challenges as a broader theme. Some questions will feel largely relevant and valid, and much depends on the municipal context and priorities but also by who is in the workshop. This tool is flexible enough to accommodate local differences while encouraging broad engagement. We encourage you to focus on where the conversation takes you, don't treat it as a self-assessment where every issue will require the same amount of attention. The next time you revisit the questionnaire after having worked with the challenges or gaps you discovered the first time, you will have new and more developed ideas, and you will start to address areas that might have seemed irrelevant the first time round.

By engaging with these resources, municipalities can develop targeted strategies, foster collaboration among stakeholders, and contribute to a more resilient, inclusive, and environmentally responsible tourism sector.

"Getting there" – Notes on developing the self-assessment tool

SveDest led the process developing a prototype questionnaire aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for municipal use. The initial version was tested and refined through structured feedback from the municipalities of Falköping, Xixona, and Scandiano, where each question was assessed for its performance, relevance, and ease of completion. As a result of this feedback, the questionnaire was adjusted in both scope and structure.

The prototype, while ambitious, presented challenges. There was noticeable disparity in the strategic maturity of municipalities, particularly in their engagement with the SDGs.
Some municipalities approached the process from a strategic standpoint, while others were more focused on operational concerns. The concept of "sustainability" itself caused interpretive issues, with definitions varying not only across municipalities but also within individual organizations. This raised concerns about how the academic tone of the questionnaire would be received in workshops, and whether municipalities would find the questions relevant. The feedback led to important revisions, improving the tool's accessibility and impact.

Despite these differences, common opportunities emerged. While each municipality demonstrated strengths shaped by cultural, geographic, and political factors, shared challenges and development areas were also identified. Each participant gained insights into specific upskilling needs, and tailored recommendations were provided accordingly.

Finally, the process highlighted the varying stages of progress among municipalities. Some were well established in their sustainable tourism strategies, while others were still addressing foundational issues. This revealed a clear need to support municipalities at earlier stages of their journey, offering them tools and guidance to help launch and – maybe more so – sustain their efforts.

The revised version was later used in dedicated workshops. Other partners, such as SERN and Cardet, expanded the tool's reach by running similar workshops with their affiliated municipalities: Municipality of Bertinoro (IT), Municipality of Limasol (CY), Municipality of Polemida (CY) and Municipality of Agios Athanasios (CY).

The **Gap Analysis Report**, developed from the questionnaires' main findings, highlighted key areas for upskilling and guided the selection of specific SDGs and case studies to focus on within this platform.

Working with the self-assessment tool

- Use the Self-Assessment Questionnaire to evaluate your current sustainability strategies.
- Explore our e-learning modules, which provide insights into key SDGs and showcase real-world examples from different municipalities.
- Learn from case studies that highlight good practices in sustainable tourism planning and implementation.
- Identify your municipality's strengths and find inspiration to improve the sustainable impact, possibly including other SDGs that you haven't considered.

From insight to action

It's one thing to do a self-assessment and quite another to get actions out of it. This requires some insights not only what the sustainability gaps are but what actions can be taken and by whom. Some actions rest on a strategical level about municipal governance where dialogue with partners like other municipalities, regional governments and other regional or national stake holder who actions and policies shape the municipal landscape. There are also actions resting on the local level where the municipality can engage diverse groups to unlock actions that impacts visitors and local community alike.

Insights from elsewhere

In order to avoid getting stuck on our own local levels the UST project has looked at different sources that inspire the partners to take the next step. These are the inspirational cases and the partner's key take-aways from each one.

THE CINQUE TERRE ECO-SUSTAINABLE PROJECT

LOCATION
Cinque Terre, Liguria Region, Italy

OVERVIEW
Cinque Terre, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is renowned for its picturesque villages, rugged coastline, and terraced landscapes along the Italian Riviera. However, the area's beauty and uniqueness have led to an influx of tourists, posing significant challenges to its delicate ecosystem and the well-being of local communities. To address these challenges, the Cinque Terre National Park Authority initiated an Eco sustainable project aimed at promoting sustainable tourism practices that protect the environment while enhancing the visitor experience.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
The project encompasses a comprehensive approach to sustainable tourism, including the management of tourist flows, the promotion of eco-friendly transportation, and the support of local agriculture and artisanal products. One of the key initiatives is the Cinque Terre Card, which provides access to trails, public transportation, and cultural sites, encouraging visitors to minimize their carbon footprint by using trains and buses instead of cars. Additionally, the project supports local vineyards practicing terraced farming, a traditional agricultural method that prevents soil erosion and preserves the landscape. The promotion of local products and crafts is another cornerstone, encouraging visitors to support the local economy by purchasing authentic goods.

