



Guidelines for application for support of WB cross- border tourism product development and promotion

***USAID Economic Development, Governance and
Enterprise Growth Project (EDGE)***

***Support to the Inbound Tourism Development in the Western
Balkans Cross-Border Rural Areas***

GUIDELINE FOR PARTICIPANTS

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1. GENERAL INFORMATION

This Guideline aims to give practical information for applicants to the Call for support of WB cross-border tourism product development and promotion. It helps applicants to submit proposals and offers information on the application procedure, eligibility and selection criteria.

The call is part of the project Support to the Inbound Tourism Development in the Western Balkans Cross-Border Rural Areas, implemented by SWG and co-financed by the USAID's Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth Project.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 What is SWG?

SWG is an International Intergovernmental Organization, consisting of governmental institutions in South-Eastern Europe (SEE) responsible for agriculture and rural development (Ministries of Agriculture) in countries and territories of South-East Europe (SEE). The SWG vision is to promote innovative and sustainable agriculture and rural development through regional cooperation, to improve rural livelihoods in the SEE countries.

The main SWG work is organized through activities implemented in the following areas:

- Networking and capacity enhancement of SWG Member Institutions;
- Facilitating regional cooperation between rural stakeholders in the SEE region;
- Implementing the area-based development approach as a tool to foster sustainable growth in the SEE region.

2.2 Project: Support to the Inbound Tourism Development in the Western Balkans Cross-Border Rural Areas

The regional project: Support to the Inbound Tourism Development in the Western Balkans Cross-Border Rural Areas involves the countries/territories: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. The objectives of this project are:

- To increase the level of integration of ecotourism, rural tourism and adventure tourism value chains in rural cross-border regions of the Western Balkans and strengthen the cooperation among their participants
- To build the capacity of ecotourism, rural tourism and adventure tourism value chain participants to meet the requirements of the target market
- To apply marketing approach in inbound tourism development in the Western Balkans
- To obtain endorsement (by national authorities responsible for rural development) of relevant policy recommendations related to inbound tourism in rural areas in the Western Balkans.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

2.3 Support provided within this project

The envisaged support within this call includes:

- Networking, matchmaking, integration of relevant stakeholders from cross-border rural regions of the WB
- Training needs assessment for selected beneficiaries
- Development and delivery of customized training
- Promotion of the developed tourism products using different promotional tools: digital media, social media, printed media (brochures), participation in a relevant international trade fair (the project covers the cost of the stand and promotional materials), commercial common website suitable for bookings
- Networking and follow-up with relevant specialty foreign tour operators

3. GUIDELINES FOR APPLYING FOR SUPPORT WITHIN THE PROJECT

3.1 Eligible countries/territories within the project

Countries of Western Balkan including: Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

Each tour must include at least 2 WB countries/territories.

3.2 Eligibility of applicants - who may apply?

In order to be eligible to submit a proposal, applicants **must**:

- be registered legal entity in the eligible countries/territories (see Section 3.1)
- be registered as the private, civil or public sector entity
- apply, in partnership with a minimum of 2 partners
- have at least one team member registered as a tour operator/travel agency.

In order to gain extra points, applicants **should**:

- Have more than two partners
- Have female as founder/owner
- Consider environmental and natural preservation policies
- Have previous experience in the development and implementation of ecotourism, rural tourism and/or adventure tourism programs/products.

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3.3 Content of the proposal

The proposal should contain a cross-country touristic tour in the area of eco-tourism, adventure tourism or rural tourism.

