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# REBUILDING OF THE TOURIST INDUSTRY AFTER COVID-19

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Cases of Dutch and Flemish urban tourist  
destinations



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# Rebuilding of the tourist industry after COVID-19

Cases of Dutch and Flemish urban tourist destinations



Master Thesis Human Geography: Conflict, Territories  
and Identities

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## Foreword

Six months before I started the master Human Geography: Conflict, Territories and Identities, the world altered completely, because of the outbreak of a new virus (which is still ongoing). To stop the spread of this virus, governments closed their borders and even complete lockdowns with closure of restaurants, shops, and even schools became normal. In the year and a half that I was doing this master, I did not go to the university a single time. All the courses and exams took place online, even a big part of my internship.

I would like to thank several people for their help accomplishing this thesis. First, I want to thank my internship supervisor, professor Dominique Vanneste of the university of Leuven (KuLeuven). Due to multiple lockdowns at the time of my master's, it was not possible to do research on the first choice of topic for my thesis; War Tourism. With the help of professor Vanneste, we found a new topic to investigate, one that was very topical; tourism and COVID-19. I want to thank her and KuLeuven for the opportunity to do a research internship and to let me finish this project after the internship. I especially want to thank professor Vanneste for all her help, feedback, and time during my internship. Someone else I would like to thank for his time and help in setting up and organizing the various online workshops with the different municipalities is Bart Neuts. Third, I want to thank the participants from the various municipalities for their time by participating in those workshops.

Fourth, I would like to thank my supervisor Oliver Kramsch for his help in writing my thesis and his feedback. Thanks to the guidance of Oliver Kramsch, this thesis has become the final result it is today. Lastly, I want to thank my parents and friends who supported me during my study and maybe even more important during COVID-19.

I am very happy that I can finally finish my master's degree (and hopefully the end of this weird period of COVID-19).

Vere van Meeteren,

Culemborg, October 2021



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## Abstract

The current COVID-19 crisis, which started at the beginning of 2020 and continued in 2021 – and it will probably determine our lives to a large extent in 2022 as well – showed light to new problems in tourism of ‘overtourism’ and the impact of climate change caused major concerns in the pre-COVID-19 era. The outbreak of COVID-19 made clear how important tourism is, even for less prominent tourism destinations such as the Netherlands and Belgium. Although the Netherlands nor Belgium are countries with a general dominant tourism industry, the countries, as destinations, suffered economically by the restrictions taken to control the outbreak. This might not be the end of the crisis or the only crisis with a global impact – thinking of climate change – and therefore it is essential to understand the responsiveness and recovery strategies developed by tourism destinations out of the crisis caused by COVID-19. Little is known about how tourist destinations managed to survive during the pandemic, apart from the fact that different policy levels have developed a lot of initiatives to support tourism entrepreneurs and fostered a series of actions to respond to lower and changing demands. In parallel, on many occasions, experts fueled their ‘tourism will never be the same’ opinion. The question is if destinations are working on real post-COVID-19 strategies, and to what extent the pandemic proves to be a momentum to do things differently? Therefore, in this thesis, there will be an investigation on the short-term crisis management as well as on the view of different cities' tourism planning and management officials in the Netherlands and Belgium on how (vision, strategy, actions) to recover in the long-term. This by searching for an answer to the question: *are (urban) destinations, such as in the Netherlands and Flemish-Belgium, working on post-COVID-19 strategies and actions, and to what extent will the pandemic proved (proves) to be a momentum to do things differently?*

## 1. Introduction

*“Mother Earth is forcing people to stay home and to become introspective – to ask themselves what is important in their lives? What is true to them? What are they fearing, denying, or resisting? What do they want to do about these questions? This is the great reset of 2020, for the world, and especially for travel and tourism (Lew et al., 2020).”*

The COVID-19 health crisis is one never seen before. The human right to travel and to enjoy the services of the tourism and hospitality sector has been curtailed in a manner that is unprecedented in peacetime (Rogerson & Baum, 2020). Although the COVID-19 virus manifested itself in China first, in two months’ time it had spread all around the world. Mid-March, the virus had been established in 146 countries (Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2020) and in less than a year the virus outbreak caused over 81 million cases in 190 countries and more than 1.7 million deaths (BBC, 2020 December 29). This could happen because of several reasons: a rapidly growing and mobile world population, urbanization trends and the concentration of people and, maybe the most important factor, the development of global transport networks acting as vectors for the spread of pathogens.

With no vaccine and limited medical interventions to treat at the moment of the outbreak (2020), most countries went into lockdown, cancelled or postponed events and banned gatherings of people over certain numbers (Gössling *et al.*, 2020). Despite the fact that the virus was initially largely disregarded by political leaders all around the world. 166 countries restricted entry into their national territories and global mobility have come to a near standstill (Lapointe, 2020). International, regional and local travel restrictions immediately affected national economies, including tourism industries. As a result of these travel restrictions and lockdowns, global tourism has slowed down significantly, with the number of global flights dropping by more than half. Passenger numbers declined even more steeply, as many airlines adopted specific seating policies to maintain a distance between customers. On 26 March 2020, 65% of tourism businesses already reported difficulties in paying invoices (Gössling *et al.*, 2020). According to Arbulú *et al.* (2021) international tourism saw a decline of 65% in the first half of 2020 compared to the previous year. In June the decline was the biggest with 93%. Northeast Asia and South Mediterranean Europe suffered the most, with a drop of 83% and 72%. For the tourism industry, the expectation is that it can take up to four years to return to a 2019-level in tourist arrivals when the crisis is over (Arbulú *et al.*, 2021).<sup>1</sup>

Looking back at prior crises, the tourism industry seems to be resilient and recovers soon when a crisis ends (ILO, 2020). However, none of the previous crises had the same magnitude as the COVID-19 pandemic. Within only a relatively short historical span, the outbreak of

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<sup>1</sup> An important note that has to be made, is that during the writing of this thesis the COVID-19 crisis still continues and at the moment of submission a fourth wave is going on in many countries. This means that it may be the case that data at the moment of reading may be outdated or information that was important at the time may no longer be relevant due to recent developments about which nothing was known or written in November 2021.

COVID-19 has exacted a massive international impact on the tourism industry by suddenly reducing and drastically curbing global mobility, creating the worst crisis in the history of commercial aviation. This is because the COVID-19 pandemic takes place on a global scale and leads to a widespread shutdown of travel, businesses, and ordinary social activities (Rogerson & Baum, 2020). The long-lasting effects on the international community and on physical, economic, and financial environments of COVID-19 or another future pandemic cannot be compared to other events such as world wars, 9/11 and even not with previous pandemics like SARS (Chang, McAleer and Ramos, 2020). This makes it unpredictable what will happen to the industry of tourism (Gössling *et al.*, 2020). Organizations and even governments will give priority to the recovery from economic loss (Zielinski & Botero, 2020). However, in the literature there is a call for a ‘build-back-better’ approach to obtain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) instead of a ‘back-to-normal’ approach. The Non-Pharmaceutical Intervention (NPI) taken to control the COVID-19 outbreak showed light to problems of ‘overtourism’ and climate change caused by global tourism (Gössling *et al.*, 2020). Those debates were already taking place in the academic domain, but became more prominent when citizens witnessed the empty streets and cafés for perhaps the first time in decades as a result of the NPI’s (Mostafanezhad, 2020). The rebuilding of the tourism industry has often been one of the main aims when a disaster happens, to recover from economic losses. This COVID-19 is seen as a moment of need to be used not simply to rebuild the existing tourism-dependent economies, but to find new approaches to reduce the carbon-footprint of tourism, as well repair the effects of ‘overtourism’ (Sheller, 2020). At this moment many states stand at the decision on how to recover socially and economically from COVID-19 and to determine what the outcome will be.

This discussion leads to the research question that is attempted to be answered in this thesis; *are (urban) destinations, such as in the Netherlands and Flemish-Belgium, working on post-COVID-19 strategies and actions, and to what extent will the pandemic proved (proves) to be a momentum to do things differently?* To answer this question first it is necessary to know how, especially local tourism agents (local authorities, private organizations etc.), reacted during the crisis (short-term) and if some strategies from the pre-COVID-19 past were just stopped or reconsidered for the future. Trying to answer those questions, a number of online ‘visioning’ workshops (per city) with professional participants were developed. There has been chosen for urban destinations, because in times of a health crisis, urban environments with high population densities are more hit than the countryside.

### *1.1. Societal relevance*

COVID-19 has changed the world forever in every imaginable respect and has impacted heavily on the international travel, tourism demand, and hospitality industry (Chang *et al.*, 2020). The tourism industry is one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world. For many states, this industry is important because it created new jobs, and promoted the local economic development and culture. Tourism contributes to job creation both directly in the sector itself as indirectly in other sectors. In 2019 the sector accounted for (directly and indirectly) 330 million jobs worldwide, which is 10.3% of the global employment (ILO, 2020). Mentioned before, this industry is one of the hardest hit industries by COVID-19



(Gössling *et al.*, 2020). This is because they are highly sensitive to significant shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic (Chang *et al.*, 2020). Given the size of the industry, this will have major effects on state economics. Unless there is a recognized massive impact of pandemics, there is limited assessment of the economic effects of them (Gössling *et al.*, 2020).

It is important to note that global tourism has been exposed to a wide range of crises in the past. None of them led to a longer-term decline in the global development of tourism. Only with SARS and the global economic crisis, the number of international arrivals did decline, but only in the short-term (Henderson, 2007). This will not mean that COVID-19 will have no long-term effects. There is much evidence that the impact and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic will be unprecedented. Given the prospect of future pandemics, there is reason to reconsider global economic value chains, and the specific role of tourism as vector and victim in the occurrence of pandemics (Gössling *et al.*, 2020).

### 1.2. *Scientific relevance*

Pandemics are perceived to be more plausible, a more real threat than before (Moreira, 2007). There is little literature about the after effects of a pandemic like COVID-19 on the tourist sector. Earlier, the United Nation World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) called for a need that states competence in this area and form national policies for tourist health. For a long time, the tourist sector was neglected, even given the size of this sector (Henderson, 2007). Pandemics will take place more in the future, because of globalization and urbanization (Gössling *et al.*, 2020). The problem is there are scripts in crisis management for old threats, but not for new ones or cases that have not occurred yet such as a pandemic (Moreira, 2007). For many years, tourism worked under the assumption that things will be normal and that tourists would continue to flock as long as there is growth in international travel. In this circumstance of COVID-19, tourism destinations should rethink their ‘business as usual’ approaches going into the future (Nepal, 2020).

One problem of crisis management, as will be discussed later, is that this focused-on crises within organizations. Those scripts cannot be applied to the tourism industry, because this industry includes many different stakeholders with different interests (Campiranon & Scott, 2007). This makes it difficult to apply existing crisis protocols directly to the tourism sector. At the same time, the long-lasting effects on the international community and on physical, economic, and financial environments of COVID-19 or another future pandemic cannot be compared to other events such as world wars, 9/11 and even not previous pandemics like SARS (Chang *et al.*, 2020). This makes it unpredictable what will happen to the industry of tourism in the future (Gössling *et al.*, 2020).

### 1.3. *Case study*

To investigate which approach local tourism agents will take in rebuilding the tourism industry, this research investigated the different stages of crisis management on tourism in five Flemish-Belgian and Dutch cities. The choice for two countries is prompted by three elements. First, the Netherlands and Belgium are countries – as so many – with a tourism sector that is not predominant for their economies but still quite important. The figures of the

World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) are revealing: in a normal year (2019), tourism and travel contributed 5.6% of Belgium's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and for the Netherlands, this reached 10.8%, which is about the world average. The visitor's impact in monetary terms is considerable: in Belgium: €9.4 billion from international visitors and 17.9 billion from domestic tourism; for the Netherlands, €21.9 billion from international visitors and €57.6 billion from domestic tourism. Knowing that most of these figures dropped in 2020 with about 50%<sup>2</sup>, one can imagine that both countries developed short- and long-term strategies and actions to support the tourism sector, which might be interesting to analyze and share.

Second, the policy structure of both countries is very different. The Netherlands is a centrally organized country where several levels of governance are responsible for the crisis management concerning COVID-19; mayors, safety regions and the federal government. On the national level, there are four ministers responsible for the measurements taken to control the outbreak of COVID-19. These ministers are the prime-minister, the minister of health, the minister of justice and the minister of economics. Between the different ministers and level of governance, there can be found a conflict over the different concerns (Rijksoverheid, n.d.). The Dutch policy is determined by the disagreement between the ministry of health and foreign affairs. The ministry of health is saying that the national health situation is their concern and an international health situation is the responsibility of foreign affairs. In contradiction, foreign affairs claims that health is not an international theme (Marijnissen, 2020 May 15). Belgium on the other hand, is almost completely federalized, which implies that many competences such as health and economics, but also tourism are the field of decision of the highly independent regions with their own parliaments and governments. These levels are also responsible for international relations in the policy areas for which they are responsible (RVO, 2021 February 9). Even though Belgium is federalized, crisis measurements concerning COVID-19 are mainly taken and coordinated at the federal level. On March 30, 2020, two special laws were published in the Belgian Official Gazette, whereby the parliament temporarily relinquished part of its powers to the Wilmès II government in order to be able to combat the COVID-19 crisis more quickly and effectively. This is quite unique for a minority government in Belgium. In normal circumstances, Belgium is a difficult country to govern. Even in COVID-19 time, it was hard to form a coalition. One of the problems in Belgium is that eight ministers and one state secretary each have substantial powers with regard to health policy. This does take a lot of time and often lead to disagreements with the National Safety Council (Goossens, 2020). These differences in policy structure makes it interesting to see if a diverse governance structure can come up with different policies and strategies that might or might not be effective during and after a crisis such as the one provoked by COVID-19.

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<sup>2</sup> Belgium, €9.4 billion (2019) to €5.5 billion. Domestic visitors impact: The Netherlands, €57.6 billion (2019) to €38.0 billion (2020), Belgium, €17.9 billion (2019) to €9.1 billion. Belgium, €9.4 billion (2019) to €5.5 billion. Domestic visitors impact: The Netherlands, €57.6 billion (2019) to €38.0 billion (2020), Belgium, €17.9 billion (2019) to €9.1 billion.

Third, both the Netherlands and Belgium are highly urbanized and are known, nationally and internationally, for their built heritage in historical cities. But, in times of a health crisis, urban environments with high population densities are more hit than the countryside. Therefore, this research focused on urban destinations in the first place.

At this moment, many states are in a phase between response and recovery, as well as the Netherlands and Belgium. The focus that governments and in this case municipalities in Flemish-Belgium and the Netherlands will take in the recovery phase is largely unknown. To investigate if COVID-19 is going to be the trigger for moving towards the SDGs, as is mentioned in the literature, a series of interactive online meetings with policymakers and stakeholders of five municipalities is organized. As far as the choice of cities is concerned, it was important to find a balance between as many municipalities as possible, but also for a study that could be carried out within a limited period (May-July 2021). A number of cities were contacted, five of which were willing to cooperate and were able to do so within the set period: Leiden and Arnhem for the Netherlands and Ghent, Mechelen and Leuven for Flanders (Belgium). These urban tourism destinations cannot be considered international top-destinations and therefore did (do) not suffer from specific problems such as ‘overtourism’ before the pandemic started, except for Ghent which can be considered as ‘an edge case’. Other cities that were invited were Delft, Leeuwarden, Eindhoven, 's-Hertogenbosch and Haarlem from the Netherlands and Bruges for Flanders (the lack of availability of Antwerp was known). These municipalities did not have time or were simply not interested in participating, due to the busyness around COVID-19. Another reason mentioned by some of the Dutch cities was that they had already been approached several times for a similar survey.

#### *1.4. Outline*

The structure of this thesis is as follows; the first part of this thesis consists of the conceptual framework, which will provide a theoretical basis for the research. This part is divided in three parts. In chapter two, the effects of tourism on the economy and the (social) environment will be investigated. Chapter three, will investigate the impact of COVID-19 on tourism, and its lack of resemblance to other crises. In chapter four, the last chapter of the conceptual framework, the different phases of crisis management will be outlined. In the second part of this thesis, chapter five, the methodology used for this research will be conducted. A brief background information on the participating municipalities and the role of tourism is provided in this same chapter. In chapter six, the analysis of the different workshops organized to investigate the short-term and long-term strategies of the five municipalities in the Netherlands and Flemish-Belgium will be presented. Finally, conclusions, reflections, and recommendations for further research will be presented in the last chapter of this thesis; chapter 7.

## 2. Tourism and its effects

The first definition of tourism came from Hunziker and Kraph (in Burkart & Medlik, 1981; 40). By them, tourism was seen as the sum of the various phenomena and relationships that result from the travel and stay of non-residents of a country. One condition is that this travel and stay does not lead to permanent residence and the purpose of the travel is not to work or earn money (Leiper, 1979; 394). This definition proved too vague, and a few years later tourism was redefined. The new definition is widened and states that tourism is a study of people away from their normal environment. Also, this new definition involves the industry that responds to the needs of these tourists and the impact on the socio-cultural, economic and physical environment of the host (Jafari, 1997 in Leiper, N., 1979; 394). A tourist is defined as a person who voluntarily leaves home with the purpose of experiencing a change (Leite & Swain, 2015; 3).

### 2.1. *The effect of tourism on the economy*

Globalization is an ongoing process without a beginning and an end, which spans a multitude of disciplines, communities, and cultures (Hjalager, 2007). This process led to a shrinkage of the world, distances got shorter, movements got faster, and interactions between persons became easier (Al-Rodhan & Stoudmann, 2006). Globalization has always been there, but since the 1990s the speed and the amount of information that is shared with the world has increased faster than ever before (Obstfeld & Taylor, 2003). Globalization has changed the nature of international tourism in such a way that it made tourism the most important economic sector on a global scale (Munar, 2007).

The tourism industry is not only an important sector for many countries because it accounts for (directly and indirectly) 330 million jobs worldwide, which is 10.3% of the global employment (ILO, 2020). It also promotes local economic development. The economic benefits of tourism development are usually translated into employment opportunities, income derivatives of the tourism sector, and investment and business opportunities (Palacios-Florencio *et al.*, 2021). Tourism has rapidly developed in recent decades and accounts for about 10% of world GDP by the direct and indirect impact of the tourism sector. International tourist arrivals have increased from 25 million in 1950 to 278 million in 1980, 674 million in 2000 and 1323 million in 2017. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) forecast that this will increase by 43 million a year during the period of 2010 to 2030. This compared to the average growth of 28 million a year during the period of 1995 to 2010. In 2030 the international arrival will reach a level of 1.8 billion by the year of 2030 (Liodakis, 2019; 1). A side note needed to be made is that this forecasting took place before the COVID-19 outbreak and its effect on the tourism industry.

