



Impact Evaluation of GSTC Certification:

Insights from the
Türkiye Sustainable Tourism Program

GSTC Impact Report 2024
By GSTC Accreditation

Introduction

In recent years, the tourism industry has become more aware of resource depletion, increased waste, and environmental damage. As the industry grows, consumer demand for environmentally friendly services also increases, which makes sustainability a significant priority for tourism entities. Tourism businesses that want to remain competitive have started to pay more attention to sustainability. According to Velaoras et al. (2024), there has been a significant increase in the use of sustainability certificates in the hospitality sector to reduce environmental impacts and increase operational efficiency. A sustainability certificate is a document given to businesses that comply with specific standards, confirming in writing that these businesses fulfill their environmental responsibilities (Graci & Dodds, 2015).

In 2022, Türkiye Tourism Promotion and Development Agency (TGA), official tourism board of Türkiye operating under auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, signed a collaboration agreement with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) and adopted the GSTC Industry Standard, which serves as the cornerstone of Türkiye's Sustainable Tourism Program and forms the basis for nationwide sustainable tourism certification across the industry. The same year, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism announced a national program and made sustainability certification mandatory for all hotels in the tourism sector.

TGA, the owner of the program, defines the purpose of the program as "Utilizing the supply resources of tourism including natural, cultural, and social aspects by considering the balance of protection-utilization and developing and globally promoting these aspects without jeopardizing any of them, has been improving national sustainable tourism standards in cooperation with its domestic and international stakeholders" (Türkiye Tourism Promotion and Development Agency, 2022). The program consists of three stages, requiring different compliance levels with the GSTC Standard. The third stage mandated by the government, which requires full compliance with the GSTC Standard and is equivalent to GSTC Certification, shall be achieved by all hotels by 2030 (Türkiye Tourism Promotion and Development Agency, 2023).

Considering that approximately 22,000 hotels are operating in the country, Türkiye stands out as an important case in understanding the impacts and outcomes of GSTC Certification.

GSTC aims to examine hotels' attitudes toward GSTC Certification, along with the benefits and challenges encountered throughout the certification process. The findings derived from the Türkiye sample are expected to contribute to a comprehensive evaluation of the impacts of GSTC Certification. A mixed-methods approach has been adopted, consisting of two phases.

The first phase employs a quantitative methodology and is currently in the data analysis stage. A survey designed to assess the impact of the GSTC Certification has been distributed to hotels in Türkiye. Upon completion of data collection, the findings will be analyzed and presented in the final report.

The second phase adopts a qualitative approach to explore the impacts of certification more deeply. This phase involves data collection through focus group discussions, which provide valuable insights into the impacts of the GSTC Certification. The results of the focus group interviews are presented in this report, highlighting both the benefits and areas for improvement in the certification process.

Given that the Türkiye Program represents one of GSTC's most significant collaborations and the number of GSTC-certified hotels is rapidly increasing, the research findings are crucial for assessing its effectiveness and the sustainability outcomes it fosters.

Note. The GSTC Certification uses the Türkiye Sustainable Tourism Industry Criteria, which is the GSTC-Recognized Standard in Türkiye. However, this report refers to it as the "GSTC Standard" for global market applications.

Methodology

Focus group interviews allow interviewees to share their common experiences, interact with each other, and express their thoughts in more depth. GSTC conducted two focus group interviews to understand the experiences, perceptions, and difficulties faced by the hotels within the scope of the Türkiye Sustainable Tourism Program regarding the sustainability certification process.

Seven people have participated, representing 47 hotels under five hotel groups operating in Türkiye. The interviewees are hotel managers and employees who directly contribute to sustainability practices.

The seven representatives were divided into two groups based on the certified status of the hotels: GSTC-certified and non-GSTC-certified. Non-GSTC-certified hotels can be classified as small entities preparing for certification. The interviews with these entities aimed to understand the benefits and challenges experienced by a small entity in the Türkiye Sustainable Tourism Program which is the GSTC Certification. The findings from this focus group interview were given separately at the end of the Results section, as they were more related to the Türkiye Sustainable Tourism Program process. Two focus group interviews were conducted for approximately 70 minutes, respectively.

