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**Working Paper on Tourism**

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# SECTION I

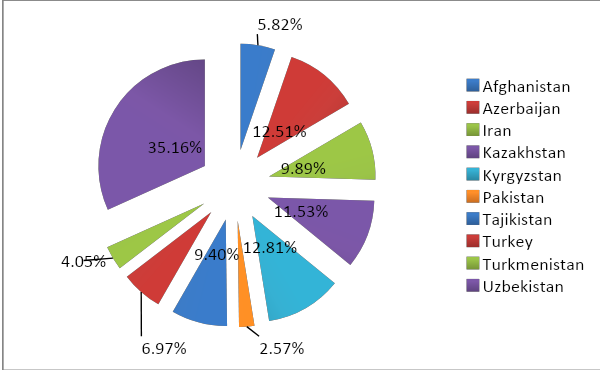
## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. With its immense potential, the tourism industry serves as an important instrument for regional development, stimulating new economic activities and fostering positive economic outcomes by bolstering employment and community growth while mitigating inequalities. The ECO Vision 2025 recognizes the vast potential of the tourism sector as a catalyst for economic and social advancement and designates it as a top-priority area for regional collaboration. The strategic objective is to establish a peaceful, eco-friendly destination with diverse offerings and high-quality services within the region.
2. Tourism has emerged as one of the largest and most rapidly expanding segments of the global economy in recent decades. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), before to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism and travel sector held a leading status, contributing nearly 10.3% to the gross domestic product (GDP) globally and generating over 330 million jobs across the world. During the period from 2014 to 2019, one out of every five new jobs worldwide emerged within tourism and travel.
3. Nevertheless, the global tourism sector suffered its most severe setback in 2020, as recorded by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). International tourist arrivals plummeted by a shocking 74% in 2020 compared to the previous year, with international tourism receipts experiencing a severe decline of 64%, marking an 80% drop relative to pre-pandemic levels in 2019.
4. The WTTC's annual research also reported an astonishing loss of nearly US$4.5 trillion, resulting in a total of US$4.7 trillion in 2020. This translated to a sharp 49.1% reduction in GDP contribution compared to 2019, in stark contrast to the 3.7% decline in global economic GDP during the same year. In 2019, the travel and tourism sector contributed 10.4% to the global GDP, a share that decreased to 5.5% in 2020, primarily due to continued mobility restrictions. This devastating downturn resulted in the loss of 62 million jobs, constituting an 18.5% reduction, reducing the global sector's workforce to 272 million, down from 334 million in 2019. The ongoing threat of job losses persists, especially for those positions supported by government retention schemes and reduced working hours, which may be at risk without a full recovery in the travel and tourism industry.
5. Domestic visitor spending also fell by 45%, and international visitor spending experienced an unprecedented decline of 69.4%. According to the UNWTO's estimates, tourism's contribution to global GDP reduced from 4.0% in 2019 to 2.0% in 2020, with a modest rebound to 2.2% in 2021. Despite a slight increase from the levels of 2020, international tourism in 2021 remained far below 2019 levels. The sector initiated a recovery trajectory in 2022 with increased travel because of the relaxation of travel restrictions for vaccinated travelers, and global progress in easing mobility constraints, thereby regaining consumer confidence and gradually restoring safe mobility in most parts of the world. In 2023 international tourism continued its recovery from the unprecedented crisis of the previous years with arrival numbers reaching 84% of pre-pandemic levels between January and July 2023, as per the latest data from UNWTO. An estimated 700 million tourists traveled during this period, marking a nearly 43% increase from the same months in 2022, yet still 16% below the figures of 2019. The Middle East, Europe, and Africa have been the forerunners in the tourism sector's recovery in 2023.
6. This steady recovery not only finds expression in tourism statistics across diverse destinations worldwide but is also reflected by various industry indicators, including air passenger traffic and hotel performance. However, the ongoing challenges of inflation and rising oil prices have translated into elevated transportation and accommodation costs. The confluence of inflation and increasing interest rates continues to exert pressure on household budgets, impacting consumer confidence and raising the cost of living. This, in turn, may influence spending patterns for the remainder of 2023 and 2024, prompting tourists to seek value-for-money options, opt for closer-to-home travel, and embark on shorter journeys in response to rising prices and prevailing economic challenges. Consequently, most experts in the global tourism industry anticipate that a full recovery of the sector may not be realized in 2023, with a return to 2019 levels more likely in 2024 or 2025.

## TOURISM IN THE ECO REGION

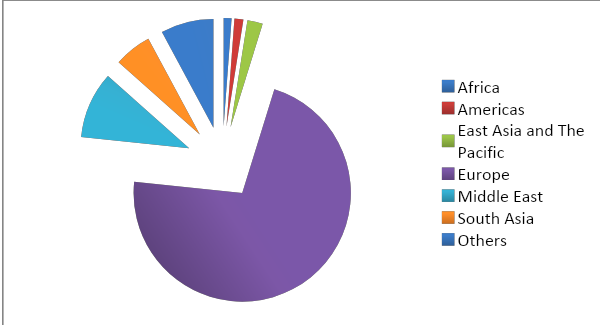
1. The latest figures indicate that one in ten jobs across the world is directly related to tourism. Showing a similar upward trend during the last decade, international travel to the ECO region in 2019 exceeded 87 million people, holding a total of 6 percent share in worldwide tourism arrivals. Considering the region's potential and population, the ratio between tourist arrivals and total international tourism expenditures is still relatively modest. It is also reflected in the tourism revenues as the ECO region has received an international tourism receipt of around 49.3 billion dollars, which accounts for only 2.72 percent of the global tourism receipts. The average total contribution of the travel and tourism sector to GDP in the ECO region in 2019 was 7 percent, which is below the global average.
2. According to WTTC, more than 10 million individuals were employed in the travel and tourism industry in 2019 within the ECO region accounting for around 6.9 percent of total employment. Around 10.7 percent of total exports of the region in 2019 have been international tourism receipts. In 2019, the intra-regional tourist flows between ECO Member States accounted for more than 24 million with its total share standing at 27.5 percent, which is far below the potential. Uzbekistan has registered 35.16 percent of the intra-regional tourism followed by Kyrgyzstan at 12.81 percent, Azerbaijan at 12.51 percent and Kazakhstan at 11.53 percent.

Chart. 1 Intra-regional Arrivals to ECO Region by Country of Origin, 2019



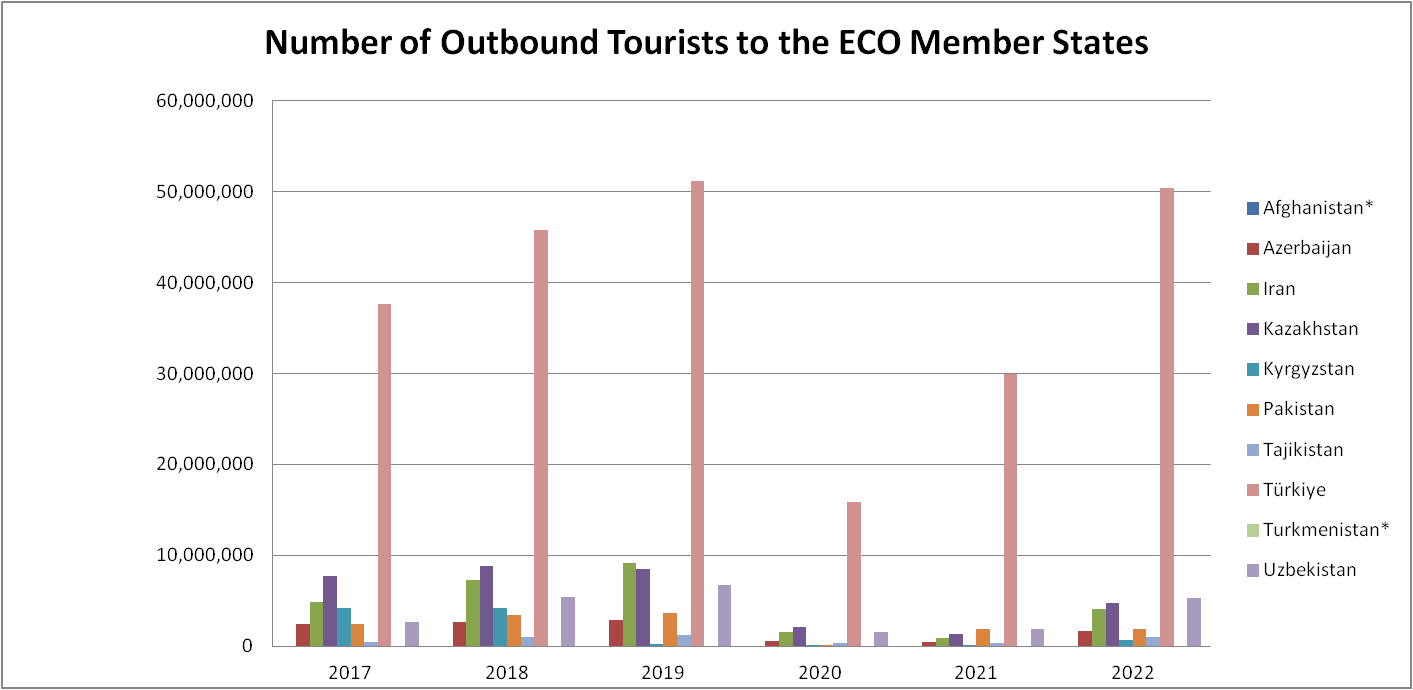
1. In the peak year for ECO tourism statistics, the number of visits from non-ECO countries was more than 63 million, accounting for a total of 72.5 percent. Around 71.87 percent of international visits were made from Europe indicating that the ECO region is a popular tourist destination for Europeans.

Chart.2 Visitor Arrivals to ECO Region by Region of Origin, 2019



1. The estimations of the ECO Secretariat show a 73.54 percent decrease in tourist arrivals in 2020, along with a 67.12 percent drop in tourism receipts. Although there was a modest recovery in 2021 with tourist arrivals increasing by around 50 percent compared to 2020, it still fell short of the levels seen in 2019. As Chart 3 shows, while some member states are approaching pre-pandemic tourist numbers, others are still facing challenges. Some states are trying to attract tourists from different regions through new flight and visa agreements, given the evolving political and economic landscape. In 2022, it was estimated that more than 70 million tourists visited the ECO region. Türkiye (50.45 million), Uzbekistan (5.23 million), Kazakhstan (4.73 million) and Iran (4.11 million) are the leading member states in terms of the number of visitors. Although the number of international tourists continued to rise in 2023, public and private stakeholders at both national and regional levels must keep working together for enhancement of regional travel.

Chart.3 Visitor Arrivals to ECO Region by Country of Destination, 2017-2022

  
  
\*Data Unavailable

Source: National Statistical Offices of Member States, UNWTO, WTTC

1. The ECO Vision 2025 outlines objectives, including strengthening the ECO-Tourism brand, revive Silk Road tourism, simplifying visa procedures, diversify tourism activities, using electronic media, developing human resources, establishing standards and accreditation bodies, and promoting sustainable and green tourism practices. The 5th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism held on 5 October 2023 in Ardabil, Iran adopted the Ardabil Declaration acknowledging the economic and social benefits of sustainable tourism development and committing the enhancement of the region's tourism potential. The meeting also selected the city of Shusha from Azerbaijan as the ECO Tourism Capital for 2026.
2. Declaring the cities from the ECO Member States as ECO Tourism Capital has become a tradition. In 2023 the ECO Secretariat in close cooperation with host country, Iran organized some important events bringing the stakeholders in tourism industry from public and private sectors in Ardabil, the ECO Tourism Capital for 2023. The Secretariat negotiated with the tourism authorities of Uzbekistan to hold series of tourism events in Shakhrisabz in framework of celebrations for the ECO Tourism Capital for 2024.
3. The ECO Secretariat implemented the project titled “Tour Operators’ Chain and Connectivity” aimed to establish a network among major tour operators in the ECO region. As the result the Tour Operators’ Network has been set up. Today the Network unites more than 350 major tour operators from Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Currently the Network is working and holding its regular meetings. So the project has just been completed without any implications to the ECO Secretariat’s budget.
4. The ECO Secretariat prioritized the calendars of events to ensure they are held in virtual or in-person. The Secretariat tried to host most of the events in virtual format and actively participated in the following recent events:

## 

## MEETINGS OF THE ECO AFFILIATED BODIES WITH ECO SECRETARIATPARTICIPATION

**ECO EVENTS**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **No.** | **Event/Activity** | **Venue** | **Date** |
|  | HLEG Meeting for the 'Road Map on Facilitating Accelerated Recovery, Safe and Sustainable Development of Tourism after "COVID-19" in the ECO region’ | ECO Secretariat (virtual) | 6 March 2023 |
|  | ECO Nowruz Festival | ECI Secretariat  (in person) | 13 March 2023 |
|  | 2nd Meeting of the ECO Tour Operators’ Network | ECO Secretariat (virtual) | 12 April 2023 |
|  | 1st Meeting of the Working Group on Tourism Standardization | ECO Secretariat (virtual) | 18 April 2023 |
|  | The Ceremony for the Proclamation of Ardabil city as the ECO Tourism Capital 2023 | Ardabil, Iran  (in person) | 27 April 2023 |
|  | 3rd Meeting of the ECO Tour Operators’ Network | ECO Secretariat (virtual) | 29 May 2023 |
|  | 2nd Meeting of the Working Group on Tourism Standardization | ECO Secretariat (virtual) | 6 June 2023 |
|  | 4th Meeting of the ECO Tour Operators’ Network | ECO Secretariat (virtual) | 3 July 2023 |
|  | 3rd Meeting of the Working Group on Tourism Standardization | ECO Secretariat (virtual) | 2 August 2023 |
|  | 5th Meeting of the ECO Tour Operators’ Network | ECO Secretariat (virtual) | 15 August  2023 |
|  | 1st Meeting of the Monitoring Committee for the Implementation of the 'Road Map on Facilitating Accelerated Recovery, Safe and Sustainable Development of Tourism after "Covid-19" in the ECO region’ | ECO Secretariat (virtual) | 26 September 2023 |
|  | 7th High Level Experts Group Meeting on Tourism | Ardabil, Iran  (in person) | 4 October 2023 |
|  | 5th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism | Ardabil, Iran  (in person) | 5 October 2023 |
|  | 4th Meeting of the Working Group on Tourism Standardization | ECO Secretariat (virtual) | 24 October2023 |

**NON-ECO EVENTS**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 16th Tehran International Tourism and Related Industries Exhibition | Tehran, Iran  (in person) | 7 February 2023 |
|  | 25th Session of the UNWTO General Assembly | Samarkand, Uzbekistan  (in person) | 16-20 October 2023 |

# SECTION II

### ECO Vision 2025 Tourism Guiding Lines and Implementation Status

**ECO Vision Guiding Lines:**

1. Guiding line for tourism development reflected in Serial no. i- x of Section 3D of ECO Vision 2025 as follows:

* The ECO-Tourism brand through effective mediums at the regional, national and international levels will be strengthened in order to attract first-time and repeat visitors.
* Silk Road tourism through cooperation with the international community and relevant organizations will be revived.
* Visa facilitation for the citizens of the region.
* Tourism activities will be diversified into various niches including; health/medical, ecological, culture, winter, sea, mountain sports, climbing, skiing, desert and religious.
* In tourism promotional activities, utilization of electronic media will be increased.
* Tourism related human resource development and capacity building activities will be promoted.
* Relevant rules and procedures in the tourism sector will be adopted in the ECO Region.
* ‘Standardization and accreditation bodies’ and ‘sustainable and green tourism’ monitoring mechanisms will be established and improved in collaboration with international tourism bodies.
* Private sector and local community involvement in the tourism activities will be strengthened.
* Diverse means and new solutions will be developed and utilized to address emerging issues and range of markets to best serve the ideals and goals of sustainable tourism in the region.

