










TOWS ANALYSIS FOR SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT
AND STATE SUPPORT DURING THE PANDEMIC: THE ARAL SEA REGION OF UZBEKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Evaluating the current ecotourism situation in the Aral Sea region of Uzbekistan and offering strategies for its sustainable development are the main objectives of the study. The threats, opportunities, weaknesses and strengths (TOWS) analysis was applied to identify the required management strategies. The article aims to review the literature on ecotourism promotion in the Aral Sea region. Based on TOWS, the results show that state support during the pandemic should be strategically coordinated to secure the sustainability of the ecotourism industry in Uzbekistan.

KEYWORDS

ecotourism, sustainable development, pandemic, Aral Sea region, Uzbekistan, exploratory study

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1. INTRODUCTION

The number of worldwide tourists has reached 1.5 billion which makes the sector a truly global force for economic growth and development, driving the creation of more and better jobs and serving as a catalyst for innovation and entrepreneurship (UNWTO, 2020) while

export earnings generated by tourism in Uzbekistan have grown to 1.7 trillion USD (UNWTO, 2019). This was believed to increase further in future years but the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the situation dramatically and now tourism is said to have been affected more than other sectors. Since January 2020, various restrictions have been imposed on visits to tourism

destinations. According to the second WTO report dated 28 April, 100% of worldwide destinations have had pandemic related travel restrictions (UNWTO, 2020).

The spread of the coronavirus pandemic has had a profound negative impact on the sustainable development of tourism, as well as other sectors of economies. According to the data, the number of foreign tourists globally in January–August 2020 reduced by 700 million compared to the same period in 2019. Losses from the export of tourist services amounted to 730 billion USD. Damage caused by the pandemic is eight times greater on tourism than the damage caused by the global financial and economic crisis in 2009 (UNWTO, 2020).

Globally, many emerging economies rely largely on tourist spending (Asadpourian, Rahimian, Gholamrezai, 2020) which accounts for a significant contribution to the GDP of those countries (Azam, Alam, Hafeez, 2018). Notably, Uzbekistan is making rapid reforms in the tourism sector by cancelling visa requirements, and establishing direct flights with major European cities. It is known that the benefits of an activity cannot guarantee its sustainability and concerns are raised about what the economy wants to generate in return. In other words, what is going to happen to the host community and environment as tourist revenue increases?

In recent years, the Aral Sea region of Uzbekistan has emerged as an attractive new destination for incoming foreign and domestic tourists. The development of tourism in the Aral Sea region contributes to employment and income opportunities for local people while the generated revenue can be further used to update the infrastructure in the territory (Saidmamatow, Rudenko, Pfister, Koziel, 2020). From a practical point of view, as of January 1, 2021, over 1500 tour operators are registered in Uzbekistan but only 4% of them are registered in the Khorezm region and 2% in Karakalpakstan. This means that most of the incoming investment via tourism is staying in the capital city of Tashkent and Samarkand the second-largest city leading to an imbalance in regional economic growth as well as poor destination management, marketing and the logistics of tourism in general in the Aral Sea region (UzbekTourism, 2020).

The research gap that motivated the authors to write is that there are very few academic articles available revealing the situation of ecotourism development, challenges and opportunities in Central Asia, and in the Aral Sea region which is an ecological catastrophe. The stakeholder engagement map and TOWS analysis generate strategies to support local entrepreneurs to take the lead in the tourism market of Uzbekistan. The research question is to assess the current situation of ecotourism development in the Aral Sea region and the role of state support is elaborated to strengthen the economic conditions of tourism businesses during the pandemic. The research methodology includes TOWS analysis (matrix), leading to the development

of a stakeholder engagement map, as well as a cluster approach. The research hypothesis is that the development of ecotourism in remote parts of Uzbekistan (i.e., Aral Sea region) is highly correlated with the state support provided during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism contributes to strengthening foreign exchange rates, driving regional development, directly supporting several types of jobs and businesses and develops many local communities. The tourism sector generates 4.4% of GDP and 21.5% of service exports in OECD countries. These shares are much higher for several OECD countries. For example, tourism in Spain contributes 11.8% of GDP while travel represents 52.3% of total service exports, in Mexico these figures are 8.7% and 78.3%, in Iceland 8.6% and 47.7%, in Portugal 8.0% and 51.1%, and in France 7.4% and 22.2% (UNWTO, 2020).