The proposal should include the following:

1. Brief analysis of the target tourism market:
 - Who are the current customers/tourists, if any?
 - Who will be the potential customers/tourists of the new program/product?
 - What are their preferences?
 - Estimated size of the potential target market
 - Who are the competitors, if any?
 - Which price range is acceptable for potential customers/tourists?
2. Description of the tour, including:
 - Name of the tour
 - Purpose of the tour
 - Countries covered (at least 2 Western Balkan territories)
 - Description of eco-tourism, rural tourism and/or adventure tourism activities – experiences, sites and attractions, tasting of local/traditional products
 - Description of any other activities included (excursions, sight-seeing, monuments...)
 - Proposed tour itinerary (locations, times and dates, duration and other relevant details)
 - Description of transport (flights and transfers), accommodation and dining facilities
 - Tour Features – political stability & safety (providing and describing the minimum of measures following the covid-19 crisis); and special reference to rescue (applicable for adventure tours and any extreme activities)
 - Terms & Conditions for bookings (it may be sent as an additional attachment if necessary)
 - Legal requirements
 - Proposed duration and prices of the tour
3. Partnership - The proposed/established partnership must contain:
 - List of all partners and their role in the tour (description of the service providers involved in the tour, such as transport companies, accommodation, restaurants, households, organizations and associations, managing authorities of natural and cultural sites and attractions, events organizations, tour guides, agents, storytellers, etc.)
 - Partnership statement signed by each partner on the tour.
4. Promotional plan for the tour that should include the answers to questions:
 - What is objective to achieve?
 - What is the target market?
 - What is the main promotional message?
 - How to communicate with the target audience?
 - How to execute the plan?



The electronic version of the proposal in English should be sent to the following e-mail address: swgsecretariat@swg-seerural.org by **22 December 2020**.

4.1. Number of proposals per applicant

An applicant may submit more than one proposal under this Call for proposals and same service providers can appear as partners in different proposals.

4.2. Partnership within the tours

The applicant must provide a list of partners (service providers) involved in the tour and clearly state the role of each partner. Partnership Statement, confirming the interest of the applicants to cooperate, must be signed by each partner and attached to the proposal. Partnerships among family members will not be eligible.

4.3. Environmental Policy and Natural Resources Preservation

Environmental Policy:

Applicants and selected Beneficiaries should take in consideration national environmental laws and regulations, but also implement measures contributing to the protection of the environment. They are encouraged to strive towards minimizing the adverse environmental impact of their products and services during the whole chain cycle.

Proposed tourist products should benefit to the economy of the inhabitants of the WB countries.

Natural resources preservation:

Applicants and selected Beneficiaries are encouraged to use natural materials and resources in a sustainable way as well as to eliminate the waste produced by all its activities.

The beneficiary should avoid undue and unnecessary use of materials and utilize recycled materials whenever appropriate.

Conservation:

Processes and activities should be monitored and modified as necessary to ensure conservation of scarce resources, including water, flora and fauna and productive land in certain situations.

Energy Use:

The beneficiary should adapt production and delivery processes as well as heating, ventilation, lighting, and transportation to maximize efficient energy use and to minimize harmful emissions.

5. SELECTION OF PROPOSALS

The selection procedure will be comprised of three stages: 1. Administrative check, 2. Evaluation 3. Final selection.

The administrative check will be done by SWG staff and will focus on checking the timeliness, completeness and supporting documents as a content of the proposal. The proposals that pass the administrative check will move on to the evaluation stage.

The evaluation will be done by Evaluation Committee. As a result of the evaluation, a ranking list of all proposed tours will be created.

The final selection will be made taking into consideration the ranking list as well as equitability criteria i.e. involvement of all target countries. Tours that are ranked under a minimum threshold will not be considered. Eventually, 5 to 7 tours will be selected (ecotourism, rural tourism and adventure tourism tours), each including at least 2 WB countries.

5.1. Evaluation and Ranking Criteria:

Proposals, in accordance with the Evaluation and Ranking Criteria can be evaluated with a maximum of 100 points. Proposals evaluated with less than 50 points will not be shortlisted.

