



**Sustainable
tourism**

**Interreg
Euro-MED**



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Interreg Euro-MED

**The Sustainable Tourism Policy Labs effect:
A model for mainstreaming projects results**

By Dialogue4Tourism
Institutional dialogue on Sustainable Tourism
and Governance in the Euro-MED area
Sustainable Tourism Mission



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1. Introduction

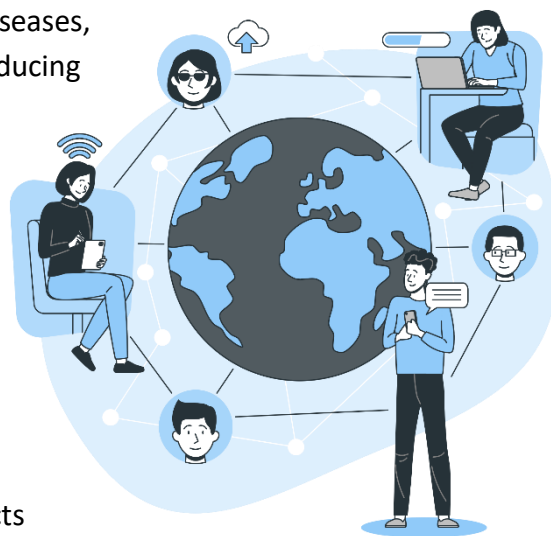
1.1 The Euro-MED Dialogue4Tourism Project

1.1.1 The Euro-MED programme and the Sustainable Tourism Mission

The **Interreg Euro-MED** is a European Territorial Cooperation Programme that supports **transnational cooperation across Mediterranean borders**. The Programme brings together **partners from sixty-nine regions of fourteen countries on the northern shore of the Mediterranean with a common objective: a climate-neutral and resilient society for the benefit of its citizens**.

The Programme funds projects willing to bring solutions to address four complementary missions and to find concrete and shared solutions to global challenges such as the transition towards a climate-neutral and resilient society. The 4 Missions are the following:

- **Strengthening an innovative, sustainable economy.** Improving innovation capacities in our Mediterranean territories is necessary to strengthen and consolidate a knowledge society.
- **Protecting, restoring and valorising the natural environment and heritage.** Nature contributes to a healthier and more resilient society. The preservation of ecosystems allows for the mitigation of natural disasters, diseases, boosts resilience and regulates climate, thus reducing risks to human societies.
- **Promoting green living areas.** Sustainable development, management of living areas and an integrated vision of the territory's energy transition are crucial to the quality of life of Mediterranean citizens.
- **Enhancing sustainable tourism.** Tourism is a key sector in our territories, both in terms of protecting and valorising natural and cultural resources and supporting their recovery. Projects under this Mission address the development of sustainable tourism as a transversal issue: fostering tourism integrated in the circular economy, considering the sustainability of ecosystem services using innovation technologies, or promoting the preservation of natural resources and cultural heritage.



The **Sustainable Tourism Mission** is one of four thematic missions under the **Interreg Euro-MED Programme 2021–2027**. It aims to reduce tourism pressures on ecosystems and local



communities, enhance governance in tourism planning and development and promote a transition to more **circular, green and resilient tourism models**. The Euro-MED scope includes partners from Southern European EU countries, non-EU Mediterranean countries and regional and local stakeholders.

1.1.2 The Euro-MED Dialogue4Tourism project and its objectives

The Euro-MED **Dialogue4Tourism** Project of the **Sustainable Tourism Mission** is one of the projects approved under the **Governance Priority** of the **Interreg Euro-MED** Programme. The Mission Enhancing Sustainable Tourism will address the development of sustainable tourism as a transversal issue:

1. Consolidating a **competitive innovation ecosystem**,
2. Supporting the **circular economy**,
3. Promoting **climate change adaptation** and risk prevention,
4. Enhancing **nature and biodiversity**.



The overall objective of the **Dialogue4Tourism** Project is to increase the **coordination level and institutional capacity of public authorities**, multi-level bodies, Programmes, Strategies and Initiatives in the Mediterranean, aiming to **transform tourism into a greener, smarter and more resilient**, embracing the fourfold approach of the mission: circularity of tourism services, environmental neutrality, sustainable ecosystem services and cultural and natural preservation of resources.

The **Dialogue4Tourism** project facilitates governance, collaboration and dialogue among public and private stakeholders to implement sustainable tourism practices. It capitalises on previous and current Thematic Projects of the Sustainable Tourism Mission.

The **Dialogue4Tourism** Project beneficiaries are primarily **public and private stakeholders** from the **Euro-Mediterranean region** involved in **tourism governance, planning and sustainability**.

The general aim is to influence public policies for transforming tourism, considering **policy makers and public authorities**, including **national, regional and local governments** responsible for tourism and environmental planning and **national tourism boards and ministries** (e.g., environment, economy, culture). Also, **tourism sector stakeholders**, such as SMEs, destination management organisations (DMOs), tour operators and tourism service providers. Universities and research



centres also figure as collaborators and beneficiaries with other Interreg Euro-MED Programme entities and partners.

1.2 The Sustainable Tourism Policy Labs effect: A model for mainstreaming project results

The **Dialogue4Tourism** Project partners support a model of **Sustainable Tourism Policy Lab** to increase public authorities' coordination and institutional capacity, mainstream the results of the Interreg Euro-MED Thematic Projects of the Sustainable Tourism Mission and improve transnational exchanges of knowledge around sustainable tourism in the Med area.



1.2.1 Objectives

The **specific objectives** of the STPLs are:

1. **Increase public authorities' coordination level and institutional capacity** in managing sustainable tourism in the Euro-MED Region and beyond.
2. **Enable mainstreaming and sustainable tourism policy transformations.**
3. **Transfer and mainstream the results of the Sustainable Tourism Mission Project's** thematic projects to the policy level.
4. **Improve public authorities' cooperation and transnational exchanges** in the MED.

These main objectives are aligned with the **Results Amplification Strategy of the Interreg Euro-MED Programme 2021-2027**. This Strategy aims to support the capitalisation of knowledge, experiences and results of projects, integrating the Programme approach to support better governance. And, in particular, with the objective 2 of this Strategy: “To encourage the transfer of practices and results to other actors and territories and their integration into local, regional, national and European policies (mainstream). Transfer is about accompanying another actor to use a resource, adopt a practice or apply a methodology or approach produced by a project. In contrast, mainstreaming is about feeding results into policy making or influencing policy through results”.

1.2.2 Target groups

The general aim is to influence public policies for transforming tourism, considering two types of targets:



- **Technical stakeholders:** partners of the Interreg Euro-MED's Thematic Projects, business support organisations (Chambers of Commerce), EGTC (European Groups of Territorial Cooperation), SMEs, Mediterranean Tourism stakeholders from the public and private sector, Associated Partners acting as receivers and stakeholders from the Southern Shore of the MED.
- **Political stakeholders:** representatives at local, regional, national and transnational **public authorities** with competencies in sustainable tourism, as well as **polymakers**.

1.2.3 Methodology

a) Stakeholder mapping and engagement

To ensure effective multi-level governance, relevant stakeholders across national, regional, and local authority levels were systematically identified and mapped. This is linked to the initial mapping of stakeholders made by Dialogue4Tourism Project. This vertical integration guarantees that the resulting policy recommendations can be seamlessly mainstreamed into broader policy frameworks. Furthermore, the selection process incorporated multi-country representation from across the Mediterranean basin, ensuring cross-border cooperation and a balanced exchange of territorial insights.

b) Co-design of training materials and operational logistics

Following structural alignment among organizers, the operational framework, dates, and venues for the Sustainable Tourism Policy Labs were scheduled to coincide with key regional, Programme's events and high-level European events to maximize attendance and institutional engagement. Ahead of each lab, a baseline pre-assessment survey was administered to participants to evaluate prior knowledge, identify capacity-building gaps, and align training outcomes with stakeholder expectations.

c) Structural framework and execution of policy lab modules

The pilot STPL framework was structured around four thematic pillars: *(i)* Tourism Governance, *(ii)* Climate Change Adaptation & Mitigation, *(iii)* Circular Economy Models, and *(iv)* Innovation in Tourism. Each lab was delivered through a two-stage sequential workflow:

- 1) Theoretical foundation & knowledge transfer:** This phase established core conceptual frameworks and highlighted relevant case studies from former Interreg Euro-MED projects



and ongoing Thematic Projects of the Sustainable Tourism Mission. Delivered via interactive presentations, these key insights served as the technical foundation for the practical exercise, with all supporting materials distributed to participants for capitalisation.

2) Practical application & policy co-creation: Participants were divided into working groups to practically apply thematic tools—including sustainable tourism indicators, circular economy principles, and innovative solutions—to a regional case study tailored to the hosting territory. Working groups prioritized interventions and formulated strategic pathways to enhance local resilience, mitigate climate impacts, and foster sustainable socio-economic growth.

d) Data synthesis and output reporting

Following the conclusion of each STPL, qualitative and quantitative data gathered during the sessions were consolidated to inform the development of a comprehensive Synthetic Report.

2. Design & setup of the Sustainable Tourism Policy Labs (STPLs)

2.1 The Euro-Mediterranean tourism institutional and governance framework

The Euro-Mediterranean tourism institutional and governance framework has been analysed alongside the Interreg Euro-Med projects to inform the selection of key concepts for the theoretical session of the STPLs.