Ecotourism is one of the most important activities that can conserve natural and cultural resources and bring economic benefits to both local people and national government at the same time. A successful plan for ecotourism is a function of developing precise goals and criteria (Demir, Esbah, Akgun, 2016). It is a fact that ecotourism, if developed sustainably, can have a less negative environmental impact, reduce adverse externalities, increase cultural and environmental integrity, make resource management more effective, and bring extra financial wellbeing (UNEP, 2013).

Ecotourism is about integrating conservation, communities and sustainable development. It means that ecotourism activities should be in line with key principles: to minimize negative environmental impacts; to build environmental and cultural awareness and respect; to provide positive engagement for both visitors and hosts; to provide direct economic interests for conservation; grant financial benefits and empowerment for local people; and establish sensitivity to host countries' environmental and social climate (Das, Chatterjee, 2015; Higham, 2007; Holden, 2007). Ecotourism can be explained as "environmentally engaged travel to comparatively undisturbed areas to enjoy and respect nature that supports conservation with low negative visitor impacts while offering active socio-economic wellbeing for local people" (Jalani, 2012, p. 48). Ecotourism is a new type of tourism that is a consumable resource, has an educational and adventurous character, and focuses on undeveloped and sparsely visited natural, cultural and historical sites (Lenao, Basupi, 2016; Liu, Li, 2013; Mayaka, Prasad, 2012).

Socio-economic and environmental factors were taken into account for the TOWS analysis. In the TOWS context, opportunity means the potential present to

carry out an activity to increase efficiency or improve the quality of management for any kind of organization (Hong, Chan, 2010). Although TOWS analysis is a widely preferred and easy-to-use method to define positive and negative issues, it is limited to qualitative evaluations (Demir, Esbah, Akgun, 2016).

Ecotourism calls for low-impact tourism, participation in decision-making and sensitive approaches to biodiversity and local cultures. It supports local conservation efforts and can bring financial and physical benefits to host communities as well as providing educational opportunities for travellers. An applicable ecotourism destination should include both original nature and cultural heritage (Dowling, Fennel, 2003; Rahemtulla, Wellstead, 2001; Rein, 2005; Weaver, Oppermann, 2000; Yilmaz, 2005).

Evaluating the ecotourism development prospects for the Aral Sea region can open up ecotourism which would allow local communities to benefit from recreational activity. If ecotourism is organised well, it is the best way to protect natural places and benefits both natural heritage and local people. Through tourism, public awareness can be raised to become environmental respect and can stimulate the emergence of new local economic activities (Salvatore, Marciano, 2019).

3. ECOTOURISM IN UZBEKISTAN

Uzbekistan has great ecotourism potential. Nowadays, there are 17 natural reserves in Uzbekistan including Baday-Tuqay, Kizilkum, Nurota, Zarafshon, Orol Paygamber, Zomin, Charvak and Chatqal, and these reserve areas are mainly used as a place for the protection of endangered species of animals and plants (Hoshimov, 2009). Besides, ecotourism destinations have increased from 29 to 65 covering 8,144,000 hectares with a capacity for hosting over 1074 visitors per day (Khamidov, 2016).

Uzbekistan has developed a scientific and theoretical framework aimed at ensuring the sustainable development of ecotourism and improving ecotourism services on the tourism market (Berdiyev, 2010). Organizational and managerial forms and practices, development trends in ecotourism in developed and developing countries have been analysed, and recommendations are made for their use in Uzbekistan (Khamidov, 2017). In 2007, the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on ecology and environmental protection adopted the concept of ecological tourism in Uzbekistan. This particular document elaborated the problems of ecological and socio-economic, organizational-legal issues and goals, and the potential development of ecotourism (SCRepUzEEP, 2007).

The President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, delivered a speech at the UN General Assembly to

draw global attention to the acute ecological problems of the Aral Sea catastrophe. Overcoming the negative consequences of this in the Aral Sea region requires active international, regional and local engagement. As a result, a special UN programme was accepted to bring effective assistance to the local population affected by the Aral Sea crisis.