Ranking criteria	Explanation	Max points
Countries involved	<p>From 0 to 5 points</p> <p>Minimum of 2 WB countries is required, while the higher number will be rated with more points.</p> <p>2 countries – 3 points More than 2 countries – 5 points</p>	5
Quality and structure of the proposed partnership	<p>From 0 to 10 points</p> <p>Minimum of 2 partners is required, while the higher number will be rated with more points.</p> <p>2 partners – 2 points Every additional partner adds 2 more points (max 6 points)</p> <p>Assessment of the structure of the proposed partnership (sector diversity, relevant previous experiences, reviews if any). (max 4 points)</p>	10
Legal requirements and registered entities	<p>From 0 to 5 points</p> <p>Copies of official documents stating the legal aspect of doing business, plus any other Legal Requirements they follow. Licenses for work or any certificates are welcome.</p>	5

Female organizers or founders in the partnership	From 0 to 5 points If the team includes female organizer or founder, it gets 5 points at the start.	5
Tour quality/Development of the activities included	From 0 to 20 points This criterion will be evaluated based on the activities description and details about it. Well described and detailed tours will be get higher score.	25
Variety of activities included	From 0 to 10 points Proposal including authentic experiences and/or additional activities related to the main product will be rated with more points.	15
Contribution to the environmental protection and preservation	From 0 to 10 points Assessment of the tour contribution to the environmental protection and natural and cultural resources preservation. The tours with a good existing practice will gain more points.	10
Promotional plan	From 0 to 10 points More detailed and strategically structured promotional plans will gain more points.	10
Safety and rescue	From 0 to 10 points Estimated customer care services described, following covid-19 protection measures.	10
Terms & conditions for booking	From 0 to 5 points Evaluation of listed and available terms & conditions for booking. Clear cancellation policy.	5
Total max points	The sum of all criteria results	100

6. FURTHER STEPS AFTER EVALUATION AND SELECTION

5 to 7 proposals will be selected that will get the following support:

- Training needs assessment for all partners – it will be done through testing and evaluating different segments of each selected tour (accommodation, food, experience, sites etc.).
- Development and delivery of customized training for all partners - based on the results from the testing, tourism experts will develop customized training programs and deliver training sessions for specific value chain groups of participants.
- Promotion of the developed tourism products using different promotional tools:
 - Logo - Design of the logo of the Tours of the Western Balkans
 - Brochure - Production of a brochure of the selected Tours of the Western Balkans
 - Web-site - Developing of a web site promoting the Tours of the Western Balkans



- Social media
- Trade fair - Representatives of the selected tours will represent the Western Balkans with a stand at a relevant specialty international tourism fair in 2021 (the project covers the cost of the stand and promotional materials).
- Follow-up – communication with potential customers to plan further actions for placing the regional tours in the offerings of the foreign international tour operators.

Once selected, partners will need to regulate their mutual business relation, including handling payments, complaints, cancellation policy etc.

ANNEX

TRENDS IN THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY

The world is constantly changing and travelers' needs are changing too. The year 2020 brought a completely new dimension to this fact, establishing a global pandemic with the spread of the covid-19. The industry that showcased the most affectionate behaviors in the last decades is now on a big test and assuming the virus consequences, travelling will never be the same as long as we live, at least according to the rules and measures.

If nothing else, the covid-19 showed the world's inhabitants that the only home that we have should be treated with more respect. Less polluting, less waste, less traffic... Simply – a new ecological approach in life is needed! Again, the travel industry was first on the target to feel this need and in the last couple of years, the biggest travel companies tried to turn the wheel and orient their approach to nature – friendly holidays.

It is not only the fact that the impact on nature is big and negative but also the fact that the most of the travelers today are coming from the generations who are hugely aware of these facts and problems. If you want to sell a travel product on the global market, you need to know what your audience is expecting from you; otherwise, they will do it on their own, because they don't need you in reality. Digital era made this quite simple and everyone is capable of organizing the holiday of their dreams with a bit of creativity and a few digital channels.