### 2.2. *The effect of tourism on the (social) environment.*

Lockdowns that had been implemented to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus revealed the world's economic dependency on the tourism industry. Therefore, governments are desperate to develop exit strategies to allow host and receiving countries to ease or lift travel restrictions as quickly as possible (Ormond, 2021). The tourism industry is not only beneficial

for destinations. One of the fiercest criticisms of tourism is the massification of those destinations and the damage this causes in both the cities and natural environments. The geography of recovery of the tourism industry after COVID-19 will be impacted by how destinations and the industry respond to the crisis. There are two main reasons why it is almost impossible to go ‘back to normal’ after COVID-19; ‘overtourism’ and the need to reach the SDGs. Both problems are (side) effects of the globalization trend of the last decades (Stankov, Filimonau & Vujičić, 2020). The global tourism crisis committee calls for a collective response to not only simply recover, but to focus on the ‘grow back better’ option, which takes into account the (negative) side effects of tourism (Gössling *et al.*, 2020). The pandemic of 2020/21 (2022?) should lead to a critical reconsideration of the global volume growth of tourism for interrelated reasons of risks incurred in global travel as well as the sector’s contribution to climate change (Rogerson & Baum, 2020).

The notion of sustainable development is a relatively new concept, which was first defined in 1987 in the Brundtland report by the UN. The concept of sustainable development is “*to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Imperatives, 1987)*”. Sustainable tourism is based on promoting and developing less massified tourist destinations. This concept was defined in 2005 by the UNWTO as “*one whose practices and principles can be applicable to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations, including mass tourism and the various niche tourism segments (Palacios-Florencio *et al.*, 2021; 2)*”. Sustainability principles are about finding a long-term balance between the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects of tourism (Palacios-Florencio *et al.*, 2021).

#### 2.2.1. The concept of ‘overtourism’

COVID-19 has forced mass tourism to face the wall and stop expanding almost instantly. With the almost stop of tourists flows and empty cities brought the discussion of ‘overtourism’ higher on the political agenda (Stankov *et al.*, 2020,). ‘Overtourism’ is the feeling that there are too many visitors and that the quality of life in the area, or the quality of the experience, has deteriorated unacceptably by locals and visitors (Goodwin, 2017). The outbreak of COVID-19 and the closure of borders ensured that streets and cafés in tourist destinations were empty for the first time in a long time. This phenomenon led people and researchers to rethink the concept of ‘overtourism’ (Mostafanezhad, 2020). The growth of tourism that is seen in recent decades and the forecasting described by Liodakis (2019) – see paragraph 2.1. – leads to more attention to a recently used phenomenon of ‘overtourism’. Despite the fact that the concept of ‘overtourism’ was first found as a hashtag on Twitter in August 2012, the problem is not new. Concerns of ‘overtourism’ in specific tourist destinations have been studied since 1975 (Dodds & Butler, 2019). As early as 1987, the need for a new form of tourism was mentioned in which the needs of people, hosts and guests, would be at the core (Goodwin, 2017). Destinations that are the core of ‘overtourism’ are mainly urban centers, as major cities offer a wide range of attractions and facilities and often include unique features. The presence of such specific attractions regularly makes it difficult to persuade potential tourists to visit other locations (Dodds & Butler, 2019).

Critique of ‘overtourism’ calls into question the growth itself and how this concerns the potential for sustainable tourism (Fletcher *et al.*, 2019). Many destinations find themselves relatively powerless to stem such inflows of visitors, even if they wished to do so (Dodds &

Butler, 2019). ‘Overtourism’ is a complex phenomenon, because there is disagreement of the nature of the problem and because it is hard to determine what the suitable and acceptable levels of visitation is. Another issue with ‘overtourism’ is that the global tourism industry is addicted to growth. At national, regional and even at the municipal level, there is still massive promotion of countries, regions and cities, while economic growth globally allows the potential number of tourists to increase, and technological progress allows more people to travel widely. Instead of the industry trying to understand the importance of degrowth, it only focuses on more growth. A misunderstanding that is made often, is that degrowth is the same as a decline or recession in tourism numbers, which are involuntary. Moments and places of crisis, economic busts, burst of financial bubbles, natural disasters, and similar events have nothing to do with degrowth (Fletcher *et al.*, 2019). Degrowth is not simply the decline of tourists, it can be better conceptualized as a “*radical political and economic reorganization leading to drastically reduced resource and energy throughput (Fletcher et al., 2019; 1752)*”.

### 2.2.2. COVID-19 and the Sustainable Development Goals

The tourism industry in the form it was before COVID-19 is based on and draws heavily on nature. The rapid growth of tourism and mass tourism caused an increasing appropriation of natural and social resources, often at no cost, and thus it tends to exhaust and degrade these resources and the ecological environment. This implication is further reinforced as, contrary to a widely accepted assumption, the tourist industry is an energy-intensive and heavily polluting industry (Lioudakis, 2019). The response towards this way of tourism is the call for a transition to a more sustainable form of tourism. This development does not stand alone, the call for more sustainable development policy is rising more generally (Fletcher *et al.*, 2019).

The restrictions implemented to stop the spread of the virus already showed to be a positive influence on the planet during the crisis. The limitation of tourist flows has resulted in many environmental gains. First, the air quality has been improved since the start of lockdowns. COVID-19 caused a drop in industrial activities and a decrease in source using fossils (such as cars and airplanes), leading to a reduction in air pollution. This is visible in China and Europe by earth satellites (Ibn-Mohammed *et al.*, 2021). Second, COVID-19 measurements have led to a limitation of tourism and recreation activities on beaches and led to less pollution on the beaches and less use of natural sources provided by coastal areas, which prevents overexploitation of coastal areas. Which is beneficial for the physical appearance of beaches across the globe (Ibn-Mohammed *et al.*, 2021). Third, the pandemic has led to a decline in primary energy use and a reduction in global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Across the globe, there was ~3.8% less energy needed during the first quarter of 2020 compared to the first quarter of 2019. Coal turned out to be the fuel with the highest decrease in use compared to the first quarter of 2019. Besides that, COVID-19 resulted in a reduction of oil demand, which can be partly explained by the lesser degree of aviation activities which took up to ~60% of global oil demand before the pandemic started. Finally, there has been a decline in global electricity demand by >20% during full lockdown restrictions. While there was a decline for electricity, gas, coal, and nuclear power, the share of renewable energy sources across the energy supply increased (Ibn-Mohammed *et al.*, 2021).

The pandemic had many beneficial effects on the environment, but there are still concerns that COVID-19 has slowed down the progress to reach other SDGs. In 2015, the United Nations (UN) created 17 SDGs hoping to improve livelihoods and to protect the earth. The UN made all countries in the world collaborate to reach these goals, promising every country globalization and sustainable economic growth. However, it turned out that the SDGs were not designed to be resilient to shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers reported that two-third of the 169 targets will not be reached by 2030 due to the pandemic (Ibn-Mohammed *et al.*, 2021). Even though the crisis has some positive effects on the environment, it is unlikely that such environmental gains will be sustained in the future when the economy and tourism industry returns back to the pre-COVID-19 situation. Tourism companies often seek contradicting goals. On the one hand, they care for protecting the environment and society. On the other hand, they try to seek their economic goals whatever it takes. COVID-19 has exposed these tensions between the environment, economy, and society. The crisis has led to economic losses on the one hand, and environmental gains on the other (Jones & Comfort, 2020).

### 3. Principles of handling the COVID-19 crisis in tourism

#### 3.1. *How severe is the economic impact of COVID-19 for the tourism industry?*

As a result of travel restrictions and lockdowns, global tourism has slowed down significantly, with the number of international flights dropping by 65% in the first half of 2020 with the biggest decline of 93% in June 2020. According to the August–September issue of the World Tourism Barometer, the drop in international demand is expected to be close to 70% for the whole of 2020 (Arbulú *et al.*, 2021). The COVID-19 quarantine decisions deeply affected the hospitality industry. The amount of employment in leisure and hospitality, which are sectors within the tourist industry, felt by 459,00 (Altuntas & Gok, 2021). On 26 March 2020, 65% of tourism businesses already reported difficulties in paying invoices (Gössling *et al.*, 2020).

COVID-19 led to massive global economic losses. The GDP dropped in many countries, millions of people became unemployed and/or likely to be pushed into extreme poverty due to the pandemic. The global economy is projected to shrink by approximately 0.9% in 2020, instead of growing 2.5% that was predicted before the outbreak of the Coronavirus (Gössling *et al.*, 2020). The tourism industry is the hardest hit sector compared to other economic industries, because of travel restrictions to stop the spread of the virus (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). It is estimated that over 90% of the world's population live in countries that have some level of international travel restrictions. Many of those countries also deal with some degree of restrictions on internal movement, including limited air travel and orders to stay at home (Gössling *et al.*, 2020). As a result of the pandemic and its implications, international tourism has fallen, resulting in huge economic losses. Many travel industries have crippled, millions of international tourist locations became deserted and many tourism-related jobs are at risk (Ibn-Mohammed *et al.*, 2021). Especially small tourism enterprises without external support are struggling to survive during the COVID-19 crisis (Sobaith *et al.*, 2021). The UNWTO (2020) has reported that a 22% decrease in international tourism and the loss of 67 million international arrivals has led to a loss of US\$80 billion in 2020. This fall in international tourism could further increase from 58% to 78% less arrivals of international tourists when the travel restrictions and border closures last. A drop in international tourists will reduce tourism's contribution to the global GDP, and it will affect countries whose economies depend on the tourism sector (Ibn-Mohammed *et al.*, 2021).

The UN' Department of Economic and Social Affairs concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic increases exclusion, inequality and global unemployment during the crisis and in the long-term, if the crisis is not going to be properly addressed by governments (Ibn-Mohammed *et al.*, 2021). The COVID-19 crisis had led to temporary, and in some cases, permanent loss of employment in the tourism industry worldwide (Jones & Comfort, 2020). Between 100 and 120 million direct tourism-related jobs are at risk if the travel restrictions continue to be in order (Ibn-Mohammed *et al.*, 2021). The UNWTO predicted a 20-30% decline in 2020 in international arrivals. This means there would be a tourism revenue loss worth US\$300-450



billion (Gössling *et al.*, 2020). It is even predicted that in 2021, there will be a drop of 60% in international tourists, which will have a huge impact on the tourism sector and, because of its size, to the global economy (Ibn-Mohammed *et al.*, 2021). The majority of countries in the developed world have been hit by unemployment. Among the active population in the European Union (EU) in 2016, it turned out 9.5% of employment is linked to tourism. Therefore, the great lockdown and shutdown of tourism-related businesses due to COVID-19 have a big socio-economic impact (Fotiadis, Polyzos & Huan, 2021). While the impact of COVID-19 is big in developed countries, it turns out that the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry in less developed countries has been far more catastrophic. Millions of employed people in the tourism industry lost their jobs. For example, it is estimated that there are 48.7 million employees in the tourism industry in the Asia Pacific region who lost their jobs due to COVID-19. In most of the less developed countries, there is very limited or no organized trade union protection for tourism employees, no financial support from the government and no social safety nets, unlike the case for many developed countries (Jones & Comfort, 2020).

### 3.2. *COVID-19 and its (lack of) resemblance to other crises*

The COVID-19 crisis is not the first crisis the tourism industry had to handle. However, none of the previous crises had the same magnitude as the COVID-19 pandemic. Within only a relatively short time span, the outbreak of COVID-19 has exacted a massive global mobilization (Rogerson & Baum 2020), creating the worst crisis in the history of commercial aviation (Arbulú *et al.*, 2021). This is because the COVID-19 pandemic took (takes) place on a global scale and led to a widespread shutdown of travel, businesses, and social activities (Rogerson & Baum 2020). The long-lasting effects on the international community and on physical, economic, and financial environments of COVID-19 or another future pandemic cannot be compared to other events such as world wars, 9/11 and even not with previous pandemics like SARS (Chang *et al.*, 2020). This makes it unpredictable what will happen to the industry of tourism (Gössling *et al.*, 2020).

COVID-19 will backtrack the growth of the tourism industry by as much as fifteen years. Recovery of the tourism industry is expected after the summer of 2021 –this recovery did not last for a long time period, because of the so-called fourth wave of COVID-19 infections that started in the end of October/start of November. – It may take up to a year for the trend of tourist arrivals to go back to the pre-crisis situation (Fotiadis *et al.*, 2021). Enterprises in the tourism sector will need to re-evaluate their business models, taking into account the reduced demand and increased costs. The duration of the crisis could create a new status quo for the industry sector. Firms could look at new ways of making profit, new tourist products may need to emerge, which can reshape the sector. These changes may be temporary or persistent after the COVID-19 crisis has passed (Fotiadis *et al.*, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic showed that the dominant economic model was absolutely not resilient to unplanned shocks and crises at all. Weaknesses and the fragility of global economies became visible. This pandemic resulted in a global economic shock like no other since the Great Depression and the global financial crisis of 2009. With massive job loss and excessive income inequality, there is a high chance that global poverty will increase for the first time since 1998 due to the

pandemic (Ibn-Mohammed *et al.*, 2021). The rebuilding of tourism has often been one of the main aims when a disaster happens. Organizations and even governments are expected to give priority to this rebuilding to recover from economic losses as soon as possible (Zielinski & Botero 2020). However, the COVID-19 crisis showed light to other ongoing crises caused or at least influenced by global tourism such as ‘overtourism’ and climate change which is not as immediate, but potentially more devastating than COVID-19. For this reason, the global tourism crisis committee calls for a collective response to not only recover, but to choose for a ‘build-back-better’ approach instead of ‘back-to-normal’ which does not take this into account (Gössling *et al.* 2020). This COVID-19 crisis is seen as a momentum to be used not simply to rebuild the existing tourism-dependent economies, but to find new approaches to reduce the carbon-footprint of tourism, as well as repair the effects of ‘overtourism’ (Sheller, 2020).

## 4. Phases of crisis management

Titles such as “*countries test tactics in war against COVID-19 (Cohen & Kupferschmidt, 2020)*”, “*the world war against the COVID-19 outbreak; don’t forget to sleep (Mônico-Neto, Santos and Moreira Antunes, 2020)*”, and “*Saliva NMR-based metabolomics in the war against COVID-19 (Costa dos Santos et al., 2020)*” suggest that this period is seen as a war against the COVID-19 virus. However, the management of COVID-19 cannot be compared with the management of a conflict. In conflict management the focus is to find a resolution with fair judgement (Opensourcedeworkplace, 2019 September 19). There are five common approaches for conflict management; competition, avoidance, accommodation, compromise, and collaboration and none of them is applicable to a virus (Rubin, 1994). However, a metaphor of war provides a mental model for understanding the abstract concept in more familiar and concrete terms. The war metaphor has gained wide usage in connection with disease over time, as writers likened illness to an invasion of the human body (Rohela *et al.*, 2020).

The spread of the COVID-19 virus has turned into a worldwide crisis, and a crisis management approach is a better fit to handle this period. A crisis is a period of great uncertainty in which predictability and control are lost or severely diminished. This is different from a disaster which is defined as a situation where an external and unpredictable catastrophic change is associated with a very low degree of control over the evolution of events, while a crisis is a situation characterized by initial events and an internal origin of the initial events. Crises and disasters are by definition unpredictable, and limited forecasting capability does not allow the design of specific response plans. The reaction to crises and disasters cannot be totally planned, and a stronger alternative to a multiplicity of specific emergency plans may be the development of general plans that can be combined with modules that are more specific (Moreira, 2007). The concept of crisis is used when a problem or situation includes three aspects: uncertainty, urgency and threat. In this case, the uncertainty is caused by a lack of knowledge, especially at the start of the pandemic. Urgency refers to the necessity to act despite the high degrees of uncertainty. In times of a crisis, inactivity and non-decisions are no options. The outbreak of COVID-19 not only threatened the health and lives of many people, but also the economic and social capital by restrictions taken by governments, based on the perceived threat. In a crisis the future is still open and can be created through individual or collective agency (Brinks & Ibert 2020). It is known that the impacts of crises and disasters can be severe enough to introduce a radical change in the tourism equation of a city, a country, or even worldwide. The effects can extend to large geographic zones and persist over long periods (Moreira, 2007).

### 4.1. Trying to model crisis management in tourism

Shock tactics follow a clear pattern: expect a crisis, declare a moment of what is sometimes called ‘extraordinary politics’, suspend some or all democratic norms and then ram the corporate wish list through as quickly as possible (Mostafanezhad, 2020). A crisis management strategy for an organization cannot be applied to the tourist industry, because of the many stakeholders that are involved. A major issue is to identify the range of stakeholders

that are involved as well as factors influencing the speed of recovery, the intensity of effects and the factors causing it (Scott, Laws & Prideaux, 2008). For tourism, the UNWTO presents a phase model to handle a tourism crisis. In phase one, the incident or crisis takes place. This leads to phase two; this is when tourists leave and bookings are cancelled. In phase three – most destinations are in this phase now – destinations suffer economically; press coverage is poor or magnifies the effects of the crisis. The last phase is about recovery and destinations start their own media coverage to attract tourists again. From the practical perspective of managers, the general challenge of the recovery phase is to restore operations to normal. The problem with most crisis management models is that it assumes that the pre-crisis situation will be reconstructed. In a post-COVID-19 era, it is likely that the tourism sector will exhibit different forms and geographies compared to the pre-2019 years. This not only to reduce the potential of another cycle of COVID-19 infections or another pandemic (Rogerson & Baum, 2020), but also to negate the negative effects of tourism on the (social) environments as is discussed in chapter two.

The crisis management phase model that will be used in this article is the one of Campiranon and Scott (2007) and includes three phases (preparation, response, and recovery), an outcome and three factors (resource, culture, and leadership). In the literature on crisis management, one focuses mostly on businesses or organizations, but it might be suitable to apply it to governance as well. The model of Campiranon and Scott (2007) has similar phases as the model of the UNWTO, except for its additional preparation phase that takes place prior to a crisis. The second and third phases are crisis response and crisis recovery. One phase that is missing in both models is the phase of resolution. In this last phase, the crisis management process is evaluated and improved when necessary (Pforr & Hosie, 2008). In the final stage of dealing with a crisis, evaluation and feedback takes place as a destination or an organization begins to recover from the crisis (figure 1). This phase is necessary for the preparation phase of a new crisis (Ritchie, 2004).

