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**UNWTO**  
World Tourism Organization



**BEST  
TOURISM  
VILLAGES**  
by UNWTO

# TOURISM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT: UNDERSTANDING CHALLENGES ON THE GROUND

Lessons learned from the Best  
Tourism Villages by UNWTO initiative



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LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE BEST TOURISM  
VILLAGES BY UNWTO INITIATIVE



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The initiative was launched in 2021 and is part of the UNWTO Tourism for Rural Development Programme within the Market Intelligence and Competitiveness Department.

This publication was prepared by Mahmoud Atiya, Juan Carlos Izurieta and Maulita Sari Hani, under the coordination of Antonio López de Ávila, Coordinator, Tourism for Rural Development Programme in the Market Intelligence and Competitiveness Department, and Sandra Carvão, Director, Market Intelligence and Competitiveness Department. The report was revised by Juliana Contreras, UNWTO Publications section, and had the support of Patricia Carmona, Programme Officer, and Ana Martín, Administrative Services Associate, managing the Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO.

UNWTO wishes to express its special appreciation to all those villages that submitted their candidacies to the Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO Initiative. These are the basis on which the present publication was built, with the aim to disseminate the valuable lessons learned on the ground.

For more information about rural tourism visit:  
<https://www.unwto.org/rural-tourism>

For more information about the Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO Initiative visit:  
<https://www.unwto.org/tourism-villages/en/villages/>.

# FOREWORD

**BY MR. ZURAB POLOLIKASHVILI  
SECRETARY-GENERAL,  
WORLD TOURISM ORGANIZATION (UNWTO)**



Rural communities are home to some of the world's most vulnerable populations. An estimated 83% of people living in poverty reside in rural areas, and they are also less likely to enjoy the social or economic opportunities of those living in cities. At the same time, however, rural areas also boast a major share of the world's invaluable cultural and natural heritage, creating important opportunities for the development of tourism.

As the world becomes increasingly urban, tourism can be an effective means of providing socioeconomic opportunities for rural communities, increasing the attractiveness and vitality of rural areas, mitigating demographic challenges, reducing migration, and promoting a range of local resources and traditions while upholding the essence of rural life. It can celebrate a territory's values – often the essence of a travel experience – in an active way to preserve and value both tangible and intangible heritage and complement the existing economic activities of these territories.

In 2020, UNWTO created the Tourism for Rural Development Programme to help rural territories make sustainable tourism a driver for development and well-being. Through initiatives such as the Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO, we seek to recognize and raise awareness of tourism's role in the rural agenda, providing opportunities for rural communities to grow and develop.

This report is the result of an analysis of the candidacies received for the Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO Initiative in 2021 and 2022.

It represents the voice from the ground, translating the vision and concerns of rural destinations across all regions. It recognizes destinations which face many limitations, but which have also creatively used the benefits offered by tourism to overcome them, and those which have embarked on novel approaches to reduce inequalities, create new opportunities and preserve their natural and cultural heritage.

Building on the *UNWTO Recommendations on Tourism and Rural Development – A Guide to Making Tourism an Effective Tool for Rural Development* and the *AIUla Framework for Inclusive Community Development through Tourism*, this report offers a unique insight from a local perspective on how tourism can be used as a driver for development and well-being for rural communities. This will be central to inform UNWTO activities and programmes geared to advance tourism and rural development and ensure we respond to the real needs and aspirations of communities worldwide.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO Initiative (BTV), launched in 2021, recognizes outstanding examples of rural destinations with cultural and natural assets that preserve and promote rural and community-based values, products and lifestyle.

Villages worldwide face a wide range of challenges in several areas. This report analyses more than 200 cases of villages that submitted candidacies to the BTV Initiative in 2021 and 2022, allowing for a direct understanding of the challenges happening on the ground.

The preservation of cultural and natural resources, infrastructure gaps, the need for better skills development programmes and management of conflicts are the most frequent challenges mentioned by the villages.

This report also covers a wide and innovative range of examples of how villages are addressing these challenges. This includes good practices in policies, tourism products and services and novel approaches to increase opportunities afforded by tourism, such as job creation, business development, engagement of women and youth, strengthening of community pride and promotion and preservation of natural and cultural resources.

The continued growth of tourism in rural areas opens up prospects for sustainable and inclusive development which – as seen in this report – can happen at the local level, irrespective of the diverse geographic regions or development levels.



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# 01 WHY RURAL AREAS AND HOW TOURISM CAN HELP

## About this chapter

Economic, social and other forms of development have traditionally been focused on urban areas, leaving important gaps in rural landscapes. This chapter describes how big these gaps are, how these affect the opportunities that tourism can bring for rural development, and particularly how tourism can help address them by creating new opportunities for development.

## Key words

Rural areas // development // gaps // economy // social // infrastructure // health // finance // tourism

## Key messages

- Overall, and when compared to urban environments, rural areas have fewer economic opportunities, and less access to basic services, infrastructure and connectivity.
- Depopulation is expected to have a big impact on the livelihoods and the conservation of rural heritage.
- Tourism can bring opportunities to provide greater motivation for people to stay in or even migrate to rural areas, as well as improving the local economy, social well-being, and the promotion and conservation of rural heritage.

# 1.1 DEPOPULATION, ECONOMY AND LABOUR GAPS

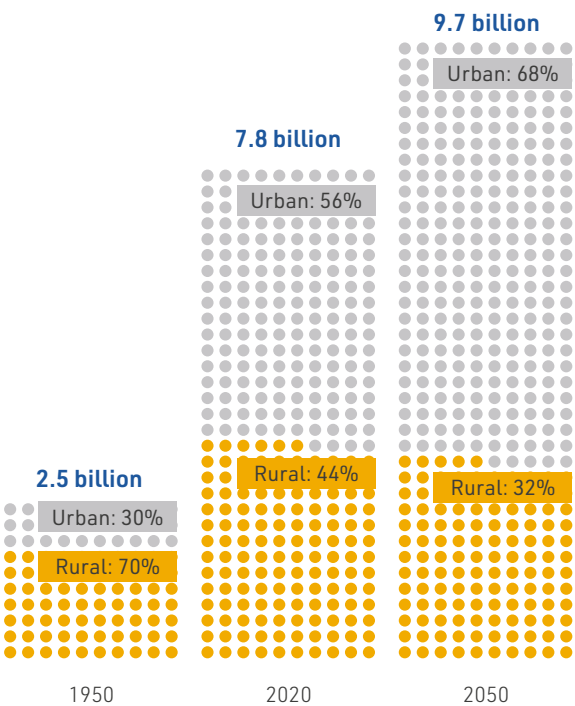
## 1.1.1 DEPOPULATION

Depopulation of rural areas is a threat to the conservation of rural heritage, especially the traditions and ways of life in agricultural landscapes. In 1950, the world population was 2.5 billion. For that year, the United Nations estimated that 70% of the population lived in rural areas. By 2020, there were an estimated 7.8 billion people living in the world. Of these, 44% lived in rural areas. For 2050, it is projected that 9.7 billion people will inhabit the planet, with only 32% living in rural areas.<sup>1</sup>

**Rural areas forecast to represent 30% of the world population in 2050 down from 70% in the 1950s**

Rural depopulation is a worldwide phenomenon, but there are important differences between regions and in terms of economic groups; Asia and the Pacific, Africa and the Americas are expected to see the biggest decrease in the share of people living in rural areas, while the same also applies to upper-middle income countries.

**Figure 1.1** Share of world population living in rural and urban areas, 1950, 2020 and 2050 (billion people, %)



Note: 1 dot represents 25 million people.

Sources: United Nations Population Division (2022), *World Population Prospects 2022: Summary of Results*. UN DESA/POP/2022/TR/NO. 3.

United Nations Population Division (2018), *'Urban population (% of total population)', World Urbanization Prospects, 2018 Revision*, World Bank, Washington, D.C.

1 United Nations – Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019), *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision (ST/ESA/SER.A/420)*, UN, New York.



Rijal Almaa, Saudi Arabia - BTV 2021

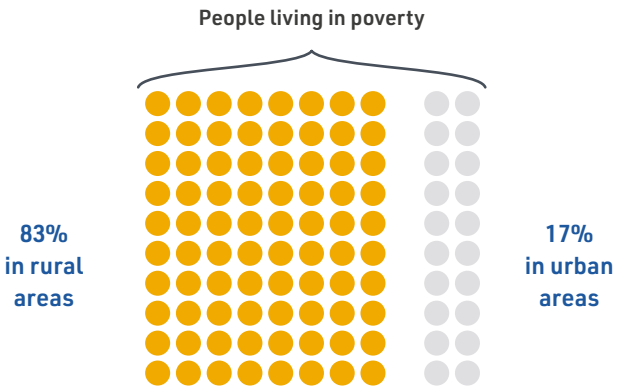
1.1.2 ECONOMY

Spatial inequalities *within* countries are often more dramatic than those *between* countries, and one of the most striking forms of spatial inequality is that between rural and urban areas. The poorest regions of middle-income countries, for instance, are frequently as poor as low-income countries.<sup>2</sup>

Nearly 83% of people living in poverty are found in rural areas,<sup>3</sup> even though rural areas account for roughly 44% of the world's population.

**Around 83% of people living in poverty are found in rural areas**

Figure 1.2 Share of world population living in poverty per rural and urban areas, 2016 (%)



Source: United Nations Development Programme, Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (2022), 2022 *Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI): Unpacking deprivation bundles to reduce multidimensional poverty*, New York.

2 United Nations – Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Social Policy and Development (2020), *World Social Report 2020: Inequality in a Rapidly Changing World* (Report No. ST/ESA/348), UN, New York.

3 United Nations Development Programme, Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (2022), 2022 *Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI): Unpacking deprivation bundles to reduce multidimensional poverty*. New York.



1.1.3 EMPLOYMENT

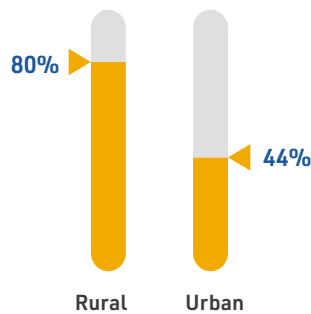
Rural areas face significant challenges in terms of economic and employment opportunities, particularly for young people and women. Informal employment is more prevalent in rural areas, where young people have lower rates of participation in employment, education or training.

Persistent stereotypical gender roles translate into higher labour force participation rates for men than for women, especially in rural areas. For example, gender norms and cultural expectations in rural communities often prioritize women’s roles as caregivers and homemakers, limiting their access to education and economic opportunities. Additionally, women can face additional challenges such as limited access to land ownership and credit, limiting economic opportunities even further.

People in rural areas are twice as likely to be in informal employment as those in urban areas

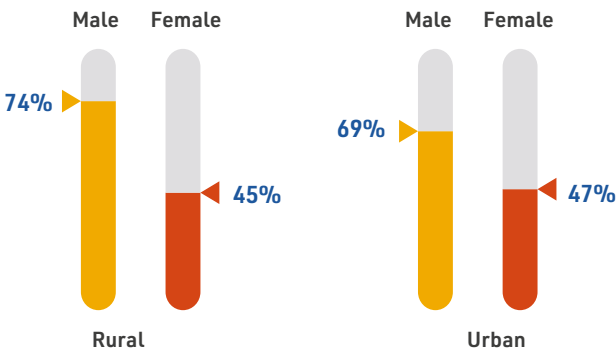
Female labour force participation is lower in rural areas

Figure 1.3 World population in informal or vulnerable employment in rural and urban areas, 2018 (%)



Source: International Labour Organization –ILOSTAT (2019), ‘Not in employment education or training: the reality for many young rural women’, ILO, Geneva.

