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Paths that last - *Collaborating for a Sustainable Tourism in the Mediterranean*
25-26 June 2026 Split, Croatia

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Table of contents

Conference report	1
Paths that last - Collaborating for a sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean	3
Agenda Overview	4
Overview of Participants	5
Welcome Remarks	5
Institutional Opening by the European Commission	6
Stronger Together: the MMM Experience	8
Powering Synergies: Capitalisation & Mainstreaming	13
Beyond 2027: building a sustainable future of Cooperation	16
Mediterranean strategic and sectoral initiatives: how do they deal with sustainable tourism?	19
Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD), sharing insights on policy coordination and governance	22
Workshops	24
Connecting Minds: Launch of MMM Peer Learning & Study Visits	25
Wrapping Up, Moving Forward: Final Thoughts & Next Steps.....	26
Final Remarks.....	27
Summary of Workshop Discussions	29
A two-step participatory format	29
Structured reflection and mind mapping.....	30
Workshop 1–2: Shared and strategic governance of the tourism offer	31
Workshop 3: Tourism and the Green Transition	36
Workshop 4 – The social dimension of tourism and inclusive and accessible tourism.....	39
Workshop 5 – Innovative and smart tourism products.....	43
Final remarks and acknowledgements	47

Paths that last - Collaborating for a sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean

On 25 and 26 June 2025 eight Interreg programmes active in the Mediterranean, namely Euro-MED, Greece-Cyprus, South-Adriatic, Italy-Croatia, Italy-France Maritime, Italy-Malta, Italy-Tunisia and NEXT MED, jointly organised the Conference "Paths That Last – Collaborating for a Sustainable Tourism in the Mediterranean" in Split, Croatia.

The event marks a **key milestone** in the **Action Plan** of the **Mediterranean Multi-Programme Mechanism (MMM)**, a pilot coordination initiative established in 2022. The MMM brings together several Interreg programmes active across the Mediterranean, with the aim of working jointly towards a more sustainable tourism, by maximising the impact and results of the projects they fund.

The Conference brought together a diverse audience made of **almost 350 people** (205 on-site and 142 online attendees), including project beneficiaries, Interreg programme representatives, EU and national decision-makers, youth representatives, and key Mediterranean stakeholders.

The overarching aim of the event was to enhance collaboration between programmes and projects, capitalise successful Interreg projects on sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean, improve collaboration between programmes and projects and find effective ways to jointly disseminate and re-use the results in the territories.

The event focused on three complementary levels of engagement: **political and institutional, programme-based, and project-specific**. At each level, the emphasis was placed on fostering synergies and capitalising on successful practices, particularly in view of the post-2027 programming period.

This report captures the key outcomes, discussions, and proposals that emerged from the conference, offering a roadmap to the MMM for the ongoing capitalisation of sustainable tourism initiatives and their future possible alignment with broader European and Mediterranean priorities.

It opens with an overview of the agenda and introductory remarks. Subsequent sections present the core thematic sessions of the event, highlighting the Mediterranean Multi-Programme Mechanism (MMM) experience and focusing on topics such as capitalisation and mainstreaming, future cooperation beyond 2027, and Mediterranean strategic and sectoral initiatives linked to sustainable tourism. Each session is summarised in a dedicated "Session

in a Nutshell" section for quick reference. The latter part of the report is devoted to the interactive workshops, detailing their participatory approach and key findings. Finally, the report closes with reflections on the outcomes, next steps for the MMM, and a summary of workshop discussions, offering a comprehensive view of collective progress towards a more sustainable Mediterranean tourism model.

Agenda Overview

The Conference agenda was carefully designed by the joint MMM team to foster structured dialogue, exchange, and joint reflection across multiple levels. It opened with **institutional welcomes**, included **two plenary sessions** and five **parallel workshops** and ended with **closing remarks** highlighting the event's main outcomes and future steps. The event was moderated by **journalist Karen Coleman**.

Opening Plenary

At the opening plenary, following an institutional introduction and a special video-message by EU Commissioner for the Mediterranean, Ms Dubravka Šuica, the eight Interreg Programmes of the MMM introduced the initiative, outlining its origins, aims, and Action Plan. Other Interreg Programmes also shared their capitalisation methods and best practices, with a focus on fostering cooperation with mainstream programmes.

A key moment was the discussion involving the European Commission and youth representatives, exploring ways to boost young people's participation in cooperation processes and their role in shaping the post-2027 programming period.

The session also highlighted broader strategies and initiatives that support sustainable tourism and improved governance in the Mediterranean, setting the stage for the workshop themes. It closed with insights into the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD), demonstrating how integrated approaches can strengthen policy coordination and regional impact.

The Workshops

Five parallel workshops during the two days brought attendants together to discuss four main topics, namely:

- #1 and #2 Shared and strategic governance of the tourism offer
- #3 Tourism and green transition
- #4 Social, inclusive and accessible tourism
- #5 Innovative tourism products

Closing Plenary

The second plenary session was dense with conclusions coming from the workshops, but it was also when the MMM Peer Learning & Study Visits was launched. It ended with the final remarks and an outline of the next steps to come.

Overview of Participants

"Paths that Last" brought together a total of 347 registered participants, with 205 attending on-site in Split and 142 joining online.

The audience represented a wide range of stakeholders: project partners made up the largest share (54%), followed by programme representatives (32%), decision-makers (4%), external experts (2%) and other categories (8%), including Monitoring Committee Members, National Contact Points, IVY volunteers and intergovernmental organisations.

Participants came from diverse organisational backgrounds: regional and local public authorities accounted for around 50% of attendees, complemented by representatives from programme bodies, higher education and research institutions, European institutions, NGOs and interest groups, and the private sector (including SMEs).

In total, 69 projects were represented, ensuring a total of 96 participants in the four thematic workshops.

This diverse and well-balanced participation reflected the event's ambition to connect cross-programme cooperation with innovative and sustainable approaches to Mediterranean tourism.

Welcome Remarks

The opening session featured contributions from Croatian representatives at city, regional, and national levels, each highlighting the importance of EU cooperation and funding in addressing the challenges and opportunities linked to tourism in the Mediterranean.

Matea Dorčić, Deputy Mayor of the City of Split, welcomed participants on behalf of Mayor Tomislav Šuta and emphasised the essential role of EU funds in transforming ideas into tangible projects. While acknowledging challenges such as the rising cost of living and the pressures of Schengen mobility, she underlined the importance of maintaining a balance between economic development and the liveability of cities.

"Citizens suffer and tourists do not always experience high-quality visits,"

she noted, adding that cooperation and shared learning are vital for preserving heritage while advancing sustainable tourism.

After welcoming the participants on behalf of the County Prefect Blaženko Boban, **Stipe Čogelja, Deputy County Prefect of Split-Dalmatia County**, echoed these priorities, viewing Interreg programmes as valuable opportunities to exchange experiences and implement projects with real benefits for local communities. He referenced the FIRESPELL project as a concrete example of how regional cooperation can address the growing impact of climate change and natural disasters on tourism. Acknowledging that climate change significantly affects the tourism sector by increasing exposure to such risks, he underlined the need to remain aware of the challenges ahead, particularly in the context of the post-2027 financial framework.

"Sustainable tourism is essential for our economy, but we must be equipped to manage the problems that come with it",

he remarked, adding that Croatia is fully committed to sustainable tourism as a strategic priority and eager to learn from the ideas and experiences of other regions.

Zrinka Raguž, State Secretary at the Croatian Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds, recognised the City of Split and the wider region as key actors in the Mediterranean, marked by exceptional geographical and biodiversity richness. She stressed the importance of working hand in hand to reduce territorial disparities and respond to common challenges. Referring to the MMM as a valuable pilot initiative, she reaffirmed Croatia's commitment to joint solutions. Tourism, she noted, represents 10% of the EU's GDP, yet remains highly vulnerable to crises. Issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, traffic congestion, but also population decline demand coordinated action. Looking ahead, she placed strong faith in future generations:

"We fully trust in building a people-friendly and sustainable Mediterranean, and youth are the future ahead".

Institutional Opening by the European Commission

Video message by Dubravka Šuica, EU Commissioner for the Mediterranean

Commissioner Šuica highlighted the vital role that tourism plays in the EU economy, contributing approximately to 10% of the Union's GDP, and up to 25% in several Mediterranean countries such as Croatia, Greece, Italy and Spain. With over 20 million people employed in the sector, primarily in small and micro enterprises, she acknowledged

both the opportunities and growing challenges facing the industry, including environmental pressures, regional disparities, and increasing demands on resources.

Šuica stressed that tourism now holds a dedicated portfolio within the Commission, reflecting its strategic importance at the European level. Looking ahead, the Commission will present a new **European Strategy for Sustainable Tourism in early 2026**. This long-term vision will focus on sustainability, digital transformation, resilience, and inclusion, while promoting innovation, quality employment, and fair working conditions across the sector.

The forthcoming strategy will be supported by cohesion policy and shaped in close dialogue with stakeholders. Regional cooperation was identified as a cornerstone of this approach.

"This strategy, the Commissioner explained - will build on the tools we already have, including cohesion policy, which is the most powerful instrument for sustainable regional development. But we cannot design this strategy alone. The Commission has already launched a consultation with tourism stakeholders across Europe. We need your experience. We need your contribution".

Regional cooperation is also going to play a crucial role in the new **Pact for the Mediterranean**, which Šuica announced she will present **in October this year**.

She said:

"It will include tourism as a bridge between people, cultures and economies".

In conclusion, Šuica called on participants to continue working together to ensure tourism becomes not only a driver of economic growth, but also a force for sustainability, identity, and social cohesion across the Mediterranean and beyond.

Address by Jean-Pierre Halkin, Head of Unit for "Interreg, Cross-Border Cooperation, Internal Borders" at the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy

Jean-Pierre Halkin expressed his strong appreciation for the level of engagement shown by the audience, noting that the event effectively set the scene for understanding the **relevance and potential of the MMM from both a political and technical perspective**.

By recalling the work carried out since 2019 to strengthen synergies and cooperation among Interreg programmes, particularly through initiatives led by Interact and TESIM, such as the Med Lab, Halkin emphasised that the conference represented an opportunity to take a significant step forward in both ambition and scope.

"This forum", he noted, "brings together the ideal group of practitioners to explore how collaboration and synergies between programmes can be further developed in concrete, practical ways".

He underlined that success depends on the right mix of context, processes, and stakeholders and all three were present at this event. From a process standpoint, the ongoing discussions on the future of Interreg provide a timely window for strategic alignment. As for context, he said that few topics are more relevant than sustainable tourism, which brings together critical issues such as economic development, environmental preservation, climate action, and security.

