



# SUSTAIN-T

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## Sustainable Tourism through Networking and Collaboration



**Module 1:**  
**Sustainable Management in the  
Tourism Sector**

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## Keywords

*Sustainable tourism; EU tourism policy; GSTC Criteria; sustainable management systems; ecolabels.*

<b>Learning objectives</b>	<p><i>As a result of engaging with the materials in this module, learners are intended to achieve the following learning outcomes:</i></p> <p><b>Knowledge:</b> <i>learn what is sustainable tourism, what are the most important regulations and initiatives at the European Union level, what are the GSTC Criteria and performance indicators, as well as sustainability certification systems to be implemented at the tourism MSEs level.</i></p> <p><b>Skills:</b> <i>improved ability to identify the main characteristics and tools that can be related to sustainable tourism, and how they can be applied to MSEs.</i></p> <p><b>Competencies:</b> <i>encouraging the promotion and the boost of sustainable tourism at the MSE level.</i></p>
<b>Methods</b>	<p><i>Autonomous learning by reading and studying the course materials and the complementary sources and links provided in the materials.</i></p>
<b>Time schedule</b>	<p><i>Time necessary for:</i></p> <p><i>Learning content (self-study): 1.5 hours</i></p> <p><i>Self-assessment questions: 5 minutes</i></p> <p><i>Additional time (depending on learners) is required to complete the learning activities and review complementary sources and links</i></p>

## Introduction

This first module of the SUSTAIN-T course aims to offer the learner an introduction to sustainable tourism, as a key concept that will be the basis for the following modules. The module is designed so that the learner becomes familiar with the concept of sustainable tourism, its contextualisation, as well as its potential implementation in the field of companies, particularly in the case of tourism micro and small enterprises (MSEs).

When talking about sustainability and sustainable tourism, for tourism MSEs the main aim should be to establish systems and procedures to incorporate sustainable tourism principles as a part of the core management function and to identify actions needed to bring sustainable tourism into being. This module aims to provide the initial basis for entrepreneurs and workers of MSEs to begin to develop the skills related to sustainability that will be explained in more detail in the following modules.

The module is structured in four differentiated units. The first one deals with the concept of sustainable tourism, its basic principles and its challenges. The second one offers a synthetic vision of the situation of sustainable tourism at the level of policies and initiatives by the European Union. The third unit deals with guidelines and recommendations for tourism MSEs to implement sustainability actions, giving special relevance to the GSTC Criteria. Finally, the fourth unit addresses the issue of certification systems for tourism companies, offering an introduction to the main systems and their characteristics.

## Content

### 1.1 Introduction to sustainable tourism

The concept of sustainable tourism is totally linked to the concept of sustainable development. In fact, the idea of sustainable tourism is none other than the application of the sustainable development principles to the tourism industry (at the destination level but also at the private sector level). Those principles, in a few words, want to find a balance between economic development, social development, and environmental development (the three dimensions or “pillars” of sustainable development -or sustainability as the progress towards sustainable development- established in the United Nations’ *Our Common Future* report, published in the late 1980s) (Swarbrooke, 1999; Hall *et al.*, 2015).

The growing awareness of negative impacts that tourism exerts over the environment and local societies led during the second half of the last century to the wide recognition of the need to promote a new tourism model. This model was called “sustainable tourism” in the early 1990s, once the concept of sustainable development was consolidated.

There are dozens of definitions of sustainable tourism. The World Tourism Organization has defined it as “tourism development [that] does not generate serious environmental or sociocultural

problems, the overall environmental quality of the tourism area is maintained or improved, a high level of tourist satisfaction is maintained so that tourist markets are retained, and the benefits of tourism are widely spread throughout the society” (WTO, 1998). The same institution has also defined it as that type of tourism “that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities” (UNEP & WTO, 2005).

We could also add here that to be truly sustainable, tourism should positively contribute to the economy, the social welfare, and the environmental conservation, both at the local and at the global level. One of the main objectives of sustainable tourism is to go after the maximisation of positive impacts of the activity (i.e. providing opportunities for enterprise development and employment creation, bringing tangible economic value to natural and cultural resources, being a force of inter-cultural understanding and peace), and the minimisation of negative impacts (i.e. placing pressure on fragile ecosystems, competing for the use of scarce resources, being a significant contributor to local and global pollution, exerting pressure on host communities, being a vulnerable and unstable source of income).