The main international policy instruments related to the Barcelona Convention and some examples of Mediterranean regional governance have been analysed, along with regional sustainable tourism initiatives. The analysis of the institutional framework included the review of the main European and Mediterranean Strategies and regulations. For the European side, the study embraced documents and laws such as [Transition Pathway for Tourism](#), [European Green Deal \(EGD\) Strategy](#), [National energy and climate plans - European Commission](#), [EU Urban Agenda Sustainable Tourism Partnership](#), [Next Generation, EU](#), [Recovery and Resilience Facility](#), [Just Transition Fund \(JTF\)](#), [EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region](#), [EU Strategy and Flagship Mission “Adaptation to Climate Change”](#), [EU 2050 long-term strategy for Climate Neutral Europe and the Mission of](#)





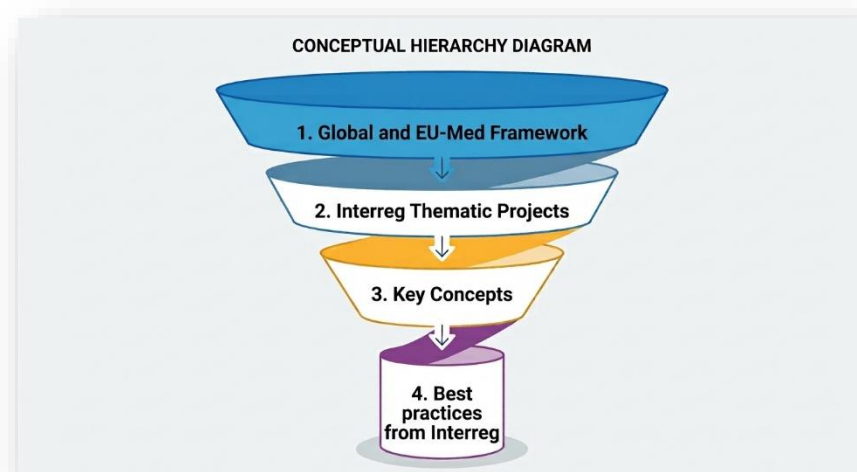
[100 Climate Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030](#), [Transforming the EU's Blue Economy for a Sustainable Future](#).

The Mediterranean institutional and policy framework review included the [Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development \(2016-2025\)](#), [UNEP/MAP Medium Term Strategy 2022-2027](#), [Barcelona Declaration “Better places to live, better places to visit”](#) and [The Med Declaration for a smarter and greener sustainable tourism ecosystem in the Mediterranean region](#).

Some work of European and Mediterranean initiatives has also been analysed, looking mainly at [WestMed](#), [Union for the Mediterranean](#), [Blue Tourism Initiative in the Mediterranean](#), [Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories \(NSTO HUB\)](#) and [Mediterranean Observatory on Environment and Sustainable Development \(Plan Bleu\)](#).

2.2 Identification of key concepts

Emerging from this analysis, for the development of the testing STP Labs, four key concepts have been identified and organised in the following modules:



- i) Sustainable tourism and regional governance,
- ii) Climate change,
- iii) Tourism innovation and
- iv) Circular economy in tourism.

Table 1 below shows the organisation of these concepts by Module, a list of the Interreg projects selected for their relevance to the topics, and the related case studies chosen as best practices to ground theoretical knowledge in practical examples.

Table 1. STPLs Modules contents:



Module	Key Concepts	Interreg projects	In the Practical Session
I	Sustainable Tourism and Regional Governance	- BEST MED - MITOMED+	MitoMED+ / BEST MED
II	Tourism and Climate Change	- D4T White paper - HERIT ADAPT - Cool Noons	–
III	Circular Economy in Tourism	- Med Cluster CE - MED-Routes - INCIRCLE	INCIRCLE
IV	Tourism Innovation	- Med Cluster Innovation - SMITour - TOURISMO	TOURISMO

2.3 Sustainable Tourism Policy Labs structure

The Interreg Euro-MED **Dialogue4Tourism** Project organizes **Sustainable Tourism Policy Labs (STPL)** to mainstream the results and outputs of the Interreg Euro-MED Thematic Projects of the Sustainable Tourism Mission and to increase the coordination and institutional capacity of public authorities, and improve transnational exchanges of knowledge around sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean.

The STPLs aim to improve the state of policies in sustainable tourism relevant to Mediterranean tourism, taking into account the perceptions of technical and political stakeholders. The Lab sessions assess participants' knowledge of sustainable tourism policies to understand the needs supporting sustainable tourism decision-making and policy-making processes.

They consist of a theoretical session including a review of selected case studies from the Thematic Projects of the Sustainable Tourism Mission and a practical session. In the practical session, participants work in small groups and apply the theoretical knowledge they have learned, including sustainable tourism indicators, circular economy and innovative solutions.

The Sustainable Tourism Policy Labs (STPLs) are designed as **90-minute sessions** aimed at supporting knowledge exchange and the practical application of sustainable tourism approaches.



To facilitate knowledge transfer among participants from different countries and backgrounds, the sessions are delivered in English.

The agenda developed for the **first testing lab** served as the basis for the subsequent STPLs and was structured as follows:

Opening

Welcome and introduction by the keynote speakers.

1. Introduction to the STPL

A brief presentation of the Sustainable Tourism Policy Lab, including an overview of the session objectives and methodology. Participants are also invited to complete a **pre-assessment form** using a QR code.

2. Theoretical session

The theoretical component introduces the main concepts and approaches related to sustainable tourism through four modules:

- **Module I: Sustainable tourism and regional governance**
- **Module II: Climate change and tourism**
- **Module III: Circular economy in tourism**
- **Module IV: Tourism innovation**

The session also includes **case studies from the Thematic Projects of the Sustainable Tourism Mission within the Interreg Euro-MED Programme**. Relevant results and experiences from the different projects are presented within each module, providing participants with practical examples and insights from different destinations.

3. Practical session

The practical component allows participants to apply the knowledge and concepts presented during the theoretical session to a specific tourism destination.

Following the presentation of **Module I**, a dedicated slide provides a brief assessment of the selected destination used as a case study for the practical exercises, such as Greece, Bulgaria, Cyprus and Montenegro. This overview provides participants with the necessary context to understand the main tourism-related challenges and opportunities of the destination.



Following **Modules II, III and IV**, participants are introduced to practical group exercises, supported by clear instructions and guidelines. Using the selected case study, participants work together to identify and prioritise actions and solutions aimed at:

- improving tourism governance at the destination level;
- supporting the transition towards a more circular tourism economy; or
- promoting innovation in tourism.

At the end of each exercise, one member of each group presents the main conclusions from the discussion. This approach encourages knowledge sharing, collaborative learning and reflection among participants.

4. Conclusion and networking

The session concludes with a brief summary of the main outcomes and key takeaways, followed by an opportunity for participants to exchange experiences and establish connections through informal networking.



5. Delivery methods and tools

A combination of presentation, discussion and practical learning methods is used throughout the STPLs:

- **PowerPoint presentations:** Used to introduce key concepts, approaches and relevant examples in a clear and accessible way.
- **Google Forms:** Used for the **pre-assessment before the session** and the **post-assessment after the session**, allowing participants' knowledge and learning to be assessed.
- **Case studies:** Used to provide real-world examples and enable participants to learn from both successful experiences and challenges encountered by different destinations and projects.
- **Group exercises:** Used during the practical session to encourage participants to apply the concepts presented and develop solutions collectively.
- **Interactive discussions:** Used throughout the sessions to encourage knowledge exchange, collaborative learning and reflection.



3. Sustainable Tourism Policy Labs into practices

3.1 Key concepts and selected Interreg Thematic Projects

3.1.1 Module I - Sustainable Tourism and Regional Governance

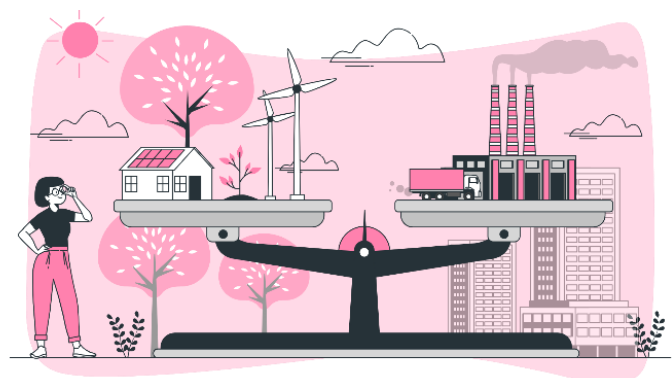
In the first module, participants gained a comprehensive understanding of the core principles and practices of sustainable tourism, including its three dimensions: economic, environmental and social. They will also gain insights into the policy frameworks and governance mechanisms relevant to sustainable tourism at local, regional, national and Mediterranean levels. They understood the complexities and challenges of policy implementation and identify opportunities for influencing and advocating policies in the Mediterranean region.

Theoretical key concepts: Principles of sustainable tourism and governance in the Euro-Mediterranean region

As per its definition, **sustainable tourism** (UNEP and UN Tourism, 2005) should:

- Make optimal use of environmental resources, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity.
- Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance.
- Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation.

Sustainable tourism governance in the Mediterranean context is defined as: “A coordinated, multi-level process involving collaboration between public, private and social actors within and beyond the tourism system. This can create policy synergies and build capacity for achieving shared goals, developing strategic joint projects, fostering sustainability and managing complexity and achieving balance between the welfare of residents





and tourists, destination competitiveness and the context-specific needs of natural, built and cultural environments”¹.

