"Towards Resilient and Sustainable Tourism in the EU, with a Focus on Mediterranean Islands"

Presented by **MARIO FAVA**, President of the Local Councils' Association Malta, on behalf of the Maltese Delegation in the Committee of the Regions
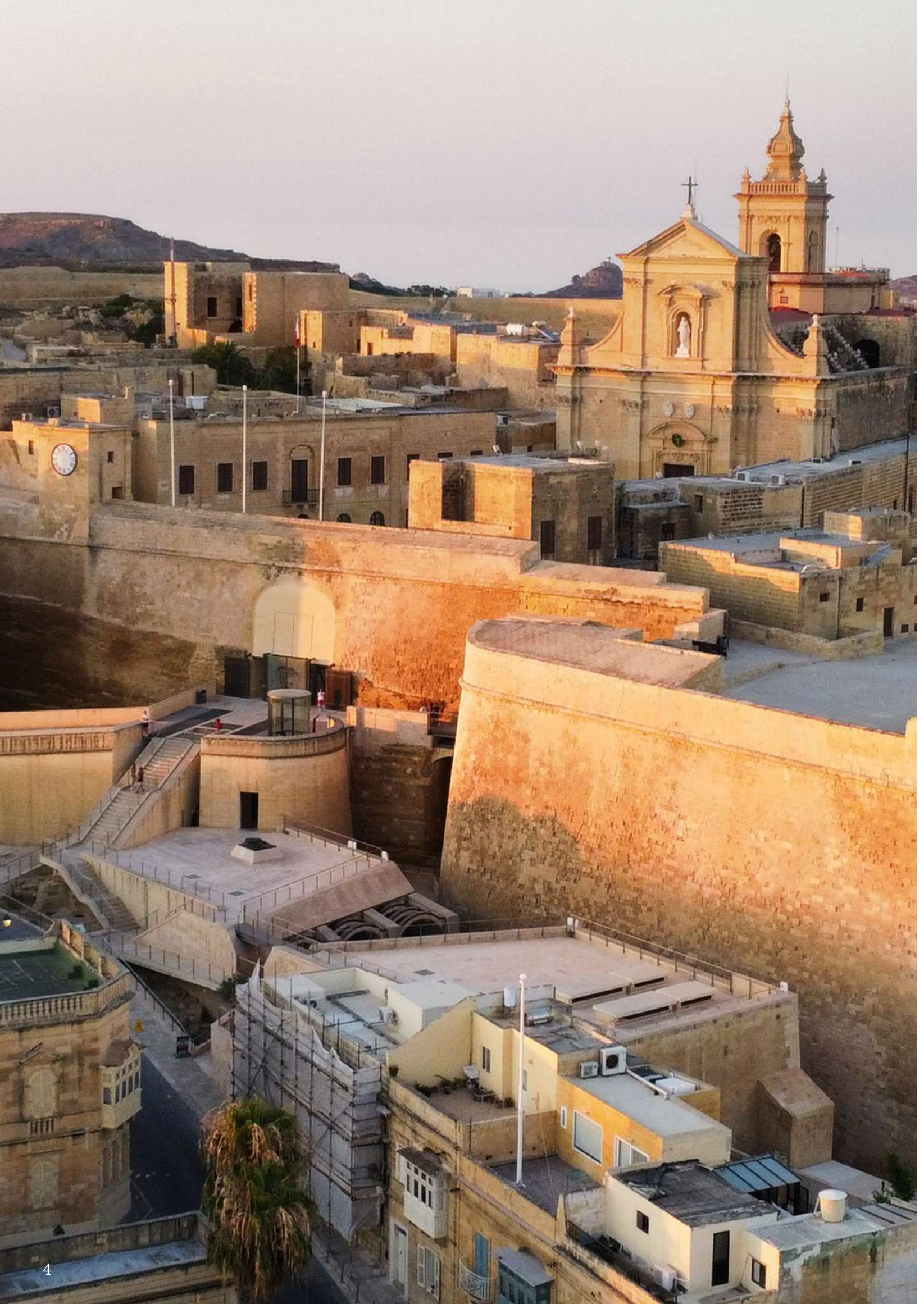
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Local Councils' Association Malta

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By Mario Fava, President, Local Councils' Association (Malta)

Foreword

Tourism has long been a vital sector for Malta and for many regions across Europe. It provides employment, stimulates local economies, and fosters cultural exchange. Yet, we must also acknowledge that if left unmanaged, tourism can put significant pressure on our environment, our infrastructure, and, most importantly, on our communities.

This document on sustainable tourism represents an important step forward. It underlines not only the challenges we face—ranging from environmental degradation to demographic shifts and social pressures—but also the opportunities to shape a more resilient and balanced model of growth.

The vision it presents is clear: we must move away from a model driven solely by numbers, and instead embrace a future where residents come first, communities thrive, and visitors experience authentic, high-quality encounters. Sustainable tourism is not simply a matter of protecting resources; it is about protecting people, their identity, and their quality of life.

For me, this report is more than a technical exercise. It is a call to action, a roadmap that can inspire Malta, the Mediterranean, and Europe as a whole. By investing in sustainable transport, green infrastructure, responsible accommodation, and strong local governance, we can ensure that tourism remains a driver of prosperity without undermining the very foundations on which it depends.

I would like to thank all those who have contributed to this work. It provides us with the necessary knowledge and guidance to move forward. Now, it is our responsibility to act decisively and collectively to ensure that by 2050, tourism in Malta and in Europe will not only be economically viable, but socially just and environmentally sustainable.

Summary of the Report: "Towards Resilient and Sustainable Tourism in the European Union, with a Focus on Mediterranean Islands"

Presented by Mario Fava, President of the Local Councils' Association Malta, on behalf of the Maltese Delegation in the Committee of the Regions

This comprehensive report outlines a strategic vision for transforming tourism in the Mediterranean and other European island regions into a sustainable and resilient sector. It recognises the critical role islands play in Europe's tourism economy while also highlighting their environmental vulnerability, infrastructural limitations, and social pressures—particularly in the context of climate change and geopolitical instability.

The report argues that tourism in islands must evolve beyond traditional mass-market models toward a sustainable approach that balances environmental protection, community empowerment, cultural preservation, and economic resilience. Key pillars of this strategy include:

- Environmental sustainability, through better waste management, marine conservation, ecological construction, and the promotion of clean mobility;
- Community involvement, with locals playing a central role in planning, implementing, and benefiting from tourism development;
- Infrastructure development, favouring smart, green, and inclusive investments that serve both residents and visitors;
- Climate adaptation, addressing the growing risks of rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and ecosystem loss;
- Regional and international cooperation, including the establishment of a Mediterranean emergency plan for maritime pollution and stronger collaboration between islands;
- Transparent monitoring, with tools for measuring environmental, economic, and social impacts to ensure accountability and continuous improvement;
- Peace and stability, emphasising that political security in the Mediterranean is essential for sustainable tourism and economic prosperity.

The report concludes with a call for stronger EU action and recognition of the Mediterranean islands' unique challenges and potential. It advocates for insular leadership, dedicated funding, participatory governance, and a shift in policy that places people and the environment at the heart of tourism development.

This policy paper is presented by Mario Fava, President of the Local Councils' Association, on behalf of the Maltese Delegation in the Committee of the Regions, as a contribution toward a more just, resilient, and sustainable future for the islands of Europe and the wider Mediterranean region.

This report, presented on behalf of the Maltese delegation within the Committee of the Regions,

is intended to address the growing need for truly sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean islands, with particular attention to the characteristics that make these islands both unique and vulnerable. The global context of climate change, pressure on natural resources, and uncontrolled development demands an urgent response from policy-makers and community leaders—among them Local Councils.

This initiative also comes in the context of the meeting held on 2nd July in Brussels, with the involvement of President Marga Prohens, acting as rapporteur for the own-initiative opinion entitled "Towards Sustainable and Resilient Tourism in the European Union: A Strategy for Adaptive Measures."