Figure 1.4 Labour force participation by gender in rural and urban areas worldwide, 2019 (%)



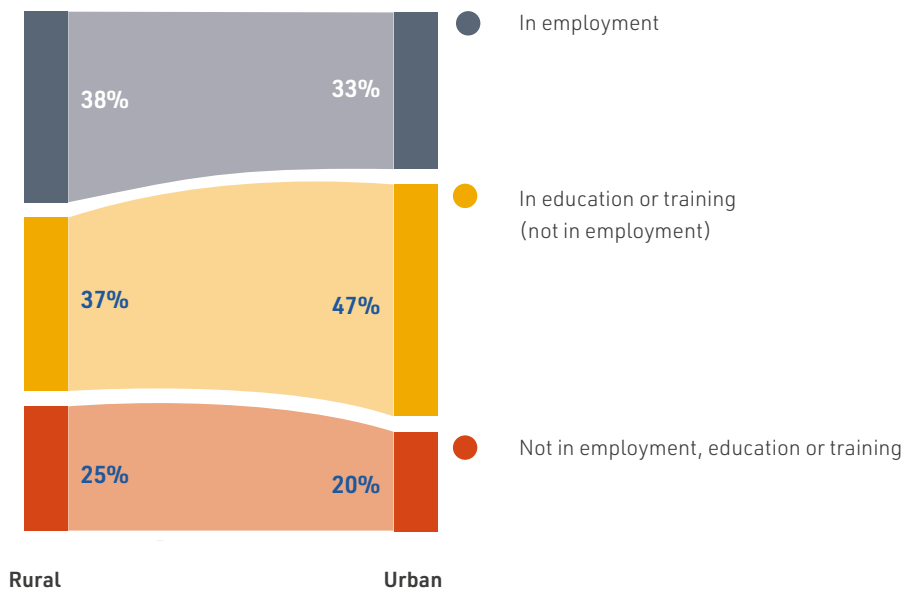
Source: International Labour Organization (2021), *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social protection at the crossroads – in pursuit of a better future*, ILO, Geneva.

Young people (aged 15 to 24) living in rural areas around the globe have a lower rate of participation in education or training. Factors such as the scarcity of schools and training resources, transportation and connectivity problems, accessibility to the digital world or the adoption of technologies not tailored to the local level of development pose limitations for young rural inhabitants. Young people in rural areas have a higher labour force participation rate than those in urban areas.

This may suggest that in rural areas, and especially poor rural areas, young people are constrained to joining the labour force earlier on than in urban areas, where they may be more able to devote themselves full-time to higher-level studies or to unpaid trainee work.<sup>4</sup>

**Youth access to employment, education or training is lower in rural areas**

**Figure 1.5** Youth participation in employment, education, or training in rural and urban areas, worldwide, 2019 (%)



Source: International Labour Organization (2021), *World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social protection at the crossroads – in pursuit of a better future*, ILO, Geneva.

<sup>4</sup> International Labour Organization (2020), *Rural and urban labour markets: Different challenges for promoting decent work, Spotlight on Work Statistics n° 11*, ILO brief, ILO, Geneva.

### 1.1.4 HOW CAN TOURISM HELP?

#### – EXAMPLES FROM BTVs

The greater economic and social opportunities provided by tourism in rural areas can make people more inclined to stay in or even migrate to these areas. Several cases in the Best Tourism Village by UNWTO Initiative have shown how tourism is increasing opportunities for local people in rural areas, especially for the young generations.

#### SAURIS ZAHRE, ITALY (BTV 2022)

##### Turning crisis into an opportunity

To reverse the destruction that resulted from the 1976 Friuli earthquake, Sauris was among the first municipalities in the Friuli Province to launch a new and exciting initiative.

Its local community created the Progetto Sauris (*Sauris Project*) which supported the village in creating major infrastructures, enabled the recovery of valuable buildings without compromising urban and architectural planning, and established the conditions to turn Sauris into a tourist destination. The project provided new socioeconomic opportunities in the village and resulted in the foundation of new businesses in the agri-food sector including a ham factory, a craft brewery, a cheese refinery, farms to produce milk and cheese, small fruits and herb production. The project was not only successful in retaining the village population but also attracted entrepreneurs from neighbouring areas thus combating the village's declining population.

For more information visit:

<https://www.unwto.org/tourism-villages/en/villages/sauris-zahre/>

#### WONCHI, ETHIOPIA (BTV 2021)

##### Sustainable ecotourism as a priority for a brighter future

With the aim of improving the livelihood of the local population in the village of Wonchi through the sustainable use of its natural and cultural resources, the Wenchi Eco-Tourism Association (WETA) was created in 2002 by local community initiatives with the support of the local and regional governments.

The village is mainly inhabited by the Oromo people, and years ago most households depended on agriculture as their main source of income. Today, however, many households are engaged in tourism services. In addition to tourism, the inhabitants practice livestock production and grow vegetables and perennial crops, among which *enset* (false banana) is the main staple food, as it is highly productive and requires little land. Local foods include honey, *enset-kolo*, and local beverages such as *arake* and beer.<sup>5</sup>

Tourism in the Wenchi area is managed by WETA, which is responsible for tourist activities, hospitality and natural resource management.

For more information visit:

<https://www.unwto.org/tourism-villages/en/villages/wonchi/>

<sup>5</sup> *Enset* is a herbaceous species of flowering plant in the banana family Musaceae. The domesticated form of the plant is cultivated only in Ethiopia, where it provides the staple food for approximately 20 million people.

*Enset-kolo* is a famous Ethiopian snack. It is a healthy combination of barley, sunflower seed and peanuts, tossed together and roasted over a clay griddle. *Areki* is a distilled, colourless, clear, traditional alcoholic beverage in which fermented products are prepared in almost the same way as *tella*, except that the fermentation mass in this case is more concentrated.

# 1.2

## INFRASTRUCTURE AND CONNECTIVITY GAPS

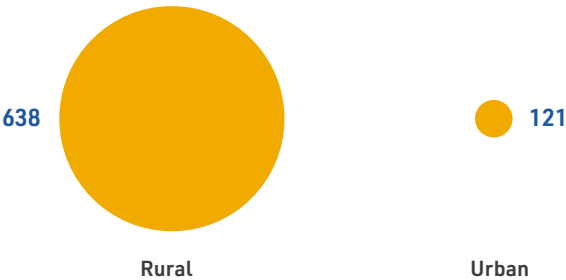
Overall, and when compared to urban environments, rural areas have less access to basic services, infrastructure and connectivity. These disparities can have significant implications for the quality of life and the economic opportunities available to rural populations. On the other hand, since the 1990s, evidence shows that progress against stunting has proceeded at a somewhat faster pace for several indicators in rural than in urban areas. However, rural populations will continue to lag behind urban dwellers by 2030 if current trends continue.<sup>6</sup>

### 1.2.1 ACCESS TO ELECTRICITY

There are five times as many people lacking access to electricity in rural areas compared to urban areas. Limited infrastructure development, geographical challenges and higher costs associated with extending electricity grids in remote locations or implementing alternative technologies contribute to this disparity. The lack of access to electricity can affect education, healthcare, productivity and overall quality of life for rural populations.

The number of people with no electricity access is 5 times higher in rural areas

Figure 1.6 People lacking access to electricity in rural and urban areas, worldwide, 2019 (millions)



Source: United Nations Chief Executives Board for Coordination (2021), *Tackling inequalities in public service coverage to “build forward better” for the rural poor*. Policy brief by the HLCP Inequalities Task Team, UN, New York.

6 United Nations – Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Social Policy and Development (2020), *World Social Report 2020: Inequality in a Rapidly Changing World* (Report No. ST/ESA/348), UN, New York.

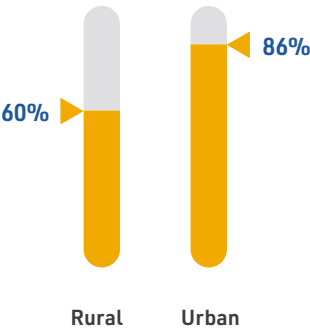


1.2.2 DRINKING WATER

Due to poor management of small-scale water supply and on-site sanitation, 1.4 billion people living in rural areas collected drinking water from faecal contaminated sources in 2020. Access to clean water is essential for preventing waterborne diseases, reducing child mortality and promoting overall well-being.

Share of population with no access to safely managed drinking water tops 40% in rural areas

Figure 1.7 People with safely managed drinking water coverage in rural and urban areas, worldwide, 2020 (%)

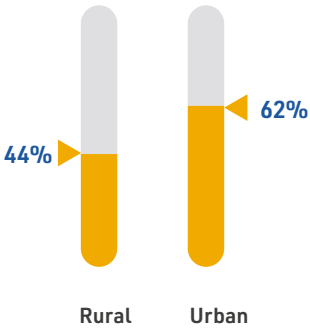


1.2.3 SANITATION COVERAGE

Less than half of the rural population has access to safely managed sanitation coverage. In urban populations, this coverage reached 62%. Access to safe sanitation systems is crucial for promoting public health, preventing disease and ensuring the dignity and well-being of individuals.

Less than half of the rural population has access to safely managed sanitation coverage

Figure 1.8 People with safely managed sanitation coverage in rural and urban areas, worldwide, 2020 (%)



Source: World Health Organization and the United Nations Children’s Fund (2021), *Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2020: Five years into the SDGs*.

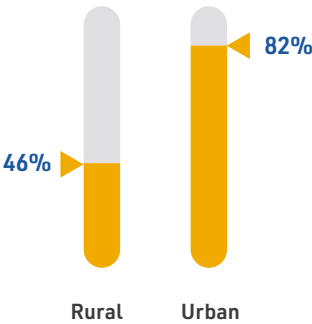


1.2.4 ACCESS TO INTERNET

Access to the digital world remains highly unequal for rural areas, with almost twice as many people accessing the Internet in urban areas. This digital divide poses challenges for rural communities in terms of education, market access, economic opportunities and access to information and services.

Access to the digital world in rural areas is almost half that of urban areas

Figure 1.9 People accessing the Internet in rural and urban areas, worldwide, 2022 (%)



Source: International Telecommunication Union (2023), *Internet use in urban and rural areas*.

1.2.5 HOW CAN TOURISM HELP? – EXAMPLES FROM THE BTVs

Investments in rural roads that attract additional investments in public services (such as electrification, agricultural extension services and enhanced water and sanitation services) do not only provide people with greater economic opportunities, but also improve security, productivity and quality of services.<sup>7</sup>

Infrastructure, particularly transport and digital infrastructure, is key for the competitiveness and sustainability of rural tourism destinations. Tourism can also impact positively on infrastructure as governments may ensure adequate levels of investment to improve connectivity, services and well-being of both rural communities and visitors.

Innovation and digital transformation should guide the development of tourism infrastructure, experiences and mobility. This can help accelerate access for local tourism businesses to the marketplace and promote inclusion and competitiveness.

7 World Bank (2016).



Saas Fee, Switzerland – BTV 2021

### **NGLANGGERAN, INDONESIA (BTV 2021)**

#### **Tourism brings a positive change to the community and connectivity with the world**

The development of the Nglanggeran tourism village is an example of a bottom-up and top-down programme approach, representing both a strong desire from the community to further develop and progress, and a solid support from government and non-government parties to work together in the development process. In short: building an effective collaboration between the tourism village's internal team and other stakeholders.

The use of e-ticketing in Nglanggeran initiated in 2015. In being one of the tourism villages that uses an e-ticketing system, Nglanggeran was motivated by the desire to reduce paper use, establish the service mechanism, minimize leakage/financial recording errors and facilitate transparency for the public. The management team uploads the total number of visitors on the village website every 10 minutes to enable anybody to easily monitor activities in the village.

For more information visit:  
[www.unwto.org/tourism-villages/en/villages/nglanggeran/](https://www.unwto.org/tourism-villages/en/villages/nglanggeran/)

### **SAAS-FEE, SWITZERLAND (BTV 2021)**

#### **A car-free village, distributing energy to all**

The car-free village of Saas-Fee lies at the foot of the Dufourspitze, the highest mountain in Switzerland. Saas-Fee's sustainability policy goes way back to the 1950s. With the construction of the road from Saas-Grund to Saas-Fee in 1951, the glacier village decided to remain traffic-free.

As no cars transit the village, a solution for visitors' luggage had to be found. Holidaymakers and locals can now leave their suitcases and heavy bags with Robi – small self-driving vehicles for transporting luggage. A teleoperator monitors Robi's operations. In the future, Robi is expected to drive around autonomously and simplify transport for guests and locals.

Additionally, the district heating network offers businesses and households the opportunity to connect to a renewable energy supply. The current network successfully provides energy to hotels and households, and it is planned to be extended so that the system will be able to supply up to 200 single-family homes.

For more information visit:  
<https://www.unwto.org/tourism-villages/en/villages/saas-fee/>

# 1.3

## HEALTH, FINANCE AND OTHER GAPS

### 1.3.1 HEALTH ACCESS

An estimated 2 billion people living in rural and remote areas across the world do not have adequate access to the essential health services they need. More than half the world's rural population lacks effective access to health care due to the shortage of health workers.

