

Cuenca Manifesto

on Tourism and Regional Economic Development

Organised by: ORU Fogar, GLOCAL International Organization and the Prefecture of Azuay

Preamble

Gathered in the city of Cuenca, Ecuador, in the framework of the GLOCAL Forum on Tourism and Regional Economic Development, convened by ORU Fogar, GLOCAL International Organization and the Prefecture of Azuay, representatives of regional governments, international organisations, public institutions, the private sector, academia, civil society and territorial development actors express our conviction that tourism must be understood, planned and managed as a strategic policy for regional economic development.

Tourism can no longer be addressed solely as a sectoral activity or as an isolated tool for destination promotion. In the current context, marked by profound economic, social, environmental, technological and cultural transformations, tourism constitutes a privileged platform for connecting territories, generating employment, attracting investment, strengthening identities, preserving heritage, stimulating productive chains and projecting regions onto the global stage.

We recognise that regions occupy a fundamental position between the national and local scales. From that strategic position, they can translate broad public policy orientations into concrete actions, adapted to territorial realities, capable of generating direct impact on the lives of communities. Regions are, therefore, spaces of planning, articulation, innovation and governance, called to transform tourism potential into genuine factors of sustainable, inclusive and competitive development.

This Manifesto expresses a shared vision: tourism, when integrated into a long-term territorial strategy, can become an engine of regional economic development, social cohesion, environmental sustainability, cultural integration and international cooperation.

I. Tourism as a regional development policy

We declare that tourism must be recognised as a cross-cutting public policy, linked to territorial planning, infrastructure, culture, the environment, education, innovation, production, connectivity and economic development.

Tourism must not be planned in isolation from the territory or its communities. It must form part of a comprehensive vision that articulates productive capacities, natural resources, cultural heritage, local identity, investment opportunities and the aspirations of the resident population.

Regions have the responsibility to lead this integrative approach, promoting governance models that overcome institutional fragmentation and enable policy coordination between national, regional and local governments, as well as between the public sector, the private sector, academia and communities.

II. The strategic role of regions

We affirm that regions must consolidate themselves as technical and political authorities capable of leading tourism management from a territorial development perspective.

This role involves planning with future vision, defining priorities, directing investments, articulating sectors, establishing quality and sustainability standards, promoting competitiveness, generating information for decision-making and ensuring that the benefits of tourism are distributed equitably across the territory.

Regions must act as connectors between the national and local levels, integrating tourism policies with policies on transport, infrastructure, culture, environment, employment, innovation, agriculture, education and productive development.

They must also build and project a strong, authentic and competitive territorial brand, based on the identity of their communities, the quality of their experiences and the capacity of their institutions to sustain long-term development models.

III. Heritage, identity and cultural sustainability

We recognise that cultural and natural heritage, both tangible and intangible, constitutes one of the most important strategic assets for regional tourism development.

Heritage must not be understood solely as an attraction resource, but as a living expression of the identity of peoples. Its valorisation requires conservation, interpretation, community participation, respect for authenticity and reinvestment of the benefits generated by tourism.

Regions must promote models of heritage tourism that protect historic sites, cultural landscapes, traditional knowledge, architecture, artistic expressions, collective memory, gastronomy and the ways of life of communities.

We warn that tourism growth without planning can generate processes of deterioration, congestion, cultural trivialisation, gentrification and loss of identity. We therefore call for the establishment of flow management tools, carrying capacities, monitoring, regulation and citizen participation mechanisms that preserve heritage resources and ensure their transmission to future generations.

IV. Data intelligence, innovation and artificial intelligence

We maintain that regional tourism governance must increasingly rely on reliable information, timely data, territorial intelligence, digital technologies and artificial intelligence used responsibly.

Evidence-based decision-making enables improved planning, anticipation of risks, impact assessment, optimisation of investments, management of tourist flows, measurement of destination resilience and design of more effective public policies.

Regions must advance towards tourism intelligence systems that integrate information on demand, supply, mobility, employment, investment, sustainability, citizen perception, carrying capacity, competitiveness and the economic effects of tourism.

At the same time, we affirm that technological innovation must serve people and territories. The use of data and artificial intelligence requires clear governance frameworks, transparency, interoperability, rights protection, human oversight, digital security and accountability.

V. Infrastructure, financing and territorial investment

We declare that a competitive and sustainable tourism model cannot exist without adequate, modern, inclusive and resilient infrastructure.

Regional tourism development requires investment in connectivity, transport, accessibility, visitor centres, event spaces, digital infrastructure, waste management, water, energy, signage, cultural facilities, heritage conservation and quality public services.

Regions need financial instruments that enable them to fulfil their responsibilities. The assignment of tourism competences must be accompanied by sufficient resources, technical capacities and sustainable financing mechanisms.

We call for the exploration and strengthening of territorial financing models that include regional tourism investment funds, public-private partnerships, international cooperation, specific fiscal instruments, green bonds, incentives for responsible investment and mechanisms to ensure that a share of the wealth generated by tourism is returned to the territory that sustains the activity.

Tourism investment must be oriented towards the public interest, improve the quality of life of the resident population, reduce territorial gaps, strengthen rural areas and contribute to environmental and climate resilience.

VI. MICE tourism and the international positioning of regions

We recognise the strategic value of meetings, incentives, congresses, conferences and exhibitions tourism as a tool for regional economic development, productive diversification and international projection.

MICE tourism attracts knowledge, investment, institutional networks, business, innovation and cooperation opportunities. It also helps reduce seasonality, stimulate professional services, strengthen hospitality, gastronomy, transport, culture and the local economy.