The questions for the focus group interviews were created based on the requirements determined by ISEAL (2023) as follows:

- Scheme Effectiveness (whether components of the scheme are working as intended)
- Scheme Sustainability Performance (whether the scheme contributes to its intended sustainability outcomes and impacts)
- Client Performance (whether clients demonstrate improved practices and/or sustainability outcomes and impacts in alignment with the scheme's objectives)
- Unintended Negative Impacts (occurrence of unintended negative effects)

The questions used in the focus group interviews are presented in Annex 1.

The qualitative data obtained were evaluated using the thematic analysis method. Interview records were carefully noted during the analysis, and detailed meeting notes were created. Recurring expressions and concepts that stood out in the data were coded, and the coded data were grouped to create meaningful themes. The identified themes were reviewed regarding their consistency with the research questions and ISEAL requirements and mapped to the relevant requirements. The identified themes were supported and reported in the results section with sample participant statements. In this way, the research findings were compatible with the requirements set forth by ISEAL. GSTC researchers analyzed the data, and the consistency between the codes was evaluated. The perceptions and experiences of hotels in Türkiye regarding the GSTC-Certification process were examined in depth, and the identified themes were analyzed within the framework of ISEAL requirements (ISEAL, 2023).



Results

The findings are organized according to the themes under the 4 ISEAL requirements, with relevant quotations provided to support each category. The analysis provides a comprehensive examination of each theme, offering insights into the broader context of the study.

The eleven themes that emerged as a result of the data analysis are listed below:

Table 1: 11 themes matched with ISEAL requirements

ISEAL Requirements	GSTC Certification Impacts in 11 Themes
Scheme Effectiveness	Learning process through certification preparation and experiencing actual audits Guidance on sustainable performance through the GSTC Standard
Scheme Sustainability Performance	Increased awareness regarding sustainability Positive impact on the supply chain Increased competitive advantage
Client Performance	Improvement in employee rights Contribution to the local economy Improved risk management Measuring energy and water consumption
Unintended Negative Impacts	Conflicting nature of luxury tourism and sustainability Dissatisfaction among guests and employees

As previously outlined, the data obtained through focus group interviews were analyzed and categorized using the thematic analysis method to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and challenges encountered by hotels participating in the Türkiye Sustainable Tourism Program regarding the GSTC Certification process. The themes identified from this analysis highlight key dimensions of hotels' adaptation to GSTC Certification, their efforts to enhance sustainability performance, and the role of certification in fostering employee and guest awareness.

Moreover, the findings reveal both anticipated and unforeseen effects of certification. While improvements in sustainability practices and increased awareness were expected, the study also identified additional benefits, such as positive impacts on supply chain dynamics and enhanced competitive advantage. Conversely, potential challenges were also noted, including conflicts between luxury tourism and sustainability requirements.

Results of the interview with the certified hotel representatives

Scheme Effectiveness

From the scheme effectiveness aspect, important findings can be categorized as the learning process through audits and the clear guidance the GSTC criterion Standard provides. Interviewees emphasized that audits performed within the GSTC Certification are crucial in fostering a learning environment. While the primary purpose of audits is to assess compliance with the GSTC Standard, they also serve as an opportunity for certified businesses to identify areas for improvement. The audit process also highlights non-conformities, enabling organizations and employees to recognize gaps in their practices and enhance their sustainability efforts over time. This contributes to continuous improvement in compliance. These elements demonstrate how well the certification scheme works, ensuring that certified organizations meet sustainability requirements and benefit from a structured and supportive process.

"Nitelikli denetçilerden öğrenmek bizim için çok önemli." (Interviewee 1)

"It is very important for us to learn from qualified auditors." (Interviewee 1)

Additionally, interviewees reported that the GSTC Standard offers clear and structured guidance for implementing sustainable practices. More than just an evaluative process, these audits also play a role in ongoing improvement by helping hotels identify gaps and areas for enhancement in their sustainability efforts. The process naturally supports learning by providing indirect learning opportunities, during which hotels receive direct feedback through audit reports. This structured framework helps hotels to navigate sustainability requirements more efficiently and align their operations with global best practices.