In December 2019, the UN General Assembly at its plenary session adopted a special resolution “Sustainable Tourism and Sustainable Development in Central Asia” that was initiated by the President of Uzbekistan in Beijing at a meeting with the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, as part of the international forum “One Belt, One Road” (UzDaily, 2019). The UN General Assembly Resolution emphasizes the essence of the efforts of Central Asian countries to disseminate the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, numerous international events for the further development of tourism on the Silk Road, as well as measures taken by local governments in Central Asian countries to capture international investment and finance to the tourism sector. It is noteworthy that the UN General Assembly (2019) invites member states, other stakeholders and the UNWTO to support the activities carried out by the countries of Central Asia to support sustainable tourism development in the region (United Nations, 2019), and in this regard:

- expand cooperation in the field of tourism with the countries of Central Asia;
- provide growth in the main sectors of a consolidated and comprehensive policy for sustainable tourism development in Central Asia, considering the specifics and current condition of economic advancement of each country in the region;
- promote the development of tourism and strategies to attract foreign tourists to Central Asia;
- join forces for the enforcement and application of innovative technologies for the modernization of the tourism industry in Central Asia (UzDaily, 2019).

At the meeting of the council of the heads of the founding states of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea in Turkmenistan, the President of Uzbekistan stated that providing conditions for attracting foreign investment for the development and implementation of environmentally clean technologies in the Aral Sea region, the fulfilment of the principles of the “green economy” as well as the comprehensive implementation of the principles of environmentally friendly energy-saving technologies, the elimination of desertification and the continuation of ecological migration, and the development of ecotourism are priority aims that should be realized (UzDaily, 2019).

As a result of reforms in the field of tourism in Uzbekistan, the flow of foreign tourists visiting the Aral Sea region is growing year by year. In particular, the Republic of Karakalpakstan was visited by a total

of 46,386 tourists: 21,399 foreign and 24,987 local, while a total of 2,646,597 tourists visited the Khorezm region: 420,828 foreign and 2,225,769 local in 2019. Local tour experts consider eco-tourism for those parts of the Aral Sea including Moynak district, Sudochoye Lake, Koyi Amu Darya biosphere reserve in the Beruniy district, Ustyurt plain of the Kungrad district (canyon), Barsakelmes salt lake (salt deposits), the open-air ship 'cemetery' and Eshan lakes (Uzbek Tourism, 2020).

4. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology is based on a literature review on ecotourism opportunities, challenges and promotional approaches in the Aral Sea region of Uzbekistan. TOWS analysis is a research method mostly applied in business management as well as being applied to evaluate decision-making in sustainable tourism (NOAA, 2011). The following analysis helps to diagnose the existing conditions of ecotourism

development in the Aral Sea region. In the longer term, the evaluation is one of several complex strategies to promote ecotourism in Uzbekistan taking into account the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, a cluster approach and stakeholder mapping are built onto a TOWS assessment helping to develop short-term and long-term strategies to improve the ecotourism market in remote zones of Uzbekistan while the stakeholder map assists the integration and harmonisation of the functions of local authorities to mitigate weaknesses as well as minimizing expected threats.

5. FINDINGS

5.1. TOWS ANALYSIS FOR ECOTOURISM IN ARAL SEA REGION OF UZBEKISTAN

In the case of the Aral Sea region, evaluating internal and external factors is essential to develop strategic planning for sustainable ecotourism management (Table 1).

