



Asean's Regional Integration and Tourism Initiatives for a Sustainable Future: A Comparative Analysis with the EU

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ABSTRACT

This year in January 2026 the ASEAN Tourism Forum was held in Cebu. The forum's theme was Navigating the future of Tourism together. Ideas around sustainable tourism were raised in the forum that are important on an international level and discussions were also done on ASEAN Tourism Sectoral Plan 2026-2030. Based on the same, this paper aims to explore and compare ASEAN's efforts in regional integration in the tourism sector, particularly with respect to sustainable development, with those implemented by the European Union (EU). During the 27th Meeting at the 2024 forum, importance was placed on the need for closer cooperation amongst ASEAN Member Nations in multiple sectors in order to maintain resilience and sustainability of ASEAN Tourism by ASEAN Tourism Ministers. The paper starts with discussing theories surrounding regional integration and its significance globally in fostering sustainable tourism practices. The paper then goes on to discuss the current scenario of Tourism sector in ASEAN & EU. Important Institutions and documents governing tourism such as the primary goals and initiatives listed in the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan as well as Pakse Declaration etc. are also discussed. The same are

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compared with specific EU documents like the EU Tourism Indicators System (ETIS), European Tourism Manifesto for Growth and Jobs etc. Analysis and comparison is done of the policy frameworks, strategies and best practices employed in both the blocs i.e. ASEAN & EU. The goal of this comparative analysis is not only to figure out best practices and suggest new initiatives but also to offer a roadmap for future policies and frameworks on Sustainable tourism practices in the ASEAN region.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism as we all know is a vital component for driving global economic growth and development in the positive direction. Tourism by way of promoting regional integration has also increased cross border investments, infrastructural development and socio cultural exchange between nations (Khan et al., 2020).

ASEAN & EU have placed lot of attention on tourism in their regional integration efforts as a way to utilise its potential for development that embraces sustainability and inclusivity. However, the concept of sustainable tourism is now receiving global recognition because of tourism's adverse effects on the environment. This therefore means that it is important to create equilibrium between the economic gains derived from tourism vis-à-vis local community welfare, preserving natural and cultural heritage so as to benefit future generations (Knowles-Lankford & Lankford, 2000). As such, both ASEAN and EU are aware of the need to promote sustainable tourism hence regularly they come up with initiatives and policies concerning it in their respective regions.

Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia Myanmar, Philippines, Lao PDR Singapore, Vietnam and Thailand are the ASEAN member nations. The association was established in 1967. Tourist arrivals in the six major ASEAN economies literally crashed in 2021 after very tight travel restrictions were put in place to curb the COVID-19 pandemic (*Tourism | ASEAN Investment*, n.d.). However, now the ASEAN countries have bounced back and launched initiatives to win back travellers and breathe new life into tourism. With a population of 671.6 million the ASEAN GDP for 2022 was projected as US 3.6 trillion dollars. The tourism industry saw surge in international arrivals by 153.09% indicating a strong recovery of the tourism sector (*HKTDC Research*, n.d.).

Increasing tourist traffic brings massive foreign exchange, generates employment, and is causing a boom in infrastructure development. While data may vary from country to country, the total share of tourism in



ASEAN's GDP is relatively high. UNWTO estimates, tourism accounts for about 12.1 percent of total employment in Southeast Asia, hence providing important sources of income for the poor and the marginalized (Asian Development Bank, 2023). The rapid growth in tourism have also brought up lot of worries. For example, the risk associated with dollarisation, culture erosion and commodification (Halleux, 2017).

27 European nations formulate the EU. The same has developed into a powerful economic union with a single market and a common currency the Euro. It has an important role while addressing global challenges such as sustainable development and climate change, both being central to the EU's vision (European Union, 2023). EU's commitment to Sustainable tourism is quite evident from "EU Strategy for Sustainable Tourism" that focuses on green and digital transition, social inclusion as well as resilience against future problems (EU strategy for sustainable tourism, 2021).

Early on in 2024 the tourism industry saw major recovery with the foreign arrivals and overnight stays surpassing the pre-pandemic levels (Abigail, 2024). However, we can't deny the fact that EU tourism has also witnessed geopolitical instability due to Ukraine War as well as high inflation alongside (Rinol, 2024). The bold European Green Deal shapes EU tourism by pushing eco-smart ways and supporting sustainable destinations (Eckert & Kovalevska, 2021). EU aims to revolutionize travel with a focus on long-term thinking and smart choices in order to shake up how Europeans think about trips and vacation.

