

ECONOSCITECH INTEGRATION

ISSUE
7

INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC
ELECTRONIC JOURNAL



TASHKENT STATE
UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS



American University
of Technology

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ISSN: 3060-5075



Acceptance of articles

PUBLISHED EVERY MONTHLY



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2026

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THE SCIENTIFIC-POPULAR
ELECTRONIC JOURNAL
"ECONOSCITECH-INTEGRATION"
HAS BEEN REGISTERED UNDER
THE NUMBER C-5669651 BY THE
AGENCY FOR INFORMATION AND
MASS COMMUNICATIONS (AOKA)
OF THE REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN,
EFFECTIVE FROM OCTOBER 9, 2024.

In accordance with Resolution No. 384/6 dated April 10, 2026, issued by the Presidium of the Supreme Attestation Commission under the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, this journal is included in the list of recommended international scientific publications for publishing the primary research findings of doctoral dissertations in the field of Economic Sciences.

Partners: Tashkent State University of Economics / American University of Technology in Tashkent (AUT)

Electronic publication. Issue 7. 374 pages.
Approved for publication in July 2026.

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TOURISM AS A BRIDGE: HOW TRAVEL FOSTERS INTERCULTURAL PEACE AND SOCIAL COHESION

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Abstract. Tourism is one of the world's largest industries and is viewed as more than merely a driver of economic growth. It is also recognized for its ability to foster cross-cultural relationships and promote peaceful coexistence. This paper examines how travel and tourism contribute to Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (Sustainable Development Goal 16) by facilitating intercultural encounters, challenging inaccurate stereotypes, and creating opportunities for people from different backgrounds to interact with one another. The study applies various theoretical frameworks, including Allport's (1979) contact hypothesis, to analyze how tourism promotes social cohesion. It also draws on recent empirical findings and data collected by the UNWTO to demonstrate tourism's positive influence on social cohesion. The findings indicate that, although tourism cannot guarantee a more peaceful world, tourism that is intentionally planned and developed, incorporates accountability mechanisms, and ensures the participation of local communities has considerable potential to contribute to peacebuilding. Finally, the paper offers recommendations for students, organizations, and policymakers on maximizing tourism's potential to contribute to more peaceful and just societies worldwide.

Keywords: tourism, peacebuilding, intercultural dialogue, SDG 16, social cohesion, sustainable development

Аннотация. Туризм является одной из крупнейших отраслей мировой экономики и рассматривается не только как фактор экономического роста. Он также обладает значительным потенциалом для развития межкультурных связей и содействия мирному сосуществованию. В данной статье исследуется вклад путешествий и туризма в достижение цели «Мир, правосудие и эффективные институты» — цели 16 в области устойчивого развития — посредством организации межкультурных контактов, преодоления ошибочных стереотипов и создания возможностей для взаимодействия людей с различным социальным и культурным происхождением. Для анализа роли туризма в укреплении социальной сплочённости применяются различные теоретические подходы, включая контактную гипотезу Олпорта (1979). Исследование также опирается на современные эмпирические результаты и данные, собранные ЮНВТО, которые свидетельствуют о положительном влиянии туризма на социальную сплочённость. Результаты исследования показывают, что, хотя туризм сам по себе не может гарантировать установление мира, целенаправленно планируемая и развиваемая туристическая деятельность, предусматривающая механизмы подотчётности и участие местных сообществ, обладает значительным потенциалом для содействия миростроительству. В заключение предложены рекомендации для студентов, организаций и лиц, принимающих решения, направленные на более эффективное использование потенциала туризма в формировании более мирных и справедливых обществ.

Ключевые слова: туризм, миростроительство, межкультурный диалог, ЦУР 16, социальная сплочённость, устойчивое развитие

INTRODUCTION

Traveling to a new country provides individuals with opportunities to encounter unfamiliar cultures, traditions, and ways of life. Such experiences can encourage travelers to view the world from perspectives different from their own and to develop a broader understanding of cultural diversity. Tourism therefore serves not only as a major economic sector but also as an important platform for intercultural communication. According to UN Tourism, approximately 1.4 billion international tourist arrivals were recorded in 2024, while international tourism

receipts reached an estimated USD 1.6 trillion. Beyond its economic contribution, tourism facilitates numerous interactions among people with different cultural, religious, and social backgrounds. These interactions can promote mutual respect, cultural awareness, interfaith tolerance, and a more inclusive global environment.