Therefore, some of the key principles of sustainable tourism that any type of stakeholder should take into account, according to the three main pillars of sustainability, are:

- Making optimal use of environmental resources, and helping to conserve natural resources and biodiversity.
- Respecting the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, contributing to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance.
- Ensuring viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities to host communities.

In addition, there are several key challenges for the sustainability of European tourism that were identified by a group of experts on sustainable tourism (Tourism Sustainability Group, 2007), and that all the stakeholders should also consider when they operate:

- *Reducing the seasonality of demand*, to guarantee the economic and social sustainability of destinations and enterprises, avoiding the concentration of activity in only few months or periods of time along the year.
- *Addressing the impact of tourism transport*, considering the important contribution of tourism mobility to current climate change and global warming, making tourism trips more energy-efficient and reducing the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.
- *Improving the quality of tourism jobs*, creating job opportunities for local people, without any discrimination, improving training opportunities and working conditions.
- *Maintaining and enhancing community prosperity and quality of life, in the face of change*, trying to maximise the proportion of income that is retained locally and other benefits to local communities, through strengthening local supply chains and promoting use of local produce, shops and other services by visitors.
- *Minimising resource use and production of waste*, taking special care on water and energy consumption (especially if the latter is not renewable), and reducing and managing litter.

- *Conserving and giving value to natural and cultural heritage*, as they are key assets for the generation of economic prosperity at the local level through tourism.
- *Making holidays available to all*, considering physical disability but also economic disadvantage of several social groups.
- *Using tourism as a tool in global sustainable development*, for instance contributing to the UN's sustainable development goals and other international initiatives.

Sustainable tourism principles can be applied to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations. Consequently, sustainable tourism should be seen not as a specific type of tourism (e.g. cultural tourism, coastal tourism, ecotourism, etc.), but as a way to understand and practice tourism (a philosophy), because all types of tourism can (and should) be sustainable. It should also be seen as an objective that any type of tourism destination, enterprise or related stakeholder, should pursue. Sustainable tourism must be seen, in fact, as a process of continuous improvement (i.e. sustainability as progress). That is why it seems more realistic to talk about a progress towards a more sustainable tourism (i.e. more sustainable than one year ago, more sustainable than our competitors, etc.) than talking about “real” sustainable tourism: it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to find a tourism destination or a tourism enterprise 100% sustainable, but all of them can implement actions that let them become more sustainable.

The progress towards a more sustainable tourism depends on the coordinated efforts of a variety of stakeholders: international agencies, national and local governments, destination management bodies, private sector businesses, employees and labour unions, NGOs, education and training providers, local community and tourists. However, tourism businesses, and more specifically **tourism MSEs**, which constitute 75% of the total number of companies in the sector in Europe, have the key role in promoting and implementing sustainable tourism. The other stakeholders have more of a regulating or facilitating role; they strive to create a favourable environment for businesses to become more sustainable. All in all, tourism enterprises are those who attract investments, develop new tourism products, deliver services, create employment and generate wealth. The key requirement to achieve a more sustainable tourism is for tourism enterprises to be responsible in their actions towards the environment, employees and the local community (UNWTO, 2013; Marinov, 2016).

The tourism sector (at all levels) rapidly adopted the concept of sustainable tourism, and most of the stakeholders and relevant institutions have considered sustainability as a priority for the sector since many years ago (Hall *et al.*, 2015). Sustainable tourism is seen as a need for the future survival of the sector. This happens, among other reasons, due to the assumption of responsibility by the sector, (it recognises the negative impacts that it has created, and the need to stop them), and also due to its own interest, (because the sector needs to change its image, especially in times of increasing global environmental and sustainability awareness, and because the benefits of doing it are higher than the costs of not doing it).