Currently, in the Mediterranean region, the main challenges related to sustainable tourism are:

- lack of solid cooperation among Euro-MED public authorities and policymakers,
- lack of multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral stakeholders' dialogue
- overtourism
- seasonality
- climate change
- low level of digitalisation

Sustainable tourism governance should maintain a careful balance that reconciles the environmental, economic and sociocultural dimensions of sustainability. Such a balance can be achieved through coordinated strategic planning and management of tourism activities and their impacts. It is also essential to build consensus and shared visions that work towards finding long-lasting pragmatic and legitimate win-win solutions².

Among others, the main **pathways** for a sustainable tourism **governance paradigm shift** embrace:

- Key role of the **policy-makers**
- **Increased capacities and institutional dialogue**
- **Improved and more effective collaboration and coordination mechanisms.**

Interreg MED projects related to regional sustainable tourism governance

After the overview of **theoretical knowledge**, follow the selected **case studies from Interreg MED projects** related to regional sustainable tourism governance in the Mediterranean.

3.1.1.1 BEST MED

BEST MED (Interreg MED Programme) brought together actors, policy makers and institutions in the MED Region sharing data on sustainable tourism and specific tools along with best practices, encouraging the transfer and reuse of knowledge.

Its main **outcomes** were:

- **Toolkit of data and indicators,**
- Design of the **Green Model “MED S&C Path- Sustainable Path & Cultural Routes Model”** focuses on
 - integration of tourism planning into wider development strategies,

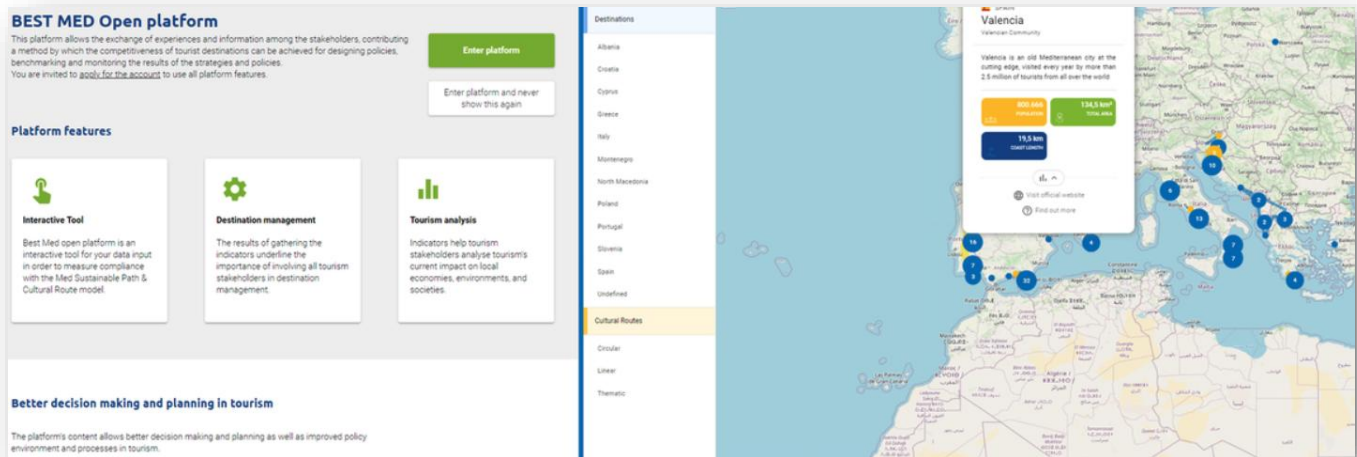
¹ Interreg Euro-Med (2019). [Governance as a Tool for sustainable and responsible tourism in the Mediterranean region.](#)

² Interreg Euro-Med (2019). [Governance as a Tool for sustainable and responsible tourism in the Mediterranean region.](#)



- key players' mobilisation at both the local and transnational levels,
- creating synergies across MED countries, promoting awareness of the MED area.

The main **challenges** this project faces were: reducing tourism seasonality and the growing number



of tourism actors and citizens' active participation in policy design.

Figure 1: BEST MED Open Platform

The **Green Model “MED Sustainable Path & Cultural Routes Model”** is a voluntary monitoring and management tool based on a structured self-assessment process. It is designed to support route managers and key stakeholders in identifying, monitoring and managing the impacts of cultural routes, while ensuring that tourism contributes positively as a socio-economic driver for all stakeholders involved.





The model was implemented through a clear, step-by-step methodology supported by dedicated tools, including:

- Self-assessment audit sheet to evaluate the level of compliance across four core criteria:
 - Sustainable management
 - Economic sustainability
 - Socio-cultural sustainability
 - Environmental sustainability
- A set of qualitative and quantitative indicators to measure performance and progress.
- A benchmarking method to compare results, identify best practices and support continuous improvement.
- The MED S&C Path methodological framework is structured around four sequential phases:
 - 1) Diagnosis – assessment of the current situation,
 - 2) Vision – definition of strategic objectives and long-term goals,
 - 3) Action – implementation of targeted measures and initiatives,
 - 4) Integration – embedding sustainability practices into ongoing management and governance

This integrated approach enables cultural routes to systematically enhance sustainability performance while strengthening their social, cultural, economic and environmental value.

3.1.1.2 MITOMED+

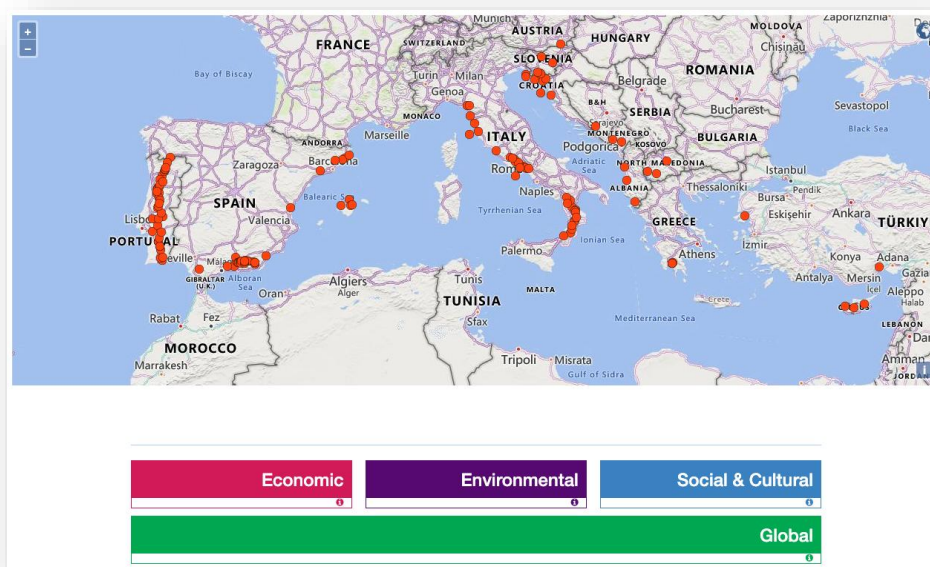
The [**MITOMED+**](#) (Models of Integrated TOurism in the MEDiterranean) project (Interreg MED Programme) aimed at protecting and promoting Mediterranean natural and cultural resources. Its **specific objective** was to enhance sustainable development policies for more efficient valorisation of natural resources and cultural heritage in coastal and adjacent maritime areas of sustainable and responsible coastal and marine tourism in the MED Area. This project focuses on coastal and island destinations in the Mediterranean.

The main **outcomes** achieved through MITOMED+ were:

- “[**Manual of transfer of best practices**](#)” with twenty cases of good practices promoting stakeholder dialogue and engagement and a data-driven decision process.
- [**Open Platform for Data Collection and Sharing Indicators**](#) to help policymakers monitor maritime and coastal tourism's social and environmental impacts.



Figure 2. Open platform for data collection - MITOMED platform



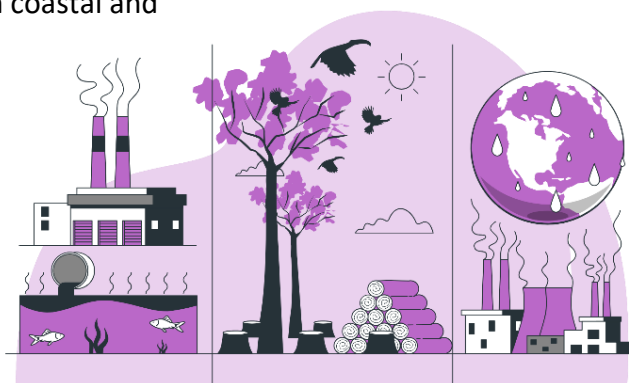
3.1.2 Module II - Climate Change and Tourism

In this second module, participants gained knowledge on the climate change situation in the Mediterranean, including key risk factors and direct impacts on the tourism sector. Also, current barriers and possible solutions to address this crisis, as suggested in the “Tourism and Climate Adaptation” section of the White Paper developed within the Interreg Euro-MED Sustainable Tourism, Dialogue4Tourism Project under the Sustainable Tourism Mission.

Theoretical key concepts

The Mediterranean is the main tourist destination, with coastal and maritime tourism-linked activities → It is warming 20% faster than the global average. Tourism, which contributes 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions, is both a contributor to and a victim of climate change, necessitating alignment with these global frameworks.

