



**Draft Report of the 7th Meeting of the
Working Group on Tourism Standardization
(Virtual)**

**September 17, 2025
ECO Secretariat – Tehran**

DRAFT REPORT

The 7th Meeting of the ECO Working Group on Tourism Standardization (WGTS) was held on September 17, 2025 under the chairmanship of the ECO Secretariat in virtual mode. The representatives from Tourism Ministries/Authorities of the, Islamic Republic of Iran Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Islamic Republic of Pakistan and Republic of Türkiye, along with the representatives of the ECO Secretariat participated in the said meeting. The list of the participants is attached at **Annex-I**.

Agenda Item No. 1

Inauguration of the Meeting

2. Mr. Hasan Tufan, Programme Officer in charge of the Tourism Directorate at the Secretariat welcomed the esteemed representatives from the national tourism authorities of the ECO Member States and outlined the primary objective of the Working Group on Tourism Standardization namely, to enhance standardization efforts within the tourism sector across the ECO region. Referring to the outcomes of the successful 6th Ministerial Meeting on Tourism held in Erzurum, he recalled that one of the key mandates was the finalization and adoption of the “ECO Sustainable Tourism – Common Criteria for Tourism Accommodation Facilities”. This document is intended to serve as a voluntary, incentive-based framework that supports sustainability in tourism, while allowing for alignment with national contexts and without introducing any binding obligations. Mr. Tufan further proposed the launch of a pilot implementation phase following the document’s adoption, aimed at collecting field-level feedback to improve its practical applicability. The full text of his statement is attached at **Annex-II**.

Agenda Item No. 2

Election of the Chairman

3. With the consent of the delegations of the Member States, it was agreed that the meeting would be chaired by Mr. Hasan Tufan from the ECO Secretariat.

Agenda Item No. 3

Adoption of the Agenda

4. The Meeting unanimously adopted its agenda without any amendment. It is attached at **Annex-III**.

Agenda Item No. 4

Appointment of the Drafting Committee

5. As agreed by all participants from Member States, the ECO Secretariat was assigned to prepare and circulate the draft Report of the Meeting.

Agenda Item No. 5

Finalizing the “ECO Sustainable Tourism - Common Criteria for Tourism Accommodation Facilities”

6. Under this agenda item, the Chair provided an overview of the draft document titled "ECO Sustainable Tourism – Common Criteria for Tourism Accommodation Facilities," noting that the first four sections had already been largely endorsed by the Member States during the 8th Meeting of the High-Level Expert Group on Tourism preceded by the 6th Ministerial Meeting on Tourism held in Erzurum. He indicated that the primary focus of the

current discussion would be Section 5, which outlines the implementation modalities, including awarding mechanisms. The Chair proposed reconsidering the use of the term “certification”, suggesting that alternative terminology be explored to better reflect the voluntary and non-binding nature of the initiative. Furthermore, he emphasized the importance of defining clear eligibility criteria, recommending that only accommodation facilities with a minimum of 10 rooms or 25 beds be considered for participation, in line with prevailing national regulations and international best practices. Participants were encouraged to share their views and contribute to the refinement of this section. The Chair clarified that the current draft closely mirrors the earlier version, with only minor revisions in terminology. He also informed the participants that the proposed fee structure had been modified: instead of issuing certificates, an annual plaque could be awarded to recognized entities. The revenue generated through this mechanism would be used to support tourism-related initiatives of the ECO Secretariat. In conclusion, the Chair underlined that the introduction of a nominal fee could serve as both a symbolic commitment and an incentive for compliance with submitted action plans. He then invited the participants to offer their feedback and suggestions on the proposed implementation framework.

7. Ms. Vildan Şenteke, Group Manager for Sustainability and Competitiveness at Türkiye’s Tourism Promotion and Development Agency (TGA), asked the possibility of presenting national experience and she was later invited by the Council to deliver a presentation on Türkiye’s sustainable tourism initiatives. She highlighted the country’s strong commitment to sustainability through a series of strategic initiatives, most notably the Sustainable Tourism Program, which evolved from the Safe Tourism Certification Program launched during the COVID-19 pandemic to support the safe reopening of the tourism sector. Developed in close collaboration with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), the National Sustainable Tourism Program offers a structured certification system for accommodation facilities, based on 42 sustainability criteria evaluated across three progressive stages. By the end of 2025, all licensed accommodation facilities will be certified against Stage-2 criteria under this program. She further informed the participants that TGA is expanding its sustainability framework by developing standards for the food and beverage sector and conducting GSTC destination assessments aimed at improving sustainability at the destination level. These efforts have garnered international recognition, with various cultural institutions and villages in Türkiye being honored for their contributions to responsible tourism. The detailed presentation is enclosed as **Annex-IV**.

