

2021 Asian Think tank Development Forum

Welcome Remarks – Dean Tetsushi Sonobe

Hello, and a very warm welcome to the 2021 Asian Think Tank Development Forum. It is my pleasure to welcome our distinguished speakers and audience members for taking the time to join us today. This year, the Forum will look at ways to unlock the economic potential of the tourism industry post-COVID-19.

The pandemic has taken a heavy toll on the tourism sector. In Asia, tourist arrivals were down by 77% in 2020 and 93% this year, until August 2021. Asia's tourism downturn is due to prolonged lockdowns in the region, and the emergence of the new delta variant. Furthermore, the slow and uneven pace of vaccinations has jeopardized plans to reopen borders.

East and Southeast Asia show the sharpest declines in tourism activity in the region. In 2020, the pandemic slashed tourist arrivals to East Asia by 88% and tourism revenue by 72.7%. In Southeast Asia, tourist arrivals plunged by 81% and tourism revenue by 78.5% .

COVID vaccinations may be the key for a tourism recovery in the region. Recent studies estimate that tourism will return to pre-pandemic levels in 2023 at the earliest, but if vaccine delivery were delayed by 6 months, the recovery process will be similarly delayed as a consequence.

In addition to vaccines, traveler confidence can be bolstered by the development of standard operating health safety protocols and clear communication on policies and actions. Where possible, digital applications should be encouraged to create a contactless travel experience.

As well the sector needs to update business models over time to meet changing demand. Understanding and tracking market trends and drivers of demand will be crucial. Countries should explore use of big data to make informed tourism policy decisions. They should also try to harmonize protocols for travel and explore ways to create travel bubbles. Given the extent of work required in different subregions, engaging all stakeholders, such as government, private sector, and civil society is essential to support the sector's recovery. I very much look forward to excellent presentations and vibrant discussion on these issues.

This year, the Asian Think Tank Development Forum also includes a session on capacity building of think tanks, which will be the first session of Day 2, starting at 2pm Manila time. We hope this session will promote dialogue among think tanks about evolving needs and challenges brought on by COVID-19. The pandemic has highlighted both the need for rapid flows of knowledge and the fact that existing technology allows patterns and knowledge to be extracted quickly from large amounts of data. Future crises, linked to climate change, pandemics, weak financial structures, or others, may trigger significant demand for quick knowledge solutions and rapid dissemination, and innovation in the use of data and technology will fuel people's expectations, leading to even stronger demand. Therefore, rather than focusing on quantity and quality of knowledge products, it may become more important for think tanks to direct or shape rapid flows of knowledge. I look forward to a discussion with three prominent think tanks from the region and hope other participating think tanks would share their insight and experiences.

Once again, a very warm welcome to all of you. Please exchange your best ideas for tourism recovery so that we are able to greet each other in person next year.