Tourism greenhouse gas emissions are responsible for between 8% and 11%. Aviation and car transport are heavy emitters, in particular in the Euro-Med region, where aviation accounts for 55% of tourism-related emissions. Also, tourism’s construction and waste exacerbate the situation. The **role of regional authorities** is key, as they have decision-making powers for tourism planning and climate action plans. Also, the Destination Management





Organisations' role is pivotal in developing tourism in smaller/targeted areas, collaborating and supporting the private sector and developing coordinated marketing campaigns.

Coastal erosion and sea-level rise pose another significant challenge, with estimates suggesting that 50-60% of Mediterranean beaches could erode by 2100, threatening €100 billion in coastal tourism assets. Biodiversity loss, such as the 30% decline in *Posidonia oceanica* meadows since 2000, has impacted diving and ecotourism, while the carbon footprint of tourism, particularly from air travel, contributes 5% of the region's total greenhouse gas emissions. Rising temperatures, for instance, are reshaping seasonal tourism patterns, with the Joint Research Centre (JRC) projecting a 2-4°C increase by 2050, potentially reducing summer tourism in southern coastal areas by up to 20% due to heat discomfort. Other significant challenges are water scarcity, sea surface temperatures, sea water salinity, changes in precipitation patterns, droughts, flash flooding incidents and land degradation and desertification.

The Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD 2016-2025), supported by the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), prioritises tourism adaptation as a key pillar of regional sustainability. Tourism in the Euro-Med region drives economic growth, with 340 million annual visitors, but is highly exposed to climate risks, with research suggesting a potential 10-15% decline in summer tourist arrivals by 2030 without proactive adaptation. Effective climate adaptation in tourism requires collaboration across multiple governance levels. As temperatures rise, extreme weather events become more frequent. At the same time, natural resources are constantly strained so the tourism sector must confront a new reality that challenges its traditional models and demands innovative adaptation strategies.

Policy efforts:

- **The Paris Agreement** sets a target to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels
- **UN Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs) call for urgent climate action under **SDG 13**.
- The UNWTO's "**Glasgow Declaration**"
- The **EU's Tourism Transition Pathway** sets ambitious targets, including a 55% reduction in emissions by 2030. This is informed by projections from the Copernicus Climate Change Service of a 30% increase in heatwave frequency by 2040.
- Countries across the Euro-Mediterranean region are integrating tourism into their national adaptation strategies—for example, Spain and regions such as Catalonia.



Responding effectively to climate change in tourism destinations requires **coordinated adaptation strategies** supported by **multi-level governance and cooperation**. This includes alignment between local, regional, national and transnational authorities, as well as collaboration across the public sector, private operators and civil society. A central element of successful adaptation is the **active engagement of local communities**, whose knowledge, participation and ownership are essential for ensuring context-specific, inclusive and durable solutions. Strengthening the capacities of local tourism stakeholders—public authorities, tourism enterprises, destination managers and community organisations—is equally critical to enable informed decision-making and effective implementation. Key solutions include:



- Adaptation requires multi-level governance and cooperation: Engagement with the local community, Capacity building among local tourism stakeholders;
 - Knowledge sharing methods with face to-face and peer to peer learning
 - Nature-Based Solutions as a supportive best practice for destination-wide climate action. Natural and Protected Areas sustainable management solutions like
 - dune and forest restoration, Posidonia protection,
 - Revived traditional agricultural practices,
- Beach cleaning,
- Eco-labels, among others.

Thematic Projects and tools from the Interreg Euro-MED Mission related to Climate Change and Tourism transferred at the STPLs

3.1.2.1 White Paper on Sustainable Tourism Governance on Tourism & Climate Adaptation by Dialogue4Tourism Project

The Interreg Euro-MED [White Paper on Sustainable Tourism Governance on Tourism & Climate Adaptation](#) has been developed by the Dialogue4Tourism Project (Sustainable Tourism Mission) with the Community4Tourism Project. This comprehensive White Paper explores the critical intersection of tourism and climate adaptation in the Euro-Med region, offering a detailed, narrative-driven analysis of the challenges, strategies and collaborative frameworks needed to ensure a sustainable, resilient future for the sector. Its primary objectives are threefold: to identify and analyse climate-related threats impacting the tourism sector; to propose evidence-based, actionable adaptation strategies that can be implemented at local, regional and transnational levels; and to foster collaboration among diverse stakeholders.



Countries across the Euro-Mediterranean region are embedding tourism into their national adaptation strategies. Spain's "Sustainable Tourism Strategy 2030" allocates €3.4 billion to enhance climate resilience, while Greece's national Adaptation Plan focuses on coastal protection and water management. Initiatives like Malta's water reuse programs aim to reduce freshwater demand by 20%. Regions and cities are also at the forefront, with Catalonia's "Climate Tourism Plan" promoting off-season tourism and Sardinia's water management strategies cutting hotel water consumption by 25% during the 2024 drought. Within the tourism sector, sustainability certifications like the "Green Key" cover 10% of Euro-Med hotels, but SMEs often lack resources, prompting calls for €1 billion in funding to bridge this gap.

3.1.2.2 HERIT ADAPT

[HERIT ADAPT](#) is an EU-funded project that fosters cooperation among key stakeholders by activating Interdisciplinary Territorial Working Groups to co-design the data-driven. [HERIT ADAPT](#) Sustainable Tourism Model will be tested in eight pilot Euro-MED regions of different typologies, including UNESCO sites and lesser-known monuments in coastal, hinterland and mountainous areas.



This project focuses on coastal, hinterland and mountainous tourism destinations in the Mediterranean. HERIT ADAPT proposes a sustainable tourism modelling. Its **approach** includes **pilot testing, evaluating interventions and fostering intersectoral collaboration**. The **Sustainable Tourism Model** will consider territorial needs and visions, existing frameworks and plans and the global technology



offer, enabling the use of existing tools and solutions and the valorisation of transnational knowledge gained from other projects.

The **expected results** of this project are:

- **Build capacity, raise awareness of climate change impacts and create strategies** to make tourism more resilient.
- Transfer **successful practices and methodologies** to other regions, ensuring broader application and impact.

3.1.2.3 Cool Noons

The [Cool Noons](#) project aims to renew the tourism offer of Mediterranean cities while promoting climate change adaptation in urban settings. The project's approach is to develop a standard methodology for Cool Noons Paths and test solutions to improve the comfort of visitors and residents during the hottest hours of the day. Likewise, it fosters co-creation with residents and stakeholders through creativity workshops to generate smart, innovative solutions.

The project includes five pilot cities: Imola, Budva, Marseille, Dubrovnik and Lisbon.

The solutions put in place by the projects include: nature-based solutions, water-based solutions, technology and multimedia, city and street furniture and behavioural (human-based) solutions and cross-project solutions.

Figure 3 shows an example of the case study: [Cool Noons Path Dubrovnik](#), Croatia. The itinerary aims to guide visitors through shaded areas, green spaces and cultural sites.

Figure 3. **Cool Noons Path**

Dubrovnik (Croatia)





3.1.3 Module III - Circular economy and tourism

In this third module, participants gain insights on the value of integrating circular economy principles into the tourism value chain, which is increasingly recognised as a key pathway toward more sustainable, resilient and inclusive destinations. By rethinking how tourism resources are used, managed and regenerated, destinations can reduce environmental pressures while enhancing local value creation. This approach supports both competitiveness and residents' well-being.

Theoretical key concepts

The tourism value chain encompasses all activities, actors and resources involved in the creation and delivery of tourism experiences, from resource extraction and infrastructure development to service provision, consumption and waste management. Applying **circular economy (CE) principles to this value chain—reduce, reuse, recycle, regenerate, rethink and redesign**—aims to decouple tourism development from resource depletion and environmental degradation.

A circular approach promotes more inclusive tourism value chains, fostering local employment, supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, and improving the quality of life for residents. By prioritising local sourcing, extending the life cycle of products and infrastructure, and reintegrating waste into productive use, tourism can generate shared socio-economic benefits while reducing negative externalities.

Circular economy practices also enhance the competitiveness and differentiation of destinations, strengthening regional identity and reinforcing the link between tourism, environment and local culture. Destinations that adopt circular models are better positioned to respond to sustainability expectations, climate challenges and changing market demands.

Key priorities for circular tourism include:

- Reducing environmental impacts and waste generation across the tourism value chain;
- Ensuring the efficient and responsible use of natural resources;
- Implementing waste prevention, reduction and recovery actions;
- Addressing overexploitation of ecosystems and local assets;
- Promoting more sustainable economic models grounded in circular economy principles;
- Creating new economic opportunities for the tourism sector through innovation, local value retention and circular business models.

The [MED Cluster on Circular Economy](#), developed within the *Interreg Euro-MED Community4Tourism project*, promotes circular economy approaches as a strategic lever for sustainable tourism transformation in the Mediterranean. By fostering cooperation and knowledge exchange, the Cluster supports destinations in embedding circular practices into tourism systems and governance frameworks. Its main objective is to **support the transfer, scaling and integration**



of **good practices, tools and results** among tourism actors and territories. Through structured cooperation and peer learning, the Cluster facilitates the uptake of circular economy solutions and their incorporation into **local, regional, national and European policies and strategies**, reinforcing policy coherence across governance levels.

Within the tourism industry, the Cluster focuses on key intervention areas where circular economy principles can generate the greatest environmental, economic and social value. These areas reflect the core pillars of the circular economy and respond directly to the sustainability challenges faced by Mediterranean destinations.