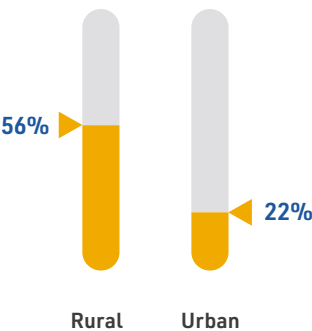
More than half of the rural population lacks health coverage

Shortage of health workers is more than twice as big in rural areas

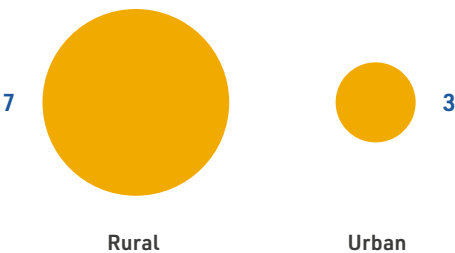
The percentage of people lacking health coverage in rural areas is 56% compared to 22% in their urban counterparts.

Other health limitations also occur in rural areas. Globally, children born in rural areas are 1.7 times more likely to die before the age of 5 than children born in urban areas. In term of maternal outcomes, only 67% of births to rural mothers are attended by a skilled birth attendant, compared to about 90% of births to urban mothers. In general, it is estimated that 51%–67% of rural populations have limited access to essential health services.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 1.10** Population without health coverage in rural and urban areas, worldwide, 2015 (%)



**Figure 1.11** Health workforce shortage in rural and urban areas, worldwide, 2015 (millions)



Source: International Labour Organization (2017), *World Social Protection Report 2017–19: Universal social protection to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals*, ILO, Geneva.

8 World Health Organization (2021), *Guideline on health workforce development, attraction, recruitment and retention in rural and remote areas*, Geneva.

### 1.3.2 FINANCE AND OTHER GAPS

About half of unbanked people globally are women in poor rural households or who are not integrated in the labour force.

In rural areas, most people rely on informal financial providers, which is a key reason for the lack of credit and financial skills, as well as productive assets, and greatly reduces the ability to prevent or recover from exposure to risks, such as disasters, climate impacts and ill health. Rural populations also tend to experience a higher incidence of impoverishing health spending.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding land tenure, rural people experiencing poverty have weak or unprotected tenure rights and insufficient access to well-functioning and efficient land tenure services.<sup>10</sup>

### 1.3.3 HOW CAN TOURISM HELP? – EXAMPLES FROM THE BTVs

Access to proper health services is a mandatory condition for tourism development. It is essential to secure health services for local populations and visitors in order to ensure competitiveness and sustainability in tourism destinations.

Tourism can be a transformative force as it offers easy access to micro and small enterprises, and the self-employed, who make up a significant part of the tourism sector and community-level entrepreneurship in general.

Public sector investment is especially important for attracting investments from the private sector, international financial institutions and development partners. Public investments, especially those focused on basic infrastructure, potable water provision, waste management and recycling, safety and security, banking facilities and health and childcare services are key to achieving competitiveness and sustainability for rural destinations.

9 United Nations Chief Executives Board for Coordination (2021), *Tackling inequalities in public service coverage to “build forward better” for the rural poor*. Policy brief by the HLCP Inequalities Task Team, UN, New York.

10 United Nations Chief Executives Board for Coordination (2017), *Leaving no one behind: equality and non-discrimination at the heart of sustainable development: a shared United Nations System framework for action*, UN, New York, NY.

**ANGOCHAGUA, ECUADOR (BTV 2022)****Conservation and management of natural resources**

The village of Angochagua is a diverse territory that aims to preserve the ancestral heritage of the Caranqui people, along with its native language *Quichua*, its cosmovision, its medicinal plant practices, and the traditional cuisine which uses endemic grains and cereals, in addition to water resources.

The commune of Zuleta is part of the Socio Bosque Network, an initiative that conserves the Andean paramo through economic incentives. There are 40 community guards and six park rangers who actively monitor and protect the forests and moors.

In addition, reforestation programmes aiming to protect several native species are carried out in Angochagua. To achieve this, a native species nursery was developed which has a production capacity of 50,000 plants. Water resources are conserved with micro-basin management plans. These processes involve the participation of government entities such as the Ministry of Environment and the provincial government, as well as actors from the financial system and the local community.

For more information visit:  
<https://www.unwto.org/tourism-villages/en/villages/angochagua/>

**BOJO, PHILIPPINES (BTV 2021)****Water as a livelihood**

In 2013, the village of Bojo in the Aloguinsan municipality recrafted its tourism vision, with the aim that by 2020 Aloguinsan would have become a "progressive town showcasing sustainable and people-centred development with a strong partnership between the local government and the community; a safe and enjoyable place for residents, visitors and investors." Today, the village association has attained this vision, transforming both the quality of life of its residents and the quality of governance of the local administration.

Since river tourism began in 2009, the village association has already financially contributed to the implementation by the local administration of projects in education, health and sanitation, environmental management, female empowerment and heritage preservation, benefiting 3,000 individuals (the village population consisting of 1,800 inhabitants only) including children, women, the elderly, farmers, fishermen and other disadvantaged members of society.

For more information visit:  
<https://www.unwto.org/tourism-villages/en/villages/bojo/>

**XIDI, CHINA (BTV 2021)****Conservation and management of water resources**

Xidi actively promotes water conservation and recycling of water resources. The village has implemented a sanitation project and has enhanced the surrounding rural scenery. The local government supervises solid waste treatment for businesses, strictly forbids disposal of waste into water bodies and has created a centralized waste management and transport mechanism.

For more information visit:  
<https://www.unwto.org/tourism-villages/en/villages/xidi/>

# 1.4

## CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE

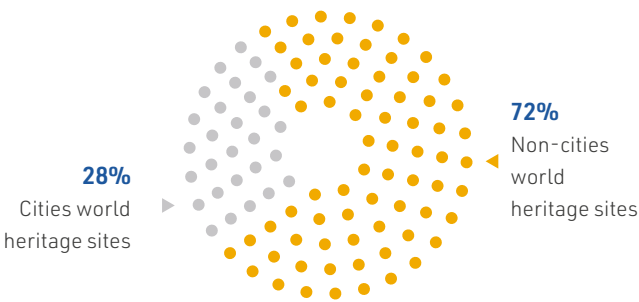


Alquézar, Spain – BTV 2022

Rural areas comprise unique and highly diverse agricultural, cultural, and natural systems and landscapes. These resources are critical for sustainable development across the world, hence their recognition as invaluable heritage.

By 2022, UNESCO had recognized 1,154 World Heritage Sites globally. Although sites located in rural areas are not specifically mentioned, a proxy of the percentage of sites outside the context of cities may be used to highlight the presence of world heritage outside urban areas.

**Figure 1.12** Distribution of world heritage sites in cities and non-cities, 2022 (%)



Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2022)

**72% of World Heritage Sites are located outside cities**

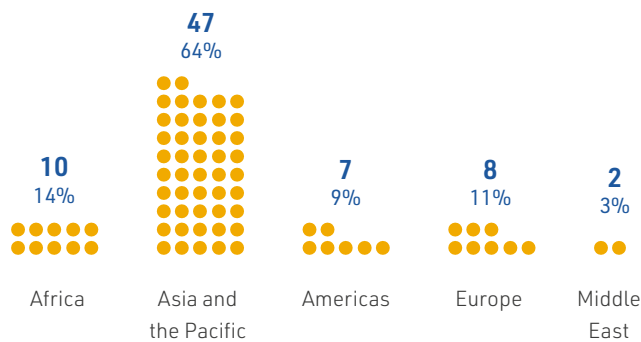
1.4.1 GLOBALLY IMPORTANT AGRICULTURAL HERITAGE SYSTEMS

Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) represent not only stunning natural landscapes but also agricultural practices that create livelihoods in rural areas while combining biodiversity, resilient ecosystems, tradition and innovation in a unique way.<sup>11</sup>

Rural landscapes are vital for agricultural heritage preservation

Since 2005, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has designated 74 systems around the globe, with 15 more proposals for consideration. Asia and the Pacific is the region with the highest concentration of GIAHSs, accounting for 64% of them.

Figure 1.13 Distribution of Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) by region, 2023 (number, %)



Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2023)

1.4.2 HOW CAN TOURISM HELP? – EXAMPLES FROM BTVs

Natural and cultural resources are often found in rural locations; consequently, their conservation is critical for ensuring the sustainable development of tourism activities.

At the same time, tourism is an opportunity to promote local economies and contribute to preserving identities, which is a pathway for the conservation and use of biodiversity, agrobiodiversity, cultural heritage and local gastronomy in rural areas.

National, regional and local governments, private sector and communities can promote sustainable practices for a more efficient use of local resources and a reduction in emissions and waste within the framework of the green economy.

11 Food and Agriculture Organization (2023), 'Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS)' [electronic database], available at: <https://www.fao.org/giahs/giahsaroundtheworld/en/> [09-02-2023].

### ALULA, SAUDI ARABIA (BTV 2022)

The village of AlUla Old Town is home to more than 900 traditional buildings made from mud brick, 100 of which have already been restored with traditional building methods.

It features a burgeoning Arts district centred around the Old Girls' School, Madrasat Adeera, which has been renovated to become a school for teaching women pottery, jewellery making and traditional handicrafts, to be sold in the Old Town's tourist shops.

The village is also preserving its intangible cultural heritage including local traditions of dance, music, poetry, storytelling and other art forms, shown in pop-up performances and cultural festivities held in the Old Town.

For more information visit:  
<https://www.unwto.org/tourism-villages/en/villages/alula-old-town/>

### MIYAMA, JAPAN (BTV 2021)

#### Conservation of 300 years of thatching heritage

Located in the vicinity of the ancient capital, Kyoto, Miyama is recognized by its traditional Japanese thatched roof houses, designated as an Important Preservation District for Groups of Historic Buildings in 1993.<sup>12</sup> The skills, techniques and knowledge of *kayabuki*<sup>13</sup> have recently been registered by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage.

When the Miyama thatched village was designated a national heritage site, its residents established regulations to ensure the cultural and historic properties of the thatched village are preserved, and to protect the natural landscape and manage tourism visits appropriately.

The convention restricts building new commercial facilities in historic buildings, while local and national governments offer subsidies to re-roof thatched houses, supporting nearly 80% of the expense.

For more information visit:  
<https://www.unwto.org/tourism-villages/en/villages/miyama/>

12 Agency of Cultural affairs Japan (2023), 'Preservation Districts for Groups of Traditional Buildings', available at: [https://www.bunka.go.jp/english/policy/cultural\\_properties/introduction/historic\\_buildings/](https://www.bunka.go.jp/english/policy/cultural_properties/introduction/historic_buildings/) [05-04-2023].

13 *Kayabuki* is a grass roofing technique that has been widely used in Japan since ancient times to create various types of structures. The skills, techniques, and knowledge of *kayabuki* were recently registered as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage along with other traditional architectural skills in Japan.

# 02 LESSONS FROM THE GROUND: ANALYSIS OF THE BEST TOURISM VILLAGES BY UNWTO CANDIDACIES

## About this chapter

More than 200 villages worldwide submitted their candidacies to be part of the Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO Initiative (BTVI) in its 2021 and 2022 editions. These candidacies describe the current challenges and opportunities that villages face to effectively take advantage of tourism as a driver for rural development. This chapter details the analysis of these descriptions, plus the results of assessment of the BTVI areas of evaluation, to identify the key points for improvements.

## Key words

Challenges // opportunities // rural development // rural tourism // Best Tourism Villages

## Key messages

- The analysis of the candidacies shows that the social, economic, and environmental sustainability areas have the lowest performance for villages worldwide, thus offering room for improvements in these areas.
- Conservation of 'cultural and natural resources', gaps in 'infrastructure', 'education and training' and 'conflicts' were the top challenge topics referred to by villages across regions.

## 2.1

# RESULTS FROM THE BEST TOURISM VILLAGES BY UNWTO INITIATIVE

The Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO Initiative showcases villages that are an outstanding example of a rural tourism destination with recognized cultural and natural assets, that preserves and promotes community-based values, products and lifestyle, and that has a clear commitment to sustainability in all its aspects – economic, social and environmental – with the fundamental aim of making tourism one of the drivers of positive transformation, rural development and community well-being. More about this initiative can be found in [Chapter 3](#).

The following results include the analysis of 210 candidacy documents from villages received for the BTV Initiative in its 2021 and 2022 editions.

- **How many villages in rural areas are included in the following results?**  
210 candidacies<sup>14</sup> from villages in 72 countries across five world regions presented their candidacies to the BTV Initiative in the 2021 and 2022 editions.