The framework of this report is rooted in the values of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and aligned with the European Union's objectives for sustainable territorial development. The main priority is to formulate a strategy that is tailored to the insular context, giving an active role to local communities and authorities in shaping a new model of tourism that is future-ready. This is particularly relevant for islands such as Malta and Gozo—the latter facing even greater challenges due to its double insularity.

The main objectives of the report are to:

- Identify the challenges and opportunities faced by islands in the context of tourism;
- Provide an evidence-based action framework informed by research and best practices;
- Demonstrate how Local Councils can act as leaders and catalysts for change;
- Stimulate national and regional debate on the subject;
- Propose practical and concrete recommendations for implementation at different levels;
- And most importantly, ensure that the content of this report is taken into account in the final drafting of the aforementioned opinion.

This chapter serves as an introduction to the chapters that follow, which will address key themes such as environmental protection, community involvement, infrastructure, climate change, international co-operation, implementation, monitoring, and the special importance of Mediterranean islands.

The vision of this document is clear: our islands can become a leading example of tourism that combines economic prosperity with environmental and social justice—for a future that puts residents first.

Introduction to the Report:
Sustainable Tourism in the Islands

Islands, particularly those in the Mediterranean, play a crucial role in the international tourism sector. These islands attract millions of visitors annually with their unique natural characteristics, significant cultural heritage, and favourable climate. Despite the substantial economic benefits of the tourism industry, it can also create severe pressure on the natural environment, the limited resources of islands, and local communities. Therefore, developing and implementing a sustainable tourism model is both urgent and essential, especially in view of the global targets for sustainable development (Sustainable Development Goals – SDGs) by 2030, set by the United Nations.

Sustainable tourism goes beyond promoting the tourism sector merely as a tool for economic growth. It is a comprehensive approach that seeks to balance the needs of visitors, host communities, and the environment that welcomes them. This approach requires proactive policy-making and effective practices that preserve the islands' natural and cultural resources, while ensuring that local communities participate actively and benefit fairly from tourism development. The goal is to establish a model of growth that is simultaneously economic, ecological, and social.

In this context, islands face specific challenges related to their limited geographic scope, vulnerability to climate change, high seasonality in tourism, and pressure on infrastructure and public services. Overdevelopment, excessive consumption of resources such as water and energy, and impacts on ecological systems are all realities that require mitigation and adaptation strategies. As a result, tourism planning must be fully integrated into local and regional policy, with coordinated efforts among all stakeholders involved – including public authorities, tourism operators, communities, and the academic sector.

On the other hand, if managed responsibly, tourism can serve as a driver of sustainable development. It can strengthen local identity, encourage the conservation of historical and cultural heritage, and create opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship in small communities. Promoting sustainable tourism can offer economic diversification while respecting environmental and social limits, particularly in islands, where a few sectors often dominate economies.

This report aims to analyse the current state of tourism in islands, specifically focusing on Mediterranean islands such as Malta, Sicily, Greece, and others, and to identify the key opportunities and challenges for developing genuinely sustainable tourism. It also assesses how public policies, local initiatives, and international partnerships can contribute to transforming the sector into a model that respects the environment, serves people's interests, and promotes territorial and social justice.

In this light, the concept of sustainable tourism is not just a global trend but a strategic necessity for islands that need to protect their resources for future generations, while continuing to attract visitors from around the world with a quality, authentic, and respectful tourism offer. Serious reporting and analysis from a local and regional perspective, as this report aims to deliver, are essential to turn this vision into reality.

Chapter 1:
Environmental Protection

Ecological Considerations in the Insular Context

Islands represent highly sensitive natural environments, with unique ecosystems that often include endemic species not found anywhere else in the world. This makes them particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of intensive tourism development. The rapid growth of tourism, especially in coastal and marine areas, has brought major challenges related to biodiversity protection, natural resource management, and the conservation of marine environments.

In this context, environmental protection must be a key pillar of any policy or strategic plan for sustainable tourism. Specifically, the management of pressure on land and sea should be a priority, with a preventive and integrated approach. Sensitive areas such as nature parks, marine reserves, and indigenous forests should be clearly identified and protected through strict environmental regulations and regular monitoring. Tourism development policies should also promote environmental certification of facilities, environmental impact assessments of infrastructure projects, and the inclusion of public consultation in the planning process.

Protecting the natural landscape should not be seen only as an aesthetic issue, but as a fundamental element of territorial identity and a cornerstone of sustainable tourist appeal. Undisturbed landscapes, clean coastlines, and healthy biodiversity are values that should be enjoyed and safeguarded — not only for the benefit of tourists, but especially for local generations who depend on these resources.

Conservation and Restoration Projects

Across various Mediterranean islands, conservation initiatives have been implemented with the aim of restoring degraded environments and protecting endangered species. Notable examples include the establishment of protected areas such as the Vendicari Nature Reserve in Sicily, the Zakynthos National Marine Park in Greece (home to the loggerhead turtles), and in Malta, the consolidation of several Natura 2000 sites such as the areas around Simar and Għadira. In Malta, we have also witnessed the preservation of traditional saltpans, a centuries-old practice also present in Gozo. These initiatives require continuous investment, cooperation between public and private entities, and direct community involvement.

While protecting natural areas is vital, the environmental restoration of degraded sites is equally important. For tour-

ism to be truly sustainable, it should help these spaces regenerate naturally. Projects can include afforestation with native tree species, the removal of invasive species, and interventions to protect freshwater ecosystems. These initiatives, especially when paired with public education campaigns, can strengthen awareness and civil society support for environmental protection. The European Union must ensure that funding for such initiatives is increased and prioritised.

Local Community Involvement

An essential element of sustainable tourism is the involvement of the local community in the management and protection of the environment. This engagement can take many forms: from participation in clean-up projects, to volunteering in nature reserves, to the development of tourism products based on ecological principles such as ecotourism and agritourism. A practical example is the breeding and cultivation of the native Gozo bee, from which traditional, high-quality honey is produced.

When communities are directly involved in decision-making regarding land use and tourism development, the sense of ownership and responsibility towards the environment increases. This fosters a stronger relationship between people and their territory, contributing to long-term sustainability. Reference can be made here to several cooperatives that are administered and run by residents themselves.

In islands, where many communities are small and deeply connected to the natural landscape, the ability to create this sense of cohesion and belonging can be of immense strategic value.

Recycling Systems and Waste Management

One of the most pressing challenges faced by islands as tourist destinations is waste management. During the tourist season, waste generation can double or even increase significantly depending on visitor volume. Without effective systems for recycling, composting, and waste separation, this can lead to unhygienic decomposition, pressure on landfill sites, and marine pollution.

Islands like Elba in Italy and Manorca in Spain have implemented advanced waste management systems, including household and tourist accommodation separation, pay-as-you-throw schemes, and partnerships with private companies for innovative recycling technologies. In Malta, steps have also been taken to introduce separate waste containers, incentives for using recycled materials, and regulations on single-use plastics. However, more progress is needed in terms of public awareness and systematic enforcement of policies.

Environmental Education and Awareness

A high level of environmental education and awareness must accompany the shift towards sustainable tourism. Education should include not only local communities but also the tourists themselves. Information campaigns on how to travel sustainably, reduce water and energy use, and choose local and eco-friendly products and services can be crucial in reducing tourism's collective impact.

The goal is to cultivate more conscious and respectful visitors who do not treat the island as merely a place of leisure, but as a living ecosystem that must be protected. This type of education can also be introduced in schools, in training programmes for tourism sector workers, and by creating environmental interpretation centres in key tourist areas.

In islands where tourism is a central economic driver, there should be a clear commitment to ensure that every operator – from hotels to transport providers, from guides to restaurants – actively participates in this cultural shift. The principles of ecotourism and sustainability should become the norm, not the exception.

Sustainable Mobility and Air Quality Impact

Tourism, particularly in islands with limited connectivity, involves large volumes of people and goods in transit — often through modes of transport that contribute to air pollution. To ensure environmental sustainability, an alternative mobility model must be developed to promote public transport, cycling, and electric vehicles.