The main areas of **circular economy** intervention in tourism include:

- **Eliminating waste and pollution:** Preventing waste generation at source through sustainable design, responsible consumption and improved operational practices across tourism services and infrastructure.
- **Circulating products and materials:** Extending the life cycle of resources through **reuse and recycling**, encouraging local value chains, sustainable procurement and innovative business models within tourism destinations.
- **Regenerating nature:** Supporting the restoration and conservation of ecosystems by integrating nature-positive practices into tourism planning and operations, thereby strengthening ecosystem resilience and enhancing destination attractiveness.



By addressing these areas, the MED Cluster on Circular Economy contributes to more resilient, competitive and sustainable tourism destinations, while supporting policy innovation and long-term transformation across the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Thematic Projects, projects from the previous Programming period and tools from the Interreg Euro-MED Mission related to circular tourism transferred at the STPLs

3.1.3.1 MED-Routes

The **MED-Routes** project aims to establish and disseminate a **local-based, low-impact sustainable tourism model** rooted in the shared cultural and natural heritage of four **Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe** across the Mediterranean region. The project promotes tourism development



that enhances heritage value, supports local communities and minimizes environmental impacts, while strengthening cooperation among Mediterranean territories.

The MED-Routes project adopts an **integrated and transferable approach**, combining strategic planning, participatory processes and practical implementation tools. Key elements of the approach include:

- **Transfer mechanisms** to facilitate the exchange and replication of sustainable tourism practices across regions and cultural routes;



- **Integrated mapping tools**, including the mapping of existing sustainable tourism initiatives along the cultural routes;
- **Implementation of circular economy practices**, applied across tourism services and experiences along the routes;
- **Participatory Labs**, designed as inclusive, multi-stakeholder processes to co-create low-impact eco-itineraries tailored to local and regional contexts;

- **Transfer of best practices and international teamwork**, fostering peer learning and collaboration among project partners and stakeholders.

This approach ensures that eco-itineraries are environmentally responsible, socially inclusive and economically viable, while remaining adaptable to diverse territorial realities. The MED-Routes project delivers tangible results that support sustainable tourism governance and destination management, including:

- Development of **eight eco-itineraries** across four Cultural Routes, highlighting low-impact and place-based tourism experiences;
- A **Green Label Guide** to support informed, sustainable choices by visitors and tourism operators;
- **Empowerment of local stakeholders** through targeted capacity-building activities;
- Delivery of **training programmes and Participatory Labs** to strengthen local skills and governance;
- **Environmental monitoring** systems to assess and manage tourism impacts;
- Implementation of **eco-friendly tourism initiatives** that enhance environmental protection and local socio-economic benefits.



Together, these outcomes contribute to the long-term sustainability, resilience and competitiveness of cultural routes in the Mediterranean, while supporting policy learning and transfer at multiple governance levels.

3.1.3.2 INCIRCLE

The INCIRCLE project – Support INSular and low-density areas in the transition towards a more CIRCULAR tourism Economy – focuses on supporting tourism destinations in islands and low-density territories as they transition toward more sustainable and circular tourism models.

The main aim of the INCIRCLE project is to **develop regional and municipal strategies for sustainable tourism**, applying **circular economy (CE) principles** to tourism destinations located in islands and low-density areas. The project addresses the specific structural, environmental and socio-economic challenges faced by these territories, supporting more resilient and resource-efficient tourism systems. INCIRCLE adopts an evidence-based and transferable approach that strengthens the link between circular economy principles and Mediterranean tourism policies. Key components of the approach include:



- Analysis of the relationship between **circular economy principles and tourism policy frameworks**, with particular attention to the application of **CE indicators** to improve tourism planning and management models;
- Development and operation of the **INCIRCLE**

Knowledge Platform, designed to facilitate the exchange of circular economy knowledge, tools, methods and good practices applicable to the tourism sector;

- Promotion of **knowledge transfer and capitalisation**, ensuring that existing experiences and innovations are scaled and adapted across territories;
- Use of **reference models and benchmarking** to support comparative analysis and informed policy-making.

INCIRCLE focuses on strategic intervention areas with high potential for circular transformation in tourism destinations, including: **Mobility; Energy; Water management and Waste prevention**.

The project delivers a comprehensive set of practical tools and frameworks to support circular tourism implementation, including:

- **Circular Tourism Self-Assessment Tools** at destination and industry level;



- **Operational, participatory and strategy evaluation toolkits;**
- A shared set of **circularity indicators** to support monitoring and decision-making.

For example, the project in the Balearic Islands (Spain) supports the draw of the **Law 8/2019 on waste and contaminated soils**, which sets ambitious targets for **reuse, recycling and food waste reduction** by 2030, involving public authorities, NGOs, SMEs and tourism businesses.

3.1.4 Module IV - Tourism Innovation

The last fourth module focused on the innovation in tourism as a key enabler of sustainable and competitive tourism transformation. It explores how collaborative innovation, smart technologies and new business models can strengthen tourism resilience and the new MED Cluster on Innovation and Technology Capacities.

Theoretical key concepts

Innovation in tourism is defined as a **collaborative process** involving governments, academia, corporations, MSMEs and start-ups, investors, business support organisations, and other stakeholders (UN Tourism). This collaborative approach is essential to address complex challenges and enable systemic change within the sector.

The COVID-19 crisis acted as a catalyst for the **re-evaluation of tourism models**, accelerating debates on degrowth and resilience. Tourism recovery has increasingly focused on **more sustainable practices**, diversification of tourism offerings, and the integration of **advanced technologies** to enhance efficiency and improve the visitor experience.

Key **challenges** to innovation in tourism include:

- Data-related constraints, such as fragmentation, heterogeneity and limited access;
- Unequal access to technology and power imbalances between actors;
- Tourist attitudes and varying levels of digital literacy.



In this context, **smart technologies** represent a strategic priority to:

- Improve innovation capacity, competitiveness and internationalisation of tourism SMEs;
- Support Smart Specialisation Strategies through technological and non-technological innovation;



- Strengthen cooperation among tourism stakeholders;
- Reinforce tourism as a sustainable growth sector and enable new business models.

Within the *Interreg Euro-MED Community4Tourism project*, the [MED Cluster on Innovation and Technology Capacities](#) aims to **facilitate the transfer of practices and results** among actors and territories, supporting their integration into **local, regional, national and European policies and strategies**. The Cluster promotes the involvement of relevant external actors working on tourism-related innovation. Its main thematic areas include:

- Innovation and advanced technologies in tourism;
- Strengthening tourism as a growth sector aligned with environmental and climate objectives;
- Enhancing innovation capacity, competitiveness and internationalisation;
- Supporting new and emerging tourism business models.

Thematic Projects and tools from the Interreg Euro-MED Mission related to innovation transferred at the STPLs

3.1.4.1 SMITour

The [SMITour project](#) aims to develop **Smart Industrial Tourism (SMIT)** activities that stimulate economic and social growth in Mediterranean destinations while minimizing environmental impacts and fostering innovation. By integrating advanced digital solutions, the project supports the transition toward more sustainable, experience-based tourism models.

SMITour identifies pathways for **new SMIT business models**, combining physical and virtual tourism experiences through **Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR) and Mixed Reality (MR)**. Key outputs include a baseline analysis of tourism systems in partner regions, a **Catalogue of Industrial Tourism Practices** and a **Catalogue of Advanced Technology Applications for Tourism**.

The project adopts a **transnational and collaborative approach**, using Focused **Working Groups and Innovation Camps** to establish a shared methodology, transfer knowledge and support the implementation of sustainable tourism strategies and action plans. Strong engagement of decision-makers and stakeholders at multiple governance levels ensures policy relevance and scalability.





A case study from Italy, for example, evaluates the use of innovative technologies in industrial tourism, including **AR applications, VR and AR experiences at the UNESCO site of Brescia, AI-based chatbots** at Lake Garda and the **tabUi App**, which uses artificial intelligence to personalise routes, visits and tourism services.

3.1.4.2 TOURISMO

The **TOURISMO** (TOURism Innovative and Sustainable Management fLOW) project addresses the growing challenges of mass tourism by introducing innovative, technology-driven solutions to monitor, analyse and manage tourist flows in Mediterranean destinations. Its overall objective is to support more sustainable, balanced and data-informed tourism management, reducing pressure on overcrowded areas while improving visitor experiences.

The project applies a data-based management approach, integrating information from multiple sources and on-site technologies such as thermal cameras, passenger (pax) counters, drones and tracking tags. These tools allow destinations to assess tourists' presence, density, movement patterns and behaviours in real time, supporting more accurate planning and responsive decision-making.

A key output of TOURISMO is the development of an integrated monitoring and decision-support management system, which is tested across eight pilot sites in the Mediterranean region. This system enables local authorities and destination managers to identify critical congestion points, anticipate peak flows and design targeted management measures.

In the Varna City pilot, for example, thermal drone observations and monitoring of pedestrian and cycling routes were used to identify mobility challenges and overcrowded areas. The insights generated supported the design of targeted improvements, contributing to safer, more efficient and more sustainable visitor flow management.





3.2 Practical sessions

3.2.1 First Sustainable Tourism Policy Lab (Athens, June 2025)

The practical session of the Sustainable Tourism Policy Lab (STPL) in Athens, held on June 3rd 2025 within the event [Circle the MED Forum](#), was designed to translate theoretical knowledge into applied policy thinking. Using Athens as a *living case study*, participants worked collaboratively to test tools, concepts and approaches related to sustainable tourism governance, circular economy and innovation. The session aimed to strengthen institutional capacity, foster peer learning and encourage context-based problem solving.