- **What do the areas of evaluation include?**

All villages were assessed under nine areas of evaluation that include 'sustainability', 'governance', 'infrastructure', 'competitiveness' and 'cultural and natural resources', among other dimensions.

- **How were the challenges and opportunities identified?**

Each candidacy included open questions to the participant villages, asking them to address the challenges and opportunities for rural development through tourism. In total, roughly 1,200 key ideas were highlighted by the villages.

<sup>14</sup> In total, this report contains the results of 210 villages' candidacies from 205 different villages. Five villages applied to both BTV editions in 2021 and 2022 and have been analysed individually.

## 2.2 AREAS OF EVALUATION



Nine areas of evaluation are assessed for each of the villages applying to the BTV Initiative.

1. **Cultural and natural resources:** The village has natural and cultural (tangible and intangible) resources recognized at national, regional or international level.
2. **Promotion and conservation of cultural resources:** The village is committed to the promotion and conservation of the cultural resources that make it unique and authentic.
3. **Economic sustainability:** The village is committed to promoting economic sustainability by supporting business development, entrepreneurship and investment.
4. **Social sustainability:** The village is committed to promoting social inclusion and equality.
5. **Environmental sustainability:** The village is committed to environmental sustainability through the promotion and/or dissemination of policies, measures and initiatives that advance the preservation and conservation of its natural resources and minimize the impact of tourism development on the environment.
6. **Tourism development and value chain integration:** Tourism in the village is significantly marketed and developed. The village further promotes the enhancement of the tourism value chain and the competitiveness of the destination in areas related to market access, marketing and promotion, innovation, product development and quality.
7. **Governance and prioritization of tourism:** The village is committed to making tourism a strategic pillar for rural development. It further promotes a governance model based on public-private partnerships, cooperation with other government levels, and the engagement of the community in tourism planning and development.
8. **Infrastructure and connectivity:** The village has infrastructure to facilitate access and communications that improve the well-being of rural communities, promote business development, as well as enhancing the visitor experience.
9. **Health, safety and security:** The village has health, safety and security systems to safeguard residents and tourists.



Xidi, China – BTV 2021

**Figure 2.1** Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO Initiative areas of evaluation

## 2.3

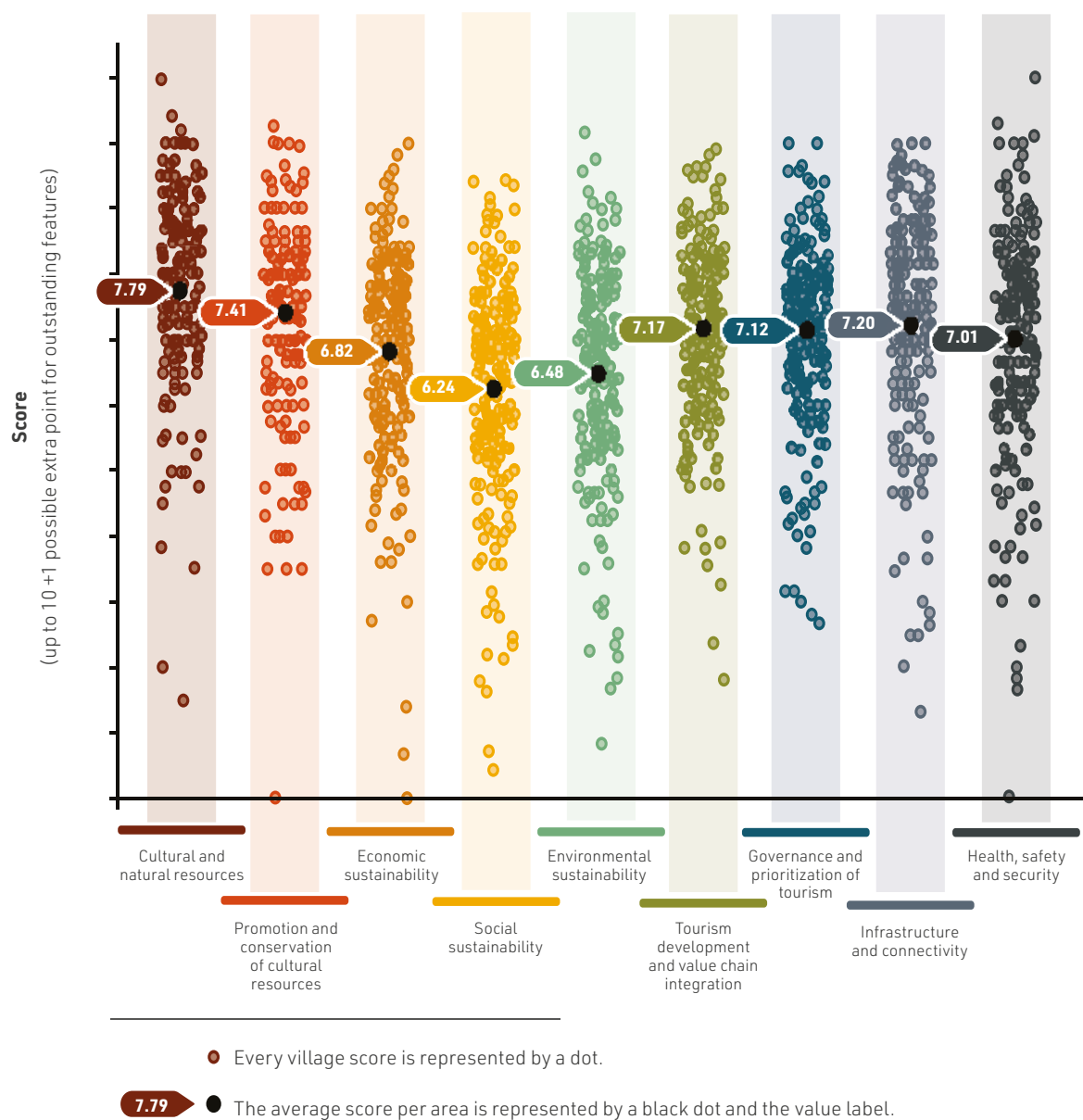
# WHERE ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT?

On average, the areas related to the 'sustainability' dimensions are the lowest scored. This shows the need for improvements in economic, social and environmental sustainability. This pattern is present in villages around all regions, regardless of the level of development of their countries.

**Areas related to the three areas of sustainability perform the lowest in evaluated villages**



Lamas, Peru - BTV 2022

**Figure 2.2** Final scores of villages part of the BTV Initiative per area of evaluation (average score per village)

Note: The numbers are based on the evaluation of the 210 villages from the 2021 and 2022 edition of the BTV competition.

Source: Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO candidacies applications analysis, 2022.

## 2.4

# DIVERSITY ACROSS LEVELS OF DEVELOPMENT AND REGIONS: THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL DECISIONS

https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/book/10.18111/9789284424368 - Katerina Kataiftsi <kataiftsi@gmail.com> - Saturday, May 11, 2024 2:47:51 AM - IP Address: 2a02:587:5455:7400:c8ca:8c75:c5c7:7447



While 'sustainability' dimensions are consistently the lowest performing areas when breaking down by region or level of development, 'cultural and natural resources', on the other hand, are the best performing areas in both breakdowns.

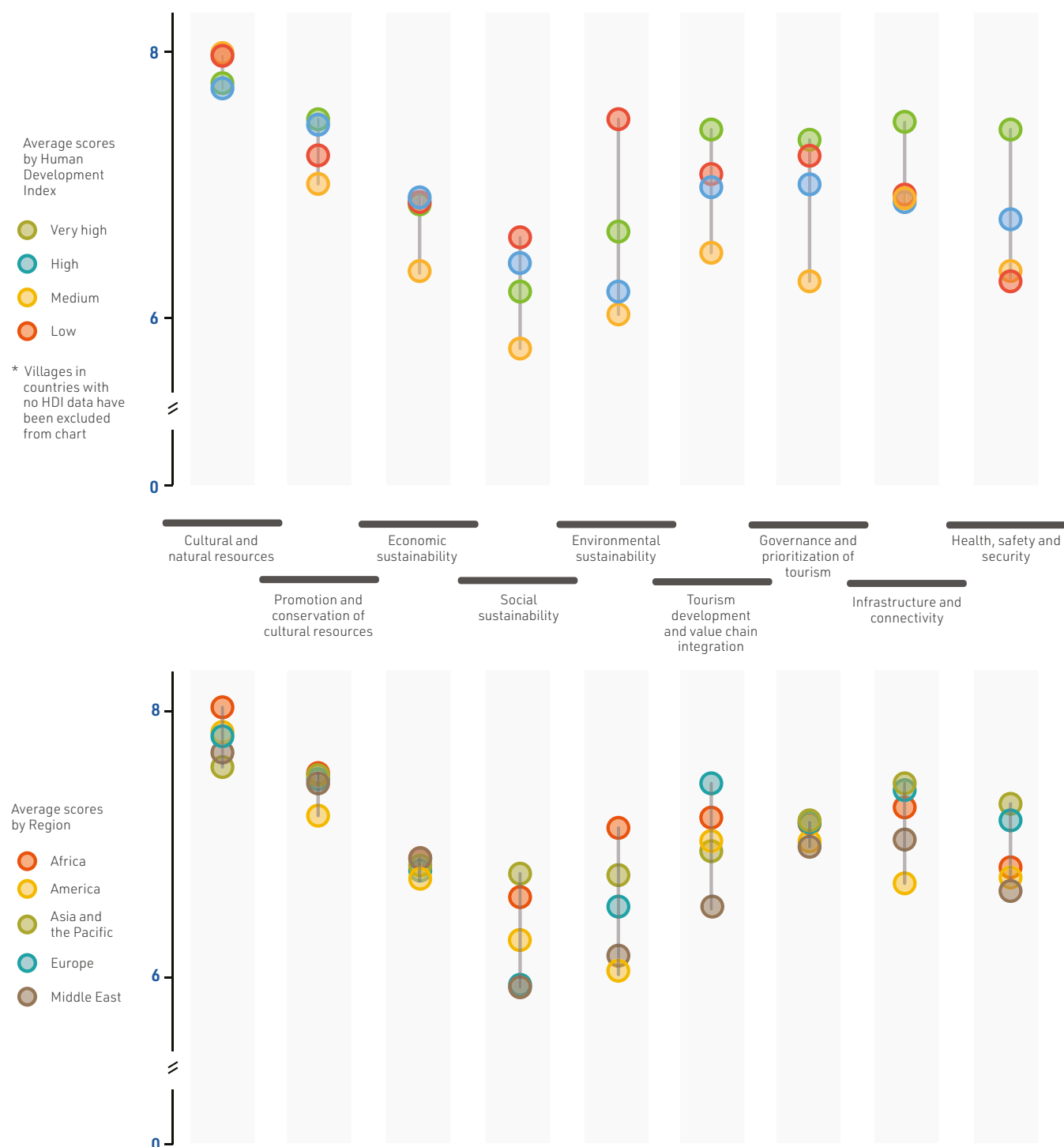
Neither the level of development in this chart, based on the Human Development Index,<sup>15</sup> nor the world region determine the average performance in the areas of evaluation of the villages.

This demonstrates that decisions taken at the very local level can have important impacts in favour of tourism as driver for rural development, despite geographical or development conditions.

**Performance of villages is not determined by the level of development and geographical location of villages**

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Development Programme (2022), 'Human Development Index (HDI)' [electronic database], UNDP, New York, available at: <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index> [20-062023].

The Human Development Index (HDI) is a summary measure of achievements in three key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard of living. It was created to emphasize that people and their capabilities should be the ultimate criteria for assessing the development of a country, not economic growth alone. The HDI is the geometric mean of normalized indices for each of the three dimensions. The 2014 *Human Development Report* introduced a system of fixed cut-off points for the four categories of human development achievements. The cut-off points are the HDI values calculated using the quartiles from the distributions of the component indicators averaged over 2004–2013.

**Figure 2.3** Scores per area of evaluation by Human Development Index (HDI) and by world region (average scores)

Note: Scores are based on the evaluation of the 210 villages from the 2021 and 2022 edition of the BTV competition.

Source: Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO candidacies applications analysis, 2022.

## 2.5

# WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES TO RURAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH TOURISM?

As part of the candidacy process for the BTV Initiative, villages were asked to state the main challenges to rural development through tourism. Being an open question, the diversity of responses was very high. Candidates registered 1,199 key ideas or topics when answering the question: "What are the main challenges to rural development through tourism?"