However, favourable conditions alone are not sufficient.

"We are also facing a complex climate and geopolitical situation, with specific challenges in the sea basin and issues of security that cannot be overlooked," he noted. "From our side, we are exploring all possible ways to support the development of this Mechanism, with the aim of making it a success story that can inspire other Interreg programmes in the next programming period."

Halkin concluded by stating that the MMM is expected not only to deliver tangible results in the Mediterranean, but also to serve **as a model for cross-programme cooperation more broadly**.

Stronger Together: the MMM Experience

In this session, divided into two rounds of questions-and-answers, representatives of the eight Interreg Programmes forming the MMM shared their experiences and discussed how they have approached the various joint activities outlined in their jointly developed 2024–2025 Action Plan.

How the MMM was born and developed

Guillaume Huet, Managing Authority Director of Interreg Euro-MED told the story of how the MMM initiative was born. He explained that the idea of establishing a coordination mechanism among Interreg programmes originated early in the current programming period, building on the Med Lab initiative and a recommendation from the European Commission aimed at fostering better coordination and capitalisation across Interreg programmes. He then emphasised how the mechanism expanded from three initial programmes Italy–France Maritime, MED/Euro-MED, and ENI CBC MED/NEXT MED to eight,

including Italy–Croatia, Greece–Cyprus, Italy–Malta, Italy–Tunisia, and Italy–Slovenia. Huet went on to describe the aims of MMM, which include promoting complementarities between Interreg programmes by addressing common challenges and harmonising terminology across programmes. He also highlighted tools such as the Euro-MED Academy and a results library, developed by the Euro-MED Programme to facilitate knowledge exchange, which could be valuable for use at a joint level.

"Our general idea was to say that programmes can achieve more together, as they can do individually, through the promotion of capitalisation. The idea is not to reinvent the wheel, but to share and to facilitate the reuse of good results".

Aldo Puleo, Programme Manager of Interreg NEXT MED, further explained the goals set by the first three programmes for the MMM:

"We wanted to demonstrate that we could establish concrete cooperation by jointly developing tools and scaling up collaboration among programmes, working on shared topics, particularly sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean."

He noted that they began by compiling a catalogue of best practices, which was presented in 2023 at a conference in Florence as a foundation for broader cooperation. A permanent working group was established, and since then regular meetings have taken place, marking significant progress since the strategy's inception in January 2021. Finally, he emphasised that the initiative has grown not only in the number of programmes involved but also in its capacity to engage stakeholders, as the conference itself demonstrates.

"The Mechanism started with an idea shared by three persons, friends and colleagues. I remember it was the fourth of January of 2021 when we started writing down the strategy. Having this impressive number of stakeholders convened here today with eight programmes adhering to the Mechanism makes us feel very proud. It really gives me the impression that we started building something big".

Filippo Giabbani, Head of Managing Authority of Interreg Italy-France Maritime then described the **key elements that allowed the MMM to grow** and attract the Interreg programmes. Particularly, he mentioned four main elements: first of all, a strong will for shared cooperation and openness to other Interreg programmes to join; secondly, the awareness of the added value of different types of programmes collaborating, from cross-border programmes that directly affect daily life in border areas, to the transnational ones that address large-scale challenges and the policy level. The third element is a pragmatic and flexible approach and the fourth is a dedicated working group with shared tools. In a nutshell, the MMM is made of will to cooperate, belief in cooperation, pragmatism, and teamwork.

"The MMM has become not only a mechanism, but a true community of programmes that share values, tools, and a common vision for the Mediterranean".

The benefits of joining the MMM

Following the origins of the MMM, the advantages of being part of the mechanism were emphasised.

Vaya Tsiagante, Communication Officer of Interreg Greece–Cyprus, explained how a cross-border cooperation programme can benefit from joining the MMM, particularly highlighting the experience of Interreg Greece–Cyprus. Rather than simply gaining a seat at a coordination table, she said it meant becoming part of **a dynamic and collaborative movement**. She emphasised how the **MMM acts as a visibility amplifier**, enabling unified messaging through shared campaigns and tools, and allowing programmes to communicate more effectively at the EU level. Beyond communications, the MMM supports concrete action, such as joint calls and policy alignment, ensuring that project results are not only documented but also widely shared and scaled.

"In essence, the MMM offers not just visibility but a stronger collective voice, better tools, and a true shift from isolated efforts to a unified Mediterranean movement".

Francesca Sibilla, member of Interreg Italy-Slovenia Managing Authority continued by presenting the reasons for the Interreg Italy-Slovenia to join the MMM, as last Programme formally adhering so far. The programme initially participated as an observer to assess the mechanism's potential to foster synergies across Interreg programmes. Over time, the **added value and potential complementarities became clear**, particularly in preparing for future joint actions and expanding existing ones. The decision was therefore driven by two main goals: to enhance long-term policy dialogue and territorial cohesion in the Mediterranean, and to offer beneficiaries continued opportunities for cooperation beyond the programme's fully committed budget, particularly in sectors beyond tourism.

"Our funded project here in Split are showing their strong commitment to continuing with this collective effort that will go beyond the current programming period".

Finally, **Daniela Segreto, Head of Managing Authority of Interreg Italy-Malta and Italy-Tunisia** talked about the added value of participating in the MMM for both programmes, allowing them to benefit from shared experience and collective governance. For Italy–Tunisia the partnership enhances **ties between European and non-European countries** like Tunisia, especially given its cultural and geographical closeness to Sicily and its strategic role in the Mediterranean. For Italy–Malta, the MMM **supports deeper cooperation within**

a key EU-Mediterranean axis. Segreto emphasised the benefits of exchanging ideas between programmes and bringing a culture of flexibility into the MMM network.

"We would like to bring our own approach to flexibility into the MMM, as it's something we're already accustomed to taking ideas from one programme and applying them to another. We believe this way of working can be just as effective within the MMM framework".

Why "Paths that last"?

Following the earlier sessions, **Silvia Comiati, Head of Managing Authority of Interreg Italy-Croatia**, turned the discussion to the Conference "Paths that Last" and its **expected outcomes**. She explained that this event serves as a key milestone within the MMM Action Plan, which has been approved by all participating programmes and discussed with the European Commission. The conference was designed to gather inputs, ideas, and creative suggestions from participants to shape the next steps of the Mechanism. She said that the goal was not only to continue collaboration and capitalisation of project results, but to do so with greater ambition and impact. The idea shared by the MMM programmes is that remaining time and resources in the current programming period should be used to maximise added value, through tools like incentives, awards, and joint initiatives. Finally, she stressed that the event's practical, project-focused nature was intended to generate valuable insights that would guide the evolution of the MMM and ensure a meaningful and forward-looking closure to the current period.

"We are trying to take the most out of what's remaining of this programming period to get to a good closure in terms of synergies and to leverage the MMM".

The audience point of view

The conference audience was engaged with Slido and asked to suggest what the MMM could do to actually increase synergies among their projects. The key-answers were "**coordinated capitalisation calls**" and "**exchange of experiences**".

Paths that last: exploring the event's main topics

Guillaume Huet, Director of Managing Authority of Interreg Euro-MED, emphasized that one of the MMM's primary aims is to **strengthen synergies across EU funds**. He explained that these synergies operate on three interconnected levels. First, among Interreg programmes themselves, where cross-border initiatives can amplify their reach by connecting with larger transnational efforts, and transnational programmes can test and

tailor ideas locally. Second, with EU-wide thematic programmes like Erasmus+, LIFE, or Horizon, especially when overlapping priorities emerge, such as environmental protection or social inclusion. And third, the most complex but impactful level involves building bridges between Interreg and mainstream regional and national programmes. Guillaume stressed that Interreg projects offer ready-made solutions that could be taken up and scaled through mainstream investments, while Interreg could also serve as a testbed for broader national strategies.

Silvia Comiati, Head of Managing Authority of Interreg Italy-Croatia framed **capitalisation** as a strategic driver for cooperation within the MMM. She clarified that capitalisation means not only making results visible, but also transferring, adapting, and building on them. By working together, programmes can access a broader pool of project outputs, benefit from shared tools and methods, and create a stronger collective impact across the Mediterranean. Capitalisation is not simply a technical task, it is a shared responsibility that helps shape common goals and supports long-term change in the region.

Daniela Segreto, Head of Managing Authority of Interreg Italy-Malta and Italy-Tunisia, offered a practical view on integration between Interreg and mainstream programmes. Managing both types of funding, she recalled a successful experience where a project from the Italy-Malta programme led to the region's coastal erosion strategy, later funded by mainstream resources. Yet she noted that, despite administrative proximity, mainstream programmes tend to dominate political and managerial attention. She argued that stronger political will, at both national and EU levels, is needed to truly embed Interreg outcomes in broader strategies. While full integration may not be realistic in this programming period, Segreto believes conversations like this one are essential to lay foundations for post-2027.

Aldo Puleo, Programme Manager of Managing Authority of Interreg NEXT MED, highlighted **the importance of involving citizens and young people** in sustainable tourism projects. He emphasised that, particularly in tourism-intense areas, locals need to see tangible social and economic benefits for the concept of sustainability to resonate. He reported that engaging youth had been equally critical, not only to prevent brain drain but also to ensure tourism initiatives aligned with their aspirations and skills. He explained that he had seen tourism as a tool to boost youth employment and entrepreneurship, provided labour market needs and training opportunities were closely aligned. He also noted that, with a new EU Strategy on Sustainable Tourism and the Mediterranean Pact on the horizon, the MMM had a valuable opportunity to influence policy by showcasing results from the ground.

Francesca Sibilla, Managing Authority Staff of Interreg Italy-Slovenia, then illustrated the importance for programmes to **align systematically with macro-regional strategies** like EUSAIR and EUSALP. She suggested that project evaluations should include criteria that assess alignment with these broader frameworks, and she encouraged more programmes

to consider embedding macro-regional goals more directly into both their strategies and project-level activities.

Vaya Tsiagante, Communication Officer of Interreg Greece-Cyprus, highlighted **communication as a strategic function within the MMM**, not merely as a support task. She argued that visibility transforms project outcomes into influence, whether among citizens, policymakers, or new partners. Through a common visual identity, joint campaigns, and shared storytelling, the MMM has already begun to speak with a single Mediterranean voice, but she stressed that its full potential has yet to be realised. Strengthening this unified voice can further build trust, extend impact, and secure the political recognition needed to sustain and expand cross-border cooperation efforts.