Athens was selected as the local case study, also considering its **rapid tourism growth, high international visibility and increasing sustainability challenges**. Participants were introduced to the city's tourism context, including its cultural heritage significance, Mediterranean climate and dense urban fabric. In particular, Athens' tourism key challenges were shared to ensure that all participants, regardless of familiarity with Athens, could meaningfully engage in the exercises. Some of the key challenges include:

- Over-concentration of visitors in historic neighbourhoods (e.g., Plaka, Monastiraki, Psyrri);
- Growing pressure on infrastructure, public services, water, energy and waste systems;
- Strong seasonality, with peak summer demand;
- Gentrification and housing pressures linked to short-term rentals;
- The need to balance tourism growth with residents' quality of life and local identity.

Structure of the practical session

Participants were divided into small, multidisciplinary groups and engaged in **three scenario-based exercises**, each aligned with one of the core STPL thematic pillars. Each exercise followed a common structure: problem identification, solution design, stakeholder mapping and discussion of implementation barriers, followed by a short plenary sharing.

Exercise 1: "Sustainable Athens Tourism – The indicator Challenge"

Objective: To explore how sustainability indicators can support evidence-based tourism policy and monitoring in a dense urban destination.



Description: Groups selected one key sustainability indicator relevant to Athens (inspired by the MITOMED+ and ETIS frameworks) and discussed:

- The policy objective linked to the indicator;
- Concrete actions to improve performance;
- Key stakeholders involved in monitoring and implementation;

- Potential barriers and data challenges.

Main outcomes: Participants highlighted indicators related to environmental certification, energy consumption and water use. The exercise underscored the importance of reliable data, municipal coordination and incentives for tourism businesses to adopt sustainable practices.

Exercise 2: “Athens tourism & circular solutions”

Objective: To apply circular economy principles to concrete tourism-related challenges in Athens.

Description: Inspired by projects such as MED-Routes and INCIRCLE, groups identified a specific problem area (e.g., waste, food systems, mobility, resource use) and proposed one practical circular solution. Discussions focused on implementation steps, stakeholder roles and feasibility.

Main outcomes: Proposed solutions included food waste composting systems, green public procurement, eco-certifications and sustainable mobility options. The exercise highlighted the role of municipalities as facilitators and the need for cross-sector collaboration.

Exercise 3: “Athens tourism & innovation solutions”



Objective: To explore how digital and smart solutions can address tourism management challenges.

Description: Drawing inspiration from innovation-focused projects (e.g., TOURISMO and SMITour), participants identified a tourism challenge in Athens and designed a digital or smart solution, such as real-time crowd management tools, AI-based recommendation systems, or decision-support platforms for authorities.

Main outcomes: Groups proposed solutions to redistribute visitor flows, improve safety through real-time monitoring and support data-driven decision-making. A key insight was that technological innovation must be paired with governance mechanisms, data-sharing protocols and stakeholder cooperation to be effective.

Outcomes and lessons learned

The practical session of the Athens Testing Sustainable Tourism Policy Lab (STPL) successfully demonstrated the value of **scenario-based, participatory learning** for strengthening sustainable tourism policy capacity. Across the three exercises, participants showed a strong ability to:

- Translate theoretical concepts (indicators, circular economy, innovation) into **context-specific policy and management solutions**;
- Work collaboratively across disciplines, governance levels and national backgrounds;
- Identify concrete actions, relevant stakeholders and implementation barriers within a short, structured timeframe.

The Athens case study proved effective in stimulating discussion around **urban tourism pressures**, including visitor concentration, infrastructure strain, resource use and governance coordination. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of:

- Evidence-based decision-making supported by indicators and data;
- Stronger coordination between municipalities, regional authorities, tourism operators and civil society;
- Integrating innovation and circular economy solutions into broader governance frameworks, rather than treating them as standalone technical fixes.

Post-assessment results confirmed a significant increase in participants' understanding, particularly in the areas of circular economy and tourism innovation. A majority of participants indicated their intention to apply tools or approaches discussed during the Lab in their own professional contexts, underlining the practical relevance of the exercises. Also, several cross-cutting lessons emerged from the Athens practical session:



- **Clear contextual grounding is essential:** While Athens provided a rich and relevant case study, some participants noted that deeper familiarity with the local context would have further enhanced the quality of discussions.
- **Governance issues resonate more than purely technical tasks:** Exercises that encouraged dialogue on cooperation, stakeholder roles and institutional coordination generated deeper engagement than highly technical indicator-focused discussions.
- **Peer learning is a key strength of the STPL format:** The diversity of participants and territorial experiences significantly enriched the discussions and outcomes.

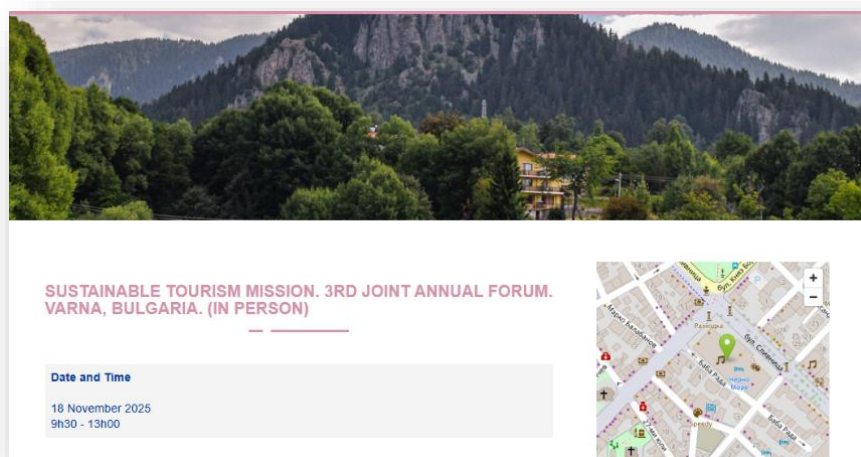
Overall, the Athens Testing Lab confirmed the **high potential of the STPL methodology** as a capacity-building and policy-transfer tool. Incorporating these lessons and improvements will further enhance its effectiveness, scalability and long-term policy impact across Mediterranean destinations.

3.2.2 Second Sustainable Tourism Policy Lab (Varna, Bulgaria. November, 2025)

The practical session of the Testing Sustainable Tourism Policy Lab (STPL) in Varna was designed to apply the theoretical content of the Lab to a concrete destination context, enabling participants to co-develop policy-relevant solutions through structured, scenario-based exercises. The session focused on strengthening governance capacity, encouraging collaborative problem-solving and testing transferable approaches for sustainable tourism management.

Varna was selected as the local case study, considering its strategic role as a major Black Sea tourism hub, combining seaside leisure tourism with cultural, historical and urban attractions. The

wider region includes coastal resorts, protected natural areas and rural zones, making Varna a complex and representative destination for testing sustainable tourism governance approaches. A preliminary tourism assessment and destination map were shared with participants to ensure a common



understanding of the local context. Key characteristics of the Varna tourism system presented to participants included:



- A tourism offer dominated by beach tourism, complemented by cultural heritage, wellness, eco-tourism and business events;
- Strong international connectivity through an international airport, seaport and road and rail infrastructure;
- High seasonality, leading to peak pressures during summer months;
- Environmental challenges such as coastal erosion, pollution and pressure on ecosystems;
- Governance challenges, including coordination gaps, uneven distribution of tourism benefits, rising living costs and resident–tourist tensions.

Participants were divided into small, multidisciplinary groups and engaged in **three scenario-based exercises**, each aligned with one of the core STPL thematic pillars. The exercises encouraged participants to identify key challenges, propose solutions and reflect on governance, feasibility and transferability.

Exercise 1: “Better governance for tourism in Varna”

Objective: To stimulate critical discussion on Varna’s main tourism governance challenges and identify actionable policy solutions.

Methodology: Using the **BEST MED Sustainable Path and Cultural Routes Model (MED S&C Path)**, groups worked through four steps: *Diagnosis* → *Vision* → *Action* → *Integration*.

Key outcomes: Participants identified several governance challenges, including food waste management, lack of coordination among tourism actors, strong seasonality, weak marketing strategies and gaps between policy and implementation. Proposed solutions included:

- Strengthening collaboration between the municipality and tourism businesses;
- Introducing awareness campaigns, certification schemes and clearer regulatory frameworks;
- Improving multi-level coordination and capacity-building for public and private actors.

Exercise 2: “Varna tourism & circular solutions”

Objective: To explore how **circular economy principles** can be applied to Varna’s tourism sector through practical, destination-level solutions.

Methodology: Inspired by projects such as **MED-Routes** and **INCIRCLE**, each group identified one specific problem area and proposed a concrete circular economy solution.





Key outcomes: The exercise highlighted the importance of transparency, monitoring and stakeholder engagement in implementing circular solutions. Proposed solutions focused on food waste reduction, plastic reduction, resource efficiency and awareness-raising. Examples included:

- Recycling biodegradable waste into biofuel through partnerships with private companies;
- Introducing measurable targets (KPIs) for food, energy and water consumption in hotels;
- Promoting reusable alternatives and improving waste management systems, particularly in coastal and central urban areas.

Exercise 3: Tourism innovation and smart solutions

Objective: To reflect on how **innovation and advanced technologies** can support sustainable tourism management and visitor flow control.

Approach: Although time constraints limited the full execution of this exercise, innovation solutions were discussed through best practices from Interreg projects, notably **TOURISMO**, using Varna as a real-life example. Participants explored the use of **thermal drone observations**, pedestrian and cycling route monitoring and data-driven tools to identify congestion points; improve visitor flow management; and support targeted infrastructure and mobility improvements.