**The five most common challenges relate to the ‘conservation of cultural and natural resources’, ‘education and training’, ‘infrastructure’ and ‘conflicts’**

### BOX 2.1 SIMILARITIES ACROSS LEVELS OF DEVELOPMENT AND REGIONS

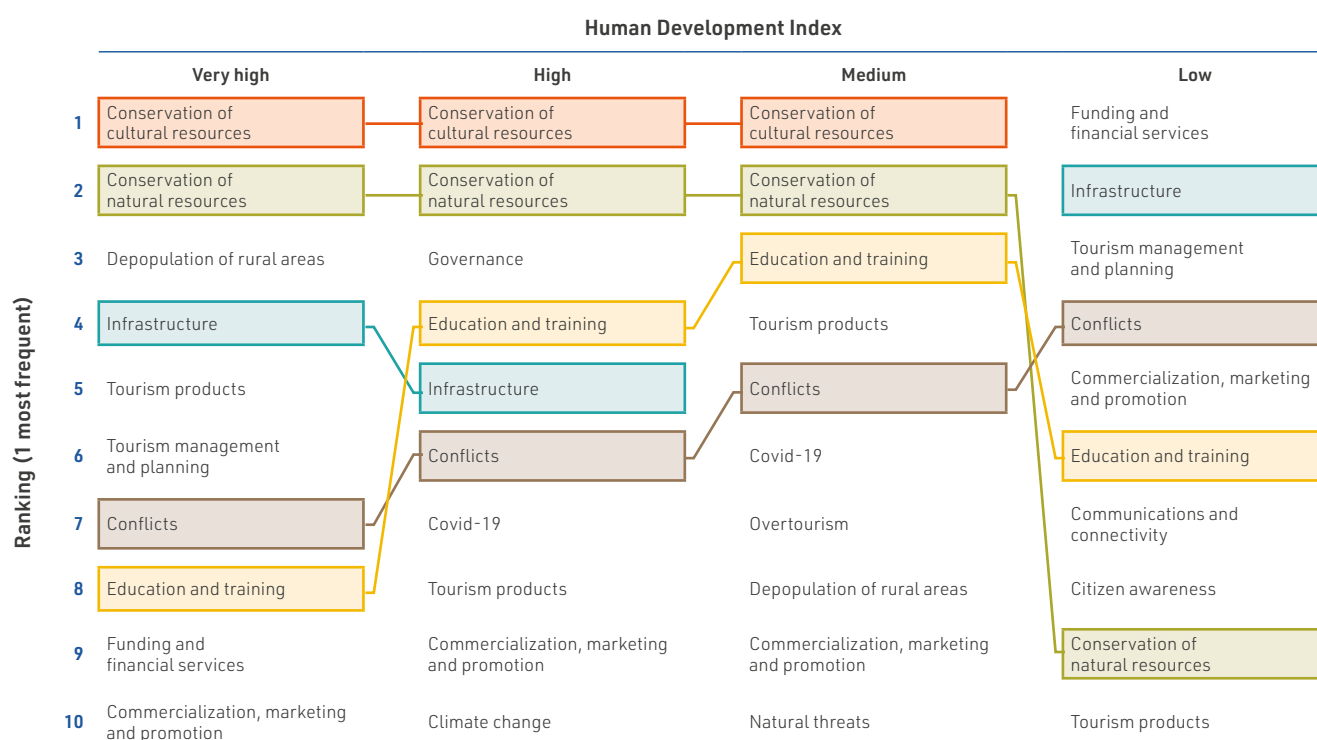
The five most frequent challenge topics mentioned by BTV candidates across the various levels of development and across regions were:

1. Conservation of cultural resources;
2. Conservation of natural resources;
3. Education and training;
4. Infrastructure; and
5. Conflicts.

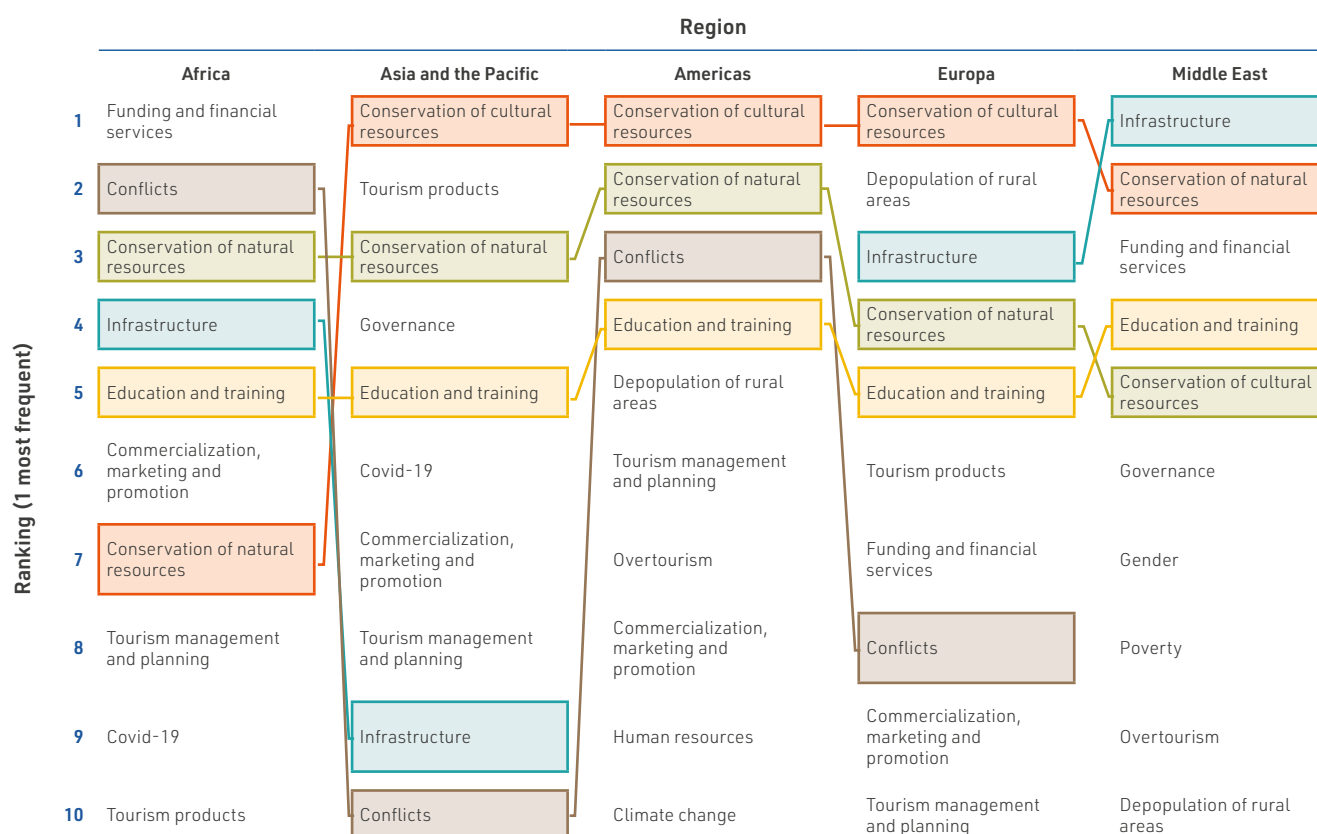
Figure 2.4 Top 20 most frequent topics identified as main challenges to rural development through tourism



Note: Rank position 01 = most frequent.  
Source: Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO candidacies applications analysis, 2022.

**Figure 2.5** Top 10 most frequent challenge topics by Human Development Index (HDI)

Note: Rank position 1 = most frequent.

**Figure 2.6** Top 10 most frequent challenge topics by world region

Note: Rank position 1 = most frequent.

Source: Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO candidacies applications analysis, 2022.

2.5.1 CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL RESOURCES

The most frequently recurring answer given by the villages when asked about the main challenges was the **'conservation of cultural resources'**, including tangible and intangible heritage. This topic included answers related to the preservation and management of cultural resources. Villages mentioned concerns about the loss of identity, the misuse of cultural heritage and the risks of losing or damaging sites or architecture with high cultural value due to bad management or misuse. The loss of cultural heritage by decreasing population in the communities or intergenerational issues, such as young people leaving the villages, were also mentioned.

This topic is the most frequent for several regions and countries with different levels of development.



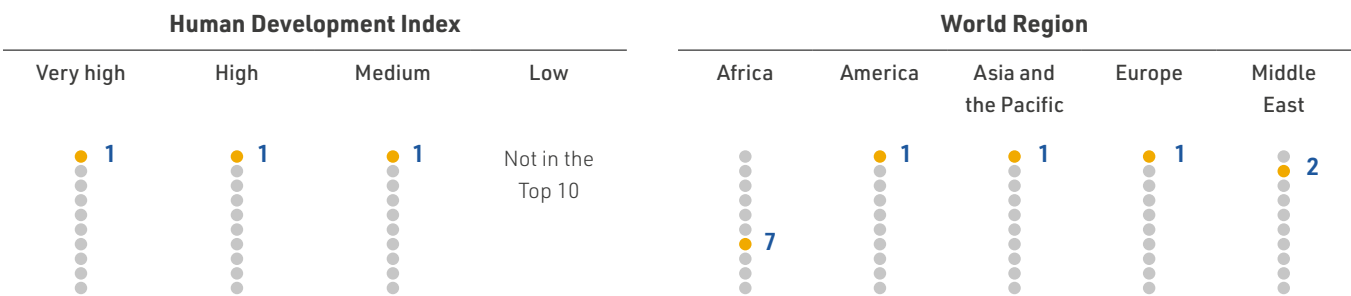
CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL RESOURCES – How can tourism help to face this challenge?

Tourism can help with increasing the attractiveness and vitality of rural areas by promoting a range of local resources and traditions while upholding the essence of rural life. It can also celebrate a territory's values to preserve both tangible and intangible heritage and complement the existing economic activities of these territories.

National, regional and local governments, the private sector and communities can work together to raise awareness of the importance of rural communities and their contribution to the national economy, and on the preservation of local and national identity in order to promote economic opportunities. In addition, they can ensure the integration of natural and cultural resources, such as nature reserves, World Heritage Sites, and natural and historical sites into the development of rural areas with a special emphasis on respecting local biodiversity and culture (religious sites, holidays, traditions, etc.). Promoting new and authentic experiences that are unique to rural areas, and enhancing contact with nature and culture in non-crowded environments can be prioritized, always under a strong and sustainable management framework that values and guarantees the conservation of cultural resources.

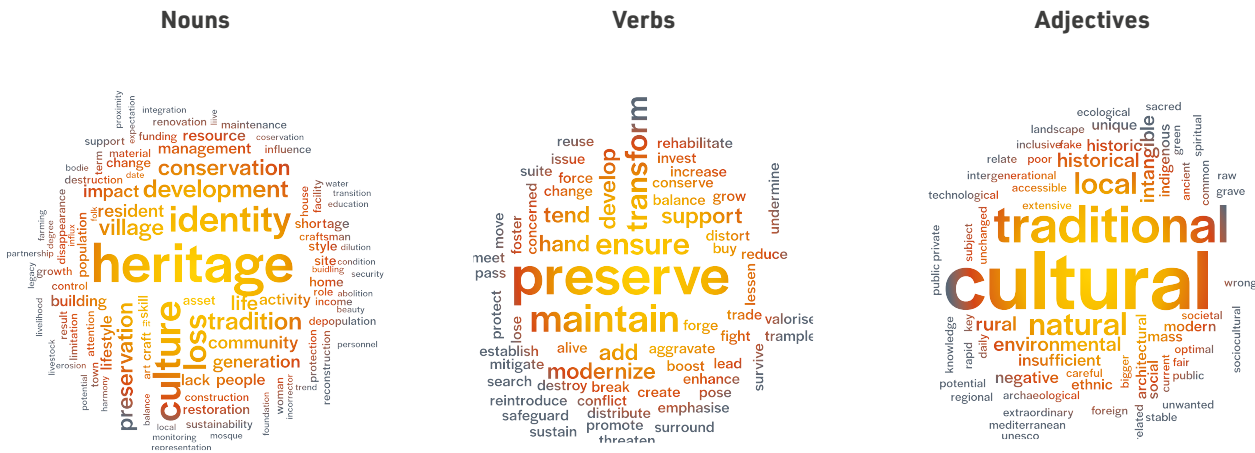
For more recommendations about how tourism can help address the challenges around the 'conservation of cultural resources', see: World Tourism Organization (2020/b), *UNWTO Recommendations on Tourism and Rural Development – A Guide to Making Tourism an Effective Tool for Rural Development*, UNWTO, Madrid, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284422173>.