However, there are several difficulties in the implementation of sustainable tourism in the real world. This is due to the very general nature of the concept (everyone agrees with it, but very few people know what it really means or how can it be translated into the everyday management of businesses or destinations). Still nowadays, after more than three decades of using the concept of sustainability, many people confound this term with ecology or greening, while, as explained before, sustainability refers not only to the environmental dimension, but also to the economic and social

dimensions. There are several concepts that sometimes are used as synonyms of sustainable tourism, but they are not exactly the same. For instance, “green tourism” puts the stress on the environmental dimension of sustainability, leaving aside the economic and social dimensions. “Responsible tourism”, for its part, although it has many similarities - and it shares many principles - with sustainable tourism, it stresses more the ethical or behavioural component of enterprises and tourists.

In addition, there exists a risk of manipulation (i.e. greenwashing) or misuse of the concept of sustainable tourism, as it has also happened in other sectors, abusing of the “sustainable” adjective, without guaranteeing the actual application of the term, and putting its value at risk. To avoid that, there is a solid academic literature that clarifies what is sustainable tourism and what is not. This SUSTAIN-T course is in this line and will help the reader/student to better understand how to implement sustainable tourism strategies on the **tourism MSEs** level.

For **tourism MSEs** the main aim should be to establish systems and procedures to incorporate sustainable tourism principles as a part of the core management function and to identify actions needed to bring sustainable tourism into being.



#### **Learning activity 1.1:**

*Do you try to integrate the three pillars of sustainable development (economic, environmental and social) into day-to-day operations of your enterprise? If yes, give examples of how you do it. If not, indicate the main challenges.*

## **1.2 EU agenda for sustainable tourism: regulations, recommendations & initiatives**

The Lisbon Treaty specifically acknowledges the importance of tourism in Europe (Article 195). Therefore, the European Union (EU) works to promote tourism in order to maintain Europe's standing as a leading destination, and to maximise the industry's contribution to growth and employment. This is reflected in relevant EU policy.

At the European level, tourism policy is mainly focused on boosting the competitiveness of the sector worldwide. All references to sustainability challenges related to the tourism sector (which includes accommodation establishments, food and beverages, tourism-related transport, recreational activities, travel agencies, tour operators, etc.) are fragmented and dispersed across sector-based policies, and the so-called *acquis communautaire* (all the EU accumulated legislation). At the same time, however, many EU environmental sector-based policies such as waste, water, terrestrial and marine biodiversity, air, soil and climate point to the environmental sustainability of the tourism sector as increasingly essential.

Current specific EU policy on tourism only partially reflects the socio-economic and environmental dimensions of the sector, including the composite nature of the tourism industry and the related sustainability challenges. There is no specific legislation on the issue, while the strategic direction currently being followed has been provided by two European Commission Communications on tourism, which mostly address the economic dimension and only deal with the environmental impacts of the sector in general terms (Giulietti *et al.*, 2018).

The sole legislative exception is the regulatory Package Travel Directive (2015/2302/EU) that was adopted in 2015, and which was applicable from 1 July 2018. This takes into account developments in the travel market, reinforcing consumers' rights and reducing the administrative burden on businesses and market operators.

The first Communication - an "Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism" (European Commission, 2007) - sets the principles for achieving a competitive and sustainable tourism in Europe. These principles are the following ones:

- *Take a holistic and integrated approach:* All the various impacts of tourism should be taken into account in its planning and development.
- *Plan for the long term:* Long term planning requires the ability to sustain actions over time.
- *Achieve an appropriate pace and rhythm of development:* Tourism development should reflect and respect the character, resources and needs of host communities and destinations.
- *Involve all stakeholders:* A sustainable approach requires widespread and committed participation in decision making and practical implementation by all those implicated in the outcome.
- *Use best available knowledge:* Policies and actions should be informed by the latest and best knowledge available. Information on tourism trends and impacts, and skills and experience, should be shared across Europe.
- *Minimise and manage risk (the precautionary principle):* Where there is uncertainty about outcomes, there should be a full evaluation and preventative action should be taken to avoid damage to the environment or society.
- *Reflect impacts in costs (user and polluter pays):* Prices should reflect the real costs to society of consumption and production activities.
- *Set and respect limits, where appropriate:* The carrying capacity of individual sites and wider areas should be recognised, with a readiness and ability to limit, where and when appropriate, the amount of tourism development and volume of tourist flows.
- *Undertake continuous monitoring:* Sustainability is all about understanding impacts and being alert to them all the time, so that the necessary changes and improvements can be made.