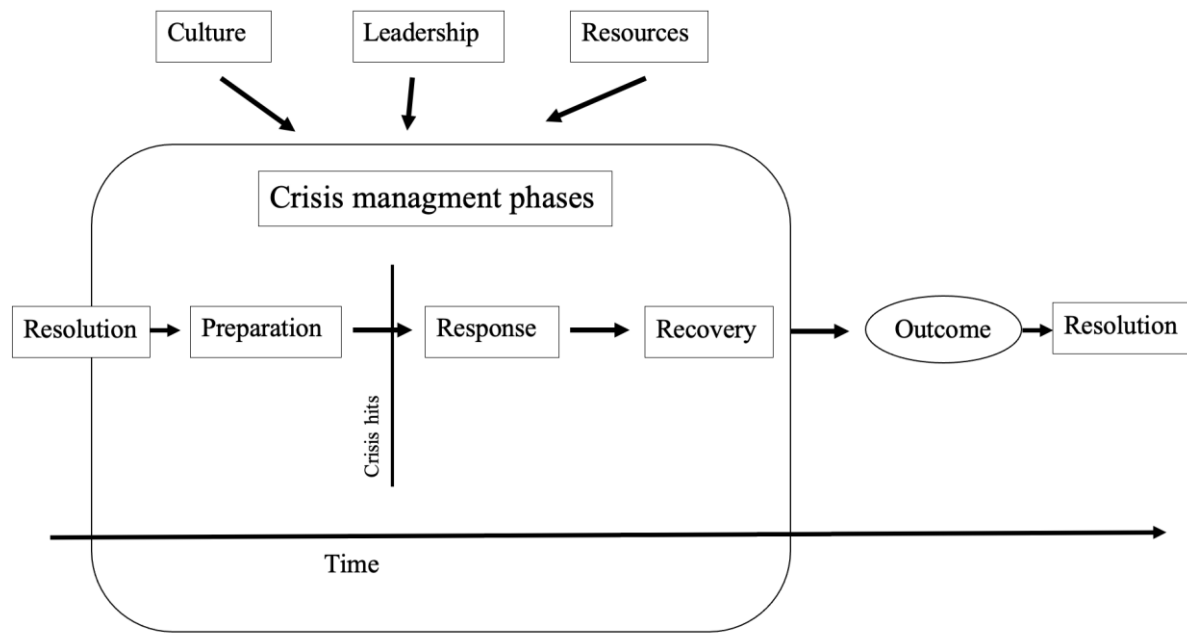


Figure 1: By author based on the crisis management of Campiranon and Scott (2007) with the inclusion of the resolution phase of Pforr and Hosie (2008).

#### 4.2. The first phase of crisis management: Preparation

The resolution phase is the first and last phase in the crisis management model which is used in this thesis (figure 1). As will appear in this paragraph many governments were not prepared for a pandemic like COVID-19, therefore the phase of resolution will be discussed after the recovery phase where there will be looked back at what has been learned for a next global pandemic. The crisis preparation is the first phase of the crisis management model of Campiranon and Scott (2007) and includes all activities undertaken and processes developed by an organization to enable it to prevent, contain and recover from a crisis (Kovoor-Misra, Zammuto & Mitroff, 2000). Preparation takes place in the pre-event stage, when crisis contingency plans are developed and scenarios and probability assessment studies are undertaken. In this stage, it may still be possible to avert or minimize a disaster, which makes the preparation phase an important phase in crisis management. At the same time, when it is no longer possible to avert a crisis, protocols that are made in this phase need to be activated (Pforr & Hosie, 2008). Preparation is critical for all organizations and tourism destinations, because none can ensure that it will escape from a crisis. The only way to minimize the consequences of a crisis is either to avert the crisis if possible or to manage it effectively. Preparation is especially indispensable for organizations in high-risk business activities such as the tourism industry (Madininos & Vassiliadis, 2008). The last two decades showed the vulnerability of the tourism industry with the financial crisis of 2008, terrorist attacks and the outbreak of SARS (Henderson, 2007). Predictions showed that pandemics are perceived to be more plausible, a more real threat than before (Moreira, 2007).

As shown in figure 1 there are several factors that have an effect on crisis management; leadership, culture, and resources. Leadership is important to make quick decisions to solve

the crisis. Fast decision-making is more powerful than to wait until all information is available in order to make a full correct decision (Elsubbaugh, Fildes & Rose, 2004). In the case of COVID-19 when the government is unprecedented and lacks a set of clear causes and scientific solutions, a problem-oriented and pro-active governance is required. A problem-oriented governance refers to *“an approach to policy design and implementation that emphasizes the need for organizations to adapt their form and functioning to the nature of the public problems they seek to address. Learning and adaptation are at the heart of this approach (Lee, Yeo & Na, 2020)”*. A proactive crisis management is based on planning for a crisis before it takes place. In contrast, reactive crisis management is about the planning after the crisis when it has already affected the organization. There are a number of techniques to help in the proactive planning and strategy development for the prevention or reduction of crises. The first, is strategic forecasting allowing for predictions based on potential crisis or disaster situations and could include opinion-based quantification, extrapolation of trends, simulation and, cause and effect methods. The second, contingency planning, is to look if there are alternative plans which can be implemented if a crisis or disaster hits and impacts upon the strategic direction of an organization. Third, issues analysis which is similar to contingency planning, but it alerts managers to evolving trends in the external environment which can be used in developing strategies to use the trend to its advantage. The last strategy is scenario analysis, which are detailed attempts to describe a potential end state if certain decisions were made by an organization. The scenario is hypothetical but able to create discussion over decisions, which can then be turned into contingency or emergency plans (Ritchie, 2004).

Not only is leadership important for the reaction and planning in the preparation phase, it also contributes to a supportive culture of an organization for the preparation phase. An organizational culture which is supported towards employers to have an open-minded attitude, are willing to exchange new ideas and accept constructive criticism are positive for the preparation phase. When an organizational culture is not supported for a crisis preparation, an organization cannot get people involved in the process of preparation (Elsubbaugh *et al.*, 2004). Motivation can be seen as a subcategory in the factor culture and is necessary in the preparation phase for organizations to invest in their crisis preparation. The best time for an organization to make a preparation plan is after an event takes place. A crisis changes the motivation, because it creates an awareness of organizational vulnerabilities. As a result, after a crisis, the motivation for improving crisis preparedness fluctuates. At the same time, once the memory of the crisis recedes, attention to crisis preparation decreases. When time passes, the organization begins to perceive the crisis they had experienced as a low probability event. There are several factors that will increase the motivation for an organization to invest in the preparation phase. Examples of such factors are the memory, likelihood, intensity, and frequency of a crisis (Kofoor-Misara, 1996).

Looking at the tourist industry, it is hard to say how they estimated their own vulnerability to such a crisis as the COVID-19 pandemic. A range of health and economic agencies and institutions have been warning of an increased risk and likelihood of a global pandemic. Even before SARS, the European Center for Disease Prevention did warn of future health threats of

a viral and microbial character. The UNWTO argued that member states must upgrade their competence in this area and formulate national policies on tourism health. One conclusion of the UNWTO was that crisis management planning was rarely well-developed. Several purported management plans were informal and undocumented, or confined to a narrow set of circumstances (Henderson, 2007). In 2006 a pandemic was the fourth-highest ranked risk scenario for the global economy in the Global Risk Report. Over time this risk estimation did decrease; in the Global Risk Report of 2020 an infectious disease ranked third last in likelihood. Only weapons of mass destruction and unimaginable inflation were less likely. In the same report, a virus was regarded as one of the least interconnected risks (Gössling *et al.*, 2020). The SARS outbreak made small changes in the estimated risk, especially for the countries in Asia that were hit hard (Henderson, 2007). For many years, tourism worked under the assumption that things will be normal and that tourists would continue to flock as long as there is growth in international travel (Moreira, 2007).

The last factor that influences crisis management is resources which can be found in financial, human, and specific in this case medical, capital (Tseng, Chen & Chou, 2005). Resources can in the case of crisis management also be found in the availability and institution of signal detection mechanisms. Good working signal detection may be one of the most important prescriptions for crisis prevention (Kovoor-Misra *et al.*, 2000). When early detection is in place, signals of an upcoming crisis can be picked up in time and in some cases a crisis can be averted before they actually happen (Paraskevas, 2006). In the preparation phase of a crisis, it is critical to anticipate on events to prevent and reduce the impact of a crisis by detecting and responding to early warning signs. Prevention of a crisis is better than to cure or minimize the negative consequences of a crisis (Jauhari, Malhotra & Venkatsh, 2009). There are three key stages of signal detection; scanning for signals, signals capture and signal transmission. The first stage is the scanning for signals which is performed by detectors which can be technical, human or a combination of both. In the second stage, the capture of signals, there are two broad categories of methods. Case definition methods use previous experiences to define an event that is similar to an early event which took place before a previous crisis happened. Pattern recognition methods identify signals that deviate from the expected baseline or routine, and often result in unknown or unimaginable crises. Using those methods of signal capture can always lead to a false alarm, this does not have to lead to a negative response of the public when the basis of a false alarm is understood. In the response phase, next paragraph, there will be explained that in some cases it is more important to act quickly without the right information than react too late. The last stage is signal transmission, where there is a need for a clear communication system to transfer signals from the detectors to those who have the mandate of launching responsive measurements (Paraskevas, 2006).

The benefits of stopping or preventing pandemics, such as COVID-19, before they start are likely to be enormous. Available evidence suggests the need to broaden the focus beyond the known pandemic threats, such as influenza, and to place much more emphasis on anticipating and preparing to stop the next pandemics at their origin. Past failures, for example the ZIKA virus, show the need to extend the surveillance and anticipation of much broader social and ecological risk factors. An alignment of drivers which together risk leading to an epidemic,

and which are largely social and ecological, is largely known. This offers possibilities of improved early detection and prevention. A core implication of that finding is the need for global collaboration for sharing and making sense of such complex interdisciplinary intelligence and translating it into early warnings (European Commission, 2020 November). A good example of early detection of COVID-19 and the control of the negative (economic) effects is in South Korea. Early detection was based on widespread testing, and the epidemiological investigation helped to control the situation in the country (Lee *et al.*, 2020).

#### 4.3. *The second phase of crisis management: Response*

The response phase takes place right after a crisis hits and might be the most critical phase to determine the outcome of a crisis. In this phase crisis managers, and in the case of COVID-19 the government, make decisions that may save lives and mitigate the effects of the crisis. The response phase is entered when prevention in the earlier phase fails and events trigger a crisis. At this point, organizations and even governments or stakeholders in the industry, shift their resources and efforts to minimizing damage to the environment, facilities, and people (Hale, Dulek & Hale, 2005). An earlier response in this phase is crucial to limit the damage of any crisis, especially for a pandemic as COVID-19. One-hundred-sixty countries were hit by the virus and all of them took measurements, the difference is the degree and timing of the policy. What could be seen is that countries that impose more restrictive policies at an earlier date will be rewarded with less damage (Chang *et al.*, 2020). Even the response phase might be the most important phase; a good preparation in the previous phase can help, as seen in countries like Taiwan and New-Zealand who were well-prepared, and the damage was limited (Summers *et al.*, 2020). A quick response not only reduces the damage on the tourism and hospitality sector, but also spillover effects on other businesses that rely on tourism, and finally prevents political criticism and rumors from being induced (Khalid, Okafor & Burzynska, 2021).

The rapid spread of COVID-19 on a global level has created a wide range of responses from governments. There are several common measures almost every country did take, such as emergency investments in healthcare facilities, new forms of social welfare provision, contact tracing, bans on public gatherings and travel restrictions. The variation of measurements has created a debate of policymakers and publics deliberate over the level of response that should be pursued and how quickly to implement them or roll them back since this is a learning process in real time (Hale *et al.* 2020). In the tourism sector, the impact of previous mentioned policies was dramatic and immediate. Many governments and destinations have been providing stimulus packages and interventions to ensure the viability and continuity of tourism firms and jobs. Governments have intervened in mobility restriction and closures of businesses to prevent or reduce the spread of the virus (Altuntas & Gok, 2021). Because of these, COVID-19 has resulted in a major intervention of governments in the functioning and operations of the tourism industry; in other words, governments have become a much bigger actor in the tourism economy. This is unique for COVID-19, as previous crises have generated research and institutional interest, but they did not have policy impact (Sigala, 2020).



For a government, it is important to take decisions as soon as possible. The longer it takes for the government to make a decision on how to act, the more political criticism and rumors may be induced. Those effects often cause the collapse of the response policies. This presents a dilemma for the government, because it takes time to formulate efficient and reasonable policies. On the other hand, government departments must intervene immediately when a crisis comes to light. Every second delay will negatively impact the government (Shangguan, Wang & Sun, 2020). To overcome this dilemma, a plan for every single kind of crisis is necessary to be made in the previous phase. Governments took leadership in time of COVID-19; holding regular press conferences to inform the public. The virus outbreak brought a sense of urgency to adapt and fight the pandemic (Janssen & van der Voort, 2020). COVID-19 showed that politics matters profoundly to public administration and management, shaping it in old and new ways. This is happening as much through public administration systems, public services, and relationships with citizens, as it is through social media platforms (O'Flynn, 2020). This is done by governments who take leadership and hold regular press conferences to inform the public, followed on television or online (Janssen & van der Voort, 2020).

Leadership and their communication are maybe the most important factors for the success of the policy in the response phase. Research shows that communication prior, during, and after a crisis is one of the most powerful factors in determining the effectiveness of crisis management and the long-term effects of a crisis (Sigala, 2011). Crisis communication is defined as the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation (Kim & Cameron, 2011). An organization or government needs to provide what is called instructing information that represents what stakeholders need and want to know after a crisis hits. There are three types of instruction information. First, the crisis basic information about what, when, where, why and how of the crisis. Second, how the crisis will affect the lives of stakeholders and how they can protect themselves from any harm. Third, what the organization, or in the case of COVID-19 the government, is doing to correct the crisis (Coombs, 2000, 2006).

According to Hale *et al.* (2005) crisis response communication includes four different stages and in every single one there is a challenge to overcome. These stages can be best seen as an ongoing spiral, when the last stage is reached, it all starts over again. The first stage is observation of the information that can be found or gives a warning for the coming crisis. As mentioned earlier and is shown in this stage is the occurrence of between the need to take action and the need to gather additional information, with the latter sometimes needed to verify the event and more often to guide the quality of the decisions made about the event. When the COVID-19 became a global crisis, it was important to act as soon as possible, even without information. Governments still tried to gather as much information as possible before making policy. The second stage is the interpretation of the observed information. This needs to be done well, otherwise wrong conclusions will be taken. The third stage is the one of choice. The challenge here is the lack of time to evaluate the chosen policy and that the wrong alternatives and inadequate communication filters are chosen. The last stage is dissemination, which is facing the challenges of a conflict between the resource demands of the

dissemination and decision making and messages poorly designed for the audience. A second commonly experienced crisis dissemination communication challenge is the failure to design dissemination messages to meet the needs of the intended audience (Hale *et al.*, 2005).

#### 4.4. *The third phase of crisis management: Recovery*

In this next phase of crisis management, there will be a look into the crisis recovery of COVID-19. According to the UNWTO the effect of COVID-19 is like no other and therefore, previous experiences provide limited evidence to predict the possible effects on tourism. It should also be noted that the effect of COVID-19 is hard to predict, as the world has not experienced such a global pandemic before with measurements taken such as travel bans and border closures (Karabulut *et al.*, 2020). Losses will be persistent at least until the summer of 2021 and will backtrack the growth of the tourism industry as much as fifteen years (Fotiadis, *et al.*, 2021). It can be even argued that the tourism industry will not return to a pre-COVID-19 situation. The industry may recover more slowly compared to other sectors due to the higher rate of unemployment and subsequent stagnation, both in the tourism sector and more broadly across the economy, with unemployment, job insecurity, and reduced savings resulting in households and visitors prioritizing necessities, and tourism suffering as a non-essential or luxury spend (Peters, Peters & Peters, 2020). Tourism and COVID-19 are the epicenter of all international discussions and economies. Because of the interlinked socio-cultural, economic, psychological and political impacts of COVID-19 of this magnitude, unforeseen trajectories instead of historical trends are expected (Sigala, 2020). In this case, the phase of recovery does most differ from crisis management for an organization. In crisis management, the recovery phase is focused on return to the pre-crisis situation (Wooten & James, 2008). As described later in the paragraph about the outcome, this is one of the possible scenarios, but perhaps not the most desirable.

It is important to note that global tourism has been exposed to a wide range of crises in the past. None of them led to a longer-term decline in the global development of tourism. Only SARS and the global economic crisis led in the short-term to declines in international arrivals (Henderson, 2007). This will not mean that COVID-19 will have no long-term effects. There is much evidence that the impact and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic will be unprecedented. Most authors argue that the tourism sector is seen as resilient and will recover when the crisis is over, as it did after the financial crisis and SARS outbreak (ILO, 2020). Even if other crises did not lead to long-term effects, this does not mean that this counts for the COVID-19 pandemic (Henderson, 2007). There is much evidence that the impact and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic will be unprecedented. The pandemic showed light to several problems of the tourism industry in the form it was before COVID-19. The negative effects of climate change and ‘overtourism’ need to be tackled, and COVID-19 can be seen as the trigger (Gössling *et al.*, 2020).

Communication is important in all steps of crisis communication, and so in this phase. The specific aim of crisis communication in this phase is to address the crisis successfully and manage to recover from a crisis. In post-crisis phases it enhances the response to, and recovery from, threats the crisis creates (Fisher, Posegga & Fischback, 2016). For the

recovery of the tourism industry, it is critical to overcome the fear and the impact of consumer's behavior. The pandemic led consumers to initially increased consumption in specific sectors such as retail, credit card spending and food items, but that overall spending later decreased sharply (Béland, Brodeur & Wright, 2020). Governments use communication in the form of social media to publicize information about successful recovery activities, collect lessons learned that can help an organization better prepare for another crisis, and facilitate coordination and collaboration between organizations. Further, organizations use social media to build relationships with the public and share information and coordination of volunteer activities (Fisher *et al.*, 2016).

Governments need to take an active role to protect the tourism industry and to move towards a more sustainable form of tourism. Authorities will need to subsidize the protective measures they propose in order to support tourism, especially in countries where tourism revenue contributes highly to the GDP. It is important that the tourist sector embraces medical guidelines, as they represent the shortest path out of the current crisis (Fotiadis *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, governments need to support a shift towards a carbon-neutral economy, because the implementation of more sustainable practices has to be pushed forward. It is very likely that organizations and even governments will give priority to the recovery from economic loss (Zielinski & Botero, 2020). To make this transition possible, recovery funds need to promote new innovations according to climate change. Policy-makers must proactively act to identify potential co-benefits during the policy design stage and shape implementation criteria to maximize impact for economical as well as environmental benefits. A poorly designed recovery policy is likely to be ineffective in delivering economic as well as climate, and social outcomes, regardless of theoretical potential. At this moment the COVID-19 crisis is (August-December 2021), for most European countries, between the response and the recovery phase bouncing back and forth with new waves of infections. In this phase, policy-makers have an opportunity to invest in productive assets for the long-term. Such investments can make the most of the shifts in human habits and behavior already under way since a sustainability agenda was developing in the years prior to the pandemic. Recovery packages that seek synergies between climate and economic goals have better prospects for increasing national wealth, enhancing productive human, social, physical, intangible, and natural capital, but the question remains if governmental bodies, and other management and planning stakeholders will be able to bridge the implementation gap (Hepburn *et al.* 2020).