Figure 2.7 Rank position of the challenge topic ‘conservation of cultural resources’ among the top 10 topics



Note: Rank position 1 = most frequent.  
Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO candidacies applications analysis, 2022.

Figure 2.8 Most common key words mentioned in the challenge topic ‘conservation of cultural resources’



Note: The size of the words reflects the frequency of the key words mentioned; the bigger the size the higher the frequency.  
Source: Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO candidacies applications analysis, 2022.

## 2.5.2 CONSERVATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES

The second most frequently recurring challenge topic in the candidates' answers was the 'conservation of natural resources'. The topic included answers related to the preservation and upgrade of natural resources (environment, biodiversity, natural heritage, forests and natural attractions). Key messages pointed to challenges for conservation posed by overuse or misuse of resources or the lack of proper management.



### CONSERVATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES – How can tourism help to address this challenge?

With awareness raising, capacity building and empowerment, local communities can play a critical role in environmental preservation and valorization, which is an essential precondition to generate long-term benefits from tourism development. At the same time, tourism brings opportunities for local communities to earn income from natural and cultural assets, thus increasing their desire to preserve those assets.

National, regional and local governments, the private sector, and communities can consider the monitoring of indicators to generate key information for the management and conservation of natural resources. As key resources that enable the tourism experience, stakeholders can raise awareness of the importance of rural communities and their contribution to the preservation of natural resources, as well as their relationship with nature. The UNWTO Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories includes a set of monitoring areas which can be used as a reference.

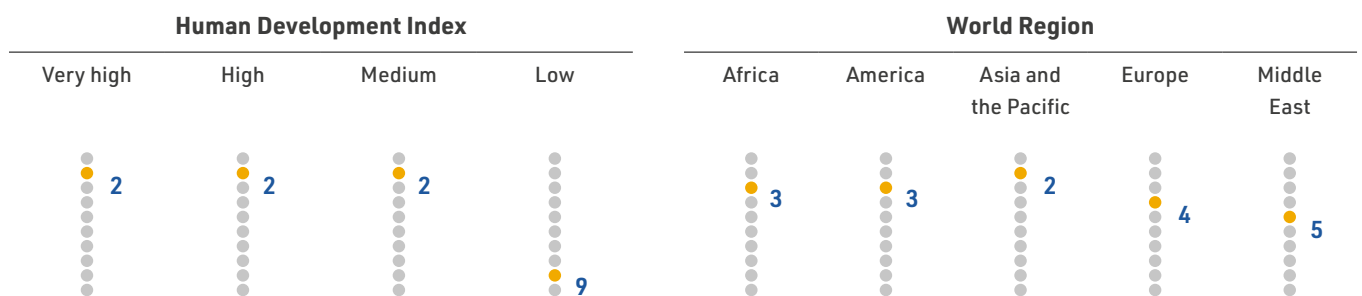
Traditional economic and cultural systems are under threat from climate change. This particularly affects indigenous people who are reliant on agriculture and local natural resources. In extreme cases, land abandoned due to migration can be affected by erosion, causing an altered cultural landscape and the potential loss of a sense of place. Such locations are also at higher risk from natural disasters.

For more recommendations about how tourism can help address the challenges around the 'conservation of natural resources', see:

World Tourism Organization (2020/b), *UNWTO Recommendations on Tourism and Rural Development – A Guide to Making Tourism an Effective Tool for Rural Development*, UNWTO, Madrid, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284422173>.

For more information on the UNWTO International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories, please visit: <https://www.unwto.org/sustainable-development/unwto-international-network-of-sustainable-tourism-observatories> [27-04-2019].

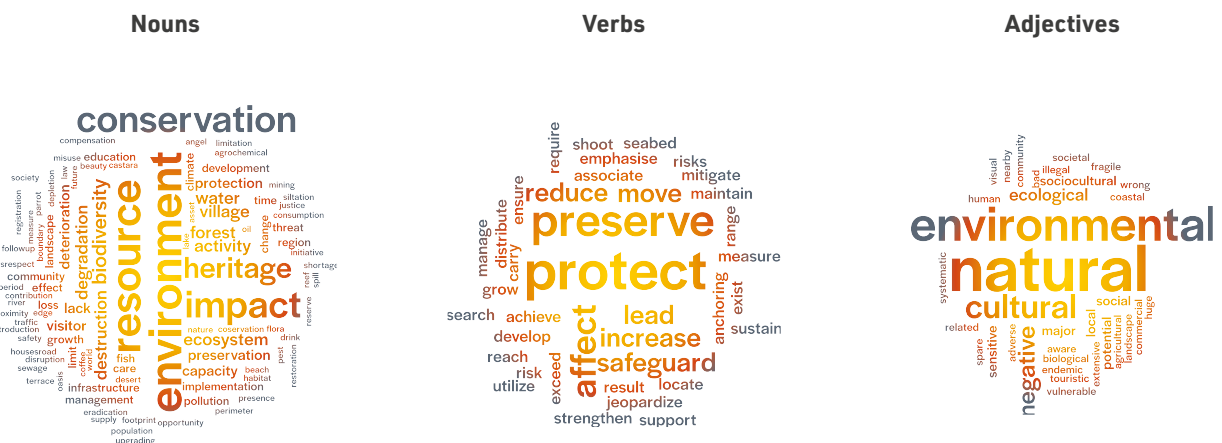
**Figure 2.9** Rank position of the challenge topic ‘Conservation of natural resources’ among the top 10 topics



Note: Rank position 1 = most frequent.

Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO candidacies applications analysis, 2022.

**Figure 2.10** Most common key words mentioned in the challenge topic ‘conservation of cultural resources’



Note: The size of the words reflects the frequency of the key words mentioned; the bigger the size the higher the frequency.

Source: Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO candidacies applications analysis, 2022.

### 2.5.3 EDUCATION AND TRAINING

This challenge topic includes answers related to the need for education and training that is mainly focused on tourism business-related skills, but also on education in general for the population at large, and training related to rural activities or rural issues (i.e., sustainability and agriculture).

Several responses from villages referred to the loss of human resources due to depopulation, and the resulting increasing need for education and training to improve skills in the remaining population.



Kaunertal, Austria – BTV 2021

#### EDUCATION AND TRAINING – How can tourism help to address this challenge?

Tourism development can promote human capital development through targeted policies and programmes for education and capacity building for communities, with a special focus on women, youth and other marginalized groups in the tourism development process, including self-governance within communities that enables efficient decision-making and leadership with regard to tourism.

National, regional and local governments can continuously promote and facilitate the training of tourism professionals and entrepreneurs, and their attraction to rural areas. Education, training and skills development for the local community are key. Without human capital, rural development would be impossible, as it is hard to ignore the role of the digital revolution in shaping education and training.

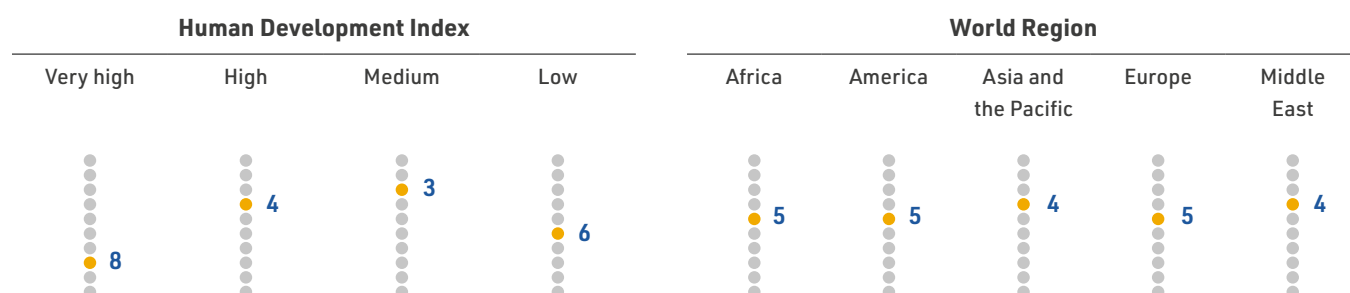
Tourism-related policies and capacity building programmes can offer training in rural communities. Training should focus on the digital economy, as well as on social and green skills that guide development towards a more ethical, greener and more socially beneficial direction, while respecting the diversity of development visions and cultural mindsets that already exist in rural areas.

Stakeholders can evaluate the human resource pool within communities to provide more effective avenues for tailored education, skills development and training opportunities.

For more recommendations about how tourism can help address the challenges around 'education and training', see:

World Tourism Organization (2020/b), *UNWTO Recommendations on Tourism and Rural Development – A Guide to Making Tourism an Effective Tool for Rural Development*, UNWTO, Madrid, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284422173>.

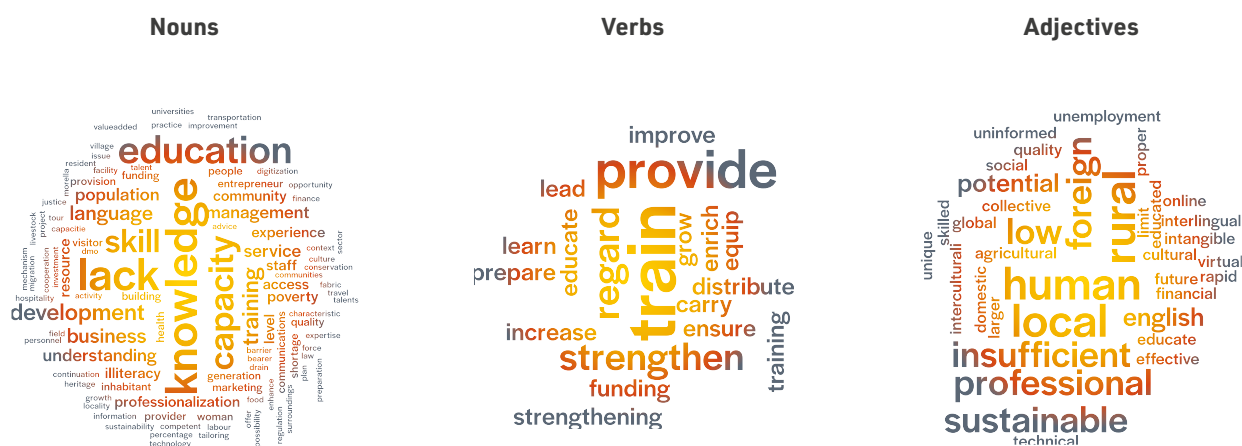
**Figure 2.11** Rank position of the challenge topic 'education and training' among the top 10 topics



Note: Rank position 1 = most frequent.

Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO candidacies applications analysis, 2022.

**Figure 2.12** Most common key words mentioned in the challenge topic ‘education and training’



Note: The size of the words reflects the frequency of the key words mentioned; the bigger the size the higher the frequency.

Source: Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO candidacies applications analysis, 2022.

### 2.5.4 INFRASTRUCTURE

Challenges in this topic include access to 'infrastructure' and basic services. Roads and accessibility infrastructure are frequently mentioned as one of the key limitations for rural destinations to promote their main attractions, which are often difficult to access due to geographical or weather-related conditions.

Connection to the digital world is also frequently mentioned as a key challenge to overcome. Tourism relies more and more on digital services that are highly dependent on Internet coverage, a condition that does not always apply to rural locations.

Albeit less frequently, the lack of basic services including drinking water supply, sanitation services and electricity is also mentioned as a key limitation that ought to be overcome.



Niseko, Japan – BTV 2021

### INFRASTRUCTURE – How can tourism help to address this challenge?

Community development through tourism provides an opportunity to use the sector to support services and infrastructure-related development and maintenance, and to improve transport infrastructure, thus not only playing a significant role in attracting tourists but also in improving quality of life for residents. Furthermore, it can generate additional funding for the development and better maintenance of basic healthcare and educational infrastructure, public spaces, cultural attractions and convention centres, which all contribute to the attractiveness of destinations.

Tourism should be included as an effective means to attain rural development in the framework of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This applies to several Goals including those related to infrastructure such as SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure), SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities) and SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities).