### ECO VISION 2025

### Implementation Framework on Tourism Sector

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **S. No.** | **Expected Outcome** | **Activities/Actions  to achieve the outcome** |
| **3D**  **i** | **The ECO-Tourism brand through effective mediums at the regional, national and international levels will be strengthened in order to attract first-time and repeat visitors** | 1. International and national consultants will be procured for developing a Draft Strategy. |
| 1. Strategy on tourism, logo and motto will be adopted. |
| 1. Strategy will be implemented. |
| **3D**  **ii** | **Silk Road tourism through cooperation with the international community and relevant organizations will be revived.** | 1. Cooperation with members of the Silk Road will be enhanced. |
| 1. Workshops on preservation of the ancient Silk Road monuments and cultural heritages will be organized. |
| 1. ECO-Silk Road related events, exhibitions and festivals will be organized. |
| 1. Close cooperation with international organizations will be established. |
| **3D**  **iii** | **Visa facilitation for the citizens of the region.** | 1. Meetings of concerned authorities on moving toward visa free regime will be organized. |
| 1. Electronic visa application will be encouraged. |
| **3D**  **iv** | **Tourism activities will be diversified into various niches including; health/medical, ecological, culture, winter, sea, mountain sports, climbing, skiing, desert and religious.** | 1. Meetings on health tourism, ecotourism, religious tourism will be organized. |
| 1. Data bank of specialized tourism destinations will be established. |
| 1. Workshops\events on niche tourism activities will be conducted. |
| 1. Unique in its kind World Nomad Games, initiated by Kyrgyz Republic on a regular basis, will be held. |
| **3D**  **v** | **In tourism promotional activities utilization of electronic media will be increased** | 1. Presence in social media will be improved. |
| 1. Collaboration with travel related advisory websites like Trip Adviser will be realized. |
| 1. Specialized tourism website will be established. |
| 1. GIS System for tourism destinations will be applied. |
| **3D**  **vi** | **Tourism related human resource development and capacity building activities will be promoted** | 1. Workshops and training courses will be organized. |
| 1. On-line training will be developed and promoted. |
| 1. Leading tourism Member States will be encouraged to offer scholarships to less developed ones. |
| **3D**  **vii** | **Relevant rules and procedures in tourism sector would be adopted in the ECO region** | 1. Easing of visa regulations will be encouraged. |
| 1. Tourism friendly policies in the Member States will be encouraged. |
| **3D**  **viii** | **‘Standardization and accreditation bodies’ and ‘sustainable and green tourism’ monitoring mechanisms will be established and improved in collaboration with international tourism bodies** | 1. Quality standards in the region will be institutionalized. |
| 1. International standards will be adopted. |
| 1. Training on international standards will be conducted. |
| **3D**  **ix** | **Private sector and local community involvement in the tourism activities will be strengthened** | 1. Tourism business unit within the ECO-CCI will be established. |
| 1. Tourism Agencies Federation of ECO will be established. |
| 1. ECO tourism events in various cities of ECO Region will be organized. |
| **3D**  **x** | **Diverse means and new solutions will be developed and utilized to address emerging issues and range of markets to best serve the ideals and goals of sustainable tourism in the region.** | 1. Technical meetings for development of diverse means and new solutions will be conducted. |

# SECTION III

## PRIORITY AREAS

#### Priority Area 1

#### Cooperation for marketing, promotion and branding tourism activities

1. **ECO Vision approach and target**

18. “3Di- The ECO-Tourism brand through effective mediums at the regional, national and international levels will be strengthened in order to attract first-time and repeat visitors.

3Dx- Diverse means and new solutions will be developed and utilized to address emerging issues and range of markets to best serve the ideals and goals of sustainable tourism in the region.”

1. The activities to achieve this target are as follows:

* International and national consultants will be procured for developing a Draft Strategy;
* Strategy on tourism, logo and motto will be adopted;
* Strategy will be implemented.

1. A concerted common action by the ECO Member States to embark on a joint tourism programme is imperative to provide the ECO region a more attractive, competitive, powerful and recognizable product image as a tourism destination and a strong institutional boost to highlight the attractiveness and variety of ECO tourism experience. Despite its unique natural and cultural assets, tourist arrivals to the ECO region are below its potential and it is a relatively less popular tourism destination internationally. In contrast its image and hence potential is unsteady. In that regard, a common approach for marketing, promotion and branding regional tourism activities is critical and a regional collective promotion and marketing programme to promote the region, as a single destination must be developed with the collaboration of the tourism Ministries and private stakeholders of the region.
2. **Background information**

1. **Tourism Core Documents: Tourism Charter, Strategy, and ECO Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development**
2. In order to achieve the tourism vision and outcomes laid in the ECO Vision 2025 and the implementation framework requires a concerted common systemic approach and actions among the Member States. Isolated activities of the Member Countries have not served the regional tourism development in general. To utilize the great potential of the region, diversification and easement of tourism activities, availability of quality services and visibility of the area is a necessary requirement. 22. In that sense, the primary requirement to achieve the ECO Vision aims in the tourism sector is a regional harmonized systemic approach to coordinate cooperation among the ECO Member States through an action plan defining the strategic key areas based on the current needs and priorities of the Member States. The plan of action is to serve as a road map to achieve the objectives envisioned in the ECO Vision 2025 defining actions and implementation timelines focusing on the region’s main strengths, addressing its weaknesses, opportunities and threats.
3. To achieve sustainable tourism development, the project of “ECO Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development” was considered by the 5th   
   High- Level Expert Group Meeting (HLWGM) on Tourism within the framework of the 3rd Ministerial Meeting on Tourism in Khujand in 2019. The Khujand Declaration on tourism underlined the importance and the necessity of undertaking planned action to promote cooperation in the field of tourism among Member States through harmonized policies. Henceforth, the project concept was considered at the level of ECO’s Council of Ministers (COM) it was endorsed as part of a document set by the 24th COM on 8-9 November 2019 in Antalya (Türkiye). The budgetary aspects of the project were also approved in due time by the 30th Regional Planning Council Meeting on 11-14 January 2020 in Tehran (Iran), upon which the project was included as part of ECO’s Work Programs in previous years.

1. **Recent developments, latest decisions, and progress since the 33rd RPC**
2. This project is still currently under consideration. A Draft Term of Reference (ToR) has been prepared for hiring a Specialist to prepare the feasibility study of the project. This ToR configures the scope of work as commensurate to the preparation of the full feasibility study. The Selection of Specialists follows the procedures stipulated by the Functional Methodology of ECO for this subject matter. The amount of US$10,000 has been requested to prepare the feasibility study of the project.
3. The main outputs expected to result from the preparation of the feasibility study are as follows:
4. **Feasibility study on the ECO regional action plan for sustainable tourism development**

* Feasibility(economic/social/integrational/environmental) of the development of specialized tourism (health/medical, industrial, rural, ecotourism, cultural, winter, sea, mountain desert, religious) with sub-sectoral strategies identified and potential destinations determined;
* Assessment of current statuses of the traditional tourisms’ development in the ten ECO Member States, and;
* Also, of their legal frameworks set for standardization/accreditation/tourism monitoring mechanisms to be under the ECO framework;
* Preparing ECO Tourism compendium;
* ECO tourism databank;
* Assessment of capacities of local communities and private sector tourism entities of ECO countries to be potentially involved in regional tourism development under the ECO framework.

1. **Preparing core Documents on Tourism**

* Draft ECO Tourism Charter;
* Draft ECO Tourism Strategy and Action Plan.

1. **Roadmap i.e. Action Plan for ECO regional sustainable tourism development**

* Set of Recommendations of ECO Member States on the Action Plan;
* Strategy of ECO regional sustainable tourism development;
* Harmonization among National Tourism Plan of Action of MSs;
* Action Plan for ECO regional sustainable tourism development;
* Introduction of Priority projects at ECO regional level.

1. Based on Para 4 of the ECO Work Program (Tourism) for 2022, to develop a coherent regional policy approach, a zero draft ECO Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development was developed on the basis of ECO Vision 2025 and circulated for comments and proposals of the Member States via Notes Verbale Nos:T/Plan of Action/2022/465 on 17/4/2022 and No. T/Plan of Action/2023/627 on 15/5/2023. The proposals and views of the esteemed Member States will be incorporated in the proposed draft ECO Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development for further enrichment through a consultancy project to develop a more comprehensive Action Plan.
2. So far responses have been received from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic and Pakistan.
3. **Road Map on Facilitating Accelerated Recovery, Safe and Sustainable Development of Tourism after "COVID-19" in the ECO region**
4. In the Ashgabat Consensus for Action declared during the 15th ECO Summit held on 28 November 2021 in Turkmenistan, the Member States have “assigned Tourism Ministers of the Member States to take urgent measures in coping with serious challenges of the ECO tourism industry arising from COVID-19 pandemic in line with other regional and global post-COVID initiatives.”
5. Due to the emerging global crisis brought about in the tourism sector by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Secretariat has also taken up the chance to reconsider and reset the direction of the regional tourism sector. Hence, to catalyze the regional potential of tourism, to develop a coherent regional policy approach to start the substantial recovery of the regional tourism, and to overcome the effects of COVID-19 Pandemic, “Draft Plan of Action on Elimination of "COVID-19" Pandemic Consequences in the Tourism Sector for Facilitating Recovery in the ECO Region” was developed based on the immediate needs of the regional tourism industry and circulated among the Member States.
6. The draft document was adopted by the 4th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism held on 13 December 2022 as a Road Map on Facilitating Accelerated Recovery, Safe and Sustainable Development of Tourism after "Covid-19" in the ECO region.
7. The ECO Secretariat convened a High-Level Expert Group Meeting to discuss the implementation of the Road Map on March 6, 2023. A Monitoring Committee of relevant tourism experts as the principal coordinating body to address all issues related to the implementation of the Road Map was established and the 1st Meeting of the Monitoring Committee was organized on September 25, 2023 in virtual mode. The Progress Report regarding the implementation of the Road Map prepared by the ECO Secretariat was submitted to the 7th HLEG Meeting on Tourism held on October 4, 2023 in Ardabil and circulated among the Member States with the Report of the 5th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism held on October 5, 2023 in Ardabil.
8. **ECO Tourism Capital**
9. The Khujand Declaration adopted in the third ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism held on 4th October 2019, announced Dushanbe the capital of the Republic of Tajikistan as ECO Tourism Capital for the years 2020-2021. Cities of Sari and Ardabil in the Islamic Republic of Iran were decided as ECO Tourism Capital(s) for the years 2022-2023 respectively. The Samarkand Declaration adopted in 4th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism held on 13 December 2022 announced the city of Shakhrisabz from Uzbekistan and the city of Erzurum from Türkiye as ECO Tourism Capitals for 2024 and 2025 respectively. Recently, 5th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism held in Ardabil on October 5, 2023 agreed on the selection of Shusha from Azerbaijan as the ECO Tourism Capital for 2026.

**Recent developments**

1. On 26-28 April 2023, an inauguration ceremony for unveiling the city of Ardabil as the ECO Tourism Capital for 2023 was held with some cultural and touristic events. On October 4-5, 2023, Ardabil also hosted the 5th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism preceded by the 7th High Level Experts Group Meeting on Tourism with a sideline B2B meeting.

1. **Expected outcomes for 2024 and Secretariat’s recommendations**
2. Considering that this issue has been pending with no tangible outcome over the years, the Council may request the remaining Member States to expedite their views on the draft ECO Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development for further action.
3. With regards to the project, the draft TOR is ready and MSs may decide on conducting the study and hiring a Specialist for further enrichment of the zero draft developed by the Secretariat based on the views of the Member States.
4. The Council may encourage the Secretariat to consider seeking technical and financial assistance from relevant international organizations in this connection.
5. The Council may request the active contribution of MSs and feedback on the implementation of the 'Road Map on Facilitating Accelerated Recovery, Safe and Sustainable Development of Tourism after "COVID-19" in the ECO region’ adopted by the 4th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism through the attending the meetings of the Monitoring Committee regarding this Road Map.
6. The Republic of Uzbekistan may kindly announce their arrangements for holding events within the framework Shakhrisabz as the ECO Tourism Capital for 2024.
7. The Council may request the establishment of a Network of ECO Tourism Capitals covering all cities selected so far as ECO Tourism Capitals to promote their tourism capacities in a more sustainable and ongoing basis.