Filippo Giabbani, Head of Managing Authority of Interreg Italy-France Maritime, closed the session by identifying **five major challenges and priorities** as the MMM looks toward the next programming cycle. First, knowledge exchange must continue and be recognized across all levels. Second, engaging communities and grounding actions locally remain key to long-term success. Third, programmes must be ready to respond to increasingly complex and shared challenges across the Mediterranean. Fourth, while transnational programmes offer broad reach, they must retain a sensitivity to place-based needs. And finally, flexibility, both operational and strategic, has been a hallmark of the MMM so far and must remain a central value going forward. In this context, the voices of projects and young people will be essential in shaping what comes next after 2027.

SESSION IN A NUTSHELL

Key outcomes of the session highlighted the MMM's role in strengthening policy dialogue, fostering cross-programme synergies, and developing strategies for capitalising and scaling project results. Looking ahead, discussions emphasised the need for continued flexibility, greater youth engagement, and stronger integration with other programmes to ensure the MMM's long-term impact beyond 2027.

Powering Synergies: Capitalisation & Mainstreaming

The second-round table session brought together a diverse group of speakers from across Europe to **share practices, methodologies, and reflections on how synergies can be built and sustained across cooperation and mainstream programmes**. At the heart of

the discussion was the conviction that **better collaboration**, not just within European territorial cooperation, but also with national and thematic programmes like LIFE and Horizon Europe, **can significantly enhance policy impact on the ground**.

Erwin Siweris, Programme Director of Interreg Europe, opened the session by painting a clear picture of how his programme fosters cross-regional learning. He highlighted the foundational principle of Interreg Europe: that for every challenge a region faces, there is likely another region that has already tackled it. His programme, he explained, connects over 270 regions across 36 countries and facilitates peer learning, enabling policymakers to draw on real-world solutions. What sets Interreg Europe apart, he noted, is its emphasis not just on the exchange of experience, but on implementation. Every project partner is required to involve local stakeholder groups and show how they have used the knowledge gained to affect real policy change.

Beyond project-based learning, Siweris introduced the Policy Learning Platform, a permanent open-access service designed to share the best of Interreg Europe with all European regions, whether or not they are project partners. With over 2,500 good practices stored in a searchable database, the platform offers tools such as matchmaking sessions, thematic webinars, and in-depth peer reviews. He also outlined how the programme is supporting sustainable tourism, with 21 ongoing projects involving more than 170 organisations across 31 countries. These range from initiatives focused on cultural heritage and digital transformation to eco-tourism and creative industries.

Luca Ferrarese, Head of Joint Secretariat of Interreg Central Europe, described Central Europe as one of the most border-dense areas in the world, home to 15 national borders and countless EU-funded initiatives, many of which operate in parallel but fail to interact. His programme, he explained, takes synergies seriously, using capitalisation as a tool to align disparate efforts. Ferrarese introduced a new call for capitalisation projects, set to open on 29 September, with €23 million in funding. The aim is to bridge the gap between transnational and cross-border cooperation, encouraging projects that can adapt existing results to new contexts and stakeholders. He encouraged stakeholders, particularly from the Mediterranean, to make use of Central Europe's matchmaking tools and apply with proposals that build on the wealth of local-level innovation already present in the region.

Mercedes Acitores, Programme Manager of MedLab group, Interact, recounted the origins of the MedLab initiative, which emerged from Interact to connect the many Mediterranean cooperation programmes. She emphasised that synergies should not be viewed as an afterthought; rather, they must be embedded from the outset of the programming cycle. MedLab, she said, has become a key enabler of this mindset, promoting inclusive dialogue among managing authorities, national ministries, macro-regional strategies, and even non-EU countries. Through initiatives like the Mediterranean Thematic Week and regular coordination with other EU funds (such as LIFE, COSME, and Horizon), MedLab has established a foundation of mutual awareness and cross-fertilisation among

Mediterranean actors. She expressed her surprise and satisfaction at the progress of the MMM, noting that it now brings together eight programmes and ensured that the MedLab can keep on supporting the MMM.

Rosario Sapienza, Senior Expert of MedLab group, TESIM, offered a complementary perspective, highlighting the vital role of southern Mediterranean countries, and among them especially Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Egypt, in shaping a truly pan-Mediterranean cooperation landscape. Especially, he emphasised that it is the projects and the partnerships they create, that serve as "*natural synergisers*". Projects, he insisted, are the carriers of impact. In practice, he noted, project partners often collaborate across multiple funding streams and programmes, effectively creating a living ecosystem of knowledge and expertise. He pointed to tourism once again as a prime example, with nearly 20% of new projects across Interreg programmes focusing on tourism, often linked to environmental objectives such as biodiversity and climate resilience. For Sapienza, this was a sign that local actors are not only aware of European priorities but deeply engaged with them.

Monica Bellisario, Senior Officer at the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Department for cohesion policy and the South, presented an Italian pilot initiative aimed at translating the value of Interreg into the mainstream programming environment. Acknowledging Interreg's relatively small share of the EU's cohesion budget (just 2.6%), she stressed its disproportionate potential as a driver of innovation. The pilot project, carried out with five Italian regions, sought to answer a simple but challenging question: how can we make Interreg outputs visible, transferable, and impactful within regional and national policies? The project involved mapping hundreds of Interreg and Horizon projects, surveying both Interreg and mainstream authorities, and building a methodology to align project results with broader strategic frameworks such as the SDGs, macro-regional strategies, and smart specialisation. Crucially, it also created opportunities for institutional dialogue and policy transfer. Bellisario called on project beneficiaries to make their results more transferable and accessible and to stay connected after the end of their projects, contributing to communities of practice like the MMM.

Giuseppe Rubino, Head of the Special Structure for Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation, Puglia Region, concluded the panel with a vivid metaphor: if the film *The Perfect Storm* represents disaster, then the Italian experience is more akin to *The Perfect Brainstorm*. He described a structured method, developed with five Italian regions, for identifying promising projects and clustering them into active cooperation platforms. These platforms, he explained, serve as informal but productive spaces where public administrations and other stakeholders can exchange knowledge and pursue shared goals. Three such platforms have already emerged: one on port logistics and energy transition in the Adriatic-Ionian basin, another on green public procurement in Alpine and Central Europe, and a third focused on sustainable cycle tourism in the central Mediterranean. In the latter, a model has been developed for assessing the impacts of cycling infrastructure, combining economic, social, environmental, and governance indicators.

SESSION IN A NUTSHELL

The session made clear that **synergy, far from being an abstract concept, is being translated into concrete action across programmes, sectors, and borders.** From knowledge platforms to territorial pilots, from grassroots projects to institutional strategies, the speakers collectively conveyed a powerful message: **the tools for cooperation are already in place; what matters now is how effectively we use them.**

Beyond 2027: building a sustainable future of Cooperation

The session offered an open exchange on post-2027 cooperation, focusing on emerging challenges, innovative ideas, and the crucial role of youth in shaping the future of Interreg.

Jean-Pierre Halkin, Head of Unit for "Interreg, Cross-Border Cooperation, Internal Borders" at the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, acknowledged that the previous sessions offered an inspiring and thought-provoking space for reflection on the future of Interreg beyond 2027.

"The buzzword we heard, he said, is for sure capitalisation and, indeed, we need to capitalise on a daily basis. In a rapidly evolving policy landscape, some good practices may become obsolete, making it essential to continuously track results and adapt. Ensuring that Interreg delivers the most impactful outcomes will be key to securing its role in the next programming period".

Looking ahead, Halkin emphasised the importance of learning from other EU funding instruments, particularly as competition among EU funds is expected to intensify in the coming months. He noted that while in Brussels the focus is increasingly on simplifying funding and reducing the number of instruments, at the Conference a different approach is being proposed, one that sees overlapping programmes and funding streams not as a problem, but as a source of efficiency and as an opportunity to create synergies, promote flexibility, and strengthen cooperation. For this reason, he stressed, it is essential to demonstrate that this approach works and brings real added value.

Halkin also underlined that as new EU priorities take shape, flexibility must become a core principle. Interreg, he noted, is uniquely positioned to address cross-border challenges that

cannot be tackled at the national level alone. Its ability to connect programmes and generate shared solutions gives it a critical role in the future EU policy landscape.

When asked how to strengthen connections between programmes, Halkin advised focusing on what already works. He pointed to success stories, active action groups, and ongoing cooperation efforts, encouraging stakeholders to build on these foundations.

"The real opportunity, he said, lies in going deeper, maximising the value of existing cross-border results and reinforcing the strong work Interreg is already doing".

He closed by warmly thanking all stakeholders and citizens who contributed to the "Harvesting Report", a synthesis document published by the EU Commission in May 2025, which summarises the results of a wide-reaching consultation process on the future of Interreg in the next programming period and includes feedback from 10,000 practitioners, stakeholders and citizens. Halkin particularly stressed its exceptional nature within the EU context:

"There is no such report in other areas. We should use it to its full potential, not only as a planning tool but also as a means of communicating to citizens the real impact and value of Interreg's work".

The session then gave voice to several youth representatives. The discussion was framed by an initial, powerful slide, illustrating the worrying future climate trend. By highlighting the extent to which future generations will experience a hotter and different world depending on the choices made today, it clarified how important it is to include young people in addressing future scenarios, and, more specifically, in EU programmes, which are at work to shape a more sustainable future. Within this context, the young speakers talked about their positive attitude, the need to overcome negative stereotypes about youth and showed ways in which they can be better engaged in EU programmes and projects.

Théo Briand, European Projects Coordinator at AFPJR and former IVY at the Italy-France Maritime Programme, started by highlighting the need to overcome stereotypes surrounding cooperation and youth engagement. He stressed the importance of maintaining an open mind and suggested that older generations should reconsider their perceptions. He made clear that young people are not lazy, despite often facing frustration due to limited quality job opportunities.

Anastasia Sakkoula, Innovation Consultant, YIELD project, Next Med Programme, emphasised that younger generations tend to be more collaborative, inclusive, and comfortable with complexity. Responding to the common criticism that they are unfocused or spend too much time online, she argued that, in fact, their strong online presence gives them a unique ability to bridge gaps, adapt quickly, and bring forward workable new solutions, especially, she added, when connected to EU projects at cross-border level.

Matteo Francesconi, President of ANCI Giovani Tuscany, then got deeper into how EU projects can become more accessible and attractive to young people. He proposed a governance model that goes beyond youth councils to include young policy makers and professionals in decision-making roles. While recognising the value of youth involvement, he also highlighted the challenges posed by the cost of living in relation to the financial means available to young people, which can create disparities, and the need to address issues around work experience and internships to ensure no one is left behind. Francesconi underlined that involving young people as project partners adds significant value through new ideas and innovative approaches. He cited the Interreg Next-MED Programme, which directly targets youth projects with specific criteria, as a positive example.

