

OPINION

## How to rescue global tourism from the coronavirus pandemic

By ZURAB POLOLIKASHVILI  
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Global tourism (Shutterstock)

Some fear that COVID-19 has halted globalization's progress, eroding international cooperation, and decimating a primary driver of our interconnectedness: tourism. For those who are dedicated to global harmony and mutual engagement, or simply concerned about the future viability and prosperity of tourism as a sector, these outcomes are unacceptable.

After all, what would the consequences for the planet be if our response to every crisis were to further retreat from worldwide partnership? It would only make us less prepared for the next great crisis, whether an unpredictable pandemic or the predictable effects of climate change. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) of the United Nations has a clear message: We must restore confidence in tourism, valuable for the solidarity it encourages — and, of course, in and of itself.

The UNWTO recently released the ["Global Guidelines to Restart Tourism,"](#) strengthened by the full endorsement of several key UN agencies, leading private sector bodies along tourism's value chain and our member states across the world.

The importance of such a restart is hard to overstate. We estimate that in 2020, global tourist arrivals could drop up to 80%, or by 800 million. That translates into 120 million jobs at risk and approximately \$1 trillion in lost exports. But how can the world avert such an impending economic and social disaster?

Only by recognizing this crisis is one of confidence and solvency. Technology will be a critical component.

Our global guidelines outline measures to restore confidence and build a new era of safe, seamless and touchless travel in a post COVID-19 world. These measures include the launch of new technology that could make a permanent, indelible mark on the worlds of aviation and tourism.

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Technological solutions are emerging, designed to connect national government databases to certify that travelers are free of COVID-19. This reflects how we need public-private collaboration for common objectives, in this case generating trust — the new currency to catalyze travel. Several initiatives are being timed to coincide with the end of national shelter-in-place policies over the coming weeks and the cautious reopening of borders and, consequently, global economies.

But while the technology to transform tourism may be here, it is the international political will to deploy those technologies that will decide the fate of this new vision of global travel. Their success, after all, requires the interoperability of visitors' COVID19 tracing apps and the willingness to pool national health data, while ensuring privacy and data security.

Strong commitment to international participation will be invaluable.

The second challenge facing the tourism sector is solvency. Critical parts of the sector have been battered by the pandemic. The solution here must include public-private partnerships which UNWTO has a proven history of facilitating. Indeed, we already see promising instances of precisely this kind of investment and engagement.

These range from measures by some countries to reimburse tourists for rescheduled trips, to prominent voices within the European Commission who have called for one-quarter of recovery funds to be targeted at the tourism sector. At the moment, however, this is a promise and a proposal, not a guaranteed action.

We at UNWTO advocate for a combination of financial and governmental support to change-making entrepreneurs operating in the most economically devastated tourism sectors around the world, helping sow the seeds for a new post-COVID-19 tourism infrastructure.

Whether countries take action will depend on political will — and this is a question UNWTO can speak to, but not answer on its own. Is there a willingness on the parts of governments and intergovernmental agencies to put their money where their mouths are, bailing out the travel sector as so many other industries have been (correctly) saved?

Likewise, is there a determination to open the door to the kind of international cooperation necessary to reimagine tourism, enabling new technologies to create confidence — which is critical for any economic revival? Crises are tragedies, but they can also be opportunities. They are inflection points. They are moments where we decide to either retreat or imagine a new future.

What we choose to do next will have consequences for generations to come. We must therefore work towards a tomorrow that will look good.

*Pololikashvili has been secretary-general of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) since January 2018 after being elected by the 22nd Session of UNWTO General Assembly.*

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