

Small but strategic: Local tourism hubs as catalysts for sustainable regional transformation

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Abstract

This study examines the role of small-scale tourism hubs in boosting entrepreneurship and sustainable innovation in the tourism sector through acceleration programmes and explores the qualities that make these hubs successful. Based on a qualitative case study design, the research draws on data collected through direct observation and in-depth interviews with eight key informants (the project coordinator and seven startup founders) at the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub in Spain between February and June 2025. The sample was selected purposively to include core stakeholders of the acceleration programme. Data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach to identify emerging barriers and success factors. Findings reveal key challenges, including the immaturity of early-stage projects, weak integration with regional innovation networks, and limited post-acceleration funding. Success enablers include institutional legitimacy, sectoral focus, integrated mentoring and matchmaking, and sustainability-oriented selection criteria. In conclusion, the study highlights that small tourism hubs, when strategically embedded within institutional frameworks, can act as catalysts for sustainable tourism innovation and regional transformation.

Keywords: tourism accelerators, entrepreneurship, innovation hubs, Costa del Sol, sustainable tourism

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1. Introduction

The increasing interest in innovation-led tourism development has led to the emergence of new organizational formats such as innovation hubs, living labs, and accelerators dedicated to fostering entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship hubs are shared workspaces promoted by public and/or private entities, where collaboration, innovation, and entrepreneurial spirit are fostered among the individuals and companies that make up the resident community (Jiménez & Zheng, 2021). In the tourism context, tourism hubs are organizational platforms often physical, but increasingly hybrid that concentrate tourism-related entrepreneurs, support services, and institutional actors in one location or network, with the aim of facilitating collaboration, knowledge exchange, and the co-creation of innovative products and services that contribute to destination competitiveness and sustainability (Baggio & Cooper, 2010; Brandão *et al.*, 2018). While such models have been extensively analysed in urban and tech-based sectors, their application in tourism remains comparatively underexplored (Brandão *et al.*, 2018). Across Europe, dedicated tourism accelerators are beginning to gain traction, yet scholarly attention remains limited. Recent initiatives such as the EU-supported FU-TOURISM programme illustrates a growing institutional push to connect tourism entrepreneurship with digital transformation and sustainability. However, comprehensive empirical assessments of these hubs are still scarce, especially in academic literature. For instance, Badulescu *et al.* (2022) analysed whether tourism ventures included in business accelerators meet their financial expectations, highlighting both the promise and the limitations of such models. Likewise, Roser *et al.* (2023) explored the evolving role of a tourism innovation intermediary in Andalusia, Spain, in promoting sustainable transitions and strengthening innovation ecosystems. In tourism, these hubs are not only sites of knowledge transfer and entrepreneurial mentoring but also enablers of strategic change in local development models (Baggio & Cooper, 2010). Indeed, the link between tourism hubs and territorial sustainability can be particularly relevant in terms of infrastructure demands, environmental impact, and energy planning, especially when the intention is to position the hub not only as an instrument of economic dynamism but also as a driver of sustainable transformation.

In this context, small tourism hubs, particularly in peripheral or saturated destinations, represent a promising yet challenging context. They often operate in environments with limited resources, institutional fragmentation, and a lack of integrated innovation strategies. Nevertheless, empirical studies suggest that when supported by clear governance and aligned with regional needs, they can function as important catalysts for sustainable tourism innovation (Falter, 2024).

Referring to the role of hubs as instruments of sustainable economic dynamisms, their accelerator programs have become increasingly relevant in fostering innovative ecosystems by connecting talent, resources, and applied knowledge. As in the case of hubs, most research on accelerators has focused on urban, tech-oriented environments, and their application in traditional sectors such as tourism, and in smaller, less centralized regions, is less understood. In these latter contexts, accelerators must contend with fragmented value chains, less digitalized business cultures, and limited collaboration traditions. Based on the above and considering the potential of small tourism hubs to boost innovation, entrepreneurship and sustainability in the industry through acceleration programmes, understanding the qualities that make those hubs successful is essential to contribute to the positive evolution of the sector.

Thus, to contribute to this field, this study aims to explore how small-scale tourism hubs foster entrepreneurship and sustainable innovation through acceleration programmes, as well as the conditions that enable their success. Specifically, it identifies the key challenges, and success factors these hubs face when operating in the tourism sector and explores their potential to act as catalysts for sustainable tourism innovation and regional transformation.

The evidence to carry out the study is taken from a hub with recognised success located in Spain, specifically in the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub, which operates under a public-sector-led governance model, taking as a reference its start-up acceleration programme. Spain stands as one of the most prominent global tourism destinations, ranking consistently among the top three countries in terms of international arrivals and revenue (Melnyk *et al.*, 2022). The sector contributes approximately 12% to Spain's GDP and employs over 2.4 million people, illustrating both its economic weight and structural importance. However, this prominence also brings challenges, including saturation, seasonality, and increasing environmental pressure. As Melnyk *et al.* (2022) point out, the Spanish tourism industry faces significant economic, social, and ecological issues that require coordinated policy and innovation responses.

In response to these national-level challenges, Spain has promoted strategic reforms aimed at making its tourism model more sustainable, digital, and inclusive. National frameworks increasingly stress the importance of regenerative destination planning, integrated mobility systems, and innovation-driven public-private partnerships (Fitur, 2025). Within this evolving landscape, hubs such as the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub serve as laboratories where these ambitions are tested at local scale, and where entrepreneurship is harnessed to address systemic transformation goals.

In particular, the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub is not merely an instrument of local entrepreneurial support but is increasingly seen as potential platforms for strategic regional transformation. This hub contributes to the diversification of tourism offerings, reinforces sustainability goals, and helps reposition destinations within a more resilient and competitive model of tourism development. More specifically, Costa del Sol Tourism Hub is a public-sector initiative aimed at transforming the regional tourism economy through digital and sustainable innovation. This hub offers a unique opportunity to observe a public-led, tourism-specific accelerator embedded in one of Spain's most mature tourism regions, allowing for insights into both its operational dynamics and strategic value. Operating in a region with over 14 million annual visitors (Costa del Sol Tourism Hub, 2024), the hub serves as a relational and organizational platform for early-stage tourism ventures. The program integrates mentoring, institutional support, and access to visibility and investors, making it a pioneering model within Spain for sector-specific acceleration.

These characteristics align with the phases of venture development outlined by Clarysse *et al.* (2015), who differentiate the pre-acceleration readiness and post-program scaffolding, particularly in non-tech and traditional sectors. Their model emphasises that accelerator outcomes depend not only on program design but also on how well start-ups are prepared beforehand and supported afterward, which is especially critical in complex and fragmented sectors such as tourism. To contextualize these dynamics more precisely, it is essential to consider the structural and operational configuration of the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub itself. Results and discussion sections outline the hub's territorial embeddedness, organisational structure, and participant profile, offering a granular perspective on how its characteristics shape both the challenges and opportunities observed.

2. Theoretical Framework: institutional embeddedness and the transformative potential of local tourism hubs

Integrating innovation and entrepreneurship theories allows for a richer understanding of how tourism hubs can function as instruments of territorial transformation through their acceleration programmes. Central to this is the concept of institutional logics, defined as overarching belief systems and practices that guide behaviour and decision-making within organizations and social systems (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). These logics shape the goals, strategies, and actions of tourism hubs and their acceleration efforts.