Alessandro Rosati, Representative of Giovanisì project, Tuscany Region, reinforced the previous interventions, by pointing out that young people bring powerful energy but are often misunderstood and judged for their enthusiasm and lack of experience. This can lead to disappointment, a reduction in innovation, and the loss of youthful energy. Rosati urged the importance of giving young people real opportunities to shine and contribute meaningfully.

Finally, **Emma Magistri, Representative of Youth for Future Cooperation and former IVY at the Interreg Italy-Croatia Programme**, reflected on how her generation is accustomed to living beyond borders, unlike previous ones who were more used to boundaries. She emphasised that young people do not lack commitment or capacity, but rather face challenges related to accessibility and support. Building on this, she presented the "Declaration by young people on the future of territorial cooperation", which was designed in November 2024 by over 100 young Europeans gathered in Brussels and includes a set of recommendations for the future of interregional cooperation. Speaking on behalf of this young people movement, Magistri stressed the fact that these recommendations should be integrated into programme strategies.

In the final part of the session, Jean-Pierre Halkin reflected positively on the interventions of the young panellists, highlighting their commitment and the valuable insights they brought to the discussion on youth engagement. Asked to give views on how to involve young people into EU programmes, he said that particularly Interreg is pioneering on youth engagement with the Interreg Volunteer Youth initiative.

Going back to the initial slide, he then stressed that

"When we take decisions, we need to engage everyone, ensuring balance not only between genders but also between generations. That's why the partnership principle in Interreg for involving young is so important".

But he also realistically pointed out that in more and more member states today a part of the population does not see the added value of EU policies. And within this population there

are young people. Therefore, he concluded by suggesting that *"We have to use all our forces to let anyone know how the EU works"*. He admitted that EU institutions and programmes are good at involving a very committed young elite, whereas there is the need to do more to reach out to all:

"In this sense, communication plays a crucial role to counterbalance fake news about EU".

SESSION IN A NUTSHELL

The session provided an open exchange on the future of Interreg post-2027, exploring emerging challenges, innovative ideas, and the role of youth in shaping cross-border cooperation. Young panellists highlighted their collaborative, inclusive, and solution-oriented approaches, emphasising the need to overcome stereotypes and create meaningful opportunities for engagement in EU projects. The discussion underlined the importance of balancing generational and gender diversity, building on existing successes, and communicating effectively to ensure EU programmes deliver real value to citizens.

Mediterranean strategic and sectoral initiatives: how do they deal with sustainable tourism?

In this session, speakers presented an overview of key initiatives, strategies, and approaches beyond Interreg, that strengthen synergies and governance for sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean, aiming to improve policy coordination and maximise impact.

Speaking on behalf of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), **Adriana Salazar, Blue Economy Expert**, opened her intervention by describing "Paths that last" as a landmark moment for the Mediterranean sustainable tourism community. She explained that the UfM had long advocated for precisely this type of exercise, designed to accelerate the systemic, complex and paradigm-shifting transformations needed to achieve more sustainable tourism models across the region.

She underlined that the Mediterranean faced a particularly complex historical phase, which required stakeholders to think boldly, creatively and differently. From the UfM's perspective, she said, mechanisms for inter-programme coordination were vital to supporting this process, and she expressed how encouraged and energised the organisation was to see this vision becoming reality.

Turning to priorities, Salazar highlighted two "macro-level" imperatives. The first was to strengthen regional, basin-wide and transboundary cooperation on sustainable tourism. The second was the continued development of a sustainable blue economy. She pointed out that the blue economy had already become one of the pillars of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, acting as a "glue" for the region and a driver for sustainable development. In her view, combining enhanced regional cooperation with the sustainable blue economy represented a winning formula for advancing sustainable tourism.

In the second part of her speech, Salazar gave an overview of the UfM's broader blue economy agenda. She recalled that in 2021, the 43 UfM member states had adopted a landmark ministerial declaration on the sustainable blue economy, building on the first such declaration agreed in 2015. Importantly, for the first time, in this declaration sustainable maritime and coastal tourism was given a dedicated standalone priority, while also cutting across all other areas.

Salazar went on to explain that the declaration was followed in 2022 by the adoption of a roadmap for its implementation, which was designed as a living document, updated regularly through a results-based monitoring and reporting mechanism, which collects annual reports from member states.

She finally stressed that the UfM did not work alone but collaborated with a wide range of partners and stakeholders. She mentioned particularly close cooperation with the WestMED Initiative, the European Commission, and EUSAIR, and highlighted the technical assistance currently in place to support the capitalisation of Interreg projects towards the wider Mediterranean. She also acknowledged the contributions of CPMR-IMC and emphasised the value of the Interreg Euro-MED Associate Partner Status, which has enabled Southern partners to engage more actively in projects.

Christos Economou, Deputy Director / Head of Unit of Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries emphasised that cooperation, capitalisation and the exchange of best practices must extend across the whole Mediterranean basin. Interreg projects, he noted, already played an important role in fostering these cross-border links and in promoting sustainable practices. At the same time, he was candid about the challenges ahead:

"Sustainability itself is the defining challenge for tourism in the Mediterranean. If stakeholders want the "path to last they must succeed in embedding sustainability into all activities".

He suggested that integrating the blue economy sectors into sustainability frameworks and ensuring that the natural and cultural "capital" of tourism is preserved, should be seen as core priorities.

Economou also underlined the delicate balance required in coastal communities, where tourism development intersects with local livelihoods. Cooperation, he argued, is not only about institutions, projects and borders, but also about the involvement of citizens, who must see and understand the benefits of sustainable tourism. He further pointed to maritime spatial planning as a missing element in the day's discussions, reminding participants that tourism is not the only sector competing for limited space in coastal and marine regions. Local authorities, he said, must plan carefully, taking into account other sectors and regional specialisations in a coherent and integrated way.

When asked to identify the top challenge for sustainable tourism, Mr Economou highlighted the importance of moving beyond sustainability alone and towards regenerative tourism. This approach, he explained, provides solutions to the negative impacts of traditional tourism and recognises that tourism is a dynamic, interconnected system. He stressed the need for a change in mindset, one that focuses on the well-being of both visitors and local residents and argued that cooperation, communication and the active engagement of local people in the planning, development and management of tourism activities are essential to this shift.

In the second part of his intervention, Mr Economou addressed the recently unveiled EU Ocean Pact, a landmark framework presented earlier in the month by the President of the European Commission. He explained that its purpose is to provide a comprehensive response to protecting ocean health while boosting Europe's sustainable blue economy. It advances a stronger sea-basin approach, with particular attention to strengthening cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean, where gaps in coordination remain. Importantly, he noted, the Pact includes a specific dimension on tourism. It incorporates the forthcoming EU Strategy on Sustainable Tourism, expected in spring next year, as well as a new Strategy for Coastal Communities, recognising tourism as a central activity for these communities and a dedicated Strategy for Islands, where tourism is again a defining sector.

Senka Daniel, Coordinator of Pillar IV of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR), emphasised that the priorities of EUSAIR Pillar IV are fully interconnected and share common objectives with the MMM initiative. She recalled that on 7 May, the European Commission officially adopted a new Communication revising the Action Plan for the Adriatic-Ionian Region. In this updated framework, the region is recognised as being heavily dependent on tourism. This dependence, she noted, highlights the urgent need to better manage tourism flows, address seasonality and unemployment in low seasons, and mitigate the negative impacts of over-tourism. Actions are also required to raise awareness and build capacity among all stakeholders in sustainable and smart destination management.

The revised Action Plan defines three main thematic areas for sustainable tourism under Pillar IV. The first focuses on facilitating the green and digital transition, aiming to promote collaboration between destinations through macro-regional networks and thematic routes,

support member countries in improving tourism data systems aligned with European standards, integrate sustainability indicators, and help stakeholders develop the necessary capacities to incorporate green and digital transitions into their strategies. The second area is preparing for the future, which emphasises improving knowledge, skills, and management capacities in relation to smart and sustainable destination management, adapting educational models, and aligning tourism skills with emerging trends and visitor needs. The third thematic area addresses the greening of tourism products and services, promoting agritourism, fishing tourism, rural tourism, and Mediterranean diet and local products as key elements of sustainable tourism offerings.

Ms Daniel explained that the first two thematic areas, digital and green transition, and knowledge and skills development, will be advanced primarily through the implementation of EUSAIR's seven flagship projects, which had been approved in the previous period, with additional support from the newly financed Surf Facility Point project under the Interreg IPA ADRION Programme.

She concluded by stressing that these flagship projects are aligned with the MMM initiative and provide a concrete platform for cooperation and capitalisation. She emphasized that together, they can significantly contribute to building resilient, sustainable, and competitive tourism models across the Adriatic-Ionian region and the wider Mediterranean.

Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD), sharing insights on policy coordination and governance

This session included two **keynote speeches**, with a focus on the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD), sharing insights on policy coordination and governance, providing concrete examples of how combining different approaches can enhance impact in the region.

Marina Markovic, Senior Programme Officer of PAP/RAC - UNEP/MAP (Regional Activity Centre for Coastal Management Towards sustainability and resilience of Mediterranean coasts) addressed the significant environmental pressures that tourism exerts on the Mediterranean region, highlighting its impacts on pollution, water resources, habitats, and local communities. She referenced a recent study produced under the Barcelona Convention examining future scenarios for the Mediterranean in 2050. The study indicates that climate change will lead to a temperature rise of at least 2.2 to 2.5 degrees Celsius, population growth will increase pressure on resources, plastic pollution will intensify, and nearly the entire Mediterranean population could face water shortages.

Urbanisation along the coastline is projected to increase substantially, with some countries experiencing up to fifty percent coastal urbanisation.

Markovic noted that tourism is both a contributor to and a victim of these changes. Using Croatia as an example, she highlighted that although the country has relatively low coastal urbanisation due to its extensive coastline and numerous islands, tourism development has led to a fourfold increase in coastal occupation over a single generation, even amid a declining population. She emphasised that tourism should be considered as part of integrated coastal zone management, which addresses the continuum between land and sea, assesses cumulative impacts across sectors, and promotes stakeholder engagement to develop sustainable policies and practical tools for coastal communities.

Looking forward, she stressed the importance of aligning tourism initiatives with broader Mediterranean strategies, particularly the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development. Coordinated under the Barcelona Convention and adopted by all Mediterranean member states, the strategy considers sustainability across social, environmental, and economic dimensions, covering themes such as natural resources, energy, food systems, climate, governance, and the transition to a green and blue economy. Although none of the strategic objectives focus solely on tourism, the sector is interlinked with all areas of the strategy, and flagship initiatives already include sustainable tourism as a core activity. Markovic concluded by emphasising that tourism cannot be treated in isolation and that sustainable development in the Mediterranean requires integrated approaches that address both current pressures and future challenges.