Regions must develop capacities to attract, organise and sustain national and international events, articulating infrastructure, connectivity, promotion, professionalisation, sustainability and public-private cooperation.

The positioning of a region as an events destination must not be measured solely by the number of visitors, but also by its capacity to generate legacy, learning, new alliances, business opportunities and lasting territorial impact.

VII. Gastronomy, food security and local productive chains

We affirm that gastronomy is an essential component of territorial identity and a powerful tool for linking tourism with local production, family farming, food security and regional economic development.

Gastronomic tourism can create markets for local producers, strengthen short supply chains, preserve traditional recipes, promote indigenous ingredients, valorise community knowledge and project the culture of a region to the world.

Regions must promote strategies that integrate farmers, entrepreneurs, restaurants, hotels, tourism operators, educational institutions, communities and public authorities around a shared vision of sustainable gastronomic development.

We warn that tourism must not compromise local populations' access to healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food. Therefore, tourism development must respect food security and sovereignty, protect traditional knowledge, avoid the exclusionary commodification of food culture and contribute to resilient food systems in the face of climate change.

VIII. Youth, employment and tourism entrepreneurship

We recognise that tourism offers significant opportunities for youth employment, innovation, entrepreneurship, social inclusion and territorial rootedness.

Young people can be protagonists of new models of sustainable, digital, creative, community-based, accessible and environmentally responsible tourism. Their capacity for innovation, technological proficiency and sensitivity to social and environmental challenges constitute a strategic asset for the future of regions.

Regions must promote policies on training, financing, incubation, mentoring, technical assistance, business networks, digital literacy and regulatory simplification that allow young people and entrepreneurs to enter, grow and remain in the tourism sector.

Specific actions must also be promoted for young women, rural entrepreneurs, indigenous communities, smallholder farmers, informal workers and historically excluded groups, ensuring that tourism is a tool for opportunity and not a factor of inequality.

When young people find a future in their territories, rootedness is strengthened, forced migration is reduced and more prosperous, resilient and cohesive communities are built.

IX. Public-private articulation and collaborative governance

We declare that regional tourism development requires a solid, transparent, professional and public-interest-oriented public-private articulation.

The public sector contributes territorial vision, democratic legitimacy, regulation, planning and the guarantee of the common good. The private sector contributes investment, innovation, operational capacity, market knowledge and business dynamism. Academia contributes research, training and critical thinking. Communities contribute identity, legitimacy, memory, culture and a sense of belonging.

No single actor can, on their own, build a sustainable regional tourism model. We therefore call for the strengthening of permanent spaces for collaborative governance, sectoral roundtables, destination management agencies, tourism observatories, strategic alliances and participation mechanisms that enable coordinated decisions, shared responsibilities and result evaluation.

Public-private partnerships must ensure transparency, balance between profitability and the public interest, equitable distribution of benefits, environmental respect, social inclusion and alignment with territorial planning.

X. Commitments of Cuenca

From the GLOCAL Forum on Tourism and Regional Economic Development, we propose to assume the following commitments:

1. Recognise tourism as a strategic engine of regional economic development and not merely as a promotional or sectoral activity.
2. Strengthen the role of regions as spaces of planning, articulation, innovation, investment and territorial governance.
3. Integrate tourism with policies on infrastructure, environment, culture, production, employment, education, agriculture, connectivity and territorial planning.
4. Promote tourism models that generate decent employment, opportunities for young people, social inclusion, gender equality and community rootedness.
5. Protect and valorise cultural and natural heritage, guaranteeing authenticity, local participation, conservation and equitable distribution of benefits.
6. Promote tourism intelligence systems, data and responsible artificial intelligence to improve decision-making and measure real impacts.
7. Develop regional financing mechanisms to invest in sustainable, resilient and public-interest-oriented tourism infrastructure.
8. Foster MICE tourism as an instrument of international positioning, investment attraction, knowledge generation and territorial legacy.
9. Integrate gastronomy, local production, food security and sovereignty as pillars of identity, competitiveness and regional economic development.
10. Consolidate transparent and effective public-private partnerships with community participation and a common-good orientation.
11. Promote interregional and international cooperation to share knowledge, good practices, management tools, investments and innovative solutions.
12. Build a permanent working agenda to give continuity to the debates, commitments and results arising from the Forum.

XI. Call to action

We call upon regional governments, national governments, municipalities, international organisations, financial institutions, universities, business chambers, tourism associations, local communities, young people, entrepreneurs and civil society to work together to build a new agenda for tourism and regional economic development.

This agenda must identify with the glocal concept: deeply rooted in the identities, capacities and needs of each territory, but open to the world, to international cooperation, to innovation and to the shared challenges of our time.

The tourism we propose is not limited to attracting visitors. The tourism we promote creates territorial value, strengthens local economies, protects heritage, generates employment, promotes investment, connects cultures, improves infrastructure, drives innovation and contributes to greater social cohesion.

From Cuenca, a city of history, culture, heritage and encounter, we affirm that regions have the capacity and the responsibility to lead this transformation.

Final Declaration

For all these reasons, the participants of the GLOCAL Forum on Tourism and Regional Economic Development declare our will to promote a renewed vision of tourism as a strategic policy for regional economic development, based on sustainability, inclusion, innovation, cooperation, territorial identity and democratic governance.

We reaffirm that the future of tourism will be regional, collaborative, intelligent, sustainable and inclusive, or it will not be fully transformative.

And we call upon the regions of the world to assume active leadership so that tourism becomes a concrete tool for development, well-being, integration and shared prosperity for our peoples.

Cuenca, Ecuador, 3 July 2026.

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