Islands such as Formentera and Lampedusa are actively experimenting with restrictions on private vehicles during the tourist season, introducing eco-friendly shuttle buses, and promoting clean marine transport technologies. This approach reduces pollution and contributes to a quieter and more nature-connected tourism experience.

Environmental protection in islands is not a choice but a necessity. For islands that rely on tourism, balancing attractiveness with environmental preservation is critical for their future. Adopting sustainable policies, local community involvement, and promoting environmental awareness and respect can make the difference between temporary exploitation and healthy long-term development.

By working in an integrated, inclusive way with a clear vision, we can ensure that islands remain renowned tourist destinations and examples of harmony between humanity and nature. This chapter presents the foundation for the rest of the report, which will explore other dimensions of sustainable tourism in islands, such as the local economy, culture, and infrastructure

Chapter 2:
The Role of the Community
Local Communities as Central Actors

One of the fundamental principles of sustainable tourism is that tourism development must take place with the active involvement of local communities. This involvement should not be merely formal or limited to symbolic consultation; it must be practical, effective, and continuous. When communities are given an active role in the design and implementation of tourism policies, it enhances not only the sense of ownership over the development but also the quality of the tourism product offered.

This approach is crucial on islands, where communities are often smaller and more isolated. The people living on islands possess a deep knowledge of their territory, cultural identity, and the needs of the natural environment. Integrating this knowledge into tourism planning and management processes can lead to practices that are better suited to the local context and more sustainable in the long term.

Community involvement should be facilitated through concrete mechanisms such as consultation boards, public forums, and participatory workshops. These tools serve to collect ideas, identify challenges, and propose solutions that reflect the community's daily realities. It is also essential that these processes be open and inclusive, ensuring that diverse voices are heard: young people, the elderly, women, persons with disabilities, and minority groups.

Education, Funding, and Structural Support

Communities must also be provided with the necessary tools to truly participate actively. Public or EU funding can be used to organize training programmes on developing sustainable local tourism initiatives, such as agritourism, homestays, or artisanal products.

Regular workshops can help build the capacity of communities to identify both the positive and negative impacts of tourism and to plan strategies to address them. Cooperative networks between local producers, tourism operators, and local authorities should be promoted to create a tourism ecosystem based on mutual support and fairness.

Such initiatives can also be supported through the creation of community hubs or centres dedicated to sustainable tourism, which would offer space for training, coordination, and communication among all stakeholders involved.

Culture as a Catalyst for Participation

The cultural element plays a vital role in involving local communities. When recognised as a fundamental resource, culture also becomes an effective medium for building a relationship between the tourist and the locality. Therefore, reinforcing the local cultural calendar with institutional and infrastructural support should be given importance.

Festivals, exhibitions, religious traditions, and folkloric events can become tourist attractions promoting community identity. These events create unique experiences for visitors, offer temporary employment, stimulate artistic production, and increase local income.

Preservation and promotion of the local language, traditional recipes, folk music, and handicrafts can also become tourism assets. On islands, where such practices are often at risk due to globalisation and modernisation, tourism can become a tool for strengthening them—if managed properly.

Employment and Entrepreneurship Opportunities

New economic opportunities are opened when communities are strategically integrated into the tourism industry. Through specialised training and financial support, residents can develop small-scale enterprises such as B&Bs, themed tours, cultural workshops, or shops for traditional products.

These types of businesses create employment and retain the added value from tourism within the community. Instead of a tourism model that exploits local resources to benefit external entities, this approach develops a model where the benefits are more fairly distributed. Promoting social enterprise within this sector can also contribute to sustainable and inclusive solutions.

Strategic tourism plans for islands must prioritise the inclusion of people who may be marginalised from the labour market—such as women in rural areas, youth not in education or training, and persons with disabilities. This would allow tourism development to serve as a means of social and economic advancement.

Preserving Community Life

Sustainable tourism also means maintaining a balance between visitors' and residents' needs. Therefore, community involvement must also include vigilance over tourism's negative impacts, such as rising prices, excessive noise, and the erosion of daily life intimacy. Communities must be empowered to determine their own limits—both in terms of visitor numbers and the type of tourism considered acceptable.

Especially in small islands where space is limited, uncontrolled expansion of tourist accommodation can lead to a loss of social spaces and increased conflict between the community and visitors. Strong local governance is therefore essential, ensuring that residents have a voice in decision-making processes.

Promoting quality over quantity in tourism, and developing designated zones for tourism accommodation that do not disrupt the environment or community life, can be a viable strategy that respects the well-being of local populations.

Local communities are not just part of the scenery that attracts tourists—they are the heart of the sustainable tourism experience. When they are genuinely integrated into the process, recognised as co-creators of the tourism offer, and supported in their work, they can make a significant difference in the sustainable development of islands.

Their involvement contributes to the building of tourism that is resilient, just, and grounded in the values of cooperation and mutual respect. This chapter shows how truly sustainable tourism cannot be imposed from outside—it must grow from within, from the communities themselves.

Chapter 3:
Infrastructure – Towards Sustainable Tourism Development in Islands

A Sustainable Foundation

Sustainable infrastructure is an essential foundation for tourism that does not destroy, but rather respects the environment and improves the quality of life for both residents and visitors. In the context of Mediterranean islands, where resource pressure is intense, space is limited, and vulnerability to climate change is high, investment in infrastructure that adheres to sustainability principles is not a luxury but a necessity.

Since tourism infrastructure includes various elements, from transport and accommodation to energy systems, water treatment, and waste management, every aspect requires a strategic approach that looks beyond short-term economic success and considers long-term impacts on the community and environment. This chapter analyses how planning and investment in island infrastructure can be integrated with a sustainable vision.

Integrated Planning for Infrastructure Development

The first step toward sustainable infrastructure is territorial planning based on a realistic assessment of the island's capacity. Tourism development on islands has often been linked to overpressure on coastal zones and the excessive urbanisation of sensitive areas. Planning must be guided by clear environmental and social limits that respect the balance between increased demand and the protection of resources.

In this regard, national plans for transport, energy, water, and waste management and those related to tourism development must be coordinated. Local authorities should lead the monitoring and implementation of these plans, supported by scientific research, public consultation, and partnerships with private and civil actors.

Infrastructure should not be seen merely as a means to increase accommodation capacity but as a system that efficiently, durably, and flexibly meets the needs of all users — including residents. The construction of multifunctional facilities, strengthening digital services, and adopting innovative solutions are all elements that should be integrated into the tourism infrastructure strategy.

Green Transport and Accessibility

Mobility on islands is a key issue for sustainable infrastructure. Transport systems should be designed to ensure accessibility for all while reducing private traffic and pollution.

A significant challenge is that, on many islands, the prevailing mobility model is based on private cars for residents and tourists. This leads to traffic congestion, increased emissions, and a negative impact on quality of life. To shift this model, it is crucial to create efficient public transport networks using electric or hybrid vehicles, with high frequency and reliability.

In islands such as the Azores (Portugal) and Formentera (Spain), clean-energy shuttle bus systems and alterna-

tive tourist routes have been introduced. Likewise, electric bike and scooter rental services have been promoted, along with the development of cycling networks and safe walking paths. The necessary infrastructure, such as bike lanes, electric charging systems, and fiscal incentives for sustainable transport modes, must support these initiatives.

Moreover, maritime and land-based public transport integration is essential, especially on islands with regular connections to the mainland or other islands. Maritime transport is often the economic lifeline of islands and should be modernised to reduce emissions, carry more passengers efficiently, and offer a viable alternative to air travel. In Malta, we are beginning to see similar services emerge, with an emphasis on sea transport to reduce dependence on private vehicles.

Accommodation and Eco-Friendly Construction

One of the most significant challenges for sustainable tourism development in islands is the construction of accommodation and other facilities in a way that respects local architectural and environmental characteristics. Traditional island buildings are typically adapted to the climate and environment, using natural stone, passive ventilation systems, and strategic orientation. Modern trends toward massive and uniform construction, often imported from urban models, erode this character.

Sustainable infrastructure also means that accommodation should be built or restored using local materials, technologies that conserve energy and water, and with integration into the landscape and cultural heritage. The concepts of green buildings, zero-energy buildings, and circular design should be promoted through environmental certification, incentive schemes, and clear guidelines.