Giulia Balestracci, Tourism Policy and Project Officer at Eco-union, presented the Blue Tourism Initiative, aimed at improving governance in coastal and marine tourism to ensure sustainable, inclusive, and resilient development. The initiative addresses environmental, social, cultural, and economic challenges in the Mediterranean, the Western Indian Ocean, and the Caribbean through a bottom-up approach, mobilising both public and private stakeholders at local levels and facilitating pilot actions across twelve selected sites in the three regions. The project, launched in 2022 and running for four years with a budget of €4.3 million, is co-led by IDDRI and Eco-Union, with regional collaboration from IUCN Centre for the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, and the Western Indian Ocean. Funding is provided primarily by the French Facility for Global Environment, with additional support from the Blue Future initiative in the Western Indian Ocean.

The project is structured around three main components. The first involves diagnosis and assessment of blue tourism, analysing global trends, challenges, and opportunities and proposing policy pathways. Detailed assessments at pilot site level informed the design of action plans developed collaboratively with local communities. The second component focuses on implementing these pilot actions, using a consistent methodology across sites. In each pilot, a national core or implementation hub was established, agreements signed with local stakeholders, and engagement secured with private sector partners. Activities

included workshops and training sessions, and in Morocco's Al Hoceima National Park, a local ecotourism cluster was created to coordinate activities, an approach mirrored in pilots across the Caribbean and Western Indian Ocean. The final component centres on outreach, knowledge sharing, and awareness-raising, promoting sustainable tourism practices beyond the pilot sites, fostering regional cooperation, and drafting roadmaps to encourage collaboration among programmes and regions.

Balestracci emphasised that the project is now embedded within the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD) as a flagship initiative, with Eco-Union, IUCN, and Plan blue. The focus is on supporting field and policy activities across Mediterranean countries, particularly promoting collaboration between the northern and southern shores of the region, leveraging the Blue Tourism pilot sites as a foundation for ongoing dialogue and further funding opportunities.

SESSION IN A NUTSHELL

The session emphasised the importance of sustainable and regenerative tourism in the Mediterranean and Adriatic-Ionian regions, highlighting cooperation, citizen engagement, and balanced development as key priorities. Speakers showcased strategies, flagship projects, and policy frameworks that integrate environmental, social, and economic well-being for both communities and visitors, with a special focus on the blue economy. Interventions highlighted the pressing environmental and social challenges linked to tourism, including water scarcity, urbanisation, and ecosystem pressures, and underlined the need for integrated coastal management and sustainable tourism governance. Practical examples from pilot projects demonstrated how local stakeholder engagement, knowledge sharing, and cross-regional cooperation can foster inclusive, resilient, and environmentally responsible tourism development.

Workshops

To actively involve beneficiaries and stakeholders and include their input in the Conference results, four thematic workshops were organised during the two days. The workshops covered main aspects related to sustainable tourism:

- #1 and #2 Shared and strategic governance of the tourism offer
- #3 Tourism and green transition
- #4 Social, inclusive and accessible tourism
- #5 Innovative tourism products

An extensive report of the achievements of the workshops can be found at the end of this report.

Connecting Minds: Launch of MMM Peer Learning & Study Visits

Martin Heibel, Communication Manager of the Interreg NEXT MED Programme, unveiled a new operational platform designed by the MMM, to enable continued collaboration, strengthen project impact, and advance sustainable tourism.

Before the conference, he explained, the teams had sought to turn the MMM itself into a practical tool for project practitioners, facilitating ongoing peer-to-peer learning. The Mediterranean, viewed as an integrated region stretching from Portugal to Lebanon, shares common tourism challenges. While many successful solutions and tested practices exist, they are often confined to individual programmes. The platform aims to bridge that gap, allowing proven approaches to be transferred across programmes, fostering a "positive Mediterranean contamination" where successful local and transnational initiatives inform one another.

The core feature of this Peer Exchange Mechanism is to facilitate tangible collaboration. Physical peer learning visits are at the heart of the initiative: projects from at least two different Interreg programmes can host visits, offering an opportunity for participants to engage directly with local stakeholders, pilot sites, and communities. Visitors are expected not just to observe, but to incorporate the insights into their own projects through concrete transfer plans, ensuring that knowledge translates into real impact.

Heibel illustrated how this might work in practice: a project from the Interreg Italia–Croatia Programme might host a visit in Split to showcase coastal tourism diversification. Partners from Tunisia, for instance, could spend a few days on-site, experiencing the results first-hand, connecting with local actors, and exploring opportunities to replicate successful practices in their own regions. Hosting can also be reciprocal, creating a dynamic, mutually beneficial exchange across the Mediterranean.

He emphasised that the MMM programme's managing authorities and secretariats will support participants throughout, facilitating costs eligibility, and providing matchmaking and communication tools to strengthen connections and maximise the outcomes of these exchanges.

The peer learning visits are conceived as the first step in building enduring synergies, a foundation for a collaborative Mediterranean community committed to delivering sustainable tourism across the region. He concluded by noting that more practical details would follow later in the year, but today marks the official launch of this initiative, a step toward sustained cooperation and lasting impact.

Wrapping Up, Moving Forward: Final Thoughts & Next Steps

Curzio Cervelli, Coordinator of the Joint Secretariat of Interreg Euro-MED, brought the event to a close on behalf of the MMM, with heartfelt thanks to all involved. He expressed particular gratitude to the Croatian Presidency for their hard work, to the European Commission's DG Regio and DG Mare for their support, to TESIM and Interact for their continuous collaboration, and to the project representatives who *"have the key for our cooperation."*

Then he went on to announce that the MMM had expanded to include one more programme, IPA South Adriatic, reaching a total of nine:

"We are officially nine today. This is quite an important achievement for the MMM towards having a single voice in the Mediterranean also for the future."

Cervelli reflected on the wider perspective gained over the two days, noting the challenges of working across the Mediterranean but stressing that overcoming these obstacles was possible and necessary. He highlighted a key lesson: while overlapping between programmes was once seen as problematic, it can in fact be a positive opportunity if properly organised. Mechanisms like the MMM, he explained, are essential tools for creating synergies, capitalising on knowledge, and maximising impact, particularly in light of the possible constraints of future programming periods, including reduced budgets.

He emphasised the need for visibility and collective strength, noting that Interreg remains largely unknown outside its immediate sphere. Greater impact requires unifying forces beyond local territories, reinforcing communication as a single voice, and building networks across borders.

Cervelli stressed that synergies and capitalisation are not optional:

"Probably the future programming period regulations ask us to work differently, probably with less money as well. This is why we cannot forget that all together we can better organise our synergies to have a bigger impact, to create new networks, and to be much more efficient and visible."

So, he urged participants to continue innovating within Interreg, rather than following mainstream approaches, and to seize opportunities to experiment with peer reviews and coordinated calls. These initiatives, he suggested, offer practical ways to strengthen

cooperation, increase visibility, and prepare for future regulatory frameworks, ensuring that sustainable tourism projects across the Mediterranean are more effective and impactful.

Concluding, Cervelli addressed the project representatives in the room, conveying a core message from the MMM: the future lies in their hands.

"Programmes can organise, help you, support you, but we cannot take your place. It is up to you to actively engage, share experiences, and take forward the lessons learned."

He closed with a call to action on behalf of the MMM: to continue working together, maximise synergies, and build a stronger, more visible, and integrated Mediterranean community focused on sustainable tourism.

Final Remarks

Jean-Pierre Halkin, Head of Unit for "Interreg, Cross-Border Cooperation, Internal Borders", Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy opened his final intervention by referring to one of Cervelli's points, highlighting the ongoing discussions on the future Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). He explained that in the post-2027 period, *"New priorities will emerge or will be reinforced"*, including security, defence, migration, enlargement, and competitiveness.

He stressed that the EU intends to preserve efficiency and impact by

"Simplifying the financial architecture to compensate for the reduction of the budget, improving coherence of the funds, and working through national plans to ensure a more strategic use of EU resources".

At the same time, Halkin emphasised the complementary role of programmes that *"are not easy to encapsulate in national plans because they are going beyond the borders"* and that should *"maintain a territorial and bottom-up philosophy."* He added that the key to preserving this approach is demonstrating impact and quality in what is delivered to citizens, a purpose at the heart of both days' discussions.

He noted that while Interreg programmes inherently foster cooperation between partners in different countries, collaboration between programmes themselves is not always easy. New ideas are now being developed to facilitate this cross-programme collaboration.

Halkin underlined that it is crucial to communicate that Interreg is not a collection of small projects. Interreg is also strategic, highlighting the example of sustainable tourism. He

explained that within the ERDF, \$4.2 billion is dedicated to sustainable tourism, with \$1.3 billion coming from Interreg programmes, which also support tourism under the objective of a greener Europe. By connecting the dots between these small projects, Interreg can showcase itself as a strategic partner in the Mediterranean region.

Reflecting on the next steps, he stressed that the MMM programmes that organised "Paths that Last" are actually *"Only at the beginning of the path."* On the other hand, he addressed the programme beneficiaries who participated in the event and noted they were leaving with both enthusiasm and a new task: to carry forward an initiative with the potential to shape Interreg in the Mediterranean Sea basin. And he stated that the EU's vision for the Mediterranean is clear: remove barriers, not build walls.

Halkin concluded with a sailing metaphor, saying that the initiative is like

"A ship we are sailing while building it, a ship with no captain by purpose, but one that can deliver results".

He reassured MMM programmes and participants of DG Regio's support, commitment, and flexibility, emphasizing that the initiative preserves the idea that Interreg's bottom-up, cooperative approach remains central.

Stella Arneri, Director at the Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds of the Republic of Croatia, closed the Conference by sharing her reflections, first highlighting what the conference had achieved and then turning to the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

On contributions, she emphasized that "sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean is not just a vision. It's certainly a common commitment, shared responsibility," and that Interreg plays "a significant role in shaping more sustainable tourism in the region."

She highlighted the conference's role in formulating initial joint recommendations, identifying common challenges and potential scalable solutions, bridging programming periods and policy levels, and further positioning MMM as *"a valuable tool, a mechanism, a good model for a cross-programme governance and post-27 collaboration."*

She also noted the importance of amplifying the voices of young people, referencing Halkin's panel with youth, which demonstrated their readiness *"to help shape the future."* Across panels and workshops, she observed that *"European territorial cooperation is actually a force for change,"* promoting inclusion, environmental responsibility, and resilience, particularly in coastal and island communities.

