

## IMPACT SHEET: TOURLINK

# Moving Thai Tourism towards sustainability through a business led supply chain approach



*Promote inclusive sustainable growth, contribute to economic prosperity and poverty reduction, develop a green economy and transition towards a low-carbon, resource-efficient and circular economy in the Thai travel sector.*



## PROJECT BACKGROUND

Tourism is a complex industry, covering hundreds of services and inputs. Stepping towards sustainability requires coordinated action across sectors, issues and scales of operation. TOURLINK united the expertise of European and Thai sustainable tourism pioneers, to deliver an integrated suite of activities to raise sustainability performance along Thai tourism supply chains and boost demand for sustainable Thai products. At sector level, TOURLINK partners mobilized and mentored Thai tour operators, accommodations, SME tourism suppliers, and selected destinations to raise their sustainability standards. At issue level, partners extended green finance opportunities; and took action to manage and reduce plastic and food waste; reduce carbon emissions; and increase tourism benefits for local Thai communities.

## CHALLENGE

Rapid growth of the Thai travel sector over the last decades has led to environmental and social challenges. TOURLINK aimed at supporting the Thai travel sector to become more sustainable, by building on existing good practices; providing capacity building training to tour operators and their suppliers (hotels, transport companies, activity providers); and facilitating common standards and an international certification facilitating market benefits and international recognition of Thailand as a leading sustainable tourism destination. A wide range of MSMEs in the tourism sector were targeted, covering multiple Thai SCP priorities. The project also aimed to reduce food waste, and improve reduction and proper disposal of plastics among tourism MSMEs and local communities. To raise B2B partner and consumer awareness, the project aimed for visibility among a wide audience of stakeholders.

## PROJECT OBJECTIVES

TOURLINK aimed to raise sustainability performance along Thai tourism supply chains and boost demand for sustainable product choices: promoting inclusive sustainable growth; and contributing towards economic prosperity, the development of a green economy and the transition towards a low-carbon, resource-efficient and circular economy in Thailand.

The specific objectives included:

- To promote sustainable production and consumption (SCP) practices in the tourism sector at national scale; with a focus on MSMEs;
- To promote less polluting and more resource efficient products, processes and services in the Thai tourism sector, and facilitate the integration of MSMEs into the tourism supply chain through sustainability training, management, reporting, labelling and certification;
- To support sustainable consumption and production (SCP), focusing on the Thailand inbound tour operator value chains;

- To support existing regional fora (e.g., ASEAN, Pacific Asia Travel Association, Asian Ecotourism Network, Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration) on tourism and SCP enhancing policy dialogue in Asia.

## TARGET GROUPS

- Thai Tour Operators and their associations
- Supply chain, Thai tourism MSME's and their associations
- Local communities
- B2B buyers (European tour operators) and consumers
- Thailand tourism destinations

## PROJECT ACTIVITIES

TOURLINK activities were defined across 9 Activity Clusters (AC).

- 1. Tailored Thai standards, training and tools development** for tour operators, transport, accommodation, guides, marine and community excursions. This AC also delivered a toolbox with detailed guidance for tour operators and suppliers; a Thai sustainable tourism training, coaching, reporting and auditing ecosystem (e.g.: online reporting, trained Thai coaches and auditors); consumer codes of conduct; a global product database; and a travel package carbon management and compensation tool.
- 2. Tour operator implementation** engaged Thai tour operators, delivered classroom introduction trainings, group and individual coaching sessions, audits and certification.
- 3. Supplier implementation** engaged Thai tourism suppliers, delivered classroom trainings, group and individual coaching sessions, audits and certification.
- 4. Integration with destinations and sectors** delivered a Value Chain Analysis to inform prioritization and planning; new sustainability standards and tools to manage and reduce food and plastic waste; research and tools to support Thai community based tourism. The project elevated and amplified carbon neutral travel packages. Activities focused on the important destinations of Phuket and Chiang Mai.
- 5. Support for Green finance** included research on existing financial products linked to sustainability performance, and promoting these products widely among Thai hotels.
- 6. Market-facing actions to integrate Thai sustainable tourism in the supply chain** included delivering market research on EU buyers needs for sustainable Thai tourism, capacity building public and private sectors in marketing communications, promotion events at major European tourism trade fairs (WTM London and ITB Berlin), meetings and matchmaking.