Table 1. TOWS for ecotourism promotion in Aral Sea region

Threats		Opportunities	
1	Climate change and poor environmental management	1	New target markets for visitors (Allanazarov, Alimov, 2019)
2	High migration rate from rural communities	2	Potential for desert tourism promotion (Khaytboyev, 2016)
3	Competition burden of other new ecotourism destinations in Central Asia	3	Open visas for over 80 countries (Lex.uz, 2020a)
4	The significance of seasonality in tourism (Bekjanov, Matyusupov, 2020)	4	Government programmes focusing on tourism promotion (Matyakubov, 2017)
5	Extreme weather conditions, water salinity and air pollution (Rudenko, Lamers, 2010)	5	Existence of ecotourism development in Uzbekistan (SCRepUzEEP, 2007)
6	Risk of being infected by the pandemic or having an impact on it (Matyakubov, Ibadullaev, 2020)	6	The main requirements of pandemic conditions are individual tours, opportunities for keeping distance and low density (Rudenko et al., 2010).
Weaknesses		Strengths	
1	Absence of regional integration of tourism in Central Asia (Saidmamatov, Rudenko, Baier, Khodjaniyazov, 2021)	1	Popularity of surrounding destinations: Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, Nukus (Saidmamatov et al., 2020)
2	Poor quality of tourism infrastructure and associated services (Alimov, 2018)	2	Potential for the development of extreme tourism in Ustyurt and high ecotourism potential in the Lower Amu Darya biodiversity (Salaev, Alimov, 2018)
3	Less integration of the Aral Sea region as a tourism destination in tour packages (Kamaletdinov, 2018)	3	Potential for hunting tourism, agritourism, gastronomic tourism, religious and recreation opportunities, archaeo-tourism, rich flora and fauna (Matyakubov, Defrancesco, 2018)
4	Poor level of marketing (Matyakubov, 2017)	4	Existence of ancient fortress (golden ring of ancient Khorezm capitals) and Savitsky Museum of Art in Central Asia (Yagodin, Betts, 2009)
5	Lack of qualified tour operators, tour agencies and guides (Alimov, 2018)	5	Government introduced "Uzbekistan. Safe travel GUARANTEED" sanitary-epidemiologically safe tourism for tourists (Matyakubov, Ibadullayev, 2020)
6	Insufficient legislative, government support to support a cluster approach in ecotourism destinations (Kamaletdinov, 2018)	6	Because of the high risk of infection during the pandemic, the choice of tourist destinations is limited (Bekjanov, 2020)

Source: authors.

Based on field observation and conversation with local travel agencies and guides, the following approaches can be recommended to eliminate weaknesses and minimize the threats to generating inclusive and long-term sustainable development of ecotourism in Aral Sea region:

1. Developing and promoting the ecotourism strategy in the Aral Sea region.
2. Improving roads and roadside infrastructure, hygienic conditions (i.e. clean drinking water) that are baselines to attracting ecotourists.
3. Forming of mutually beneficial partnerships among tour operators, hotels, local communities, academy, think tanks and tour destinations.
4. Development of programmes (i.e. public-private partnership) to attract local and foreign direct investment for the development of ecotourism infrastructure in the Aral Sea region.
5. Organization of training for guides on ecological tourism in training centres under the Departments of Tourism Development in the Republic of Karakalpakstan and the Khorezm region.
6. To promote ecotourism in the Aral Sea region, new tourist routes should include destinations such as:
 - Lower Amu Darya State Biosphere Reserve,
 - Sultan Uvays Mountain,
 - Ustyurt Plateau,
 - Sudochye,
 - Saigachi.

The main factor affecting the tourism industry as a whole is the level of competitiveness in the field of tourism. In modern conditions, it is important not only to obtain a set of high-quality tourist services (accommodation, transportation, excursions, meals, the availability of modern sanitary facilities) but also to satisfy spiritual and emotional needs, and to gain experience of living in extraordinary conditions in an unfamiliar environment.

There are several issues and problems including the number of tourists, historical places in cities and towns, and issues of transport logistics. It is difficult to compete with other tourist destinations if the response is expensive and takes a long time.

5.2. CLUSTER APPROACH

In order to implement a cluster approach to tourism development in the Aral Sea region, it is advisable to create at least four small tourist zones (STZ) – Fig. 1.

They will be developed based on ecological situation, transportation, logistics, biodiversity and the location of the ecotourism destination (Kamaletdinov, 2018):

1. So, in STZ tourists can go to Akchakul Lake, located on the Amu Darya coast in the Ellikkala district, which has a high potential for the development of