Looking ahead, she stressed the need to stay committed to supporting capitalisation of results achieved through Interreg programmes, promoting coordinated calls for proposals

to multiply impacts, and continuing to highlight the Mediterranean perspective in Brussels so that regional needs are incorporated into future EU policies.

She concluded by thanking the organisers, the facilitation team, and all participants for their professionalism and energy, inviting everyone to *"Build paths that last, together"*.

Summary of Workshop Discussions

The workshops, which brought together 96 beneficiaries representing all programmes participating in the Mechanism, were delivered in two sessions — commencing on the afternoon of 25 June and continuing in the morning of 26 June. All workshops followed the same co-developed methodologies and were aimed at strengthening cooperation across stakeholders of Interreg Programmes.

Over the course of two days, five parallel workshops were organised, each addressing a key dimension of sustainable tourism:

- **Workshop 1 & Workshop 2¹:** Shared and strategic governance of the tourism offer
- **Workshop 3:** Tourism and the green transition
- **Workshop 4:** The social dimension of tourism (employment and upskilling) and inclusive and accessible tourism
- **Workshop 5:** Innovative and smart tourism products
- The workshops were jointly designed and coordinated by MMM Programme teams, with the valuable contribution of facilitators from INTERACT, TESIM and the Euro-MED Governance projects.

This joint initiative followed a dual objective: on the one hand, to identify shared challenges and potential synergies among Programme beneficiaries; and on the other, to lay the groundwork for a future MMM coordinated call.

A two-step participatory format

The workshops were delivered in two sessions, beginning on the afternoon of 25 June and continuing in the morning of 26 June.

¹Given the high number of registered participants, this workshop was delivered in **two parallel sessions**.

A total of 69 projects were represented, contributing to 96 participants who took part in the four thematic workshops, distributed as follows: 21 participants in "Tourism and Green Transition"; 15 participants "Innovative Tourism Products"; 24 participants "Social, Inclusive and Accessible Tourism"; and 36 participants "Shared and Strategic Governance of the Tourism Offer".

It is highly relevant to mention that all workshops followed the same co-developed methodologies.

The first session was designed to foster mutual trust and stimulate creative engagement among participants. The opening activity, **Human Bingo**, served as a light and informal icebreaker, encouraging participants to connect with one another through a playful and interactive format. This contributed to creating a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere, conducive to open exchange.

Participants were then guided through the **Imaginary Planet** exercise, a creative and perspective-shifting journey aimed at stimulating out-of-the-box thinking. Each group was invited to co-create a fictional Mediterranean planet that reflected their vision of an ideal tourism model, in line with the specific thematic focus of their workshop (governance, accessibility, innovation, green transition or the social dimension of tourism). In several cases, this exercise was enriched by evocative background music and visual materials illustrating Mediterranean landscapes, local cultures and tourism experiences, carefully selected to resonate with the theme. This multisensory approach supported participants in engaging with the content in a more intuitive and visionary way.

The collective imagination process served as a gateway to identify key thematic challenges and opportunities, which were then explored in greater depth during the second session the following morning.

Structured reflection and mind mapping

The second session, held on the morning of 26 June, shifted the focus towards a more structured and strategic discussion. Working in plenary or in break-out groups, where considered most effective to explore specific aspects in greater depth, participants examined concrete ways to address the key issues that had emerged from the previous day's creative work.

A shared reflection template was at the core of the session, which guided participants through a set of structured questions designed to foster exchange and generate forward-looking proposals. The discussions were not intended to evaluate past project

achievements, but rather to explore what is needed going forward — in terms of enabling conditions, capitalisation, policy alignment, and future project design.

The first part of the **discussion focused on existing and tested solutions**, investigating what has already been developed within Interreg projects, what barriers still hinder scalability or transferability, and which challenges remain unaddressed. The second part **focused on the future**, identifying innovative approaches, opportunities for capitalising on results, pathways for embedding outcomes in broader strategies, and mechanisms to a more meaningful involvement of citizens and youth in sustainable tourism initiatives.

In parallel, participants contributed to a **mind mapping** exercise. Key ideas and insights that emerged organically during the discussions were first captured on post-it, then clustered into two or three core concepts. These were subsequently consolidated into a large-format mind map, offering a coherent visual synthesis of the contributions and connections developed during the session.

Throughout the process, facilitators and programme representatives played a key role. They introduced the session format and objectives, supported group dynamics, encouraged balanced participation, and contributed to clarifying and synthesising emerging content. Their presence ensured both methodological coherence and thematic consistency across the five parallel workshops.

To close the session, key outcomes from all workshops were presented in the plenary, creating space for collective reflection, identification of cross-cutting themes, and the consolidation of a shared vision. This final moment reinforced participant ownership of the results and laid the groundwork for future common call for proposals to be launched under the MMM framework.

Workshop 1–2: Shared and strategic governance of the tourism offer

This workshop focused on project experiences addressing governance in sustainable tourism. Participants shared a range of approaches aimed at building strategic, multi-level and cross-sectoral governance frameworks to strengthen coordination among tourism stakeholders and embed governance structures into wider territorial development processes. The exchanges revealed a rich variety of practices implemented under different Interreg programmes and confirmed the **urgent need to evolve from temporary, project-based coordination mechanisms towards more stable and institutionalised forms of governance**.

Existing solutions

Several existing solutions were highlighted during the workshop, reflecting the diversity of governance approaches across programmes participating in the MMM. Projects such as **Dialogue4Tourism** and **Community4Tourism**, developed under **Interreg Euro-MED**, were recognised as strong **examples of sustained stakeholder engagement** and **long-term policy dialogue**, supported by a seven-year implementation period. Participants also referred to shared digital tools that help consolidate and disseminate governance solutions. The Join the MED platform, developed by *Community4Tourism*, and Portico, presented as a reference from URBACT, were highlighted as useful repositories to ensure visibility and continuity beyond the project lifecycle. The potential of platforms like the Cross-Network Alliance, also developed under *Dialogue4Tourism*, was acknowledged for facilitating dialogue across countries and programmes. While these examples show meaningful progress, participants underlined the need to strengthen the use of digital governance tools, ensure the continuity of stakeholder engagement beyond project duration, and further promote cooperation across programmes. They also highlighted the importance of fostering data-driven governance and integrated decision-making.

Barriers to development

The discussion highlighted several **structural barriers** that continue to hinder the **long-term effectiveness** of **tourism governance frameworks**.

A key obstacle identified was the **lack of a shared vision** among tourism stakeholders. Participants noted that, in many cases, **actors operate with divergent objectives**, which undermines the collective understanding of what kind of destination is being developed.

Another recurring issue was the **difficulty of ensuring continuity** between **governance structures** and **on-the-ground implementation**. Stakeholder groups are often set up ad hoc for the duration of a project, then dissolve without being anchored in permanent local or regional frameworks. Participants also reflected on the tension between economic dependence on tourism revenues and the pursuit of sustainability. In several contexts, this dependence drives a preference for volume-based tourism models, which hampers innovation and weakens long-term governance strategies.

Finally, the **limited participation** of **local and regional authorities** in strategic decision-making processes was raised as a concern, with calls to reinforce their role in designing and maintaining inclusive governance systems.

New challenges to address

In addition to existing barriers, the workshop discussions surfaced several emerging priorities that should be addressed in future programming.

Strengthening the integration of tourism governance with adjacent policy domains, such as sport, public health, and spatial planning, was seen as a key step towards more holistic and resilient destination strategies.

Participants also advocated for embedding landscape protection more systematically within tourism governance frameworks, recognising its central role in shaping both policy and visitor experience.

Further emphasis was placed on the potential of engaging regional and local councils in the **co-management** of tourism-related assets and values, especially when it comes to intangible cultural heritage (ICH). While some steps have been taken, this area still requires targeted support.

Finally, the need to involve governance actors more directly in the development and implementation of digital tourism experiences was underlined, not only as users, but also as co-creators and enablers of innovation.

How to maximise the impact of projects

To enhance the long-term impact of projects in sustainable tourism governance, several key recommendations emerged during the session. Participants underlined the importance of creating dedicated **task forces of governance**, able to support the implementation and continuity of governance solutions beyond individual project cycles. These task forces could provide guidance, promote institutional anchoring, and ensure that governance innovations are taken forward in the medium to long term.

Stronger **collaboration with wider European initiatives**, such as the **Urban Agenda for the EU**, was also encouraged. Aligning with complementary stakeholder ecosystems and policy platforms is seen as an effective way to scale results and ensure coherence across interventions.

Participants also proposed the **establishment of steering committees** involving representatives from the public, private, academic and civil society sectors, to guide project implementation and policy integration. Such multi-actor groups could help ground governance solutions and create conditions for inclusive and informed decision-making.

Capacity-building and peer-learning were highlighted as critical levers for impact. Participants stressed the need to provide beneficiaries with practical support to use digital governance tools more effectively. Platforms such as *Join the MED* and *Portico*, as well as cooperation frameworks like the *Cross-Network Alliance* and the Sustainable Tourism Observatories, were cited as valuable resources that should continue to be supported and promoted.

How can results be better capitalised

Capitalisation was recognised as a strategic process requiring intentional planning and long-term thinking. Participants pointed to the value of establishing **permanent regional**

networks to ensure the continuity of stakeholder engagement and the institutional take-up of project results.

A key recommendation concerned the **transformation of project results into tangible tools**, such as training modules, toolkits and policy labs. Reference was made to existing models, including the Interreg Euro-MED Academy and the Sustainable Tourism Policy Labs developed by the Interreg Euro-MED *Dialogue4Tourism* project, which can serve as transferable formats for knowledge sharing and policy support.

In order to embed results into policy processes, participants proposed the development of policy papers, briefs and position papers, co-designed with regional and local authorities. Such instruments would help articulate project findings in a way that is accessible and relevant to decision-makers. Continued support for governance and institutional dialogue projects was also recommended to strengthen policy alignment and sustainability.

How to improve synergies and embedding

The discussion emphasised the need to better connect governance results with broader policy frameworks. The use of **shared digital platforms** to monitor tourist behaviour and environmental impacts was proposed to inform governance decisions and improve transparency.

Participants recommended **aligning governance approaches with national tourism strategies**, with regards to the green transition and digital transformation, to reinforce policy coherence and impact. Early involvement of Interreg programme authorities in the co-design of scalable governance tools was also seen as a strategic step to ensure that projects respond to real territorial needs and can be embedded in future programming. Embedding governance outputs into regional Smart Specialisation Strategies and climate adaptation plans was suggested to institutionalise results and connect tourism governance with broader development agendas.