There are several ways to support the tourism industry in the short-term and maybe even in the longer term. One of them is to focus on domestic travel which is expected to bounce back earlier in the wake of the pandemic than international travel (Zhang *et al.* 2021; Vanneste, Steenbergen & Neuts, 2021). Before international travel can resume, domestic tourism will boost the resumption of the tourism industry in the wake of the pandemic (Sharma, Thomas & Paul, 2021)<sup>3</sup>. Domestic travel already represented a large part of all tourism, with a total of 73% of total travel and tourism spending in 2017 (Arbulú *et al.*, 2021). However, governments and destination managers often prefer international visitors who are associated

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<sup>3</sup> See also footnote 2

with higher spending capacities and foreign exchange. Domestic travel only becomes important for governments when international travel is negatively affected, as in the case of a pandemic. A number of studies provide evidence of how the promotion of domestic tourism helped to counteract the decreases in international arrivals due to economic crises. Domestic tourism has several benefits compared to international tourism regarding its role in economic development. For example, domestic tourism may result in a higher contribution to local development due to its capacity to decrease external leakages. Numerous studies on developing countries demonstrate that domestic tourists are more likely to purchase more locally produced goods and services than other categories of tourists. These domestic tourists support small-scale enterprises and are more willing to participate in community development initiatives. Beyond that, domestic travel can help the tourism industry in the short-term, it also overcomes the problem of ‘overtourism’. Domestic travel is mainly focused on visiting family and friends and in this way promotes a more balanced regional development (Arbulú *et al.*, 2021). The sub sector of domestic travel has the potential to expand to leisure tourism in the near future (Sharma *et al.*, 2021).

Domestic travel can be a (short-term) solution for the recovery of tourism. To overcome problems of climate change and ‘overtourism’ in the long-term it might be necessary to focus more on other ways such as a mindful tourist, slow tourism and e-tourism. Through mindfulness, tourists became more aware of their surroundings and the need for more sustainable options to travel. This pandemic has given an argument for advocating the adoption of mindfulness by the tourism industry’s mindset towards a more consciousness for the environment. Mindfulness can be beneficial for the concern of ‘overtourism’ and climate change, with a more conscious consumer who are more aware of their unconscious behaviors, purchasing patterns, and increased ability to resist the promise of false happiness. Mindfulness can be defined as an approach for increasing awareness and responding skillfully to mental processes that contribute to emotional distress and maladaptive behavior. A mindful tourist, is a tourist who pay attention to the present moment (not the past or the future), attending to the actual somatic sensations lived at the destination in an open, non-reactive and non-judgement, rather than tourists who accept their present emotions and thoughts (Stankov *et al.*, 2020).

Slow tourism, on the other hand, is associated with slow experience and even slow adventure, which refers to activities on the destination. Slow tourism is about two different elements. First, the travel to a destination can be slow if the demand side looks explicitly for a lower ecological footprint. Second, the travel itself can be at the core of the tourism product since transport and travel is the main activity during the trip. The second one is sometimes referred to as soft slow travel and is focused on the travel experience, such as social contact or enjoying the landscape. Therefore, in general, slow tourists are not actively interested in sustainability and the environment. More important is the slow image of moving landscapes. A way to experience this is by cycling roads, hiking trails and canoe trips. Slow tourism inspires the tourist to reflect on the quality of the experience. A growing number of tourists are disenchanted by the cultural and natural highlights because of over-tourism, looking for the undiscovered or under-visited locations instead (Vanneste *et al.*, 2021).

Another way to overcome the problem of ‘overtourism’ is the use of e-tourism. This is done by virtual tours (Gretzel *et al.*, 2020) and online events by zoom (Hermans, 2020). Tourism marketing has recently switched to some already existing and new virtual solutions to satisfy people’s desire for travel (Stankov *et al.*, 2020). The wide use of technology has already started at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. IT has been widely used, adapted and developed to address some pressing issues. While physical tourism has come to a stand-still, past and potential tourists have been busy ruminating about past trips on social media. Virtual tours can play a role in preventing the total suspension of many tourism activities during crisis periods, such as the current situation of COVID-19. This is by creating new business models and providing various opportunities for different entities in the tourism ecosystem (El-Said & Aziz, 2021). Virtual tourism has the potential to reshape tourism expectations and the tourist experience (Wearing, Stevenson & Young, 2009). However, virtual tours would never replace the experience of a real tour.

#### 4.5. *The fourth phase of crisis management: Resolution*

The fourth phase of resolution is the last and first phase in crisis management. As mentioned before, this final stage of crisis management is about the evaluation and feedback of the prior crisis, which starts when a destination or organization starts to recover from a crisis. This phase is necessary for the preparation phase of a new crisis (Ritchie, 2004). At the short time of recovery of COVID-19 in the summer of 2020, governments could evaluate previous policies to control the spread of the virus. At that moment, there cannot be spoken of more awareness of the environment and climate change in the recovery plans. The focus was for all stakeholders to limit the economic damage that was done. This period of recovery did not last for a long period. In the autumn of the same year measurements to control the spread were taken again (Rijksoverheid, 2020 September 28). In the second wave, NPI measures which have been applied across the globe in the first wave were the major part of responses in the second wave (Middleton *et al.*, 2020).

For the COVID-19 crisis many countries were not well-prepared, and even the EU was not prepared as can be read in their own evaluation report (European Commission, 2020 November 12). According to their own review the EU mentions that this pandemic and previous one showed that the outbreak of a highly infectious disease causes a broader societal crisis and highlights pre-existing social ills at their origin. Past failures, for example the ZIKA virus, show the need to extend the surveillance and anticipation of much broader social and ecological risk factors. The emergence of a new infectious disease itself cannot be predicted or controlled; it is impossible to avoid the circulation of Coronaviruses in the wild. However, an alignment of drivers which together risk leading to an epidemic, and which are largely social and ecological, is largely known. This offers possibilities of improved early detection and prevention. Another problem was the lack of information, for example, about the effectiveness of facemasks for reducing the transmission of COVID-19. It was suggested that people should be encouraged to wear face masks in application of the precautionary principle.

Even a small reduction in the number of new infections could make a major difference to the burden on the health systems (European Commission, 2020 November 12).

It seems the EU has learned from the COVID-19 outbreak and how ill prepared they and their members were for a pandemic. On 16 September 2021 Europe Commission launched a health crisis body that will coordinate EU spending of almost 30 million euros to prepare for a future pandemic. The new Health Emergency preparedness and Response Authority (HERA) will assess potential health threats, promote research, ensure the availability of critical production and help build stockpiles (Reuters, 2021 September 17). When – not if, pandemics are perceived to be more plausible than before (Moreira, 2007) and will take more often in the future because of globalization and urbanization (Gössling *et al.*, 2020) – a new health crisis struck, it would activate emergency funding and help coordinate monitoring, procurement and purchase of medical equipment or treatments. The authority is partly designed to avoid a repeat of the ad hoc measures taken by individual EU countries at the start of COVID-19 pandemic (Reuters, 2021 September 17).

#### 4.6. *Crisis management: Outcome*

The way governments and the industry recover will influence the outcome of the crisis. There can be made a distinction in two scenarios which are called a negative or a positive scenario. A negative scenario occurs when the pandemic will bring little change on the surface, as with the financial crisis of 2008 where the crisis was never explained to the people. A positive scenario requires that positive moments of the COVID-19 shock will be recognized, emphasized and brought to the forefront. In this scenario, the natural phenomena of the virus turns into a social crisis, instead of only about the trigger, the virus, as is the case in a negative scenario. This is crucial to develop the society for the better. In such case, the COVID-19 can be the shock that is needed to avert greater environmental catastrophes caused by climate change (Ötsch, 2020). Postma, Heslinga and Harman (2020 April 9) are arguing that there are even four possible scenarios depending on the duration of the pandemic and if recovery will focus on the collective or the individual, see figure 2.

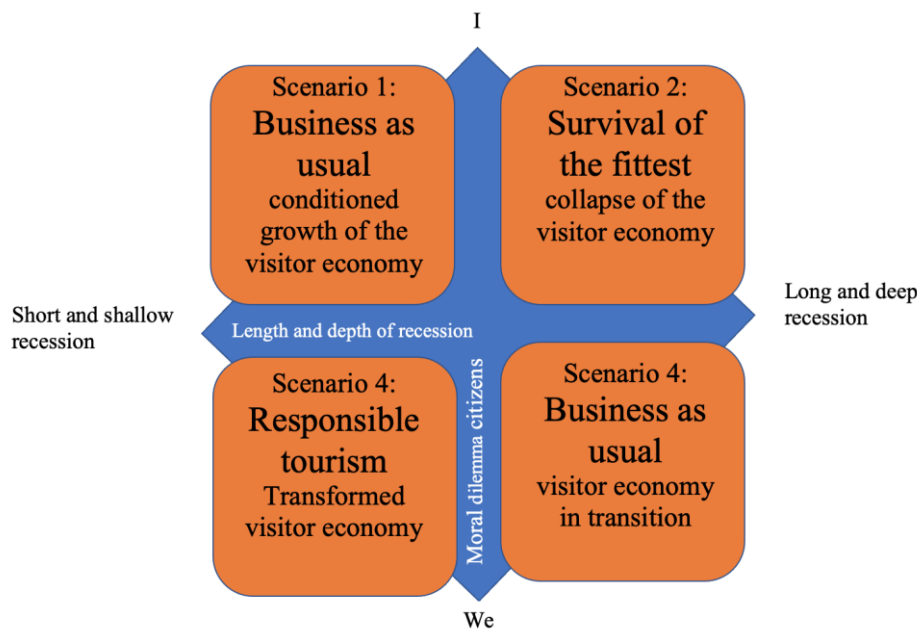


Figure 2: Translation by author of the four different outcomes by Postma, Heslinga & Hartman (2020 April 9).

The first scenario is called a ‘business as usual’ and takes place when there is a short and shallow recession and the focus is on the individual level. In this scenario, everything will return to the pre-COVID-19 situation. To make this happen, support of the government is necessary for organizations to survive and there is a need for large numbers of tourists to support the tourism industry and reduce economic damage. In this scenario, discussions of climate change and ‘overtourism’ will come back. This first scenario is unlikely to take place, because it can only take place when there is a short and shallow recession, which is not the case with COVID-19. The second scenario, ‘survival of the fittest’, is based on an individual focus, but the recession is long and deep. In this scenario, not all organizations in the tourist sector will survive and rivalry will rise. There is less support from the government and everything will be done to earn money. The third scenario, ‘business as unusual’, is based on the collective and a long and deep recession. New forms of tourism, such as online tourism, will become popular and fewer people can travel. This scenario takes into account the environment and society (Postma *et al.*, 2020 April 9). The wide use of technology has already started at this current moment of the COVID-19 crisis (January 2020-November 2021). IT has been widely used, adapted and developed to address some pressing problems. While physical tourism has come to a stand-still, past and potential tourists have been busy ruminating about past trips on social media, museums have opened virtual doors (Gretzel *et al.*, 2020) and events are taking place online (Hermans, 2020). When people travel in this scenario, they will do this in a totally different way and according to totally different demands than pre-COVID-19.

The last scenario, ‘responsible tourism’, is based on the collective, while this is associated by the authors with a short and shallow recession. In this scenario change can be found by tourists themselves who will choose a form of tourism which is associated with e.g., slow



experience (Postma *et al.*, 2020 April 9). Slow tourism accepts previous demands and aspirations, but inspires the tourist to reflect more on the quality of the experience. A growing number of tourists are disenchanted by the ‘traditional’ highlights because of ‘overtourism’, looking for the undiscovered or under-visited locations instead (Vanneste *et al.*, 2020). In this scenario the tourist sector will pay more attention to the well-being of humans and animals in tourist destinations and the reduction of negative effects, but will still look for interesting tourism destinations. There is no certainty which outcome can be expected, this is dependent on a various range of factors. At the same time a combination or middle path of multiple scenarios is a possible outcome (Postma *et al.*, 2020 April 9).

#### 4.7. *The cases of the Netherlands and Belgium*

In the previous paragraphs, the various phases of crisis management were highlighted. This paragraph examines to what extent the Netherlands and Flemish-Belgium were prepared for a crisis such as the one of COVID-19, and what their response was at the moment of the outbreak. Since both countries are still between the response and recovery phase, with a fourth wave of infection at this current moment (November 2021) and there is still no literature available, this paragraph does not look at the other phases of crisis management; recovery, resolution and outcome. In addition, those phases are part of the research that was conducted for this thesis and will be discussed in the following chapters.

How well a country is prepared for a health crisis is measured by the Global Health Security (GHS) index. The GHS assesses countries’ health security health and capabilities across six categories, 34 indicators and 85 sub-indicators. Their ranking is based on open-source information that answers their 140 questions across the different categories. In October 2019 the GHS-index published their conclusion that no country is fully prepared for epidemics or pandemics, and every country has important gaps to address. Even the highest ranked country, the United States, is not adequately prepared to respond to potentially catastrophic infectious disease outbreaks. The COVID-19 pandemic has become proof for this conclusion, with the global struggle of the virus. For countries, it is more important than ever for the global community to take stock of its strengths and capitalize on opportunities to chart paths towards a safer, secure world. The highest score given by the GHS-index is still only an 83,5 out of 100 (GHS-index, 2019).

Even though the Netherlands and Belgium are neighboring countries their scores on the GHS-index are different, the Netherlands is ranked in the top three and Belgium can be found in the top 20. Looking at the preparation phase, the Netherlands scored a third place of the 195 countries with a score of 75,6 (GHS-index, 2019). The Netherlands got its high score, because of their good healthcare system. For citizens of the country there is easy access to care, there is sufficient capacity, medical measures can be taken and there is a clear communication plan in the case of an emergency which is an important factor in the next phase of a crisis management, response. In the Netherlands, the National Institute for Public Health and Environment (RIVM) plays a central role in times of a pandemic. According to their protocols which are the basis for the GHS-index, the Netherlands has a care system that pays a lot of attention to prevention, where dangerous infections can be identified in an early stadium and



actions to prevent the spread of an epidemic or pandemic can be taken (Kabekee & van de Reep, 2020 February 26). In practice, this detection does not work, because of fragmentation of responsibility when a global pandemic appears. According to Steenbergen, who wrote a critical report in 2018 on this matter, the Dutch policy is determined by the disagreement between the ministry of health and foreign affairs. The ministry of health is saying that the national health situation is their concern and an international health situation is the responsibility of foreign affairs. In contradiction, foreign affairs claims that health is not an international theme. Steenbergen tried to break this deadlock with his rapport to plead for a broad coalition. Two years later this still did not take place (Marijnissen, 2020 May 15). According to the GHS-index, the Netherlands scores low on the Joint External Evaluation (JEE), which helps to identify shortcoming in health systems and offers tools to address these shortcomings. The JEE scores are part of the financial plan of financial commitments to tackle an international pandemic (Kabekee & van de Reep, 2020 February 26).

Belgium scores lower than the Netherlands with a score of 61 and is ranked on place nineteen worldwide. The country scores low, especially in the prevention and response category. When looking at the different categories, Belgium has less available (communication) plans ready for a pandemic (GHS-index, 2019). The importance of communication is already described in the previous paragraph. According to microbiologic Emmanuel André Belgium was not prepared for a pandemic such as COVID-19 (Nieuwsblad, 2020 May 10). At the start of the outbreak in January 2020 questions were asked about the preparedness of the minister of health of Belgium. When looking back, the government did not fall back on the (outdated) plan for a pandemic of 2006. Earlier in 2009 Belgium got the advice of the committee bio-ethic that stock of medical protection, such as medical masks, was not sufficient. It is even argued that it would not be ethical to economize on face masks, as they could be used in time of a pandemic and of the low cost. It is therefore painful to conclude that this advice was completely ignored. Instead of good stock management, the entire stock was burned months before the outbreak of COVID-19 without building up a new stock. In January when the first signs of a pandemic were visible, the government of Belgium should have checked their stock of masks and, if necessary, intervened. At that moment, there were no shortages on the world market. This moment was also the perfect time to revisit the 2006 plan. Even though this plan, like most pandemic plans, is focused on influenza, it could work as a guideline at the beginning of the pandemic (Knack, 2020 May 11). In both countries, the Netherlands and Belgium, their pandemic plans are focused on an influenza kind of pandemic which is bound to a seasonal epidemic with a vaccine that is available soon after the outbreak (Bio-ethiek, 2009 March 30).

In the response phase, nearly all countries took measures to control the spread of the COVID-19 virus, as did the Netherlands and Belgium. A timeline of the different measurements taken by the Dutch policy can be found on the website of the RIVM<sup>4</sup>. Like many other countries, the Netherlands provided and still provides stimulus packages for the different sectors hit by the measures to control the spread of COVID-19, which can be found on the website of the

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.rivm.nl/gedragsonderzoek/tijddlijn-maatregelen-COVID>

*Rijksoverheid* (state government)<sup>5</sup>. The approach to tackle COVID-19 changed over time in the Netherlands, from local measurement for specific Provinces towards measurements for the entire country when the virus started to spread. At first, prevention of the spread of the virus was the main focus of the Dutch governments. When the outbreak was seen as unstoppable, the focus shifted towards scaling up intensive care capacity.