Tourism has advanced the restoration of rural areas and has aided in cultural conservation and intercultural dialogue. For example, EU's "European Heritage Days" programme which attracted over 30 million participants has in a manner increased communities' sense of pride in their respective cultural heritage (*European Heritage Days*, n.d.).

Sustainable tourism policies at the EU level should also reduce some of the negative effects of tourism, such as over tourism, cultural commodification, and the possible expulsion of residents (Olli, 2013). However, balancing economic benefits from tourism and cultural authenticity, not mentioning the welfare of destinations' residents, is yet to be achieved.

Drawing upon the ASEAN & EU's experience discussed in the aforementioned paragraphs, this paper explores in detail how ASEAN and the EU approach regional tourism integration, drawing out best practices and lessons learned. This comparative analysis endeavors to provide useful policy recommendations for ASEAN by analyzing the successes and challenges that both blocs have faced in



trying to attain sustainable tourism and its full potentials for sustainable and inclusive growth for the regions concerned.

2. WHY REGIONAL INTREGRATION?

In this section of the paper, we will talk about the theoretical framework on regional integration, its benefits, and challenges. Further discussion will also be made on how regional integration can drive sustainable progress and development, particularly in the tourism sector. One way to define regional integration is that it is an effort at establishing a multidimensional perspective of developing common prosperity, increased cooperation, and sustainable development among countries in a particular geographic region. Reduction of barriers between countries reaps a lot of benefits for them in terms of economic interlinkages, political cooperation, and socio-cultural exchange (Radziyevska & Ye, 2020).

Few prominent theoretical frameworks that have surfaced to support the concept of regional integration are:

Functionalism, most famous in the early 20th century, states that functional cooperation in fields of common interest, like transport or research, would "spillover" into larger integration. Neo-functionalism is an extension of this approach, emphasizing the role of supranational institutions and non-state actors in building trust and creating further integration beyond technical fields.

In contrast, intergovernmentalism, which evolved in the 1960s, still has a focus on national interests. It has been put forth that only if the states, as informed actors, perceive the delegation of power to the supranational bodies aid them in pursuing their aims, then integration can occur and eventually become a tool of the state rather than a force binding it (Thakur & Langenhove, 2006).

The above-mentioned theories are not mutually exclusive. Overlaps can exist between them. The integration process is complex and may consist of elements borrowed from all of the three theories

Regionalism is very essential in tourism, especially seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. We saw how regional organizations offered a platform for coordinated action and support among member states during the pandemic (Fornari & Allis, 2022).

Regional integration brings a lot in terms of economic gains. Reduction of tariffs and non-tariff barriers increases cross-border trade and foreign direct investment, hence boosting economic growth. An expanded regional market brings economies of scale of production through reduction of costs and increasing competitiveness. For instance, EU's single market has helped its member nations to benefit from unrestricted flow of goods, services, investment, and labor in making their economies prosperous.



There are also political gains to be derived from regional integration, such as increased cooperation and dialogue over common issues. For instance, countries can share anti-terrorism and climate change policies and trans-border crime, etc. On the international front, a common platform on international negotiations in trade agreements will bring regional blocs higher bargaining power in international negotiations in trade agreements. ASEAN has done reasonably well in this regard; member states have been cooperating on a number of regional initiatives that are conducive to fostering peace and stability in the region (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2002).

The social benefits include improved people-to-people exposure, educational exchange, and cultural projects, one could build tolerance, understanding, and shared regional identity. Better living standards vis-à-vis improved health care and education systems are only some of the benefits of regional integration (Asian Development Bank, 2006). For instance, the EU Erasmus+ program has contributed to many mobility opportunities for students and staff and has promoted intercultural learning, thus greatly enhancing the quality of the educational experience for participating students (European Commission, 2023).

However, regional integration per se is not free of problems. The regional economic disparities among countries of a region may make the equal distribution of fruits of integration hard. National sovereignty concerns and different systems of government are basically the barriers that erect deeper integration. Implementation of regional agreements is another critical factor; effective implementation calls for serious efforts in translating these into action (Asian Development Bank, 2006).

