

# Policy Brief 23

## Post COVID-19 Tourism: Promoting the Holy Family Trail as a Niche Religious Tourism Destination



### Background

The tourism sector constitutes a significant importance for the Egyptian economy, with a contribution of 11.9% to the GDP and a total employment of 2.49 million in 2018. The sector has different segments including both mass and niche tourism, where Egypt is heavily dependent on the former. Over the past 10 years, the sector was hammered by several internal and external intermittent hits, resulting in instability in the sector and fluctuations in its revenues that have consequently pulled down the foreign currency reserves. The current challenge of COVID-19 has introduced a new global norm that hurdled the mobility of mass tourist groups and the regular functionality of the sector in light of the imposed global travel restrictions.

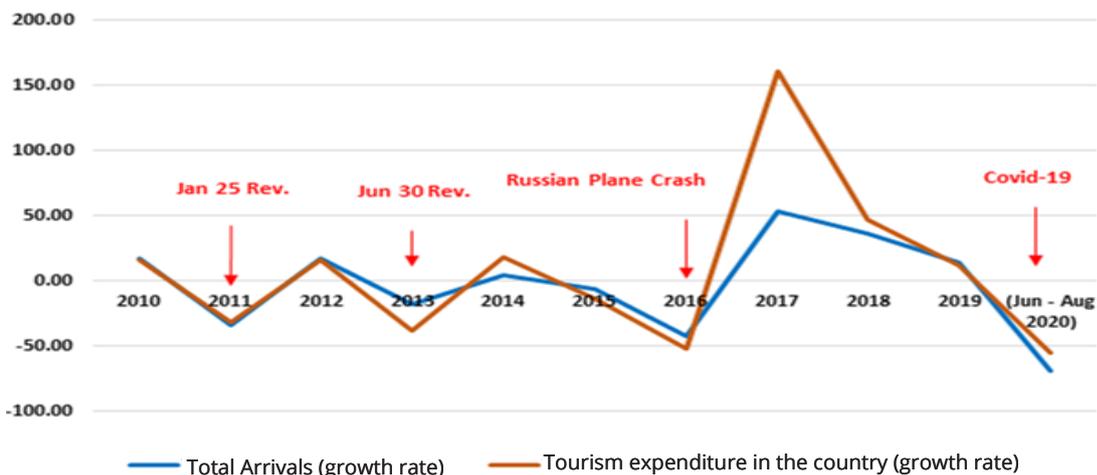


Figure 1: Performance of Tourism Sector in response to crises (2010-2020)

Despite Egypt’s tourism product portfolio diversification, Egypt relies heavily on both segments of mass tourism: recreational and cultural tourism. Given the increasing competition that characterizes the marketplace of the world’s mass tourism sector, in addition to the new normal dictated by COVID-19, there is a need to shift towards the niche tourism segments. By virtue of its nature, niche segments are less damaging, more sustainable, and more inclusive. Moreover, it generates higher revenues and expands the life cycle of tourism destinations.

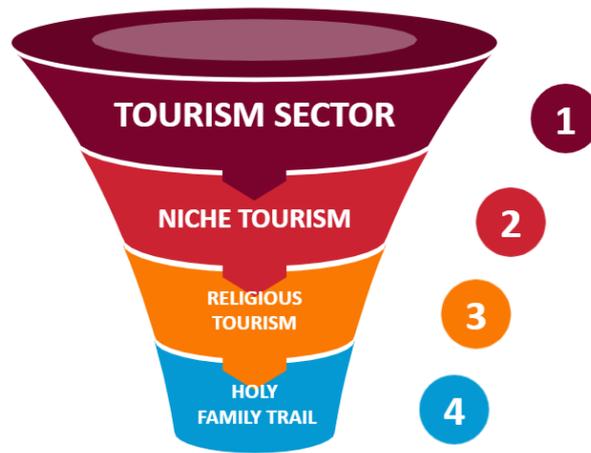


Figure 2: Funnel Approach for Tourism Niche Product Identification

Religious tourism in Egypt used to be marketed as part of cultural tourism as Egypt possesses various Islamic, Christian, and Jewish archaeological sites. However, Egypt retains the qualities that can reorient religious tourism as a niche tourism by targeting tourists who aim to visit the sacred sites to complete their pilgrimage.