KEY ASPECTS
Tourist Flow Management: Implementing strategies to control and distribute tourist traffic throughout the year to avoid over-tourism during peak seasons.

Preservation of Traditional Practices: Supporting terraced agriculture, which is vital for preventing soil erosion and maintaining the area's distinctive landscape. This includes promoting the cultivation of native grape varieties and traditional winemaking techniques.

Sustainable Local Products: Encouraging the consumption and purchase of local products, including wine, olive oil, and artisan crafts, contributing to the sustainability of local businesses and reducing the carbon footprint associated with imported goods.

Education and Awareness: Educating tourists about the fragility of the Cinque Terre ecosystem through guided tours, informational materials, and signage along trails. This initiative aims to foster a sense of responsibility and encourage visitors to adhere to sustainable practices during their stay.

THE ICE HOTEL IN SWEDEN

LOCATION
Jukkasjärvi, Northern Sweden

OVERVIEW
The Icehotel in Jukkasjärvi stands as a pioneering example of sustainable tourism and innovative design, about 200 km north of the Arctic Circle. Founded in 1989, it's the world's first hotel made entirely of ice and snow, rebuilt each year from the frozen waters of the nearby Torne River. This ephemeral creation offers guests a unique experience of sleeping in rooms kept at sub-zero temperatures, surrounded by stunning ice sculptures and architecture.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
Each winter, artists from around the world gather in Jukkasjärvi to design and construct the Icehotel. The hotel uses approximately 2,500 tons of ice and 30,000 cubic meters of snice (a mixture of snow and ice that strengthens the structure) sourced from the Torne River. The design of the hotel changes annually, making each iteration a unique art project that showcases innovative designs and techniques in ice construction. The hotel comprises guest rooms, a bar, a chapel, and art galleries, all of which are made of ice. Furniture and even beds are crafted from ice, with warm reindeer hides and specially designed sleeping bags provided to ensure guests' comfort. The Icehotel also offers warm accommodations and a range of Arctic experiences, such as Northern Lights tours, dog sledding, and ice sculpting workshops, to complement the ice stay experience.

KEY ASPECTS
Environmental Impact: The Icehotel leverages the natural cycle of the Torne River, with all ice used in construction returning to the river each spring, ensuring minimal environmental impact. This cycle of creation and melting epitomizes the principles of sustainable use of natural resources.

Energy Efficiency: Despite its icy construction, the Icehotel employs several measures to minimize its energy consumption. The hotel uses renewable energy sourced from hydroelectric power for all its electricity needs, significantly reducing its carbon footprint.

Promotion of Local Culture and Economy: The Icehotel plays a crucial role in promoting local Sami culture and traditions, providing guests with an authentic experience of the Arctic way of life. It also significantly contributes to the local economy by attracting tourists to the region during the winter months, creating jobs, and supporting local businesses.

Innovation and Education: The hotel serves as a living example of innovative design and sustainable tourism practices. It educates visitors about sustainable living in extreme conditions and the importance of environmental conservation. The annual reconstruction offers continuous opportunities to explore and implement sustainable building techniques and materials.

The Icehotel offers an accommodation experience and represents an example of the possibilities of sustainable tourism and the creative use of natural resources. Its commitment to environmental sustainability, combined with its support for local culture and the economy, makes it a model for innovative and eco-friendly tourism practices.

THE AYIA NAPA MARINA PROJECT

LOCATION
Ayia Napa, Cyprus

OVERVIEW
The Ayia Napa Marina Project is a large-scale development in Cyprus aimed at creating a modern marina while ensuring environmental sustainability. The project seeks to boost high-end tourism, provide economic benefits, and preserve the natural beauty of the coastal region. It integrates sustainable tourism principles, emphasizing eco-friendly infrastructure, responsible resource management, and active community engagement.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
The Ayia Napa Marina is designed as a luxury waterfront destination featuring:
- A state-of-the-art marina accommodating yachts and boats.
- Luxury residential buildings with sustainable architectural designs.
- Retail, dining, and entertainment facilities that promote local businesses.
- Public spaces and recreational areas to encourage tourism and community interaction.

To minimize its environmental footprint, the project incorporates:
- Green Building Design: The structures use energy-efficient materials and incorporate renewable energy sources.
- Water Conservation: Advanced systems for rainwater harvesting and wastewater treatment are implemented.
- Sustainable Transport: The development encourages pedestrian-friendly zones and alternative transportation options.