**Area Conclusion**

1. 'Road Map on Facilitating Accelerated Recovery, Safe and Sustainable Development of Tourism after "COVID-19" in the ECO region’ is ready and the most important thing is active contribution of Member States for monitoring the progress regarding the implementation of the Road Map in 2024. The relevant events within the framework of ECO Tourism Capital 2024 in Shakhrisabz will be followed.

#### Priority Area 2

#### Cooperation in Promotion of Silk Road Tourism

1. **ECO Vision approach and target**
2. “3D ii. Silk Road tourism through cooperation with the international community and relevant organizations will be revived.”
3. The activities which were supposed to achieve this target are as follows:

* Enhancing Cooperation with members of the Silk Road;
* Organizing Workshops on preservation of the ancient Silk Road monuments and cultural heritages;
* Organizing ECO-Silk Road related events, exhibitions and festivals;
* Establishing close cooperation with international organizations.

1. The Ancient Silk Road, which was the first global trade route in history, went from China to Eastern Europe. The Silk Road was important for the generation of trade and commerce and served as the connection between East and West. This also facilitated the spread and interaction of ideas, culture, religion, art, inventions, and unique products across much of the settled world. Throughout its existence of over two thousand years, the Silk Road provided a vital link enabling people of diverse cultures to interact with each other.
2. With the rise of interest, in 1993 the UNWTO started the Silk Road tourism initiative. The UNWTO Silk Road initiative currently includes more than 34 countries and all ECO Member States are situated along this ancient route. The UNWTO is trying to advocate the Silk Road tourism routes as a transnational tourism experience.
3. In light of the enduring legacy of the Silk Roads in connecting civilizations throughout history, the UNESCO Silk Roads Programme also aims to revive and extend the historic networks in a digital space, bringing people together in an ongoing dialogue and fostering a mutual understanding of the diverse and often inter-related cultures that have sprung up around these routes.
4. Building on the increasing international recognition of the Silk Road and reviving the historic Silk Routes in the region. The ECO region has an extensive opportunity for developing sustainable tourism along the Silk Road. To maximize opportunities of the Silk Road Tourism initiative, while it is essential to create opportunities for research, exposure and collaboration to protect endangered cultural heritage sites along the Silk Road, there is a need to address some challenges including connectivity and visa facilitation among the ECO Member States and the target markets. To achieve the Silk Road Tourism objectives requires dedicated engagement and support from the public and private stakeholders in the region and collaboration at the international level.
5. **Background information**
6. For the promotion of regional Silk Road culture and traditions, the 25th RPC welcomed the offer of the Islamic Republic of Iran for organizing the First ECO-Silk Road Food Festival in Zanjan, Iran. A Variety of cuisines from several Member States, as well as Silk Road countries, were served to a huge number of visitors during the events. The Festival is planned to take place on an annual basis at the host city (Zanjan). The First International ECO - Silk Road Food Festival was held in 2015 in Zanjan.
7. The Fifth International ECO - Silk Road Food Festival was held on 18-21 April 2019 in Zanjan. It was a successful experience in this regard. Gastronomy is about much more than food. It reflects the culture, heritage, traditions and sense of community of different peoples. It is a way of promoting understanding among different cultures, and of bringing people and traditions closer together. Gastronomy tourism is also emerging as an important protector of cultural heritage, and the sector helps create opportunities, including jobs, most notably in rural destinations.
8. The 27th RPC requested the Member States to form a contact group on the sidelines of Silk Road-related meetings, conferences and events to effectively pursue the collective interests of the ECO Region and enhance the role of ECO in the international tourism market. The ECO Secretariat was also requested to participate in Silk Road related meetings, conferences and events and coordinate the participation of Member States in such events within and outside the ECO Region.
9. **Recent developments, latest decisions and progress**
10. The worldwide outbreak of COVID-19, led to the cancellation of the 6th International ECO - Silk Road Food Festival since 2020. In 2023 the Iranian Side through Note Verbale No. 531/1627619 dated 11 June 2023 informed their readiness to hold this event, but it was postponed due to lack of quorum.
11. The 32nd Council requested the Member States to form an ECO Silk Road Task Force to increase cooperation and coordination to publicize Silk Road Tourism initiative with the cooperation of the Member States, international community and relevant organizations. While appreciating the establishment of the Task Force the 33rd Council also requested the Member States to appoint their focal points to the ECO Silk Road Task Force. The Secretariat via NV ECO Silk Road Task Force/2022/243 dated 22 February 2022 and NV No. T/Silk Road Task Force/2023/626 dated 15 May 2023 requested Member States to share their nominations for the Task Force group.
12. Nominations were received from Azerbaijan, Iran, Kyrgyz Republic, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Türkiye for the ECO Silk Road Task Force. In this regard the 1st meeting of the ECO Silk Road Task Force was scheduled for 14 August 2023 in virtual mode but it was postponed due to lack of quorum.

1. **Expected outcomes for 2024 and Secretariat’s recommendations**

1. The Council may advise the remaining Member States to send their nominations for the ECO Silk Road Task Force.
2. The Council may recommend the Member States to actively participate in the 1st Meeting of the ECO Silk Road Task Force in 2024.
3. The ECO Silk Road Task Force may come up with proposals to hold meetings, conferences and events to effectively pursue the collective interests of ECO Region and enhance the role of ECO in such arenas.
4. The Member States may decide on holding a regional meeting to create an effective Silk Road brand strategy, enhancing collaboration between Silk Road destinations and increasing consumer awareness.
5. The Council may request the Member States to hold international workshops, meetings, seminars, forums, fairs, exhibitions on gastronomy tourism and any other events to promote ECO-wide Silk Road cultural heritage. The interested Member States may propose to hold the Sixth International ECO - Silk Road Food Festival in their countries along with the Meeting on Culinary Tourism.
6. To promote and revive tourism in the region in 2024, the Council may request the Member States to cooperate on preparing joint ECO Silk Road tour packages to bring regional and international tourists together with the unique cultural, spiritual, historical and gastronomic life of the traditional Silk Road.
7. The Member States may consider holding an annual competition of ECO Silk Road Tourist destinations to increase public awareness and promote ECO Silk Road tourism.
8. ECO Cultural Institute (ECI) may cooperate with the Secretariat and include this initiative in their program in 2024 to enhance the visibility of the ECO Silk Road destinations in their publications, exhibitions and events.

**Area Conclusion**

1. In line with the mandate of ECO Vision 2025 to promote regional Silk Road tourism and enhance cooperation with members of the Silk Road and international organizations, the active involvement and support of the Member States is essential. The Member States may appoint their focal points to the ECO-Silk Road Task Force and come up with concrete proposals for 2024 for holding Silk Road related meetings, conferences and events.

#### Priority Area 3

#### Travel and Tourism Facilitation

1. **ECO Tourism Visa:**
2. **ECO Vision approach and target**
3. “3D iii. Visa facilitation for the citizens of the region.”

“3D vii. Relevant rules and procedures in the tourism sector would be adopted in the ECO region.

1. The activities to achieve this target are as follows:

* Organizing Meetings of Visa Officials of the Embassies of ECO Member States in Tehran and concerned authorities on moving toward visa free regime which leads to developing the Roadmap;
* Electronic visa application will be encouraged;
* Easing of visa regulations will be encouraged;
* Tourism friendly policies in the Member States will be encouraged.

1. **Background information**
2. The Major objective of defining the ECO Tourism Visa is Tourist Visa Facilitation for non-ECO nationals for travelling to ECO Countries. The increase in tourism receipts resulting from visa facilitation is the product of the increased international tourist arrivals and the average spending per tourist. Tourism spending fuels job creation in the travel and tourism sector. The spending of the additional tourists resulting from visa facilitation in ECO destinations directly supports jobs in tourism industries, including hotels, restaurants, retail stores, transportation, entertainment and recreation. The employment impacts are not limited to tourism industries. Indirect jobs are created through the supply chain of tourism industries and induced jobs are generated as employees spend their incomes in other sectors of the economy.
3. Visa and travel procedure facilitation for the citizens of the ECO and non-ECO regions has been always one of the important goals in tourism sector. In this regard and for the purposes of the ECO Vision 2025, effective cooperation of all Member States are needed to promote tourism industry regionally.
4. The objective is to initially facilitate the process of traveling to ECO countries for non-ECO citizens with the aim of a tangible increase in tourism receipts and related revenues in the ECO region. That means for the third country citizens getting a tourist visa from the Member States may be valid for traveling in other ECO countries, which may facilitate the ECO tour package. In other words, a unified Tourist visa regime should be developed within the ECO region to extend tourist visa stickers with a specific label to the foreigners visiting ECO region. The mechanism should facilitate the process of obtaining tourist visas from any country of the ECO region and it should be valid for the whole region for a specific period.

1. **Recent developments, latest decisions and progress**
2. The project of “Pre-feasibility study of planning a mechanism for issuing ECO Tourist Visa for non-ECO Nationals” was considered and approved by the 5th High Level Expert Group Meeting (HLWGM) on Tourism and supported by the 3rd Ministerial Meeting on Tourism in Khujand in 2019. Henceforth, the project concept was considered at the level of ECO’s Council of Ministers (COM). It was endorsed as part of a document set by the 24th COM on 8-9 November 2019 in Antalya (Türkiye). This project was also approved by the 30th Regional Planning Council Meeting on 11-14 January 2020 in Tehran (Iran), and the project was included as part of ECO’s Work Program 2020 and 2021.
3. It’s pertinent to mention that the ECO Transport Directorate has also followed up the issue of ECO Visa for drivers in recent years. During the Consular Officials Meeting of Embassies of ITI and KTAI en-route Member States which was held on 9 February 2020 at the ECO Secretariat in Tehran, the Senior Consular Officials from the Embassies of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Islamic Republic of Iran, the Kyrgyz Republic, Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Republic of Tajikistan and Republic of Türkiye discussed the "Visa Pilot Scheme" among the KTAI & ITI Road Corridor en-route Member States.
4. As per Article 13 of the said Meeting, the Senior Consular Officials of Member States suggested that “if this Visa Pilot Scheme is successful among the en-route Member States, the ECO Secretariat would closely work with all the Member States to establish a uniform visa scheme as “ECO Visa” for citizens of all Member States traveling within the ECO region. Further, it could be extended for non-ECO citizens/tourists entering the ECO region.”
5. So implementation of ECO Agreement on Simplification and Harmonization of Visa Procedure for businessmen and drivers, can pave the way for following up the General ECO Visa.
6. ECO High Level Expert Meeting on Visa Facilitation was scheduled for three times (5 October 2022, and for 28 November 2022 and 18 September 2023) yet it was postponed due to lack of quorum.
7. **Expected outcomes for 2024 and Secretariat’s recommendations**
8. The Council may request the Member States to host and participate in the ECO High Level Expert Meeting on Visa Facilitation to move towards a visa free travel regime in the region.
9. The meeting may discuss initiation of smart visa policies including electronic visa applications, changes to the method of visa issuance, including Tourist Visa on Arrival (VoA), immigration on board, introduction of other forms of travel authorization and improve processes and remove barriers to ease visits to ECO region by minimizing the deterrence to legitimate travelers whether for leisure or professional purposes and consider reducing fiscal and administrative burdens by setting up a common set of rules applying to people crossing the ECO borders, including automation and harmonization of entry requirements and the rules on issuance of visas for short stays.

**Area Conclusion**

1. Active contribution of Consular Officials of Member States and close cooperation of Tourism and Transport directorates of the Secretariat are the most important factors regarding the implementation of ECO Tourism Visa.
2. **Travel Facilitation**
3. According to the Samarkand Declaration adopted in the 4th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism held on 13 December 2022 under the Chairmanship of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Tourism Ministers of ECO Member States have agreed to:

**"Take initiatives** to increase collaboration between tourism and transport sectors for developing regional tourism by enhancing land, rail, sea and air connectivity to major tourism destinations of the Member States in order to ensure comfortable, economical, accessible and secure travel in the ECO region;

**Reaffirm** the need to address the obstacles and barriers that hamper the expansion of both tourism and air transport within, and the ECO Region and

**Encourage** the Member States to facilitate air connectivity into the region through establishing regular and chartered flights to stimulate regional tourism.

1. **Background information**
2. Travel facilitation is closely linked with the development of tourism and is a key contributor to the overall appeal of a destination, which can lead to increased demand and sustained tourism performance. Therefore, accessibility of the ECO region is the primary requirement for promoting tourism to and within the region. The development of the tourism industry throughout the region needs intra-regional and international connectivity through all modes of transportation in order to ensure comfortable, cheaper, accessible and secure travel in the ECO Region. There is an immediate need for cooperation in the ECO region for making travel into and within the ECO region easier and more efficient. Development of easy and cost- effective air connectivity among all the ECO Member States will boost tourism flow within and to the region.
3. Due to inter linkages between transport and tourism sector to achieve the targeted aims for facilitation of mobility and accessibility of the region and tourism attractions, cross-sectoral cooperation, consultation, planning, synchronization and harmonization of transport and tourism policy synergies and coordination of action among all the Member States and relevant stakeholders in the public and private sector is strongly needed. To ensure smooth and cost-effective accessibility of the region and stimulate travel flows and tourism growth, Member States may collaborate on enhancing connectivity and route development via collaboration with the public and private airlines, tourism and transport ministries of the ECO Member States.
4. Air-travel being the most convenient and fastest way of travel, to promote transboundary travel and dispersal of travel, the region would highly benefit holding meetings of transport, tourism and other relevant authorities for increasing aviation capacity and regulations to promote cost-effective air travel arrangements among the Member States, with the broader objective of introduction of new air routes to lucrative priority markets, direct air links between potential regional tourism destinations, increased flight frequencies and improved travel connectivity overall.
5. The meetings of relevant authorities for improving land and rail connectivity to enhance accessibility and travel time between the main cross-border tourism attractions and cities among the Member States would also facilitate cross-border regional tourism activities.
6. In this context, railway transport occupies a core position in ECO’s overall transport sector. While there is a definite need to further improve the existing capacities of railway connections across all the borders in the region, even with the existing established routes and train capacities, there is a potential for increasing cooperation among the railways of the ECO Member States to enhance the connectedness of the region and facilitate tourism. To enhance domestic, intra-regional and international tourism as a cost-friendly travel alternative, the Tourism Directorate has prepared the proposal on ECO Regional Rail PASS initiative as a proposal enclosed as Annex III.