The institutional logics perspective (Thornton *et al.*, 2012) highlights that tourism hubs often become arenas where competing rationalities coexist. On one hand, the market logic prioritizes efficiency, scalability, and economic returns by accelerating startups targeting clearly defined clients such as tourists or local businesses. On the other, the community or normative logic introduces values of equity, regeneration, and environmental and social sustainability in response to community pressures, public policies, and global agendas such as the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Fresneda-Fuentes *et al.*, 2022).

This coexistence is especially significant in tourism, given the sector's historically negative environmental and social impacts on destinations (Fresneda-Fuentes *et al.*, 2022). The simultaneous presence of these logics within hubs generates both tensions and synergies that influence startup selection, programme design, and success metrics (Urbaniec & Žur, 2021). Market-driven accelerators typically focus on startups with scalability potential and economic returns in the short to medium term, emphasizing metrics like user growth, revenue, and market validation to justify investment decisions (Clarysse *et al.*, 2015). Conversely, the normative logic calls for regenerating destinations, minimizing adverse effects, promoting equity and inclusion, and preserving cultural and natural heritage. Hub managers can prioritize these values and align with frameworks such as the SDGs and Smart Tourist Destination strategies, which require impact indicators beyond financial outcomes.

While market and normative logics may seem conflicting, their coexistence in tourism hubs does not necessarily lead to opposition. Instead, it can create strategic opportunities for mutual reinforcement, where sustainability principles enrich entrepreneurial objectives and vice versa. When a hub strategically adopts sustainability as a guiding principle, it enables reframing entrepreneurial goals to recognize not suppress the tensions between economic and socio-environmental aims. This fosters synergies that participating ventures can leverage and lays the foundation for reconciling these logics in entrepreneurial practice. Given tourism's historical oversight of social and environmental costs, such reconciliation is both novel and increasingly imperative (Fresneda-Fuentes *et al.*, 2022).

Understanding this dynamic requires situating tourism hubs within their institutional environments, as their transformative potential is deeply embedded in broader historical, political, and organizational trajectories. The concept of path dependency (Martin & Sunley, 2006) is instrumental here, illustrating how hubs develop within long-standing tourism trajectories and institutional paths in specific territories, which can provide enabling conditions like destination branding and institutional legitimacy that facilitate hub operation and startup attraction, but also impose constraints through entrenched sectoral practices and expectations that may limit innovation (Méndez *et al.*, 2019).

To address the frequent constraints anticipated by the path dependency perspective, tourism accelerators must display adaptive capacity (Folke *et al.*, 2005), characterized by iterative learning, flexibility in programme design, and responsiveness to emerging demands. In this regard, and in response to a dynamic and often socially hostile environment marked by growing criticism of tourism's negative impacts (Fresneda-Fuentes *et al.*, 2022), integrating sustainability criteria and engaging mission-aligned investors into project evaluations acquires great relevance (Iñigo & Albareda, 2019)

Nevertheless, the transformative impact of hubs through their accelerator programmes is conditioned by their institutional embeddedness and the historical trajectories of their territories. Méndez *et al.* (2019) identify that path dependency can generate rigidity traps stemming from self-reinforcing mechanisms, entrenched discourses, and asymmetric power relations, especially in mature tourism regions. Such institutional legacies may resist alternative development models, narrowing innovation opportunities. Yet, hubs can engage in institutional work, that is the deliberate alteration of rules, practices, and meanings to enable change (Iñigo & Albareda, 2019). By acting as boundary-spanning

intermediaries, they can help reframe dominant narratives, legitimize sustainability-oriented ventures, and build coalitions to challenge existing regimes.

Agency, reflexivity, and adaptive capacity are key to institutional change (Iñigo & Albareda, 2019; Méndez *et al.*, 2019). Transformative entrepreneurship emerges from the strategic triangulation and leveraging of institutional complexities, moving beyond narrow startup success metrics to embrace iterative learning, stakeholder engagement, and impact measurement sensitive to local contexts. Tourism hubs thus function as institutional arenas where multiple, often conflicting logics are negotiated and reconfigured. The balance they strike between economic performance and social-ecological goals largely determines their capacity to drive territorial transformation.

Finally, the hubs' embeddedness in local governance and policy frameworks further shapes their priorities and operational modalities. Close collaboration with public administrations and alignment with initiatives like the SDGs and Smart Tourist Destination strategies facilitate hybrid governance models. These models negotiate market and community logics, enabling hubs to pursue economic growth alongside social and environmental sustainability.

The relevance of these dynamics is illustrated in empirical works. Recent evidence from rural and cross-border contexts reinforces the importance of designing accessible and inclusive tourism ecosystems structured around hubs. A study in regions of Spain and Portugal shows how the creation of hubs as innovation pivots enables the concentration of resources, the coordination of stakeholders, and the establishment of performance metrics to promote accessible, inclusive, and sustainable rural tourism, supported by smart technologies and cross-border collaboration. Through focus groups with consumers, distributors, and producers, the study identifies physical, informational, attitudinal, and systemic barriers and proposes action lines to strengthen value chains and create employment, particularly for priority groups. These findings support the idea of tourism hubs as catalysts for territorial transformation when accessibility and inclusion are integrated from the ecosystem design stage (Paiva *et al.*, 2025). In line with this approach, small hubs in consolidated destinations such as the one analysed in this study can operate as platforms for applied innovation that translate these principles of accessibility and inclusion into concrete programmes and measurable outcomes.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore the challenges and enabling factors of success in small-scale tourism hubs, as well as its potential to act as catalysts for sustainable tourism innovation and regional transformation. Previous studies have also used case study research to examine both hubs (e.g., Jiménez & Zheng, 2021) and accelerator programmes (e.g., Caccamo & Beckman, 2022; Urbaniec & Žur, 2021). Although our study focuses on a single accelerator, the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub, evidence is drawn from multiple startups that have participated in different cohorts of its acceleration programme. This approach enables the identification and comparison of key structural and contextual elements that shape how the accelerator fosters entrepreneurship and innovation. By examining a variety of entrepreneurial projects within the same institutional and territorial setting, the study mitigates the influence of external contextual factors (Hochberg, 2016) and strengthens the internal validity of the findings. The fieldwork was conducted by the two authors, who led the data collection through direct observation and in-depth interviews.

The Costa del Sol Tourism Hub in Spain was selected as the case due to its notable success over its eight years of operation. The selection is further justified by its inclusion in the Guide to Best Practices in Innovation for Smart Tourist Destinations (SEGITTUR, 2022), its listing in the First Catalogue of

Entrepreneurial Initiative Accelerators in Andalusia, and its frequent use as a data source in the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor and FUNCAS economic reports.

3.1.1. Contextual profile of the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub

Unlike isolated or low-density innovation spaces found in some Mediterranean destinations, the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub operates in a densely populated, tourism-intensive region. The province of Málaga hosts over 14 million visitors annually (Costa del Sol Tourism Hub, 2024), and tourism accounts for nearly 20% of its GDP, reflecting both economic dependency and opportunity for innovation.

Rather than occupying a large, purpose-built site, the hub is embedded in the institutional infrastructure of Turismo y Planificación Costa del Sol, functioning as a hybrid platform that mixes virtual and physical formats. This institutional embedding reflects a public-sector-led governance model, with the hub being promoted and managed by Turismo y Planificación Costa del Sol, a provincial government agency. Such governance provides strategic alignment with regional tourism policies and ensures institutional legitimacy, which shapes both the hub's operational approach and its stakeholder relationships. This setting allows for continuous year-round operation, as opposed to the underutilisation patterns observed in residential or seasonal hubs.