This "Agenda" explicitly mentions the important role that **tourism MSEs** play in European tourism, as one of the key stakeholders, (jointly with destinations and tourists), for the implementation of sustainable tourism.

On its part, EC Communication "Europe, the world's No 1 tourist destination - a new political framework for tourism in Europe" (European Commission, 2010) represents the most recent general policy reference for the sector, and establishes and reconfirms certain priority actions already established in the previous "Agenda":

- To stimulate competitiveness in the European tourism sector;
- To promote the development of sustainable, responsible, and high-quality tourism;
- To consolidate Europe's image as a collection of sustainable, high-quality destinations;
- To maximise the potential of EU financial policies for developing tourism.

In the area of sustainable, responsible and high-quality tourism, the Commission proposed to monitor sustainable management of tourism destinations and protect the heritage of tourism



destinations (Juul, 2015). The Communication was accompanied by an implementation rolling plan that should be regularly updated.

In this context, the European Commission encourages a coordinated approach to European or multinational initiatives in the tourism sector (such as the Knowledge Networking Portal for Sustainable & Responsible Tourism - Destinet, or the European Destinations of Excellence - EDEN), including a consolidation of the socioeconomic and environmental knowledge base. It is also working on establishing a new framework for action to increase both the competitiveness of tourism and its capacity for further sustainable growth. The Communication “A European strategy for more Growth and Jobs in Coastal and Maritime Tourism” (COM(2014) 86 final), which covers a specific and important geographic segment of European tourism, provides one example of this.

The Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW) plays a major policy role through:

- Enhancing what European tourism has to offer in a global context;
- Providing support to tourism businesses, particularly to **tourism MSEs**;
- Promoting Europe as a destination;
- Fostering international cooperation.

In this context, the sustainable tourism dimension of tourism policy is addressed through a specific set of initiatives, in combination with initiatives in other areas such as “coastal and maritime tourism”, “cultural tourism”, “low-season tourism” and “accessible tourism”. The “sustainable tourism” file managed by the EC is characterised by the main following actions:

- diversification of the EU tourism offer through sustainable transnational tourism products and services, in areas such as environmentally friendly tourism - including cycling routes, sports and wellbeing tourism, nature tourism, and cultural routes crossing Europe that can contribute to tourism growth;
- the European Tourism Indicators System (ETIS), developed as a simple method for measuring the sustainability performance of tourism destinations (European Commission, 2016a);
- the EU Ecolabel and EMAS, as a voluntary tool available to tourism accommodation services willing to prove and promote their environmental excellence, (in this case, initiatives developed by the Directorate-General for Environment).



### **Learning activity 1.2:**

*Do you think the principles for achieving a sustainable and competitive tourism, cited above, can be applied to your enterprise? If not, what are the main challenges?*

## **1.3. Sustainable tourism criteria & performance indicators: GSTC approach**

In order to help achieve sustainability, **tourism MSEs** have at their disposal a set of different guidelines and recommendations that can inspire and help them in implementing actions that promote a more sustainable tourism. There are many examples of guidelines relating to tourism sustainability, developed at international (i.e. European Commission, 2016b), national (i.e. Visit England Sustainability Good Practice Guides), local and at site level. They may be produced by



international agencies, governments, management bodies such as national park authorities, and NGOs (i.e. Rainforest Alliance, 2013). They may also be produced by associations of enterprises, as a way of promoting good practice within a group, seeking common standards and demonstrating this to others (i.e. TUI Travel PLC, 2011). In this way, they form a very useful tool for self-regulation within the tourism sector. These guidelines can be used by companies to:

- Exercise control, encouraging everyone to abide by a common approach.
- Give helpful guidance and improve performance, providing a checklist of actions to follow to achieve objectives.
- Facilitate regulation compliance.

They can also be used as the basis for other instruments, such as reporting and certification, which will make them more effective. The advantages are that they are direct, simple and may be developed and used at little cost. The disadvantages are that they rely on voluntary action and there may be no process of checking or enforcement. In any case, they are a recommendable starting point for the introduction of sustainability actions at the **tourism MSEs** level, since MSEs can start implementing actions gradually, according to their available resources and capacity, not necessarily all of them at the same time.