1. **Recent developments, latest decisions and progress**
2. As per the decision of the 32nd RPC to form Tourism and Transport Task Force gathering related officials including authorities from aviation, railway, and land transport sectors to coordinate travel and tourism facilitation in the ECO Region, the 1st Meeting of the ECO Tourism and Transport Task Force was held in virtual format on 12 September 2022 under the chairmanship of the ECO Secretariat. During the meeting, the Member States besides many other proposals suggested setting up further working groups to draft a joint regional strategy for facilitation of regional connectivity through all means of transport to boost the tourism sector. The 2nd meeting of the ECO Tourism and Transport Task Force is scheduled to be held on 11 December 2023 in virtual mode.
3. The ECO Regional Rail PASS initiative was introduced by the Secretariat during the 32nd and the 33rd RPC and was shared with the Member States for their comments about its feasibility in their countries in collaboration with their National Railway Authorities. So far the Secretariat has received responses from Azerbaijan, Kyrgyz Republic, Türkiye and Uzbekistan. With the suggestions of [Türkiye, a working group to discuss the details of the ECO Regional Rail PASS initiative was initiated.](https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/T%C3%BCrkiye)

1. **Expected outcomes for 2024 and Secretariat’s recommendations**
2. The Member States may kindly review the Secretariat’s proposal with regards to ECO Regional Rail PASS initiative and come up with their comments and suggestions about its feasibility in their countries in collaboration with their National Railway authorities and kindly send their nominations for the Working Group to discuss the initiative in detail with the relevant National Railway Authorities.
3. The Member States may participate in the 2nd Meeting of the **ECO Tourism and Transport Task Force** and share their proposals for advancement of travel and tourism in the region.

1. **Tourism Destination Chain and Connectivity**
2. There are several criteria/factors that have been identified as most important to the choice of Tourism Destination. These criteria/factors include examination of the destination from perspectives such as culture, economic and political situations, climate, and accessibility of attractions (e.g., cultural events, monuments, and festivals), as well as from the viewpoint of the customers, their age and sex, family and socioeconomic status, the size of the domicile location, their financial and physical wellbeing, etc. These characteristics are often interrelated, thus create an even broader platform of preferences, and associated constraints. The identification of particular attractions related to the promotion of the destination is important to the identification of efficient marketing efforts focused on a particular group of customers.
3. Providing a Tourism Destination Chain and Connectivity among the ECO Member States, has a key role in the tourism development of ECO Region. It can be helpful for travel agencies and those responsible for the development of tourism infrastructure, as well as for the organization of further studies on the subject.

1. **Recent developments, latest decisions and progress**
2. In this regard to ease the process of selecting the Tourism Destinations for the Member States, the ECO Secretariat in collaboration with related specialists has developed the list of the most important criteria for Tourism Destination Choice as below and circulated it among the Member States before the 30th RPC Meeting for their feedback.
3. It’s worth mentioning that the criteria have not been classified into priorities. The Member States were requested to consider these criteria for selection and Introduction of Tourism Destinations in their countries. Each Member State should evaluate its cities based on these criteria and classify them according to the score they will reach. Ultimately each Member State should introduce at least five top-rated cities as Tourist Destination in the ECO Region.
4. The Secretariat has conveyed NV Nos: T/Tourism Destination/2021/238 dated 4 March 2021, No: T/ Tourism Destination /2021/644 dated 16 June 2021 and T/Tourism Destinations/2022/799 dated 12 June 2022 to the Member States requesting their choice of tourism destinations. So far responses have been received from Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kyrgyz Republic, Türkiye and Pakistan.

1. **Expected outcomes for 2024 and Secretariat’s recommendations**

1. The Council may request the remaining Member States to accelerate submitting their Tourism Destination Choice to the Secretariat according to the said criteria.

1. The Council may request all the Member States to send data including information about the tourism activities in the destination choice selected by the Member States along with high resolution photos to be compiled by the Secretariat to establish a databank on selected ECO tourism destinations.

#### Priority Area 4

#### Diversification of Tourism into various niches

1. **ECO Vision approach and target**
2. “3D iv. Tourism activities will be diversified into various niches including; health/medical, ecological, culture, winter, sea, mountain sports, climbing, skiing, desert and religious.”
3. In order to achieve this target:

* Meetings on health tourism, ecotourism, religious tourism should be organized;
* Data bank of specialized tourism destinations should be established;
* Workshops\events on niche tourism activities will be conducted;
* Unique in its kind World Nomad Games, initiated by Kyrgyz Republic on a regular basis, will be held.

1. The ECO region constitutes a rich and unexplored network of destinations capable of providing unique experiences catering to various tourism segments such as business, culture, nature and adventure, sun and beach holidays, and health and wellness, among others. Diversifying products, services and markets in the tourism sector is essential to avoid dependence on a single activity or market. Building on partnerships to develop enhanced tourism experiences to optimize key assets for the benefit of tourism and economic development through increasing regional spread, season extension and promoting sustainable growth has huge benefits for increasing the demand to the ECO region. Tourism is currently highly seasonal in the region but there is scope for developing alternative multi-seasonal activities to enrich the tourism offer during the off-season. The businesses require investments in capacity and quality to reduce their seasonality and improve their profitability. Based on its capacity, the ECO region can diversify tourism services and products into diverse segments. To achieve the ECO Vision 2025 objectives to help address seasonality, regional experiences that combine different tourism products and experiences that provide year-round tourism opportunities in the region across the Member States needs to be developed. Achieving this mandate regionally requires action at the national level and close cooperation among the Tourism Ministries of the Member States.
2. **Background information**
3. **Health Tourism**
4. As per the decision of 21st RPC Meeting, to promote regional health tourism, the 2nd Coordination Committee Meeting on Health Tourism Cooperation in the ECO Region was held on 27 November 2013 in Mashhad in collaboration with the ECO Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ECO-CCI) on the sidelines of the 4th Conference on Health Tourism in Islamic Countries.
5. The Islamic Republic of Iran in cooperation with the ECO-CCI and the ECO Secretariat hosted the 1st ECO Confobition (conference + exhibition) on ECO Health Tourism in August 2014 in Ramsar. The 2nd ECO Confobition (Conference + Exhibition) on Health Tourism was held on 18-20 June 2019, in Ardabil, Iran. The event was attended by the vast majority of ECO Member States namely Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Turkmenistan and had 4 panels.
6. Although medical tourism kept operating during the pandemic, many major medical tourism sources and destination countries were negatively affected due to travel restrictions and suspensions of flights.
7. The 32nd Council appreciated the Islamic Republic of Iran (Iranian Chamber of Commerce) for hosting the 2nd ECO Confobition on ECO Health Tourism in Ardabil, Iran on 18-20 June 2019. The Council also welcomed the offer of the Islamic Republic of Iran to host the 3rd ECO Confobition on ECO Health Tourism in 2022 and requested information with regards to exact date and hospitality of the event may be conveyed to the Secretariat for smooth coordination. Due to the pandemic the event was not hosted in 2022. The 33rd Council also welcomed the offer of the Islamic Republic of Iran to host the 3rd ECO Confobition on ECO Health Tourism in 2023 but the meeting was not held.
8. In the 7th High Level Experts Group (HLEG) Meeting on Tourism held on 4 October 2023 in Ardabil, the representative of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts of the Islamic Republic of Iran made a presentation on development of hydrotherapy sites to improve health tourism and introduced Iran’s proposals in this regard. They also shared a questionnaire on hydrotherapy tourism and requested Member States to submit their response in order to make a database of the hydrotherapy sites of the ECO Member States. Iran’s proposal was also reflected in Ardabil Declaration as well recommending the Member States to explore the prospects of hydrotherapy tourism in the ECO region and to develop a comprehensive strategy aimed at fostering growth in this field of tourism.

1. **Ecotourism**
2. The Republic of Azerbaijan as coordinator of Ecotourism prepared a Plan of Action in the field of Ecological Tourism and hosted the 2nd Experts Group Meeting on Ecotourism on 10-12 June 2010.
3. The 3rd Experts Group Meeting on Ecotourism and “ECO Regional Ecotourism Development Training Program” were held on 17-21 September 2012 in Antalya, Türkiye. The meeting reviewed the related issues and agreed on some points as under:

* Establish a database for Ecotourism (Iran will follow it up).
* Training program, field works and capacity building for promotion of ecotourism in ECO member countries (it will be prepared by Türkiye).
* ECO region’s ecological tourism catalogue (it will be prepared by Türkiye).

1. The 23rd RPC Meeting welcomed the offer of the Republic of Türkiye to prepare an Ecotourism Catalogue for the ECO region and requested all Member States to provide the necessary information for its preparation of this catalogue to the relevant Turkish authorities by 15 August 2013.
2. The 24th RPC Meeting reiterated its request to the Member States to provide the relevant information for the Ecotourism Catalogue to be prepared by Türkiye.
3. Iran informed the 25th RPC Meeting that it developed   
   a questionnaire for collecting information to establish an ecotourism database. The Council requested Iran to circulate Member States for completion.
4. Türkiye and the Turkish Cypriot State (the ECO Observer) offered to co-host the 4th EGM on Ecotourism on 21-23 December 2017, in Nicosia to keep the pace of sustainable cooperation in this important field.
5. The 4th Experts Group Meeting on Ecotourism was scheduled to be held in Nicosia on 19-10 October 2022 but it was cancelled due to lack of quorum.
6. The 4th Experts Group Meeting on Ecotourism was scheduled to be held in Nicosia in the 3rd quarter of 2023.The Secretariat sent a reminder Note verbale to Türkiye (№T/2023/1479 dated 29.09.2023).

1. **Agro-tourism**
2. International Forum on Agro-Tourism Development was held back to back with the International Nowruz Festival of "Dushanbe - ECO Tourism Capital '' on 29-30 August 2021 in Tajikistan in hybrid format. Considering that holding such events facilitate cooperation and promotion of agro tourism in the ECO region, the Member States had the opportunity to discuss the development of agro-tourism in their respective countries and exchanged views on progress and problems in this area.

1. **ECO Region Databank/Catalogue of Specialized Tourism Products and Services**
2. the ECO Vision 2025, one of the mandates in tourism sector is to prepare a Data bank of specialized tourism destinations. In that regard, the Secretariat via NV No: T/ Ecotourism /2022/752 dated 5 June 2022, and NV No: T/ Ecotourism Catalogue/2023/657 dated 18 May 2023 requested the Member States to share the necessary information for establishment of an “Ecotourism Catalogue for the ECO Region” to be prepared by Türkiye. Response from Afghanistan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan providing all the necessary information including HD photos (high definition) along with brief data of ecotourism attractions for the aforementioned Catalogue to be prepared by the Republic of Türkiye is still awaited. The other Member States may also consider updating the information prepared due to passage of long time.
3. Regarding the “Establishment of ECO-Ecotourism Database” the 33rd RPC requested all Member States (except Kazakhstan and Pakistan) to fill up and furnish the ECO Secretariat with the questionnaire on ecotourism that was kindly prepared by the Islamic Republic of Iran, in order to establish the relevant database as early as possible. Secretariat via Note Verbales No. AIT/ECO-Ecotourism/2018/540 dated 29 April 2018, and No: T/ECO Tourism /753 dated 5 June 2022 and Note Verbale   
   No. T/ Ecotourism/2023/717 dated 31 May 2023 requested the Member States (except Kazakhstan and Pakistan) to kindly fill and return the questionnaire at the earliest enabling the Secretariat to take further necessary action for establishment of the envisioned database. The inputs are still awaited.
4. The Council may request the Member States to send data on other specialized tourism segments and destinations in their countries (health tourism, sports tourism, mountain climbing, cycling, culinary tourism, urban tourism, religious tourism, heritage tourism, agro tourism, winter tourism, wellness tourism, MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions ) tourism, nature and adventure tourism, sun and beach tourism to be compiled by the Secretariat to establish an ECO Region Databank /Catalogue of Specialized Tourism Products and Services based on the information received from the Member States. To facilitate compilation of the data in each segment the Council may request the Member States to prepare a table of requested data along with the required visual materials.

1. **Recent developments, latest decisions and progress**
2. The 32nd Council requested the need to prepare a framework document for investigating and identifying the potential and opportunities for diversification of intra-regional tourism to broaden the regional tourism offer by joining efforts to bring out lesser-known or niche destinations and identifying all available and potentially available tourism resources and facilities in various tourism segments to the 4th Meeting of the ECO Tourism Ministers for consideration. To this end, the Council requested the establishment of an ad-hoc specialized working group among the Member States to prepare the document before the Ministerial Meeting.
3. The Secretariat via Note Verbale NV: T/2022/323 dated 9 March 2022 and NV No. T/Diversification of Tourism/2023/983 dated 10 July 2023 requested the Member States to send their nominations for the ad-hoc specialized working group. Nominations have been received from Azerbaijan, Iran, Pakistan and Uzbekistan so far.

1. **Expected outcomes for 2024 and Secretariat’s recommendations**

1. The Council may request Iran to consider holding the 3rd ECO Conference on Health Tourism in 2024.
2. The Council may request the Member States to offer their views/ proposals in order to contribute to the Agenda of the 3rd ECO Conference on Health Tourism.
3. The Council may request Iran to share Questionnaire on hydrotherapy tourism in the ECO region with the ECO Member States through the Secretariat and to consider the possibility of development of a comprehensive strategy aimed at fostering growth in hydrotherapy tourism.
4. The Council may request the remaining Member States to send their nominations for the ad-hoc specialized working group to prepare the framework document.
5. The Council may request Türkiye and the Turkish Cypriot State to announce the exact days of the 4th EGM on Ecotourism in 2024 to keep the pace of sustainable cooperation.
6. The Member States may consider holding other events, workshops and seminars for enhancing regional collaboration in other specialized tourism segments.