7. **Policy actions** included identifying key policy bottlenecks, preventing Thai tourism businesses from scaling up sustainability, delivering a white paper with recommendations, and a high level workshop in Phuket, focusing on waste management. The project delivered Green Destination Management training for Thai authorities, successful Green Destinations assessments leading to global awards, policy briefs and case studies to national and regional forums. This work has continued post project.
8. **Knowledge transfer** was achieved through the project team's participation in over 30 high level events; and sharing lessons learned into parallel standards-development processes, including development of the Asian Ecotourism Standard by AEN.
9. **Project management** ensured strong team building, regular communication and sharing of ideas, well-coordinated action, monitoring and reporting.

## LESSONS LEARNED

TOURLINK started with a challenge during the first year, as Thailand was completely shut to visitors because of COVID. This very difficult time effected the morale of our key stakeholders. Many Thai tour operators were not even sure which of their suppliers would survive. Gradually, Thailand opened again, and travel became possible. The TOURLINK project team carefully prioritised which elements of the supply chain would be in scope, and headed into the field with full passion as soon as travel was possible, to encourage Thai SME businesses to “build back better”. The team focused on positive messaging, and feasible standards during COVID recovery.

The core tool for raising supplier standards was the **Travelife online training and reporting platform**. This powerful hub links all Travelife members, across the world, from source markets to destinations, enabling seamless communication of achievements. However, as the team extended training deeper into the supply chain, the suppliers were less familiar and confident to navigate an online environment. Project partners and contractors, including ECEAT, TEATA, DASTA, CBT-I and TRTA organised, coaching cafes onsite, at destination, to sit alongside SME and community members in an informal, supportive environment. This significantly improved suppliers' motivation and ability to report on the new Step-In standards. The process also supported suppliers to align with national and local standards.

Sustainability standards are becoming more demanding, and moving from voluntary towards regulatory. Driving benefits to SMEs and communities is a key aim of sustainable tourism, without which claims of ‘sustainability’ lack integrity. However, as we travel deeper down the supply chain, it becomes more difficult for SMEs to understand and comply with criteria. This creates a risk that SME's may be excluded from B2B tourism trade opportunities. Therefore, standards must strike the right balance between feasibility and challenge. TOURLINK lessons can be summarised through **5 S's**:

1. Carefully **Scope** the sector to be targeted;
2. Define the **Scale** of the target sector (e.g., SME, large etc);
3. Draft **Standards** and criteria based on global and local best practices, in consultation with local associations and businesses, to identify existing good practices and pain points;
4. Divide the criteria in progressively more challenging **Steps** based on suppliers' capacities;
5. Actively **Support** suppliers, by translating and simplifying criteria, guidelines and case studies; and offering accessible, hands-on coaching.

## PROJECT ACHIEVEMENT

TOURLINK had a ground-breaking impact on the post COVID-19 Thai sustainable tourism ecosystem, amplifying the importance given by European tourism markets to sustainability performance and standards; and demonstrating how to extend sustainability standards much deeper into local EU-Thai B2B supply chains.

Partners delivered tailored standards and training materials across six sectors; trained 1,324 staff from 610 businesses; and coached 200+ SME suppliers to report their achievements. The project facilitated global-national collaboration to deliver Thailand's first GSTC Recognised sustainable hotel standard; technical discussions between European and Thai scientists to deliver a mutually recognised EU-Thai methodology for calculating the Carbon Footprint of Thai tours; and promoted Thai sustainable tourism at the World Travel Market 2023 and the ITB Berlin 2024 travel fairs. The project also delivered practical tools for tourism businesses to reduce plastic and food waste; and useful research on opportunities for Thai hotels to access green finance, and tour operators' needs for community based tourism.





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TOURLINK partners worked diligently, across sectors, to train a new ecosystem of locally owned and managed Thai tour operators and tourism suppliers to recognize demand for sustainable tourism, and have simple tools to start a systematic sustainability journey. The team focused on supporting SME businesses from ‘where they are’; striking a pragmatic balance between feasibility and challenge. The project helped move sustainability into the mainstream and close the gap between ‘the best’ and ‘the rest,’ which is essential to scale up sustainable practices. TOURLINK had a significant and sustainable impact on the Thai tourism ecosystem.