The Holy Family Trail (HFT), a 3500 KM path surrounded by different monuments and attractions from Rafah, North Sinai to Assiut governorate, is a distinct product to Egypt that targets **2.4 billion** Christian pilgrims.

The promotion of the HFT must consider the current challenges prevalent in the sector, mainly:

1. The lack of sufficient amenities, infrastructure, services, transportation, and accommodations surrounding the less commonly known touristic areas, especially in Upper Egypt.
2. The underrepresentation of the HFT in the current marketing tourism campaigns of Egypt.

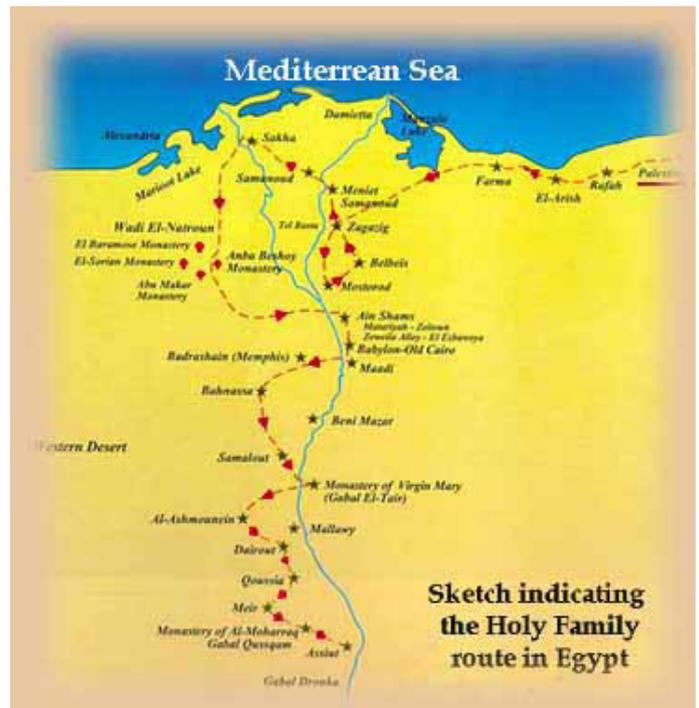


Figure 3: Map of Holy Family Route in Egypt

### Key Activities in HFT program

- A ministerial national committee was established to document the HFT to have it enlisted by UNESCO as an intangible heritage unique to Egypt.
- Tourism Development Authority designed the plan for estate development provision and rehabilitation of the areas along the HFT.
- Renovation of selected religious archeological sites along the HFT.

## Current Policies

The Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities has allocated EGP 60 million through the “Tourism and Antiquities Fund” for a program to revive the HFT. The program entails: 1) planning, 2) renovation and development, and

3) promotion and marketing activities carried out by the relevant stakeholders including the Ministry of Local Development, the Ministry of Culture, and the Egyptian Tourism Development Authority.

## Policy Alternatives

There are 3 main alternative approaches that can be adopted in introducing the HFT as a tourist destination. Policy makers need first

to identify the preferred approach before designating the policies for destinations’ development.