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) Criteria can be seen as a set of guidelines or recommendations for all types of enterprises, including **tourism MSEs**. GSTC Criteria were created in 2008 by a partnership of very important international institutions (among them, the UN World Tourism Organization) in order to provide a common understanding throughout the world of “sustainable tourism”. Accordingly, they have become one of the key international reference and milestone as sustainable tourism guideline document to be followed by tourism companies.

GSTC Criteria have evolved over time, and nowadays there are different sets of criteria - ones for tourism companies, others for destinations, among others-. In the case of enterprises, two main sets of criteria have been developed: one for accommodations (“hotels”) and another one for tour operators. However, both sets are very similar with no significant differences and they have applicability to the entire tourism sector. According to their creators, those criteria are the minimum that any tourism business should aspire to reach, and they are organized around four main themes:

- effective sustainability planning,
- maximising social and economic benefits for the local community,
- enhancing cultural heritage, and
- reducing negative impacts to the environment.

The criteria have been developed and revised while striving to adhere to the Standard-Setting Code of the ISEAL Alliance, the body recognised to provide guidance on international norms for developing sustainability standards in all sectors. The criteria are revised every 3 to 5 years. Plans for revisions plus advance sign-up for public input into future revisions are available on GSTC website ([www.gstcouncil.org](http://www.gstcouncil.org)). The website also provides information on the process and history of the criteria development.

Some of the potential uses of the criteria by **tourism MSEs** include the following:

- Serve as the basis for certification for sustainability or the implementation of a sustainability management system (see Unit 1.4).
- Serve as basic guidelines for businesses to become more sustainable, and help businesses choose sustainable tourism programmes that fulfil these global criteria.
- Provide greater market access in the growing market for sustainable products, serving as guidance both for travellers and for travel agencies in choosing suppliers and sustainable tourism programmes.
- Help consumers identify sound sustainable tourism programmes and businesses.
- Serve as a common denominator for information media to recognise sustainable tourism providers.
- Help certification and other voluntary programmes ensure that their standards meet a broadly-accepted baseline.
- Offer governmental, non-governmental, and private sector programmes a starting point for developing sustainable tourism requirements.
- Demonstrate leadership that inspires others to act.

The criteria indicate *what* should be done, not *how* to do it or whether the goal has been achieved. This role is fulfilled by performance indicators, associated educational materials, and access to tools for implementation, all of which are an indispensable complement to the GSTC Criteria. **SUSTAIN-T self-audit tool** is a good instrument to check the compliance of GSTC Criteria for any enterprise.

It is recommended that all criteria be applied to the greatest extent practical, unless for a specific situation the criterion is not applicable and this is justified. There may be circumstances in which a criterion is not applicable to a specific tourism product, given the local regulatory, environmental, social, economic or cultural conditions. In the case of **tourism MSEs** which have a small social, economic and environmental footprint, it is recognised that limited resources may prevent comprehensive application of all criteria. Further guidance on these criteria may be found from the supporting indicators, that are designed to provide guidance in measuring compliance with the GSTC Criteria, published by the GSTC.

**Examples of criteria and indicators** for each of the four main sections of the set of criteria:

Criteria	Indicators
A7.4 Access for all ...provide access and information for persons with special needs, where appropriate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Sites, buildings and activities are accessible to persons with physical disabilities and other special needs, as appropriate to the nature of the operation.</li> <li>b. Clear and accurate information is provided on the level of accessibility.</li> <li>c. Accessibility is certified or checked with relevant experts/user bodies.</li> </ul>
B3 Local purchasing When purchasing and offering goods and services, the organisation gives priority to local and fair trade suppliers whenever these are available and of sufficient quality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. The organisation regularly audits its sources of supply of goods and services.</li> <li>b. The proportion of goods and services purchased from locally owned and operated businesses is measured and managed.</li> </ul>