KEY ASPECTS
In terms of environmental sustainability, the Ayia Napa Marina project incorporates several measures to protect the marine ecosystem and prevent pollution. Sustainable waste management and recycling programs are implemented to minimize environmental impact,

while the use of solar panels and energy-efficient systems in buildings reduces energy consumption and carbon emissions.

From an economic sustainability perspective, the project creates job opportunities for local communities, supporting employment in various sectors related to tourism and hospitality. Additionally, it encourages the growth of local businesses and service providers, ensuring that the economic benefits extend beyond the marina itself. The long-term investment in tourism infrastructure strengthens the region's appeal as a high-quality, sustainable travel destination.

Regarding social and cultural sustainability, the project emphasizes collaboration with local stakeholders in the planning and development phases, ensuring that the community has an active role in decision-making. It also promotes local heritage and culture through tourism activities, preserving and showcasing the unique identity of the area. Furthermore, public access to waterfront areas is prioritized, fostering community inclusivity and allowing both residents and visitors to enjoy the marina's offerings.

Insights from project partners

SCANDIANO MUNICIPALITY

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM APPLYING THE TOOLS OURSELVES

Our participation in the UST project has been a meaningful journey of self-discovery and strategic reflection. Through the tools and workshops—especially the self-assessment questionnaire and the SDG framework—we gained valuable insight into our strengths and redefined our approach to tourism within a broader, community-centered vision of sustainability.

In the early stages of administering the questionnaire—first internally and later with key local stakeholders, particularly those from our network of associations—we realized that we initially had limited clarity on what constituted good practices in sustainable tourism at the municipal level. While the municipality had been active in promoting the area, especially through events aimed at residents of the surrounding territories, a broader strategic framework around sustainability was lacking. At the same time, our territory is embedded in a region rich in gastronomic excellence and wine production, offering a strong foundation for sustainable tourism development.

The workshop setting, where the questionnaire was discussed and reflected upon collaboratively, became a crucial moment of shared learning.

It created space for open dialogue around sustainability and enabled participants to recognize existing strengths. The exchange of perspectives underscored a key insight: community and stakeholder participation is essential to territorial development.

One of the most significant takeaways was the realization that Scandiano has a natural aptitude for community involvement, especially through the active participation of associations and volunteers in organizing events. This deep-rooted civic engagement emerged as a central asset for promoting a sustainable, inclusive model of tourism.

This awareness, gained early in the project, served to guide our reflection and strategic thinking throughout the UST journey. It not only shaped our understanding of sustainability in tourism but also reaffirmed the importance of community engagement as a driver for long-term, place-based development.

THE JOURNEY OF "SELF-DISCOVERY" THROUGH THE UST PROJECT

The self-assessment framework revealed a strong alignment with SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, which helped Scandiano focus on key priorities such as reducing the environmental footprint of events, supporting local businesses, and preserving cultural heritage through responsible practices.

At the beginning, the approach focused on how the rich associative and cultural heritage of Scandiano could contribute to tourism, and how the sustainability theme could be integrated into events and community activities. The starting point was the strong network of associations and local events, and a shared sense of identity rooted in heritage, gastronomy, and landscape.

RETHINKING THE STARTING POINT

However, as we progressed through the project and workshops, we experienced a paradigm shift: rather than asking how events could serve tourism, we asked instead:
"How can tourism serve the community?"

This inversion allowed us to realign our strategy with core municipal objectives: improving residents' well-being, strengthening community bonds, and investing in local infrastructure and culture. We realized that community well-being is not only compatible with tourism, but is in fact a powerful driver of sustainable tourism.

1. Sustainability starts with the community.
2. A strong, engaged community creates the foundation for authentic and attractive tourism.
3. Events like the Spergolonga embody community-based tourism.
4. Its success lies not in the number of visitors, but in the deep involvement of at least 15 local associations and the promotion of local food and wine. It's a model of low-impact tourism, built on pride, collaboration, and shared identity.
5. Shifting from event-based promotion to quality-of-life-based planning.
6. Rather than seeking a balance between environment, economy, and society, we are now exploring how investments in residents' quality of life naturally lead to sustainable tourism outcomes.