Like the Netherlands, Belgium took measurement as well to control the spread of COVID-19, which can be found on the news website of HLN<sup>6</sup>, and provided stimulus package according to *Toerisme Vlaanderen* (Tourism Flanders)<sup>7</sup> and *Beobank*<sup>8</sup>. The Dutch approach of ‘smart lockdown’ was taken to attenuate the pandemic’s negative impact on the Dutch economy and gained a lot of criticisms. Neighboring country Belgium considered the Dutch measures too lenient and closed its borders in response (Janssen & van der Voort, 2020). In Belgium, measurements were taken sooner and stricter than in the Netherlands. In the first half of March, the measurements entered a central phase. This means that all decisions will be taken by a management unit consisting of the Prime Minister and the competent ministers (HLN, 2020 September 11). In Belgium, the crisis measures are mainly taken and coordinated at the federal level, which at first sight would not be expected from a federal country where the focus is shifting to the provincial communities and regions. Another shift took place in the government of the country. On March 30, 2020, two special laws were published in the Belgian Official Gazette, whereby the parliament temporarily relinquished part of its powers to the Wilmès II government in order to be able to combat the COVID-19 crisis more quickly and effectively. This is quite unique for a minority government in Belgium (Goossens, 2020). In normal circumstances, Belgium is a difficult country to govern. Even in the COVID-19 time, it was hard to form a coalition. The crisis has not smoothed out the divisions, but has on the contrary, painfully exposed them (van Assen, 2020 October 30). As a result of the new laws, the government does not always have to ask for permission from the parliament, for example to take health measures or economic measures in the context of combating the virus. One of the problems in Belgium is that eight ministers and one state secretary each have substantial powers with regard to health policy. This does take a lot of time and often lead to disagreements with the National Safety Council (Goossens, 2020).

As described in the recovery phase, one way is to focus on domestic tourism when international travel is not a possibility. In the summer of 2020, there can be seen that in Belgium the domestic travel increased with a significant growth in July (+37%), August (+27%) and September (+63%) as compared to the same period last year (Vanneste *et al.*, 2021). In the Netherlands, a decrease of 30% was visible in the first half of 2020 of domestic travel compared to 2019. Later, in the summer of the same year this did recover with an increase of more than 25% compared to the summer of the previous year (CBS, 2020

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-tijdlijn/mei-2020-economische-gevolgen-financiele-steun-en-versoepeling-maatregelen>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.hln.be/binnenland/tijdlijn-de-coronapandemie-in-ons-land~aef415c1/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>

<sup>7</sup> <https://toerismevlaanderen.be/concrete-steunmaatregelen-voor-toeristische-sector>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.beobank.be/nl/professioneel/blog-tips/steunmaatregelen-voor-bedrijven-tijden-van-corona>



December 23). This may be related to the fact that the perspective of a holiday has a positive effect on the feeling of happiness. Continued research confirms that planning a holiday contributes to the feeling of happiness (Van Bendegom *et al.*, 2020).

## 5. Methodology

### 5.1. *The participants*

In the previous chapter, the different phases of crisis management are described. At this moment, many states are in a phase between response and recovery, as well as the Netherlands and Belgium. The focus that governments, and in this case municipalities in Belgium and the Netherlands, will take in the recovery phase is largely unknown. To investigate if COVID-19 is going to be the trigger point for moving towards the SDGs, as is mentioned in the literature, a series of interactive online meetings with policymakers and stakeholders of five municipalities is organized.

As far as the choice of cities is concerned, attempts have been made for as many municipalities as possible, but also for a study that could be carried out within a limited time period (May-July 2021). A number of cities were contacted, five of which were willing to cooperate and were able to do so within the set period: Leiden and Arnhem for the Netherlands and Ghent, Mechelen and Leuven for Flanders (Belgium). These urban tourism destinations cannot be considered international top-destinations and therefore did (do) not suffer from specific problems such as ‘overtourism’ before the pandemic started, except for Ghent which can be considered as ‘an edge case’. Other cities that had been approached were Delft, Eindhoven, Haarlem, Leeuwarden and 's-Hertogenbosch from the Netherlands and Bruges for Flanders (the lack of availability of Antwerp was already known). These municipalities did not have time or were simply not interested in participating, due to the busyness of COVID-19. Another reason mentioned by some of the Dutch cities was that they had already been approached several times for a similar survey.

#### 5.1.1. Arnhem

Arnhem (Netherlands, Gelderland) has 162,421 inhabitants (GemeenteArnhem, n.d.). The city has a rich and eventful history, some of which is reflected in a number of monumental buildings (Holland, n.d.). The Arnhem-Nijmegen region attracted just under 1.7 million tourists with 2.7 million overnight stays in 2019, spending a total of 1.6 billion euros, which is the highest number ever. The tourism sales increased by 300 million euros in the last two years (Moolenaar, 2019 June 6). Most tourists are domestic tourists (85%) followed by tourists from Germany (6.5%) and Flanders (2.8%). In 2018, the tourism industry created 26,000 jobs in the region (VisitArnhemNijmegen, n.d.). Tourism is not only important for the economy, but it is also an important resource to answer the regional questions regarding the economy, employment, livability and sustainability. Not only do tourist visits help to sustain hospitality and retail, but they also, for example, provide employment for those with practical skills (Toerismevan, 2020 March 12).

During COVID-19, domestic tourism in Gelderland increased by 12 percent in the summer of 2020 compared to the same period of the previous year. According to the Veluwe Arnhem Nijmegen Tourism Office, domestic tourists compensated for the decline in the number of foreign tourists. The region would like to attract more foreign tourists in normal times, as is

the case in the coastal regions, since they themselves attract mainly domestic tourists. This attraction for the region from domestic tourists proved to be beneficial in times of COVID-19 (Beeks & de Herdt, 2020 October 6).

Since there are hardly any city-level figures available from national statistical agencies for Arnhem, there will be looked at figures regarding tourism for the province of Gelderland to frame the pre-COVID-19 situation. 57% of the inhabitants of Gelderland in 2019 thought that tourism brought more advantages than disadvantages. This is above average for the whole of the Netherlands (51%). The share of residents experiencing inconvenience from tourism was 22% in 2019. Tourism intensity reflects the number of overnight stays per 100 residents. This number includes both domestic and foreign visitors, but does not include the pressure caused by day tourism. Figure 3 shows that until 2019 (pre-COVID-19), the intensity per year was increasing. During the COVID-19 outbreak, this figure dropped from 1.72 in 2019 to 1.49 in 2020. Figure 4 shows what this intensity is per month for the years 2019, 2020 and 2021. In 2019 (pre-COVID-19) there can be seen that the peak season occurred earlier with an increase starting in March. In 2020, this increase just started in May, with a higher peak in August. The high peak in August could be explained by the fact that at that time there were fewer measurements in place in the Netherlands and people did not desire to go on vacation far from home. The intensity from June 2021 onwards is higher than the numbers in 2020, but not yet as high as pre-COVID-19 (NBTC, n.d.a). Almost all visitors (95.7%) in 2021 are from the Netherlands, with the remaining 4.3% coming from the rest of Europe (excluding the Netherlands) as shown in Figure 5 (NBTC, n.d.b).

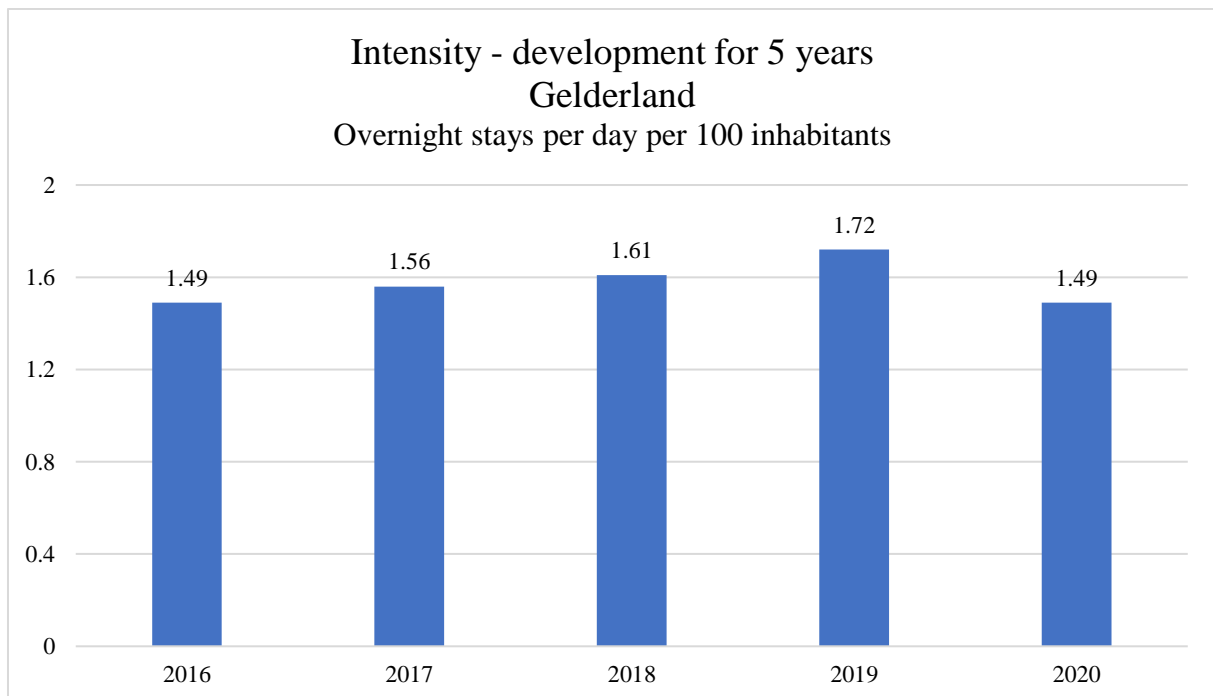


Figure 3: Translation by author of NBTC, n.d.a. tourism intensity Gelderland 2016-2020, overnight stays daily per 100 inhabitants. <https://dashboard.nbtc.nl/dashboard/staat-van-bestemming-nl/bewoners>

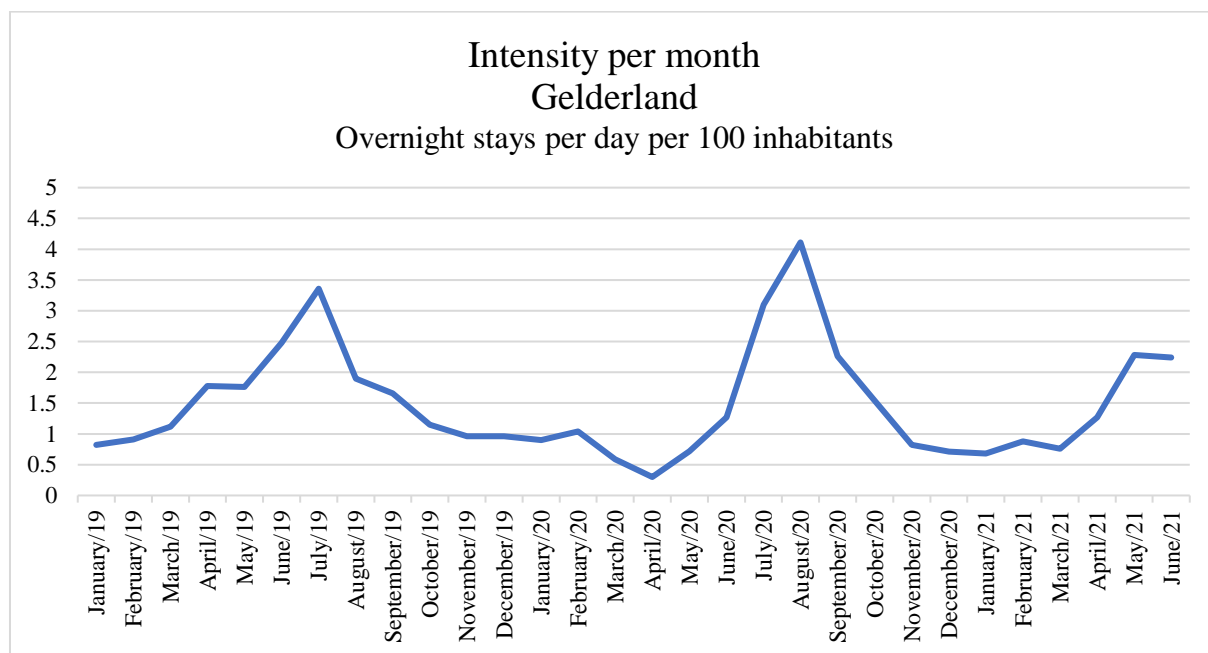


Figure 4: Translation by author of NBTC, n.d.a. intensity tourism Gelderland 2016-2020, overnight stays daily per 100 inhabitants. <https://dashboard.nbtc.nl/dashboard/staat-van-bestemming-nl/bewoners>

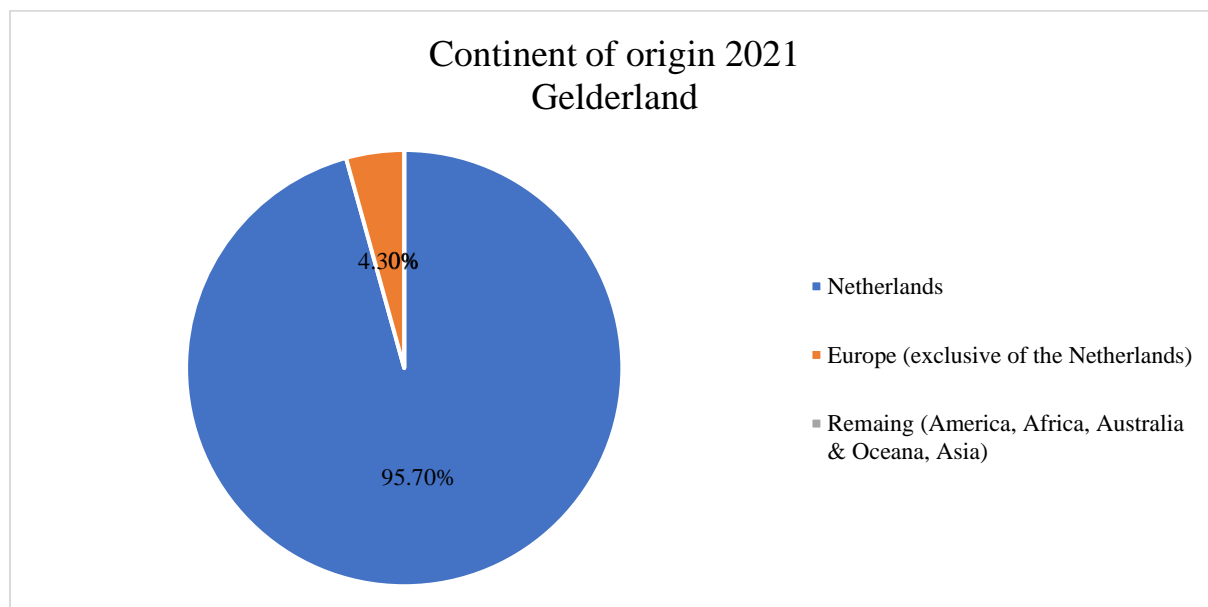


Figure 5: Translation by author of NBTC, n.d.b. continent of origin 2021 Gelderland. <https://dashboard.nbtc.nl/dashboard/staat-van-bestemming-nl/bezoekers>

#### 5.1.1.1. Workshop participants

A total of five people participated in the workshop, three who work for the municipality of Arnhem and two who work for tourism Veluwe, Arnhem and Nijmegen.

#### 5.1.2. Ghent

Ghent (Belgium, East Flanders) had 263.703 inhabitants on the first of January 2021<sup>9</sup>. Together with Antwerp, Bruges and Brussels, Ghent is one of the four most popular cities that Dutch people visit for a day or a short vacation and is the third-largest city in Flanders in total tourist arrivals (689,019 in 2019) – after Bruges and Antwerp (ToerismeVlaanderen, n.d.a). The city focuses on quality residential tourism from inland and neighboring countries: The Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom and France. Together with the domestic market, these markets represent the largest number of tourists (van Braeckvelt, 2021 March 2). Overnight stays showed an increase of an average of 4.3% per year between 2012 (919,477) and 2019 (1,288,261) (ToerismeVlaanderen, n.d.a), despite the decline in 2016 due to the attacks on Brussels and Brussels Airport (van Braeckvelt, 2021 March 2). At the time of the attacks in Brussel, it was clear that the effects were felt far beyond where the attacks had taken place and cities other than Brussels were dragged into a crisis (Vanneste *et al.*, 2017). For Ghent, the number of visitors decreased by 3.9% in 2016 compared to 2015; the following year (2017), the number of visitors to attractions had increased by 9.1% and thus was already well above the level of both the year of the attacks and the year before the attacks<sup>10</sup>.

As of mid-March 2020, tourism came to a sudden halt due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The overnight stays decreased by 62% in 2020 due to COVID-19 compared to the 1.2 million overnight stays in 2019<sup>11</sup>. In April and May 2020, no tourism was possible due to the measures and therefore there were no overnight stays for those two months (Figure 6). In June, travel was again possible and more tourists came to the city. Later that year, in June and July 2021, especially hotel stays increased again. However, starting in August, a second wave of infection caused a decline in the sector, with occupancy rates dropping to 20-30%. The decline in tourism due to the attacks in 2016 is therefore not comparable to the economic impact of COVID-19. At the time, there was an annualized decline of about 5 to 7% in the various segments of Ghent tourism. In 2020, there were still about 480,000 overnight stays, which is a decrease of 62.5% compared to 2019<sup>12</sup>. In 2019, total tourism revenue was about €461 million for the city of Ghent, for the period between March and August 2020, the loss of revenue is estimated at €160 million (van Braeckvelt, March 2, 2021)<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://statbel.fgov.be/nl/themas/bevolking/structuur-van-de-bevolking#figures>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.toerismevlaanderen.be/sites/toerismevlaanderen.be/files/assets/documents\\_KENNIS/cijfers/2019\\_attractieaanbod-2014-2018.pdf](https://www.toerismevlaanderen.be/sites/toerismevlaanderen.be/files/assets/documents_KENNIS/cijfers/2019_attractieaanbod-2014-2018.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.toerismevlaanderen.be/sites/toerismevlaanderen.be/files/assets/documents\\_KENNIS/cijfers/Kerncijfers/2019-Toerisme-kerncijfers-2018\\_0.pdf](https://www.toerismevlaanderen.be/sites/toerismevlaanderen.be/files/assets/documents_KENNIS/cijfers/Kerncijfers/2019-Toerisme-kerncijfers-2018_0.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> <https://hoeveelin.stad.gent/tendensen/gent-centrumstad/>

<sup>13</sup> In the graphs below regarding the number of overnight stays, we looked at the gross figures. This is the occupancy of the number of rooms available, without taking into account any closing days (ToerismeVlaanderen, n.d.b).