A key differentiator of the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub is its strong relational fabric with local tourism stakeholders.

The hub's model is characterized by:

- No fixed co-working space, relying instead on flexible meeting formats and digital mentoring.
- A regional rather than hyperlocal focus, attracting ventures from across Andalusia and beyond.
- Embeddedness in a mature tourism cluster, yet with room for improvement in cross-sector and university linkages.

This combination of institutional access and adaptive infrastructure makes the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub an interesting outlier among small accelerators, meriting closer analysis.

3.2. Data collection

Upon receiving authorization from the hub's management team to conduct the research, data collection was carried out in three distinct phases that were carried out between February and June 2025. First, we familiarized ourselves with the context of Costa del Sol tourism hub by collecting information on the tourism area and on the tourism hub from official websites (e.g., information on the Andalusia's and Malaga's tourism contexts, phases history of the tourism hub and its governance, their acceleration programmes accelerated startups, business models of startups, etc.).

The second phase of the data collection focused on the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub and relied, first, on direct observation by the researchers through site visits to the hub premises. Secondly it included in-depth interview with the Project Coordinator of the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub. This fieldwork was carried out in February 2025. Table 1 offers details of the interviewed carried out in this second phase.

Table 1. *Costa del Sol tourism hub interview.*

ID	Role/Position	Gender	Tenure in the position	Duration	Interview Date
01	Hub Project Coordinator	Male	9 years (since the hub's creation in 2016)	3'5 hours	Feb 19, 2025

The third phase of data collection focused on tourism startups that had participated in the acceleration programme of the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub. We interviewed the founders of seven startups, including cases of startups successfully launched alongside others that changed ownership or experienced major strategic pivots. Concerning these accelerated startups, a sustained effort was made to contact them. Personalized emails were sent to several participants, inviting them to take part in the study. Each invitation included the option to schedule an interview based on a structured, yet open script designed to allow respondents to answer freely and share insights in their own terms. Phone calls were also used to boost participation. All the interviews took place among April and June 2025, and their average length was 55 minutes. Table 2 provides an overview of the accelerated startups that participated in the research, interviewees and the interviews carried out.

Table 2. *Overview of the accelerated startups, interviewees and interviews.*

ID	Accelerated start-up	Acceleration year	Sector focus	Status of operations	Role/Position	Gender	Interview Date
02	Axarguias	2018	Digital Guided Tours	Changed Ownership	Founder	Female	May 26, 2025
03	AC Scholarships	2018	Education / Cultural Travel	Strategic pivot	Co-founder	Male	Jun 10, 2025
04	Billy Goat	2019	Adventure / Active Tourism	Strategic pivot	Founder	Male	Jun 16, 2025
05	Discoolver	2020	Smart Tourism / SaaS	Active	CEO/Co-founder	Male	Apr 23, 2025
06	EcoDive	2020	Marine Ecotourism Tourism	Active	Co-founder	Female	May 28, 2025
07	Cisnea	2021	Accessibility Tech	Inactive	Co-founder	Male	Jun 3, 2025
08	Biotonomy	2023	Deep Tech / Urban Planning	Active	Co-founder	Male	Apr 15, 2025

4. Data analysis

The data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun *et al.*, 2019), a widely used method in qualitative research for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. This approach has been successfully used in studies on hubs and startup accelerators (e.g., de Klerk *et al.*, 2024; Mwantimwa *et al.*, 2021). The method offers a flexible and accessible framework for examining qualitative information and is particularly well-suited for exploring complex phenomena such as perceptions, lived experiences, and organisational practices. Given the exploratory nature of this study, thematic analysis was an appropriate choice to systematically interpret the data and generate meaningful insights.

Following Braun *et al.*'s (2019) six-phase framework, this study explored patterns emerging from the qualitative material. The process began with familiarization with the data (phase 1) by the two researchers, involving repeated reading of transcripts to gain an in-depth understanding. Initial codes were then generated (phase 2) to systematically capture relevant features related to the research questions. These codes were grouped into broader themes (phase 3), which were subsequently reviewed (phase 4) for internal coherence and consistency with the overall dataset. Each theme was then defined and clearly named (phase 5) to reflect its core meaning and relevance to the research aims. Finally, the

analysis was presented in a structured narrative (phase 6) supported by illustrative data extracts. This approach allowed for both inductive and deductive interpretation (Braun *et al.*, 2019: p.48), ensuring analytical rigor and transparency throughout the process. To this respect, we highlight that both researchers carried out each phase independently and after each of them they share, discuss and reach consensus before advancing to the following phase.

Table 3. *Challenges and enablers of accelerated startups interviewed from the hub costa del sol*

Startup	Sample quotes - data	Code as challenge	Code as enabler
Axarguias	We initially lacked a clear understanding of the digital market	✓ (ch-1)	
	We engaged within the hub in a validation process supported by continuous feedback loops		✓ (en-1)
AC Scholarships	We found that investors were unfamiliar with B2B educational models in the tourism sector	✓ (ch-2)	
	We experienced validation primarily from the public sector, rather than receiving equity funding		✓ (en-1)
Billy Goat	We lacked strong ties with tech and design networks, and we also feel a sense of isolation within the cohort	✓ (ch-3)	
	We gained exposure through the hub, although we still needed stronger connections with the tech ecosystem		✓ (en-2)
Discoolver	We needed to reposition our product in the market because we were not managing to reach the target audience we had initially chosen, and we also lacked contacts in the public sector	✓ (ch-3, ch-4)	
	We benefited from mentoring and matchmaking efforts with the city of Ronda, which helped align our SaaS solution with local governance needs		✓ (en-3, en-4)
EcoDive	We had no prior connection to local tourism actors	✓ (ch-3)	
	We were introduced to sustainable diving and nautical networks through the programme		✓ (en-5)
Cisnea	We faced scepticism from public clients due to the novelty of our project	✓ (ch-5)	
	Being affiliated with the hub boosted our credibility with local governments		✓ (en-6)
Biotonomy	We had advanced technology but struggled to find a clear market fit, and we lacked alignment with potential investors	✓ (ch-6, ch-2)	
	We received mentoring that helped us pivot, and the hub provided institutional legitimacy that strengthened our position		✓ (en-3, en-6)

Table 3 presents, as an illustration, several statements reported by the startup founders/co-founders who participated in the study, based on their individual experiences throughout the acceleration process. These statements were initially codified as challenges or enabling factors. These accounts reflect the specific difficulties they encountered when deciding to join the programme, as well as the aspects of the accelerator that contributed most to their progress. It is important to note that this table focuses exclusively on the startups' perspectives and does not include the views of hub coordinators or institutional actors. While the hub aims to drive regional transformation by supporting innovative ventures, its efforts are also shaped and sometimes constrained by internal limitations and by challenges brought in by the startups themselves –factors which are further analysed later in the paper.

After the full application of the Braun *et al.*'s (2019) six-phase procedure, we identified four key barriers faced by the hub and four enabling factors that help explain its success in promoting innovative startups in the tourism sector through its acceleration programme. Building on the themes that emerged from the data, these findings contribute to a broader narrative about the potential role of small-scale tourism hubs which, when strategically embedded within institutional frameworks, can act through their accelerator programmes as catalysts for sustainable tourism innovation and regional transformation.