Figure 1. Small Tourist Zones in Aral Sea basin.
Source: authors development

- both archaeological and medical tourism – Photo 1. In addition, there are also opportunities to create new tourist routes using the recreational resources of Akchakul, other natural reservoirs, sites with a high concentration of minerals, etc.
2. The second STZ is proposed to be located in the Beruniy district, at the village of Oltinsay, which is located near the Lower Amu Darya State Biosphere Reserve (Badai Tugai), where endangered species of plants, fish, birds and animals live in natural conditions – Photo 2. This zone can be aimed at the development of ecotourism, historical and special programmes for pilgrimage (ziyorat) tourism to accommodate tourist infrastructure and accommodation networks (Matyakubov, Ibadullaev, 2020).
 3. The third STZ may be located in the city of Muynak where there are great prospects for the development of ecological and extreme tourism. New tourist attractions, “ship cemeteries”, where old fishing



Photo 1. STZ Akchakul
Source: authors



Photo 2. STZ Amudarya river
Source: authors



Photo 3. STZ Muynak
Source: authors



Photo 4. STZ Nukus
Source: authors

vessels and steamboats have become stranded – Photo 3. Travellers are expected to get acquainted with saxaul forest plantations on the floor of the Aral Sea, observe swans, flamingos, pelicans and other rare birds on Sudochoye Lake. Muynak also attracts those who want to feel the fragility of nature. Extreme tourists will be interested in visiting the Aral Sea and other local disaster areas. For these purposes, it is necessary to implement comprehensive measures to expand tourism opportunities as well as various cultural and recreational activities (Kamaletdinov, 2018).

4. The fourth STZ, the central zone is proposed to be created in the city of Nukus, not far from Nukus international airport and will provide travel services (Kamaletdinov, 2018) – Photo 4.

5.3. STAKEHOLDER MAPPING OF THE UZBEK TOURISM SECTOR

Stakeholder mapping is the visual representation of a stakeholder analysis, organised according to key criteria. It is a process and visual tool to clarify

and categorize the various stakeholders by drawing further pictures of who the stakeholder groups are, which interests they represent, the amount of power they possess, whether they represent inhibiting or supporting factors for the organization to realize its objectives, or the methods by which they should be dealt with (Figure 2).

The stakeholder map demonstrates that the Uzbek tourism market is regulated by the State Committee for Tourism Development and State Committee on Ecology and Environmental protection. The newly established Ministry of Innovative Development is playing an accelerating role to solve tourism problems while the Ministry of Culture controls the museums and tourism destination sites. Increasing the wellbeing and livelihood of local communities remains the key priority behind developing the tourism sector.

For support structure and service providers, it is very important to cooperate jointly with the four key regulatory bodies in order to realize strategic projects to reform the tourism industry in a complex and integrated way.