Outcomes and lessons learned

The practical session in Varna confirmed the **effectiveness of the STPL methodology** in translating project knowledge into applied policy thinking. Key outcomes included:

- High levels of engagement and peer learning across diverse stakeholder groups.
- Strong relevance of governance and circular economy topics to local destination challenges.
- Improved understanding of how innovation and data can support decision-making.
- Clear recognition of the need for stronger coordination, capacity-building and integrated planning.

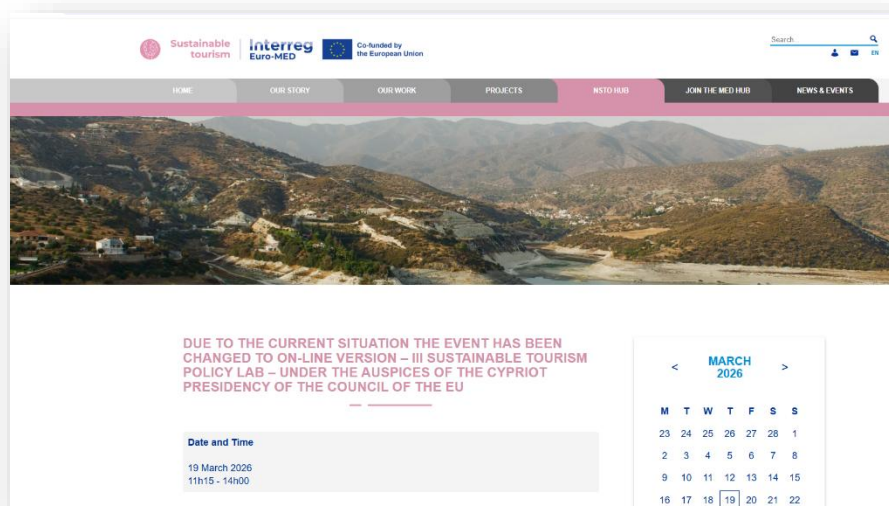
Overall, the Varna Testing Lab demonstrated that **scenario-based, place-specific exercises** are a powerful tool for fostering collaboration, enhancing institutional capacity and supporting the transferability of sustainable tourism solutions across Mediterranean destinations.

3.2.3 Third Sustainable Tourism Policy Lab (Cyprus & online, March 2026)

The practical session of the Third Sustainable Tourism Policy Lab (STPL), organised under the auspices of the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union on March 19th, 2026, was delivered in an online format. It was designed to apply the theoretical framework of the Lab to an insular destination context, focusing on tackling the main challenges affecting the fragile ecosystems of Euro-Mediterranean islands. The session aimed to enhance institutional capacity,



strengthen governance, and encourage multi-stakeholder collaboration through interactive online breakout sessions and scenario-based exercises centered on Cyprus.



Cyprus was selected as the focal destination case study to examine the specific sustainability pressures faced by Mediterranean island territories. The island presents a complex tourism ecosystem characterized by high seasonal demand,

significant environmental vulnerability, and specific resource constraints. Key destination features and challenges presented to participants included:

- **Insularity and delicate ecosystems:** Vulnerability of coastal and marine environments to intense human pressure and climate impacts.
- **Resource scarcity:** Severe water scarcity risks requiring circular water management and efficient resource allocation.
- **High seasonality:** Concentration of tourism flows during peak months, putting strain on public infrastructure, services, and local communities.
- **Maritime and coastal flow management:** The need for smart, innovative solutions to manage coastal tourism, heritage interpretation, and sea routes sustainably.

Structure of the practical session

Participants were divided into three parallel digital breakout rooms to engage in scenario-based roundtable exercises. Facilitated by experts from the Dialogue4Tourism partner organizations (European Public Law Organisation, ASCAME, and the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Works - Public Works Department of Cyprus), each exercise focused on co-designing policy interventions and testing transferable tools from Interreg Euro-MED projects tailored to island environments.

Roundtable Exercise 1: “Regional Sustainable Tourism Governance”

- **Objective:** To address policy gaps, enhance institutional coordination, and refine multi-level governance models suited to the complexities of island tourism ecosystems.



- **Methodology:** Participants examined governance frameworks and strategic planning tools to balance resident well-being with tourism competitiveness, building on multi-level dialogue and structured decision-making.
- **Key outcomes:** Discussions emphasized the necessity of stronger cross-sectoral policy integration between national ministries, local authorities, and private stakeholders. Recommendations focused on establishing structured dialogue platforms, improving policy coherence, and building technical capacity among public authorities to design and implement sustainable destination strategies.

Roundtable Exercise 2: “Tourism innovation & maritime flow management”

- **Objective:** To explore how digital technologies and smart tools can optimize visitor flow management, enhance cultural heritage interpretation, and protect coastal areas.
- **Methodology:** The exercise integrated a targeted thematic presentation of the **ECO-SEAROUTES** project pilot in Cyprus (presented by the Cyprus Marine & Maritime Institute), showcasing smart applications for sustainable sea routes and heritage interpretation.
- **Key outcomes:** Participants highlighted the value of data-driven tools and digital monitoring systems to regulate overcrowding in coastal zones, diversify tourism experiences, and improve visitor management. Key takeaways emphasized that technological innovation must be supported by clear governance protocols and data-sharing agreements among maritime and tourism stakeholders.

Roundtable Exercise 3: “Circular economy in tourism and water scarcity”

- **Objective:** To identify circular solutions and resource management strategies to mitigate environmental footprints and address acute water scarcity in island tourism destinations.
- **Methodology:** The session featured a presentation of the **IDRON** project (presented by the Lead Partner, University of Patras), demonstrating practical circular approaches and water/resource efficiency measures.
- **Key outcomes:** Discussions focused on actionable circular economy strategies, including water recycling/reuse systems in hospitality, plastic reduction, food waste prevention, and circular procurement policies. Participants stressed the need for clear performance indicators (KPIs), regulatory incentives for SMEs, and public-private partnerships to scale circular practices across fragile island territories.

Outcomes and lessons learned

The online Cyprus Sustainable Tourism Policy Lab successfully demonstrated the adaptability of the STPL methodology to a virtual format. Key outcomes include:



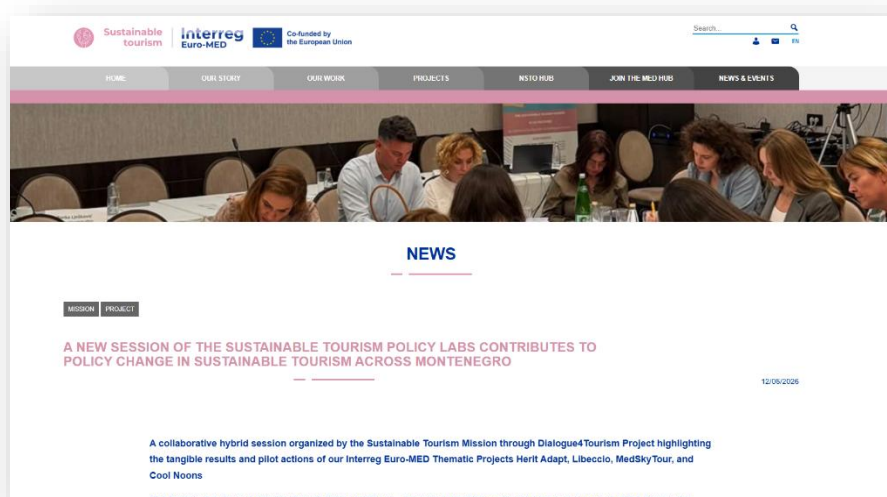
- **Adaptability of the Policy Lab model:** Digital breakout rooms effectively facilitated active transnational exchange, multi-stakeholder dialogue, and practical problem-solving across borders.
- **Focus on island-specific vulnerabilities:** The exercises reinforced that fragile ecosystems require specialized governance frameworks, with a strong focus on water management, circularity, and smart flow monitoring.
- **Effective project capitalisation:** Direct integration of ongoing Interreg projects (ECO-SEAROUTES and IDRON) provided concrete, operational examples that grounded theoretical discussions in real-world applications.
- **Need for integrated governance:** Participants reaffirmed that technical and circular solutions can only achieve long-term impact when embedded within cohesive, multi-level governance structures supported by continuous capacity building

3.2.4. Fourth Sustainable Tourism Policy Lab (Montenegro & online, June 2026)

The practical session of the Fourth Sustainable Tourism Policy Lab (STPL), organized by the partner National Tourism Organisation of Montenegro on June 10th, 2026, was delivered in a hybrid format at the Hotel Hilton in Podgorica alongside virtual participation. The session focused on applying the theoretical framework of the Lab to Montenegro's specific destination management context, addressing key sustainability pressures across coastal, historical, and urban areas. The Lab aimed to strengthen institutional capacity, enhance multi-level coordination, and foster transnational knowledge exchange through scenario-based roundtable exercises.

Montenegro was selected as the destination case study to explore sustainable tourism transformation across diverse coastal, heritage, and municipal environments. Key destination features and management challenges presented to participants included:

- **High seasonality and spatial concentration:** Intense pressure on coastal municipalities during peak summer months compared to hinterland regions.
- **Cultural and natural heritage preservation:** Balancing tourist access with protection in historic sites and vulnerable natural ecosystems.
- **Urban heat and climate risks:** Increasing climate impacts, heat discomfort in urban destinations, and the need for climate adaptation strategies.
- **Resource and infrastructure limits:** Managing water scarcity, waste generation, and service capacity during peak visitor periods.