4. Findings

This section presents the results of the cross-accelerated startups analysis using a thematic analysis approach that allows us to identify and illustrates the main challenges and success enablers Costa del Sol Tourism Hub face when implementing its acceleration programme, as well as to discuss their potential to act as catalysts for sustainable tourism innovation and regional transformation.

4.1. Challenges identified

Figure 1 illustrates the challenges identified through the coding process, illustrative quotes from interviews and occurrence across accelerated ventures. These challenges are presented below.

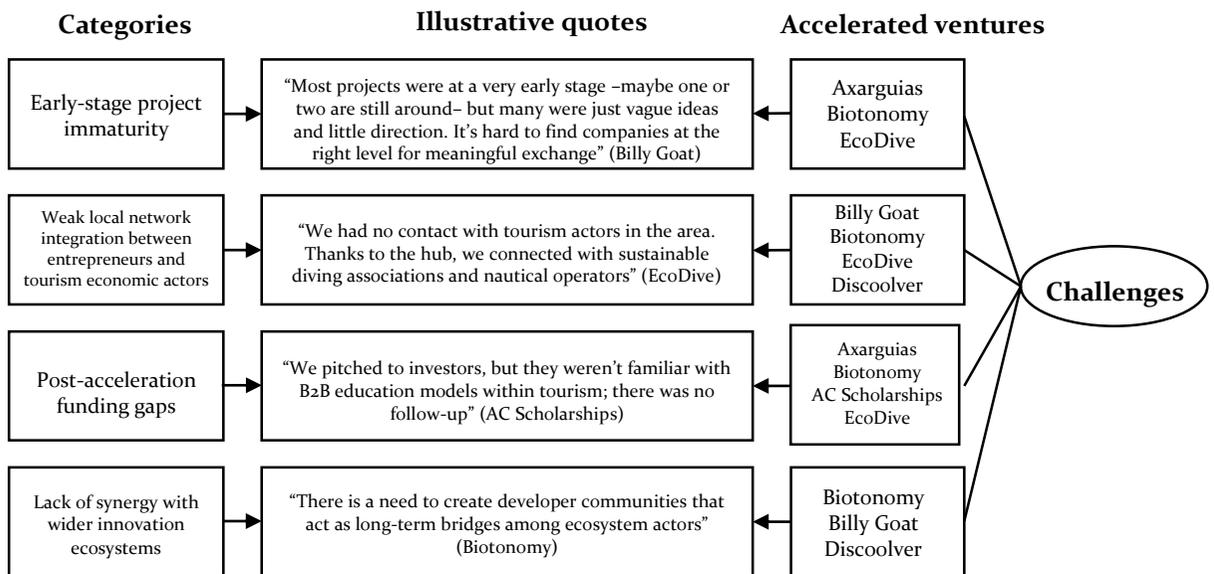


Figure 1. Challenges identified through thematic analysis

Early-stage project immaturity. A substantial number of ventures entered the hub without a fully validated business model, as recognized by co-founders (e.g., EcoDive, Biotonomy). The immaturity of many participating ventures limited peer interaction. As Billy Goat' founders noted, "Most projects were at a very early stage –maybe one or two are still around– but many were just vague ideas and little direction. It's hard to find companies at the right level for meaningful exchange". Indeed, the first weeks of the program were often dedicated to idea clarification and viability testing. As stated by the hub coordinator, "we spend the first two weeks just trying to make sure the idea is viable. Many founders come with just a concept, no prototype, no market feedback." This challenge echoes findings by Falter (2024), who argue that pre-acceleration or preparatory phases are essential, particularly in sectors like tourism where entrepreneurship maturity is often low. The case of Biotonomy reinforces this limitation. The team entered the program with an advanced technological solution for vertical gardens, yet lacking clear market understanding. As its co-founder noted, "we had to invest a lot of time in evangelizing the technology. The product worked, but people had no idea what it was for." With support from mentors

in the hub, they pivoted their approach to target architectural and urban planning departments rather than hotel managers, improving alignment with actual decision-makers. This reality was also shared by other initiatives such as EcoDive and Axarguias. For example, the Axarguias' founder explained: "We arrived with a clear idea but without really knowing how it would fit the digital market; the validation process was crucial".

By contrast, some ventures entered the hub with a relatively mature product and an articulated value proposition (e.g., Cisnea, Discoolver), but they also checked their business model and enhanced it. A notable case is Discoolver, a startup founded by university peers with a decade-long trajectory in digital tourism innovation. Prior to joining the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub, Discoolver had already developed a proprietary algorithm for personalized travel planning, demonstrated advanced technical capabilities, and validated their value proposition and business model through startup competitions. However, they tried to target tourists as customers and users of their digital platform to enhance their experiences when visiting destinations. But after checking their business model in the hub, they also must pivot concerning the target market. Discoolver changed their focus to a two-tailed market, where the client would be an institution promoting a destination (the one that pays for its services), and the user would be the tourist who visits the destination. According to Discoolver's CEO, the true value of the experience was the opportunity to identify a suitable target market and to establish a long-term collaboration with their first institutional client, the city of Ronda. This illustrates how innovation hubs, beyond supporting early-stage validation, can also play a critical role as strategic matchmakers not only helping startups scale, but ensuring they relate to the right type of client at the right time. In many cases, the hub successfully redirected the startups toward their optimal customer segments (e.g., EcoDive, Biotonomy, Axarguias), which proved decisive: it was this targeted matchmaking that enabled the accelerated companies to secure their first clients. Thus, the cases of Discoolver and Cisnea, on the one hand, and Axarguias, EcoDive and Biotonomy, on the other, underscore the need for differentiated support pathways based on startup maturity and market alignment.

Weak local network integration between entrepreneurs and tourism economic actors. Many participating entrepreneurs had limited or no prior engagement with key regional tourism actors, such as accommodation providers, tourism boards, or cultural institutions (e.g., Billy Goat, EcoDive, Discoolver). This lack of relational capital constrained partnership-building and early market testing. One interviewee noted: "Before joining, I didn't even know who the key tourism stakeholders in the region were." (Billy Goat Interview, 2025). Similar structural disconnections have been highlighted in emerging tourism ecosystems (Ntoi, 2023). Biotonomy also faced this challenge and reported that the hub provided valuable access to industry actors. "What helped us most was getting into rooms with proper people we otherwise couldn't reach," said one co-founder. Similarly, EcoDive reported that before the program, "we had no contact with tourism actors in the area. Thanks to the hub, we connected with sustainable diving associations and nautical operators" (EcoDive Interview, 2025).

While many participants lacked prior engagement with local tourism stakeholders limiting early partnership-building and feedback loops, Billy Goat and Discoolver stand out as a success story of relational integration. Both startups not only leveraged the hub's visibility but also Discoolver secured a long-term collaboration with the city of Ronda, becoming the official tourism technology provider for the destination. As the interviewees emphasized, the greatest value of the program was not the training content, but the strategic connection to a real client. To this respect the Discoolver's CEO said: "The theory often overlaps across accelerator programs of different hubs, but what truly matters is connecting with decision-makers in the market." This illustrates the potential of tourism hubs to act as market access facilitators. Certainly, some accelerated ventures had established their own sector relationships prior to joining the programme (e.g., Axarguias maintained contacts with the Axarquía municipal authorities and rural associations). However, they pointed out that internal networking

among cohort members could be strengthened (e.g., Axarguías Interview, 2025). As several co-founders noted, while the programme creates initial connections among participating ventures, it lacks mechanisms to sustain those relationships over time, limiting the hub's potential as a long-term collaborative platform (AC Scholarships Interview, 2025; Cisnea Interview, 2025).