The organized trips will always stay interesting because these are time-savers, so this comes as a crucial reason especially for the western outgoing markets that work under a lot of pressure and live a very busy lifestyle. The modern-time tour operators are skipping the mass-tourism and are focusing on the niche needs as well as respecting visitors' opinions and reviews. This brings a new synergy of travel experiences and is part of modern travel demands and global trends.

When it comes to tourism segments, the global travel trends are emphasizing a few sorts of tourism, which are, at the same time, the crucial part of this project. Namely, the newly developed tours will obligatory contain one or more of these aspects described in the following paragraphs.

Ecotourism is a type of nature-based tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to observe, learn, discover, experience and appreciate biological and cultural diversity with

a responsible attitude to protect the integrity of the ecosystem and enhance the well being of the local community.

Eco-tours usually involve visiting of the scenic or remote natural areas attempting to minimize negative impacts on the environment and on the local inhabitants. This is a holiday that either contributes to the protection of the environment or minimizes damage to it.

Rural tourism is a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling and sightseeing.

Fleischer and Pizam associate rural tourism with the 'country vacation' where the tourist spends the vast proportion of his/her vacation period engaging in recreational activities in a rural environment on a farm, ranch, country home, or the surrounding areas.¹

Rural travel tours are conceived as tourism activities in a non-urban territory where human (land-related economic) activity is going on, primarily agriculture: a permanent human presence seems a qualifying requirement.

Adventure tourism is a type of tourism which usually takes place in destinations with specific geographic features and landscape and tends to be associated with a physical activity, cultural exchange, interaction and engagement with nature. This experience may involve some kind of real or perceived risk and may require significant physical and/or mental effort. Assuming this fact, it is favorable if the operators have safety (and rescue if necessary) covered.

Adventure tours should allow the consumer to participate in their area of interest for the length of the tour and should provide an experience. These are mostly physical and require a certain level of fitness, however, can sometimes be modified to meet your needs depending on the other travellers.

Benefits of cross border collaboration and cross-border products

Benefits are numerous and we are emphasizing only few with the greatest impact:

1. *Differentiate the product* - region can offer many different experiences from gastronomy, to natural and cultural heritage, traditions, hospitality, historical sites, impressive coastline and so much more. The region lies at a crossroads, where empires met, fought and combined to form a kaleidoscope of cultures unique in Europe, left their own indelible mark on the local architecture, cuisine, languages, music and traditions.² The uniqueness of the common offer will create an instant impact on the global travel market.
2. *Income, jobs and investments* – this all comes within the wider picture as a result of joint products creation and implementation.
3. *Filling the gap in between institutions and the market* – the public institutions, but also some private ones, seems not to care indeed about the benefits that can be brought by the regional promotion and products creation, so this can be fixed without institutions and thanks to these sorts of projects, as the global organizations and funds are keen on investing in this.
4. *Know-how and marketing support* – this particular project brings benefits for the most prominent participants who come to the final phase. They will get the training for

¹ <https://tourismnotes.com/rural-tourism/>

² <https://thebalkanforum.org/en/research-on-tourism-in-the-western-balkans>

improving all parts of the tour created and will get the practical marketing support and distribution of the newly created products onto the new digital channels (website – marketplace, social media and internationally known channels).

5. *Growth of the local communities* – all the small, family or local brands, households, food producers who are included in the process will experience benefits of these cross-border product and this will affect them in 2 directions – they will get to know more about their industry and gain valuable experiences; they will experience economic benefits.

A chance for attracting Far-Away markets

New generations of travelers are seeing the whole globe as their travel destination. Elderly inhabitants of our planet did travel and are traveling, but not with the same goals and not with the same awareness of the world problems and differences as today's travelers.

When working in the travel industry, you are aware of the movement on the global market and at the certain point, it comes clear that if you are traveling long to the destination of your choice, you wish to stay longer. Thus, we have Europeans traveling to Asia/Far East or Americas and staying at least 3 weeks; Asians (Japanese, Korean, Chinese) traveling to Europe or Americas and staying at least 3 weeks; as well as Americans travelling to Asia or Europe and staying at least 3 weeks.