New construction should take place on already-developed or degraded land, not on untouched natural areas. Regulating the proliferation of small, unregistered tourist accommodations is also important to avoid negative impacts on residential life and the property market.

Energy Use and Management

One of the biggest pressures on island infrastructure is related to energy. During the tourist season, energy consumption increases significantly due to air conditioning, lighting, transport, and other services.

The use of renewable energy sources is not only a sustainable choice but also a strategy for energy independence and long-term cost reduction. Solar energy has great potential in Mediterranean islands, which enjoy long, sunny days for much of the year. Installing photovoltaic panels on public buildings, hotels, charging stations, and even electric ferries can be a significant shift towards a more sustainable future.

In some islands, such as Crete and the Canary Islands, microgrid projects are underway that integrate renewable sources, energy storage systems, and smart control technologies. These projects can serve as good

examples for Malta and other Mediterranean islands to achieve a balance between tourism needs and environmental protection.

Energy efficiency should also be encouraged through mandatory standards in the accommodation and service industries, including energy-saving appliances, LED lighting systems, and smart sensors. This would reduce environmental impact and lower service providers' operational costs.

Water and Waste Management

Water supply and treatment are critical in islands, where natural freshwater resources are limited or reliant on desalination. Sustainable tourism cannot operate in a reality where visitors use significantly more water than residents, especially if this leads to supply shortages.

Investment in rainwater harvesting systems, greywater treatment and reuse, and upgrading networks to reduce technical losses is essential to improve water supply sustainability. Conservation systems in hotels and restaurants should also be promoted through smart technologies, training, and regulation.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, efficient waste separation, recycling, and composting systems are vital. Tourists should be educated about local waste management practices and the behavioural expectations of responsible visitors. Collaboration with private operators for high-tech solutions can reduce the burden on public administrations and deliver more efficient services.

Smart Islands: Digital Infrastructure

In the modern era, sustainable infrastructure also means technology and connectivity. Islands aiming for smart tourism must develop strategies for "smart tourism", including apps for sustainable mobility, environmentally conscious booking systems, and sensor networks for monitoring the environment and tourist flows.

Using big data, artificial intelligence, and the Internet of Things (IoT) can significantly improve tourism planning and management. For example, sensors can provide real-time information on congestion at tourist sites, monitor pollution levels, assist with water management, and track how infrastructure is being used.

Sustainable infrastructure is not just a matter of technology or design — it is a framework of policy, values, and long-term vision. Major challenges can be tackled in the Mediterranean islands through new ideas, smart investment, and community commitment. For the tourism industry to be sustainable, there must be a strong and flexible foundation that aligns the needs of residents, tourists, and nature in harmony.

Chapter 4:
Climate Change and the Challenges for the Future of Tourism in Islands

The Global Context and the Vulnerability of Islands

Climate change is not only the most significant environmental challenge of the 21st century, but it is also a determining factor for the future of the tourism industry, particularly in islands. The geographical and environmental characteristics of islands — such as low elevation, dependence on limited natural resources, and small-scale economies — make them especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change. The Mediterranean islands, including Malta, are among the regions already experiencing substantial impacts on their local climate and ecosystems.

The Mediterranean climate is warming faster than the global average, with increasingly hotter summers, more intense droughts, and steadily rising sea levels. These changes are creating significant challenges not only for natural environments and infrastructure but also for the viability of tourism as a source of income and employment. In this light, adaptation to climate change is no longer a matter of choice or moral responsibility; it is essential for islands' economic stability and sustainability.

Negative Impacts on Ecosystems and Tourist Appeal

One of the immediate consequences of climate change is the degradation of ecosystems that form an integral part of the islands' tourism offering. Rising sea temperatures are affecting the health of marine ecosystems, particularly seagrass reefs and fish populations, which are crucial for ecotourism, diving, and the availability of fresh seafood. In some cases, climate change has also encouraged the spread of invasive species that threaten local biodiversity.

Wildfires, heavy rainfall, and extreme storms are becoming more frequent and less predictable, causing direct damage to tourism infrastructure, limiting access to popular sites, and reducing the ability of sensitive areas to host visitors. Moreover, coastal erosion, beach sand loss, and rising sea levels may destroy one of the islands' main tourism attractions — their coastline.

This creates a clear risk: that tourist destinations may become less attractive, leading to decreased demand and economic losses for residents dependent on this sector. Therefore, mitigation and adaptation policies must be fully integrated into all levels of tourism planning and territorial development.

Public Health and Communities

Climate change also indirectly impacts public health, which can affect local communities and the tourist experience. Heatwaves disproportionately affect the elderly and those with chronic illnesses, while new vector-borne diseases such as dengue or chikungunya are becoming an increasingly probable reality in the Mediterranean climate.

Such risks can deter tourists who view islands as places of relaxation and retreat. Therefore, public health, safety, and information systems must be adapted and strengthened as an integral part of climate preparedness.

Adaptation: Smart Planning and Nature-Based Solutions

An integrated adaptation approach, including social, infrastructural, and nature-based measures, is needed for islands to effectively face these changes. One of the most effective aspects is using nature-based solutions, such as restoring valleys, creating vegetative buffers along coasts to control erosion, and rehabilitating traditional water management systems like cisterns and rubble walls.

Additionally, there must be regular vulnerability assessments of tourist areas to flooding, storms, and high temperatures, so that protection protocols, early warning systems, and visitor information campaigns can be introduced. Climate-resilient tourism not only helps mitigate the potential consequences of natural disasters but also signals safety and seriousness to the entire industry.

Energy and Emissions: A Critical Role in Carbon Reduction

Islands urgently need to become role models in carbon emission reduction. This means significantly increasing the use of renewable energy sources while applying large-scale energy efficiency measures in tourist facilities and private homes.

Tourism itself has a substantial carbon footprint, primarily due to air transport. Therefore, there should be a focus on promoting regional tourism, clean maritime transport alternatives, and the development of "slow tourism" routes that encourage extended experiences rather than frequent short visits. Hotels and accommodations should be encouraged to implement carbon audits and calculate their carbon footprint, supported by technical assistance and incentives.

Education, Training, and Participation

One of the most effective tools in combating climate change is awareness. Environmental and climate education programmes should be developed for both local communities and tourists. Schools and cultural centres should be platforms for discussing climate change and how daily life can be adapted accordingly.

Workers in the tourism sector should receive specific training on how to deliver low-carbon tourism, how to present sustainable practices to their clients, and how to respond to climate-related situations. Codes of conduct for tourism operators and certification systems linked to environmental performance should also be introduced.

Direct awareness should also be extended to tourists. Simple infographics, beach signage, mobile apps with climate impact information, and announcements on transport services can be practical and effective tools to build a more conscious tourism culture. The goal is to ensure that every visitor understands they are participants in a global fight — and that the choices they make while holidaying on an island can make a real difference.

Policy, Partnerships, and Funding

Climate change requires a clear, multi-level, and evidence-based political response. Islands must integrate climate adaptation strategies, land use policies, and public investment budgets into their tourism plans. Policy should reward those implementing sustainable practices and promote integrated approaches that bring together all sectors: environment, health, energy, transport, and tourism.

EU and international climate funding, such as the EU Green Deal, the Just Transition Fund, and multilateral climate finance sources, should be fully leveraged. These resources can be used to fund resilient infrastructure, restore vulnerable areas, deploy monitoring systems, and provide professional training.

At the regional level, partnerships between Mediterranean and non-Mediterranean islands can serve as valuable tools for sharing best practices, co-developing projects, and launching public awareness campaigns on a larger scale. Island collaboration can strengthen their common identity as vulnerable yet proactive players in this global crisis.

Climate change is not a futuristic threat — it is a present reality, affecting islands in concrete and multifaceted ways. For islands that rely on natural beauty, environmental calm, and quality of life to attract tourists, climate change poses a central challenge to their viability.

However, it can also be an opportunity — an opportunity to build new models of tourism based on resilience, responsibility, and environmental intelligence. An opportunity for communities to reclaim control over their future and become central actors in the fight against the climate crisis.