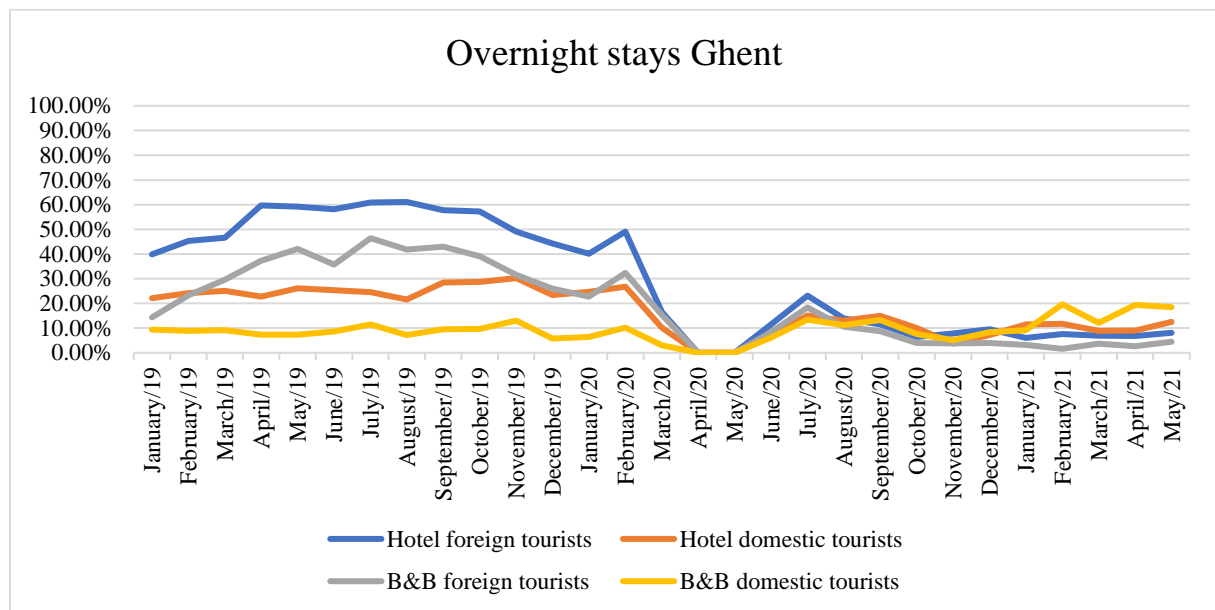


Figure 6: Toerisme Vlaanderen, n.d.b <https://www.toerismevlaanderen.be/logiesbarometer>

#### 5.1.2.1. Workshop participants

A total of three people participated in the workshop, two who work for the City of Ghent and one for Visit Ghent in the Data and Information Department.

#### 5.1.3. Leiden

The city of Leiden (Netherlands, South Holland) had 125,099 inhabitants in 2020 (Leiden in cijfers, n.d.). The number of overnight stays increased between 2016 and 2018, from 342,000 to 412,000. Visitors to the city of Leiden mainly visit a museum or take a city walk. People visit the city less for shopping, in contrast to other cities (Leiden in cijfers, 2018). Leiden is also an important university city that attracts international students (32,806 by 2020<sup>14</sup>) and staff, and is also the base for scientific conferences.

As in many other destinations, the number of visitors has dropped drastically since 2020 due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Before the COVID-19 crisis, it was predicted that more tourists would visit the city and the city of Leiden had started to develop a strategy regarding the visitor economy (Simons, 2018 November 22). At the municipality of Leiden and the city marketing of Leiden, people speak in terms of visitors instead of tourists due to the negative association attached to the word.

Since there are hardly any city-level figures available from national statistical agencies for Leiden, there will be looked at figures regarding tourism for the province of South Holland to frame the pre-COVID-19 situation. Because the province of South Holland also includes more popular cities such as The Hague and Rotterdam, popular coastal towns such as Wassenaar and Scheveningen, as well as the *Kinderdijk* World Heritage site, the figures and

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/over-ons/feiten-en-cijfers>



their interpretation should therefore be used with caution. 48% of South Holland residents in 2019 felt that tourism brought more advantages than disadvantages. On average, for the Netherlands, that percentage is 51%. Therefore, it seems that within the province of South Holland, slightly more problems are experienced with regard to the visitor economy. The proportion of residents who experience nuisance from tourism is the same for both the Netherlands and South Holland: 26% in 2019. Figure 7 shows that until 2019 (pre-COVID-19), the intensity per year was increasing. During the COVID-19 outbreak, this figure dropped from 0.94 in 2019 to 0.60 in 2020 (figure 7). Figure 8 shows this intensity per month for the years 2019, 2020 and 2021. Notable are the rapid decreases that occurred in March 2020 and September 2020. These are the periods when infections rose sharply and the most measures were applied in the Netherlands. July and August 2020 saw an increase, but this did not reach the level of a year earlier (NBTC, n.d.c). Most visitors in 2021 came from Holland itself with 87.3%, followed by Europe (excluding the Netherlands) with 10.9% as shown in Figure 9 (NBTC, n.d.d).

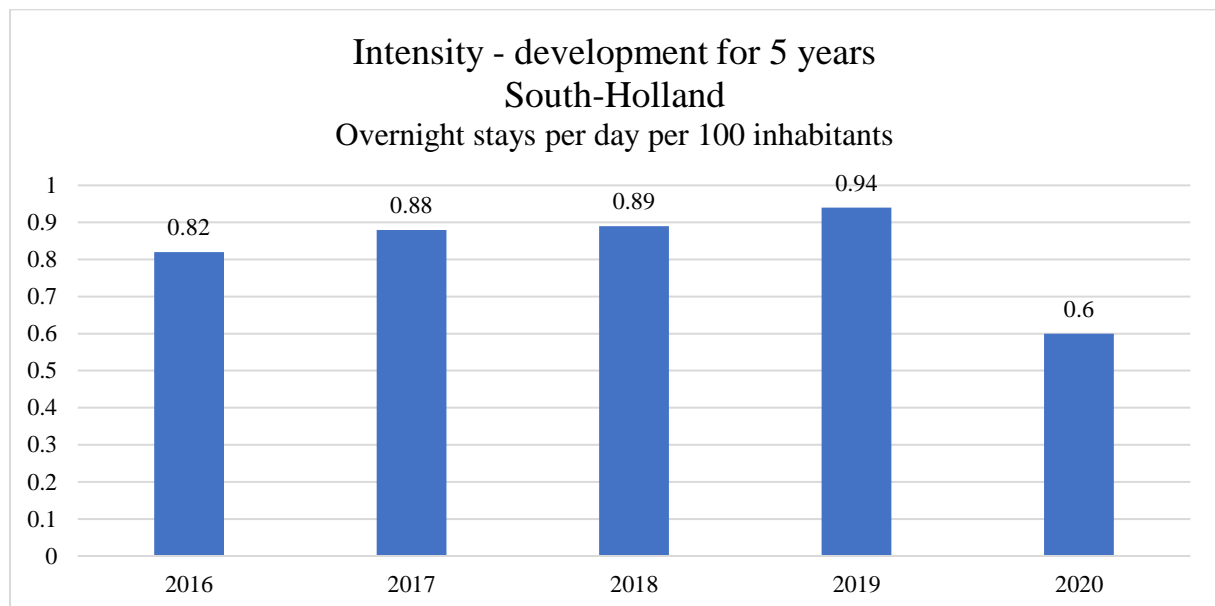


Figure 7: Translation by author of NBTC, n.d.c. tourism intensity South Holland 2016-2020, overnight stays daily per 100 inhabitants. <https://dashboard.nbtc.nl/dashboard/staat-van-besteding-nl/bewoners>

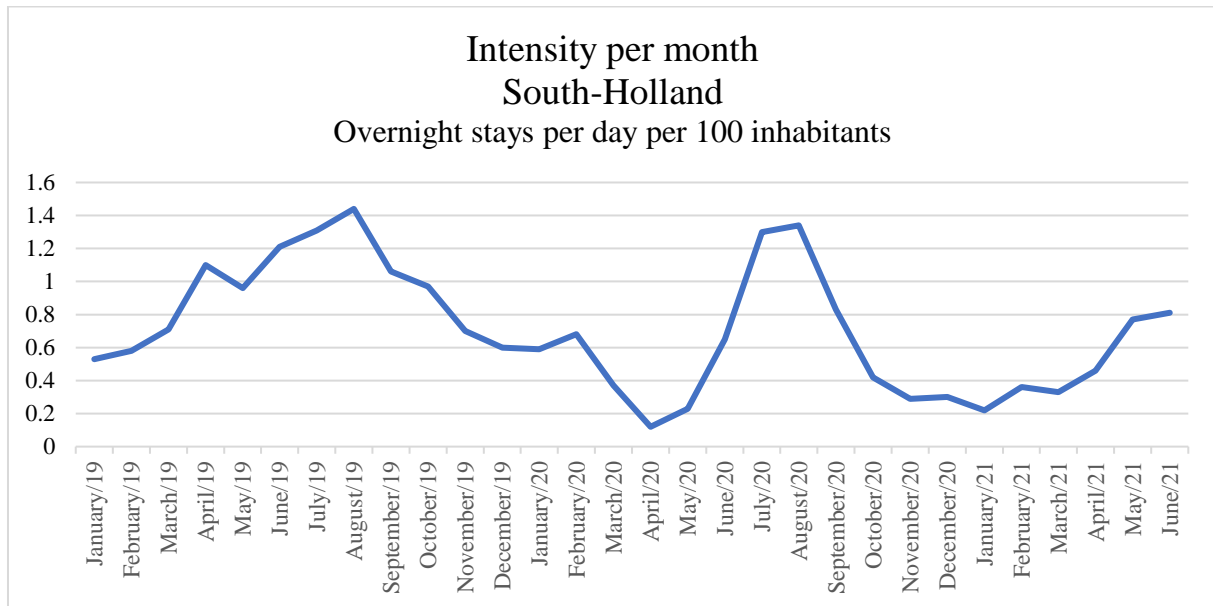


Figure 8: Translation by author of NBTC, n.d.c. tourism intensity South Holland 2016-2020, overnight stays daily per 100 inhabitants. <https://dashboard.nbtc.nl/dashboard/staat-van-bestemming-nl/bewoners>

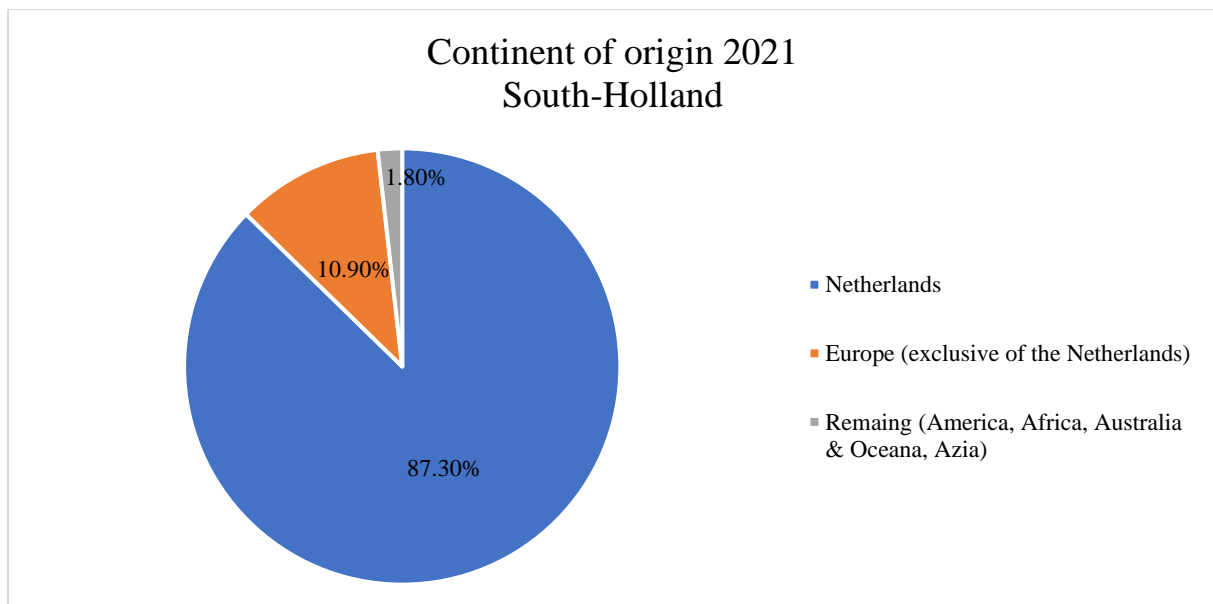


Figure 9: Translation by author of NBTC, n.d.d. continent of origin 2021 South Holland, the Netherlands, Europe exclusion of the Netherlands, America, Africa, Australia and Oceania, Asian. <https://dashboard.nbtc.nl/dashboard/staat-van-bestemming-nl/bezoekers>

#### 5.1.3.1. Workshop participants

A total of three people participated in the workshop, one who works for Leiden municipality and two for Leiden marketing.

#### 5.1.4. Leuven

Leuven (Belgium, Flemish Brabant) is a medium-sized city located about 30 kilometers east of the Belgian capital, Brussels (AllesoverBelgië, n.d.). In 2021, the city had a population of 100,859 (Leuven in cijfers, n.d.). Leuven is a student city where you can also have a good time as a tourist. The city has a number of beautiful sights, is wonderfully compact, offers good shopping opportunities and is known for its excellent nightlife.

The presence of thousands (62,643 in 2021) of students ensures that the city is young and dynamic. There is a lot happening in terms of culture and entertainment (AllesoverBelgië, n.d.). Between 2017 and 2018, the number of tourists increased significantly, with a 17.5% increase in overnight stays and a 13.5% increase in arrivals compared to 2017. Leuven was one of the strongest risers in the number of overnight stays compared to the other Flemish Art cities Mechelen, Bruges, Brussels, and Ghent. Compared to the peak year, a slight decline was observed in 2019, with a decline in arrivals of -4% and of overnight stays of -3.7%, for a total of 295,157 arrivals and 581,155 overnight stays. This made Leuven the 15th municipality in Flanders in terms of tourist overnights and the 6th municipality in terms of number of visitors (ToerismeVlaanderen, n.d.a). Foreign tourists staying in the city are mainly from neighboring countries. Leuven remains especially popular with Dutch people, although there is also a clear increase in visitors from Italy, Germany, and Spain (Pers.Leuven, 2019 July 26).

In April and May 2020, no tourism was possible due to the measures and therefore there were no overnight stays for those two months as shown in Figure 10. In June, travel was again possible and more tourists came to the city. It can be seen that in June and July 2020 especially hotel stays increased again. However, starting in August, a second wave of infection caused another decline in occupancy rates in the sector. To date (May 2021), the occupancy rates of both hotels and Bed and Breakfasts (B&Bs) have not recovered. Many of the closed B&Bs have not reopened even deep into 2021 (MURAL workshop, 2021), which could partly explain why these figures lag behind those of hotel occupancy rates<sup>15</sup>.

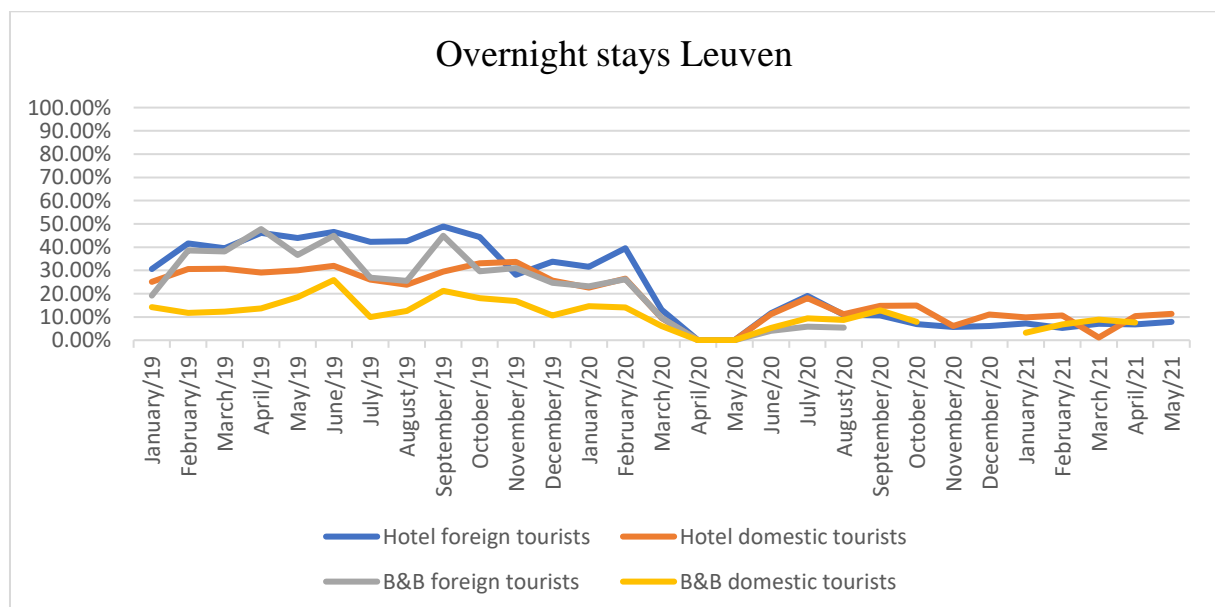


Figure 10: Translation by auhtor of Toerisme Vlaanderen n.d.b  
<https://www.toerismevlaanderen.be/logiesbarometer>

<sup>15</sup> See also footnote 13

#### 5.1.4.1. *Workshop participants*

A total of two people participated in the workshop, one working at Visit Leuven and one at Leuven Convention Bureau.

#### 5.1.5. Mechelen

Mechelen (Belgium, Antwerp) had 86,718 inhabitants in 2020 (Vlaanderen.be, n.d.).

Mechelen is a smaller and lesser-known city compared to the other Art cities in Flanders, and has room for the tourism industry to grow. The city is close to both Antwerp and Brussels, which makes it a good place to stay and visit both (bigger) cities (Visit Flanders, n.d.).

Tourism in Mechelen has seen significant growth in recent years. In 2017, the city had 145,681 arrivals and 232,463 overnight stays; this is an increase of 42% and 29% since 2011 (Made-in, n.d.). In 2019, the numbers increased even further to 154,424 arrivals and 259,356 overnight stays (ToerismeVlaanderen, n.d.a).

In Mechelen there was no matter of 'overtourism' pre-COVID-19. For the city, it is especially important to monitor its growth and, as a function of this, Visit Mechelen is setting out lines to evolve into a sustainable form of tourism (Made-in, 2020 January 16). The goal of City Mechelen is to focus on the city as a 'thriving destination'. The main focus here is that tourism adds value to the city and all stakeholders including residents and entrepreneurs, and not just for the tourism industry. In addition, it is critical to look at how residents play a role in the promotion of the city. This is driven, because residents are the first ambassadors who can get to know their city better during a vacation in their own town (Visit Mechelen, 2020 June 4).

