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Mekong Tourism Forum Cited as an Inclusive Tourism Model **Articles**



Traditional festive lights adorn a temple in Luang Prabang. Photo: iStock.com.

The United Nations' World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) cited last year's Mekong Tourism Forum in Luang Prabang as one of seven case studies showcasing a socially inclusive tourism policy.

UNWTO launched the *Global Report on Inclusive Tourism: Model and Success Stories* [3] on 24 October in Madrid. The report discusses how tourism can help achieve Agenda 2030 and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by reducing poverty and inequality. It highlights the need for new approaches to inclusive tourism in order to drive tourism's long-term sustainability.

The report presents the [2017 Mekong Tourism Forum](#) [4] as one of the success stories in inclusive tourism, along with the Tarhiata 2021 program of Michoacán state in Mexico, township tourism in South Africa, and four other case studies. It

cites these as examples of “how, in addition to improving a destination’s performance, a socially inclusive tourism policy can also offer new economic opportunities in depressed areas and become a unifying element for the sector, the society, and the public administration.”

“As globalization, interconnectivity and a growing middle class leads to ever more people travelling, the world will continue seeming to get smaller and inclusion will become even more of a priority,” said UNWTO Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili in a [news release](#) [5].

The ancient city of Luang Prabang, a UNESCO World Heritage site in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, hosted the 2017 Mekong Tourism Forum, an annual event organized by the [Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office \(MTCO\)](#) [6] and supported by the [Asian Development Bank \(ADB\)](#) [7].

The Mekong Tourism Forum is held usually at a convention center. However, Luang Prabang does not have dedicated conference facilities. Event planners decided to make the entire destination the venue and showcase small and medium-sized enterprises. For instance, local travel operators hosted 90-minute “breakthrough” sessions and networking lunches took place in several restaurants.

“The annual forum is the Greater Mekong Subregion’s (GMS) premier multistakeholder travel and tourism industry event so it is appropriate that multiple stakeholders from the host town help to plan and host the event,” explains Steven Schipani, Head of Project Administration at ADB's Viet Nam Resident Mission and tourism sector focal person for the [GMS Program](#) [8], in the report. “This approach is a good model that other towns without big conference facilities could adapt to become more competitive in the meetings and events segment.”

This is in line with the tourism strategy adopted by the six countries comprising the subregion, Cambodia, Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in the People’s Republic of China, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam. The GMS Tourism Sector Strategy 2016-2025 supports a [more competitive, balanced, and sustainable tourism development](#) [9].

The 2017 forum also promoted sustainable practices such as ecotourism and reduced the use of plastic bottles and straws by giving delegates refillable water bottles.

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