CHANGES OF STRATEGIES, POLICIES

As a result of the project, several policy and strategy developments are taking shape:

- The Rocca renovation is being reimagined as a cultural community hub, prioritizing residents while welcoming tourism as a secondary benefit (Strategic Objective: SCO2.3 – CULTURE: THE FORTRESS AT THE CENTER)
- A network of cultural, historical and nature trails is being developed - not just as tourist attractions, but as enhancements to local life, mobility, and environmental education.
- Deeper collaboration with associations in now seen as central to tourism planning - not an accessory, but a structural pillar as included in the Strategic Objective: SCO1.5 - PARTICIPATION: HAMLETS AND CITY CLUBS AS PROTAGONITS OF THEIR OWN FUTURE. For this reason, it is expected that discussion tables will soon be set up to enable reflection on the various events and the common objective of promoting sustainable tourism.

We also recognize the need to develop stronger communication strategies to convey this model of tourism clearly: one that is rooted in community, respectful of place, and driven by authenticity and sustainability.

Through the UST project, we learned that sustainable tourism is not a separate goal, but the natural result of a community-first approach. By focusing on residents, investing in local capacity, and strengthening associative networks, we are creating a tourism model that is resilient, inclusive, and deeply tied to our territory.

Our journey is ongoing, but we now have a stronger sense of direction and purpose. UST has not only offered us tools - it has helped us reflect, question, and evolve

XIXONA MUNICIPALITY

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM APPLYING THE TOOLS OURSELVES

Participating in the UST project has allowed us to look at the Christmas Fair, one of Xixona's most emblematic events, with new eyes. By using the SDG framework and self-assessment process, we were able to identify the multiple roles that the fair plays in our community, not only as a strong seasonal tourist attraction, but as a powerful engine for social inclusion, local entrepreneurship, and sustainable food heritage.

Initially, we approached the Christmas Fair as an event that supported tourism and local pride. But the self-assessment tool helped us better understand the broader impact the fair has across different dimensions of sustainability, especially SDGs 1 (No Poverty) and 2 (Zero Hunger).

Xixona

We realized that many of the fair's elements were already aligned with good practices in sustainable tourism, but we had not yet framed them that way. The tool helped us recognize these strengths, giving us a clearer sense of purpose and a language to communicate our work and a boost to see other parts of the work as integrated parts in our sustainability journey.

When we looked at the fair through the self-assessment framework we uncovered the basis of a platform for supporting local entrepreneurship and economic inclusion. The fair provides a direct sales channel for artisans, nougat makers and micro enterprises. The spillover effects are also clear from logistics to hospitality.

The inclusive structure of the fair, the participation of community associations, and the opportunities it provides for small producers and artisans stood out as areas where we were already contributing to local economic development and social equity. Moreover, our efforts to promote local gastronomy and responsible food consumption offered a strong foundation for linking tourism with cultural identity and sustainability as well as dealing with the sustainability complexities and strong seasonality inherent in producing nougat.

THE JOURNEY OF "SELF-DISCOVERY" THROUGH THE UST PROJECT

Through the UST project, we experienced a shift in how we perceive our role as a municipality in developing tourism. Rather than focusing solely on attracting visitors, we began to ask: how can tourism contribute to the well-being of our residents, and how can it reinforce local identity and cohesion?

The Christmas Fair became a lens through which we could see this transformation. It emerged on the other side of UST not only as a commercial event but as a shared community process. Associations from different sectors, like neighbourhood groups, cultural organisations, and educational entities, now co-create the event, making it a living expression of Xixona's values and traditions. Traditions that now includes a broader spectrum of Xixona's food culture and better ways of showcasing and creating inclusive experiences around it, for example through workshops, tastings and experiences that strengthens the bond between food, tradition and place.

The project also allowed us to connect this community-driven approach to sustainability. By integrating environmental measures, like reducing waste and promoting sustainable mobility, and by creating programming that is intergenerational and inclusive, the fair and tourism has taken on a more holistic role in our place development strategy. These reflections deepened our understanding of sustainability as something that can happen not only through policy, but more so through everyday community engagement and celebration of traditions and place.

CHANGES TO STRATEGIES, POLICIES OR WAYS OF WORKING

Thanks to the UST approach, our way of working has become more integrated and reflective. On top of changes in how we work with planning, inclusion and policies, we have made important shifts in how we frame, communicate, and plan around our tourism-related activities.

UST Project

The biggest change has been our recognition that the Christmas Fair is part of a broader strategy for sustainable development. We no longer see it as a stand-alone event. Instead, it has become a cornerstone in a set of interrelated initiatives that reflect our community values and strengthen our economic and social fabric.

