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NMSHE NATIONAL MISSION FOR
SUSTAINING THE HIMALAYAN
ECOSYSTEM

POLICY BRIEF

MAKING TOURISM SUSTAINABLE IN THE INDIAN HIMALAYAN REGION

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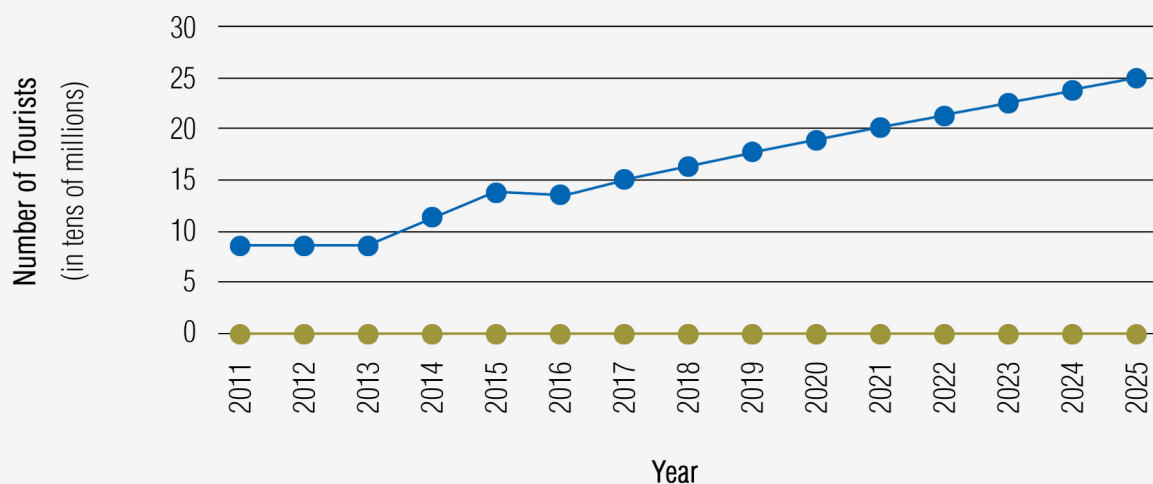
Context

Tourism has experienced tremendous expansion and diversification in the 21st century, emerging as one of the most dynamic and fastest-growing industries in the world. **The IHR has been a tourist hub for a very long time, owing to the location multiple sacred pilgrim shrines spread across the Himalayas.** For the past two decades, other kinds of tourism such as adventure tourism and agro-tourism have also developed in the region, leading to a dramatic increase in the number of people visiting IHR throughout the year. While earlier tourism in IHR was limited to the summer season, recently the IHR states have been pushing towards the expansion of winter tourism activities to make tourism flourish in the region throughout the year.



The total number of tourist arrivals from 2011-2015 was 494 million which is 8.42% of the total national arrival (5,870,256,562). **Further, it is expected that by 2025 (Figure 1) tourist footfall in IHR will increase to an estimated 240 million.** If we look at the tourism trends in the country, especially IHR, it becomes clear that domestic tourists form the major share. Hence, domestic tourism is significant to the economy of IHR. According to the Ministry of Tourism, there were 1652.49 million domestic tourist visits all over the country during the year 2017.

Figure 1: Tourist arrival forecast in the IHR states by 2025



Source: Compiled based on the Tourism Master Plans of the IHR States

Key Challenges to Sustainable Tourism in IHR

In IHR, tourism is among the drivers of economic prosperity, providing employment to a substantial section of the population. All the IHR states have plans on expanding this sector in the next decade. However, owing to the **delicate ecosystems in this region, the unchecked growth of mass tourism can spell disaster for the environment and native communities**. That's why in IHR sustainable tourism development is critical for the overall sustainable development of the region. The maintenance of the ecological balance of IHR is to not just vital for the region or the country, it impacts the health of the whole planet.