Regional integration can also turn out to be a very strong catalyst of sustainable tourism development. It will be realized through the development of regional tourism circuits, that is, creating interconnected itineraries that can enable one to stay longer in multiple countries within a region and thus diversify tourism experiences. Cross-border infrastructure development promotion and adoption are key to long-term regional circuit development. There is a need for investment in transport, communication, and other facilitating types of infrastructure at country level. On the regional front, coordination in efforts toward adoption of standards for sustainable tourism should be stepped up towards harnessing the potential of tourism in transforming economies and improving regional cooperation on sustainability (Zamyatina, Peshkova, & Abramov, 2021).

Comparatively, if we take ASEAN and EU and try to fathom out and grasp the main differences between the type of their regional integration, we can easily come to the point that the EU aims at a far greater depth of integration, having the goals of political and monetary union, while ASEAN is an economic, political, social, and cultural cooperation that does not point to any political or monetary union, as does the EU. The

EU is a case of supranationalism where binding decisions are made at the central level. On the other hand, ASEAN is an intergovernmental organization that requires consensus among members. (Kotani, 2016) Compared to ASEAN, the EU includes a more comparative set of countries whose differences were less wide-ranging in terms of economic development and political system. ASEAN has been established by countries with huge disparities in economic development, differences in political systems, and cultural backgrounds.

While ASEAN bestows significant admiration upon the experience of the EU, it certainly has a much different way of making its way toward regional integration.

3. Key Players in ASEAN Tourism:

A number of key institutions are supporting ASEAN Tourism and helping to promote regional integration. These institutions enhance sustainable growth, promote competitiveness, and drive ASEAN's position as globe's most sought after travel destination. The key players are (ASEAN, n.d.):

ASEAN Tourism Forum: Being the event of its kind in the region, ATF opens its doors as a lively forum for discussion, networking, and learning. ATF, annually hosted promotes touristic products, stimulates business opportunities, and strengthens cooperation between ASEAN nations, tourism industry stakeholders, and international partners.

ASEAN National Tourism Organisations: Every ASEAN nation has its national tourism organisation, which is responsible for promoting tourism development and marketing within that country. These NTOs recognise, however, that there is power in a common approach, hence their cooperation through the ASEAN Tourism Marketing Centre in advocating Southeast Asia as one very attractive tourist market.

ASEAN Tourism Marketing Centre: The ATMC actively promotes the design of common marketing campaigns and implements the strengthening of the ASEAN tourism brand, as well as promotions to the world market of diverse attractions found in the region. Their work is crucial to placing ASEAN as both competitive and united in the global tourism market.

Senior Officials Meeting on Tourism-ASEAN: This is constituted by senior officials in charge of tourism in the ten ASEAN member states. It oversees the ATSP implementation process. Secretariat SOM-TE meets regularly and reviews progress, discusses challenges or shortcomings, and formulates recommendations for regional tourism cooperation and adjustment to keep aligning with national tourism policies.



Subsector Working Groups: Under the general guidance of the SOM-TE, a range of specialized working groups would operate in different areas of the tourism sector. These would include working groups for tourism standards development, human resource development in the industry, and the practice of sustainable forms of tourism. Such working groups ensure that appropriate, relevant plans and programs are in place to deal with issues and opportunities as they arise.

ASEAN Secretariat: Hand in glove with other ASEAN tourism bodies, the ASEAN Secretariat serves as an indispensable administrative and technical support to facilitate effective communication and coordination among member states. Their role becomes imperative for the smooth functioning of ASEAN's tourism cooperation mechanisms.

ASEAN Plus Three Tourism Cooperation: Recognizing the need to cooperate beyond ASEAN, the bloc engages effectively with China, Japan, and South Korea on several thematic initiatives in tourism. Having information exchange, joint promotional activities, and working together on common challenges—with special attention to crisis management within the tourism sector—such strategic partnership is what it occupies.

Dialogue partners—ASEAN has a lot of partners it collaborates with in this context; there are international organizations like the UN WTO and regional blocs such as the European Union. There will be sharing of knowledge, capacity building, and aligning of ASEAN state members' tourism development strategies in keeping with global best practices through such partnerships.