Structure of the practical session

Following the theoretical framing and a technical session highlighting pilot actions carried out by Montenegrin project partners under the Interreg Euro-MED Sustainable Tourism Mission (including **HERIT ADAPT Project** in Cetinje, **LIBECCIO Project** in Kotor, **MedSkyTour Project**

with the NGO Center for Tourism Development and Cooperation, and **Cool Noons Project** in Budva), participants engaged in three practical roundtable exercises:

Roundtable Exercise 1: “Regional Sustainable Tourism Governance”

- **Objective:** To identify governance gaps and propose policy solutions to enhance destination management and multi-level cooperation across Montenegrin municipalities.
- **Methodology:** Guided by structured governance frameworks, participants analyzed decision-making processes, policy alignment, and stakeholder engagement mechanisms between national authorities, local municipalities, and private operators.
- **Key outcomes:** Discussions emphasized the need for stronger cross-municipal coordination, permanent inter-institutional dialogue mechanisms, and capacity-building programs for local authorities to support long-term, data-driven sustainable tourism planning.

Roundtable Exercise 2: “Tourism Innovation and Smart Solutions”

- **Objective:** To explore how digital tools, innovative business models, and technology-driven practices can address congestion, improve visitor management, and diversify tourism offerings.
- **Methodology:** Drawing from innovation methodologies and Interreg thematic project tools (such as smart flow monitoring and digital heritage interpretation), participants co-designed tech-enabled solutions tailored to local challenges.
- **Key outcomes:** Participants highlighted the importance of real-time monitoring, crowd management technologies, and smart tools to redistribute tourist flows. A central takeaway was that technological deployment must be backed by multi-stakeholder governance protocols and capacity building for local managers.

Roundtable Exercise 3: “Circular Economy in Tourism and Water Scarcity”

- **Objective:** To address resource strain, waste prevention, and water scarcity across hospitality and municipal tourism services.
- **Methodology:** Inspired by circular economy frameworks, groups identified key resource hotspots (waste generation, water efficiency, energy use) and formulated actionable circular interventions for destinations.
- **Key outcomes:** Recommendations focused on implementing circular procurement, introducing water-saving technologies in accommodation facilities, food waste reduction programs, and establishing clear circularity indicators (KPIs) to measure progress across destinations.

Outcomes and lessons learned

The hybrid Montenegro Sustainable Tourism Policy Lab confirmed the value of combining transnational project results with concrete local pilot actions. Key insights include:

- **Value of hybrid engagement:** The format successfully combined on-site local expertise in Podgorica with online transnational contributions, enabling broad participation and knowledge transfer.
- **Capitalisation of local pilot actions:** Directly linking the exercises to ongoing Montenegrin pilot actions (such as HERIT ADAPT, LIBECCIO, MedSkyTour, and Cool Noons) provided concrete, context-specific references that enriched policy discussions.
- **Integrated approach to sustainability:** The session reinforced that technical tools, smart technologies, and circular practices achieve maximum impact only when backed by cohesive governance frameworks, stakeholder ownership, and multi-level political commitment.

3.3 Key lessons for replication and transfer



The testing editions of the Sustainable Tourism Policy Labs (STPLs) in Athens and Varna confirmed the **overall robustness and relevance of the STPL methodology** as a policy-learning and capacity-building tool for sustainable tourism governance in the Euro-Mediterranean context. Based on the testing experiences, several improvements are recommended to strengthen future practical sessions:



- **Provide preparatory materials in advance**, including a concise destination profile and exercise guidelines, to ensure all participants start with a shared understanding of the case study.
- **Allocate more time to practical exercises**, allowing deeper analysis and more refined solutions, particularly for governance and innovation-focused activities.
- **Enhance wrap-up and synthesis moments**, dedicating time to collectively reflect on outcomes, transferable lessons and policy implications.
- **Increase opportunities for networking and informal exchange**, recognizing their value for transnational learning and future collaboration.

A first key takeaway concerns the **choice of Interreg Euro-MED projects** used as reference cases. The selected projects—covering governance, climate change, circular economy and innovation—proved highly relevant and complementary. Their concrete tools, frameworks and pilot experiences helped bridge the gap between policy concepts and real-world implementation. Participants particularly valued projects that provided **clear, operational instruments** (e.g., indicators, self-assessment tools, governance models), which could be more easily translated into their own territorial contexts.

The design of the **scenario-based exercises** emerged as a core strength of the STPL format. Exercises grounded in local case studies and structured around step-by-step methodologies (such as the MED S&C Path) effectively guided participants from problem identification to solution design. This approach encouraged strategic thinking, stakeholder mapping and reflection on policy integration, rather than isolated technical fixes.

At the same time, the Labs highlighted the importance of **careful alignment between project content and exercise objectives**. Exercises that directly connected Interreg project outputs to practical decision-making challenges generated the highest levels of engagement and learning. This suggests that prioritising fewer, well-matched project examples—rather than a broad overview—can enhance depth and clarity.



Another key takeaway relates to the **balance between technical content and governance discussions**. While indicators, circular economy tools and innovation solutions were appreciated, participants consistently gravitated toward debates on governance, coordination and implementation capacity. This reinforces the need for exercises to foreground institutional roles, cooperation mechanisms and policy feasibility.

Finally, the STPLs demonstrated that **learning is strongest when theory, projects and practice are tightly integrated**. The combination of targeted Interreg project examples, structured exercises and peer exchange enabled participants to critically assess not only “what works,” but also “under what conditions” and “with which actors.”



4. Conclusions

The testing editions of the Sustainable Tourism Policy Labs (STPLs) in Greece, Bulgaria and Cyprus demonstrated the **flexibility and overall relevance of the STPL methodology** as a practical instrument for policy learning, capacity building and the transfer of sustainable tourism solutions across the Euro-Mediterranean region. This integrated approach enabled participants to move beyond the conceptual understanding of sustainable tourism and engage directly with the institutional, organisational and territorial challenges involved in translating policy approaches into practice. In this regard, the STPLs provided a useful interface between **knowledge, policy development and implementation**, supporting participants in assessing how existing tools and solutions can be adapted to their own territorial contexts.

A key finding from the testing phase was the central importance of **governance, coordination and stakeholder cooperation** in enabling sustainable tourism transitions. While technical instruments such as indicators, circular economy approaches, digital and smart solutions, and innovation tools provide important means of addressing specific challenges, their effectiveness largely depends on the institutional and governance conditions in which they are applied. The STPL methodology therefore demonstrated the importance of considering not only **what solution can be transferred**, but also **how, by whom and under which territorial conditions** it can be effectively implemented.

The testing also highlighted several **critical conditions for successful knowledge and solution transfer**. Adequate preparation, including a clear understanding of the destination context and the objectives of the practical exercises, was essential to ensure meaningful participation. In addition, a clear alignment between the selected Interreg Euro-MED project results and the objectives of each exercise contributed significantly to the relevance and effectiveness of the learning process.

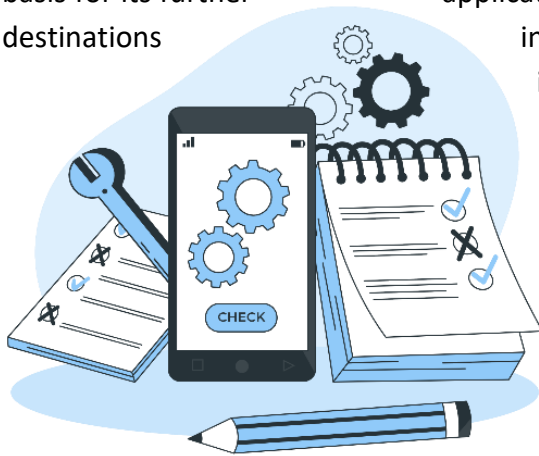
The experiences in Greece, Bulgaria and Cyprus have therefore provided valuable evidence for refining the STPL methodology and strengthening its **transferability, replicability and policy relevance**. In particular, the testing process demonstrated that successful transfer requires a balance between providing a structured methodology and allowing sufficient flexibility for adaptation to different territorial, institutional and tourism contexts. This balance is essential for ensuring that transferred solutions are not simply replicated but are appropriately **contextualized and integrated into existing governance and policy frameworks**.

Overall, these Policy Labs represent a valuable mechanism for **policy dialogue, capacity building, peer learning and the transfer of results from Interreg Euro-MED Thematic Projects**. By connecting project-generated knowledge and tools with the practical needs of destinations and their stakeholders, the STPL approach can contribute to strengthening institutional capacity, supporting



more informed decision-making and facilitating the uptake of sustainable tourism solutions across Mediterranean territories.

The testing phase ultimately confirms that the value of the STPL methodology lies not only in the dissemination of existing knowledge and project results, but in its capacity to create a **structured process for understanding, assessing, adapting and transferring solutions**. This provides a strong basis for its further application to other Interreg Programmes and for supporting destinations in their transition towards more **sustainable, resilient, innovative and inclusive tourism models**.



By combining **targeted theoretical modules, carefully selected Interreg Euro-MED project examples and place-based practical exercises**, the STPLs successfully bridged the gap between policy concepts and real-world implementation challenges. The Labs confirmed the central role of **governance, coordination and stakeholder cooperation** in advancing sustainability

transitions, while showing that technical tools—such as indicators, circular economy models and smart technologies—are most effective when embedded within broader governance frameworks. The testing phase also highlighted key conditions for success, including adequate preparation, sufficient time for interaction and clear alignment between project content and exercise objectives.



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