Suggestions to better include youth and citizens

The discussion strongly encouraged more inclusive and participatory approaches involving both youth and citizens. In particular, an **intergenerational approach** was recommended, ensuring that knowledge and perspectives are exchanged across age groups and governance levels considered the older not only the youth.

Mechanisms to support **youth-led start-ups** in tourism governance were proposed, alongside the continuation of successful initiatives such as **Interreg Volunteer Youth (IVY)**. The role of civic engagement in innovation was emphasised, and participants proposed organising **interactive workshops**, including digital and hybrid formats, to strengthen intergenerational dialogue and participatory planning.

The creation of **local and regional advisory groups**, including intergenerational representatives, was also suggested to institutionalise citizen consultation within tourism

governance structures. These groups could provide regular input on tourism development strategies and foster shared responsibility between institutions and communities.

Governance Workshop – Main Takeaways

Main Takeaway Area	Key Messages
Existing solutions	Multi-level governance models, cross-sectoral steering groups, digital platforms and observatories were piloted to foster coordination and integration.
Barriers to development	Fragmented governance, lack of shared vision, short project timeframes, and low platform use hinder long-term sustainability and systemic change.
New Challenges to address	Greater integration is needed between tourism and sectors like sport, health, and digital; and local councils should co-manage cultural heritage with communities.
How to maximise the impact of projects	Future projects should focus on durable governance structures, inclusive vision co-creation, and integration of tourism in public policy frameworks.
Capitalisation and sustainability of results	Mainstream project results into institutional practice via policy briefs, toolkits, and long-term structures such as observatories and governance labs.
Synergies and Mainstreaming	Build synergies with EU initiatives (e.g. Urban Agenda, LIFE), align with Smart Specialisation Strategies and ensure early involvement of programme authorities.
Suggestions to Better Include Youth and Citizens	Youth organisations and intergenerational groups should be empowered through participatory tools, volunteer schemes and civic entrepreneurship in tourism governance.

THE THREE IDEAS THAT MOST CAUGHT OUR EYE

1. **Continuation and exchange** - Support the continuation and exchange of governance and institutional dialogue projects across future calls of the Programmes.
2. **Mainstreaming into policy** - Mainstream project results into policy frameworks through co-designed policy papers, briefs and position papers with local and regional authorities.
3. **Capacity-building and peer learning** - Strengthen capacity-building and peer-learning to avoid dependencies and promote knowledge sharing in future coordinated calls.

Workshop 3: Tourism and the Green Transition

This workshop focused on project experiences addressing the role of tourism in advancing the green transition. Participants explored how Interreg projects are contributing to more sustainable, inclusive and resilient tourism models, with particular attention to the environmental dimension and the shift towards long-term transformation.

Building on concrete project cases, the discussion highlighted the importance of linking green tourism to integrated territorial development, placing citizens, local authorities and nature at the heart of the governance processes. Emphasis was placed on the need to move from short-term interventions to systemic approaches, with **tourism positioned not only as an economic driver, but as a lever for improving quality of life and ecological balance.**

Existing Solutions

Participants showcased numerous examples of how small-scale, fact-based solutions have proven particularly effective in fostering sustainable tourism models. Projects focused on the management of natural resources and demonstrated successful practices in coastal and maritime regions. **Citizen engagement** emerged as a powerful driver, particularly when paired with **multi-level governance** frameworks that encouraged dialogue across sectors and institutions. These experiences confirmed that even modest interventions can be impactful when grounded in **data, cooperation, and long-term vision.**

Barriers to Development

Despite these achievements, several persistent barriers were identified. A **short-term project vision** remains a major constraint, often preventing the continuity and

consolidation of results. Many local and regional authorities lack long-term infrastructure or strategic tools to maintain the outcomes of tourism initiatives once project funding ends. Additionally, a prevailing **mindset based on competition for profit**, rather than cooperation and sustainability, hinders broader systemic change. A further obstacle is the **technological and knowledge divide**: many public authorities, particularly at the local level, lack the skills or capacity to take full ownership of innovative solutions developed during the project lifecycle.

New Challenges to Address

Participants emphasised the need for a fundamental **shift in mindset and behaviour**, from extractive and competitive logics to more participatory, responsible approaches to tourism. This includes strengthening governance perspectives and ensuring that tourism projects are anchored in shared decision-making frameworks. Another emerging priority is improving **knowledge management**: rather than remaining isolated, project-generated knowledge must be connected and exchanged across ecosystems. Finally, participants cautiously noted the importance of **democratising accessibility** to sustainable tourism, ensuring that the benefits of green transitions are broadly shared and not limited to certain groups or destinations.

How to Maximise the Impact of Projects

To increase project impact, participants proposed adopting a **"bike approach"**: projects need the right level of support and momentum to become self-sustaining, just like a cyclist needs a push to stay upright. This implies a need for mid-term enabling mechanisms and a stronger institutional commitment, particularly at the local level. Project teams were encouraged to design their exit strategies and capitalisation actions from the start, rather than leaving them to the final project stages. A further recommendation was to promote shared governance models that actively engage both local stakeholders and tourists, thereby fostering longer lasting and more inclusive impact.

How can results be better capitalised

Capitalisation efforts should be based on a **horizontal approach**, enabling peer-to-peer exchanges and collaborative learning across programmes and territories. Participants stressed the importance of using **shared tools and platforms** to increase visibility, connectivity, and usability of project outputs. Expectations raised through cooperation initiatives should be met with concrete opportunities for follow-up, and a strong call was made to advocate for mid-to long-term visions that go beyond project cycles and are integrated into public governance systems.

How to improve synergies and embedding

Embedding project results into **local policies** and **institutional strategies** was seen as essential. Participants proposed a stronger focus on human-centred and actor-oriented cooperation models, as well as on peer review exercises designed to examine processes rather than only results. In some cases, Interreg projects were seen to contribute to a shift in organisational culture, fostering collaboration even within the entities involved. Such experiences confirmed that moving away from isolated implementation towards structured, long-term cooperation models is both possible and beneficial.

Suggestions to better include youth and citizens

A recurring theme was the need to involve citizens and youth more meaningfully in governance processes. **Local authorities** were invited to adopt a **facilitation role** — providing space and support for others to act — rather than assuming sole responsibility for decision-making. **Citizens** should be encouraged to **express their views** and actively shape tourism development, while **youth** should be supported in **performing cooperation**, not just benefiting from it. Tourists, in turn, were envisioned as temporary residents, encouraged to reciprocate rather than consume, thereby strengthening the social dimension of green tourism.

Tourism and the Green Transition Workshop – Main Takeaways

Main Takeaway Area	Key Messages
Existing solutions	Small-scale, fact-based solutions in coastal regions with strong citizen engagement and multi-level governance formed the basis for successful green tourism models.
Barriers to development	Short-term vision, lack of infrastructure, competitive mindsets and knowledge/technological divides remain major obstacles.
New Challenges to address	A shift in mindset and governance is needed, including improved knowledge management and broader accessibility to sustainable tourism.
How to maximise the impact of projects – <i>perspectives for future projects</i>	The “bike approach” and strong institutional commitment, particularly local, are essential; exit strategies should be constructed from the start.

Capitalisation and sustainability of results	Horizontal capitalisation and shared tools/platforms enable policy integration and help transcend the project lifecycle.
Synergies and Mainstreaming	Embedding results into local policies, fostering peer reviews and actor-oriented cooperation reinforce longer-term governance models.
Suggestions to Better Include Youth and Citizens	Civic engagement led by local authorities, intergenerational participation, and involvement of tourists as temporary residents enhance inclusive tourism governance.

THE THREE IDEAS THAT MOST CAUGHT OUR EYE

1. **A better place to live is a better place to visit** - Green tourism can become more than a product, it offers a real opportunity to experiment with shared, multi-level governance that connects people, places and policies.
2. **Less competition, more cooperation: the Interreg mindset** - Participants confirmed that Interreg has already shown the way: replacing competition with collaborative learning is both possible and rewarding, a shift worth amplifying.
3. **Beyond project-based thinking** - Projects cannot operate in isolation. They require ecosystems for exchange, continuity and scaling, including tools, dialogue spaces and follow-up mechanisms embedded in long-term strategies.

Workshop 4 – The social dimension of tourism and inclusive and accessible tourism

This session brought together participants from two interlinked workshops, jointly held to explore the shared social dimension of tourism, from employment and upskilling to inclusive and accessible practices. Discussions drew from a range of project experiences across Interreg programmes, with a strong focus on equity, empowerment, and participation. The session surfaced both structural gaps and inspiring practices, with a recurring call to place users and final beneficiaries, particularly young people, persons with disabilities, and underrepresented groups, at the centre of project and policy design.

Existing solutions

Participants highlighted several promising practices already implemented across different Interreg projects. These include the **empowerment of young people**, improvements in **infrastructure for people with disabilities**, and the use of **digital platforms** to provide accessible tourism information. Some projects showcased housing solutions for people with disabilities, while others demonstrated the value of participatory local action plans and community mapping tools that strengthen local involvement and ownership. The concept of co-participation and the application of universal design principles emerged as cross-cutting enablers of inclusive tourism.

Barriers to development

Despite the progress achieved, several structural barriers continue to hinder the development and scaling-up of inclusive and socially responsive tourism approaches. The **limited engagement of policy makers** was a recurrent concern, as was the persistence of **bureaucratic and regulatory constraints**. A lack of **awareness, training opportunities**, and **cross-sectoral cooperation** was reported, alongside **resistance to change** in some communities. Participants also noted the use of overly **technical language** in project communication, which creates barriers for final beneficiaries. The insufficient involvement of end users in project design and the absence of adequate digital and physical infrastructure were also flagged as limiting factors.

New challenges to address

The discussion called for an expanded understanding of **accessibility**, beyond the needs of persons with disabilities, to include children and the elderly. The need to promote a more universal definition of accessibility — adaptable to different territorial and cultural contexts — was considered essential. Several participants called for greater attention to the concept of **social readiness**, including the idea of a measurable "social readiness level", to assess how communities are equipped to embrace inclusive innovation. The **lack of financial sustainability**, the challenge of **regulatory fragmentation**, and the need for greater flexibility in adapting frameworks to national and regional realities were also highlighted. Finally, the importance of addressing the **silver economy**, and more generally, age-inclusive approaches in tourism, was noted as an area requiring more structured attention in future projects.