	c. The proportion of non-locally owned or operated suppliers that are fair trade is measured and managed.
<p>C2 Protecting cultural heritage</p> <p>The organisation contributes to the protection, preservation and enhancement of local properties, sites and traditions of historical, archaeological, cultural and spiritual significance and does not impede access to them by residents.</p>	<p>a. The organization makes and records monetary contributions to the protection of cultural heritage.</p> <p>b. The organisation provides in-kind or other support for cultural heritage.</p> <p>c. Provision is made for local access to sites.</p>
<p>D1.3 Energy conservation</p> <p>Energy consumption is measured by type and steps are taken to minimise overall consumption. The organisation makes efforts to increase its use of renewable energy.</p>	<p>a. Total energy used is monitored and managed.</p> <p>b. Energy used per tourist/night for each type of energy is monitored and managed.</p> <p>c. Renewable sources are favoured and the share of renewable energy in total energy supply is monitored and managed.</p> <p>d. Equipment and practices are used that minimise energy use.</p> <p>e. Goals for reducing energy consumption are in place.</p> <p>f. Staff and guests are given guidance on minimising energy use.</p>



### Learning activity 1.3:

*Using the Sustain-T Self-Audit Tool, undertake self-assessment of sustainability performance of your enterprise and reflect on the results:*

*- Are there any areas where you underperform? If yes, what are these areas?*

*- Can you identify causes of low results in these areas? What are they?*

*- Do you think you could improve your performance in these areas?*

*- Do you have any immediate ideas on how to do it? If yes, list them. If not, proceed with the other Sustain-T modules. Structured around the GSCT Criteria, they may inspire such ideas.*

## 1.4 Certification systems for sustainable tourism

Although for a **tourism MSE** is relatively easier to implement sustainability actions following some guidance like the previously explained GSCT Criteria or other guidelines or best practices for enterprises, in some cases it can also be recommendable to implement a certified system. The latter option may be a little bit more complex than the previous one, but it can also give to the enterprise a better appreciation by customers and suppliers.

Certification is a mechanism for ensuring that an activity or product meets certain standards that may be set by government or agreed within an industry sector. In tourism, certification is used primarily to check on the activities and standards of tourism enterprises, such as accommodation operators, to ensure consumer safety and satisfaction (i.e. quality or “stars” systems). However, it may also be extended to cover sustainability issues.

The key components of certification include (UNEP & WTO, 2005):

- Voluntary participation by businesses.

- Well defined criteria and standards.
- A process of auditing and assessment.
- Recognition of those who meet the criteria, through a label or logo.
- Follow up, in due course, to check continued compliance.

Certification is one of the few objective ways of enabling those who want to promote sustainability in their actions and choices (e.g. individual consumers, tour operators and governments) to know who to support. Certification systems for sustainable tourism serve as important tools for distinguishing genuinely responsible companies, products, or services from those that are merely using "eco-" or "sustainable" as a marketing tool to attract consumers, and increase the credibility of certified organisations, and, consequently improve their image and reputation (Battaglia, 2017).

Most of the certification schemes in the tourism industry are related to quality (e.g. ISO 9000) or environmental performance (ecolabels and environmental management systems, such as ISO 14000). Social and economic aspects of sustainability have not been developed in the same way so far, although there is a standard for social responsibility (ISO 26000), and every time more systems are incorporating those aspects, especially the ecolabels.

In fact, we can differentiate two main types of certification schemes: on one side, ecolabels or sustainability labels (static systems, that consist of meeting a certain number of criteria), and on another side, environmental or sustainability management systems (dynamic systems, that consist of designing a flexible or adaptable management system addressed to promote sustainability).

Ecolabels are a type of 'performance' schemes that certify that businesses have reached a specific, measurable level of performance against the standards associated with the different elements of the scheme. Ecolabels can play two main roles: serve as a mechanism to guide industry actors to improve their performance by providing defined operational guidelines, and serve as a communication tool for consumers in highlighting products and services that have met or exceeded a set of defined criteria.