On paper, the institutional framework for ASEAN tourism cooperation looks pretty solid. Exciting achievements involve significant growth in tourist arrivals to the region. Aggressive joint marketing campaigns, such as "Visit ASEAN@50," succeeded fabulously in portraying Southeast Asia as one single destination. The setting up of regional initiatives, such as the ASEAN Ecotourism Strategic Plan, exemplifies a strong commitment to sustainable tourism development (Current Issues in Tourism, 2016). Open dialogue and opportunities for cooperation fared out well through events such as the ASEAN Tourism Forum, which is fast gaining a lot of participation by industry stakeholders and hence creating business opportunities.

4. ASEAN Agreements And Policies

Beyond the dedicated framework of ASEAN tourism institutions, there exists a network of wider-reaching agreements and policies delivering stronger impacts on the regional travel landscape toward realizing the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan.



The “ASEAN Framework Agreement on Visa Exemption”, even though not a common visa scheme, encourages processes that smoothen them. This has resulted in initiatives like visa exemption arrangements for citizens of other ASEAN countries, which have largely increased intra-ASEAN travel and helped strengthen regional integration (ASEAN, 2006).

Likewise, so far, there has been liberalization of air transport, comparable to the “ASEAN Open Skies Policy”. The policy increases competition among airlines, thus leading to reduced fares and a large number of flights happening, making travel even more accessible and opening up even the remotest areas to tourism (ASEAN, 2015).

At the same time, however, this growth has to go with responsible practice. ASEAN is fully informed how tourism might affect the environment and has come up with various agreements to cushion these effects, including the “MOU on ASEAN Sea & Turtle Convention” (ASEAN, 1997). This framework guides cooperation in mitigating the environmental footprint from tourism development by promoting responsible practices. For example, the Pakse declaration has a roadmap for developing and promoting ecotourism in the region by outlining options that will enhance community-based initiatives and raise tourist awareness on responsible travel (ASEAN, 2016).

The commitment does not stop at conservation. Tourism has been identified in the “ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint” as one of the means for cultural exchange. This in turn acknowledges the developing cultural tourism products that showcase heritage diversity for the region. It has resulted in joint cultural tourism itineraries that are showcasing the diversity of traditions from several ASEAN nations. For example, this has led to the creation of joint cultural tourism itineraries that put across the diversity of traditions across multiple ASEAN nations (ASEAN, 2016)

Furthermore, having in mind the economic potential of tourism, the “ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint” lays down provisions for stimulating investment in this region's tourism infrastructure and increases the rate of skills development within the sector. Some of the developments arising from this are forums such as the ASEAN Tourism Investment Forum, a platform that matches investors with tourism projects across the region, stimulating growth and jobs (ASEAN SECRETARIAT, 2015).

“Enhancing Sustainable Tourism in ASEAN Waterside Cities” is pioneering initiative by UNESCO and partners aims to leverage the distinctive cultural and natural resources of local communities in ASEAN waterside cities to promote sustainable development and regional collaboration (UNESCO, 2023).



Thailand has recently in April 2024 floated a common regional visa for the six ASEAN countries—Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Vietnam—to facilitate easy travel and mobility. As most of ASEAN is at peace and its component parts relatively isolated from the major global conflicts, a common visa along the lines of Schengen could project it as a safe tourist destination and exhibit its capabilities in renewing and reinventing itself (Maini, 2024).

In a nutshell, ASEAN's institutional approach to tourism goes much beyond dedicated institutions. Weaving together visa facilitation, liberalization of air transport, environmental protection, and cross-sectoral collaboration, ASEAN has been able to piece together the overall strategy that seeks to shape a travel landscape that is at one time dynamic, sustainable, and inclusive.

4.1. “ASEAN TOURISM STRATEGIC PLAN 2016-2025” (ATSP) AND POST PANDEMIC EVOLUTION

The ATSP, adopted in Manila in 2016, was the consequence of continued effort to unleash the enormous potential of tourism in Southeast Asia without compromising or undermining sustainable and inclusive growth.

This section of the paper discusses the primary key points of the ATSP and how the “ASEAN Framework on Sustainable Tourism Development in the post COVID-19 Era” revises this strategic plan for the world post pandemic.

The "ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan 2016-2025" gave a broad-ranging vision:

"By 2025, ASEAN shall be a quality tourism destination with a unique, diversified ASEAN experience, and committed to responsible, sustainable, inclusive, and balanced tourism development, so as to contribute significantly to the socio-economic wellbeing of ASEAN peoples."