The development of sustainable tourism in IHR faces some major challenges that threaten the balanced growth of this industry. Some of these challenges are listed here:

- **Efficient resource management** : In the last five years tourist arrivals have shown unprecedented growth in the IHR. Further, it is predicted that by 2025 an estimated 240 million tourists will be visiting IHR. This will put considerable pressure on the resources of the region upon which the growth of tourism itself depends. Hence, there is a need to properly plan and manage tourism.
- **Climate change** : Climate change will play a crucial role in determining the long-term sustainability of tourism in IHR. It is a major issue in two ways: climate change poses a serious threat to tourism development, and at the same time, tourism is a contributor to climate change. According to UNWTO, tourism is responsible for about 5% of global CO2 emissions and in terms of radioactive forcing; tourism contributes to 4.6% of global warming.
- **Poverty alleviation** : The potential for tourism in poverty reduction in the IHR region is being increasingly recognized as new avenues of opportunities have opened up with the expansion of tourism. The challenge is to maximize visitor spending per head locally and to reduce leakages, as well as developing long term linkages in the local economy.
- **Visitors' well-being and security** : Uncertainty about the health and safety of tourists owing to lack of infrastructural facilities and basic amenities, and natural disasters could cause significant fluctuations in the tourist flow.

Hence, the challenge lies in finding a balance between maintaining the dynamic growth of the tourism industry and preserving the physical and socio-cultural heritage of the region. Two aspects of livelihood and environment, protection are integral to sustainable tourism in the IHR.

Policy Gap Assessment of IHR

Table 7: State policies in IHR

States	Tourism Policy Year	Ecotourism Policy	Climate Action Plans	SDG incorporated in Policy
Arunachal Pradesh		✓	✓	
Assam	✓		✓	
Himachal Pradesh	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jammu & Kashmir	✓	✓	✓	
Manipur	✓		✓	
Meghalaya	✓		✓	
Mizoram	✓	✓	✓	
Nagaland	✓		✓	
Sikkim	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tripura		✓	✓	
Uttarakhand	✓		✓	
West Bengal	✓		✓	

Table 7 shows various policies related to the development of sustainable development of tourism in IHR states. We find that apart from Tripura the IHR states have tourism policies in place. However, apart from Himachal Pradesh and Sikkim, no other states have incorporated the component of SDGs to guide their tourism policies. Only Assam, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Uttarakhand have tourism policies made after 2015. Similarly, while all the IHR states have State Action Plan on Climate Change, most of them are more than 5 years old and none of these plans take SDGs into account as a critical parameter.

The above analysis shows that while all IHR states have recognized the potential of the tourism sector for state development, they are yet to come up with integrated policies to make the growth of tourism sustainable. **The IHR states tourism policies need to be updated to resonate with the current discourse of sustainable tourism development in order to tackle the present and upcoming infrastructural and environmental challenges.**

Key Recommendations

IHR is poised to witness an overwhelming increase in the number of tourist arrivals in the next decade. The resident population of IHR is about 60 million and many of its existing tourist destinations are already bursting at the seam with serious environmental and socio-cultural consequences. Thus, tourism development based on the principles of long-term sustainability is essential for harmonious growth in IHR. The following recommendations are vital to meet the sustainability demands of tourism development in IHR :

1. ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

- a) **Skill Development in Tourism Industry** : As discussed earlier, the proportion of people belonging to the local communities in IHR who are skilled and trained for employment is very low. **There is a need to ensure that employment opportunities demanding skilled professionals are secured by the local residents in order to maintain sustainable economic growth in the tourism sector.**
- b) **Economic prosperity of locals** : The current model of tourism has led to lopsided seasonal employment patterns and created intra-state economic disparities, which have adversely affected the grassroots development of IHR. While the local residents have been forced to share their resources to accommodate the rising tide of tourists, they have not been made equal partners in sharing the gains. **Promotion of agri-tourism and rural tourism with the help of the public and private sector can be instrumental in the development of remote village communities and can also provide relief to major mountain cities that are under strain with overcrowding.**
- c) **Public-Private Partnerships** : As most of the livelihood opportunities are generated by the private sector in the tourism industry, there is a need for well-defined rules and guidelines to regulate the labor-environment. **The government further needs to synergize its schemes according to the local work environment and the private sector should be made a major stakeholder implement these schemes effectively.**

2. ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

- a) **Carrying Capacity Assessment** : While this concept has been espoused by most of the IHR states, **they are yet to have an integrated database of the same that could be used as a guide to policymakers.** The states of Himachal Pradesh and Sikkim have taken steps towards carrying capacity assessment but other states also need to take concrete measures towards this.
- b) **Development of satellite towns** : A major cause behind the ecological deterioration of prominent tourist destinations of IHR have been the overcrowding, traffic congestion, and unchecked construction to accommodate

the throngs of tourists flocking these towns in peak tourist seasons. **It is therefore of utmost importance to develop the infrastructure of satellite towns surrounding these major cities especially the roads and parking spaces.**



c) **Waste disposal and management** : In exceedingly urbanized mountain cities and centers of mass-tourism (e.g. Shimla, Darjeeling, Srinagar, Nainital, Kohima), waste segregation and its disposal have emerged as a major challenge. There have been trials of controlling visitor-related waste on the Kullu-Rohtang Pass route, but such good practices are often person-specific “Champion Initiatives” and with the shift of the person from the site, such ideas suffer and even revert to the business as usual approach.

3. SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

- a) **Preserving cultural integrity** : With the steady rise in the number of tourist inflow in IHR, there have been fears of the loss of the distinct socio-cultural identity of native communities. While tourism is not the only medium that is leading to this accelerated assimilation process, the native communities have often expressed resentment of visitors' negligent attitude towards the local customs. **The historic legacy of cultural practices needs to be recognized and the tourism policy needs to take this into account in their vision for future development.**
- b) **Promoting local culture and prosperity** : Tourism can be a considerable force for the conservation of historic and cultural heritage and can stimulate arts, crafts, and other creative activities within communities. It can bring prosperity to marginalized sections located at remote locations by promoting their handicrafts without changing their way of life or practices. By providing a source of income-based around local culture and arts and handicrafts, tourism can encourage communities to value their cultural heritage more highly.

4. VISITORS' WELL-BEING AND SAFETY

- a) **Ensuring safety** : IHR is characterized by tough terrain and unpredictable weather conditions. As adventure and winter tourism gaining traction in the region, it has become important to ensure the safety of the tourists. Natural hazards like landslides and avalanches, not only result in traffic jams and overcrowding at prime tourist spots but can also be fatal to the lives of the tourists. **Hence, much needs to be invested in the further development of infrastructure to remote areas and villages in IHR.**



The infrastructure development in North-East Region has been provided a major push in the past five years, timely execution of these proposed projects need to be ensured.

- b) **Access to basic facilities** : The growth of tourism in IHR has put considerable pressure on the available resources like water, land, and forests. In peak seasons, tourists deal face unavailability of these basic facilities along with sanitation issues. There needs to be regulation of tourist inflow during peak seasons and spread out tourist-seasons to other months during which tourists can visit the hills. Thus, sustainable tourism development needs providing these basic facilities to the tourists to maintain the pace of tourist inflow.

5. SUSTAINABLE POLICYMAKING

- a) **Bridging the implementation gap** : As discussed earlier, a major flaw has been the inability of translating the policy targets and vision into ground reality. The policymaking for sustainable tourism needs to take the practical constraints into account while formulating plans. The paucity of funds also needs to be resolved and the Central government schemes should specifically take the distinct needs and conditions of the Himalayan region into account while sanctioning funds.
- b) **Decentralized policymaking** : Rather than making unitary plans for the whole state, the IHR states should focus on the strengths of particular areas and communities with different regions if the state and develop tourism accordingly. Such planning can provide clarity in setting proper targets for tourism development and funds can be sanctioned accordingly. Himachal Pradesh and Sikkim have espoused the thematic planning with a special focus on eco-tourism. IHR states can learn from each other's innovative policy measures.

Owing to the proximity of IHR states to each other, the sustainable development of the region, especially in areas of ecological and climate change planning, as a whole depends on the synergy of efforts of all the stakeholders across IHR.



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