Currently, tourism boasts more than 140 quality labels or ecolabels worldwide. The small stickers with green leaves, radiant suns or blue flags are displayed at hotel entrances, tourism offices or at the entrance gates of camping sites (Plüss *et al.*, 2014). Some examples of highly recognised tourism ecolabels or sustainability labels in Europe are: Biosphere Responsible Tourism, EarthCheck, Green Globe, Green Key, Travelife, Blaue Schwalbe, European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST) in Protected Areas, etc. Most of them are applicable to accommodation enterprises, but others to tour operators and other tourism services companies. For instance, GSTC - apart from being a set of criteria - is also a certification system in which accommodations and tour operators can become certified. One of the ecolabel of reference at the European level is the EU's Ecolabel for accommodation establishments and campsites. However, the latter only covers the environmental dimension of sustainability. Some examples of successful cases of implementation of ecolabels in **tourism MSEs** in Europe can be seen in the module's **best practices**.

Environmental Management Systems (EMS) and/or Sustainability Management Systems (SMS) are 'process' schemes that certify that businesses have established and documented systems for assuring the improvement of quality or environmental performance. They do not determine any specific performance results other than the company's own and those required by law.

Management systems provide a structure of how the organisation should manage internal processes and connections as well as interaction with its environment, namely customers, suppliers, other interested parties. Hence, management systems provide systemised information on how things are done within the company.

The most widespread Environmental Management Systems (EMS) in the tourism sector are the ISO 14001 (international scope, developed by the International Organization for Standardization - ISO), and the EMAS (Eco Management and Audit Scheme) (European scope, developed by the European Union). There also exists other management systems more specific, such as the ISO 50001, energy management system for an organization, or the sustainability management system for events (event organization enterprises), ISO 20121, among many others.

Bearing in mind that ISO 14001 and EMAS are the two most extended EMS in the tourism sector, it is important to be able to differentiate both systems, as they have a lot in common, but they are not the same thing. The ISO 14001 requirements are fully integrated in EMAS, however there are elements where EMAS goes further than ISO 14001. While ISO 14001 focuses on improving the management system, EMAS organisations commit to the continuous improvement of their environmental performance beyond legal requirements. EMAS also requires active involvement and participation of employees, among other stricter requirements than ISO 14001.

These management systems have several things in common with ecolabels, such as the fact that both systems are certified and externally audited (by an independent auditor). But there are several differences too. Management systems, as previously said, are more dynamic and flexible. This allows each enterprise to establish its own environmental objectives for each year, not having to accomplish certain predetermined standards. Since these systems do not have specific criteria, enterprises can follow or can be inspired by guidelines, such as the GSTC Criteria explained in the previous unit, or other documents intendedly created for helping with this (i.e. European Commission, 2016b; TUI Travel PLC, 2011), especially when enterprises want to design and establish specific sustainability objectives and actions.

However, these systems have a relatively high level of complexity of implementation, since they require complex documentation (i.e. records, processes, annual audits, etc.). In this regard, it can be said that management systems, although recommendable, are more complex for **tourism MSEs** than ecolabels, due to the lower complexity and the higher simplicity of the latter. European Commission, though, has created a guidebook addressed to tourism enterprises (also **MSEs**) by offering them a set of practical steps to improve environmental performance and, in the end, to facilitate them in the implementation of EMAS system (European Commission, 2016b).

In any case, businesses that participate in certification often report that the main advantage to them is the educational process it involves, helping them to clearly understand the requirements of sustainability and focusing their attention on the changes they need to make in their business. Compliance with certification also benefits businesses through (UNEP & WTO, 2005):

- Cost savings: most enterprises report clear savings, for example energy, water and raw material costs.

- Providing a potential marketing advantage: however, this appears to be still quite limited in terms of the certification of environmental or social sustainability compared to certification of quality.
- Better recognition by supporting bodies: including opportunities for technical assistance and sometimes finance.
- Compliance with legislation (avoiding fines and sanctions).

A particularly important sign of possible future market advantage is the growing interest by some tour operators in using certification as a basis for selecting the businesses that they will sub-contract and include in their holiday catalogues, reflecting the increasing integration of sustainability into their business ethics and activities.