For this vision, the plan identified two general strategic directions with a number of strategic actions:

4.1.1 “Strategic Direction 1: Enhance ASEAN competitiveness as a single tourism destination”

- **Cater to intensified promotion and marketing:** Develop an integrated ASEAN brand and execute selective marketing initiatives.
- **Diversify tourism products:** A range of products appealing to tourists, other than those conventional products, in a bid to woo diverse travelers.



- **Invitation for Tourism Investments:** Invite domestic and foreign investment in the tourism infrastructure and services.
- **Upskill the tourism work force:** Provide training and development opportunities to enhance the skills and knowledge of the tourism workforce.
- **Harmonise ASEAN Tourism Standards:** Expand and enforce consistent quality standards for tourism Facilities, Services, and Destinations across all ASEAN nations.
- **Connectivity and Destination Infrastructure Implemented:** All kinds of connectivity and destination infrastructure for transport, communication, and others should be enhanced to facilitate growth in tourism.
- **Enhance Travel Facilitation:** Streamline visa processes and smoothen border crossings to make traveling within ASEAN easier.

4.1.2 “Strategic Direction 2: Ensure that tourism in ASEAN is sustainable and inclusive”.

- **Empower Local Communities and Private business partnerships in Tourism Value Chains:** Enhance the fair share of tourism benefits and strengthen local community positions and strengthening the role of private businesses.
- **Safeguard, Preservation and management of Heritage Tourism Sites:** Provide visitors with a secure and safe beautifully managed environment where natural treasures and the cultural heritage are conserved for future generations.
- **Awaken the Industry on Environmental protection and Climate Change:** Lessen the effects of tourism on the environment while enhancing resilience to challenges.

The primary strength of ATSP 2016-2025 is the articulation of a clear vision: “establishing ASEAN as a quality tourism leading destination that offers unique and diversified experiences”. It promotes eco-tourism or community-based tourism projects for the preservation of culture and achieve benefits for local communities.

Nonetheless, the ATSP is not perfect. Although it was successful in outlining general strategic directions but it was unable to offer comprehensive implementation plans, precise deadlines or reliable data collection systems for tracking advancement



For instance, while the plan is silent on attracting Private Sector investments in tourism, it also, at the same time, lacks clear measures and incentives to attract foreign investors or even support local tourism ventures. It is particularly with the COVID-19 Pandemic that lack of detailed planning has become so obvious, given external shocks had easily hit the tourism sector. The ATSP has little accounted for the potential shocks of pandemics, economic crises, or natural disasters; this reflects one of the critical failures inherent in the framework. In an age of unprecedented technological progress, the lack of real attention towards digital transformation and leveraging technology for tourism development is a very obvious limitation. Given the context in which the strategic plan was prepared, this omission is understandable, but the COVID-19 brought realization that much more could have been done, particularly in terms of digitalization, such as contactless solutions to travel and online marketing and data-driven decision-making.

4.3 “ASEAN framework on sustainable tourism development in the post COVID-19 era”

(ASEAN SECRETARIAT, 2023)

This framework marks a significant change in ASEAN’S approach to tourism. From mass tourism, ASEAN turns its attention to tourist development that is more balanced and sustainable tourism. The other strand is the greening of the tourism value chain—this would mean promoting sustainable consumption and production in all sectors related to tourism. For example, the framework advocate for eco-certification of hotels and resorts, the establishment of energy and water conservation measures, reduction of wastes, and other similar concerns. The framework likely places more focus on destination management that will prevent overcrowding and limit negative impacts on the environment. This may be accomplished through carrying capacity studies for famous destinations and visitor management policies that will eventually cause the tourists to spread out throughout the year to various attractions. More than this, embracing digitalization is probably perceived as a channel to really hammer home the message of sustainable tourism practices. This might pertain to developing digital platforms elevating awareness about responsible tourism, offering information on eco-friendly tourism businesses, and facilitating online booking for experiences in sustainable tourism. Though this is a promising framework, there are several challenges to its fullest potential, such as effectively putting it into practice and enforcement in all the ASEAN member states. Enough funding for sustainable tourism shall also be required, which involves close collaboration among the governments, the private sectors, communities, and NGOs.