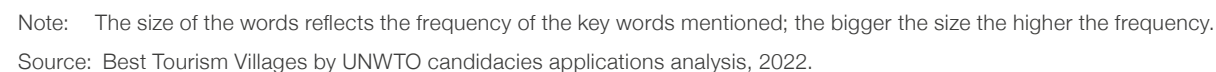
National, regional and local governments, the private sector and communities can increase investment to boost productivity, investment and new tourism developments in rural areas. Public sector investment is especially important for attracting investment from the private sector, international financial institutions and development partners. Infrastructure, particularly transport and digital infrastructure, is key for the competitiveness and sustainability of rural destinations.

For more recommendations about how tourism can help address the challenges around 'infrastructure', see:

World Tourism Organization (2020/b), *UNWTO Recommendations on Tourism and Rural Development – A Guide to Making Tourism an Effective Tool for Rural Development*, UNWTO, Madrid, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284422173>.

Human Development Index				World Region				
Very high	High	Medium	Low	Africa	America	Asia and the Pacific	Europe	Middle East
 4	 5	Not in the Top 10	 2	 4	 9	 3	Not in the Top 10	 1

**Figure 2.14** Most common key words mentioned in the topic ‘infrastructure’



2.5.5 CONFLICTS

The topic includes answers related to several forms of conflict that may be caused by uncontrolled tourism development.

Some of the most frequent mentions included potential cultural clashes between locals and tourists. These have the potential to negatively affect traditional ways of living or local customs, to bring unwanted changes in

landscapes due to tourism or other forms of development, uneven distribution of benefits, concentrating the shares into small groups of beneficiaries, and gentrification of developing areas and distortions in local economies, especially related to real estate and land tenure.

Important mentions were also made of discord between the interests of different stakeholders in the local community, such as disagreements about the desired vision for the development of local communities.

CONFLICTS – How can tourism help to address this challenge?

If not properly managed, tourism development may exacerbate existing conflicts and badly affect decision-making and power management. Understanding and managing the impact of tourism on the social dimension of communities is also critical to ensuring its sustainability.

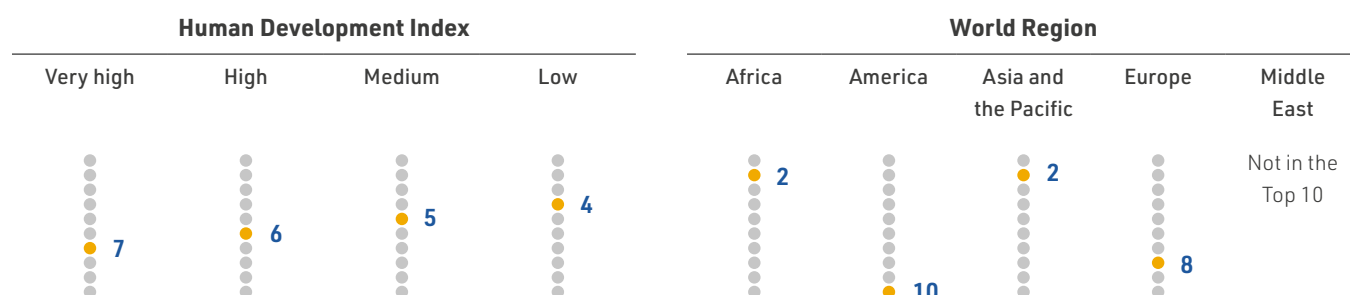
Recovery, resilience and a sustainable future will only be possible with strong governance models for tourism at the national and local levels. One such model is the public-private-community partnership (PPCP) approach: Stakeholders can engage in a thorough, transparent and permanent consultation process on planning, designing and managing tourism projects, products and services, thus placing the community at the centre of tourism development. Stakeholders should also empower local communities through organizational structures and governance models, ensuring fair representation for all groups impacted by tourism development. Tourism development must establish transparent and accountable mechanisms for the distribution of revenue and profits generated through tourism.

Enabling key stakeholders, especially residents, to fully participate in planning and policy debates and decision-making processes is a means of empowering communities and marginalized groups, particularly those who tend to be underrepresented such as women. It is also a means for the destination to co-create more authentic experiences, and to plan more comprehensive strategies on crucial issues such as visitor management of the destination, business models and priority areas for development, in order to help spread the sector benefits throughout the whole community.

For more recommendations about how tourism can help address the challenges around 'conflicts', see:  
World Tourism Organization (2020/b), *UNWTO Recommendations on Tourism and Rural Development – A Guide to Making Tourism an Effective Tool for Rural Development*, UNWTO, Madrid, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284422173>.

For more information on public-private-community partnerships, see:  
World Tourism Organization (2020/a), *AIUla Framework for Inclusive Community Development through Tourism*, UNWTO, Madrid, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284422173>.

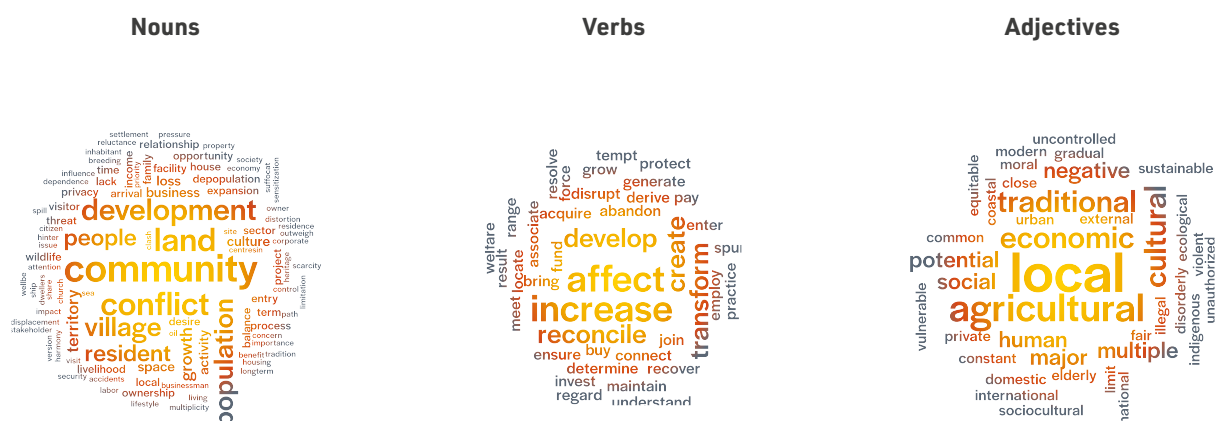
**Figure 2.15** Rank position of the challenge topic ‘conflicts’ among the top 10 topics



Note: Rank position 1 = most frequent.

Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO candidacies applications analysis, 2022.

**Figure 2.16** Most common key words mentioned in the topic ‘conflicts’



Note: The size of the words reflects the frequency of the key words mentioned; the bigger the size the higher the frequency.

Source: Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO candidacies applications analysis, 2022.

# 03

## THE PATH FORWARD: UNWTO TOURISM FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

### About this chapter

Rural tourism has great potential to stimulate local economic growth and development, as well as social change and preservation of cultural and natural heritage. At the same time, existing challenges at the local level must be properly recognized in order to take full advantage of the opportunities afforded by tourism. Based on the need to address these conditions under a programmatic approach and at local, national and regional levels, UNWTO has established the Tourism for Rural Development Programme within its Department of Tourism Intelligence, Marketing and Competitiveness. This chapter describes the vision, mission, framework, objectives and way forward of this Programme for supporting rural development through tourism.

### Key words

Rural tourism // rural development // Tourism for Rural Development Programme

### Key messages

- UNWTO designated 2020 as the Year of Tourism and Rural Development, which prepared the ground for promoting tourism's potential to create jobs and opportunities.
- In 2020, on the occasion of the G20 Saudi Presidency, UNWTO and the G20 Tourism Working Group developed the *AIUla Framework for Inclusive Community Development through Tourism* to help fulfil the sector's potential to contribute to and achieve inclusive community development and the SDGs.
- During the 24th session of the UNWTO General Assembly in 2021, the *UNWTO Recommendations on Tourism and Rural Development* were approved in order to support governments at various levels, as well as the private sector and the international community, in developing tourism in rural territories in a way that contributes to inclusive, sustainable, and resilient development.
- The Tourism and Rural Development Programme seeks to establish tourism as a driver to stimulate local economic growth, sustainability, inclusion, and well-being in rural areas.

# 3.1

## UNWTO TOURISM FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

The year 2020 was designated as the Year of Tourism and Rural Development. The designation acknowledged the existence of enabling factors to promote the potential of tourism to create jobs and opportunities, and to highlight the unique role tourism can play in preserving and promoting natural and cultural heritage, and in curbing urban migration.<sup>16</sup>

On this occasion, under the leadership of the 2020 G20 Saudi Presidency, UNWTO and the G20 Tourism Working Group developed the *AIUla Framework for Inclusive Community Development through Tourism*. The framework outlines how integrating inclusivity and sustainability into tourism models can benefit local communities while also preserving the rich natural and cultural heritage of destinations, as well as supporting the sector's potential to contribute to and achieve inclusive community development and the SDGs.

To this end, and as a complement to the sector's policy framework, the *UNWTO Recommendations on Tourism and Rural Development* were approved by the

24th session of the UNWTO General Assembly in 2021. This document aims to support governments at various levels, as well as the private sector and the international community, in developing tourism in rural territories in a way that contributes to inclusive, sustainable and resilient development.

Under this framework, the Tourism and Rural Development Programme, within the Market Intelligence and Competitiveness Department of UNWTO, seeks to establish tourism as a driver to stimulate local economic growth, sustainability, inclusion and well-being in rural areas.

The Programme recognizes the opportunities tourism can bring to rural areas thanks to its multiplier effects, its contribution to GDP and job creation – complementarity with other economic activities – and its capacity to support natural and cultural preservation, as well as promoting the dispersal of demand in time (fight seasonality) and space (along a wider territory).

16 World Tourism Organization (2020), Technical note, *2020 YEAR OF TOURISM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT*, available online at: <https://www.unwto.org/world-tourism-day-2020/tourism-and-rural-development-technical-note>.

VISION

Make tourism a driver of rural development and well-being.

MISSION

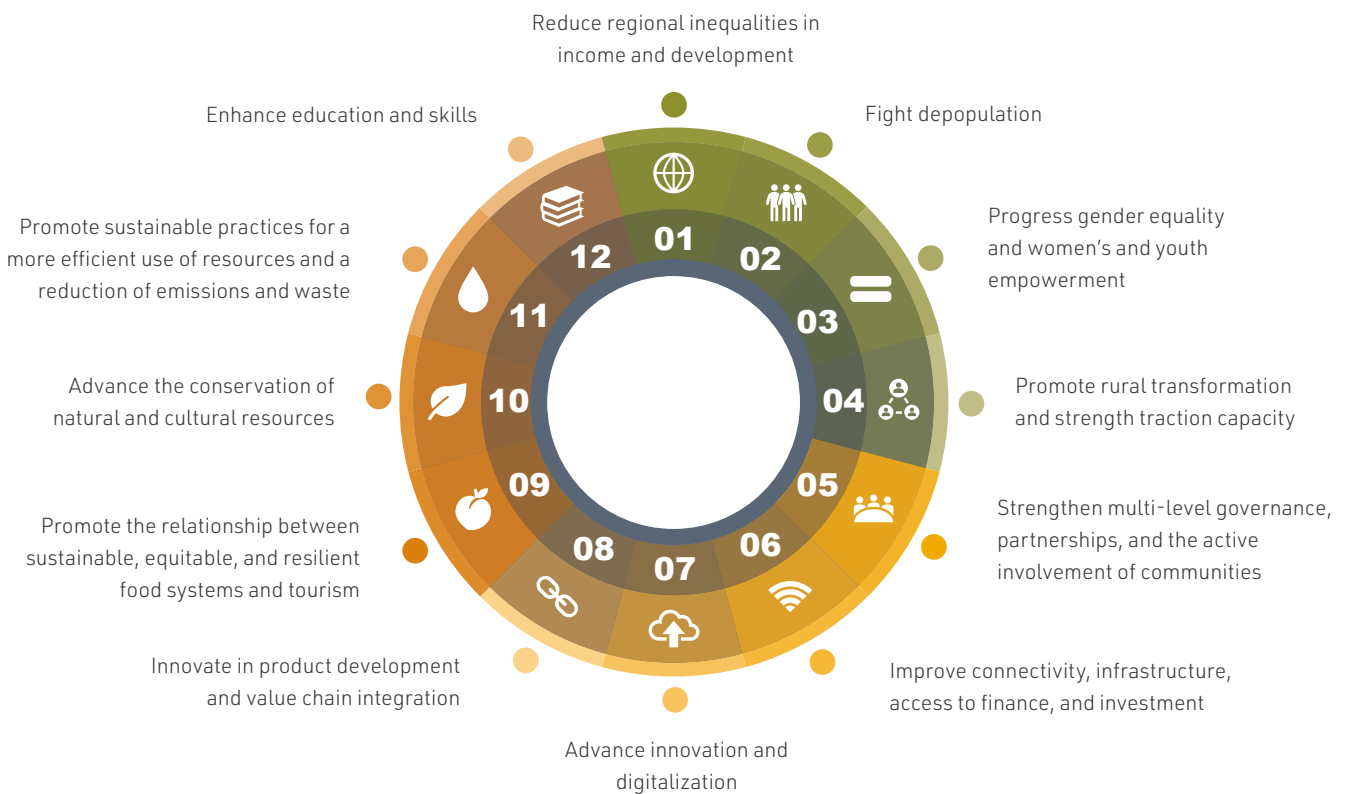
Advance the role of tourism in valuing and safeguarding rural villages along with their associated landscapes, knowledge systems, biological and cultural diversity, local values and activities.