#### **Learning activity 1.4:**

*Has your enterprise implemented any certification scheme or an EMS / SMS? If yes, why did you decide to do it? What results has it helped you to achieve? If not, do you have any plans to do it in the future? What objectives would it help you to accomplish?*

### **Summary of key points**

- Sustainable tourism can be defined as that type of tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities.
- Tourism MSEs have a key role in promoting and implementing sustainable tourism, understood as a process of continuous improvement.
- At the European level, tourism policy is mainly focused on boosting the competitiveness of the sector worldwide. The European Commission has issued a pair of Communications in which the promotion of sustainable, responsible, and high-quality tourism is one of the priorities.
- In order to help achieve sustainability, tourism MSEs have at their disposal a set of different guidelines and recommendations that can inspire and help them in implementing actions that promote a more sustainable tourism.
- The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) Criteria are a set of guidelines or recommendations for all types of tourism enterprises, serving as basic guidelines for businesses to become more sustainable, and help businesses choose sustainable tourism programmes.
- Certification is used primarily to check on the activities and standards of tourism enterprises. Certification systems for sustainable tourism serve as important tools for distinguishing genuinely responsible companies that put in place sustainability actions and programs.
- There are two main types of sustainability certification for enterprises. Ecolabels or sustainability labels (that consist of meeting a certain number of criteria), and environmental or sustainability management systems (that consist of a management system with sustainability objectives).

### **Integrative learning activity for Module 1: Position Paper**



*Systematise the reflections you made while engaging with the module materials. Outline the aspects, which need to be considered for your enterprise to improve its sustainability performance.*

Indicative structure:

1. General awareness of the sustainable development principles in the tourism sector and the way you apply them in your business operations;
2. Strengths supporting sustainability performance of your enterprises (consider all three pillars of sustainability);
3. Weaknesses hindering the progress towards a more sustainable performance;
4. Value of certification schemes and/or environmental/sustainability management systems for your enterprise;
5. Broad definition of objectives you may set up for improving sustainability performance of your enterprises.

<b>Useful links</b>	<a href="http://sdt.unwto.org">http://sdt.unwto.org</a> <i>Sustainable development of tourism section of United Nations World Tourism Organisation, with different resources and links to sustainable tourism related topics.</i>
	<a href="http://www.gstcouncil.org/">http://www.gstcouncil.org/</a> <i>Global Sustainable Tourism Council website, where GSTC Criteria are available, among other information related to those criteria.</i>
	<a href="https://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/tourism/offer/sustainable_en">https://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/tourism/offer/sustainable_en</a> <i>European Commission's DG GROW website section dedicated to sustainable tourism at the European level. Link to ETIS indicator system and other relevant documentation.</i>
	<a href="https://www.visitbritain.org/maximising-your-sustainability">https://www.visitbritain.org/maximising-your-sustainability</a> <i>Section dedicated to sustainable tourism inside the British national tourism agency. It includes several sustainability good practice guides for different types of tourism enterprises.</i>
	<a href="http://ec.europa.eu/environment/emas/index_en.htm">http://ec.europa.eu/environment/emas/index_en.htm</a> <i>Official website about the environmental management system EMAS, promoted by the European Commission</i>

**Glossary**

<b>Sustainability</b>	<i>Although there is no universally agreed definition of sustainability, in many occasions it is used as a synonym of sustainable development (that type of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs). To be more precise, though, sustainability would be the process that brings to sustainable development.</i>
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<i>Sustainable tourism</i>	<i>The implementation of sustainable development or sustainability principles in the tourism sector.</i>
<i>Micro and small enterprises (MSEs)</i>	<i>Micro enterprise: An enterprise that employs fewer than 10 persons and whose annual turnover and/or annual balance sheet total does not exceed EUR 2 million. Small enterprise: An enterprise that employs fewer than 50 persons and whose annual turnover and/or annual balance sheet total does not exceed EUR 10 million.</i>
<i>Greenwashing</i>	<i>A form of spin in which green marketing is deceptively used to promote the perception that an organisations products, aims or policies are environmentally friendly or they are promoting sustainability, when this is not the reality (or that is done only partially).</i>
<i>Ecolabel</i>	<i>A sustainability or environmental certification scheme for companies or organisations that consists of meeting a certain number of standard criteria. If the company or organisation meets those criteria, it can use the label or logo for marketing purposes.</i>
<i>Sustainable Management System (or Environmental Management System)</i>	<i>A sustainability or environmental certification scheme for companies or organisations that consists of a set of processes and practices that enable an organisation to reduce its environmental impacts and increase its operating efficiency.</i>



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