Scheme Sustainability Performance

In the context of scheme sustainability performance, findings indicate that GSTC Certification significantly contributes to sustainability outcomes and impacts, particularly in terms of increased awareness regarding sustainability, positive impact on the supply chain, and increased competitive advantage. These outputs from interviewees indicate that certification is more than just compliance; it is a tool that promotes economic resilience, environmental responsibility, and social interaction.

The second important outcome of focus group interviews is the increased sustainability awareness among employees and guests, encouraging behavioral changes that benefit both the environment and business operations. Interviewees pointed out that training sessions, sustainability communication strategies, and the visibility of good practices support a shift in mindset, contributing to more responsible behavior among staff and visitors.

"Sertifikayı almak misafir ve çalışanda farkındalık yarattı." (Interviewee 3)

"Becoming a certified organization created awareness among guests and employees." (Interviewee 3)

Interviewees highlighted that prioritizing local products and fostering relationships with local communities are key benefits of certification, supporting economic sustainability. This process, which encourages businesses to source locally, shows that the certification process pushes supply chains to transform their business in line with the increasing demand for sustainable and local products from accommodation facilities.

"Yerel ürünlere öncelik verdik, yerel halkla ilişkiler arttı, yerel ekonomiye katkı büyüdü." (Interviewee 2)

"We prioritized local products, local public relations have been improved, and contribution to the local economy increased." (Interviewee 2)

Additionally, the competitive advantage of the GSTC Certification was widely recognized, particularly in international markets. Interviewees mentioned that having the certification is a significant factor in sales and marketing discussions.

"Satış pazarlama görüşmelerinde GSTC Sertifikasına sahip olup olmadığımızı soruyorlar." (Interviewee 2)

"In sales and marketing meetings, they ask whether we have GSTC Certification." (Interviewee 2)



Client Performance

From a client performance perspective, key findings include improvements in employee rights, contribution to the local economy, improved risk management, and measuring energy and water consumption.

Interviewees noted that compliance with the GSTC Standard has led to tangible improvements in employee rights, particularly regarding education, benefits, and working conditions. As a requirement of the GSTC Certification, hotels shall prove during the audit process that they provide a safe and secure environment to their employees and that they provide the necessary opportunities, experience, and regular training for advancement to obtain the certificate. As stated by the interviewee, complying with the GSTC Standard improves in employee rights.

*"GSTC Sertifikasyonu için yapılan denetimlerin en önemli çıktısı personel hakları oldu."
(Interviewee 3)*

"The most important outcome of the audits conducted for GSTC Certification is improvement in employee rights." (Interviewee 3)

Moreover, the certification process has increased hotels' awareness of sustainability-related risks, such as water scarcity. Interviewees reported that undergoing GSTC audits have encouraged hotel management to integrate risk management strategies into hotel operations.

"Su kıtlığı büyük risk, risk analizleri işin ciddiyetini anlamamıza sebep oldu." (Interviewee 5)

"Water scarcity is a big risk, thanks to risk analysis with the GSTC Certification, we understood the importance of this risk." (Interviewee 5)

Another important aspect of GSTC Certification is the improvement in measuring and tracking energy and water consumption required to obtain certification. Interviewees expressed that implementing data-driven strategies to monitor consumption, which is very important, has led to better resource optimization and financial benefits.

"Tüketim verileriyle ilgili ölçme çok büyük fayda sağladı." (Interviewee 4)

"With the certification, measurement of consumption data has been very beneficial for hotel operation." (Interviewee 4)



Unintended Negative Impacts

Despite its many benefits, interviewees highlighted the unintended negative impacts of the GSTC Certification. These impacts have been described as sustainability actions, which are not always applicable, conflicts between sustainability and luxury tourism, and dissatisfaction among guests and employees.