Promote innovative and transformative approaches to the development of tourism in rural destinations that contribute to the three pillars of sustainability – economic, social and environmental – in line with the SDGs.

OBJECTIVES

UNWTO is committed to guiding the tourism sector as a driver of sustainable economic and social inclusion, and ensuring that tourism can contribute to “leaving no one behind” in a way that contributes to inclusive, sustainable and resilient development in order to enhance rural tourism’s contribution towards achieving the SDGs.

Figure 3.1 Objectives of the UNWTO Tourism for Rural Development Programme



## OUR POLICY FRAMEWORK

### UNWTO Recommendations on Tourism and Rural Development



The sustainability of tourism in rural areas will only be successful when a comprehensive, inclusive planning strategy is adopted and implemented, based on a multi-action and multi-stakeholder participatory approach.

The *UNWTO Recommendations on Tourism and Rural Development*, approved by the 24th session of the UNWTO

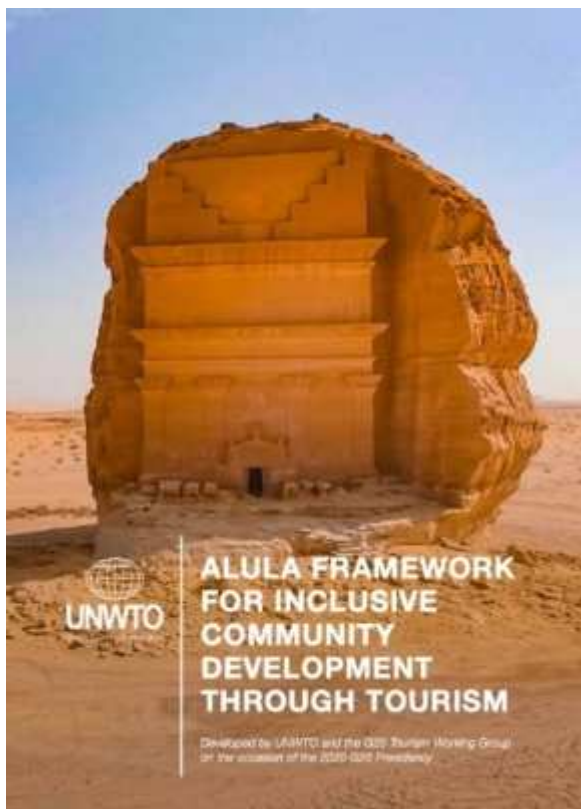
General Assembly, aim to support governments at various levels, as well as the private sector and the international community, in developing tourism in rural territories in a way that contributes to inclusive, sustainable and resilient development.

Such development will ensure the fair distribution of benefits from tourism, enhance job creation, protect natural resources and cultural heritage, promote social inclusion and empower local communities and traditionally disadvantaged groups, particularly women, youth and indigenous peoples. Inclusive tourism will also help to make rural territories more accessible for both locals and visitors of different generations and with different access needs, thus providing a better quality of life for all.

See the full Recommendations here:

World Tourism Organization (2020), *UNWTO Recommendations on Tourism and Rural Development – A Guide to Making Tourism an Effective Tool for Rural Development*, UNWTO, Madrid, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284422173>.

### ALUla Framework for Inclusive Community Development through Tourism



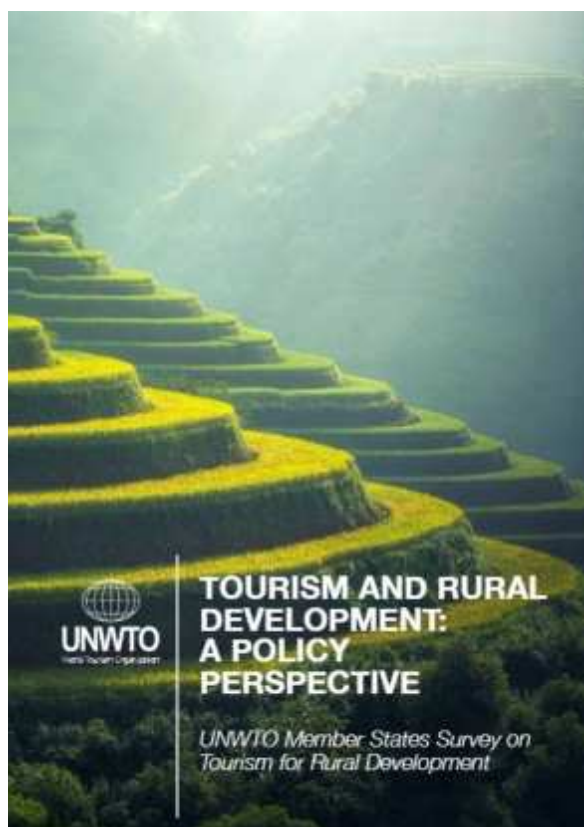
The Framework provides guidance and inspiration to all governments, as well as all other key stakeholders in the tourism sector – including regional and local governments, the private sector, industry associations, civil society, communities and tourists – with the aim of fostering a truly holistic and integrated approach to inclusive community development through tourism.

It further supports development cooperation organizations in prioritizing tourism as an effective means to advance inclusion by supporting governments and local communities. These organizations, in turn, are expected to develop policies and action plans that build and enhance public-private-community cooperation, making tourism an effective tool for inclusive development through the fair and efficient distribution of the benefits of tourism throughout their territories.

See the full report here:

World Tourism Organization (2020), *ALUla Framework for Inclusive Community Development through Tourism*, UNWTO, Madrid, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284422159>.

## Tourism and Rural Development: A Policy Perspective – UNWTO Member States Survey on Tourism for Rural Development



To gain a comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationship between tourism and rural development and the prevailing national policies, the UNWTO launched the first Tourism for Rural Development Survey, which was disseminated among its Member States.

This publication brings together the results of the survey conducted between October 2022 and January 2023. It highlights the way UNWTO Member States see the role that tourism plays in promoting rural development, including the challenges and opportunities, as well as the main policies and instruments that exist in their countries.

See the full report here:

World Tourism Organization (2023), *Tourism and Rural Development: A Policy Perspective*, UNWTO, Madrid, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284424306>.

## THE BEST TOURISM VILLAGES INITIATIVE

Following the 2020 UNWTO Year of Tourism for Rural Development, the *Recommendations on Tourism and Rural Development and the AIUla Framework*, in 2021 UNWTO launched the Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO Initiative pilot project, which was endorsed by the 24th session of the UNWTO General Assembly held on 30 November – 3 December 2021 in Madrid, Spain.

The initiative recognizes villages which are examples of a rural tourism destination with recognized cultural and natural assets, that preserves and promotes rural and community-based values, products and lifestyle and has a clear commitment to sustainability in all its aspects – economic, social and environmental – with the fundamental aim of making tourism one of the drivers of rural development and community well-being.

With the vision of making tourism a positive force for transformation, rural development and community wellbeing, the Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO Initiative seeks to advance the role of tourism in valuing and safeguarding rural villages along with their associated landscapes, knowledge systems, biological and cultural diversity, local values and activities (agriculture, forestry, livestock and/or fisheries), including their gastronomy.

In the first two editions of the initiative (2021 and 2022), 74 villages were recognized in five different regions globally, with examples of best practice of promoting and

managing a rural tourism destination with recognized cultural and natural assets.

The BTV Initiative also includes:

- The Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO Upgrade Programme, which is the second component of the initiative and benefits a number of villages selected from those that do not fully meet the initiative criteria. These villages receive support from UNWTO and partners to **improve elements of the areas identified as gaps in the evaluation process**. Through the initiative, 40 villages have been selected as part of the upgrade programme, and are thus able to take advantage of its capacity building and development activities;
- The Best Tourism Villages Global Network, which is a space for villages recognized as BTVs and also part of the Upgrade Programme to exchange experience, good practice, learning and opportunities. The network focuses its activities on **practice-sharing** events, fostering exchanges of experience between its members, while also involving industry experts and external stakeholders, and promoting **skills development** aimed towards identified needs, and opportunities for **industry meetings** and **networking**. As of July 2023, a total of 116 members are part of the network.

# CONCLUSIONS

Rural areas play a vital role in the economic and social fabric of countries around the world. However, these areas face significant challenges in terms of access to economic opportunities, infrastructure and services, which are critical for their sustainable development. Although some of these gaps and challenges have been overcome, the current trend shows that by 2030 some of them will persist, maintaining rural areas behind their urban counterparts.

Populations in rural areas face important gaps in their access to employment and economic opportunities, particularly for young people and women, something that added to the depopulation trend poses a threat to the conservation of heritage and traditional ways of living in rural landscapes. Tourism can increase motivation for people to stay or even migrate to rural areas. Across all regions, several case studies show how tourism is increasing opportunities for local people, especially for the younger generations.

Infrastructure, particularly transport and digital infrastructure, as well as health and financial services are key for the competitiveness and sustainability of rural tourism destinations. Tourism can impact positively on closing current services and infrastructure gaps in rural areas by incentivizing governments to ensure adequate levels of investment to improve the well-being of rural communities, as well as enriching the visitor experience. Tourism could also incentivize the use of digital services,

thus encouraging administrations to close gaps in digitalization and connectivity.

As documented in this report's examples, there is a wide range of different approaches through which tourism can promote innovative and transformative local actions that help to reduce limitations in rural areas and to enhance sustainable development. Nevertheless, when it comes to their implementation, these approaches contain challenges that have been recognized by rural destinations regardless of their location or level of development.

The most frequent challenges identified encompass the threats to the conservation of heritage in rural areas, including cultural and natural resources. The cases analysed show how, if well-managed, tourism can be a tool for preservation and promotion of these resources, but at the same time they also document how rural destinations still face threats to their heritage because of a lack of proper management or limitations in local awareness. For cultural heritage in particular, the depopulation phenomenon in rural areas constrains its preservation even further.

Other challenges include limitations in skills development, hence the need for education and training focusing both on tourism-related businesses and on rural activities such as agriculture. Although some of the analysed information from rural destinations acknowledged the



existence of some limited formative programmes, their wide concentration in urban areas makes it difficult for rural populations to take advantage of them. The gaps in infrastructure, widely recognized in the literature as one of the key challenges for rural areas, were also acknowledged at the local level, mainly emphasizing physical and digital accessibility issues.

The development of tourism in rural destinations also poses potential challenges regarding the management of conflicts. Disagreements in the development vision, changes to local ways of living, conflicts around land tenure and an uneven distribution of the benefits were identified as key challenges for the analysed villages.

Innovative approaches to overcome these challenges have been identified among the analysed candidacies. These include diversification of local economies, enhancement of local value chains and their integration into tourism, adoption of policies to prioritize investment in focused areas, introduction of new technologies and alternative sources of energy, and the creation and encouragement of public-private partnerships.

Despite the different levels of development between the various countries and regions, the abundant similarities provide a valuable opportunity for sharing and learning from experiences at the local level.

By recognizing the outstanding examples of rural destinations around the world that promote and preserve their cultural and natural assets, values, products and lifestyle, and that all share a clear commitment to sustainability, the Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO Initiative empowers and showcases local hands-on examples of how tourism is maximizing its positive impact in rural areas.

Using the data of the first two editions of the Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO Initiative from 2021 and 2022, this report is the first of a number of continuous monitoring processes that will document the challenges and opportunities that rural destinations are facing worldwide, and, more importantly, the innovative approaches that these destinations are using to overcome them.

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