Sustainable Development Goal 16 promotes peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice for all, and the development of effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions (United Nations, 2015). Although this goal may initially appear only indirectly related to tourism services, accommodation, or destination management, tourism has a meaningful connection with its objectives. Through intercultural encounters, tourism can create opportunities for individuals to engage with different cultures, broaden their perspectives, and develop greater mutual understanding.

This paper examines tourism as a platform for connecting people across cultures and provides a theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding the relationship between tourism, peace, and social cohesion. It also considers the opportunities and challenges associated with tourism's contribution to SDG 16. The study is intended for students, educators, tourism professionals, organizations, and policymakers interested in the social dimensions of sustainable tourism development and the role of intercultural interaction in strengthening inclusive and peaceful societies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between peace and tourism is based primarily on Allport's (1979) contact hypothesis, according to which positive interactions among different groups under conditions of equal status can contribute to a reduction in prejudice. This proposition has been supported by studies examining relationships between tourists and host communities (Farmaki & Stergiou, 2021; Pratt & Liu, 2016). This notion is also reflected in international tourism policies, which recognize tourism as a potential contributor to SDG 16 because of the large-scale intercultural interactions it generates (World Tourism Organization & United Nations Development Programme, 2018). This perspective can be traced back to 1967, when the United Nations designated the International Year of Tourism under the theme "Tourism: Passport to Peace" (UN Tourism, 2024a). It is also supported by the Tourism for SDGs Platform (n.d.), which emphasizes that tourism's contribution to peace depends on purposeful and responsible planning.

The second aspect concerns governance in addition to interpersonal contact. Sharma et al. (2023) demonstrated that meaningful participation by local communities in tourism development can contribute to conflict resolution and peacebuilding in destinations affected by complex social conditions, including the case examined in Jammu and Kashmir. Similarly, Suriyankietkaew et al. (2025) argued that participatory and creative tourism can strengthen social capital, environmental responsibility, and a sense of belonging within host communities. However, some researchers recommend a more cautious interpretation of tourism's peacebuilding potential. Carbone (2022), for example, contended that an increase in tourist numbers alone does not necessarily produce greater intercultural understanding. Higgins-Desbiolles (2022) likewise emphasized that tourism may reproduce inequality and dependency when local communities lack control, while ethically designed and community-based tourism can contribute to more just and peaceful outcomes. Hence, this literature provides a theoretical foundation for the methodology and findings of the present review.

Research Methodology

An integrative literature review was conducted using peer-reviewed articles and official documents published by international and national organizations, including the United Nations, the World Tourism Organization, and the Tourism for SDGs Platform. Relevant studies were identified through academic databases. The search terms included "tourism and peace," "tourism and intercultural dialogue," "tourism and SDG 16," "contact theory and tourism," and "community-based tourism and social cohesion." The review primarily covered studies published between 2015 and 2025, reflecting research conducted following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Selected foundational publications issued before 2015 were also included. A structured academic format was used to present the methodology, findings, and conclusions clearly and systematically.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The complex interaction between tourism and peace has been studied in three major areas, which are presented as findings.

Finding 1: Tourism creates opportunities for individuals from different cultures to meet, which helps reduce prejudice.

Allport's contact hypothesis provides an important theoretical framework for examining how tourism may contribute to prejudice reduction. According to this hypothesis, positive, meaningful, and safe interactions between members of different social groups can encourage more favorable perceptions and attitudes. Tourism

studies have provided empirical support for this proposition, indicating that communication between visitors and host communities can reduce stereotypical perceptions and strengthen intercultural understanding (Farmaki & Stergiou, 2021; Pratt & Liu, 2016).

According to the World Tourism Organization and the United Nations Development Programme (2018), tourism creates numerous opportunities for interaction among individuals from different cultural and geographical backgrounds. In societies recovering from conflict or social tensions, responsibly planned tourism can support peacebuilding by connecting visitors with local communities and encouraging dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding. The Tourism for SDGs Platform (n.d.) further emphasizes that tourism can promote cultural and interfaith tolerance as part of SDG 16 when it is developed through purposeful, inclusive, and responsible planning rather than treated as an automatic outcome.