Now, when it comes to Western Balkan travel destinations, these are small countries and it's a small continent they belong to, after all. When somebody from the Far East or Australia is traveling to Europe and choosing active or rural holidays, they usually pick more than one country, as they stay for a longer time and they want to explore the region they stay in. The common product will save time to far-away travelers and will offer them the value they ask for. The value of learning about nature, culture, lifestyle, food, and will allow them to feel the vibe of the local life, to involve in the local communities and bring back memories to remember.

A big chance lays in the opportunity to target these far-away markets as the region, as the newly developed travel tours can respond to these needs perfectly. This opens the possibility to present joint products to the Asian, American and Australian companies who visit the most important fair trades in Europe.

Benefits of joint marketing efforts as the region

New travelers

Taking in mind the history and turbulences on the Balkans market, not in traveling as much as in politics and economy, it is a must to know that we need to work hard to be able to become competitive among global travelers and to build the reputation of a new hot-spot area for travel experiences. The competition in the Mediterranean is probably the largest in the world, as this is a part of the planet Earth that was interesting for traveling, trading, cruising throughout the history, especially because this has always been the center of the world.

Today's travelers are mostly belonging to Millennials and Gen Z. These are people born after 1980. Millennials, as the older of the two groups by age, define people who see traveling as a lifestyle, travel solo and use digital platforms and are very willing to join to the quality tours.



They spend money on experiences, not things, thus they will rather hike with you and taste local food than buy souvenirs and do regular sightseeing. They see marketing as a lifestyle and they carefully choose the content, which they trust.

Similar, but not the same, Gen Z describes people who are international travelers and who see continents as their travel destinations rather than countries. They crave value and most willingly spend money on adventures and travel experiences. They care a lot about the environment and look for Instagrammable destinations. The influencers they follow can mostly convince them which destination to choose, so this comes as a great fact when it comes to promotions.

Joint chances

The Western Balkan region is actively trying to promote and develop the travel industry and agriculture. In the last decade, a lot of efforts have been put in these fields, as well as sources and knowledge followed by researches. Western Balkan countries are at the Mediterranean directly or in its hinterland, so *the location* is defined as excellent for traveling. Unlike location, *the competition* is very big and the closest competitors are countries that are giants in the travel industry, such as Spain, Italy, south of France, Turkey, Greece etc. It is very difficult to be at the top of the Mediterranean list, additionally taking in mind that Croatia and Slovenia are other significant competitors and assuming that both are part of EU, with a much more stable situation in the latest years compared to western Balkans.

On the other hand, *chances* for development are almost unlimited. Every country in the Western Balkan is recognized for its stunning natural beauties, delicious food and cultural heritage. Why don't we showcase this in a common product and with common marketing efforts? Joint marketing efforts can bring benefits of various sorts, but mentioning only a few:

- *Digitalization and AI; e-payments; social media and reviews* – modern world and modern travelers' demands are requiring modern measures. Small markets are harder to position on the global map, but performing as a region and with joint promotional efforts, this can be such an important part in attracting more visitors. Assuming that we all share the history and centuries of together-life, the experience will be a real treasure to the worldwide globetrotters. With common social media channels and a unified product, the region can achieve a big impact on the European market in a short time, especially respecting the fact that after-covid19 travels will be all eco-oriented. AI can help us research the target market precisely and thus invest in digital promotion wisely and e-payments will bring the flexibility that modern travelers need.
- *Environment protection and eco-friendly mindset* – the Western Balkans have so many national parks, natural protected spots, rare flora & fauna species, UNESCO protected heritage, the first in the world ecological country among them, etc. This is the direction in which the region should develop its tourism influence and raising the awareness of sharing the eco-mindset with modern travelers.
- *Promotion of local experiences and culture on a higher level* – every country included has so much to offer and so much to show and luckily every country is also awakening to the numerous possibilities. Collecting the best from the region and promoting it in one spot can make such a good impact on the market especially when it comes to responding to the needs of a Gen Z traveler.
- *Solving the branding problem/Unity, friendship, stability and safety* – simply showcasing the world that Balkans do not fight against each other, that we live normal lives and have one of the most beautiful regions in the world. Plus, stability and safety

are now guaranteed, as most of the participants are parts of the international organizations and alliances who provide global safety and influence the global movements.