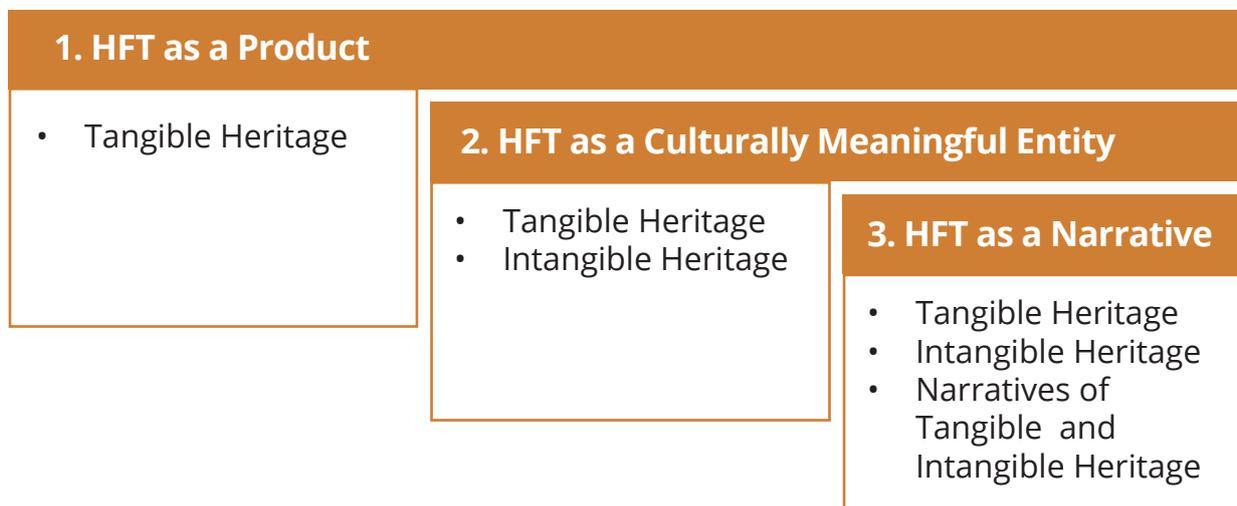


Figure 4: Approaches for HFT Policy Alternatives Design

## 1. Introducing the HFT as a 'product'

This approach focuses on the tangible heritage of the HFT, whereas the intangible one is considered as one of the destination's resources that creates an appealing atmosphere for tourism consumption of the existing tangible heritage. Hence, more attention should be paid to the physical destination of the HFT, which incorporates physical attractions in addition to accommodation, transportation, activities, and other amenities.

### Relevant Policies

Policies need to address promoting the positive experience that tourists would gain from their visit to the physical place.

- Capitalizing on mass marketing policies and making them more consistent and focused on branding the HFT as a religious tourism destination.
- Expanding the coverage and improving the services quality of traditional hotels along the HFT.
- Raising the quality of existing roads leading to the HFT areas and introducing niche transportation modes with high quality services during the journey.

## 2. Introducing the HFT as a 'culturally meaningful' entity

This approach treats a destination as an integrated set of meanings that have been developed in a dynamic process throughout the destination's history and leading to its existence in reality. Hence, more weight is placed on the intangible heritage behind the existence of the HFT, which is considered as an end, available for consumption, rather than a means for increasing tourists' satisfaction of the physical place.

### Relevant Policies

Policies here need to work mainly on introducing the place as a full-fledged package that introduces tourists not only to the tangible heritage of the place they visit, but also the intangible aspects behind its foundation.

- Adopting niche marketing policies, tailored to brand the HFT as a unique niche destination, mainly serving Christian pilgrims.
- Expanding the coverage of eco-based lodges as they are sustainable and responsible to local communities' cultural and resources.
- Introducing niche transportation modes with high quality services that enable tourists and pilgrims to experience the religious and cultural aspects of the HFT.



### 3. Introducing the HFT as a 'narrative'

This approach is a more developed form of the second one as it utilizes the power of narratives in highlighting the importance of the intangible aspect of the destination.

#### Related Policies

Policies should aim at forming the value of the place in the mind of both local communities and tourists. In addition to suggested policies in the second approach, narrative tools need to be adopted. These narratives should be disseminated in marketing campaigns, in activities held in eco-based lodges that are close to the HFT's attractions, and in different means of transportation that tourists of HFT will use.



## Policy Recommendations

By introducing a quantitative assessment of the above-mentioned alternatives, using weights for economic and technical criteria, we conclude that the culturally meaningful approach is the most fitting policy framework in addressing the unique nature of destinations across the HFT, particularly in UE. The rationale behind the selection of this approach is that tourism should be reintroduced as a full-fledged package aiming at offering tourists the experience of not only the tangible heritage of the places they visit, but also the intangible aspects behind its foundation.

Building on this, the following policies are recommended:

1. Marketing policies need to target branding the HFT as a niche tourism product to reenforce the linkage to the place in tourists' minds.
2. Providing incentives to the private sector, local communities, and individual entrepreneurs; in order to increase the eco-lodges and varying transportation modes' supply coverage along the HFT.
3. Focusing on the Minya to Assiut route could potentially take an advantage of the abundant monuments in the region, while also balancing the high demand with other leisure tourism spots in UE and across Egypt.
4. Designing and implementing tailored training programs to reduce the skills gap in the tourism services sector, with the objective of having graduates mastering the required skill set to effectively operate services' amenities across the HFT in UE.

«All the academic references used in this brief are mentioned in the policy paper.»

This brief is published by: The Public Policy Hub - GAPP School (AUC)

<https://gapp.aucegypt.edu/public-policy-hub>

Follow us on:  PublicPolicyHUB  PolicyHub  Public Policy Hub  The Public Policy HUB - AUC GAPP