New yearly initiatives born out of this way of working with events as drivers for sustainable tourism promotion include the Almond Blossom Route, which reconnects residents and visitors with the agricultural landscape of Xixona through nature-based experiences, the Sustainable Artisan Market, which promotes proximity consumption and supports the circular economy, and annual culinary celebrations like World Nougat Day and European Artisan Ice Cream Day, which elevate Xixona's gastronomic heritage. As a part of these initiatives, events like Artisan Nougat Ice Cream Exhibition are currently being planned with PGI.

These activities were not created solely for tourism. They emerged from a process of local dialogue and reflection, supported by UST and the self-assessment framework, about how to connect sustainability, identity, and economic inclusion. The tools offered by the project helped us articulate these connections and gave us confidence in the direction we were already taking.

THE WAY FORWARD

We now have a stronger understanding of how our local initiatives contribute to broader sustainability goals. The UST project has helped us see tourism and sustainability not as goals in themselves but for community development and place-based identity. Through these policies are merging into key pillars of a framework focused on people, sustainability and place. Through integrating tourism and sustainability we can draw on strengths from many parts of our community and way of life to build resilience and strengthen identity.

Moving forward, we aim to strengthen the participatory elements of our work even further. The success of the Christmas Fair has shown us the power of collaboration. Not only among municipal departments but also with civil society organisations, producers, and residents. Our next steps involve ensuring that these partnerships remain at the centre of our strategy, especially as we continue to evolve and expand initiatives like the Almond Blossom Route and the Sustainable Artisan Market.

We also recognize the importance of continuing to work across sectors, making sure that environmental considerations, economic opportunities, and cultural heritage remain interlinked. While we are still early in this transformation, the UST project has helped us lay the foundation for a more just, inclusive, and sustainable tourism model – one that places people, territory, and shared identity at the heart of development

FALKÖPING MUNICIPALITY

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM APPLYING THE TOOLS OURSELVES

One of the first challenges we faced when organizing the workshops was simply getting everyone in the same room. Coordinating participants from different departments and finding time in their busy schedules proved difficult. However, once everyone was present, the workshops turned out to be very successful. A key decision that contributed to this success was involving an external facilitator. This allowed all participants, including those who convened the meeting, to fully engage in the process. It helped level the playing field and made the workshop more inclusive and effective.

After the workshop, we analysed our local context and noted that we already have many strong strategic documents to guide us, such as the municipal environmental plan, the business strategy, the rural development strategy, and Falköping municipality's cooperation agreement with Visit Hornborgasjön. These are important resources to lean on when working with sustainable tourism.

These are important resources to lean on when working with sustainable tourism, However, it also became clear that one of the biggest ongoing challenges is ensuring constant dialogue and regular meetings across departmental boundaries within the municipality. This cross-sectoral communication is essential but difficult to maintain in day-to-day operations.

One ongoing challenge, however, is maintaining momentum after the workshop ends. People often return to their traditional roles and ways of working, which makes it difficult to sustain the energy and collaborative spirit that emerged during the sessions.

THE JOURNEY OF "SELF-DISCOVERY" THROUGH THE UST PROJECT

Throughout the UST process, we've realized how valuable it is to share our sustainability journey with other municipalities, both nationally and internationally. These exchanges offered powerful learning opportunities—dialogue with others helped us reflect on our own practices, better understand our challenges, and appreciate different approaches. For instance, it became clear that we are not alone in struggling to work across administrative boundaries within our own municipality. Many others shared similar difficulties in establishing lasting cross-departmental collaboration.

UST Project

During the project's workshops and meetings, we actively shared our journey, including both our challenges and successful strategies. It truly felt like we were able to create "aha moments" together, for example, shifting the perspective from simply asking what visitors can contribute economically, to exploring how they might also help improve the place itself. Can their presence support the protection of nature and the well-being of the animals that live there? These insights sparked new ways of thinking about the role of tourism in sustainable development.

We started the project from a strong foundation, having already made significant progress in our sustainability work. During the project, we received repeated confirmation that our efforts are inspiring to others, and that our commitment to sustainable development and innovation is meaningful. That recognition has been incredibly energizing and has strengthened our motivation to continue, even when it's difficult to push boundaries and build new types of collaboration, especially with local actors who are not traditionally involved in tourism.

To provide a more detailed view of our work and the context we operate in, we invite you to explore our report "Visit Hornborgasjön – Sustainable Place Development Through Tourism", which outlines our approach, local strategies, and key insights how we are working with sustainable tourism.