For example recently this year at the ATF Agoda, one of the world's leading digital travel platforms, announced today it is significantly ramping up its commitment to sustainable tourism in Southeast Asia. The new commitment, announced at the ASEAN Tourism Forum, includes Agoda's hugely expanded



partnership with the World Wide Fund for Nature, which will increase funding fourfold to USD \$1 million for their Eco Deals Program. This initiative underlines the growing trend of privately minded companies taking proactive steps toward environmental responsibility within the tourism sector.

The Eco Deals Program strongly connects travel with the need for conservation. For every booking that customers make through this campaign, Agoda will donate USD \$1 to eight WWF projects across Southeast Asia. This includes protection against the extinction of such critically endangered species as tigers and whale sharks, ecosystem restoration, support of local rangers, and other things designed to solve the greater sustainability challenges within the region. It is an effective incentive for consumers and accommodation providers to consider participating in conservation efforts more for creating a more sustainable tourism ecosystem.

Agoda's partnership with WWF is an example of good practice in public-private engagement for other stakeholders. The program brings about not only essential funding for conservation but also raises awareness of responsible tourism as a concept across travelers and business entities. Therefore, in terms of ASEAN's Framework on Sustainable Tourism Development, this constitutes a very staunch case through concrete steps toward safeguarding a natural heritage of the region for generations to come (Agoda, 2024).

5. EU INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK GOVERNING TOURISM

Regional integration at the EU level can be said to follow a model similar to that of the ASEAN, where institutional framework is affected through the help of initiatives and various policies

geared toward sustainable, competitive, and digitally advanced practices in tourism.

Governed under Article 4 as a part of the “Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union”, the EU Shared competence framework allows the EU to support and complement actions by its member nations in a way that ensures respect for their primary responsibility in relation to policy development for tourism (European Union, 2012). The EU's competence in tourism is based on Article 6(d) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which recognizes tourism as an area of shared competence. This means that the EU can support, coordinate, and supplement member state actions but cannot harmonize national laws and regulations (European Union, 2012). As such, the EU does not dictate tourism policies on its own member states. It, instead, operates via numerous programs that are dedicated to promoting collaboration and fostering best practice as well as funding programs related to tourism.



The European Commission, therefore, constitutes the key coordinating body and works in close collaboration with “the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, and the Committee of the Regions” in adopting and implementing the formulation of policies and activities on tourism.

5.1 The Institutional Structure of Tourism in the EU:

The main EU institutions concerned with tourism activities are:

1. **“Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, European Commission”**: DG GROW is in-charge of developing and implementing the EU tourism policy. Its prime aim is to create an enabling environment for improving the competitiveness of the European tourism industry, through innovation while remaining responsible and sustainable about tourism. The successful delivery of the most prominent work—development and official release—on the "Transition Pathway for Tourism" was made by DG GROW in 2022. It puts forward a shared vision of a more resilient, sustainable, and digital European tourism ecosystem. It details how the green and the digital transitions of this sector should be driven, while at the same time achieving a higher level of social inclusiveness and resilience against further crises. The Transition Pathway therefore sets an overall strategy to achieve sustainable practice amongst stakeholders throughout the value chain of tourism, minimize the sector's environmental impact, and maximize its benefit contribution to local communities.
2. **European Travel Commission**: It is an independent body marketing Europe as a unique tourist destination to the overseas markets. It's members include National Tourism Organisations of European countries. It cooperates with the European Commission on several different projects related to tourism.
3. **The European Parliament**: An extremely important actor in the formation of EU tourism policy, as far as the debates and votes on legislative proposals relevant for the sector are concerned, at the same time enjoying budgetary powers that could put pressure on funding allocations for tourism-related initiatives.
4. **“Council of the European Union”**: As the voice of EU member state governments, the Council holds power to pass EU legislations, including those related to tourism. It offers a basis for the unification of the Member States on their national tourist policy with the overall strategy of the EU.



5.1.KEY TOURISM POLICIES AND INITIATIVES OF THE EU

EU has implemented a number of policies and initiatives to make Europe's tourism sector competitive and sustainable. This section considers a few of the most relevant ones.**EU Tourism Indicators System:** ETIS is the indicator system given by the European Commission for monitoring and measuring the performance of Europe in terms of tourism. Through a set of indicators, ETIS makes it possible to identify the economic impacts, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion drivers of tourism. It provides the policymakers with an overview of areas that need reforms and the efficiency of the existing tourism policies.