Islands can, and must, be an example, both at home and globally, of how tourism can adapt to this crisis and actively contribute to the change we need to see.

Chapter 5:
Global Practices and International Cooperation in the Field of Sustainable Tourism

The Value of Global Knowledge in a Local Context

Sustainable tourism is not an abstract concept but a reality already being developed in various countries and regions worldwide, with concrete results and case studies that can inspire other islands, including Mediterranean ones such as Malta. Studying these experiences is essential to understand which strategies have proven successful, how to adapt to the local reality, and which paths should be avoided.

Across the globe, several tourism destinations have transformed their development approach by integrating environmental protection, community engagement, and technological innovation into a model that prioritises sustainability over visitor volume. Their experiences offer examples of implementing practical measures and building a culture of resilient and participatory tourism management.

International Case Studies

One of the most well-known examples is Costa Rica. This country recognised the value of nature-based tourism early and decided to promote ecotourism as the core model of its tourism industry. With over 25% of its territory under legal protection and the creation of national parks, Costa Rica has successfully attracted millions of visitors annually while maintaining high levels of biodiversity and social development. Local communities play a direct role in managing tourism facilities and promoting authentic and sustainable experiences.

Another example is Slovenia, which has gained a reputation as one of Europe's most sustainable destinations. Its capital, Ljubljana, was named European Green Capital thanks to an efficient public transport system, extensive pedestrian zones, and the implementation of urban plans that prioritise the environment. More importantly, certification and evaluation models were introduced for rural and small destinations, allowing local communities to take control of their tourism development.

Despite their small size and growing tourism pressures, the Faroe Islands introduced a programme called "Closed for Maintenance, Open for Voluntourism". On selected days of the year, the islands close to ordinary tourists and welcome only those who wish to participate in environmental clean-up, maintenance, and restoration work. This strategy reduces ecological impacts and strengthens the respect and relationship between the visitor and the destination.

In Asia, South Korea's Jeju Islands offer another model of environmental innovation, with strict coastal development measures, tourist capacity limits, and protected zones. Using high-tech solutions for monitoring tourist areas and managing visitor flows has enabled more efficient and transparent administration.

These examples show that sustainable practices can be implemented in both developed and developing countries and in continental and island environments. What matters is adapting these practices to each island's specific context, considering size, resources, and local administrative capacities.

International Cooperation as a Catalyst for Change

International cooperation in sustainable tourism is not just about exchanging ideas — it's also about forming strategic partnerships, accessing funding, and participating in initiatives at the European or global level. For islands, which often operate with limited resources and everyday challenges, cooperation is a key tool for overcoming structural limitations and exploring new opportunities.

Organisations such as the UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization) and UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) offer policy tools, standards, and technical support programmes that can assist local and regional administrations in implementing sustainable measures. For example, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) has developed international criteria that can be applied to tourist destinations to help assess and improve their sustainability performance.

Additionally, European programmes such as Interreg, LIFE+, and Horizon Europe provide space for transnational partnerships where islands and insular regions can collaborate on clean mobility, biodiversity protection, and digital tourism transformation projects. Participation in such projects creates a support network, technical knowledge sharing, and access to new technologies.

Cooperation with international and regional NGOs can also be highly effective. Examples include The Travel Foundation, WWF Mediterranean, and Island Innovation, which directly support communities in tourist areas by organising training, educational campaigns, and community-based governance initiatives. These NGOs can act as catalysts for real sustainable development for islands that cannot develop programmes from scratch.

Regional Diplomacy and Island Alliances

Beyond global cooperation, the Mediterranean region offers a favourable space for collective action. Many countries in the region face similar challenges, such as climate change, biodiversity preservation, and tourism seasonality, making it feasible to develop joint strategies.

Organisations like MedCities, MedPan (Mediterranean Protected Areas Network), and the Mediterranean Commission of UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments) actively design regional sustainable policies. Active participation of islands in these forums means they can have a voice in regional policy and more effectively advocate for their interests.

Regional cooperation could also include the adoption of standard certification criteria, regional educational programmes, or joint promotional initiatives based on ecological and cultural values. This could lead to new thematically conscious tourism routes for Malta and other Mediterranean islands, such as insular cultural heritage tourism, Mediterranean cuisine, or regional marine parks.

Policy-Making Inspired by Good Practices

The study of and cooperation with international experiences should not stop at observation; it must serve as a basis for concrete policies and measures that can be adapted to the island context. This includes adopting sustainable assessment systems, codifying regulations recognizing environmental carrying capacities, and integrating sustainability indicators into planning and monitoring processes.

It is also important that these practices be combined with local knowledge, so that solutions respect each island's social and cultural realities. Therefore, change must not be imposed from outside but supported by participatory and inclusive processes that acknowledge local communities' potential and limitations.

Global practices and international cooperation offer islands a unique opportunity to learn from one another, develop resilient strategies, and strengthen their position as active players in the transition toward sustainable tourism. Other countries' experiences and collaboration with NGOs, international organisations, and regional partners can serve as the foundation for ongoing improvement, innovation, and responsible management.

Islands that embrace this shift will benefit from global contributions to tourism and ensure a more stable and equitable future for their communities.

Chapter 6:
Implementation – Towards Sustainable Tourism through Concrete Action

The Need for Effective and Structured Action

Planning and vision for sustainable tourism are essential, but success may remain an illusion without a coherent, structured implementation process driven by strong political leadership. Implementation is the foundation upon which the credibility of any policy or strategy is built, and it is the only path to real change, achieved jointly with communities.

In the context of islands, where time, resources, and space are limited, the implementation process must be more strategic, inclusive, and adaptable. This requires not only professional teams with technical expertise but also the political will to stay the course in the face of obstacles, as well as the active involvement of all stakeholders, from local communities and economic operators to public authorities and civil society.

Designing a Strategic Action Plan

The first fundamental step is drafting a clear, pragmatic Action Plan guided by transparency and participation principles. This plan should include clear and measurable objectives, realistic timelines, performance indicators, and defined responsibilities for each entity involved.

The plan should be based on analyzing the community and local ecosystems' real needs, market assessments, administrative capacity, and investment potential. It must reflect a dialogue between policy and evidence, not simply a static document. It should also include impact assessments for each action on the environment, economy, and society to avoid causing more harm than good.

It is also crucial that the plan includes mechanisms for sustainable financing, which are not solely dependent on public funds but also seek partnerships with the private sector, NGOs, and international funding bodies. Including incentive schemes, tax credits, and public-private partnership (PPP) agreements can enable more flexible implementation and broader reach.

Creating an Effective Governance Structure

For implementation to be effective, there must be a clear governance structure that defines who makes decisions, with which tools, and under what control and accountability mechanisms. This could include creating a specialised unit within Local Government or a Sustainable Tourism Coordination Authority, with a clear mandate to implement, monitor, and report on progress. In Malta, the Malta Tourism Authority could also perform this role in collaboration with the Local Councils' Association.

This authority should be composed of representatives from public authorities, experts in environment, planning, culture, and economy, and members of the community and private sector. The goal is not to create another bureaucratic body but to establish a dynamic platform that combines expertise, stakeholder input, and ongoing evaluation.

Its main functions should include:

- Coordinating implementation across ministries and administrative levels;
- Real-time tracking of objectives and indicators;
- Transparent communication with the public;
- Technical verification of implemented measures;
- Mobilising funds and resources;
- Providing technical support to authorities and communities.

This body must remain independent of direct political interference and benefit from administrative continuity. It should also be able to provide recommendations to Parliament or regulatory bodies on how policies and legal instruments should be adjusted.

Community Involvement and the Principle of Cohesion

While central governance is necessary, effective implementation should be decentralised and guided by principles of territorial cohesion. Communities must be given the tools to implement projects at the local level — for example, funds for community tourism initiatives, the management of natural sites, or the promotion of sustainable cultural festivals.

To this end, a participatory platform should be developed to allow communities to identify their priorities and propose solutions, supported by technical and financial assistance. This would strengthen implementation and ensure a sense of ownership over the process.