CHANGES TO STRATEGIES, POLICIES OR WAYS OF WORKING

In our case, the project did not lead to a formal change in strategy. Instead, it reinforced and validated the path we are already on. We've gained confidence and momentum to continue pushing forward with our work on sustainable tourism. One of the greatest outcomes has been the relationships we've built—connections with other municipalities and partners that we value highly. These networks will continue beyond the scope of the project, and we are already exploring ways to collaborate.

At the same time, the project has contributed to subtle but important shifts in how we think and work. For example, we are now more consciously using existing strategic documents— such as the municipal environmental plan, the business strategy, the rural development strategy, and our cooperation agreement with Visit Hornborgasjön —as foundations for aligning our tourism development with sustainability goals, especially SDG 17.

It also became clear during the project that one of our ongoing challenges is maintaining a consistent dialogue and cooperation across administrative boundaries within the municipality. This has sparked internal discussions about how we can work more holistically and ensure that tourism planning becomes better integrated with environmental, cultural, and community development efforts.

Although these changes are not yet formalized in policy documents, they represent a deepening of our approach—moving from isolated efforts to a more system-oriented way of thinking. In that sense, UST has functioned as a catalyst for reflection, internal alignment, and long-term commitment.

THE WAY FORWARD

Working with the UST project has strengthened our belief that place-based development through tourism is the right path forward—and that we are on the right track. As a next step, this will be more clearly reflected in our renewed cooperation agreement with Visit Hornborgasjön, where place development through tourism will take a more central role.

We will actively work to build networks that ensure the voices and engagement of local residents are part of our place development process. One initiative we are planning is an annual workshop that brings together actors across administrative boundaries, where we can share knowledge, learn about each other's work, and explore new ways to collaborate.

In addition, we aim to organize an annual bus tour for local politicians to experience firsthand how we are working on sustainability at the destination level. Our ambition is to continue to be a source of inspiration and to take the lead in demonstrating how to develop a place where everyone thrives—local residents, businesses, nature, wildlife, and visitors alike.

SVEDEST

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM APPLYING THE TOOLS OURSELVES – REFLECTIONS FROM RUNNING THE WORKSHOPS

We have run the self-assessment tool and the training modules for municipal staff and as a part of a vocational training course and seen the benefits of doing sustainability policy as a group effort, combining different perspectives and skill sets to create a whole.

SVENSK DESTINATIONS UTVECKLING

Our key learnings are from working with the partners on creating and prototyping the self-assessment tool and e-learning platform. There are so many different perspectives and takes on sustainability and whether tourism can be a source of good, or is a necessary evil to be managed.

It has become clear that as long as local community is involved and there is a clear benefit to local society then tourism definitely plays a part in creating resilient societies that cares for local heritage through culture, nature, gastronomy and traditions. A lot of the key takeaways from working with large stakeholder groups together with the partners shows that the SDGs seem far away from the local situation – especially on an individual level. There are always policies in place to handle municipal high level goals directed to the realisation of the SDGs but no real way of connecting it to a broad set of community stakeholders that make the SDGs matter for daily life. This disconnect may make local stakeholders feel that the issues around sustainability is someone else's and this can make them feel powerless and deflated.

It turns out that when you start to construct a definition of the SDGs in a local tourism context you also uncover a lot of good practices, all grounded in grass roots movements, associations and small scale entrepreneurs. These good practices can been seen as isolated things, but once you start to place them side by side a tapestry of actions appear, most of which have a substantial bearing on promoting sustainable tourism linked to resilient and sustainable municipal government.

THE JOURNEY OF "SELF-DISCOVERY" THROUGH THE UST PROJECT

There is a lot of good that comes out of prescriptive frameworks like GSTC where you have to consider pre-defined issues and solutions and self-assess along the beaten path. On a destination level the discussion becomes one of policy upon which action may follow. The approaches and good practices of Falköping, Xixona and Scandiano show that there is also a lot of actions outside of the municipal governance window that could use policy to support them.

The role of facilitator becomes an even more important part where listing is the key skill as well as translating what is being said into a common "sustainability language" to be shared within the group. Words are filled with meaning and words filled with meaning create calls to action between stakeholder groups which includes the local people on the destination. No longer people to build policy around but rather people to include in policy making and governance decisions.

CHANGES TO STRATEGIES, POLICIES OR WAYS OF WORKING

We have adopted broader stakeholder approaches as a consequence of the work with UST, implemented strategies both for our own organisation where a wider range of stakeholders are included and also influenced our broader network of municipal stakeholders throughout Sweden to include voices from the local perspective.