**Area Conclusion**

1. It is important that Member States take steps to support the regional tourism sector to expand into niche products or markets where there are demonstrable benefits to the regional economy, its people and the sustainability of the tourism industry.

#### Priority Area 5

#### Enhancing utilization of digital technologies and social media in tourism sector across ECO region

1. **ECO Vision approach and target**
2. *“3D v. In tourism promotional activities utilization of electronic media will be increased.”*
3. In order to achieve this target:

* Presence in the social media will be improved
* Collaboration with travel related advisory websites like Trip Adviser will be realized
* Specialized tourism website will be established
* GIS System for tourism destinations will be applied

1. **Background information**
2. The technological innovations and the digitalization of the tourism sector have introduced new business models of tourism. It has transformed the expectations and behaviors of consumers, opening up new and highly creative ways of delivering tourism services to enhance the visitor experience.
3. As the vast majority of tourists internationally now use the Internet as their primary means of research, marketing and promotion through various Internet platforms has become a cost-effective and convenient option for reaching the consumers and promoting tourism offerings and destinations. While some ECO Member States have considerably enhanced their virtual promotion and global reach through the digital platforms, there are significant differences in the uptake of digital technologies in tourism across the ECO region, which still exhibits a huge unused potential in integration of digital technologies into the sector.
4. With tourists increasingly using digital technologies to search, plan and book travel, it is essential that ECO Member States engage meaningfully to incorporate advanced digital technologies and prioritize accelerating the move to a more seamless and contactless end-to-end travel and tourism experience through new technologies to compete favorably with best-in-class tourist destinations around the world. Integration of advanced commonly preferred digital technologies into the regional tourism activities and portals has the potential to facilitate competitiveness and global reach of the ECO region and promotion of its diverse tourism offerings.
5. As the sector fast tracks this transition globally, the ECO Member States may pursue the necessary actions to enhance the presence and initiatives of the regional tourism sector in digital platforms to expand their market reach and sharpen their competitive edge.
6. **Recent developments, latest decisions and progress**
7. Keeping in view that integration of advanced commonly preferred digital technologies into the regional tourism activities and portals has the potential to facilitate competitiveness and global reach of the ECO region and promotion of its diverse tourism offerings, the 32nd RPC requested the Secretariat to design a user-friendly, specialized ECO Tourism Website as a regional tool for sharing and consolidating tourism-related information and generating business and investment opportunities for the private sector in the ECO Member States for easy access to information on tourism offerings, programmes and events in the ECO Member States and promotion of the region to be designed for use by the tourists and the tourism professionals and agencies to complement the national tourism websites by allowing a more systematic process for users to collect and view the information they are looking for. The 32ndCouncil requested the Member States to cooperate with the Secretariat and provide technical and financial support in preparation of the website.
8. After the 32nd RPC, the Tourism Directorate got in touch with some IT companies to initiate the preparations of the website. As the Secretariat and the consultants require the relevant inputs from the Member States, the Secretariat circulated a NV asking the Member States to provide the Secretariat information to be displayed on the Website.
9. Information on tourism industry of country (popular tourism destinations, attractions, travel agencies, travel regulations, visa application process, hotel accommodation and booking facilities, food and drinks, public transport, maps and guides and etc.);

* calendar of international and regional, as well as national tourism events;
* tourism promotion HD videos and images;
* information on tourism investment incentives;
* links to the Official Tourism Websites.

1. The Secretariat received some requested information from Azerbaijan, Iran and Pakistan. Currently, at the first stage all the gathered data is hosted on the Tourism Section of the ECO Official Website which is accessible at www.eco.int/tourism. It will save the Secretariat the cost of consultants and maintenance. The IT section of the Secretariat will handle the technical process.
2. The 33rd RPC Council welcomed the launching of the Tourism Section of the ECO Website and requested the Member States to cooperate with the Secretariat and provide inputs as well as technical and financial support in preparation of the separate website dedicated to tourism in the ECO region.
3. In the second stage of the project, and after consulting with some web designers and evaluating the proposals a separate website dedicated to regional tourism website will be launched and activated with a more interactive design for travelers and tourism professionals.
4. **Expected outcomes for 2024 and Secretariat’s recommendations**
   1. The Council may request the Member States to cooperate with the Secretariat and technical and financial support in preparation of the website and convey to the Secretariat their inputs to be uploaded on the website.
   2. The Council may request the Member States to send data regarding their specialized tourism attractions to be compiled as a digital catalogue of all the tourism destinations of the ECO Member States to be hosted in the ECO Tourism Website.
   3. The Council may recommend that the main tour operators and tourism agencies of the Member States may collaborate with the Secretariat to enhance presence and initiatives of the tourism sector in digital platforms to expand regional market reach and sharpen its competitiveness.

#### Priority Area 6

#### Strengthening human resource and capacity building for increase of the quality of the services

1. **ECO Vision approach and target**
2. “3D vi. Tourism related human resource development and capacity building activities will be promoted.”
3. In order to achieve this target:

* Workshops and training courses will be organized
* On-line training will be developed and promoted
* Leading tourism Member States will be encouraged to offer scholarships to less developed ones

1. **Background information**
2. Professional and qualified workforce is essential to the success of any tourism business or destination. With the rapid growth of the tourism sector, the need to develop a well-trained, customer and service-oriented tourism workforce for the tourism industry has become imperative.
3. Many ECO Member States face the problem of lacking resources and trainers for human resource development in the tourism sector. There is considerable scope for collaboration among the Member States in enhancing the human resource capacity of the Member States for providing high standards and quality in the tourism services of the region.
4. Providing specialized skills training in the sector will help ensure the quality of future service delivery is stronger in the region and the tourism workforce has the right high quality skills to interact safely with future travelers. In that regard, continued emphasis on tourism training is necessary, not only to sustain ECO region’s competitive advantage, but for the upgrading of skills to address the demand for improved levels of quality, service and professionalism in the tourism and travel industry.
5. **Recent developments, latest decisions and progress**
6. The 32nd RPC requested the Member States to share their training needs and proposals to ascertain HRD and skills requirements in their tourism sector in ECO Region and the Council further  requested that the Member States consider cooperation in HRD activities (tourism education and training), by sharing resources, skills and training facilities, such as networking of tourism training centers/institutes, provision of technical assistance and experts, emphasis on new job skills and new technologies, training of trainers, etc.
7. The Secretariat vide Note Verbale requested the Member States to share their training needs and proposals to ascertain Human Resources Development (HRD) and skills requirements in their tourism sector. Response was received from Azerbaijan, Iran and Pakistan and it was circulated for the information of the other Member States to seek resources and trainers to provide the required training.
8. Training and Research Department under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Türkiye has informed the Secretariat that they offer on the job international tourism training programs in the fields of ‘Front Desk’, ‘Housekeeping Services’, ‘Food and Beverage Catering’, ‘Food Preparation(Cuisine)’, ‘Training the Managers as Trainers ‘and the relevant department is ready to meet any training requests in above-mentioned fields. It was circulated to the Member States vide Notes Verbales No: T/HRD /2022/925 dated 3/7/2022, No: T/HRD/2022/1308 dated 21/9/2022 and No: T/HRD/2023/1036 dated 18/7/2023. The Response is still awaited to coordinate the required training if any.
9. During the 33rd RPC Meeting Azerbaijan initiated to organize the Meeting of the Tourism Specialized Education Institutions in the ECO Member States and the initiative was welcomed by the other Member States. This meeting will be hosted by the Republic of Azerbaijan on December 4-5, 2023. At the meeting, development of the curricula for tourism education based on the future needs of the tourism industry, cooperation among the private sector, the governments and the academy exchanging the best practices, and emerging trends in tourism education will be discussed.
10. **Expected outcomes for 2024 and Secretariat’s recommendations**

1. The Member States may inform the Secretariat if they require the training offered by Türkiye to the Secretariat to coordinate training activities in the region.
2. The Member States who have not conducted a training needs assessment, to ascertain HRD and skills requirements in their tourism sector may inform the Secretariat about their training needs. The results may be shared with the Secretariat to coordinate training activities in the region.
3. The Member States may consider cooperation in HRD activities (tourism education and training), by sharing resources, skills and training facilities, such as networking of tourism training centres/institutes, provision of technical assistance and experts, emphasis on new job skills and new technologies, training of trainers, etc.
4. Member States with more resources and experience in the tourism sector may consider leading and sharing their experiences with those Member States who are in need of a qualified tourism workforce.
5. The Council may request the Secretariat and the Member States to consider the possibility of organizing joint workshops in cooperation with leading training centers for enhancing skills and knowledge of tourism experts in the ECO Region.

#### Priority Area 7

#### Cooperation in quality development and harmonization of rules and procedures for sustainable tourism

1. **ECO Vision approach and target**
2. *“3D viii. Standardization and accreditation bodies’ and ‘sustainable and green tourism’ monitoring mechanisms will be established and improved in collaboration with international tourism bodies”*
3. In order to achieve this target:

* Quality standards in the region will be institutionalized
* International standards will be adopted
* Training on international standards will be conducted

1. **Background information**
2. Development and implementation of harmonized service quality and environmental standards that can help protect the environment and bring tangible benefits to local communities and align with international best practices, including those related to safety, health and environment protocols are essential to increasing the competitiveness of the region as a global tourism destination, and attracting tourists from international markets.
3. The establishment of a common ECO regional tourism brand as a high-quality tourist destination also requires essentially defining the common harmonized safety, hygiene, environment and minimum service quality standards in tourism services, facilities, hotels, restaurants, heritage sites, transport systems etc. to improve its global profile and image. This objective requires member countries to work in a coordinated and collaborative manner to protect and foster their brand value through regionally harmonized quality standards and regulations while carrying out programmes to ensure the preservation, conservation and promotion of the natural, cultural and historical heritage of Member States.

1. **Recent developments, latest decisions and progress**
2. To promote the ECO region as a brand with uniform tourism standards, the 32nd RPC requested the Secretariat to set up a working group from the representatives of the public and private tourism sectors to adopt and implement international tourism standards and certification programmes with measurable standards and indicators for each of the tourism areas while addressing and monitoring the essential requirements of facilities and services for visitors, the industry infrastructure, the environment and local communities and make them transparent to the tourists to help with their choices. The Council requested the working group to develop a regional inspection mechanism to ensure standards compliance.
3. The Secretariat requested the Member States to nominate their representatives to the working group from the public and private tourism sectors. Nominations were received from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Türkiye, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.
4. The Secretariat also had meeting with the GSTC (Global Sustainable Tourism Organization). GSTC establishes and manages global standards for sustainable travel and tourism, known as the GSTC Criteria and the organization also delivers training to managers and practitioners on use of contemporary tools and resources to facilitate the transition to sustainable practices. The main objective of the meeting was to further collaborate for advancement of sustainable tourism in the region and development of the quality of tourism services and the workforce. A formal letter was addressed to the GSTC seeking their guidance/ideas/proposals to achieve all desired goals towards the promotion of travel and tourism industry. Upon receipt of response from the GSTC, GSTC’s proposal was circulated among ECO member states for further deliberation/discussions/concurrence and implementation as well as the GSTC representatives briefed the Working Group about their works.
5. The Working Group on Tourism Standardization held 4 meetings during 2023 (18 April, 6 June, 2 August and 24 October) and now the experts are working on drafting Common Criteria on Sustainability for Accommodation Facilities in the ECO Region.
6. **Expected outcomes for 2024 and Secretariat’s recommendations**
7. The Council may request the Member State to actively participate in the Working Group on Tourism Standardization.
8. The Council may appreciate work done by the Working Group and task experts to finalize ECO Common Criteria and the Council. Furthermore, the Council may request the Member States to consider the approval and the implementation of this standard which will help the advancement of sustainable tourism in the region as well as the development of the quality of tourism services.
9. The Council may request the ECO Member States to consider the proposal of GSTC on cooperation circulated by the Secretariat and share their feedback and comments with the Secretariat for taking further actions.

#### Priority Area 8

#### Strengthening Private Sector and Local Community in tourism activities

1. **ECO Vision approach and target**
2. “3D ix. Private sector and local community involvement in the tourism activities will be strengthened.”
3. In order to achieve this target:

* Tourism business unit within the ECO- CCI will be established
* Tourism Agencies Federation of ECO will be established
* ECO tourism events in various cities of ECO Region will be organized

1. **Background information**
2. Tourism is a people-oriented sector and its major activities depend on human resources. The sector is underperforming in some ECO countries as tourism development often takes place without the participation of communities, leading to unsustainable projects and few economic gains for the local communities. Due to the cross-cutting nature of the tourism sector, a close coordination across various national stakeholders in the private sector including tour operators, tourism agencies, and tourism organizations is essential to reach the regional tourism objectives.