In April and May 2020, no tourism was possible due to the measures and therefore there were no overnight stays for those two months as shown in Figure 11. In June, travel was again possible and more tourists came to the city. It can be seen that in June and July 2021, especially hotel stays and B&B stays of domestic tourists increased again. However, starting in August, a second wave of infection caused another decline in occupancy rates in the sector. To date, hotel occupancy rates have not recovered for both domestic and foreign tourists. Overnight stays in B&Bs by domestic tourists in April and May 2021 were back to about the same level as before the COVID-19 outbreak. The impacted average revenue loss when all hotels are 100% closed is €78125 per month for the city of Mechelen (Visit Mechelen, 2020 June 4)<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> See also footnote 13

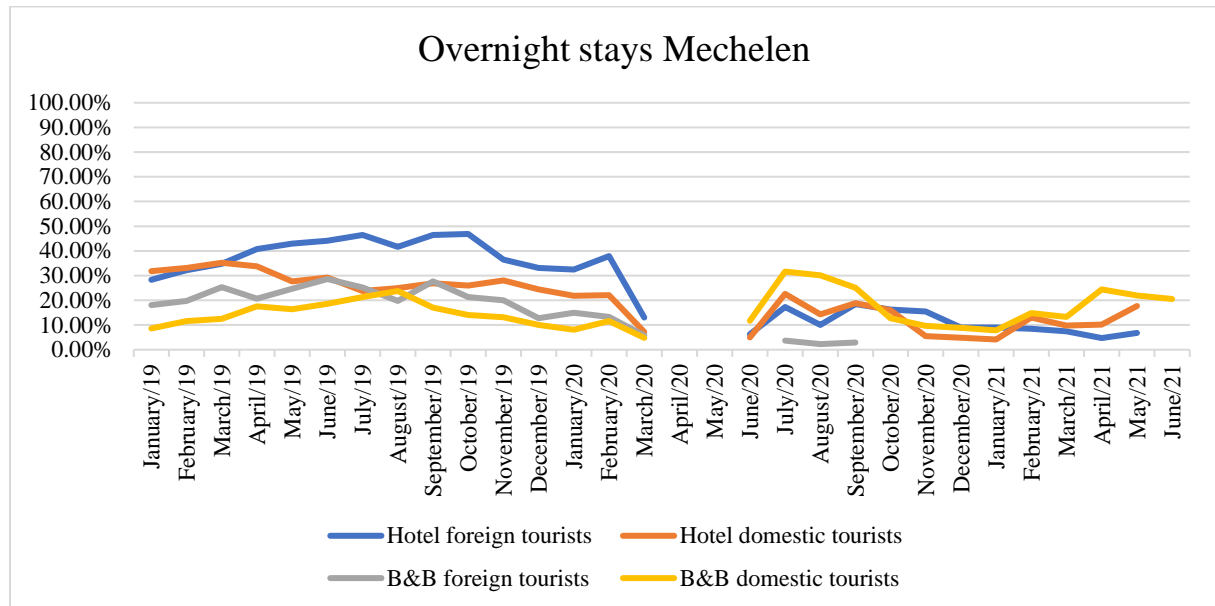


Figure 11: Translation by author of Toerisme Vlaanderen n.d.b  
<https://www.toerismevlaanderen.be/logiesbarometer>

#### 5.1.5.1. Workshop participants

A total of two people participated in the workshop, one who works at Mechelen's Tourism and UiT Department and the other at the City Mechelen and Visit Mechelen.

#### 5.2. Online workshop with MURAL software

To investigate which approach local tourism agents will take in rebuilding the tourism industry after COVID-19, the research design used to find an answer, is a focus group. Qualitative interviews with more participants at the same time are group interviews. A focus group is a group interview – centered on a particular topic and facilitated and coordinated by a moderator or facilitator – that aims to generate primary qualitative data, by responding to the interaction taking place within the group (Boeije 2010: 64). In this research, a focus group is used to investigate the different stages of crisis management in the previously described municipalities in the Netherlands and Flemish-Belgium. During the online meetings for this research, Microsoft-Teams was used in combination with the online visual workspace of MURAL<sup>17</sup>. The workshop was deliberately limited to 2 hours, with 3 substantive discussions of approximately half an hour each. These discussions were held around the different phases as described in the theoretical framework: pre-COVID-19, COVID-19, post-COVID-19. For each city, there were several participants (from 2 to 5), mostly from local government services with competence or impact on tourism; in some cases, private sector representatives were also present.

The discussion was divided in three rounds based on the phases of Campiranon and Scott (2007); preparation/pre-COVID-19, response and recovery on the short-term, and outcome/post-COVID-19 on the long-term. In the first round, each participant was asked to think about the challenges, focus of objectives and guiding principles of tourism in the city pre-COVID-19 via digital sticky notes. Contrary to the crisis management model, the focus in the first round was not on the preparation for a crisis, but rather on the general challenges, objectives, and leading principles of the pre-COVID tourism policy and practice. The main

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.mural.co/>

aim for this approach was to recall the pre-pandemic situation and to be more aware about continuities as well as changes and ruptures. This technique of recalling the past to reflect the present and future is a common technique in workshops targeting visioning (George, Mair & Reid, 2009). The information, ideas, and impressions on the sticky notes were discussed in-depth with and among the participants.

In the second round, each participant was asked to think about the actions and strategies in the response and (short-term) recovery phase of COVID-19. In this phase there is a distinction made between actions and strategies of the municipality (city level), the higher levels of government (regional and national) and other stakeholders (private sector, interest organization). This is done again by using digital sticky notes and followed by a discussion about the elements mentioned on the notes.

In the third and last round, each participant was asked to think about a post-COVID-19 situation and long-term recovery of COVID-19. In this last phase the scenarios of Postma, Heslinga and Harman model, described in the theoretical framework (chapter 4.6), were presented as a continuum from ‘business as usual’ to ‘business as unusual’. In other words, the participants were asked to think about policy strategies and actions (and possible outcomes) that focused on economic recovery and return to the post-COVID-19 situation only (‘business as usual’). Second, an outcome of ‘business as unusual’, where the government or municipality has the greatest influence and policy is not only focused on economic recovery, but also on strategies and actions striving for a new paradigm in tourism. In this scenario, the tourism sector will look different or play a different role than in the post-COVID-19 situation. In between, one can imagine policy strategies and actions which lead to an outcome of ‘transformed tourism’ with part of the old policy resumed but with considerable changes and adjustments. In this phase, the participants were invited to think in terms of necessary versus nice-to-have to achieve the specific outcome and make a distinction between actions and strategies to be handled by the municipality or by other stakeholders, including higher levels of government. This again was done by using sticky notes and followed by an in-depth discussion (figure 12: an outline of the MURAL).

### COVID-19 and Tourism - reactions in *municipality*

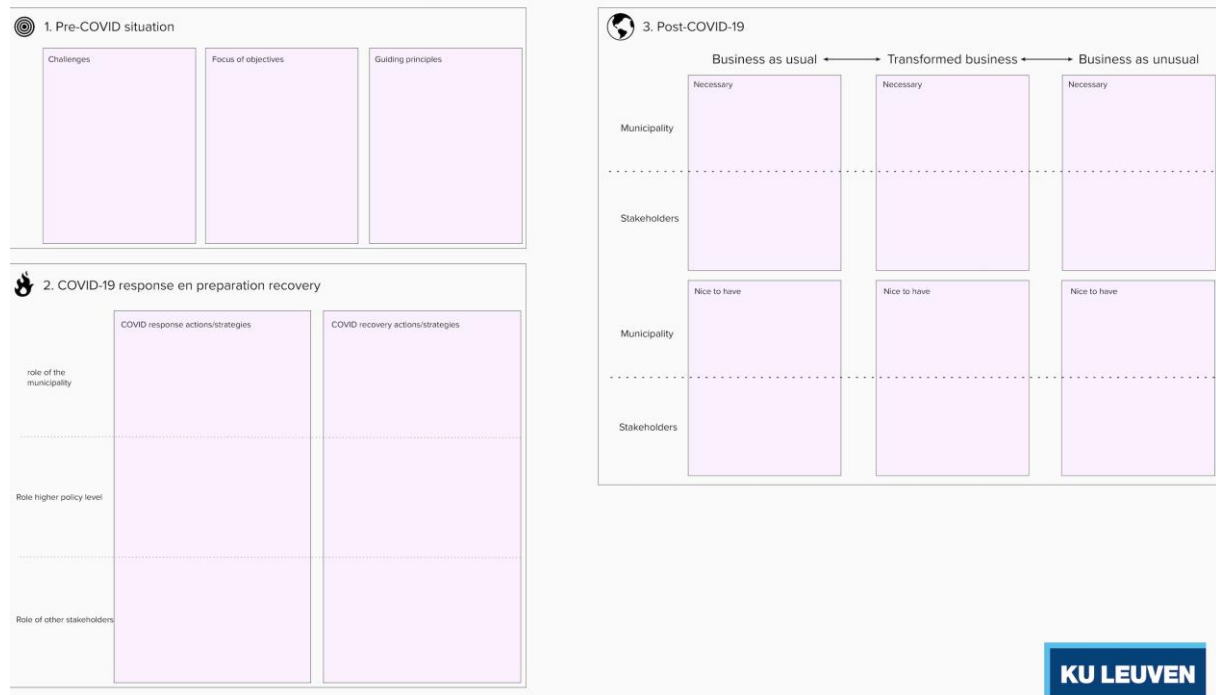


Figure 12: Outline of the MURAL-workshop.

## 6. Results

All the workshops were recorded and transcribed afterward for analysis. An individual report was written for the various participating municipalities as well as an integrated report with the overarching findings. These reports together with the transcriptions form the basis for the results described in this chapter.

### 6.1. *Phase 1: Pre-COVID-19*

Prior to COVID-19, all participating cities were in a healthy flow with regard to tourism. Despite the fact that tourism was not yet a nuisance in the different cities, all participants indicated that they were working on the (predicted) growth in visitor numbers. The main reason given for this is to keep the residents of their own city happy and to maintain support. In Flemish-Belgium this is measured in a biannual – with a first version conducted in 2017 and repeat study in 2019 – survey done by the different Art cities (Antwerp, Bruges, Ghent, Mechelen, and Leuven) in collaboration with *Toerisme Vlaanderen* (Tourism Flanders). Leiden is the only city to mention that actual nuisance is experienced by its residents, with tourism being blamed, among other things. However, when looked at objectively, this nuisance, according to the participants, is more likely to be caused by its own residents including temporary residents such as students.

The way in which the increasing growth is dealt with is different for each city. One similarity is that all cities focus on a high-quality form of tourism and want to focus on a specific target group. Which target group this is, depends on the profile of the city itself. Arnhem is still searching for their image which they want to convey and how their war heritage can play a role in this. Their main focus is on returning tourists and on attracting (overnight) tourists in the ‘shadow season’ (the period outside the main season of tourism) for the Veluwe. Leiden already knows what image they want to convey – city of knowledge and culture – but they find a challenge in how to communicate this to their potential tourists. The city focuses mostly on museum visitors – which is the one of their biggest sub sectors of tourism as mentioned in chapter 5.1.3 – who stay longer in the city and cause less nuisance, as well as the international conference tourist who can be linked to the activities of the university. All Belgium participating cities explicitly state that they focus on overnight tourists, since this group is economically profitable and causes the least inconvenience for residents.

### 6.2. *Phase 2: Response and recovery; short-term actions and strategies*

None of the participating cities were prepared for a crisis like this, which makes sense given the unparalleled effects produced by COVID-19. All cities soon came up with a reliance plan to be able to support businesses in the first place with the extra time and money freed up. This could be done by granting payment deferrals on local taxes, but also through support in applying for specific COVID-19 subsidies from higher authorities. The response phase of COVID-19 highlighted the importance of good communication and cooperation. Communication is important in times of crisis for conveying information. For all participating cities, during COVID-19, new structures were created in the form of crisis cells and



consultation domes. In addition to the fact that communication has proven to be crucial, the same is true for collaboration. As one of the respondents said; “*when cooperation becomes a need it can happen very easily, when it is a nice-to-have it disappears into the background*”. Not only did more collaboration take place within the different cities, but also with higher policy levels. Many of these collaborations already existed prior to the crisis, and this proved to be crucial. Despite the fact that collaborations proved to be necessary and were generally perceived as positive, there were also instances of unfortunate initiatives due to a lack of communication. It is critical to work together, not to impose actions.

A cooperation that is mentioned by all Belgian participants is the cooperation with *Toerisme Vlaanderen* (Tourism Flanders), which has deployed consultative umbrellas among the various cities. From *Toerisme Vlaanderen* (Tourism Flanders) support came quickly through, among other things, monitoring and the establishment of consultation domes to translate ministerial decisions to the local level. Instead of competition between the different cities, a joint action now took place under the project ‘*Vlaanderen Vakantieland 2.0*’ (a project to promote Flanders as a tourist destination<sup>18</sup>). This project stimulated – and still does – collaborations with a focus on domestic tourism where *Toerisme Vlaanderen* (Tourism Flanders) before the pandemic, focused on foreign markets and inbound tourism. On account of the project ‘*Vlaanderen Vakantieland*’ become more prominent, it is easier for the cities together to occupy a place in the international tourism market when this is possible again.

For the Netherlands, as an example of higher-level cooperation, Leiden mentions the establishment of a crisis team to share information and ensure that it gets to the right people. This crisis team brought together one representative from a number of sectors, someone from a business association, two aldermen and senior officials enforcement. During these consultation moments, measurements that were (are) imposed from higher level government were explained and problems that were (are) identified in the city were brought to higher policy level. The crisis team met once a week – which later was scaled down – to discuss and identify the urgent issues and then take actions.

Not only collaborations with organizations on a higher level have taken place, but also within cities themselves. In Leiden, previously established collaborations helped to expand its visitor offerings to the wider region during COVID-19 and thereby also supported these businesses. The project ‘Region of Surprises’ was created with the goal of attracting local residents to explore their own region and spreading visitors throughout the region. The focus on regional tourism was inspired by the fact that nobody could or would travel far from home, but there was still a great need for outdoor recreation. This project will (probably) have a lasting effect, because the project can easily further develop to foreigners when this is possible again. Another example of cooperation between different services within a city in the Netherlands is the ‘*Arnhem pass*’. This pass is a kind of ‘*VVV voucher*’ for Arnhem specifically, which ensures that money stays in the city. In the case of Mechelen, a mutual respect has arisen in

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.toerismevlaanderen.be/vlaanderen-vakantieland-20>

the city and the need to help other sectors, because of COVID-19. This is done by also directing visitors to other tourism sub sectors than just the one they came for.

Collaborations have also become important in the collection of data and research. One of the Dutch participants mentions that not only for the city itself, but for the whole of the Netherlands, too little data was collected in the past about tourism and visitors. Because of this, it is not visible where visitors come from and what their motivations are. During the COVID-19 crisis, the lack of data meant that the extent of the problem was (is) not visible, and if or how tourism is recovering again. The belief is that the demand for more data is a movement that has started throughout the Netherlands, as the importance of data has been clearly demonstrated. This shortage of data can be explained by the fact that the importance of collecting data has come to the fore for various parties, and that people could not (or did not want to) free up time for this before.

Because of COVID-19, and the travel restrictions imposed, the focus of all participating municipalities has changed from foreign visitors to domestic tourists. For the Belgian cities, this also means that they have started to focus more on Wallonia. Pre-COVID-19, there was a feeling (among others in Leuven) that due to different structures<sup>19</sup>, access to Wallonia was difficult for collaborations or mutual exchange of visitors. There was a political demand to do this, but in practice it did not work well. With the COVID-19 outbreak, the focus is more on domestic tourism and this cooperation has become more important and necessary. In most cities, domestic tourism seems to have recovered. In Arnhem, domestic tourism seems to have recovered mainly in the Veluwe. However, most tourists pre-COVID-19 came from Germany and Belgium, which until the time of the workshop had not yet recovered. Despite the fact that all the participating cities are focusing on domestic tourism and this seems to be recovering, this is not a solution for the long-term. Revenue from domestic tourism cannot fully compensate for foreign tourism, because this is not only related to numbers of tourists, but also to differences in spending patterns. Recovery does seem to be coming from tourists from the surrounding countries. Visitors from countries further away are expected to be less likely to return, although vaccinations will help.

Looking ahead to the recovery of the tourism industry, the expectation among the Belgian participants is that in the short- and medium-term visitors will prefer coast and nature destinations over (Art) cities, where they belong themselves. This is already visible at the moment of the workshops, see figure 13a&b. In Leiden it was clearly visible that in times of the lockdown in the Netherlands, cities were avoided, but at the moment the rules were relaxed, visitors quickly returned to the city. Leiden experienced a recovery in hotel stays in June/July/August 2020 with hotels achieving high occupancy rates. The expectation is that this will happen again soon (summer 2021) under the condition that some measures such as the one-and-a-half-meter distance remain. Thus, it was expected by participants from Leiden that the market, consisting of visitors from the surrounding countries, will soon recover again.

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<sup>19</sup> Tourism in Belgium is a competence of the regions, which can decide on their organization and approach completely independently.

In Flanders, occupancy rates in cities during the 2020 summer season had certainly not recovered, and this expectation did not exist for 2021 either.