Some interviewees expressed challenges in meeting specific sustainability requirements, as certain auditor expectations may be difficult to implement in practice due to guest service demands. This discrepancy may also result from subtle differences in auditors' interpretations of the criteria, despite their training and experience. However, these variations can be minimized through clear and consistent guidance provided by the certification scheme.

"Bazı denetçilerin talepleri, lüks otellerde uygulanabilir olmayabiliyor." (Interviewee 3)

"Some auditors' requests in the context of audits may not be applicable in luxury hotels." (Interviewee 3)

Based on the outcomes of focus meetings, one of the key challenges identified is the perceived conflict between luxury hospitality and sustainability requirements. Some certification-related sustainability measures may not fully align with the expectations and preferences of luxury hotel guests, creating potential barriers to implementation. For example, guests often perceive services such as daily towel changes and room cleaning as hallmarks of luxury. It is stated that some guests may perceive sustainability measures, such as reduced towel changes and the removal of single-use plastics, as service deficiencies, leading to dissatisfaction.

"Lüks konseptle sürdürülebilirlik bazen çelişebiliyor." (Interviewee 1)

"Luxury and sustainability can sometimes conflict." (Interviewee 1)

"Pipet konusu, havlu ve çarşafarla ilgili çok tepkiler alıyoruz." (Interviewee 3)

"We get a lot of complaints about no provision of straw and no daily change of towels and linens." (Interviewee 3)

Another unintended negative impact raised by interviewees can be described as the indifference and weariness shown by employees and guests regarding the issue of sustainability. They noted that repeatedly implementing the same sustainability practices can reduce employees' motivation over time. While it is positive that hotels continue to prioritize sustainability, it also highlights the need for effective strategies to maintain the engagement and interest of both employees and guests.

"Personeller bu konudan sıkılıyor." (Interviewee 2)

"Staff get bored of sustainability matter." (Interviewee 2)



Results of the interview with the non-GSTC-certified hotel representatives

The interview with the two non-GSTC-certified hotels revealed the following: The challenges they identified pertain not to the GSTC certification process itself but rather to the implementation of the program in Türkiye; The interviewees shared two main difficulties for small businesses in applying for the first-level verification process, particularly related to the lack of information about the process and the high consultancy costs.

These two small entities stated they were not provided with sufficient information. Although these entities generally understood the requirements of the criteria provided by the GSTC, it was stated that there was a lack of clear guidance on how to manage the process. In particular, it was stated that despite the government's mandatory program, applicants were not provided with sufficient information, and they had to contact other previously certified hotels to access accurate information. They stated they had difficulty determining which person or institution they could get support from throughout the process. Due to the lack of precise guidance mechanism from the beginning of the application, they had to manage the process independently.

On the other hand, within the scope of the Türkiye Sustainable Tourism Program, informational materials of the program, including a model of sustainable management system and documentation samples for accommodation facilities, have been made publicly available on the TGA website with the aim of minimizing the need for consultancy services. Therefore, this gap may have resulted from potential problems such as inefficient communication, lack of engagement, or technological deficiencies.

“Hiçbir yerde açıklama yok, devlet bu sertifikayı almamızı istiyor ama bizi bilgilendirmiyor” (Interviewee 6)

“There is no provided guidance anywhere, the government wants us to get the GSTC Certificate but does not provide sufficient information” (Interviewee 6)

“Süreç hakkında ayrıntılı bilgi sağlanmıyor. Bu belirsizlik nedeniyle zorluk yaşıyoruz” (Interviewee 7)

“There is no detailed information about the process. We are experiencing difficulties due to this uncertainty and lack of information” (Interviewee 7)

Additionally, they emphasized that they were directed to consultants throughout the process but that consultancy companies were costly for small businesses. Although audit fees are reasonable for small businesses, consulting costs are understood to make the process more challenging to access.