8. The Chair expressed gratitude to Ms. Şenteke for the comprehensive presentation and acknowledged Türkiye as a leading example in the region for sustainable tourism certification. The Chair further elaborated that while the ECO Secretariat had initially considered establishing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the GSTC, the WGTS ultimately resolved to develop its own Common Criteria document, designed to align closely with the GSTC Sustainable Tourism Criteria, much like the structured model adopted by Türkiye. The Chair invited the participants to share their views and comments on the proposed Common Criteria, to further refine the document.

9. Ms. Banu Bedel, representing the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Türkiye, shared the Ministry’s long-standing experience in sustainable tourism certification, emphasizing that their engagement in this field dates back to the 1990s. She noted that the

Ministry initially developed an EU-Eco-label-based certification scheme in 2008, which later evolved into an internationally recognized standard. This was subsequently followed by the adoption and implementation of a GSTC-based Sustainable Tourism Program. While acknowledging the potential value of any new ECO initiative in the field, Ms. Bedel cautioned against the proliferation of overlapping standards, which could risk diluting their collective credibility. She emphasized that the rationale for developing an additional regional document should be clearly justified, especially in view of the diverse challenges faced by ECO Member States. In conclusion, she stressed the importance of enhanced intergovernmental collaboration, suggesting that a shared framework or common denominator could help bridge existing gaps in knowledge and experience, and contribute more meaningfully to advancing sustainable tourism practices across the region.

10. The Chair thanked Ms. Bedel for her valuable contributions and reaffirmed the importance of aligning the Common Criteria with the operational modalities of the ECO Secretariat and the specific national contexts of Member States. He recalled that this marked the 7th Meeting of the WGTS, which has benefited from substantial input from Member States, including the submission of national tourism standardization documents from Iran, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and the Kyrgyz Republic — all of which have pursued certification schemes in sustainable and green tourism. He explained that the Working Group is not only responsible for drafting the criteria but is also envisioned to act as a technical advisory body in the assessment of applications from accommodation facilities seeking recognition. As part of the pilot phase, the Secretariat plans to provide training on sustainability practices, drawing on the best practices and expertise of Member States. He reiterated that the objective of the initiative is to harmonize these national efforts into a high-level, voluntary regional framework, with minimal and adaptable requirements to ensure inclusivity and relevance.

11. Furthermore, Mr. Tufan underscored that the WGTS would serve in an advisory capacity and does not possess a binding mandate. Upon finalization, the draft Common Criteria document will be submitted for consideration through ECO's formal decision-making bodies, notably the Council of Permanent Representatives (CPR) and the Council of Ministers (COM). He also noted that consultations would be made with the Legal Department of the Secretariat to ensure the document's procedural conformity and effective implementation. The Chair further informed participants that during the 8th Meeting of the High-Level Expert Group on Tourism requested the development of a template for a Sustainable Management System and accompanying Action Plan, to be submitted by applicant accommodation facilities.

12. Following extensive deliberations and the incorporation of amendments proposed by participating delegates, the Meeting concurred both the template and the implementation section of the draft document. These revisions, along with the Draft Report, will be circulated among the ECO Member States for their review. Delegates were invited to submit any additional feedback or proposals via email or official communication channels. Upon receipt of final comments, the Secretariat will proceed with the preparation of the revised document for formal adoption by the Member States through the relevant ECO mechanisms, including the Council of Permanent Representatives (CPR) or the Ministerial Meeting, in accordance with a two-week silence procedure. The updated version of the draft document is attached herewith as **Annex-V.**

Agenda Item No. 6

Any Other Business

13. No other issues raised under this agenda item.

Agenda Item No. 7

Date and Venue of the Next Meeting

14. It was decided that the next meeting will be held in the beginning of next year and Secretariat will announce the exact date of the next meeting which will be communicated among the ECO Member States through official channels.

Agenda Item No. 8

Adoption of the Report

15. The meeting tasked the Secretariat to draft the report along with the annexure to be circulated amongst the Member States.

Agenda Item No. 9

Vote of Thanks and Closure

16. The Chair concluded the meeting by expressing his sincere appreciation to all participants for their valuable inputs, views, and suggestions regarding the proposed standardization document. He highlighted the constructive spirit of cooperation demonstrated throughout the discussions. In closing, the Chair reminded delegates of the upcoming International Tourism Forum, to be held on 25-26 September 2025 in Aktau, hosted by the Ministry of Tourism and Sports of the Republic of Kazakhstan with a special theme of tourism investment opportunities within the ECO region. The Chair expressed his anticipation of meeting many participants in Aktau and welcomed continued engagement at future ECO events.