1. The development of community-based tourism in the region including tourism initiatives that involve local people in all kinds of tourism activities and allow visitors to interact with locals and encourage rural communities to utilize the tourism resources for their livelihoods has the potential to generate greater economic benefits to the local communities especially for poverty reduction and job creation. The private sector also has a key role to play in the tourism industry. While governments make policies and plans for development of tourism in terms of national economic objectives and priorities, tourism is an economic activity largely carried out by the private sector in many countries. As various stakeholders have different interests in the sector, the Member States encourage greater participation and cooperation with the private sector and local communities have more chances of achieving efficiency in reaching their tourism objectives.
2. There is considerable scope and benefits for strengthening and promoting regional cooperation for reaching these objectives collectively with the public and private stakeholders and the inclusion of the local communities. There is a need for a clear mandate from the Member States to facilitate appropriate roles for the various stakeholders and close coordination across various national stakeholders in the private sector including tour operators, tourism agencies, and tourism associations and local communities is essential to reach the aims of the ECO Vision 2025.
3. Coordination among the local cultures and communities at the international level can be achieved with the collaboration of the private sector through the national tourism organizations and tour operators.  National tour operators and travel agencies are key for involving the local communities into tourism activities and the development of community-based tourism, especially in ECO countries, where many tourism attractions are difficult to reach, connections with the local population is hard. In that regard, joint cooperation and developing a network among major tour operators has huge potential and efficient outcomes for promotion of regional sustainable development and poverty reduction.
4. Establishment of a network among major tour operators in ECO region for providing ECO Tourism Package would facilitate increasing the number of tourists and the amount of tourism revenues. Promoting integrity within the tour operator industry in the ECO region provides professional services by setting up an appropriate platform of dialogue, cooperation, data exchanges and experience sharing to use all capacities and opportunities in the ECO region as a rich area in cultural heritage and history.
5. During the 27th RPC meeting, the Council requested the Member States to encourage the private sector involvement in the regional tourism activities through participation in the relevant meetings/events/initiatives. And in this connection, the ECO CCI was requested to explore the possibility of setting up regional tourism platforms to coordinate the activities of the national private sector associations/forums/federations with the purpose of sustainable tourism promotion and propose to the ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism.

1. **Recent developments, latest decisions and progress**
2. In order to achieve the above said goals, the project titled “Tour Operators’ Network in ECO Region” was considered and approved by the 5th High Level Expert Group Meeting (HLWGM) on Tourism and supported by 3rd Ministerial Meeting on Tourism in Khujand in 2019. Henceforth, the project concept was considered at the level of ECO’s Council of Ministers (COM) where it was endorsed as part of a document set by the 24th COM on 8-9 November 2019 in Antalya (Türkiye). This project was submitted to 30th Regional Planning Council Meeting on 11-14 January 2020 in Tehran (Iran), and approved by the Council and the project has become part of ECO’s Work Program since 2020.
3. The First Forum of the ECO Heads of Tourism Associations, Unions and other Tourism Stakeholders was hosted by the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in virtual format on June 20, 2022. The Forum agreed to set up a Tour Operator Network among ECO Member States as an efficient outcome and 1st Meeting of the ECO Tour Operators Network consisting of more than 350 tour operators from 8 member states was held on 22nd November, 2022 in virtual format. In 2023, the Network convened 4 more times virtually to discuss the joint tour packages among the ECO Member States and participants exchanged information about their business offerings.
4. It is expected that the ECO Tour Operators Forum to be held in Azerbaijan will bring together all regional tour operators together physically for an efficient platform to discuss further joint cooperation areas in a more concrete manner to promote regional tourism.
5. **Expected outcomes for 2024 and Secretariat’s recommendations**
6. Azerbaijan may consider holding the ECO Tour Operators Forum in 2024 for developing cooperation between the tour operators, hotel associations and other stakeholders for benefiting the opportunities of tourism activities between ECO Member States and as a good platform for considering and discussing Tourism Destination Chain and Connectivity among ECO Countries. The Council may request the Member States to convey their Focal Points in this regard.
7. Member States may consider holding the 2nd Meeting of the ECO Heads of Tourism Associations, Unions and other tourism stakeholders in 2024 for developing cooperation between the tour operators, hotel associations and other stakeholders for benefiting the opportunities of tourism activities between ECO Member States.
8. The Tour Operators’ Network in ECO Region may continue to work on facilitation of joint packages for tourists from the ECO region with low prices and airfares by each ECO Member State. The Secretariat may work with the volunteer tour operators to develop a pilot ECO regional tour package for 2024. The network may pave the way for establishment of ECO Tourism Agencies Federation as envisioned in the ECO Vision 2025.
9. The Council may encourage the ECO-CCI to hold the meetings of the Tourism Committee of ECO Chamber of Commerce and Industry regularly and task the ECO CCI Secretariat to work out a report on ways and means of cooperation in tourism among the member countries.
10. The Council may urge the ECO–CCI to set up a business unit specifically for promotion of tourism within the ECO- CCI and hold ECO-wide promotional tourism events such as fairs, exhibitions, sports games within the region and internationally.
11. The Council may urge ECO CCI Secretariat to share information about conferences, seminars or summits on tourism that take place in ECO Member Countries in order to generate participation from the ECO countries and encourage the private sector to take initiative for marketing the joint tourism packages on the occasion of these tourism events.
12. The Council may urge ECO-CCI to upload tourism events in the ECO CCI website for promotion of the regional tourism sector.
13. The Council may encourage the non-governmental organizations\entities\ associations involved in the tourism sector to contribute to regional tourism development through organizing joint activities and projects.
14. The Council may request the Member States to encourage active involvement of their main Tour operators in the ECO tourism programs and events.

**Area Conclusion**

1. There is a need for more intense collaboration among the public and private stakeholders in the regional tourism sector. Joint cooperation will facilitate new opportunities for the development of regional tourism.

#### Priority Area 9

#### Tourism Promotion Fund

1. **ECO Vision approach and target**
2. The ECO Tourism Promotion Fund was proposed with the main aim of providing adequate financial resources and budgetary support in financing Tourism projects. This financing helps to reach the tourism mandates of the ECO Vision 2025 such as:

* joint promotion and marketing of regional tourism sector;
* exhibition and promotion of ECO tourism potentials to the world;
* encouraging the intra -regional tourism;
* enhancing sustainable development of the ECO region by generating new tourism related businesses;
* promoting healthy collaboration among businesses actively engaged in tourism sector through useful interaction;
* organizing regular meetings and cultural and social activities to promote regional tourism.

1. **Background information**
2. The 1st ECO High Level Experts Group Meeting on Tourism held on 11-13 December 2006 in Tehran proposed the establishment of the Fund to finance the development of the tourism sector in the ECO region. This was approved by the 1st Ministerial Meeting on Tourism on 20 October 2008 and the Modality for establishment of the ECO Tourism Promotion Fund was approved by the 18thCouncil of Ministers (COM) on 9 March 2009 in Tehran.

1. **Recent developments, latest decisions and progress**
2. During the 1st ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism Azerbaijan, Iran and Türkiye declared to provide financial contribution to this Fund as soon as it became operational. Iran has pledged US$50,000. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan joined them by announcing to contribute US$20,000 to the Fund during the 2nd Ministerial Meeting. Kazakhstan has also announced that it will participate in the activities of the Fund. The Secretariat asked concerned Member States to transfer their pledged contributions to the Secretariat account and to appoint their representatives to the Board of Trustees at the earliest. Türkiye and Iran have approached the Secretariat to finalize their payment procedures to the Fund. However, no amount has been transferred to the Secretariat.
3. During the 26th RPC Meeting, about the pledged amount to the Tourism Promotion Fund, Türkiye informed that the allocation is in final stages and will be transferred at the earliest. Iran also informed that it will be transferred and the Meeting of the Board of Trustees will be hosted respectively. The Council reiterated its request to the ECO Trade and Development Bank (ECO-TDB) to contribute to tourism development projects in the region in close consultation with the ECO Secretariat and the Member States.
4. Due to the low contribution of the Member States, no amount has been transferred to the Secretariat so far. So this project has been suspended for the past years and for make it activate again, the most important issue is the high contribution of the Member States in order to transfer their pledged amount to the Secretariat.
5. The 32nd and 33rd Councils called upon the Member States to consider contributing to the said Fund to provide financial support for the projects and initiatives to reach the tourism mandates of the ECO Vision 2025. The Council requested the Member States to nominate their Representatives to the Board of Trustee of the Fund. The Council requested the Secretariat to look for means including financial support for tourism projects and initiatives.
6. **Expected outcomes for 2024 and Secretariat’s recommendations**
7. The Council may request the Member States to join and contribute to the Fund and participate in its activities.
8. The Council may request the Concerned Member States to nominate their Representatives to the Board of Trustee of the Fund.

**Area Conclusion**

1. All the platforms for reactivation of the Tourism Fund are ready and just contributions of Member States with a positive view on funding tourism projects are needed.

#### Priority Area 10

#### Investment Generation and Facilitation

1. **ECO Vision approach and target**
2. As investment is essential for a competitive tourism sector, it has been given specific attention and included as a priority area to better mobilize and target investment to the tourism sector to promote ways to increase the regional tourism appeal and facilitate development of the regional tourism sector as envisioned in the ECO Vision 2025.
3. Tourism sector is one of the priority sectors for generation of domestic and foreign direct investment (FDI). Engendering investment in this sector is also inclusively crucial for the other sectors of the ECO Member States for stimulating economic growth and enhancing poverty reduction. While investment instigates the transfer of technology and facilitates improvements in productivity, tourism is the only sector where its product and service are consumed at the same location where it is produced. Therefore, by providing products and services to the businesses through the value chain, and directly to the tourists through various means, it also stimulates local economies in creating jobs, increasing per capita income and elevating overall standards of living of the local people.
4. The implementation of tourism infrastructure development projects can help upgrade or reposition destinations, while creating jobs for many. In order to compensate for the decrease in investment in the sector during the pandemic, member States may take active policies to incentivize and restore investment in the tourism sector to maintain the quality of the tourism offer and promote a sustainable recovery.
5. **Background information**
6. The first meeting of the Tourism Committee of ECO Chamber of Commerce and Industry, hosted by the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries and Mines (ICCIM) was held on January 17, 2011, in Tehran, Iran. The meeting called the Member Chambers to present reports on the capacities, potentials, ways and means of investment in tourism of their respective countries and requested the ECO CCI Secretariat to undertake a study for the tourism potential of the ECO region.
7. **Recent developments, latest decisions and progress**
8. During the 32nd and 33rd RPC, emphasizing the significance of mobilization of investment to regional tourism by promoting ways to increase the regional tourism appeal and facilitate development of the regional tourism sector as envisioned in the ECO Vision 2025, the Council requested the Member States to consider organizing a Tourism Investment and Business Conference/Forum in coordination with the ECO-CCI in 2022 to raise awareness of the ECO region’s investment potential and marketing regional tourism investment opportunities. Pakistan has kindly volunteered to hold this event in 2022 and 2023, yet the event was not held.
9. The 32nd RPC requested the Secretariat to develop a regional Tourism Investment Guide to provide a compendium of policies, laws, incentives and opportunities in the ECO tourism sector. In that regard, the Council requested the Member States to furnish the Secretariat with country information, investment climate, economic indicators and policies, financial framework, statutory requirements and relevant agencies along with all the tourism projects, investment opportunities and incentives to be compiled for identification and promotion of investment initiatives in the regional tourism sector as a guide. The Secretariat via Note Verbale No: Tourism/ Tourism Investment Guide /2022 /2022/114 dated 6/2/2022 and No: Tourism/ Tourism Investment Guide /2022/765 dated 6/6/2022 requested the relevant inputs from the Member States. As requested by the 32nd RPC, the document would further be processed to develop a draft ECO Regional Tourism Investment Framework through identification of possible areas of consolidation of national tourism investment policies and incentives in the ECO Member States. Incomplete information was received from Azerbaijan, Iran, Kyrgyz Republic and Türkiye.
10. The 33rd Council requested all the Member States to provide and update the inputs. The Secretariat via Note Verbale No: Tourism/ Tourism Investment Guide /2023 /607 dated 11/5/2023 requested a complete document consisting all relevant information necessary for the preparation of this guide from the Member States. Only Türkiye has provided a document as a response to the latest request.

**IV. Expected outcomes for 2024 and Secretariat’s recommendations**

1. The Council may request Pakistan to host the Tourism Investment and Business Conference/Forum in coordination with the ECO-CCI in 2024 to raise awareness of the ECO region’s investment potential and marketing regional tourism investment opportunities and to facilitate investment into regional tourism projects.
2. The Council may encourage developing initiatives to facilitate investment into regional tourism projects including a possible ECO regional tourism investment promotion framework.
3. The Council may request the Member States to provide and update the inputs to the Secretariat to develop a regional Tourism Investment Guide to prepare a compendium of policies, laws, incentives and opportunities in the ECO tourism sector to be presented in the Tourism Investment and Business Conference/Forum.
4. The Council may request the Secretariat to consider setting up a specific section for Investment promotion in the ECO Tourism Website where investors can access information on ECO wide investment opportunities in various tourism segments i.e. infrastructure development for transport and telecommunications, hotels, resorts, marinas, golf clubs, spas, boutique hotels; infrastructure for medical tourism such as specialized medical centres and hospitals; entertainment and theme parks etc.

#### Priority Area 11

#### Relations with Regional / International Organizations / Agencies

1. **ECO Vision approach and target**
2. According to the ECO Vision 2025, close cooperation with international organizations should be established. MSs may decide to instruct the Secretariat to expand bilateral cooperation with the relevant organizations through MoU or any other format in line with the mentioned goal and may recommend the (CPR) to allocate a sufficient budget to carry out activities in this regard.
3. **Background information**
4. The 24th RPC had asked the Secretariat to start establishing relations with the relevant international organization in the field of tourism industry i.e. UNWTO and other relevant national and regional development agencies for cooperation and funding its activities and projects. The Secretariat has been mandated by CPR to negotiate a MoU for bilateral cooperation with UNWTO and thus has exchanged a draft MoU with the latter.
5. **Recent developments, latest decisions and progress**
6. The Secretariat has sent a letter to the Secretary General of UNWTO to enhance bilateral cooperation between the two organizations. In the letter, while following the conclusion of MoU between the two Organizations, UNWTO's assistance has been requested in designing and implementing in tourism development projects. Unfortunately, ECO Secretariat didn’t receive any feedback from UNWTO in this regard.
7. Upon the invitation of the UNWTO Secretary-General Ambassador Zurab Pololikashvili, and ECO delegation headed by Secretary General Ambassador Khusrav Noziri attended the 25th Session of the General Assembly of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) held in Samarkand on 16-20 October 2023. Participating in the panel discussion of High-Level Dialogue with Ministers, the ECO Secretary General Ambassador Khusrav Noziri briefed the panel about ECO’s initiatives in the tourism sector.
8. On 22 September 2023, the ECO and ASEAN adopted the Framework of Cooperation (FOC) between the two Organizations. Tourism is envisaged as one of the priority areas of collaboration in this document.
9. The Secretariat is also reviving collaboration with the UNIDO, which was initiated through a Working Arrangement signed between the ECO Secretariat and UNIDO.
10. **Expected outcomes for 2024 and Secretariat’s recommendations**

1. The Council may recommend the Member States and the Secretariat to actively participate in the international conferences and meetings with the aim of introducing the tourism potentials of the ECO Region and also to increase the role of ECO in the international community.
2. The Council may recommend the Secretariat to expand its cooperation with the relevant international and regional organizations in the tourism sector.
3. The Council may request the Secretariat to cooperate with UNESCO closely in order to promote and enhance the image of the region globally.
4. The Council may request the ECO Member States to promote ECO- World Heritage Sites in the region in close cooperation with UNESCO and UNWTO. The outcomes of promoting this site include not only economic benefits for the local community but also educational and social benefits for visitors. By immersing themselves in a different way of life, visitors can broaden their horizons and gain a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things. They can also support local businesses and initiatives that aim to improve the quality of life for everyone involved.