In addition, the quality of communication is a crucial factor: communities must be regularly informed about progress, obstacles, and successes related to the plan. Tools such as online portals, regular meetings, newsletters, and semi-annual reports can help maintain high trust and public engagement levels.

Evaluation and Monitoring

A continuous monitoring and evaluation system must accompany a serious implementation process. This means establishing objective, data-driven indicators that measure administrative progress (e.g., number of projects or amount of funding) and the real impact on the environment, society, and the economy.

Examples include:

– The level of sustainable transport usage by tourists;

– Reduction in energy consumption in hotels and accommodations;

– Increased community participation in tourism initiatives;

– Protection of natural areas and resource management;

– Satisfaction of communities and visitors.

Monitoring should use quantitative and qualitative methods, incorporating smart technologies, public surveys, and independent evaluations. Annual reports should be published and discussed publicly, and corrective actions should be taken as needed.

Administrative Capacity and Training

One of the greatest obstacles to implementing sustainable policy is the lack of administrative and technical capacity. Therefore, it is crucial to train public employees, local council officers, and tourism operators.

Training programmes should cover environmental management, public communication, strategic planning, and support for sustainable small enterprises. Regular networking between islands or other regions implementing similar initiatives should be encouraged to exchange knowledge and mutually learn from successes or mistakes.

Political Leadership and Long-Term Vision

Visionary politics is essential for implementing sustainable tourism. This means that local and national govern- ments must not only approve the plan but maintain it as a national priority and integrate it into a broader vision for sustainable development. There must be coherence between environmental, transport, cultural, and energy policies — not just in policy documents but also in action and budgets.

Political and administrative continuity is also crucial so that projects are not abandoned after an election or leadership change. Sustainable tourism should become a national and political consensus, transcending party lines and serving the long-term common good.

Implementation is the ultimate test of whether vision can become reality. Without a serious, strategic, and participatory process, the ideals of sustainable tourism risk remaining empty slogans. Islands, in particular, should view implementation as an opportunity to demonstrate resilience, innovation, and responsible leadership.

Chapter 7:
Protection of the Mediterranean Sea and a Regional Emergency Plan for the Prevention of Environmental Disasters

The Mediterranean Sea – A Shared and Vulnerable Heritage

The Mediterranean Sea is one of the world's greatest natural and cultural treasures but also one of the most vulnerable ecosystems. Surrounded by over 20 countries, it serves as a critical artery for maritime transport, with thousands of industrial and passenger vessels crossing it daily. This intense activity presents a serious risk, where a single incident could escalate into an irreparable environmental disaster.

The Critical Need for a Regional Emergency Plan

While each country has national protocols for pollution and maritime emergencies, there is an apparent absence of a comprehensive, coordinated plan covering the Mediterranean region. Such a plan should include clear guidelines for action during a crude oil spill, release of toxic substances, or a tanker accident in sensitive areas. Creating this plan must be an absolute priority and involve the direct participation of coastal states, including Malta, among the most exposed countries.

The Ongoing Risk of Pollution and Maritime Disasters

The intensity of maritime traffic means that at any moment, an accident could release thousands of tonnes of oil or chemicals into the sea. Such incidents would immediately affect the marine environment, the economy, the tourism sector, and public health. The risk is severe in Malta, as over 70% of the country's water supply is produced through seawater desalination. A major pollution event could compromise this vital resource since Malta lacks natural freshwater sources from rivers or mountains, and its groundwater reserves are continuously depleted.

Devastating Impact on Residents and the Tourism Sector

Imagine a serious accident between two tankers near Malta, spilling crude oil into the eastern coastal area. The consequences would be catastrophic: beaches would be closed, desalination plants would shut down, water supply would be at risk, and the country would be forced to rely on imported water at significantly higher costs. Residents ' daily lives would be severely disrupted, directly impacting hygiene, health, and household economies.

Tourism, a primary source of income for Mediterranean countries, especially islands like Malta, would be the first sector to suffer. Visitors would cancel trips, hotels and restaurants would struggle, and the effects could last for years. The damage to the country's international reputation would be long-term and difficult to repair.

Biodiversity and Coastal Areas at Serious Risk

The impact of such a disaster goes beyond economic aspects. The Mediterranean is one of the wealthiest regions globally in terms of biodiversity. It is home to more than 17,000 species, including protected ones like loggerhead turtles and dolphins, as well as many types of fish, molluscs, and marine plants. Crude oil or other chemicals would cause the immediate death of these organisms and disrupt their development.

The same applies to the coastline, where sea meets land, which is essential for numerous species and human communities. Pollution could destroy dunes and near-shore marine habitats and increase erosion. Restoration could take decades and, in some cases, may never be fully achieved.

Malta as a Case Study of Vulnerability

Due to its small size and lack of alternative natural resources, Malta represents a prime case study in vulnerability. Any serious compromise in seawater quality could lead to a sanitary and environmental crisis, with no realistic means to source alternative water or marine life. It is essential to recognise that Malta's resilience in such a scenario is limited and must be strengthened through preventive measures and strategic partnerships.

The Need for Effective International Coordination

Therefore, it is imperative to establish a regional rapid-response mechanism made up of technical experts, specialised resources, and emergency fleets under joint coordination. This mechanism should operate under the auspices of the EU or the Barcelona Convention for the Protection of the Mediterranean and be activated by any Mediterranean country experiencing a crisis.

In the event of an incident, the plan should automatically deploy cleaning fleets, monitoring teams, technical support for water treatment, and coordinated public communication with affected populations. A regional stockpile of immediate response equipment and materials, including oil-absorbent systems, containment booms, and surveillance drones, must be maintained.

The Importance of Prevention and Continuous Monitoring

The plan must not be reactive only during emergencies. It needs to be permanently active, with technological monitoring of vessel movement, sensors for water quality, and regular simulations of emergency scenarios. This would allow for risk reduction, faster responses, and identification of vulnerable zones.

Additionally, regular training must be provided for both public and private sector workers who could be involved in an emergency response. Residents should also be educated on how to act during a pollution alert.

The Committee of the Regions as a Strategic Actor in Protecting the Mediterranean

In this context, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) has a strategic and vital role in elevating this challenge to a European level. As an institution representing local and regional authorities in the EU, the CoR can raise awareness, present concrete proposals, and push European institutions to act with urgency and responsibility.

The Committee can issue formal opinions, organise thematic debates, and facilitate coordination among Mediterranean EU member states to create a united front that drives real change. This forum also has the tools to monitor and raise warnings against delays or failure to implement necessary measures at the regional and national levels.

Furthermore, through its broad network of local and regional authorities, the Committee can serve as a platform for collecting field-based experiences, demanding more transparent monitoring, and advocating for dedicated EU funding to support prevention, restoration, and marine protection projects.

It is crucial to understand that the Mediterranean Sea, despite being considered a "closed sea," is a livelihood, employment, and identity source for millions of European citizens. The sea is vital for water, food, tourism, and culture, particularly for island and coastal populations. Therefore, the Committee must apply all necessary pressure to ensure the EU places the Mediterranean as an absolute ecological and social priority, and that all required actions are implemented without further delay.

A Collective Responsibility for the Mediterranean's Future

Protecting the Mediterranean Sea must not be regarded as a national issue alone, but as a collective and strategic priority for every country bordering it. For Malta, this is a matter of survival and quality of life. For islands, which are isolated and have few alternatives, protecting the sea is essential for sustainable living and development.

The creation of a regional, coordinated, funded, and operational emergency plan must happen without delay. Any delay could come at a price that is too high.

Chapter 8:
Monitoring and Reporting –
Tools for Success and Transparency
in Sustainable Tourism

The Essential Role of Monitoring

Following planning and implementation, the monitoring phase represents the checkpoint where sustainable tourism is tested in everyday reality. Monitoring is not merely an administrative control mechanism but a strategic tool that enables the evaluation of effectiveness, course correction where needed, and ensures that the benefits of policies and projects are truly achieved.