Post-acceleration funding gaps. Although the program incorporated business angel networks (e.g., Málaga Business Angels) and investor matchmaking events, only 13 out of 69 accelerated projects in the period of 2016 to 2024 secured financing exceeding €300,000 (Hub Project Coordinator interview, 2025). This reflects structural deficiencies in the tourism investment ecosystem, as discussed by Falter (2024) and Vongvisitsin and Tung (2025). Biotonomy's co-founder commented that investment was not their immediate goal, but that investor profiles didn't always match the type of solutions being presented. "They were looking for SaaS with quick returns, not deep tech linked to urban planning," he explained. Other startups, such as AC Scholarships, echoed this difficulty: "We pitched to investors, but they weren't familiar with B2B education models within tourism; there was no follow-up" (AC Scholarships Interview, 2025). And other ventures did not even hold meetings with investors (e.g., Axarguías, EcoDive). While several participants cited a lack of post-acceleration investment as a key challenge, especially due to a mismatch between investor profiles and tourism-sector solutions, Discoolver illustrates an alternative trajectory. Rather than prioritizing funding, the team focused on securing institutional clients to validate and monetize their products. Their collaboration with the city of Ronda provided a reliable source of income and visibility, reducing dependence on external financing. Furthermore, their operational model where founders receive compensation based on deliverables rather than fixed salaries allowed for lean financial management during the early growth phase. In this sense, Discoolver exemplifies how public-sector partnerships can serve as non-equity pathways to sustainability, especially SaaS startups offering scalable infrastructure for destinations.

Lack of synergy with wider innovation ecosystems. Despite being located near Málaga TechPark, the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub has struggled to establish robust connections with other regional accelerators, universities, or private R&D actors (Hub Project Coordinator interview, 2025). This insularity weakens cross-sector learning and limits spillover effects; an issue observed in other hub-based systems. While efforts to network with organisations like Finnova and TopSevLab exist, the hub still lacks a structural bridge to the broader entrepreneurial landscape. Billy Goat emphasized the lack of connection with broader tech networks: "It would be helpful to have bridges with universities or product design centres focused on active tourism, we felt a bit isolated" (Billy Goat Interview, 2025). The experience of Discoolver reinforces concerns about the yet limited integration of the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub within the wider entrepreneurial ecosystem. For example, despite the program's geographic proximity to innovation hotspots such as Málaga TechPark, the startups reported little to no post-program engagement with fellow participants, highlighting a lack of community-building initiatives. However, the founders reported different perspectives concerning it. For example, one founded said "The reality is that entrepreneurs are very pressed for time and need it to interact with the mentor and advance their projects.... It's human nature... It's interesting to listen to your peers, but in the end, you must pay salaries and move everything forward... Mentoring does help, but when you interact with other entrepreneurs who are in other businesses you end up chatting about life" (Biotonomy interview, 2025). On the other hand, the absence of technical or developer-focused channels has hindered ongoing collaboration and knowledge exchange. "There is a need to create developer communities that act as long-term bridges among ecosystem actors," he noted. The absence of intra-hub community building supports the broader critique that without structural ties to other accelerators, research centres, or R&D networks, the hub's potential for cross-sector spillovers remains underutilized.

4.2. Success enablers

Figure 2 displays the enabling factors derived from the coding process, illustrative quotes from interviews and occurrence across accelerated ventures. These enabling factors are presented below.

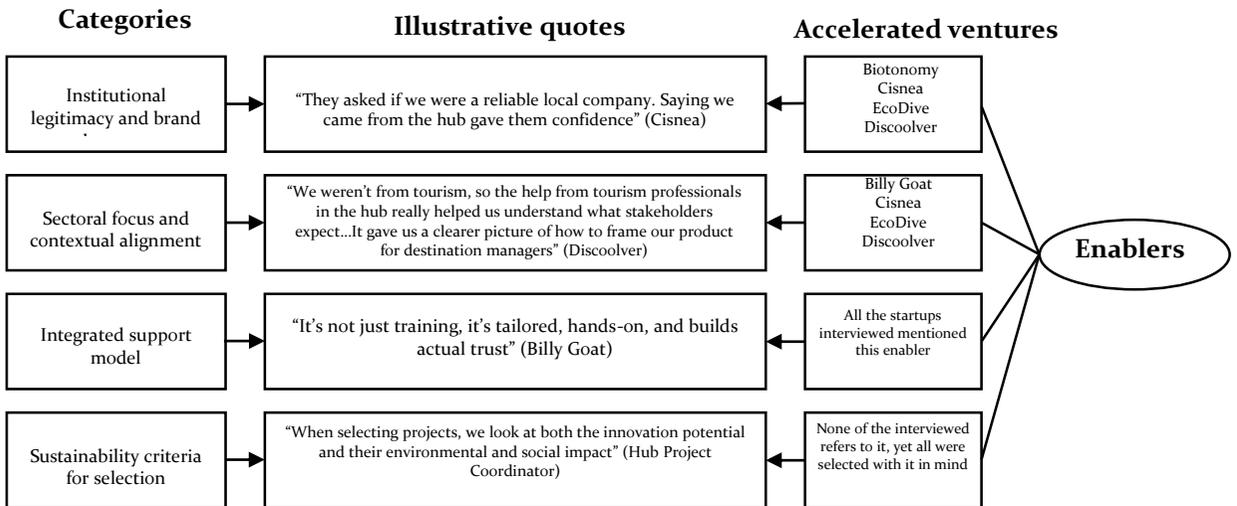


Figure 2. Enablers identified through thematic analysis

Institutional legitimacy and brand leverage. The hub benefits from the strong visibility of the “Costa del Sol” tourism brand and the direct backing of the Diputación de Málaga (Hub Project Coordinator interview, 2025). The inclusion of the hub in SEGITTUR’s Guide of Good Practices in 2022 further reinforced its national profile. This positioning fosters trust among applicants and enhance project credibility with investors and tourism stakeholders. Several interviewees highlighted this point (e.g., Biotonomy, Cisnea, EcoDive, Discoolver). For example, Biotonomy noted that association with the Costa del Sol brand helped them open doors, particularly with public institutions: “It gave us credibility when approaching municipalities”. Likewise, Cisnea highlighted how institutional backing helped them build trust with public actors: “They asked if we were a reliable local company. Saying we came from the hub gave them confidence” (Cisnea Interview, 2025). The case of Discoolver also illustrates how institutional legitimacy and the branding of the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub can directly translate into strategic opportunities. The startup was selected as a finalist in the program and, through that platform, established contact with the city of Ronda now for their long-term client. As Discoolver’s CEO recounted, “They asked us if we could adapt our system to the city’s needs and we said yes.” The affiliation with the hub not only gave startups access to decision-makers, but also enhanced their credibility in municipal negotiations, demonstrating the tangible benefits of being associated with a brand backed by the Diputación de Málaga. This mirrors findings from Biotonomy, Cisnea and Discoolver and supports the notion that institutional endorsement plays a vital role in early trust-building within the tourism sector.