There is also something to be said about where these approaches are applicable and not. Falköping, Scandiano and Xixona are all small municipalities. When you go bigger the municipal governance structure has more of a gap toward local perspectives. We have therefor started breaking down policy work to include the micro perspective, meaning that larger governance structures need to be segmented in order for the UST approach to work. These local self-assessments can then be grounds for strategic policy making, which has been successfully implemented in Kungsbacka and Laholm municipalities as a consequence of them following the project, attending dissemination seminars and applying the tools.

THE WAY FORWARD

Part of what we do is consultancy work, part of what we do is being a part of the larger development of Swedish policy discussions through key note appearances at national and regional conferences. With mostly regional and national clients, we offer a toolset for free to strengthen municipalities on their journey promoting sustainability and creating more resilient local communities with tourism as a toll.

The UST toolkit with self-assessment at its helm and the e-learning platform to support we will continue to advocate for dialogue based approaches to sustainable development so that everyone can take part, not only on a strategic level.

SERN

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM APPLYING THE TOOLS OURSELVES – REFLECTIONS FROM RUNNING THE WORKSHOPS

In the case of SERN, being a network rather than a municipality, the self-assessment questionnaire workshop was conducted by the Municipality of Bertinoro, an associate partner in the project and a SERN member. Participating in this workshop was insightful, as it highlighted how—even though Bertinoro already had its own developed strategy for promoting sustainable tourism—the use of the questionnaire, which incorporates all 17 SDGs, ensured that no aspect was overlooked. This included dimensions not usually associated directly with tourism but which should indeed be integrated into tourism planning.

THE JOURNEY OF "SELF-DISCOVERY" THROUGH THE UST PROJECT

For SERN, the journey through the UST project has led to valuable new insights, particularly regarding the essential steps required when working towards sustainable tourism.

Among these is the importance of continuous dialogue and active involvement of all relevant local stakeholders. This message has been a central theme in discussions and dissemination efforts shared with other SERN members.

Beyond these project-specific reflections, the focus on sustainability has extended to SERN's overall operations. Greater consideration is now given when organising events, meetings, and seminars—with deliberate choices such as selecting eco-certified hotels, offering meals made from local ingredients, using reusable dishware, and offsetting emissions from air travel. This broadened perspective is now influencing all of SERN's activities, not just those directly related to tourism.

THE WAY FORWARD

SERN's next steps will be to continue working on the themes of sustainable tourism by disseminating the tools and materials produced by the UST project and further engaging its network of municipalities. This will be achieved through webinars, seminars, and direct support to its members, both in Sweden and Italy, in developing new project proposals that build on and extend the work carried out by the UST partners.

CARDET

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM APPLYING THE TOOLS OURSELVES – REFLECTIONS FROM RUNNING THE WORKSHOPS

The UST project achieved its main objective by delivering all workshops / seminars and piloting activities which trained European municipal staff for sustainable tourism planning.

The e-course platform and digital learning strategy of the project received significant direction from CARDET as the dedicated partner organization.

The e-course platform developed became the essential foundation for the self-paced learning activities and a mechanism of communication. The combination of brief interactive modules with practical case studies from EU municipalities provided flexible learning opportunities which delivered strong results through workshop integration.

Lessons learned:

- The UST project forced CARDET to adapt its digital learning expertise for public sector requirements during project entry. The training platform development for municipal staff required transforming sophisticated sustainability information into functional operational materials. The actual impact emerges from knowledge production combined with the development of adaptable tools which serve end users' needs.
- The Self-Assessment Framework demonstrated that self-reflection serves as a strong catalyst for change. The e-course became more appealing to civil servants when they recognized knowledge gaps and municipal strategy weaknesses during the piloting phase. The diagnostic tool proved to CARDET that it functions as a fundamental starting point for delivering purposeful targeted capacity building.
- Public authorities with limited digital proficiency exist throughout all municipality sizes particularly in small and mid-sized municipalities. CARDET learned that platforms need to maintain simplicity while providing offline capabilities and seamless integration with current operational systems. A well-designed platform serves as both accessible and empowering for users.

THE JOURNEY OF "SELF-DISCOVERY" THROUGH THE UST PROJECT

As a member of CARDET we viewed the UST project as both a chance to apply our expertise and a significant organizational journey to discover ourselves as a Technology online learning expert institution dedicated to transformation and sustainability.

The Self-Assessment Framework development process with the consortium provided CARDET with fundamental insights into real-life needs of civil servants which focused on practical daily capabilities in planning and stakeholder engagement and sustainable vision development.

The gained understanding became the foundation for our main work which involved building and managing the UST e-course platform. The development process required us to enhance our approach to transform sustainability ideas into practical content which meets the needs of non-academic learners in a modular structure.