In the context of islands, where the impacts of unsustainable development can be particularly severe, the need for robust, regular, and transparent monitoring systems is even more urgent. These systems should be based on scientific methods, credible data, and open participation so that results are accepted by the community and serve as political and practical guidance.

Evaluation Methods and Indicators

Effective monitoring starts with the careful selection of indicators and evaluation methods. The indicators must be measurable, relevant to the established goals, and updatable. They should cover the three main dimensions of sustainable tourism:

1. The natural environment – for example, air and water quality levels, energy and water use in tourist accommodations, the volume of waste generated by tourism, and the conservation status of protected areas.

2. The economy and local impact include the proportion of tourism revenue retained in the community, the number of local enterprises involved in tourism, and jobs generated directly or indirectly.

3. Social well-being and culture – including resident satisfaction levels, their involvement in the industry, and the conservation and promotion of cultural heritage.

To ensure these indicators are not just a formality, a monitoring plan must be developed, outlining how, when, and by whom data will be collected and analysed, and how this information will be communicated and used to inform policy decisions.

Evaluation methods may include:

– Resident and visitor surveys, providing valuable insights into experience, service strain, and perceived environmental quality;
– Administrative data analysis such as tourism arrival statistics, transport usage, and resource consumption;
– On-site monitoring using environmental sensors, direct observation, and geospatial data;
– External evaluations conducted by experts or independent bodies to avoid bias and enhance credibility.
The evaluation must be continuous, not done spo-

radically. Regular cycles of data collection and review (e.g., every six months or annually) should be established, and indicators should be revised and updated according to evolving contexts and priorities.

Periodic Reporting as a Tool for Transparency and Participation

Regular and public reporting is the most effective way to ensure that monitoring leads to real impact. Reports should not be merely technocratic documents for government entities but clear communication tools for citizens, the private sector, and the international community.

Periodic reports should include:

– A clear presentation of key indicators;
– A selection of indicators presented graphically;
– An analysis of progress achieved or obstacles encountered;
– Recommendations for the upcoming period;
– Contributions and comments from the community and stakeholders.
Ideally, these reports should be presented at public forums (community meetings, local conferences, exhibitions) and published on digital platforms, including authority websites and interactive applications. This practice improves transparency and trust in institutions and encourages active participation.

At the same time, reports should also serve as internal management tools. Local and national authorities should use them as a basis for informed decision-making, project evaluation, and funding allocation. They should contribute to creating a feedback loop between policy and practice.

Community Participation in Monitoring

An effective monitoring system cannot be the exclusive domain of experts and institutions. Mechanisms for citizen science and community-based monitoring should be established, where residents are part of the observation and evaluation process.

For example, residents could be trained to collect data on the use of transport modes in certain areas or the seasonal effects on community life. This provides valuable data and fosters a sense of ownership and commitment.

Constructive criticism and active feedback from the public should also be encouraged. Tools such as feedback hubs, direct hotlines, reporting apps, and periodic surveys can be introduced. Local tourism operators should serve as sources of data, observations, and innovative ideas.

Standardisation and Certification

A monitoring system can become even more effective if linked to sustainable certification mechanisms. These can serve as tools to identify those hotels, businesses, or destinations that meet specific environmental, social, and economic performance levels.

Organisations like the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) offer certifications that can be adapted for regions or island contexts. For example, islands can establish regional certification to recognise enterprises that actively contribute to sustainable tourism goals.

These mechanisms can encourage positive competition, improve service quality, and act as guarantees for visitors seeking conscious and sustainable choices.

Monitoring and reporting are not secondary elements in the sustainable development process – they are the tools that ensure the reliability of the entire process. Establishing a regular, transparent, and participatory evaluation system is crucial for islands that wish to place sustainable tourism at the heart of their policy.

Through clear indicators, public reports, and civic participation, the tourism sector can become one of the most regulated and responsible, not as a burden, but as an opportunity. Knowledge, data, and feedback help correct mistakes, inspire new projects, enable innovation, and strengthen legislation in the field.

Chapter 9:
Special Importance for Mediterranean Islands – Towards Sustainable Tourism as a Path to the Future

Strategic Position and Insular Identity

The Mediterranean islands are essential to the European and wider Mediterranean region's natural, cultural, and economic heritage. They are places where culture, history, and nature converge in a unique harmony that attracts millions of visitors annually. Despite their small size, these islands hold strategic value across several fields: environmental to economic significance, defence to regional security, and biodiversity to managing natural resources. This importance makes them natural candidates for specific, differentiated policies that acknowledge their potential and vulnerabilities.

Positioned at the crossroads between Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, islands such as Malta, Sicily, the Greek Islands, Corsica, Sardinia, and others not only provide essential maritime connectivity but also serve as meeting points between cultures, traditions, and historical ties. This makes them not just tourist destinations but also spaces where tourism can serve as a tool for cultural diplomacy, regional development, and Mediterranean cooperation.

The Unique Challenges of Islands

These islands also face a set of unique challenges that require policies based on their insular reality:

– Geographic limitations: limited space and high population density on many islands lead to pressure on land and infrastructure;

– Dependence on vulnerable sectors: many islands rely heavily on seasonal tourism and the importation of essential resources such as food, fuel, and water;

– Distance from decision-making centers: often, the priorities of islands are overlooked in national or regional debates;

– Disproportionate impacts of climate change: sea-level rise, coastal erosion, violent storms, and pressure on natural and social systems are increasingly evident realities.

In light of all this, adopting a sustainable tourism strategy for Mediterranean islands is not just a visionary choice but a necessity for long-term survival.

Biodiversity and Natural Heritage – A Globally Valuable Legacy

Mediterranean islands exhibit high biodiversity and endemic species, meaning their natural resources are rare, valuable, and unfortunately at risk. Ecosystems such as lagoons, salt marshes, forest trails, rocky hills, and untouched coastlines are the first victims of uncontrolled conventional tourism growth.

Sustainable tourism in these contexts must be built on an active conservation approach. Protected areas should be strengthened, seasonal access limits must be respected, and the tourism product and ecosystem conservation must be integrated. Therefore, investments in ecotourism, nature trails, wildlife observation, and educational theme parks can serve as educational tools and sustainable income sources.

Cultural Heritage and Local Identity

The cultural heritage of Mediterranean islands is vast: from megalithic temples and catacombs to religious feasts, from traditional crafts to minority languages. This heritage has intrinsic value and is also one of the main pillars of insular tourism.

However, this heritage is under pressure from cultural homogenization, rapid urbanization, and uncontrolled tourist expansion. Therefore, promoting sustainable cultural tourism protects local identity, supports traditional communities, and offers an authentic and distinctive tourism product.

On the islands, priority should be given to creating thematic cultural routes, authentic festivals with controlled commercialization, and initiatives that connect tourists to residents' daily lives—such as agritourism, artisanal workshops, or volunteering in cultural projects.

Tourism and Sustainability as a Strategic Opportunity

For Mediterranean islands, tourism can become a driver of sustainable development rather than a source of degradation. With investments in better infrastructure, clean mobility, renewable energy, and efficient resource management, islands can demonstrate that even small regions with natural limitations can be innovative, thoughtful, and resilient.

This must be supported by European and international policy that recognizes islands' unique characteristics and provides tailored tools, such as adapted funding streams, insular monitoring systems, and partnership networks between islands.

A shared Mediterranean identity should also be developed, based on values of cooperation, territorial justice, and shared sustainability. This identity can be expressed through joint tourism projects, promotion of a sustainable Mediterranean route, and regular cultural exchanges.

The Future: Insular Leadership and Island-Focused Policy

The implementation of sustainable tourism on islands must be led by local leadership with a clear vision. This means that local authorities and their communities should play a central role in the design, implementation, and evaluation of tourism policy. This vision must be rooted in local culture and aspirations—not imposed from outside.

Therefore, tourism policy in the Mediterranean islands should include:
– Specific plans for insular realities;
– Mechanisms for participatory local governance;
– Guaranteed access to EU funding for environmental and infrastructural adaptation;
– Support for training, education, and innovation within communities;
– Networking platforms and insular diplomacy

Chapter 10:
Peace in the Mediterranean Region – Instrumental for Sustainable Tourism

The Mediterranean, a region rich in history, culture, and natural beauty, has been a bridge between continents and civilizations for centuries. Yet this privileged geography has also brought conflict, invasions, and political tensions. The history of the Mediterranean is also a history of wars and instability—each time these escalate, they directly impact people's movements and the viability of tourism, a crucial sector for many countries in the region.