Sectoral focus and contextual alignment. The hub’s exclusive tourism focus allows for targeted content delivery and challenge-based design. Its close connection to the Costa del Sol Tourism Forum (a consultative body that brings together business associations from all subsectors of the tourism industry in Malaga) ensures that acceleration topics reflect the region’s strategic tourism priorities, including sustainability, mobility, and digitalisation (Hub Project Coordinator interview, 2025). Indeed, a distinctive asset of the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub is its deep-rooted connection with a broad and diverse network of local tourism actors, ranging from municipalities and tourism boards to hospitality and mobility providers. This relational density adds high value for participating startups, as highlighted

by accelerated ventures such as Billy Goat, Cisnea or EcoDive, offering them privileged access to key decision-makers and facilitating early validation of solutions in real-world settings. Discoolver further exemplifies the benefits of a sector-specific acceleration model. Although the co-founders did not come from within the traditional tourism value chain, they noted that the mentorship provided during the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub gave them a much deeper understanding of sectoral priorities and stakeholder expectations. This alignment proved key to validating their solution and adjusting their pitch to public-sector clients. This perspective was echoed by the founder of EcoDive, who noted: “We were lost at the beginning, but the hub became our cornerstone. It helped us identify our niche, shape our brand, and realise that our competitive edge lay in offering exclusive, environmentally driven diving experiences to sustainability-minded nature tourists”. Similarly, Discoolver’s CEO emphasized the value of contextualized guidance: “It gave us a clearer picture of how to frame our product for destination managers.” By adapting to strategic themes like digitalisation and data-driven destination management, the startup successfully transitioned from an end-user travel app to a full-fledged 360° SaaS platform for local governments demonstrating how sectoral focus can shape and accelerate commercial scalability.

Integrated support model. Participants benefit from tailored mentoring, strategic matchmaking, media coverage, and workshops (Hub Project Coordinator interview, 2025). Feedback from interviewees suggests that mentorship is one of the most valued aspects of the program, as reported by Axarguia, Billy Goat, AC Scholarships or EcoDive. One participant stated: “It’s not just training, it’s tailored, hands-on, and builds actual trust.” (Billy Goat interview, 2025). This holistic model aligns with international best practices in tourism-focused acceleration (Falter, 2024). The Biotonomy team particularly highlighted the hands-on nature of mentoring and its role in enabling a significant strategic pivot. Discoolver’s experience underscores the importance of a well-rounded support model tailored to the specific challenges of the firm in the tourism sector. The co-founders emphasized that mentorship was one of the most transformative aspects of the program, particularly because it provided sector-specific insights they were previously lacking. Coming from outside the core tourism industry, they benefited from strategic guidance that helped them translate their technological vision into a market-ready, destination-oriented service. In addition to personalized mentoring, Discoolver cited the matchmaking with the city of Ronda as the most impactful moment: “What mattered most wasn’t the theory it was meeting a real client who gave us a real challenge”, Discoolver’s CEO explained. This opportunity to validate and implement their platform in a live municipal context accelerated their growth far more than traditional accelerator formats.

In addition to personalized support, several participants highlighted the strategic role of the Hub coordinator as a bridge between projects and the local tourism ecosystem (e.g., Cisnea). As a reference institution in the Costa del Sol, the Hub has built a valuable reservoir of relational capital over successive program editions, facilitating access to municipal stakeholders, business associations, and technical entities. In this context, the coordinator’s work was crucial in connecting innovative solutions like those of Discoolver and Biotonomy with real territorial needs. In the case of Discoolver, this mediation was instrumental in reaching an agreement with the City Council of Ronda, while Biotonomy emphasized how these connections allowed them to reorient their approach toward areas more receptive to their proposal. Billy Goat emphasized the need for more structured external connections (Billy Goat Interview, 2025).

Sustainability criteria for selection. Projects are evaluated not only on innovation potential but also on their environmental and social impact (Hub Project Coordinator interview, 2025), in alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the three pillars of sustainability: People, Planet, and Prosperity. Project selection also takes into account the specific needs of the destination, as

reported by local business associations (Hub Project Coordinator interview, 2025). Table 4 lists all the ventures that have participated in the Hub's acceleration programme.

Table 4. Participating companies in the costa del sol tourism hub by year of acceleration programme.

Year of Participation in the Acceleration Programme						
2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Clicorder	Ac scholarships agency	Asistente virtual Málaga	Applaudi	Activacar	Aumentur	Biotonomy
Easy stay technologies	Axarguías	Billy goat garage	Beouat	Cisnea	Costa del Sol meta-tourism office	Bracelit
Galeota viajes	Bellboy	Güelcom	Boatinn	Hostandboat	Electric car tour	Cicerone by iurban
Galveztown brig adventure	Dreamed restaurants	Hamacapp	Crea & ticket	Hypertasting	Exity	Hotel break
Sunshine solar energy	Easy mixers	Yumego	Dejando tu huella	Turbosuite	Tleo.app	Zibarit
Past view	Escapadas del sur	Transfers and experiences	Discoolver	Tourmobility	Sunapp	Turiscool
Nilva enoturismo	Flymate	Stmate	Ecodive	The nomadapp	Sayfly!	Teco mobility
Mystreetbook	I+db acústico	Renthas	Watable	Rural shoppers	Pilarbox	Novelingo
Málaga mice	You tour	Plangratis	Navitapp	Pueblotel	Petti pod	Ok located
Iurban	Kiwktravel	Madewell	Monumentia	Kolotrip	Nosiesting	Swap your travel

Source: Costa del Sol Tourism Hub (<https://www.costadelsolmalaga.org/tourismhub/proyectos/>)

The sustainability requirement has led to the inclusion of startups working on AI-based route personalisation (e.g., Mystreetbook, which leverages artificial intelligence to generate personalised and adaptive travel itineraries, contributing to smart infrastructure and user-centric innovation SDGs 9, 11; Prosperity), sustainable mobility (e.g., Tourmobility, which enhances tourism accessibility while supporting local businesses ,SDGs 10, 11; Prosperity, People; and TECO Mobility, offering green mobility solutions and promoting circular economy models in tourism SDGs 11, 12, 13; Planet, Prosperity), or digital inclusion (e.g., OK Located, which fosters territorial cohesion and promotes heritage through interoperable digital signage SDGs 9, 11, 17; Prosperity, People). Other ventures, such as Sunshine Solar Energy, focus on clean energy and technological innovation by developing solar-powered smart info-points to democratise public access to digital content SDGs 7, 9, 11; Prosperity.

The programme has also supported models that contribute to sustainable development beyond high-tech innovation. For instance, AC Scholarships promotes educational and cultural tourism aligned with SDGs 4 and 11 (People, Prosperity), while Axarguías fosters rural livelihoods and heritage preservation through experiential tourism, advancing SDGs 8, 11, 12, and 15 (Prosperity, Planet).

The inclusion of sustainability not only improves project alignment with policy but also differentiates the hub in a crowded startup support landscape. For example, Discoolver's inclusion in the Hub reflects its strong alignment with sustainability criteria emphasized in the program's selection process (SDGs 8, 9, 11; Pillars: Prosperity, People). Although not framed explicitly as a "green tech" solution, their AI-

powered route personalization and destination management tools contribute to more efficient tourist flows and improved visitor experience, helping municipalities reduce overcrowding and environmental stress in high-traffic areas. Their modular, data-informed system enables local governments to track, adapt, and refine visitor dynamics in real time, supporting more sustainable tourism planning. This strategic alignment with both social impact (by enhancing inclusivity and accessibility) and smart destination governance exemplifies how technological innovation can support sustainability goals in practice. It aligns with broader European efforts to stimulate tourism innovation through dedicated accelerator schemes. For example, the EU-funded FU-TOURISM Accelerator Programme supports SMEs across member states in developing digital and sustainable tourism solutions, positioning hubs as key enablers in the sector's green and digital transition.