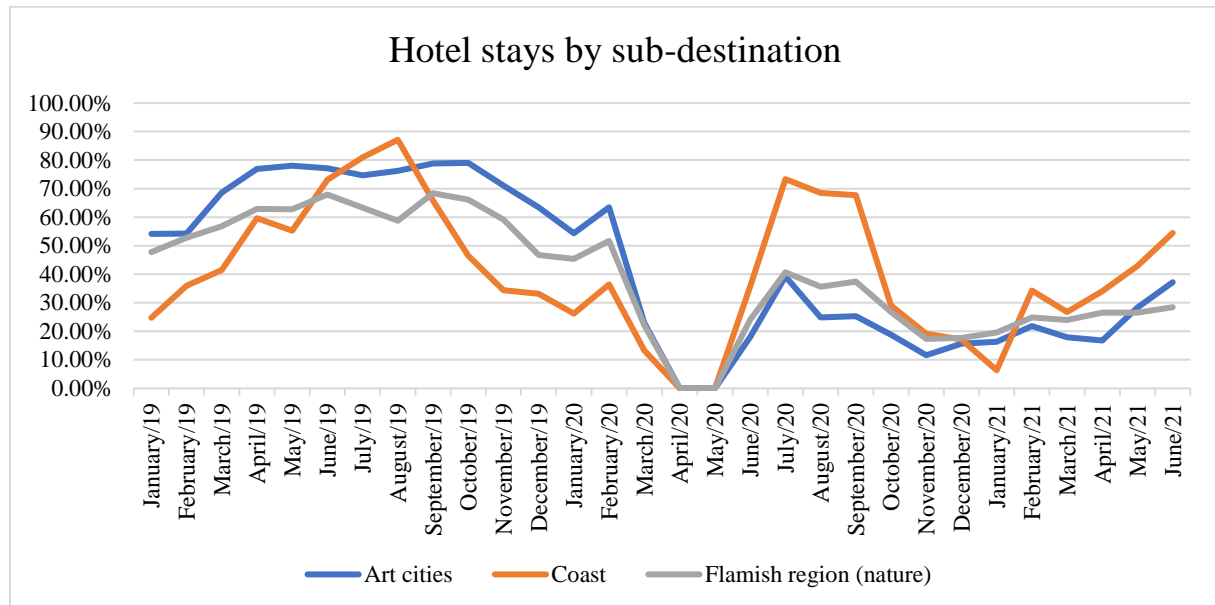


Figure 13a: Translation by author of Toerisme Vlaanderen n.d.b  
<https://www.toerismevlaanderen.be/logiesbarometer>

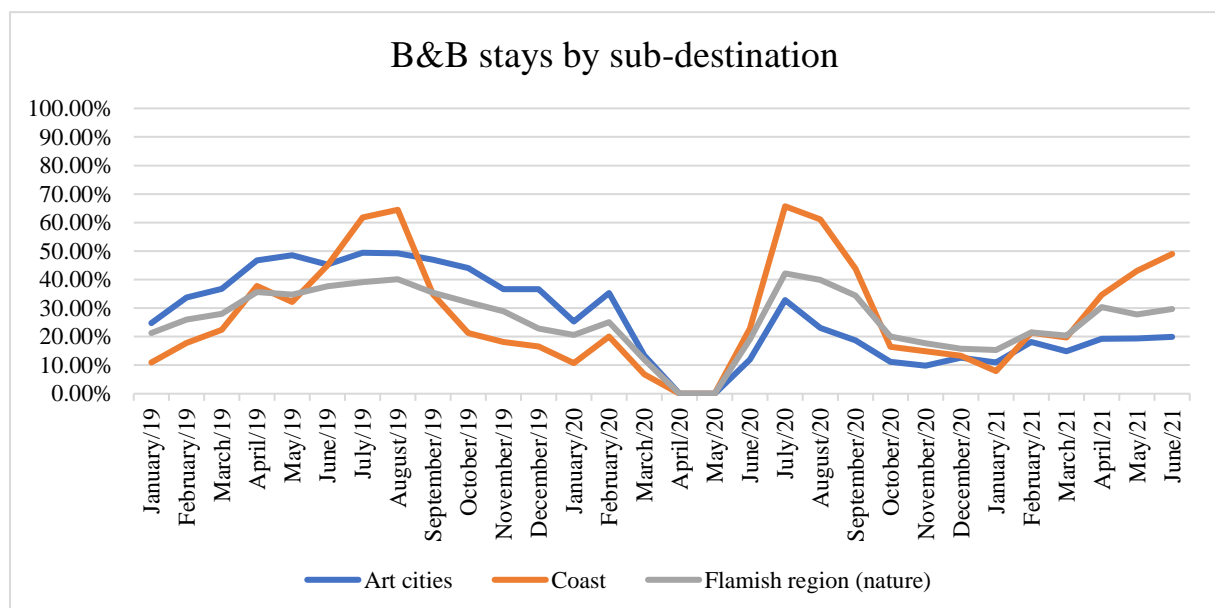


Figure 13b: Translation by author of Toerisme Vlaanderen n.d.b  
<https://www.toerismevlaanderen.be/logiesbarometer>

### 6.3. Phase 3: Post-COVID-19; long-term strategies

Looking at three scenarios for the long-term recovery and outcome as described in the theoretical framework, it appears that most prefer a 'transformed business' or 'business as usual' outcome. One of the cities (Ghent) thinks that a 'business as usual' is most likely'. This could be explained by the fact that this is the only city that participated where there is some

'overtourism'. Among the other participating cities there is no feeling that an opportunity has been missed, but then again COVID-19 has not been the 'turning point' for tourism with respect to sustainability. COVID-19 does seem to have accelerated things that would otherwise have taken place in the long-term, such as making the industry more sustainable and hybrid conventions. This leads to the fact that the category 'business as unusual' was not filled in by many participants (e.g., Leiden) or only to a limited extent (e.g., Arnhem and Leuven). During the workshops it became clear each time that no shocking changes were brought about by COVID-19 for the simple reason that changes based on a clear focus of the vision on sustainable tourism had already started before COVID-19.

At a higher level of abstraction, it is expected that something will change with regard to the mentality of tourists rather than the tourism industry itself. It is expected that, because of COVID-19, tourists are (have become) more aware of their own actions. On the other hand, participants are sometimes worried about too much behavioral change in tourists. A participant from Mechelen hopes that COVID-19 will not lead to 'travelshaming' (the shame to travel). Travel is seen as an added value for a city, provided tourism is looked at differently. All participating cities were, to varying degrees, before COVID-19 already working on the sustainability of the tourism industry and quality tourism by focusing on target groups and less on economic value. Investments are needed to enable adjustments towards the future, which need to come mainly from top-down. For the moment, many entrepreneurs are mainly concerned with staying afloat and there is no money and time left to look at research and translate it into their own business. In addition, financial resources are needed to maintain a diverse offering and ensure that not only the big players remain. This is a scenario that is perceived as real by Ghent. Already before the pandemic, it was clear that the time of small players who are not professional is over. At the moment, with the COVID-19 crisis, the fear is that it is no longer possible to keep small entrepreneurs afloat. In Ghent, the role of scaling up and globalization has been visible in the city for some time. Globalization is already so pervasive in the city that it can no longer be stopped. Other cities, including Mechelen, think that this can be reversed by opting for local entrepreneurs. It is mentioned that it is important to make partners aware that quantity is not always better. This is easier when dealing with local partners instead of organizations that are further away from the city. However, given the participating cities that mention this, this seems easier to accomplish if tourism development has not yet reached full maturity.

It is thought by most participating municipalities that cities will not be the first choice of tourists. In times of the lockdown of 2020 this has been the case, but participants of Leiden also mentioned that at the time the rules were relaxed, visitors quickly returned to the city. The expectation is that this will happen again in the summer of 2021 under the condition that some measures such as the one-and-a-half-meter distance remain. Although the participants did not expect this to apply to all people and some would make the trade-off of not coming, this will not be visible in how busy the city is. In Flanders, occupancy rates in cities during the 2020 summer season had certainly not recovered, and the expectation is that this will not happen in 2021 either. Solutions to attract people back to the city is to combine them with the region. By combining the city with the surrounding area and villages, this not only ensures

that tourists are more dispersed and overcome the problem of 'overtourism' this also ensures that the surrounding area benefits from the tourist industry. An example of this is the previously mentioned 'Region of Surprises', a project of Leiden in which they connect the city and the coast. Arnhem would like to position itself as the sustainable gateway to the Veluwe and region through a good train station, bus connections and electric bicycles. Many of these facilities already existed, but Arnhem wants to expand them further. It is also seen as a way of sparing nature, namely by getting more people to travel via Arnhem Central Station or to travel to Arnhem itself. For Arnhem it is also important, in a 'business as usual' scenario, that the city helps to maintain that natural capital and find balance in nature. COVID-19 increased pressure on the quality of nature in the Veluwe because of the restrictions that were in place. People felt (think) that they have the right to use nature, forgetting that it also comes at a price. Keeping the natural capital intact and ensuring that the peace and silence for the animals is not disturbed is seen as a 'business as usual' scenario. Mechelen also refers very explicitly to the green environment, but more as a potential that still has to be developed. Leuven does not refer to the (green) environment, while Ghent wants to further develop the potential within the city. However, this is also a process that has been going on since before the pandemic.

Four of the five cities mentioned that the greatest uncertainty lay in the recovery of business tourism. Business tourism is one of the most important sub sectors within tourism for several cities, as this group generates the most overnight stays. COVID-19 has made people discover the online possibilities and benefits in full. Still, various cities think that when it is possible again, congresses and meetings will take place in a hybrid way. It is mentioned that participants will meet physically, because of the need for people to meet and talk informally in each other's company over some food or a drink. Speakers, on the other hand, will no longer fly over for a presentation but will rather give it via live-streaming is the expectation. For one of the Dutch cities, physical conferences are already planned post-COVID-19. This is positive for the economic importance of the city. It is important to make a distinction between congresses and international business travel. Of the latter, only 80% are expected to recover. Large international companies are making huge cuts in their travel budgets. COVID-19 has made it clear that meetings can also take place online. Large companies with offices in multiple locations may still hold a large physical corporate meeting once a year and hold the rest of their meetings online. This change has been indicated by large companies, which, for example, provide many hotel bookings in Leiden.

## 7. Conclusion

Globalization has changed the nature of international tourism in such a way that it became one of the biggest and most important sectors for many states. International tourists arrivals increased from 25 million in 1950 to 1323 million in 2017 and the forecast by the UNWTO was that this will reach a level of 1.8 billion international arrivals by the year of 2030. With the outbreak of COVID-19, a worldwide pandemic, the world and the tourism industry came to a standstill. NPI's that had been implanted to reduce the spread of the virus revealed the world's economic dependency on the tourism industry. As a result of travel restrictions and lockdowns, the UNWTO reported that a 22% decrease in international tourism and the loss of 67 million international arrivals has led to a loss of \$80 billion in 2020. This fall in international tourism could further increase from 58% to 78% less arrivals of international tourists if the travel restrictions and border closures last. Because of these losses, governments are desperate to develop exit strategies to allow host and receiving countries to ease or lift travel restrictions as quickly as possible.

The tourism industry is not only beneficial for destinations. One of the fiercest criticisms of tourism is the massification of those destinations and the damage this causes in both the cities and natural environments. 'Overtourism' is not a new problem and has been studied since 1975, but the empty streets in normally overcrowded cities caused by COVID-19 led citizens and researchers to rethink the concept of 'overtourism'. The growth of tourism in recent decades and the forecast of growth in tourist numbers led to more attention to this phenomenon. Another difficulty that came to the attention was the negative effects of tourism on climate change and the attempts to reach the SDGs. The limitations of tourists flow has resulted in many environmental gains such as a better air quality, less pollution on beaches, less use of natural sources, a decline in primary energy use and reduction in the global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. However, the pandemic has been beneficial for the environment and the SDGs associated with it, there are still concerns that COVID-19 has slowed down the progress to reach other SDGs. Researchers reported that two-thirds of the 169 targets will not be reached by 2030 due to the pandemic. This is because of economic losses of states and the drop in employment in tourism dependent countries. There is a need to find a balance after COVID-19, despite the fact that it seems that organizations and governments will prioritize rebuilding to recover from economic losses as soon as possible. Instead, the global tourism committee calls for a collective response to not only simply recover, but to focus on 'grow back better' which includes awareness of 'overtourism' and climate change.

The spread of the COVID-19 virus has turned into a worldwide crisis, and a crisis management approach has been chosen to investigate how different municipalities in the Netherlands and Flemish-Belgium took action in the different stages of this model. This has been done to answer the question; *are (urban) destinations, such as in the Netherlands and Belgium, working on post-COVID-19 strategies and actions, and to what extent the pandemic proved (proves) to be a momentum to do things differently?* The first phase was approached differently in the

workshops than in the theoretical framework, which is called the preparation phase. This was done because it emerged in the literature, but also during the workshops, that there was no plan ready for a crisis like COVID-19. The urban destinations in this investigation were selected – and this also became clear from the workshop – because they cannot be considered as international top-destinations and therefore did (do) not suffer from specific problems such as ‘overtourism’ before the pandemic started, except for Ghent which can be considered as ‘an edge case’. However, all participants indicated that they were working on the (predicted) growth in visitor numbers to keep the residents of their own city pleased and to maintain support for the industry. Although there was no prior contingency planning for such a pandemic, all cities moved quickly to crisis management, with an initial focus on communication – not at least as an intermediate level between local stakeholders and higher authorities – and supporting businesses.

The next phase, response, takes place right after a crisis hits and might be the most critical phase to determine the outcome of a crisis. In this phase crisis managers, and in the case of COVID-19 the government, make decisions that may save lives and mitigate the effects of the crisis. Many governments and destinations – such as the cases in this thesis – have been providing stimulus packages and interventions to ensure the viability and continuity of tourism firms and jobs. Communication and cooperation are maybe the most important factors for the success of the policy in the response phase. Research shows that communication prior, during, and after a crisis is one of the most powerful factors in determining the effectiveness of crisis management and the long-term effects of a crisis. An organization or government needs to provide what is called instructing information that represents what stakeholders need and want to know after a crisis hits. There are three types of instruction information. First, the crisis basic information about what, when, where, why and how of the crisis. Second, how the crisis will affect the lives of stakeholders and how they can protect themselves from harm. Third, what the organization or in the case of COVID-19 the government is doing to correct the crisis. In the theoretical framework, multiple challenges can be found in the different stages of crisis response communication. One was explicitly mentioned by one of the participating municipalities and took place in the first stage of communication. At the start of the crisis, little was known about the situation which made it difficult for the municipality to give the necessary information to companies since they themselves did not know what to communicate.

About the second, cooperation, is less mentioned in literature, but was seen by both the Dutch and Belgian municipalities as one of the most important factors during the response and recovery phase. Not only did more collaboration take place within the different cities, but also with higher policy levels. Examples of this cooperation are crisis teams and cooperation with other (Flemish) municipalities facilitated by *Toerisme Vlaanderen* (Tourism Flanders). Some of these collaborations already existed prior to the crisis, and this proved to be crucial. Despite the fact that collaborations proved to be necessary and were generally perceived as positive, there were also instances of unfortunate initiatives due to a lack of communication. It is significant to work together, not to impose actions. The fair is that when cooperation is no longer a need, but a nice-to-have, it will disappear in the background.

To control the spread of the COVID-19 virus, different measurements were taken. Most of the measurements led to travel restrictions and closing of the travel industry. Financial and human capital resources became available to support the industry. Due to the travel restrictions, international travel was no longer possible, and the focus changed to domestic tourists or own (region) residents. Domestic tourism will boost the resumption of the tourism industry in the wake of the pandemic before international travel can resume. However, domestic travel only becomes important for governments when international travel is negatively affected, as in the case of a pandemic. Governments and destination managers often prefer foreign visitors who are associated with higher spending capacities and foreign exchange. The project '*Vlaanderen Vakantieland 2.0*', a project of Toerisme Vlaanderen (Tourism Flanders) together with the different Flemish cities, was founded to jointly attract more tourists. In the first place from citizens from Flanders and Wallonia, but this can later be extended to the international tourist market. More regional projects were launched in the Netherlands to attract domestic tourists to the city and the region. Multiple municipalities try to spread tourism in the city to the region to overcome the problem of 'overtourism' and let the surrounding area benefit from the tourist industry. Domestic travel can be a (short-term) solution for the recovery of tourism, which is expected to bounce back earlier in the wake of the pandemic than international travel.

For most of the participating cities, the greatest uncertainty lies with business tourism. For many of the cities, this is an important sub sector as it provides many overnight stays. It is expected that conferences will mostly take a hybrid form in the future. COVID-19 has shown the importance of meeting each other offline and informal conversations. This is visible in Leiden, where congresses are already planned. It is significant to make a distinction between congresses and international business travel. Of the latter, only 80% are expected to recover.

Despite tourism having many negative effects on (urban) destinations by 'overtourism' and the environment, it is still an important economy. The hope is that, in addition to 'flight shaming', something like 'travel shaming' will not arise. Travel is seen as an added value for a city, provided tourism is looked at differently. It is thought by most participating municipalities that cities will not be the first choice of tourists in time and after COVID-19. Solutions to attract people back to the city is to combine them with the region. By combining the city with the surrounding area and villages, this not only ensures that tourists are more dispersed, and overcome the problem of 'overtourism'. It also ensures that the surrounding area benefits from the tourist industry.

To answer the question: *are (urban) destinations, such as in the Netherlands and Belgium, working on post-COVID-19 strategies and actions, and to what extent the pandemic proved (proves) to be a momentum to do things differently?* it is necessary to take a look at the three possible outcomes of COVID-19 and likeability which are investigated during the workshops and in this thesis; 'business as usual', 'transformed business' and 'business as unusual'. It seems that the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery did not really lead to a significant revision of the vision of tourism and strategic development because it was largely unnecessary by the fact that in the objectives focus and guiding principles most cities were already noticing that they were no longer acting from a neo-liberal frame of mind and were already thinking much more in the



direction of ‘tourism in balance’, with a focus on local livability and quality. This is why most of the participants prefer a ‘transformed business’ or ‘business as usual’ outcome, where the path embarked upon continues to be pursued. All participating cities were pre-COVID-19, to varying degrees, engaged in making the tourism industry more sustainable. Each city is doing this in its own way. For some, this new path pre-COVID-19 meant that the ‘business as unusual’ scenario was not fulfilled, as there was no clear turnaround in tourism visible in policy. Others did fill out the scenario of ‘business as unusual’ precisely, because they want to continue on this newly chosen path. For this, it is important to consciously decide, together with partners, specific target groups that fit the goals of the different cities and not to choose the tourist with the most economic value. It can therefore be said that COVID-19 was not the ‘trigger’ needed to significantly change the sector, but that this shift was already underway for some time due to the problems of ‘overtourism’ and (negative) climate effects. In short, COVID-19 may not be the turning point for the tourism industry, but can help to achieve sustainable goals sooner. This is not entirely negative as the different cities indicated that they were already working on tourist management before COVID-19 to prevent ‘overtourism’ – even though it was not yet an issue – in the future. In addition, participating municipalities were in varying degrees working on the sustainability of tourism in the city prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. However, to achieve this, top-down actions are needed for innovations in this industry, because many organizations have neither time or money to achieve this by themselves and probably will give priority to the recovery from economic loss.

### *7.1. Further research*

The future will show what tourism will look like post-covid. Unfortunately, we don't have a crystal ball at our disposal. At the time of writing this thesis, we are still in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis with a fourth wave (November/December 2021) which makes it difficult to forecast the outcome and depends on several (unknown) variables. One of the questions is how long tourist destinations will be able to cope with the economic shortage and how willing they will be, when the COVID-19 finally ends, to invest in a more sustainable form of tourism. The same applies to the municipalities and governments, the importance of management by these authorities has been demonstrated during the workshops to make sustainability of the tourism industry possible.

This research looked at (urban) tourism destinations which cannot be considered international top-destinations and therefore did (do) not suffer from specific problems such as ‘overtourism’ before the pandemic started, except for Ghent which can be considered as ‘an edge case’. The expectation is that destinations that are international top-destinations, will have a different view on the possible outcomes. It is known that inhabitants of Venice have tried to stop cruise ships. On the other hand, one of the participants from the Netherlands mentioned that Amsterdam is investing money to attract tourists again.

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