## Long-term project sustainability

The work initiated and amplified by TOURLINK is continuing. The sense of urgency, catalysed by the project can be seen reflected across multiple Thai government tourism agencies and initiatives. Travelife and Green Destination Standards are a core part of the Thai Department of Tourism’s Green Plan in 2025 to upgrade Thai tourism standards. Thai tour operators are continuing to register on the Travelife online platform, and can now be supported by Thai coaches, trained by TOURLINK. Micro-standards for SME suppliers are being used and scaled up in multiple destinations across Thailand by project partners including DASTA and TEATA.

Strategic decisions to strengthen and amplify existing good work is also paying off. The new GSTC recognised Green Hotel Plus standard, developed in partnership with the Thai government DCCE, has been officially kicked off, and will be a core tool to prepare Thai hotels for the Global Sustainable Tourism Council annual conference in Phuket in 2026. Over 200 Thai Carbon Neutral Tours, developed through TSRI/PMUC research, and amplified and promoted by TOURLINK at the WTM and ITB, are scaling up and moving towards Net Zero.

## Project contributions to Climate Change Mitigation and SDGs

At the simplest level, all of the standards and trainings delivered by the TOURLINK project to over 1,300 staff and 600 businesses, across 6 sectors, include concrete actions which reduce carbon emissions. Even without understanding CF and CO<sub>2</sub> calculation, Thai suppliers which take steps to buy more environmentally friendly products, save energy, reduce and manage waste, choose more local suppliers, among others, will automatically reduce their carbon footprint.

On a technical level, the project delivered a Mutual Recognition Agreement and a shared methodology for Tourism Product Category Rules (EU-Thai PCR) and Emission Factors (EF) between Thailand Greenhouse Gas Management Organisation (TGO) and Carmacal. Rather than re-inventing the wheel, the project team helped to upgrade and amplify existing Carbon Neutral Tours, developed through Thai research, which had been ‘out of sight’ of European tour operators. Over 30 tours were recalculated using the ‘EU-Thai PCR’. TEATA are already selling these lower-carbon tours to European tourists. TOURLINK also delivered Thailand’s first globally recognised green hotel standard to the new department of Climate Change and environment, providing a tool to support hundreds of Thai hotels reduce their CF.

TOURLINK contributed significantly to the SDGs. Tourism is a complex activity, with hundreds of inputs across sectors and suppliers; and touch-points to all of the SDGs. The Travelife sustainability standard, used as the key training, management and reporting tool for Thai tour operators, is aligned to the SDGs. The project design optimised SDG impacts, by engaging with the tourism supply chain from global to grassroots levels, across multiple sectors and issues. Poverty reduction (SDG 1) is achieved by local purchasing and supporting community based tourism. The Travelife online platform has tour operator members in source markets and destinations. This facilitates B2B connections motivated by shared commitment to sustainability. This is an example of ‘partnerships for the goals’ (SDG 17), which directly reduces poverty (SDG 1), increases access to decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), and enables more sustainable production and consumption (SDG 12). The micro-standards, developed by TOURLINK for specific sub sectors and activities, also support specific SDGs including life below water and on land (SDG 14,15). Multiple activities supported climate action (SDG 13).