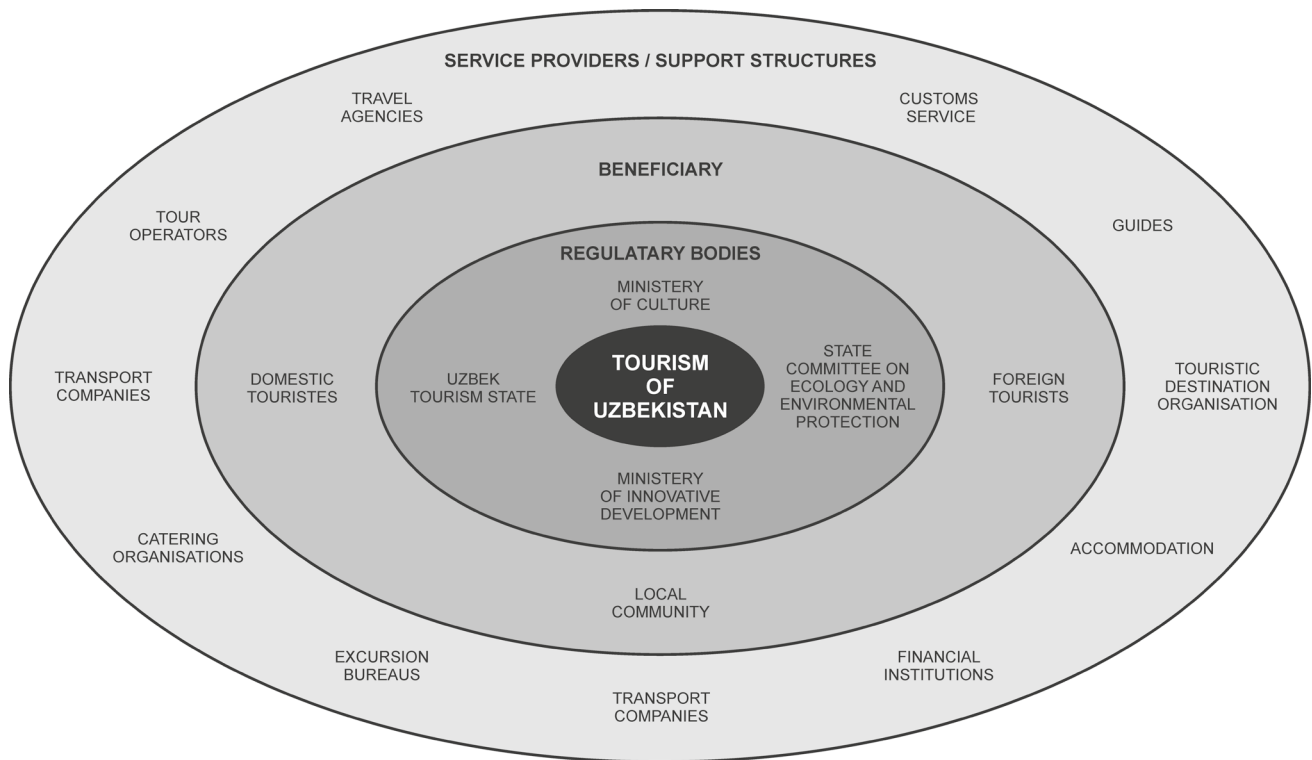


Figure 2. Key tourism industry bodies in Uzbekistan
Source: authors development

6. STATE SUPPORT DURING THE PANDEMIC IN UZBEKISTAN

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is, first and foremost, a humanitarian crisis affecting lives, which has also triggered a global economic crisis. This has a very tangible impact on the tourism sector which is critical for many people, places and businesses, with the impact particularly felt in countries, cities and regions where tourism is an important part of the economy. The coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis has disrupted lives and livelihoods worldwide and has limited travel within and across borders. Like other countries, the coronavirus pandemic has affected Uzbekistan's tourism destinations very badly. In March 2020, the first patient was recorded and the government had to establish strict regulations against spread of the pandemic. In this kind of harsh economic

situation, tourism entities are not working and they need the support of the government to maintain their businesses. Subsidies were introduced to the tourism sector by a state fund to support entrepreneurship (Table 2).

In order to accelerate the recovery of tourism and the formation of new development directions after the stabilization of the sanitary-epidemiological situation in the country, as well as to ensure the execution process, the Presidential Decree No. PD-6002 on 28 May 2020 "On urgent measures to support tourism to reduce the negative impact of the coronavirus pandemic" was passed. The presidential resolution No 4755 "Additional measures to the development of the tourism sector in following the demands of the strengthened sanitary-epidemiological security regime" was accepted on June 19, 2020. In this resolution, the main actions to restart international tourism in the country are below (Table 3).

Table 2. Post-pandemic relief measures for Uzbekistan

No.	Period	Relief measures
1	From 1 March to 1 June 2020	to compensate the expenses of tourism entities on loans previously issued by commercial banks for the construction of accommodation facilities
2	From 1 June 2020 to 31 December 2021	to subsidize accommodation at 10% of the cost (hotel services), 15 USD, except for those bought by a compensatory charter flight allocation of incentive subsidies in USD, provided that they stay in the territory of the Republic of Uzbekistan for at least five days

Table 2. (cont.)

No.	Period	Relief measures
3	From the date of resumption of inbound tourism at the expense of the fund until December 31, 2020	for foreign tourist groups of at least 10 people, provided that they organize a tour in the Republic of Uzbekistan and spend at least five nights in their accommodation, partial subsidization of air and rail ticket expenses of tour operators at 30% of the ticket price
4	By 1 June 2021	the fund will reimburse the cost of renovation, reconstruction and strengthening the material and technical base for the acquisition or upgrading of hotels, provided that the category is maintained for the next three years, 5 million soums for each room in 3-star hotels, 10 million soums for each room in 4-star hotels, 15 million soums for each room in 5-star hotels
5	Until January 1, 2022	legal entities for construction, reconstruction and equipping machinery, their components and spare parts, buildings and structures for disinfection, imported into the territory of Uzbekistan are exempted from payment of customs duties (except for customs clearance fees and value added tax) for contactless controlled equipment, as well as odourless disinfectants. Besides, the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Uzbekistan was ordered to allocate 20 billion soums to start the execution of the measures
6	July 1, 2020 to July 1, 2023	income tax, property and land taxes and turnover tax rates on the main activities of non-governmental (private) museums, art galleries and craft centres will be reduced by 50% compared to the established amount

Source: UzbekTourism (2020).

