Press release

for immediate release

New European Strategy for Sustainable Tourism: ISTO calls for social sustainability to be placed at the heart of the sector's transformation

Brussels (Belgium), November 27, 2026

On 4 November, the European Commission presented its new strategy for sustainable tourism. The International Social Tourism Organisation (ISTO) welcomes this initiative and the various proposals it puts forward to support the sector's development. The strategy addresses a number of important issues, including the green transition, business competitiveness, destination management, access to tourism and skills development.

We share many of these concerns. However, we believe it is important to reiterate a point we have been making for many years: sustainable tourism cannot be achieved by focusing primarily on environmental issues. The social, economic and environmental dimensions are closely interconnected. We are convinced that the social dimension can be a powerful driver of progress in the other two. Access to holidays, inclusion, working conditions and the role of local residents in tourism development all influence how the sector operates, as well as its economic models and practices.

This is clearly reflected in the experience of associations and social economy organisations. For many years, they have helped develop more accessible forms of tourism, while supporting economic activity and working alongside local communities. Their experience complements that of businesses and can make a valuable contribution to discussions about the future of the sector. We believe they should be more closely involved in the discussions and work surrounding the implementation of this strategy.

Another issue of particular importance to us is the use of indicators to measure tourism sustainability. Visitor numbers and economic returns are useful, but on their own they do not show whether tourism is genuinely moving in the right direction. We also need to be able to measure the benefits it brings to local residents, workers and visitors, as well as its impact on local communities and areas.

We have already begun this work through the Brussels Addendum on the Social Sustainability of Tourism, under which we have developed indicators to better reflect these different realities. We hope this experience can also help inform discussions at European level. Beyond defining the indicators, it is also important to consider how they will be used, by whom, and to what extent they can genuinely help destinations improve their practices.

The new European strategy sets out several promising avenues, but much will depend on how it is implemented and on the role given to the different stakeholders in tourism. We will therefore follow this work with interest and hope to contribute by sharing the experience of our network and the initiatives developed by our members.

For us, the challenge remains the same: to ensure that tourism development also benefits people and local communities. Making progress on this social dimension is essential to driving lasting change across the sector as a whole.

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