How to maximise the impact of projects

To ensure long-term impact, participants recommended **involving people with disabilities** directly in the **design of calls** and **project proposals**. The development of targeted calls was seen as a way to strengthen inclusion, while the use of AI was considered potentially useful for analysing data, anticipating needs, and designing more tailored solutions. The creation of new educational tools, especially for teachers and facilitators, was discussed as a strategy to support long-term mindset change. Enhancing connections with less-touristed areas, facilitating exchange of practices, and promoting responsible tourist behaviour through tracking and awarding systems were also proposed.

How can results be better capitalised

Capitalisation was considered a priority. Participants suggested that **transferability partners** should be identified early, already at the application stage, and that a clear capitalisation **strategy** should be embedded in every proposal. This strategy should also include the **identification of follow-up funds** to ensure the continuity and re-use of project results beyond the formal end of implementation. Ensuring the **scalability** of outputs to other regions and improving the **visibility of results**, including through alert mechanisms targeting local policy makers, were seen as effective ways to increase institutional ownership and policy uptake. The importance of maintaining and updating digital platforms was also mentioned, along with the idea of launching calls focused specifically on capitalisation.

How to improve synergies and embedding

Participants underlined the need to strengthen multi-level governance, enabling more structured collaboration across programmes, regions and institutional levels. Several ideas were proposed to improve alignment with regional and national strategies. These included organising multi-level events to foster the exchange of best practices among projects, beneficiaries and authorities. Such events were seen as crucial for promoting transparency, mutual learning, and strategic coherence across territories.

Participants also recommended the creation of boot camps focused on specific thematic areas, bringing together programme staff and beneficiaries for peer learning and targeted support. The use of matchmaking platforms to connect actors and identify synergies more effectively was also highlighted. In addition, suggestions were made to promote the **harmonisation of rules and procedures** between programmes, and to explore fast-track financing mechanisms to sustain the participation of public authorities already engaged in Interreg projects.

While these proposals were discussed in general terms, the MMM was recognised by several participants as a useful framework to facilitate dialogue and enable such practices to take root more broadly.

Suggestions to better include youth and citizens

The importance of engaging youth and citizens in all phases of the project cycle was strongly underlined. Participants suggested organising **participatory formats**, such as hackathons, as well as launching **youth-dedicated calls** with simplified procedures. Financial incentives were proposed as a way to encourage sustained involvement. Awareness-raising should begin early, through educational support at school and university level, and involve both youth representatives and educators in co-designing outreach activities. The inclusion of youth organisations as associated partners in projects was also seen as a means to foster more structured participation.

Social, inclusive and accessible tourism Workshop – Main Takeaways

Main Takeaway Area	Key Messages
Existing solutions	Practices include the empowerment of youth, infrastructure for people with disabilities, digital platforms, participatory action plans, and community mapping, reflecting growing use of universal design and co-creation.
Barriers to development	Key obstacles include limited policy-maker engagement, bureaucracy, lack of incentives, technical language, and insufficient involvement of end users. Greater inclusion and awareness are needed.
New Challenges to address	Accessibility should include children and the elderly. More focus is needed on social readiness, financial sustainability, regulatory diversity, and the emerging silver economy
How to maximise the impact of projects – <i>perspectives for future projects</i>	Projects should involve people with disabilities from the start, promote targeted calls, use AI, link with under-visited areas, and introduce reward mechanisms for responsible tourism.
Capitalisation and sustainability of results	Include a capitalisation strategy, identify transferability partners, allocate a dedicated budget, and ensure follow-up funding and visibility, e.g. through alert systems.

Synergies and Mainstreaming	Strengthen multi-level governance, organise exchange events, promote matchmaking platforms, and encourage harmonised rules.
Suggestions to Better Include Youth and Citizens	Engage youth through participatory formats, simplified calls, and financial incentives. Start awareness at school level and involve youth organisations and educators.

THE THREE IDEAS THAT MOST CAUGHT OUR EYE

1. **Broadening the scope of accessibility** - Accessibility should go beyond disability and include children, the elderly, and other user groups. Adopting a universal design approach can help create more inclusive and adaptable tourism experiences.
2. **Budgets and partners for transferability** - To ensure long-term impact, projects should identify transferability partners and allocate a dedicated budget for capitalisation from the outset, making it easier to scale and sustain results.
3. **A co-participation approach** - Inclusive tourism depends on involving final users and target groups — such as persons with disabilities and youth — directly in the design and implementation of projects and calls.

Workshop 5 – Innovative and smart tourism products

This workshop brought together participants to explore two interlinked sub-themes: Smart Tourism and Digital Transformation and Innovation in Tourism Business Models and Start-ups. The session showcased cutting-edge practices, addressed emerging gaps, and identified concrete strategies for embedding digital and innovative approaches across programmes.

Existing solutions

Participants highlighted a range of **digitally enabled services**, such as AI-powered customer facilitation, VR planning tools, and immersive virtual environment experiences. Projects also deployed **cascade funding schemes (FSTP)** to support SMEs and start-ups, enabling innovation in tourism through tailored grants. The adoption of e-platforms and digital

payment solutions for trip planning further exemplified digital readiness in delivering personalised tourism services.

Barriers to development

Despite the innovations, structural constraints remain. A major challenge is **skills development**: many start-ups and SMEs lack the capacity to adapt to business models shaped by AI and digital technologies. **Regulatory uncertainty** and limited **support from local authorities** hamper innovation. Barriers were also reported in **data availability and analysis**, including confusion over which certification standards to apply. Finally, the **complexity of multi-level governance**, particularly in public-private cooperation (including PPP) models, was often cited as a bottleneck.

New challenges to address

Looking ahead, participants identified a set of emerging priorities: enhancing **person-to-person experiences** through digital innovation; strengthening **capacity building** for entrepreneurs and workers across the tourism sector; addressing **governance gaps** in resource and seasonality management; and scaling up **eco-tourism initiatives** with faster deployment. A pressing need was also noted for more effective resource utilisation support across regions and seasons.

How to maximise the impact of projects

To increase practical impact, several recommendations arose: **improve project selection methods** by incorporating interviews with shortlisted applicants to confirm delivery capability; design **scalable, practical outputs**; facilitate effective **stakeholder engagement**, including genuine youth involvement; and support **cross-sectoral partnerships** between local authorities, SMEs, certification bodies, academia and investors. Stronger capacity building for both project staff and beneficiaries was seen as essential to ensure implementation quality.

How can results be better capitalised

Participants underlined the value of **networking** and the use of existing channels, such as the European Network for Sustainable Travel or DestiNet, to enhance visibility and uptake. They called for capitalisation to focus on scalable outputs, impact monitoring, and data-driven matching of best practice. Leveraging **joint distribution mechanisms, targeted**

capitalisation calls, and embedding outcomes into **regional planning processes** were all seen as key elements in sustaining project legacies.

How to improve synergies and embedding

Embedding innovation requires aligning project design with **local and national innovation policies**, supporting internationalisation of outputs, and building synergy from the outset. Participants stressed the importance of project fairs and exchange events, the use of AI-powered tools to match thematic synergies, and the adoption of capitalisation criteria in standard calls. Faster financing mechanisms and governance-oriented selection criteria were also identified as enablers of stronger programme coherence.

Suggestions to better include youth and citizens

Youth and citizens should be engaged at all stages of the project lifecycle, from design and implementation to assessment through a fully participatory approach. The session underlined the importance of **co-design formats**, such as Living Labs, and capacity-building events that equip participants with the skills to contribute meaningfully. Participants also recommended the organisation of hackathons and other interactive formats to foster creative exchange. The role of youth-led green tourism start-ups was highlighted as a key area where innovation, sustainability and inclusion converge. Programmes should support this engagement through **simplified procedures, financial incentives**, and stronger collaboration with **educators and schools** to raise awareness from an early stage.

Innovative and smart tourism products Workshop – Main Takeaways

Main Takeaway Area	Key Messages
Existing solutions	Digital innovation is advancing through AI services, VR tools, cascade funding, e-platforms, and payment solutions supporting smarter tourism.
Barriers to development	Challenges include lack of digital skills, limited authority support, data gaps, complex certification systems, and public-private cooperation issues.
New Challenges to address	Future focus should include enhanced person-to-person experiences, stronger capacity building, tackling governance gaps, and scaling eco-tourism.

How to maximise the impact of projects – <i>perspectives for future projects</i>	Improve project selection, deliver scalable outputs, ensure stakeholder and youth engagement, foster cross-sector cooperation, and strengthen project team capacity.
Capitalisation and sustainability of results	Use existing networks, ensure data-driven scaling, embed results in regional plans, and support replication through capitalisation calls.
Synergies and Mainstreaming	Align with innovation policies, promote AI for matching, support internationalisation, and embed capitalisation criteria in calls.
Suggestions to Better Include Youth and Citizens	Involve youth and citizens from the start through Living Labs, hackathons, green start-ups, and offer simplified procedures and incentives.

THE THREE IDEAS THAT MOST CAUGHT OUR EYE

1. **Smart niche tourism** | Innovative models such as industrial tourism (e.g. textile) and cross-sector experiences (e.g. music, museums, local food) can broaden tourism opportunities and promote hidden or less-visited destinations.
2. **Expanding open data** | Increasing the availability and accessibility of data from both public and private stakeholders is crucial for scaling innovation and enabling more personalised tourism services.
3. **Bridging the governance gap** | Strengthening the connection between project implementation and local policy agendas is essential to ensure alignment, foster ownership, and secure long-term impact.

Final remarks and acknowledgements

The organisers wish to thank all participants for their active engagement, acknowledge the support of the EU, and recognise the collaborative efforts that made this event possible. They also warmly welcome Interreg IPA South Adriatic as a new member of the MMM.

Further information and updates on the activities of the Mediterranean Multi-Programme Mechanism can be found on the MMM programmes' websites.

The MMM Programmes:

- [Interreg Italy-France Maritime](#)
- [Interreg Euro-MED](#)
- [Interreg NEXT MED](#)
- [Interreg Italy-Croatia](#)
- [Interreg Greece-Cyprus](#)
- [Interreg Italy-Malta](#)
- [Interreg Italy-Tunisia](#)
- [Interreg Italy-Slovenia](#)
- [Interreg IPA South Adriatic](#)

Other attending institutions and programmes:

- [DG REGIO - Regional and Urban Policy](#)
- [DG MARE - Maritime Affairs and Fisheries](#)
- [Ministry of Regional Development and European Union Funds](#)
- [Presidency of the Council of Ministers - Department for the Cohesion Policy and the South](#)
- [Interreg Europe](#)
- [Interact](#)
- [Interreg TESIM NEXT](#)
- [Interreg Central Europe](#)
- [Interreg Volunteer Youth](#)
- [EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region EUSAIR](#)
- [Union for the Mediterranean](#)
- [Mediterranean Action Plan](#)
- [Eco-Union](#)