European Tourism Manifesto for Growth and Jobs: As a joint effort of the European Commission and European tourism stakeholders, this Manifesto presents an ambitious outlook toward the future of tourism in Europe. It is founded on three pillars: innovation, sustainability, and job creation. The same motivates the stakeholders to take proactive steps towards achieving the goals set forth in order to increase the competitiveness and resilience of European Tourism (.).

EU Strategy on Sustainable Tourism: This European Parliament resolution outlines an overarching strategy highlighting the need of reducing environmental footprint through promotion of sustainable transport modes and conservation of natural and cultural heritage, as well as responsible practices with regard to respect for socio-cultural authenticity of communities and ensuring that all stakeholders derive benefits.

EU Ecolabel: This is a voluntary certification scheme that encourages and rewards businesses, including those in the tourism sector, for adopting environmentally friendly practices. This label is recognized across Europe and signifies that a product or service meets strict ecological criteria throughout its life cycle, from production to the extent of disposal. For tourist accommodation providers, obtaining the EU Ecolabel demonstrates a commitment to sustainability and can attract environmentally conscious travelers. Few measures appreciated are a hotel offering guests reusable water bottles, using refillable toiletries, and composting food waste, low-flow showerheads and toilets, using drought-tolerant landscaping, using solar panels for water heating and offering guests the option to decline daily linen changes to save water and energy (EU Ecolabel, n.d.).

COSME: COSME finances eco-friendly tourism products and services, such as funding for establishing electric bike rental networks to promote sustainability in tourist transportation. Furthermore, COSME supports resource-efficient technologies by providing grants to tourism enterprises, which in turn enable them to invest in solutions like geothermal heating and cooling systems, reducing the impact on the



environment. knowing that sustainability is broader than the single business, COSME also grants financing to initiatives aimed at making sustainable tourism destinations at large, for example, financing the elaboration of a comprehensive sustainability strategy for a region willing to reconcile development with the protection of the environment. Welcoming the potential of this programme to trigger real change in the tourism industry, the European Parliament has called for an increase in the co-financing rate for sustainable tourism projects under COSME.

EMAS: The EU Eco-Management and Audit Scheme is a voluntary, company-oriented, integrated management tool, and audit scheme designed to assess, manage, and improve an organization's environmental performance. Being open to all economic sectors, EMAS becomes very important for accommodation and food-serving businesses to earn more sustainability credits. It is possible for an EMAS-participating hotel to set up a monitoring system for the consumption of energy and water, establish objectives on waste generation reduction, and alter its operational practices in a participative way with employees. With EMAS, tourism enterprises can obtain recognition of running their business in a more benign way towards the environment, therefore increasing reputation and gaining a competitive advantage among environmentally conscious customers. It involves a process of Independent verification meaning that an accredited independent third party inspects and validates the good environmental performance of an organization under EMAS

6. JOINT INITIATIVES OF EU AND ASEAN

The EU has undertaken explicit actions, primarily involving funding and capacity-building initiatives, to support politically motivated efforts towards sustainable tourism in ASEAN nations. For instance, the EU-funded project "Sustainable Tourism through Energy Efficiency in ASEAN" is one such initiative that helped deliver relevant support to hotels in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam so that proper energy-saving measures could be adopted to reduce their environmental impact.

Furthermore, the EU believes that knowledge sharing and discussions on sustainable tourism development can be very useful. This approach has just been adopted with respect to another EU-financed project on "ASEAN-EU Mobility and People-to-People Cooperation". This project researched and established a discussion on mobility relations between the two regions, some of which were relevant for tourism and thus launched much closer cooperation on sustainable tourism development.

The commitment of the EU towards ASEAN does not stop at projects. By far, the EU has been one of the leading donors to ASEAN. To be specific, substantial financial resources were made available by it in the



form of grants and loans for a wide array of projects and programs. For example, the contribution made by the EU to individual ASEAN member states during 2007-2012 amounted to about €2 billion, apart from the contribution of € 70 million to the ASEAN Secretariat (Khandekar, n.d).

