

Remarks by UN Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili at the opening of the G20 Tourism Ministers Meeting in Skukuza, Mpumalanga

12 September 2025

Dear Minister Patricia de Lille
Dear Premier of Mpumalanga, Mr Mandla Ndlovu
Your Excellencies,
Dear Ministers,

Dear Minister de Lille

Let me start by congratulating South Africa on a successful Presidency and you for your leadership in the Tourism Track.

Allow me to also recognize Saudi Arabia, Italy, Indonesia, India and Brazil, for their presidencies and for placing tourism high on the G20 agenda.

Our sector has weathered the worst storm in its history.

In 2024 international tourist arrivals reached 1.5 billion – the same level of 2019. In the G20 economies, arrivals are also fully back to pre-pandemic levels.

Exports from tourism reached a record value of 2 trillion US dollars, growing above travel volume and ranking 4th in the total of G20 economies total exports.

And tourism direct GDP stands at 3.4 trillion.

And the first half of this year has seen a consolidation of such strong growth with tourism growing by 4% compared to same time in 2023.

But as we welcome these results we are reminded of our responsibility to address the polycrisis facing our world.

Climate change, inequality, poverty, hunger, technological changes and geopolitical instability.

The theme of this Presidency - “Solidarity, Equality, Sustainability” - reminds us the challenges faced by one nation affect us all.

It’s time for cooperation and policy to drive change.

Allow me to touch briefly on the key areas that you as leaders of tourism globally, in the G20 and your countries will take upon today.

1. The digital transformation and the support to MSEMs as the backbone of our sector

The G20 Tourism Action Plan for Digital Innovation calls for expanding digital access and smart infrastructure.

It stresses the need for strengthened governance data. And it highlights the importance of supporting the whole travel tech ecosystem.

Economic incentives are essential. That means supporting MSMEs through financial instruments such as grants, tax relief and concessional loans.

It also means supporting women-led MSMEs, youth, and people in vulnerable situations, and to reduce regional digital divides.

All this will not be possible without voluntary governance frameworks aligned with G20 AI Principles, measures to build resilience including rapid-response platforms, AI-powered crisis communication tools, and training for MSMEs.

To track progress, we need to create indicators and interim reviews providing us a roadmap towards 2030.

2. Building a more Resilient and Sustainable Future for Tourism

Almost without exception, countries are embedding resilience into their strategies.

Tourism cannot be forgotten.

Every plan and investment must be stress-tested.

Crisis preparedness and rapid response must be stronger, with coordinated plans, and clear communication to travellers.

Investment in smart, sustainable, climate-resilient systems is essential as is shifting focus from visitor numbers to long-term value.

And strengthening the capacity of MSMEs is also critical. They make up 80% of tourism businesses and are both the backbone of the sector and the most vulnerable in times of crisis.

Accelerating climate action in tourism is vital for the resilience of the sector and host communities.

We look forward to strengthening the work done in COP 29 with Brazil and all of you at COP30 in Belem.

Sustainability and resilience are also about an inclusive society.

Expanding domestic and regional travel, and investing in cultural, nature and community-based experiences, creates opportunity and strengthens resilience.

Tourism should be inclusive and community-led, creating fair opportunities for women, youth, and vulnerable groups, and ensuring true accessibility for all.

All of these elements sit at the core of the Action Plan and your discussions.

2. Financing and Investment in Tourism Development

Tourism continues to be underrepresented in international financing for development .

Indeed, the total Official Development Assistance disbursements reported by official donors as allocated for tourism remaining below 0.11% of the total ODA.

The sector is also overlooked as a tool for development, despite being widely recognized as a major driver of economic growth and development.

Thus, we welcome the focus on financing for development and investment for tourism and the strengthening of the links with the G20 Finance Track and other relevant Working Groups such as Development and Trade and Investment.

Between 2019 and 2024, they accounted for almost 80% of global foreign direct investment in greenfield tourism projects.

This represents more than 1,800 projects, over 98 billion US dollars in capital, and nearly 250,000 new jobs.

These numbers demonstrate the scale of tourism as an engine of development, but also the responsibility that comes with such leadership.

The G20's mission is clear: to make tourism investment not only abundant, but also inclusive, resilient, and sustainable.

It means empowering MSMEs by improving access to finance and reducing credit gaps, supporting women and youth and financing climate-resilient infrastructure while guaranteeing that the benefits of tourism are shared across communities.

Our Tourism Doing Business and network of investors and projects, help governments and investors translate commitments into bankable projects.

We close equity gaps and reduce barriers to financing through blended instruments and innovative partnerships.

This way, the scale of G20 investment is translated into real impact: more jobs, stronger communities, and destinations that are climate-resilient and inclusive.

Dear brothers and sisters,

I could not end without recognizing that this year's Presidency is an African Presidency.

And that in 2023 the African Union became the second regional body to join the G20, alongside the European Union.

These landmark achievements bring Africa to the forefront and amplify its voice within the international arena.

Africa is home to 19% of the world's population, with 70% of sub-Saharan Africa under the age of 30.

The investment opportunities the continent offers in tourism are many, as we explored at the Tourism Investment Summit in Cape Town this week.

Unlocking tourism investment is a core priority of the UN Tourism Agenda for Africa.

Our Africa Investment Report and the Investment Guidelines for South Africa highlight the business opportunities our sector can create to foster sustainable and inclusive development.

Yet, while our sector holds an immense potential, Africa's share of international tourism remains at 5% of the world's total.

Today we have a unique opportunity to pledge to turn this 5% into 10% in the near future.

Together we can make this a reality by working on enablers including air connectivity, visa facilitation, investment and skills development.

Minister de Lille
Dear Ministers

It has been an honor to work with you as a Knowledge Partner of South Africa's Presidency as well as over the past Presidencies.

As such we are pleased to have supported the work of this Group with the Actions Plans on Digital Innovations and Building Resilience as well as the Report on Air Connectivity for Seamless Travel which will be at the center of today's discussions.

They have been built upon the vision and efforts of the G20 Tourism Working Group and each of your countries.

Minister de Lille
Dear Ministers

Having seen tourism evolve from an informal meeting to an official sherpa's track of the G20 under Saudi Arabia's Presidency in 2020 is testimony of the value of our sector.

A year ago in Belem, I recalled that strengthening multilateralism through tourism will deliver results in socio-economic inclusion, sustainable development, peace and understanding.

One year later, the challenges have only grown.

In the spirit of Ubuntu, inspired by our hosts, let us recognise that individual nations cannot thrive in isolation.

We look forward to continuing to make tourism an important contributor to the G20 Agenda.

Thank you.