World Tourism Day 2024 was held under the theme “Tourism and Peace,” highlighting the potential of travel to bridge cultural differences, strengthen mutual understanding, and support sustainable economic development (UN Tourism, 2024a). This perspective has a long institutional history. In 1967, the United Nations designated the International Year of Tourism under the theme “Tourism: Passport to Peace,” reflecting the international community’s recognition of tourism as a potential platform for intercultural dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding (UN Tourism, 2024a).

Finding 2: Community-inclusive tourism governance strengthens institutions and social cohesion.

SDG 16 concerns not only peace in the interpersonal sense but also the development of strong, transparent, accountable, and inclusive institutions. Studies of community-based tourism (CBT) demonstrate that the meaningful participation of local communities in tourism planning and management can contribute to the achievement of SDG target 16.7, which promotes responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels.

Figure 1. Global Tourism Recovery and SDG 16 Linkage Analysis
Compiled from UN Tourism World Tourism Barometer (2025), UNWTO (2019), and Tourism for SDGs (n.d.)

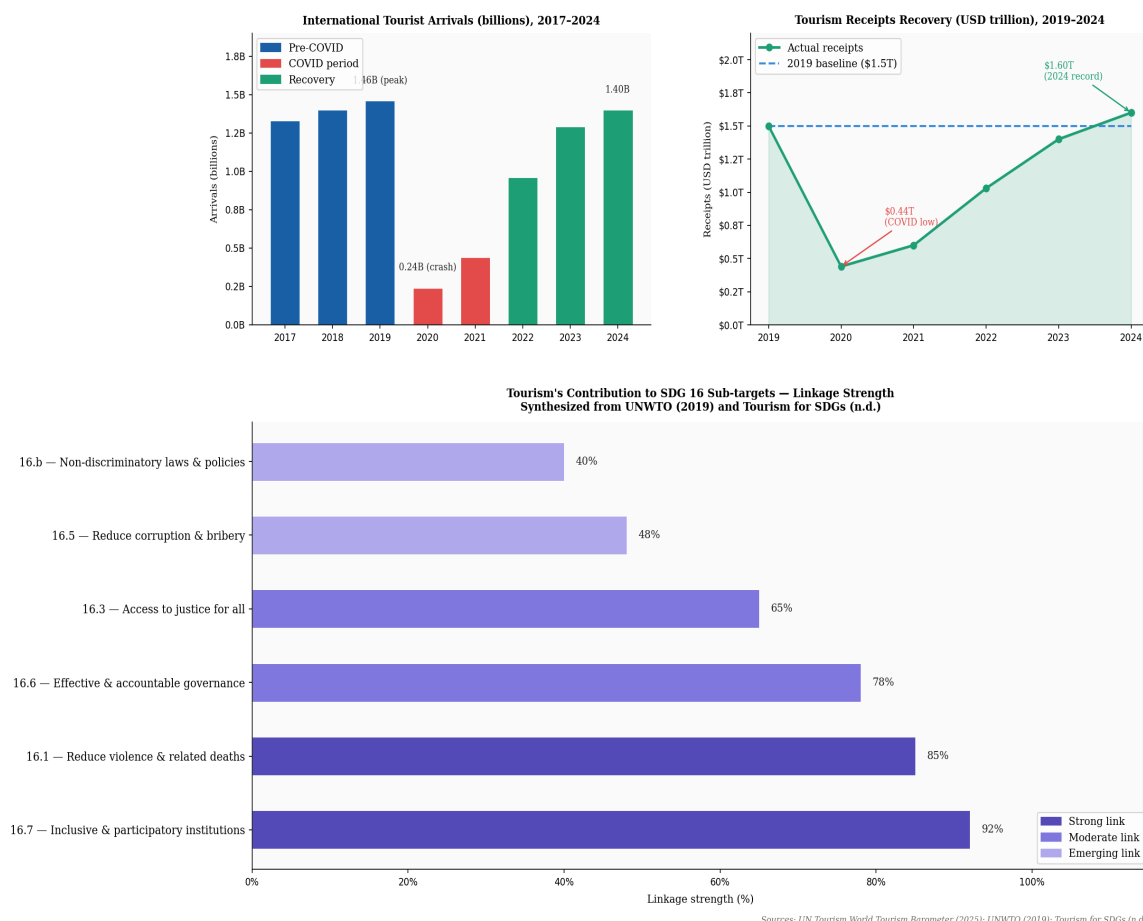


Figure 1. Global Tourism Recovery and SDG 16 Linkage Analysis.¹

¹ Source: Compiled by the author based on UN Tourism (2025), World Tourism Organization and United Nations Development Programme (2018), and Tourism for SDGs (n.d.).