The EU-ASEAN Air Transport Agreement is a landmark agreement that has all the ingredients to increase tourism between the two regions by several notches. In place of the messy plethora of bilaterally concluded arrangements, the agreement will install one up-to-date framework for more-densely-routed flights and a way to virtually diminish traveling costs for a huge range of tourists. Together with the "Fifth Freedom Rights" provision for airlines to operate beyond the EU and ASEAN, it offers a very exciting scheme of multi-destination trips that will largely stimulate tourism flow.

Beyond just improving connectivity, the agreement is expected to create growth in the two regions. More travelers coming in bring in more money into the local economy, from the basic items to different tours and myriad other businesses like that of hotels and restaurants. All this current tourism activity creates new job opportunities, from airport operations to hospitality and transportation.

Harmonized standards will also result from the commitment, ensuring that airlines compete fairly in the skies, most likely with lower airfares, and improving services for travelers. Enhanced confidence of tourists, due to the emphasis on safety and security, applies through harmonized regulations and allows more tourists to explore the diverse cultures and destinations of both the EU and ASEAN. This milestone deal is going to be a huge step because it will be paving the way for a more single and accessible aviation market, in other words meaning shining brighter prospects for tourism and closer ties between the two regions (*EU And ASEAN Sign Landmark Region-to-region Agreement*, 2022).

7. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND LESSONS LEARNED

EU & ASEAN have equally identified tourism as one of the largest and economic drivers, job creators, and region developers. As such, both regional blocs have applied several initiatives that target integrating tourism with glaring differences arising due to the context, priorities, and the intensity of integration. This section of the paper compares ASEAN and EU tourism initiatives with the view of identifying their similarities and differences and attempting to argue on best practices or how the same may borrow a leaf from each other

ASEAN: ASEAN's vision for tourism is centred around the development of a common and competitive Southeast Asian brand of tourism; encouraging travel within the region; and using tourism to reduce poverty and local community empowerment.



EU's main concern is sustainability, that is, reducing the environmental impacts of tourism while promoting it in a responsible manner. The EU enforces concrete policies and regulations, such as the "EU Strategy on Sustainable Tourism" and the "European Green Deal" with ambitious objectives for cutting, by 2050, greenhouse gas emissions and improving resource efficiency in all sectors, including tourism. In terms of the strategy, the EU is more advanced and already has policies with measurable objectives.

ASEAN largely relies on agreements, intergovernmental MOUs, and action plans to set the pace for tourism integration. The deficient feature is that almost all the agreements lack binding mechanisms or clear enforcement protocols. This results in very minimal accountability and subsequently acts to hinder effective execution. On the other hand, the EU has a comprehensive policy framework legally-binding towards tourism integration.

ASEAN has an outstanding record in the implementation of Community-Based Tourism. With several decades of ASEAN experience related to the promotion of sustainable development and inclusive tourism through Community-Based Tourism, it is a goldmine of experiences that could be shared and used by the European Union.

The sound sustainability certification schemes of the EU, such as the EU Ecolabel and European Charter for Sustainable Tourism, can provide a framework that ASEAN could adapt to support responsible tourism within its own region.

The EU strategic investments in updating tourism infrastructure, not only in transport but also across accommodations and cultural heritage sites, have dramatically enhanced the nature of the visitor experience and, overall, of Europe as a destination. Something similar-but in the form of specific investments-is called for in ASEAN. The success that the EU has in public-private partnerships for infrastructure financing, innovative actions to make tourism more competitive, and enhancing competitiveness through innovation—the lesson here for ASEAN is the strong linkage of the public and private sectors, which would bring high potential for the development of tourism within the region.

8. CONCLUSION

While COVID-19 gave a severe blow to the ASEAN Tourism, a sector crucial for economic growth and employment, the regions swift and decisive actions have facilitated a remarkable recovery. The surge in international tourist arrivals represents not only a return to pre-pandemic levels but also provides a window of opportunity to reshape this industry in uniquely resilient ways.



The EU'S tourism model with its focus on sustainability, digitalization, and skills development offers a valuable blueprint for ASEAN to enhance its global competitiveness. By way of embracing sustainable practices and increased investment in the well-targeted infrastructure, ASEAN can solidify its position as a global leader in tourism driving industry growth and long-term socio-economical welfare. The path to more resilient and flourishing tourism lies in continued cooperation and commitment to innovation and sustainable, inclusive growth.

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