- *Targeting the niche* – being alone in the global market is not easy, but being there supported by neighbors is much more pleasant. The segment we focus on during this tour creation is eco, rural and/or adventure-oriented and every country included has already had experience with worldwide travelers who insisted on such tours. By collecting the insights in between each other, countries can easily make decisions upon the target markets and the definition of their buyer persona, which is crucial.
- *Community creation* – being part of the community in the modern world is a must and travel industry is not an exception. The times of non-loyal competition are behind us and now we all see the value of the community in the travel industry, common marketing efforts and common products. There are more ideas in a bigger team and more members to perform the perfect holidays for joint benefits. This will also help in fighting the under-promotion that the region currently experiences.

A good example of a travel product/tour

Today, package tours are a vital segment of the world's travel and tourism industry. According to WTTC, the package tour sales generate \$25 billion annually in the United States, \$18 billion in Europe, \$19 billion in Britain, and \$21 billion in Asia. Today tour sales represented 50 percent of all leisure travel sales and 35 percent of all travel agency revenues.³

The main benefits of organized tours are:

- Time saving
- Increase the seasonality of a destination cost/price
- Earn foreign currency
- Better quality of products professional services
- Wide-variety of the tour package
- Provide bulk business to organizers.

There are already some good examples of good cross-border collaborations and ideas that consider the environment and take natural beauties as the main direction in the travel industry, for this specific area. Some examples can be found [at this link](#).

A well organized and structured travel tour should consider the following:

- *User experience (online and offline)* – in today's digital world, online is very important and it might even be crucial in the decision-making process when it comes to travelling. Numerous brands are competing on the digital global market to have the best social media channels and high traffic on their websites and market places. User experience is the most important part of websites optimization and social media performances. Offline, it has always been the most important part of an organized trip! We need to work towards meeting the users/customers' needs and to put them in the focus of our planning and working process.

³ <http://tourismnotes.com/travel-tourism/>

- *Long-term goals and benefits for all the participants* – the instant gain and mass tourism are long-time past, but unfortunately Balkan countries are sometimes neglecting this fact. This project is a great start for the ones looking at the market with a long-term approach as it allows every participant to benefit from new contacts, spread to new markets, get marketing strategy and present their work to the wider audience.
- *A competitive price that is not too low* – the price should be formed in a way that every partner in the project is satisfied with what they get. Assuming that the customers are the most important partners in the realization of the tours, they need to be happy as the priority, but this doesn't mean that the price should be too low. Everyone traveling as an aware traveler, willing to keep the environment safe and to help local communities grow, doesn't expect anything for free. Assuming that everyone is well-informed thanks to the Internet expansion, a tour-operator can never go too high with the price, as the product will be hard to sell if Balkan countries offer the same prices as Switzerland, for instance. But, a price that is too low can cause a contra-effect, as the customers might expect low quality. This means we need to be realistic, pay every partner included in the tour fairly and make customers happy with the balanced service-price ratio.
- *Trustworthy partners* on the local and regional ground
- *Promotion and digital marketing to the target markets* – a very important part for a new product on the market and this should be thoughtfully covered. New digital channels are a must among new travel generations and the source they mostly trust. So, the tour organizers or sellers must be widely aware of this.
- *Creativeness, uniqueness, and authenticity* – some examples in the world showed that creativity could make the best destination promotion, such as the Faroe Islands (Google Sheep View).⁴ We don't have to be the biggest or the strongest region in the world, but we can make a unique offer and promote the best things we have.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pe-x-WgEGRl>