**Area Conclusion**

1. Close cooperation with regional/international organizations is essential for the sustainable development of any organization. The ECO is no exception and in the tourism sector getting technical and financial support from other organizations has a vital role.

# SECTION IV

## ANNEXES

## Annex-I

### PROJECTS

1. Directorate of Tourism submits the following projects for kind consideration of the 34th RPC:

* **Ongoing projects**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| :**Tourism** | **1. Project Category/Code:** |
| **i. ECO Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development** | **2. Project Title** |
| **T/PoA/SSP/2019** | **Project Code:** |
| The main goal of the project is to draw up a Roadmap to meet strategic objective (s) set out under the tourism section of the ECO Vision 2025. It should be in line with the ECO Principles for Sustainable Tourism Development and contribute towards sustainable socio-economic development of the ECO countries focusing on the realization of natural and cultural tourism resources of the region as well as the vast unexploited relevant potential of the Member States. | **3. Project Objectives** |
| US$10,000 | **4. Project Budget (US$)** |
| **ECO Secretariat in collaboration with** **IDB** | **5. Project Funding Source** |
| **ECO Secretariat** | **6. Project Coordinator** |
| **ECO Secretariat (Coordinating Agency)**  **UNIDO (Technical Assistance)**  **UNWTO (Technical Assistance)**  **IDB (Financial Assistance)** | **7.International/Regional Partner** |
| **6 Months** | **8. Duration of Project** |
| **2022** | **9. Project Starting Time** |
| * The Project has been approved by the decision making bodies of the ECO (MM on Tourism & COM). * Draft ToR of the Project has been prepared by the Tourism Directorate of the Secretariat. | **10. Project Progress** |
| **11. Background:**  In the 13th ECO Summit in the first quarter of 2017 all ECO Member States welcomed the ECO Vision 2025 and had agreed to emphasize the need to augment cooperation in the area of tourism as identified in the Vision.  The Strategic objective of the Vision on Tourism is to establish a peaceful and green tourism destination with diverse products and high quality services in the region.  The composite details of this project were considered and approved by the 5th High Level Expert Group Meeting (HLWGM) on Tourism and supported by the 3rd Ministerial Meeting on Tourism in Khujand in 2019. Henceforth, the project concept was as well considered at the level of ECO’s Council of Ministers (COM) where it was endorsed as part of a document set by the 24th COM on 8-9 November 2019 in Antalya (Turkey). The budgetary aspects of the project were also approved in due time by the 30th Regional Planning Council Meeting on 11-14 January 2020 in Tehran (Iran), upon which act the project has become part of ECO’s Work Program 2020. The latter Program is currently being implemented. The amount of US$10,000 has been endorsed by CPR to prepare the feasibility study of the project.  The Member States’ strategic approach in the tourism sector has been to work together on issues that are of common concern to them in order to strengthen the contribution that tourism can make to their socioeconomic development, while protecting the valuable natural and cultural heritage on which the tourism sector depends. In recognition of the important contribution that tourism could make toward socio economic development, especially poverty reduction and conservation of natural and cultural heritage during the preparation of the ECO Vision 2025 tourism was selected as one of the main cooperation areas.  Geographical richness, good neighborly relations and a peaceful environment are the natural features of the region on which a solid foundation for sustainable cooperation in tourism can be built step by step. Cultural commonalities and numerous historical and overlapping heritages offer the region enormous potential for bringing together ordinary people in the member states who are passionate about peace and prosperity.  The ECO region, with an area of more than 8 million square kilometers stretching from Central to South and Southwest Asia, and a population of more than 500 million, is known for its natural beauty as well as for the diversity of its historical and cultural heritage. In this respect, the region has significant potential to become one of the world's major tourist destinations. The region is one of the richest in the world in terms of historical and cultural heritage, reminiscent of the ancient Silk Road.  The Project should also consider the increase of the share of the tourism sector in national and regional GDP and economic growth of Member States, taking into account the conservation of the region's cultural and environmental heritage. Moreover, this would further contribute to income-generation, poverty eradication, sustainable use of natural resources, protection of vulnerable groups enhancing life standards of indigenous as well as local communities within the ECO tourism destination.  It should also support the regional tourism industry and facilitate investment in the tourism sector creating a chain of ECO Tourism destinations. This would accelerate the facilitation of tourism activities across the land borders and along the economic corridors, expanding community-based tourism approach to attract locals’ participation in tourism-related supply and value chains.  The project would also address the need for raising the skills of the tourism public sector at all levels, improving service and hygiene standards among staff in small to medium hospitality enterprises in the ECO tourism destination and enhancing locally generated private sector participation in small and medium tourism enterprise investment and operation.   1. Harmonization of National Tourism Action Plan of Member States and increasing synergy in the region on tourism development; 2. Follow up the strategic objective of the Vision on tourism and preparation of a roadmap for implementation its annual program (s); 3. Developing a framework and guidelines for sustainable tourism development at ECO tourism destinations; 4. Increasing capability and quality of regional tourism industry as well as regional tourism institutions, local communities and government institutions to be able to enhance share of this sector on regional GDP and capability to compete with outside tourism industry; 5. Providing coordination mechanisms in all tourism sectors including tour operators, accommodation sector and hotels, airlines, etc.; 6. Preparation the ground for fundraising and credit facilitation for the implementation of the Action Plan. | |
| **12. Necessary Actions and Assistance Needed:**   1. A feasibility study of the process of Tourism Policies integration in the region. 2. Establishing a network of Tourism potentials and attractions in ECO region. 3. Assessment of current statuses of the traditional tourisms’ development in the ten ECO Member States, and also, of their legal frameworks set for standardization/accreditation/tourism monitoring mechanisms to be under the ECO framework. 4. Preparing ECO Tourism compendium. 5. Preparing ECO tourism databank. 6. Assessment of capacities of local communities and private sector tourism entities of ECO countries to be potentially involved in regional tourism development under the ECO framework. 7. Holding the Meetings which are related to key areas of Tourism by the Member States. | |
| **13. Expected Outcomes of the Project:**   * Action Plan for ECO regional sustainable tourism development; * Introduction of Priority projects at ECO regional level. | |
| **14. Current status:**   1. Draft ECO Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development was prepared by the Secretariat on the basis of ECO Vision 2025 and circulated for comments and proposals among the Member States via note verbale on April 17, 2022. So far response has been received from the Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Azerbaijan and Pakistan. 2. The Secretariat circulated reminders NV No: T/Plan of Action/2022/1459 dated 24/10/2022, NV No:T/Plan of Action/2023/627 dated 15/05/2023 and is still awaiting the response from the rest of the Member States to take further action. 3. The proposals and views of the esteemed Member States would be incorporated in the proposed draft ECO Regional Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development for further enrichment through a consultancy project to develop a more comprehensive Action Plan with the contributions and inputs of the Member States. | |

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| **Tourism** | **1.Project Category/Code:** |
| **ECO Tourism Routes and Packages** | **2. Project Title** |
| **T/Routes/SPP-2019** | **Project Code:** |
| The Main goal is to create an ECO Tourism Package that would be useful for increasing the number of tourists and tourism revenues. The final outputs of the Project are as follows:   * Achieving a high level of professionalism and developing sustainability in ECO Tourism industry; * Identification of the best cities of ECO countries in Cultural/ Historical, Scientific, Industrial/Business, Nature-Based, Religious, Health and Mass Tourism separately; * Improving the relation of industrial and scientific bodies of the Member States such as factories, universities, science and technology parks and study centers in order to attracting the industrial/ scientific tourists from inside or outside of ECO countries; * Optimizing use of existing resources and capacities in order to have less costly and high quality trips in the ECO region; * Increasing number of tourists and the amount of tourism revenues; * Promoting ECO Region as one of the best tourism destinations. | **3. Project Objectives** |
| Subject to proposed TOR | **4. Project Budget (US$)** |
| **ECO Secretariat, UNWTO or any other Regional or International Organizations may be explored for full or partial financing of the project.** | **5. Project Funding Source** |
| **ECO Secretariat** | **6. Project Coordinator** |
| ECO Secretariat (Coordinating Agency)  UNWTO or any other Regional or International Organizations (Technical Assistance)  National agencies/associations of (private) tourism companies/operators/etc. | **7.International/Regional Partner** |
| **8 months** | **8. Duration of Project** |
| **2022** | **9. Project Starting Time** |
|  | **10. Project Progress** |
| **11**. **Background**:  The Strategic Objective which was defined for the Tourism sector in ECO Vision 2025 is establishing a peaceful and green tourism destination with diverse products and high quality Services in the region. One of the Expected Outcomes of the Tourism sector in ECO Vision 2025 is strengthening Private sector and local community involvement in the tourism activities.  The unfamiliar situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid spread of the coronavirus around the world has had a massive impact on many sectors of the global economy, of which tourism is one of the most affected. According to an analysis by UNWTO, all destinations worldwide have implemented travel restrictions in response to COVID-19, which is unprecedented. This further highlights the important role of small projects.  Before COVID-19 Pandemic, there was another similar project in the ECO Tourism sector called “ECO Tours Operators Network” which was approved by the 3rd ECO Ministerial Meeting of Tourism in Khujand, Tajikistan in October, 2019 as well as the 30th ECO Regional Planning Council (RPC) on January, 2020. Considering the above said main goal on tourism and in order to achieve the best results during the coronavirus crisis, the ECO Secretariat decided to review previous projects and define small-sized Projects to adapt them to the current situation. ECO Tourism Routes and Packages project with the aim of introducing main Tourism routes including Cultural/ Historical, Scientific, Industrial/Business, Nature-Based, Religious, Health and Mass Tourism among the ECO countries, is going to focus on different areas of tourism especially on Industrial and Scientific tourism which its desired destination includes industrial sites peculiar to a particular location. The most obvious industrial tourism destinations are cities and regions with a solid industrial base. | |
| **12. Necessary Actions and Assistance Needed:**   1. Implementation of the part of ECO Vision 2025 in Tourism sector with respect to strengthening Private sector and local community involvement in the tourism activities; 2. Preparing the required ToR for recruiting an international consultancy team by the Secretariat; 3. Allocation of ECO financial contribution for recruitment of consultant by CPR or COM based on recruitment policy and procedures of ECO; 4. Encourage relevant international organizations to assist ECO Secretariat financially and technically; 5. Gathering the information from Member States about the cities which are famous for having tourist attractions, infrastructures and facilities related to Cultural/ Historical, Scientific, Industrial/Business, Nature-Based, Religious, Health and Mass Tourism and other required information; 6. Sharing data and knowledge among the Member States regarding Tourism related industries. | |
| **13. Expected Outcomes of the Project:**   * Establishing the Network of Tourism related industries of ECO countries; * Providing ECO Tourism Routes and Packages in Cultural/ Historical, Scientific, Industrial/Business, Nature-Based, Religious, Health and Mass Tourism by the Network of ECO Tourism related industries; * Introducing at least 3 main Cultural/ Historical, Nature-Based Tourism Routes among the ECO countries; * Providing ECO Health Tourism Packages with using the top ECO Medical Tourism Destinations which have health facilities such as equipped hospitals, mineral groundwater resources, clean weather, etc. * Providing ECO Industrial/ Scientific Tourism Routes with passing at least 3 main Industrial cities of the ECO countries with high level of development and progress in the special part of industry or science. | |
| **14. Current status:**  The issue of development of the joint tour packages was discussed in the ECO Tour Operators’ Network meetings. The Secretariat is now gathering proposals of tour operators concerning their tour packages in order to initiate joint tour packages for ECO region. | |