However, based on the interviews conducted, it is difficult to isolate and assess the hub's specific contribution to the sustainability dimension of the accelerated projects beyond the selection stage, where a prior commitment to sustainability is already required. However, meaningful contributions did emerge, as illustrated by EcoDive's experience: "we had no contact with tourism actors in the area. Thanks to the hub, we connected with 'sustainable' diving associations and nautical operators" (EcoDive Interview, 2025).

4.3. The role of hub in boosting sustainable tourism innovation and regional transformation

The analysis of the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub contributes to the theoretical understanding of how tourism innovation hubs can strategically act as drivers of territorial transformation through their acceleration programmes. This section focuses on the empirical insights from the startups accelerated by the hub, highlighting practical challenges and enabling factors that affect its role in fostering sustainable tourism innovation and regional transformation.

Firstly, there is a clear interaction between multiple institutional logics (Thornton *et al.*, 2012). On the one hand, a market logic predominates, focused on maximising the scalability and profitability of participating startups by seeking viable, client-oriented business models. This logic is evident, for example, in the prioritisation of mentoring highly tailored to each startup's business model, aiming for rapid validation and connection with real clients, such as local municipalities or public institutions as occurred with Discoolver, which pivoted its target market towards institutions instead of individual tourists. On the other hand, a community or normative logic coexists, centred on sustainability and territorial regeneration, as reflected in the inclusion of environmental and social impact criteria as requirements for project selection. This productive tension between both logics shapes the hub's strategic identity and determines not only its startup portfolio but also the design and delivery of its activities, including mentoring priorities, stakeholder engagement strategies, and programme content.

The startups face several common challenges. Early-stage project immaturity is notable, with many ventures entering the hub lacking a fully validated business model, necessitating initial phases focused on idea refinement and market alignment. For instance, Biotonomy adjusted its target clients after mentoring helped clarify its proposition, while Discoolver pivoted from tourists to institutional clients. EcoDive and Billy Goat also required and benefit from exposure to relevant sector stakeholders to shape their business ideas and market entry. This highlights the hub's role not just as an accelerator but as a strategic connector matching startups to suitable markets at the right stage.

Secondly, the case illustrates how path dependency (Martin & Sunley, 2006) shapes tourism innovation at the regional level. The Hub is embedded in a context marked by a long-standing tourism monoculture and strong public-sector leadership, which confer institutional legitimacy and enable access to well-established networks. However, these same conditions can constrain more disruptive or systemic forms of innovation. For example, its close alignment with the Costa del Sol Tourism Forum a consultative

body integrating business associations from across the sector ensures that acceleration priorities reflect regional tourism strategies, including sustainability, mobility, and digitalisation. While this strengthens policy coherence and stakeholder buy-in, it may also reinforce dominant tourism paradigms and limit experimentation beyond established development trajectories, so making deeper systemic transformation challenging.

Third, the case underscores the importance of adaptive capacity (Folke *et al.*, 2005) as a critical characteristic for innovation hubs operating in dynamic and resource-constrained contexts. The Costa del Sol Tourism Hub exemplifies this capacity through continuous iterative refinements to its programme design, based on stakeholder feedback and experiential learning. According to the Hub project coordinator, notable changes include the progressive elimination of generic training modules initially offered, replaced by bespoke mentoring tailored to the unique needs of each startup; the systematic expansion of the mentor network with experienced professionals; and a strategic shift from broad group sessions involving all cohort members toward more focused, individualized one-on-one interactions, which have been consistently identified as more impactful. Despite these advancements improving the programme's relevance and operational efficiency, certain dimensions remain underdeveloped. Specifically, investor engagement initiatives, while established, warrant further consolidation, and the formal incorporation of comprehensive sustainability metrics remains a priority for future improvement. Additionally, the hub's limited integration with other regional innovation stakeholders continues to restrict opportunities for cross-sector collaboration and systemic ecosystem development.

In summary, the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub confirms that tourism hubs are not merely incubation or acceleration spaces but hybrid arenas where diverse logics are negotiated and articulated, embedded in historical development trajectories (path dependency), and whose sustainability largely depends on their adaptive capacity to respond to new challenges and opportunities. This integrated view offers a comprehensive framework for analysing and designing tourism hubs as strategic instruments for territorial transformation.

5. Conclusions

The case of the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub demonstrates that small-scale, tourism-focused accelerators can become strategic instruments of territorial transformation when embedded within broader regional innovation networks. As highlighted by Brandão, Costa, and Buhalis (2018), tourism innovation systems thrive when local actors are not isolated but integrated into multi-stakeholder ecosystems involving government, academia, and the private sector. In this regard, the hub's alignment with the Costa del Sol Tourism Forum and institutional backing from the Diputación de Málaga illustrates the value of anchoring accelerators in existing governance frameworks.

Importantly, this research suggests that tourism hubs can evolve beyond entrepreneurial support infrastructures to function as platforms for environmental and societal sustainability. For instance, the hub's inclusion of sustainability criteria in project selection echoes the multidimensional frameworks applied to heritage destinations. This is coherent with Fresneda-Fuentes *et al.* (2022), who underscore the need to integrate economic, sociocultural, environmental, and governance dimensions in tourism planning. Similar principles could be operationalized in the hub using participatory governance and performance measurement mechanisms that track not only business growth but also social and ecological impact.

The case of Disoolver provides a compelling example of how tourism startups can scale meaningful innovation when hubs act as bridges to public-sector collaboration. Already a mature startup, when entering the program, albeit not its project, Disoolver benefitted from mentoring that help them to

refine the target market (changed from tourists to institutional client) and relational leverage connecting with their first institutional client, the city of Ronda. This highlights how hubs can offer value to ventures irrespective of their stage of maturity. Moreover, their dual model combining a SaaS platform for destination managers with a hyper-local, AI-driven app for travellers demonstrates how startups can operationalise digital transformation while enhancing sustainability through better visitor flow management and personalized experiences.

Evidence from Mediterranean hubs (Moll-de-Alba *et al.*, 2016) further reinforces the importance of behavioural insight and visitor segmentation in shaping tourism competitiveness. Tailoring support to different types of tourism entrepreneurs, whether focused on short-stay leisure or long-term experiential offers, can improve the strategic fit between startups and target markets. This was especially relevant for Discoolver, whose shift from B2C to B2G channels marked a pivotal evolution in their business model, supported by sector-specific mentoring.

Digital transformation also emerges as a cross-cutting priority. Kapoulas and Ratković (2015) argue that e-CRM implementation in tourism contexts requires more than tools that require cultural adaptation and behavioural understanding. This resonates with feedback from several Costa del Sol participants, including Discoolver, who emphasised the importance of demo sessions and real-time market exposure in refining user engagement strategies. Strengthening this component could further enhance the hub's ability to accelerate ventures toward long-term market integration and loyalty generation.