# Impacts at a Glance

<b>Economic Impact</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 20 additional Thai tour operators have an internationally recognised standard, and are connected to European tour operators through the Travelife platform.</li> <li>• Over 600 Thai tourism suppliers had opportunities to network and make potential business contacts.</li> <li>• 600+ Thai SMEs / communities have new, simple, accessible tools in Thai language, to support them to start a systematic sustainability journey, and compete in the tightening regulatory environment.</li> <li>• European tour operators are more aware of Thailand sustainable tourism products, are increasingly integrating them in product packages and inform their customers about them.</li> <li>• European tour operators expect their local partners in Thailand and wider Asia to comply with international sustainability standards.</li> </ul>
<b>Environmental Impact</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New standards and tools for Thai tourism SMEs include multiple actions related to energy and water reduction and efficiency, waste reduction and management, reduction and avoidance of harmful chemicals, animal welfare, and contributions to nature conservation.</li> <li>• 632 additional hotels certified; each saving estimated 660 kg of waste for a total of 417 tonnes.</li> </ul>
<b>Social Impact</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over 100 Thai tour operators introduced to Health and Safety principles and tools.</li> <li>• Delivering unique, participatory research on DMC needs for Thai community based tourism; and human rights issues and solutions in Thai village tourism.</li> <li>• 60% of tourism staff trained during the project were women. Gender balance and empowerment of women and anti-discrimination are key criteria for CSR and SCP and are integrated in all criteria sets of Travelife, Green Destinations, Green Hotel and the code of conducts developed.</li> <li>• Special focus on human rights of local tourism communities, specifically the Pandang (long-neck) women.</li> </ul>
<b>Climate Benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Estimated electrical savings of 48.000 Kwh for each hotel for a total of 30 million Kwh.</li> <li>• Estimated GHG reduction of 120 tonnes for each hotel for a total of 75,000 tonnes.</li> </ul>
<b>Green Finance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commissioning research on opportunities for Thai hotels to access Green Finance products, and sharing results widely via partners and project training workshops.</li> <li>• Amplified existing financial products to increase tourism businesses awareness of existing opportunities.</li> </ul>
<b>Target Group Engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training a total of 1,324 Thai tourism professionals from 610 unique businesses.</li> <li>• Training 954 local supplier staff from 442 businesses, including remote rural communities, resulting in 154 companies reporting their sustainability achievements, and 73 companies receiving Certificates of Commitment to recognise their actions.</li> <li>• Tailoring the Travelife for Tour Operators ecosystem and tools into Thai language, and engaging with three Thai tourism associations to train 295 staff from 151 Thai tour operators, bringing 20 Thai companies up to Travelife Partner level.</li> <li>• Through its supply chain sector wide approach involving all major Thai travel associations TOURLINK has reached more than 25,000 SMEs.</li> <li>• More than 250 online and offline media articles were published referring to the TOURLINK activities and results with indication of the SWITCH-Asia support.</li> </ul>
<b>Policy Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TOURLINK conducted a Phuket sustainability policy workshop; a training for destination managers (local governments) and training for the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) on communicating sustainability.</li> <li>• Delivering a White Paper, exploring 'Policy for Practice', exploring how the process of policy can make it easier for businesses to scale up sustainable practices.</li> </ul>
<b>Europe-Asia Cooperation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 MOUs signed between TEATA and European / Global partners to develop and promote Carbon Neutral Tours.</li> <li>• B2B exchange events, product presentations and award ceremonies at the ITB Berlin 2024 travel fair.</li> <li>• Policy workshop in Phuket with representatives of European buyers (tour operators), including the secretary general of ECTAA, the European umbrella association of 35 national tour operator associations.</li> </ul>

TOURLINK united the expertise of European and Thai sustainable tourism pioneers: The European Centre for Ecological and Agricultural Tourism (ECEAT), Thailand's Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA), Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), Thai Hotel Association (THA) and Thai Ecotourism and Adventure Travel Association (TEATA). As the project progressed, many other Thai organisations stepped onboard. Organisations that played a key role include the Department of Climate Change and Environment, Thailand Community Based Tourism Institute (CBT-I), Thailand Responsible Tourism Association (TRTA), Association of Thai Travel Agents (ATTA), Thailand Greenhouse Gas Management Organisation (TGO), Thailand Science and Research Innovation (TSRI), Project Management Unit for Competitiveness (PMUC), Greenleaf Foundation and Fair Tourism Foundation.



## FUNDING

EUR 1,047,000  
(EU Contribution: 80%)



## DURATION

2020 - 2024



## PARTNERS



European Centre for Eco and Agro  
Tourism (ECEAT)



Designated Areas for Sustainable  
Tourism Administration (DASTA)



Thai Ecotourism and Adventure  
Travel Association (TEATA)



Pacific Asia Travel  
Association (PATA)



Thai Hotel Association (THA)



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