Using structural equation modeling based on responses from 340 community members, Sharma et al. (2023) found that peacebuilding outcomes were more favorable when local residents actively participated in developing and managing tourism experiences. This conclusion is consistent with SDG target 16.7, which promotes responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels.

Related research on creative tourism indicates that immersive and participatory activities, including storytelling, traditional crafts, and culinary exchanges, can foster intercultural communication, strengthen a sense of belonging, and enhance social capital within host communities (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025). These activities represent practical community-level applications of the principles reflected in SDG 16.

Finding 3: The tourism–peace relationship is promising but conditional.

Although tourism has considerable potential to contribute to peacebuilding, scholars generally recommend a cautious and balanced interpretation of its role. Carbone (2022) emphasized that an increase in tourist numbers alone does not necessarily lead to greater intercultural understanding, as the quality, inclusiveness, and continuity of interactions are equally important. Tourism's contribution to reconciliation can therefore be understood as a continuum. It may weaken social cohesion when local communities have limited participation in decision-making or when tourism benefits are distributed unequally. In contrast, ethically planned and community-based tourism can support fairer, more inclusive, and more peaceful social outcomes (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022).

This finding reflects a broader principle within the literature on the Sustainable Development Goals: development outcomes depend on transparent governance, equitable benefit-sharing, meaningful community participation, and balanced power relations. Tourism is no exception in this regard. The 2024 Global Peace Index reported that the average level of global peacefulness had declined for the fifth consecutive year (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024). Although tourism can contribute to the development of more peaceful and inclusive societies, it cannot independently address deep-rooted social and institutional challenges. Its positive contribution is strongest when it is supported by accountable institutions, ethical frameworks, meaningful local participation, and fair economic arrangements.