“Danışmanlardan destek almayı düşündük ancak yüksek maliyetleri nedeniyle küçük işletmeler için erişilebilir değil” (Interviewee 7)

“We have considered getting support from consultants, but due to their high costs, consultancy service is not accessible for small businesses” (Interviewee 7)

The difficulties experienced by businesses that have not yet started the GSTC Certification process are more related to the lack of information and understanding about the program and how to comply with the GSTC Standard. It requires GSTC to provide more accessible training and guidance documents for small businesses.

Discussion

This study conducted qualitative research to understand the experiences, perceptions, and challenges hotels face within the scope of the Türkiye Sustainable Tourism Program regarding the GSTC Certification. The findings obtained through focus group interviews allowed us to understand the effects of GSTC Certification on hotels and the reflections of this process in different dimensions. The findings show that GSTC Certification offers various benefits to certified organizations. Most interviewees emphasized that they and hotel employees have the opportunity to learn about sustainability practices through the audit process, which supports the effectiveness of the certification system. Additionally, GSTC Certification has other positive effects in areas such as contributing to the local economy, increasing sustainability awareness, and improving the measurement of energy and water consumption in hotels.

On the other hand, interviewees also shared positive feedback on topics such as improving employee rights, enhancing the supply chain in the context of sustainability, and emphasizing the importance of risk management in hotel operations. However, unexpected adverse effects were also observed during the focus group meetings, such as the conflict between luxury tourism and sustainability and the dissatisfaction of some guests and employees with the certification process.

According to interviewees, certain sustainability practices, such as investment in renewable energy and elimination of single-use plastics, were not applicable to their hotels, and audit expectations were sometimes unrealistic. At this point, providing more transparent and practical guidance would benefit hotels by making it easier for them to implement sustainability criteria. In addition, importance should be given to informing guests and employees about sustainable tourism practices and highlighting their contributions to the hotel's overall service quality.

Conclusion

This research has examined the experiences of hotels within the scope of the Türkiye Sustainable Tourism Program regarding the GSTC Certification process in depth through focus group interviews and revealed the effects of the certification. The interviews revealed the positive impacts of GSTC Certification on hotels' awareness and performance.

The certification process enables hotels to implement sustainability practices more systematically, positively contributing to the local economy and environmental processes. However, the certification process may pose implementation difficulties for small hotels and impact some guests' satisfaction as unintended impacts.

The study is intended to be repeated in a longitudinal manner annually to more comprehensively examine the long-term perceptions of hotel managers, employees, and guests regarding GSTC certification and the effects of this process on financial continuity.

Annex 1

Question to know whether components of the scheme are working as intended (scheme effectiveness)

Can you describe any new opportunities or challenges that have emerged since becoming certified?

How do you feel the certification has influenced your relationship with clients, employees, or other stakeholders?

What impact do you think the certification has had on your hotel's overall commitment to sustainable practices (in a social context)?

Questions related to whether clients demonstrate improved practices and/or sustainability outcomes and impacts in alignment with the scheme's objectives (client performance)

In what ways have your hotel's practices changed since you began the certification process?

Unintended negative effects

Have you noticed any negative effects during the sustainable tourism certification process? Could you explain what those are?

Whether the scheme contributes to its intended sustainability outcomes and impacts (scheme sustainability performance)

How has the certification process affected awareness of sustainable tourism in your hotel? In what ways do you feel the GSTC Criteria contributed to this awareness?

What changes, if any, have you observed in market opportunities for sustainable tourism services? To what extent do you think the GSTC Criteria played a role in these changes?

Validity of the scheme's causal pathways and assumptions (Assumptions)

In what ways have the (GSTC Criteria) helped guide your implementation of sustainable practices?

How do you think having (GSTC Criteria) certification has influenced your hotel's position or performance in the marketplace?

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A wide-angle photograph of a hot air balloon festival. In the foreground, a large blue and yellow striped balloon is prominent. To its left, a red and white balloon with the word 'KAPALI' is visible. The background shows a vast valley with ancient stone ruins, likely in Cappadocia, Turkey. Several other hot air balloons of various colors are scattered across the sky. The sky is a pale, hazy blue.

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