A. Contribution to policy debate and awareness raising

Sustainable tourism in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) has always been high in the agenda of the World Tourism Organization, as shown by the Organization’s contribution, since its early stages, to the 1994 Barbados Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of SIDS. The publication “Making Tourism Work for Small Island Developing States” released by UNWTO in 2004, as an input to the 2005 Mauritius Strategy for the Implementation of the Barbados Plan of Action, assesses the potential of sustainable tourism as a tool for social and economic development and as a contributor to poverty alleviation.

In 2012, on the occasion of the Rio+20 Conference, UNWTO released a new book, “Challenges and Opportunities for Tourism Development in Small Island Developing States”, which explores in detail a number of issues such as climate change, social and cultural impacts, coastal management, local prosperity, poverty alleviation and many others, with a view of providing knowledge and tools to Governments and tourism stakeholders in SIDS.

An International Conference co-organized by UNWTO and the Government of France in Reunion Island (11-13 September 2013), with the participation of over thirty countries including several SIDS, adopted the “Reunion Island Declaration on Sustainable Tourism in Islands” which highlights a few key messages: the role of sustainable tourism in the development of SIDS; the potential of tourism to generate awareness and support for the natural and cultural heritage of islands; the need to coordinate tourism and transport policies to ensure the connectivity of islands, and partnerships among groups of islands as a basis for achieving more together. (http://europe.unwto.org/en/event/conference-sustainable-development-tourism-islands-jointly-organized-world-tourism-organizatio)

The Declaration also provides fourteen specific recommendations to enhance tourism’s contribution toward the sustainable development of islands, with special attention to SIDS, and requests that these be transmitted and considered at the Third International Conference on SIDS as well as other international forums. These recommendations, which will further assessed and reviewed at an international conference on tourism development in SIDS, to be held in Bahamas in mid-February 2014, are the basis for a roadmap of action oriented strategies on sustainable tourism

The relevance of tourism in the development of SIDS is universally acknowledged. However, as paragraph 47 of the draft outcome document for the SIDS conference rightly states:

“SIDS have not received adequate support from the international community for assessing the overall impact of the economic, social and ecological aspects of tourism in order to plan sustainable tourism and to further develop eco and cultural tourism”.

UNWTO is fully engaged to play the key role to coordinate UN efforts toward the recognition that sustainable tourism need to be placed as a priority in the development agenda of SIDS and that it receives the political and financial support it requires. The Steering Committee for Tourism Development (SCTD) (http://icr.unwto.org/en/sctd), led by UNWTO and providing an integrated approach for tourism by nine UN entities is an already existing structure that can be further reinforced and geared toward the specific objectives of the SIDS process.
SIDS vulnerabilities such as accessibility, environmental fragilities, exposure to global warming impacts, lack of economies of scale and loss of biodiversity, have a direct impact on tourism, which constitutes often the main economic revenue of the country. Therefore any integrated approach toward SIDS development must take into account sustainable tourism as key sector with a special focus on community development, poverty alleviation and employment for vulnerable segments of the population. While UNWTO, as the UN Specialized Agency on Tourism, provides the required expertise, a global engagement from the United Nations and from other multilateral bodies and bilateral initiatives is necessary. The Samoa Conference can provide the opportunity for catalysing these common efforts.

B. Partnership for enhancing sustainability at SIDS destinations

UNWTO is also committed to implement specific actions in support of SIDS. Based on the successful implementation of an on-going programme of observatories for sustainable tourism that are designed to assess the impact of tourism at destinations UNWTO is ready to work with key local partners: the national tourism administrations, tourism operators, academic institutions and the local community to establish one or more observatories in key SIDS destinations, with the objective of monitoring the adherence to identified indicators of sustainability and to initiate corrective actions when needed. Such observatories would develop and enhance expertise on the specific vulnerabilities of SIDS, such as climate change, coastal management, biodiversity conservation, and others. The programme will be technically supported by UNWTO and would benefit of the experience of the existing observatories.

C. Key issues for the conference

Against the before-mentioned background, UNWTO suggests to address the following key themes at the conference:

Vulnerability
The important role of tourism to the economy of many SIDS and the opportunity for further growth are challenged especially by the vulnerability of SIDS due to the exposure to external shocks and global environmental challenges, such as global warming, coastal erosion, marine and land biodiversity loss, among others.

Poverty
Tourism is recognized as a sector that can be shaped to deliver high levels of employment and alleviation of poverty, and has demonstrated its ability to be an engine for growth and development in SIDS. Poverty alleviation through tourism has been a central area of policy and support by the UNWTO.

Connectivity
Connectivity both intra-regionally and domestically, is of great importance for island destinations similar to larger territories where communities and destinations are physically separated by long distances or impenetrable terrain. The development of airline routes and sustaining their economic viability through tourism also contributes to market access for other economic activities of SIDS.

Resource Management
Efficient management of resources is a central requirement of sustainable tourism and of special importance for SIDS. The management of freshwater, wastewater, waster, energy and biodiversity is linked to environmental aims but has also positive implications for economic viability and community wellbeing.

In conclusion, The World Tourism Organization stands ready to provide full support to the preparatory work of the Third International Conference on SIDS. The Organization is uniquely placed, through its membership of 156 States, represented by Ministries of Tourism and National Tourism Authorities, to convey the perspective and the contribution of sustainable tourism to this important UN-led process.