Finally, the experience of Biotonomy illustrates the challenges of deep tech tourism ventures in traditional ecosystems. Their pivot from hotel clients to urban planning departments, supported by hub mentors, exemplifies the value of adaptive guidance in achieving product-market alignment. Yet, as with other ventures, they faced misalignment with investor expectations echoing a broader need for tourism-specialised funding channels. Strengthening post-program investment readiness and connecting to aligned capital sources should thus be a key policy priority.

The Costa del Sol Tourism Hub also proves how small-scale tourism accelerators can strategically combine economic innovation with regional sustainability objectives. While sustainability is explicitly considered as a selection criterion, its operationalisation remains largely qualitative rather than based on standardised indicators or post-programme performance measurement. Addressing this gap could strengthen the hub's capacity to demonstrate tangible contributions to environmental and social objectives alongside economic outcomes. Still, some challenges persist across the board. Other startups, such as AC Scholarships, echoed the limited alignment with investor profiles.

While addressing gaps in sustainability measurement and investment alignment is important, the broader applicability of these findings depends on local specificities. Destinations with less mature tourism markets, limited institutional branding, fragmented governance, and weak public-private networks may struggle to replicate similar accelerator models without substantial adaptation. Thus, findings from the case of the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub should be seen as a reference for context-sensitive experimentation, not as a prescriptive model.

5.1. *Theoretical contribution*

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of tourism innovation by highlighting the role of small-scale tourism hubs as instruments of territorial transformation. Specifically, it integrates the institutional logics perspective to explain how market-oriented and community-oriented rationalities interact within tourism accelerators, shaping their selection processes, programme design, and definitions of success. By applying this perspective to the case of the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub, the research extends existing theories of entrepreneurship and innovation beyond urban and tech-based

contexts, demonstrating that hubs operating in traditional sectors such as tourism also function as arenas where multiple logics coexist, compete, and synergise. Furthermore, the study enriches the literature on tourism accelerators by identifying differentiated support pathways based on startup maturity and market *alignment*, and by demonstrating how hubs can act not only as entrepreneurial support infrastructures but also as platforms for advancing sustainability objectives in tourism destinations. These findings provide a conceptual basis for future research on the design and governance of sector-specific innovation hubs within regional development strategies.

Beyond the operational challenges and enabling factors identified in this study, hybrid governance dynamics –characterised by public-sector leadership combined with elements of public-private collaboration– also shape the hub’s performance and sustainability. Although the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub benefits from strong institutional legitimacy and predominantly public-sector backing, its governance model is not exempt from the inherent tensions of public-private collaboration, which are nonetheless necessary and potentially useful.

For instance, ideological political turnover poses a considerable challenge, as changes in regional or municipal government leadership may shift strategic priorities, budget *allocations*, or programme continuity. Given that the hub operates under a public-sector-led governance model, being managed by Turismo y Planificación Costa del Sol, an entity linked to the provincial government, shifts in political agendas could potentially impact its financial stability and operational autonomy. However, our analysis of multiple editions reveals a notable consistency in the core pillars that have guided and characterized its success over time. Furthermore, although funding continuity is generally vulnerable to broader economic and political cycles due to dependence on public budgets, the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub has consistently secured annual financing since its inception, likely because tourism has remained a priority sector.

While bureaucratic rigidity is often a concern in public administration and could potentially limit a hub’s agility to adapt swiftly to market changes and startup needs, no such issues were reported by stakeholders involved in the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub. This can be attributed to the hub’s governance model, which although publicly managed benefits from close collaboration with private-sector actors, fostering a more flexible and responsive operational environment. This practical example supports Clarysse, Wright, and Van Hove’s (2015) argument that hybrid governance structures, blending public leadership with private sector flexibility and co-management, can enhance both strategic alignment with public policy objectives and operational agility to meet market demands.

5.2. *Practical contribution*

This study offers valuable insights and actionable recommendations for policymakers, tourism stakeholders, and innovation practitioners aiming to foster sustainable tourism development through local accelerators. By examining the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub, the research highlights the following practical implications:

Tailored acceleration programs: Accelerators should design mentoring and support services that are highly customized to the maturity level and market *alignment* of startups. Early-stage ventures benefit from targeted guidance on business model validation and market fit, while more advanced startups require support focused on scaling and client acquisition.

Strategic market matchmaking: The hub’s role as a connector between startups and suitable institutional or private clients is crucial. Facilitating early partnerships with local governments, tourism boards, or relevant enterprises enhances startups’ chances of successful market entry and long-term sustainability.

Integration of sustainability criteria: Embedding environmental and social impact indicators into project selection and evaluation ensures that startups contribute to destination regeneration and community benefits. This also aligns acceleration efforts with global agendas like the UN SDGs and smart tourism strategies, reinforcing the hub's legitimacy and societal relevance.

Building adaptive capacity: Accelerators should embrace iterative learning and flexible program design to respond effectively to evolving economic, regulatory, and market challenges. Incorporating investor engagement initiatives and adapting criteria based on cohort feedback enhances resilience and relevance.

Strengthening ecosystem linkages: To maximize systemic impact, hubs must actively foster connections with regional innovation actors such as universities, research centres, and technology parks. Developing long-term collaborative networks promotes cross-sector knowledge exchange and supports broader territorial innovation dynamics.

Hybrid governance structures: The Costa del Sol Tourism Hub illustrates how public-sector-led models can benefit from private-sector collaboration to enhance agility, strategic focus, and the capacity to build strong networks that effectively support accelerated startups. Incorporating co-management mechanisms, such as advisory boards or structured partnerships, helps balance public accountability with the flexibility needed for impactful programme delivery.

Recognition of contextual specificities: Practitioners should acknowledge that success factors like strong institutional support, brand leverage, and established governance may not be replicable in all settings. Tailoring acceleration models to local capacities and cultural contexts is essential for scalability and effectiveness.

5.3. *Limitations and further research*

While the Costa del Sol Tourism Hub offers a compelling case of institutional maturity and innovation capacity, its effectiveness is supported by context-specific enablers such as a consolidated tourism brand, strong political leadership, and dense public-private networks. These conditions have fostered an enabling environment for tourism-driven innovation and multi-actor collaboration. However, such enabling factors are not universally available. Accordingly, the transferability of the findings must be approached with caution. Core mechanisms identified in this study, including hybrid governance, value-based startup selection, and adaptive programming, are embedded in a favourable sociopolitical and economic context characterised by high institutional coordination, a mature tourism economy, and a historically consolidated tourism monoculture. This path dependency shapes both the scope and the limitations of the hub's evolution, conditioning the applicability of its model in structurally dissimilar regions. As noted by Moll-de-Alba *et al.* (2016), the territorial embedding of innovation hubs significantly influences their operational logic and outcomes.

This does not negate the relevance of the case beyond its original setting. Rather, it underscores the need for context-sensitive adaptation and co-design strategies that align with local governance capacities, levels of tourism development, and stakeholder readiness. Thus, in line with Fresneda-Fuentes *et al.* (2022), future research should explore how to configure tourism hubs that integrate economic, sociocultural, environmental, and governance dimensions while remaining responsive to territorial specificities. In addition, longitudinal and comparative research could usefully examine how different territorial configurations affect the emergence, consolidation, and impact of tourism hubs. Specifically, mapping how hub models interact with local ecosystems over time would deepen understanding of the institutional and market conditions that enable or constrain innovation, support sustainability alignment, and enhance their effectiveness across diverse territorial contexts.

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