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| **Tourism**  **T/Website/SSP/2021** | **1. Project Category/Code:** |
| **Development of ECO Tourism Website** | **2. Project Title** |
| The Main goal is to design a user-friendly specialized ECO Tourism website as a regional tool for sharing and consolidating tourism-related information and generating business and investment opportunities for the private sector in ECO Member States for easy access to information on tourism offerings, programmes and events in ECO Member States and promotion of the region.  The portal will complement the national tourism websites by allowing a more systematic process for users to collect and view the information they are looking for.  The website will be designed for use by the tourists and the tourism professionals and agencies. The part used by the tourism professionals and agencies will be a tool for linking regional partners and promoting information sharing, including on tourism projects, business opportunities, investment initiatives, investment related information, tourism data and statistics, events, and educational and training resources. The sections of the portal targeting potential and actual travelers will focus on providing information about the countries, regions, and tourism attractions, whilst promoting the services of private sector tourism providers in the region. | **3. Project Objectives** |
| **Subject to proposed TOR** | **4. Project Budget (US$)** |
| **ECO Secretariat, or any other Regional or International Organizations may be explored for full or partial financing of the project.** | **5. Project Funding Source** |
| **ECO Secretariat** | **6. Project Coordinator** |
| **UNWTO or any other Regional or International Organizations** | **7.International/Regional Partner** |
| **10 months** | **8. Duration of Project** |
| **2022** | **9. Project Starting Time** |
| **-** | **10. Project Progress** |
| **11.** **Background:**  The technological innovations and the digitalization of the tourism sector have introduced new business models for tourism suppliers, as well as improved and connected operations along global tourism value chains. It has transformed the expectations and behaviors of consumers, opening up new and highly creative ways of delivering tourism services to enhance the visitor experience. As the vast majority of tourists internationally now use the Internet as their primary means of research, marketing and promotion through various Internet platforms has become a cost-effective and convenient option for reaching consumers and promoting tourism offerings and destinations.  The ECO region still exhibits a huge unused potential in integration of digital technologies into the sector. With tourists increasingly using digital technologies to search, plan and book travel, it is essential that ECO Member States engage meaningfully to incorporate advanced digital technologies and prioritize accelerating the move to a more seamless and contactless end-to-end travel and tourism experience through new technologies to compete favorably with best-in-class tourist destinations around the world.  Integration of advanced commonly preferred digital technologies into the regional tourism activities and portals has the potential to facilitate competitiveness and global reach of the ECO region and promotion of its diverse tourism offerings. As the sector fast tracks this transition globally, the ECO region may enhance the presence and initiatives of the regional tourism sector in digital platforms to expand their market reach and sharpen their competitive edge through a common virtual platform for marketing and promotion of regional tourism destinations, natural, historical and cultural assets and tourism activities for enhancing marketing, promotion of the region in the international arena.  A user-friendly website is essential to effectively position the ECO region globally, by marketing and promoting the ECO region’s assets extensively in the areas of history, nature, religion, archaeology, living culture, cuisine and hospitality. The website can further be availed to generate business and investment opportunities for the private sector. | |
| **12. Necessary Actions and Assistance Needed:**   1. Design of ECO Tourism Website as specified in the TOR; 2. Design one part for travelers including data for each MSs Tourism attractions and means to promote the private sector tourism agencies’ initiatives including tour packages, and promotions. A section could be added to incorporate the comments and reviews of the travelers along with links to social media and blogs; 3. Upload all the required data on specialized tourism segments in each Member State, and tourism attractions in collaboration with the Member States and links to national tourism websites, museums and any other tourism resources. 4. Design one part of the website for tourism professionals and tour agencies including data for country wise and regional tourism statistics, tourism investment related information, events, fairs, forums, HRD Training activities 5. Make the Website operational | |
| **13. Expected Outcomes of the Project:**   1. Preparation of a dynamic and interactive user-friendly ECO Tourism Website that is completely operational | |
| **14. Current status:**  After the 32nd RPC the Directorate got in touch with some IT companies to initiate the preparations of the website. As the Secretariat and the consultants require the relevant inputs from the Member States, the Tourism Directorate circulated a note verbale asking the Member States to provide the Secretariat information to be displayed on the Website.  - Information on tourism industry of country (popular tourism destinations, attractions, travel agencies, travel regulations, visa application process, hotel accommodation and booking facilities, food and drinks, public transport, maps and guides and etc.);  - Calendar of international and regional, as well as national tourism events;  - Tourism promotion HD videos and images;  - Information on tourism investment incentives;  - links to the Official Tourism Websites.  At the first stage all the gathered data is hosted on the Tourism Section of the ECO official website which is accessible at [www.eco.int/tourism](http://www.eco.int/tourism). It will save the Secretariat the cost of consultant and maintenance. The IT section of the Secretariat will handle the technical process.  In the second stage of the project, and after consultancy with some web designers and evaluating the proposals a separate website dedicated to regional tourism website will be launched and activated with a more interactive design for travelers and tourism professionals. | |

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## Annex-II

### PROPOSALS

111. Directorate of Tourism submits the following updated proposal for kind consideration of the 34th RPC:

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| **Concept Note** | |
| **ECO Regional Rail PASS Initiative** | **1. Proposed Title** |
| **2. Background on the issue and Justification:**  Transport connectivity is closely linked with the development of Tourism and is a key contributor to the overall appeal of a destination, which can lead to increased demand and sustained tourism performance. Therefore, accessibility of the ECO region is the primary requirement for promoting tourism to and within the region. The development of the tourism industry throughout the region needs intra-regional and international connectivity through all modes of transportation in order to ensure comfortable, cheaper, accessible and secure travel in the ECO Region. There is an immediate need for cooperation in the ECO region to make travel into and within the ECO region easier, cost effective and more efficient that will boost tourism flow within and to the region.  Development of easy and cost-effective air, land and rail connectivity among all the ECO Member States will boost tourism flow within and to the region. In this context, railway transport occupies a core position in ECO’s overall transport sector. While Railway transport connectivity across the borders has missing links, the ECO Member States are working on developing cost-effective intra-regional rail transport corridors for enhancement of regional mobility.  The Tourism Directorate has studied the cross border rail connections and countrywide railway transport systems and it was observed that most ECO Member states have established domestic railway transportation systems in different capacities and some countries even had established bilateral cross-border rail transport services. While there is a definite need to further improve the existing capacities of railway connections across all the borders in the region, even with the existing established routes and train capacities, there is a potential for increasing cooperation among the railways of the ECO Member States to enhance connectedness of the region and facilitate tourism. To enhance domestic, intra-regional and international tourism as a cost-friendly travel alternative, the Tourism Directorate has prepared the proposal on ECO Rail PASS initiative. | |
| **3. Overall Objective:**  The strategic objective of this initiative is to empower the local people and tourism businesses through a railway travel arrangement that will facilitate regional mobility and enhance tourism. | |
| **4. Proposal:**  To meet the tourism enhancement objectives, the Secretariat proposes to initiate ECO Rail PASS arrangement in the ECO region. The initiative will allow rail passengers travelling in ECO Member States’ regional railways to buy a pass ticket for different options that will permit tourists travel as much as they want on participating ECO train networks for a set amount of travel days. The initiative has several benefits to the region through enhancing mobility and regional cross-border travel. It affords the opportunity to serve as an economical travel option within the ECO region as a good means to provide tourism accessibility to all groups of people. The pass will be available in two options for ECO and non-ECO travelers. The pass may be designed in different options including regional pass, one country pass or two countries pass. The pass can also be designed to involve domestic tourists inside the countries with special promotions for residents of the country. Special attention could be given for resident passes of the same country to prevent misuse. It is worth noting that while the initiative could be operational in all willing Member States at the outset, it could also be initially operationalized as a pilot among some willing Member States and could be extended to others later. | |
| * Transport Ministries of ECO Member States, * Tourism Ministries of ECO Member States, * Railway Authorities of ECO Member States, * Private Tourism Stakeholders including tourism associations, tour agencies and tour operators, * Travelers from ECO and non-ECO Member States, * Local businesses and local people in the ECO Member States including tourism businesses that include mainly hotel and restaurant owners. | **5.Potential stakeholders:** |
| **6. Required Activities to be undertaken to launch the initiative:**   * Sign a regional cooperation Agreement on facilitating the initiative and in each MS * Planning and coordination of available functional passenger train links in the region * Fares determination   The ECO Regional Rail Pass could be available as a one-country pass or regional pass open to ECO and Non-ECO citizens in different fares and different set of timings. It could also be available in four age-based categories. Up to two children aged 4 to 11 may travel free of charge when accompanied by a full-fare adult:   1. Child: under age 12 2. Youth: ages 12 to 27 3. Senior: over age 60  * Coordination of local transportation and bus services for easy access to tourism destinations and attractions in each MS; * Marketing and promotion; * Design of brochures of the ECO Rail Pass Initiative (A regional competition could be held for its design); * Preparation of informative booklets and guide books about the Eco Rail Pass initiative; * Preparation of brochures for tourism destinations accessible via the rail route and * Preparation of alternative tour packages via railway along the rail routes in collaboration with the local tourism agencies and tour operators | |
| **7. Potential opportunities and benefits to the region:**  The impact of transport connectivity on regional development is known to be difficult to verify empirically, yet there seems to be clear positive correlation between transport connectivity endowment and regional growth. The envisioned advantages, opportunities and benefits of the initiative both for the travelers and the Member States are outlined as below:   1. No financial implications for the Member States. It can be collectively coordinated among the Railway Authorities of the Member States willing to participate through administrative arrangements 2. for interested travelers, as a continuity to Inter rail and EU rail initiatives for European countries, will provide an access to ECO Member States stretching up to central Asia 3. enhance regional and international travel and tourism 4. improve regional mobility and regional connectivity 5. enhance domestic tourism 6. stimulate economic development 7. enhance global visibility of the ECO region 8. enhance global visibility 9. enhance promotion of Silk Road tourism destinations along the rail routes 10. enhancing tourism accessibility among less privileged groups and enabling all people to participate in and enjoy tourism experiences will provide an alternative economic travel option to economically disadvantaged segments of the society i.e. youth, families with low economic income and older age groups 11. links and tour packages via road transport could be developed for tourism destinations that are not reachable via rail system 12. positive impacts on local businesses and local communities 13. generate employment 14. generate investment | |
| **8. Risks**  The risks that surround the development of these undertakings include:   1. All the ECO Member States may not be interested in the initiative and it may cause disconnection among the rail roads in the borders, 2. Potential security problems in the borders, 3. Potential visa issues, 4. Missing railway stations close to the tourism destinations, 5. Lack of local transportation for the travelers to reach the tourism destinations, 6. Lack of facilities in the tourism destinations. | |
| **9. Assumptions:**  Assumptions related to the initiative include:   1. The local communities and local businesses will have an interest in this arrangement due to enhanced travel and mobility directed towards various local tourism destinations via railways, 2. The social-economic benefits of the arrangement for low budget travelers will allow for acceptability of the initiative among the tourists as an alternative budget friendly tourism option, 3. The practicality of the initiative will allow smooth implementation initially among the interested Member States with the collaboration of available train networks, 4. The Missing links could be facilitated through road or air transport for interested travelers, 5. The global accessibility of the initiative will allow easy marketing and promotion of the ECO regional tourism potential, 6. The initiative could be initiated among the interested Member States, 7. The local tourism businesses can facilitate and attract more travelers through alternative joint tour package arrangements for tourism destinations. | |
| **Current status:**  The ECO Regional Rail PASS initiative was shared with the Member States for their comments about its feasibility in their countries in collaboration with their National Railway Authorities. The 33rd RPC also requested the Member States to send their nominations for the ECO Regional Pass Working Group.  The nominations for the Working Group were requested via Notes Verbales No: T/ECO Regional Rail Pass/2023/346 on 13/03/2023 and No: T/ECO Regional Rail Pass/2023 /737 on 4/6/2023. Besides Türkiye’s nominations received in 2022 Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan shared their nominations in 2023. | |

## Annex-III

### Draft Calendar of Events/Meetings for 2024

*(Subject to revision and approval by the 34th RPC)*

### E. SECTOR: TOURISM

#### ECO Events

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **No.** | **Event/Activity** | **Venue** | **Date/Status** |
|  | 6th ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism | TBD | 2024-2025 |
|  | 8th High Level Experts Group (HLEG) on Tourism Meeting | TBD | 2024-2025 |
|  | Unveiling Ceremony for Shakhrisabz as ECO Tourism Capital for 2023 and related events | Uzbekistan | May-onward 2024 |
|  | The 4th Experts Group Meeting on Ecotourism | Nicosia | 2024 |
|  | 1st ECO Tourism Investment and Business Forum | Pakistan | 2024 |
|  | ECO Tour operators Forum | Azerbaijan | 2024 |
|  | ECO Workshop/Seminar on new procedures and achievements of educational technologies for ecotourism | TBD | 2024 |
|  | ECO High Level Expert Meeting on Visa Facilitation | TBD | 2024 |
|  | Following-up meetings of the ECO Tour Operators’ Network | TBD | 2024 |
|  | 6th International ECO - Silk Road Food Festival | TBD | 2024 |
|  | 3rd Meeting of the ECO Tourism and Transport Task Force | TBD | 2024 |
|  | 5th Meeting of the Working Group on Tourism Standardization | ECO Secretariat (virtual) | 2024 |
|  | 2nd Meeting of the Monitoring Committee for the Implementation of the 'Road Map on Facilitating Accelerated Recovery, Safe and Sustainable Development of Tourism after "COVID-19" in the ECO region’ | ECO Secretariat (virtual) | 2024 |
|  | 1st Meeting of the ECO Silk Road Task Force | TBD | 2024 |
|  | 1st ECO International Tourism Market Fair | TBD | 2024 |
|  | 3rd Confobition (conference + exhibition) on Health Tourism | TBD | 2024 |
|  | 1st Meeting of the Working Group for investigating and identifying the potential and opportunities for diversification of intra-regional tourism | TBD | 2024 |

#### Non-ECO Events\*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **No.** | **Event/Activity** | **Venue** | **Date** |
|  | 17th Tehran International Tourism and Handicraft Exhibition | Tehran,  Iran | 12-15 February  2024 |
|  | East Mediterranean International Tourism and Travel Exhibition 2024 | Istanbul,  Türkiye | 6-9 February  2024 |
|  | ITB Berlin (Internationale Tourismus-Börse Berlin)\* | Berlin, Germany | 5-7 March 2024 |
|  | 10th Azerbaijan International Travel and Tourism Fair | Baku, Azerbaijan | 3 - 5 April 2024 |
|  | Kazakhstan International Exhibition "Tourism & Travel" | Astana,  Kazakhstan | 24-26 April 2024 |
|  | 5th World Nomad Games | Astana,  Kazakhstan | September  2024 |

\* Subject to availability of the financial resources of the ECO Secretariat.

\*ITB takes place at the Berlin Expo Center City exhibition center. With more than 10,000 exhibitors, ITB is the largest convention in the travel industry. The convention presents informational stands on countries, destinations, hotels and tourism associations as well as on specialist suppliers, booking systems and transport operators. ITB is a platform for B2B travel industry leaders to meet and network.

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