Rationale

Tourism is increasingly recognized as a powerful tool for the development of rural areas and the empowerment of local communities thanks to its potential to create socio-economic opportunities, contribute to a balanced territorial development and foster the sustainable development of less-developed regions. This makes tourism a powerful ally in the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

If properly developed, tourism has the capacity to be an important source of income and job creation and provide a solution to economic marginalization and rural depopulation. Tourism helps also enhance natural sites and supports the preservation of local biodiversity, which is particularly relevant for destinations where nature is flourishing. Natural sites such as mountains, forests, lakes and rivers, offer significant potential for the development of innovative tourism activities and the diversification of the tourism sector, including through the enhancement of strategic tourism segments like adventure tourism, eco-tourism and sports tourism. If done in a sustainable manner, the development of these segments can contribute to increasing the attractiveness of remote areas, drawing visitors to the area and driving local development.

The development of nature-based tourism can therefore provide an excellent means of empowering local actors, in particular women and youth, while at the same time contributing to the preservation of natural ecosystems and fostering the sustainable development of a region.
Background

Belarus has pursued a gradual path of transition, characterized by limited structural reforms and a modest expansion of the private sector. Economic growth has been accompanied by an impressive fall in the number of households living below the poverty line and an increase in household income among the bottom 40%. Unfortunately, the factors that enabled Belarus’s past success are no longer in play. The capacity of capital accumulation to drive economic growth is exhausted, the energy subsidies stemming from bilateral agreements with Russia are smaller, and public debt ratios to GDP are growing.

Against this backdrop, the development of alternative income and job creation sources such as tourism has been identified as a priority for the Government. The introduction of the country’s 30-day visa-free travel scheme for 74 countries in 2018 resulted in a 43% increase in visitors and numbers are expected to grow over the coming years. Despite this, the sector is characterized by insufficient tourism infrastructure, the low quality of tourism services and limited tourism offerings. The country also faces a high unemployment rate, poor local governance and a difficulty in attracting foreign investments. The main weaknesses are the lack of capacity and knowledge of local communities in building and managing tourist attractions, the lack of training for tourism services providers and the limited tourism planning and governance capacity of both national and regional authorities.

With its flourishing natural beauty, numerous national parks, lakes and rivers, nature remains the biggest tourism asset of the country. The country is home to over 20,000 rivers and 11,000 lakes, and water spots are among the most popular destinations for both locals and tourists. The development of river tourism was already included in the country’s last national tourism development program for 2011-2015 and in a number of regional development strategies, such as the Pripyat Polesie initiative for 2010-2015 and the Lake Naroch region development program. It will also be incorporated in the new National Tourism Strategy which is currently under development. Lastly, the improvement of living standards in rural areas is today a priority for the Government, as demonstrated by the recently-launched Belarus Education Modernization Project, which aims to improve education for 65,000 children living in rural areas.

In spite of the above, the important potential of river sites has yet to be fully realized as the Belarus Government lacks the required expertise and resources to reach the relevant local rural communities in an efficient and strong manner.

Overall Objective

The project’s main objective is to leverage Belarus’s numerous river sites into an engine of economic growth, contributing to the development of remote areas and boosting the regional and national economy by empowering local communities.

Main Activities

- Enhance employment in river areas, especially for women and youth, through the support of local SMEs in mobilizing funds and creation of jobs through boosting tourism activity;

- Develop the attractiveness of river areas to tourists through the diversification of tourism offerings (eg. the development of adventure tourism, sports tourism close to river sites) and improving the quality of services;

- Foster sustainable destination management through better local tourism planning, management and decision-making processes;

- Position the region as a river tourism destination through an effective marketing and promotional strategy.

- Enhance the attractiveness of river areas to foreign investments through a better promotion strategy and the organization of a dedicated event.
Project Outputs

- Analysis of the situation, which includes a comprehensive evaluation of river destinations’ potential (identification and analysis of tourism assets, identification of the needs of the local communities in terms of training etc)
- Support for a product development and marketing strategy, which includes the identification of potential new tourism products and markets.
- Training and coaching activities for local stakeholders (Training in the development of tourism products, enhancement of local rural heritage, improvement of the quality of services, promotion of river sites etc).
- Strengthening local governance through training activities on tourism planning, management and promotion to local authorities.
- Development of an investment attraction strategy, including the organization of a foreign investments forum to attract potential tourism investors
- Evaluation of the outputs at the end of the project, elaboration of a visitor’s survey, conclusions and recommendations.

Outcomes

Overall, it is anticipated that the project will lead to a better informed and well-trained workforce in the tourism sector, alongside the enhancement of river sites and the growth of tourism activity in river areas. The impact of the project will be measured by:

- the number of individuals in local communities trained;
- the number of representatives of local authorities trained;
- the number of new tourism activities offered in each community;
- the percentage increase in the number of tourists visiting river communities at the end of the project;
- the opinion of tourists on the quality of the service (Visitor’s survey);
- the percentage increase in foreign investment in tourism amenities;

For more information, contact UNWTO:
Institutional Relations and Partnerships at sdg17@unwto.org

Tourism is a powerful vehicle to promote and reach the milestones of the ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development given that it is one of the most important sectors in the global economy and a main job and wealth creator for many countries. Tourism is now the third largest export category in the world, behind fuels and chemicals, and ahead of food and automotive. It provides 1 in 10 jobs and contributes to more than 10% of global GDP. In 2018 alone, international tourist arrivals amounted to 1.4 billion and generated US$ 1.5 trillion, while domestic tourism generated a further US$ 3.88 trillion.

But the sector doesn’t just play a role in economic growth; it is most remarkable for its potential to improve the quality of people’s lives. Truly sustainable tourism can act as a catalyst for environmental protection, champion diverse cultural heritage, and contribute to peace-building in the world. In all these areas, tourism offers great potential to advance sustainable development, and thus contributes – directly and indirectly – to the achievement of all 17 SDGs.

The World Tourism Organization has been providing technical assistance in countries across the globe for more than 40 years, supported by a wide range of donors, in partnerships with other IOs, Civil Society and the private sector. It has knowledge and expertise in the development of a sustainable, responsible and accessible tourism sector that contributes to a better world.

To scale up the efforts to unlock aid flows for tourism in the new 2030 aid architecture, UNWTO has developed a co-creation space in the T4SDGs platform for sharing developing countries’ needs.

Please visit www.Tourism4SDGs.org