Table 3. Actions taken during the pandemic

Actions taken during the pandemic	Description
Uzbekistan. Safe travel GUARANTEED	Establishment of a sanitary-epidemiological situation in tourist destinations. All expenditures are covered by the government
Digital menu	Minimizing physical contact between customers and staff
Compensation	Government pays 3000 USD per tourist if they become infected with COVID-19 during their stay in Uzbekistan
Tourist <i>makhallas</i> (Tourist neighbours)	These will be created in traditional architecture using modern building materials. They will be leased to local <i>dehkans</i> (farmers) who are ready to receive tourists as part of rural and ethnographic tours, demonstrating the traditional way of life, crafts and cuisine of the regions
Family guest houses in rural places, mountains, desert zones	support local entrepreneurs by compensating certain amount of the cost of a project that intends to establish family guest houses in remote rural and mountainous areas if they meet certain requirements such as running the accommodation for at least five years and to setting up a special automated electronic programme that registers visitors coming to the accommodation. The amount of compensation should not surpass 10 mln UZS, which should be 30% of the cost

Source: Lex.uz (2020b).

Table 4. Prospects for the development of ecotourism in the Aral Sea region

Actions	Funding source
Establishment of a large tourist complex "Aral Oasis" with a closed protected area	Entrepreneurial funds and loans from commercial banks, grants
Aral Sea, Sudochye Lake, Kungrad State Forestry, new routes with maximum involvement of the local population living in the vicinity of the "Kazakdarya", permanent tourist accommodation and tourist infrastructure facilities	Funds and grants from entrepreneurs
Akchakul Lake ecotourism complex	Partnership with government
Establishing Lower Amu Darya State Biosphere Reserve ecotourism complex	Partly by the government

Source: Lex.uz (2020c).

Furthermore, the government is paying special attention to Aral Sea region tourism development as the region has great potential. In 2017 presidential decree No. 2731 "The state programme for the development of the Aral Sea Region" tourism (especially ecotourism) is believed to be one of the leading sectors in future directions for this process. In this document, the exact position for ecotourism was indicated (Table 4).

7. CONCLUSION

The exploratory study focuses on ecotourism development in the Aral Sea region of Uzbekistan. TOWS analysis has generated possible scenarios and strategies to transfer weaknesses into strengths via a cluster approach and stakeholder engagement mapping. In this context, accelerating the development of inbound and domestic tourism in the Aral Sea region by implementing a tourist cluster is one of the most important factors for sustainable socio-economic development of the region, and will contribute to the transformation of the tourism sector into one of the leading sectors of the regional economy with the widespread promotion of ecological tourism. The analysis of stakeholder mapping plays an essential role in overcoming the mutual conflicts of interest, expected risks and misunderstandings of stakeholders in the tourism sector of Uzbekistan. In addition, it possesses an important role in the development of organizational and economic mechanisms that have a positive impact on stakeholders in the development of tourism in the region.

In order to utilise the potential, there must be professional management and a cooperation strategy among authorities to plan and implement ecotourism development in short and long-term scenarios. The management should focus more on the opinions of the tourists as end-users while considering foreign experience to produce a roadmap to develop successful ecotourism development in the Aral Sea region. Hence, making ecotourism a financially attractive business leads to an enormous improvement in the living conditions of the rural population which is the main motive behind promoting ecotourism in rural parts of Uzbekistan.

Finally, the unexpected situation with the pandemic disturbs (pre-COVID) development strategies. Importantly, government support is essential in the case of the pandemic to encourage private sector participation as well as easing negative economic consequences to the tourism industry. This article suggests further research with micro and macro perspectives in considering the consequences caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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