THE WAY FORWARD

The e-course platform, Self-Assessment tool and the Final Handbook have demonstrated their effectiveness in various European municipalities. The future direction requires these tools to become integrated into local governance systems and VET systems and regional policy frameworks to achieve long term sustainability and project continuity.

Testimonials

MUNICIPALITY OF SCANDIANO

LORENA LANZONI
Councillor for Culture, Youth Policy, International Relations, Scandiano Muncipality

66 *UST has been a turning point for those who are called upon every day to imagine and build a future for our communities, because it has strengthened skills, urging concrete actions for a truly sustainable and area-based tourism. We learnt how to design sustainable experiences, how to valorise local heritage in an authentic way, and how to involve citizens and stakeholders in a shared vision. It was therefore not just a matter of training, but of activation: we now have the tools - and above all the motivation - to transform ideas into concrete policies. When training, vision and participation come together, change is not only possible, it becomes real.* 99

MELISSA BOCCACCINI
UST project contact person for the municipality of Scandiano

66 *Thanks to the UST project, we have transformed our idea of sustainable tourism: no longer a goal to be achieved but an engine of development for our community, for a city that welcomes in a conscious manner.* 99

VISIT HORNBORGASJÖN - FALKÖPING

SOFIA LENNSTRÖM
Project Manager, Tourism Initiatives, Business Developer, Visit Hornborgasjön

66 *The UST project provides Visit Hornborgasjön with a concrete tool to continue strengthening our work with sustainable place development. Through self-assessment and new knowledge, we gain better conditions for working cross-sectorally, building stronger collaborations, and thereby creating better opportunities to integrate tourism into community planning. This helps us take responsibility for visitors, local residents, and nature – now and for the future.* 99

MUNICIPALITY OF FALKÖPING

ADAM JOHANSSON
Chairman of the Municipal Executive Committee, Municipality of Falköping

66 *Working with the UST project has strengthened our conviction that our approach to place development through tourism is the right path. It has confirmed that we are working in a sustainable and meaningful way.* 99

MUNICIPALITY OF XIXONA

ISABEL LÓPEZ GALERA
Mayor, Municipality of Xixona

" Thanks to this project, we now see the Xixona Christmas Fair not just as a beloved tradition, but as a powerful tool for economic development, social cohesion, and support for vulnerable communities. "

UST
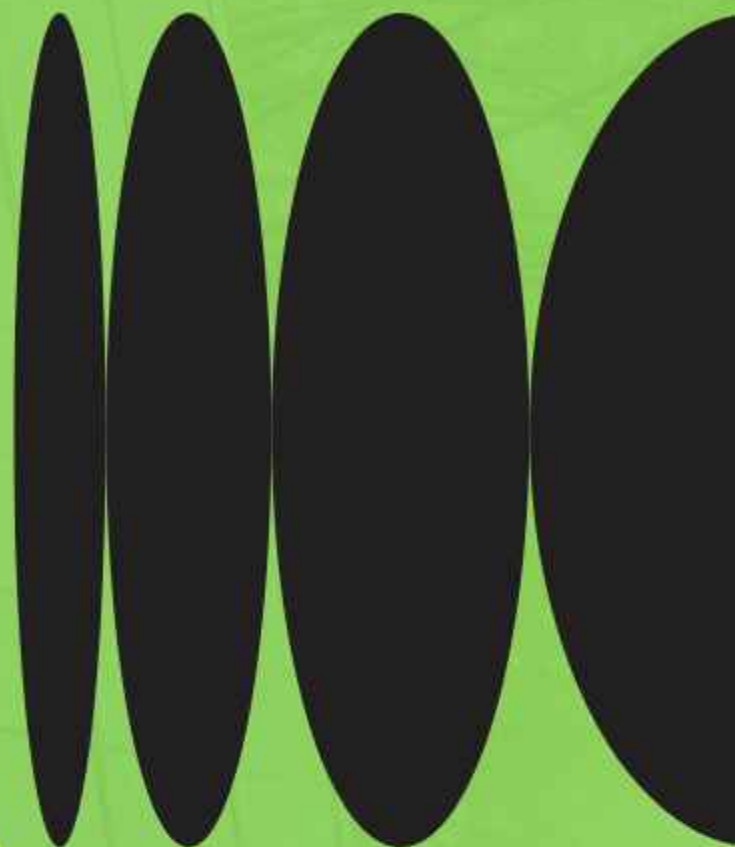
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