Let us explore how peace in the Mediterranean is fundamental for sustainable tourism and essential for the stability and security of Europe as a whole. The connection between peace, inter-country collaboration, and sustainable development is vital for Mediterranean islands and coastal regions to continue offering visitors authentic, safe, and sustainable experiences.

The Mediterranean: A Region of Contrasts and Historical Conflict

Throughout the centuries, the Mediterranean has witnessed the rise and fall of Roman, Ottoman, and Napoleonic empires. The 20th century brought with it devastating wars such as World War II and the Spanish Civil War. In the 21st century, conflicts in the Middle East (Syria, Libya, Israel-Palestine) and instability in North Africa have continued to undermine the region's sense of security.

Whenever conflict occurs in the area, its consequences are immediately felt in the tourism industry. For example, during the war in Libya, there was a sharp decline in passenger arrivals to neighboring countries, including Malta and Italy. Flights were cancelled or rerouted, tourism companies panicked, and fear worked against the image of typically considered safe destinations.

The Negative Impact on Tourism, Economy and Society

Instability in the Mediterranean leads to several harmful consequences:

– Fragile Tourism Economy: Tourists are susceptible to risk. Political tensions, terrorist attacks, or reports of instability halt bookings, lead to cancellations, and result in empty tourist seasons. This can be devastating for islands like Malta, Greece, and Sicily, where tourism represents a high percentage of GDP.

– Rising Unemployment and Social Precarity: Fewer visitors means losing both temporary and permanent jobs in hotels, restaurants, transport, and related services. This also leads to lower prices and reduced profits for small and medium businesses reliant on tourist spending.

– Damaged International Image: International media and travel agencies often avoid conflict-affected regions. This harms not only the present, but also the long term, as it takes years to rebuild the reputation of a safe and attractive destination.

Peace in the Mediterranean: An Essential Condition for a Stable Europe

The Mediterranean should not be considered a peripheral region; it is central to Europe's southern dimension. Any destabilisation in the Mediterranean—such as migration crises, armed conflict, or state failure—has direct repercussions on the whole of Europe.

– Link Between Continents: The Mediterranean connects Africa, Asia, and Europe. Peace in the region facilitates tourism routes, trade corridors, and cultural exchanges. War, on the other hand, disrupts all of this.

– Migration Pressures: Conflict in the Middle East or surrounding regions leads to sharp increases in migration toward European countries such as Italy, Spain, and Malta. This can cause political tensions, strain on social systems, and provoke anti-immigration rhetoric that undermines a culture of hospitality.

– Radicalisation and Terrorism: Instability can become fertile ground for extremist groups who may attack not only locally but also in European capitals. The result? Fear, generalisation, and deterioration of intercultural relations.

Peace as the Foundation of Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism is not possible without stability and security. Peace provides the necessary conditions to:

– Build international partnerships between tourist destinations – e.g., joint routes between Malta, Sicily, and Tunisia;

– Develop regional ecological projects, such as marine conservation and coordinated coastal protection;

– trengthen ecotourism and cultural collaboration, vital for tourism that legally supports local communities.

The Challenge and Necessity of Regional Tourism Diplomacy

European institutions should emphasize peace in the Mediterranean as a foundation for security, tourism, and sustainable development. Countries like Malta, an island state in the heart of the sea, should assume a leadership role as peace mediators.

Partnerships such as those within the Interreg Med Programme and initiatives like UCLG and MedCities can serve as platforms to advance this dialogue.

Peace in the Mediterranean is much more than a noble value; it is a necessary condition for the survival of local economies, the tourism industry, and the stability of Europe as a whole. Conflict repels tourists, destroys reputations, and erodes the potential for sustainable development.

By contrast, peaceful relations open the door to investment, promote culture, and create a climate of trust—an essential element for resilient tourism. Therefore, any policy on sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean must promote peace and dialogue at the heart of its mission.

Conclusion

The Mediterranean islands represent spaces of both vulnerability and opportunity. Their challenges are real and urgent, yet their potential to become laboratories of sustainability is enormous. With consistent policy, community engagement, and regional and international support, tourism can become the primary tool for islands to face the future with courage and wisdom.

The future of Mediterranean islands should not rest on short-term exploitation, but on a long-term vision that views tourism not as an end but as a means to build a just and durable economic, environmental, and social model. This is the true path to sustainability, starting from the islands and radiating across the entire region.

Sustainable tourism in Mediterranean islands stands at a critical juncture. In insular realities with unique characteristics and specific challenges, it is clear that conventional models of economic growth and tourism development can no longer be applied indiscriminately. Change is necessary, and it must be built on collaboration, innovation, and shared commitment among all actors: communities, authorities, the private sector, and civil society.

Sustainable tourism cannot be achieved through isolated initiatives or purely economic terms. It requires a holistic approach that places people and the environment at the heart of development. Knowledge, adaptability, and a vision for a more equitable and resilient future must be the compass for all island tourism-related policies.

The role of local communities is central. They are not merely users or passive observers; they are the true ambassadors of island identity, the custodians of cultural heritage, and the protectors of the environment. Their active participation in planning, implementing, and evaluating tourism policies must be guaranteed and encouraged—symbolically and as a cornerstone of the entire process.

At the same time, environmental protection must be treated as a strategic investment, not an administrative burden. Safeguarding the sea, land, biodiversity, and climate is not an abstract goal—it protects the resources upon which tourism and community quality of life are built. Sustainable practices must, therefore, be structurally integrated into infrastructure plans, educational efforts, business models, and technology.

Technological and social innovation should be promoted as a pillar of this process. Renewable energy, clean mobility, intelligent monitoring, and digital tools can reduce tourism's negative impacts and create new, personalised, and high-value experiences. Innovation also means exploring alternative economic models that prioritise sustainability over short-term profit.

Multilevel collaboration, local, national, and international, is essential. Islands are not isolated. They must be integrated into exchange networks, cooperation platforms, and regional initiatives that promote shared approaches to common challenges. EU and Mediterranean policies must recognise the insular reality as a strategic, not peripheral, dimension.

This report shows that the path to sustainable tourism is not a simple one, but it is absolutely necessary. We must look at our islands not as places for short-term exploitation, but as living communities deserving of policies that respect their needs, recognise their limits, and support their aspirations.

Our shared and concrete goal should be to make our islands truly sustainable destinations—environmentally clean and protected, socially inclusive and participatory, and economically firm and fair. This is not just a political vision; it is a tangible reality that must be built step by step, with the commitment, courage, and wisdom of all those who live on and love these islands.

MARIO FAVA is the President of the Local Councils' Association and the Local Government Section (Partit Laburista). He is also a member of the Committee of Regions in Brussels and served as vice president of the Chamber of Local Authorities in the Congress for Local and Regional Authorities in Strasbourg.

Mario was elected President of the Local Councils' Association in April 2017. Since then, he has played a leading role in raising the profile of local government and the role of the Association. He also spearheaded the vision of the Local Councils' Associations – 'Resident First' – Better Quality of Life.

On a national political level, he was a member of the Labour Party National Executive and later the President of the Labour Party Local Government Section. He is also a member of the Labour Party Administration.

He contested the Local Council elections for the first time in 2002 and was elected a Councillor within the Swieqi Local Council. He also served as a Councillor in the Fgura Local Council from 2017 to 2024.

Internationally, he is a member of the Committee of the Regions in Brussels, SEDEC, CIVEX, and NAT Commissions. He also served as vice-president of the Chamber of Local Authorities in the Congress for Local and Regional Authorities in Strasbourg.

Mario is also the Head of the Maltese Delegation to the Committee of the Regions and the Council of Europe Congress.

For 18 years, he has served on the Executive Committee of the European Cities Against Drugs (ECAD), which is based in Stockholm.