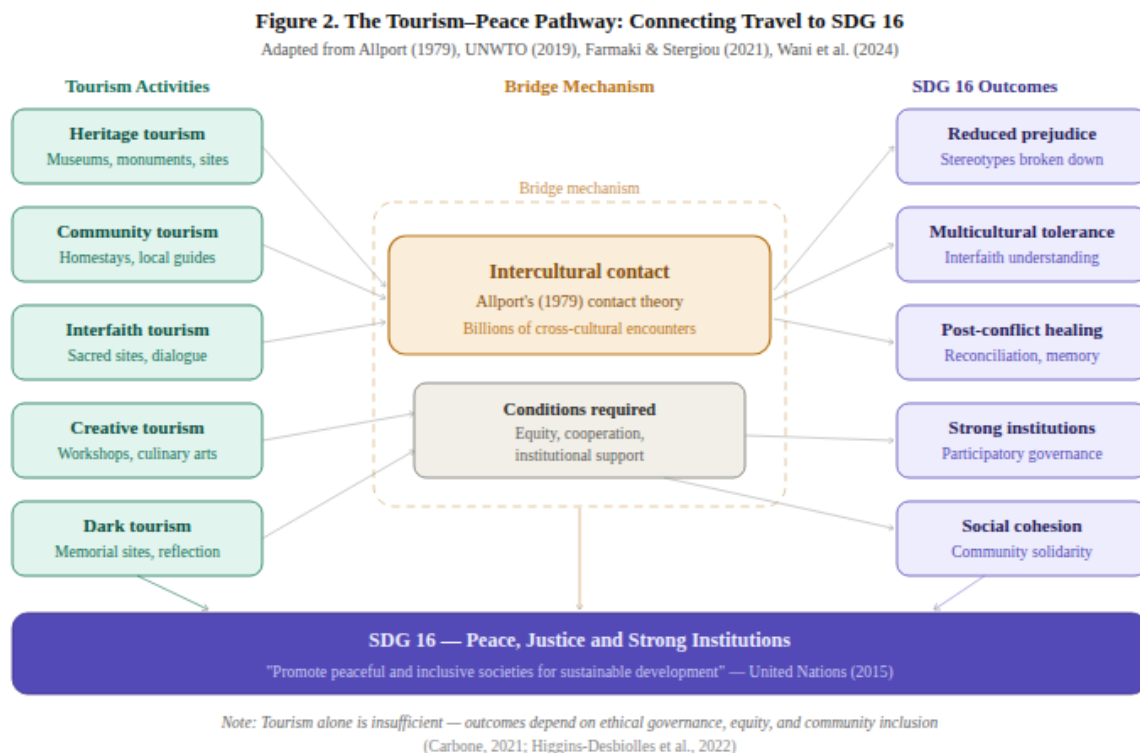


Figure 2. The Tourism–Peace Pathway: Connecting Travel to SDG 16.²

² Source: Adapted by the author from Allport (1979), World Tourism Organization and United Nations Development Programme (2018), Farmaki and Stergiou (2021), and Sharma et al. (2023).

According to the findings, tourism can contribute to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 by creating opportunities for intercultural interaction, community participation, and mutual understanding. For tourism students, practitioners, destination managers, and policymakers, these findings have important practical implications. Tourism may be understood as a bridge that connects individuals from different cultural and social backgrounds. However, it does not automatically prevent misunderstandings or ensure mutual respect. Its social contribution depends on how tourism experiences are designed, who participates in decision-making, how benefits are distributed, and whether the cultural values and interests of host communities are respected.

The bridge metaphor also illustrates the broader role of tourism as a major global industry. International tourism guidance emphasizes that coordinated action among public institutions, tourism businesses, local communities, and other stakeholders is essential for promoting responsible tourism practices, equitable benefit-sharing, and socially inclusive development (World Tourism Organization & United Nations Development Programme, 2018; Tourism for SDGs, n.d.). Such cooperation can create meaningful opportunities for people from different backgrounds to meet, communicate, and develop greater mutual understanding.

Tourism students and professionals should therefore recognize that their decisions and professional activities can contribute to intercultural dialogue, social cohesion, and responsible destination development. In practical terms, this includes designing inclusive tourism itineraries, preserving cultural heritage, applying culturally sensitive approaches, supporting transparent tourism governance, and ensuring meaningful community participation. These practices are not merely academic principles; they can contribute to more inclusive institutions and stronger relationships between visitors and host communities.

The Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 16, are relevant not only to public institutions but also to local communities, educational institutions, tourism enterprises, and individual professionals who facilitate intercultural interaction. Each of these stakeholders can contribute to creating conditions in which tourism encounters are respectful, inclusive, and beneficial to all participants.

According to UN Tourism (2025), international tourist arrivals reached approximately 1.4 billion in 2024, while total export revenues from international tourism were estimated at USD 1.9 trillion. These results demonstrate both the renewed economic potential of the sector and its growing responsibility to support inclusive and sustainable development. The recovery of international tourism provides an opportunity to integrate the principles of SDG 16 into destination planning, tourism governance, community engagement, and benefit-sharing mechanisms.

Carbone (2020) suggested that post-pandemic tourism development could place greater emphasis on human relationships, intercultural dialogue, and human-centered destination management. Realizing this potential will depend on responsible institutional practices, ethical tourism planning, and the knowledge and professional decisions of current and future tourism specialists.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Tourism provides important economic benefits, including employment creation, income generation, and the development of local infrastructure. Beyond these economic contributions, tourism also facilitates interaction among individuals from different cultural and social backgrounds. Through shared experiences, visitors and host communities can develop greater cultural awareness, mutual respect, and understanding.

When travelers and local residents meet at cultural, historical, or community sites, participate in shared activities, or communicate despite linguistic differences, such encounters can help strengthen intercultural understanding and social cohesion. However, these outcomes depend on responsible tourism planning, cultural sensitivity, inclusive participation, and respect for the values and interests of host communities.

Within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, peace involves not only the absence of violence but also justice, inclusion, accountability, and the existence of effective institutions that respect the rights and interests of all members of society. Tourism can support these principles by creating opportunities for intercultural learning, community participation, constructive dialogue, and equitable cooperation.

Tourism should therefore be regarded as a complementary mechanism within broader institutional and social initiatives aimed at strengthening social cohesion and addressing conflict-related challenges. When supported by accountable governance, ethical standards, equitable benefit-sharing, and meaningful local participation, tourism can make a positive contribution to more inclusive, respectful, and peaceful societies.

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Proofreader: Xondamir Ismoilov
Layout and Designer: Hasan Maqsudov

2026. № 7

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