

Social innovation in tourism: organisational intermediation through participatory governance for sustainable destination development

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Abstract

Purpose – The rapid growth of mass tourism has increasingly pressured local ecosystems and community structures, exposing the limitations of conventional state-led regulatory frameworks and demanding new management paradigms. This paper aims to examine how social innovation, operationalised through collaborative networks, can act as a transformative driver of sustainable development in tourist destinations.

Design/methodology/approach – Grounded in a qualitative analysis of Raízes Desenvolvimento Sustentável (RDS), a Brazilian social enterprise and certified B Corp, the study investigates the complex dynamics among community associations, private-sector stakeholders and public institutions. Through the lens of RDS's role as a strategic mediator across multiple Brazilian territories, the research moves beyond broad claims about the value of networks to identify specific mechanisms of participatory governance and active listening that empower local leadership.

Findings – The findings suggest that, in the Global South, social innovation is not merely a reactive response to overtourism, but rather a proactive framework capable of reshaping power dynamics and safeguarding territorial sovereignty. This case study enriches the existing literature by illustrating how social entrepreneurship can effectively bridge the gap between global tourism pressures and the socio-environmental priorities of traditional communities.

Originality/value – This paper presents an original case study that contributes to the existing literature by empirically demonstrating how a private company can operate with a social impact purpose through social innovation. The findings highlight that active and structured listening, by fostering community protagonism, not only strengthens participatory processes but also generates tangible benefits that can mitigate the negative impacts of overtourism. By doing so, this study advances the understanding of the private sector's role as a driver of social transformation and provides novel insights for sustainable tourism destination management.

Keywords Brazil, Social entrepreneurship, Social innovation, Collaborative networks, Tourism, Sustainability, Participatory governance

Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

Many tourist destinations have been facing the negative effects of high visitor numbers, a phenomenon often discussed in the literature under the concept of overtourism (Mihalic, 2020). This process is characterised not only by high tourist demand, but above all by the socioeconomic, cultural and environmental impacts resulting from unbridled pressure on local resources and communities (Milano *et al.*, 2018; Mihalic, 2020). In addition to negative socio-environmental impacts, overtourism highlights critical governance failures, where conventional management models focused on quantitative growth prove incapable of protecting the social fabric of host communities (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). In this scenario of crisis for traditional models, there is a need to develop strategies that mitigate the effects of mass tourism by reconfiguring power and decision-making relationships (Loverio *et al.*, 2023).

It is precisely in this governance gap that social innovation emerges as a structural response. By proposing the creation of processes and services that respond to challenges of social and territorial transformation (Mulgan, 2006; Murray *et al.*, 2010), social innovation in tourism functions as a mechanism of resilience. It allows destinations to transition from purely commercial management to models that prioritise local agency and social justice (Benckendorff *et al.*, 2019). In tourism, this translates into collaborative governance practices in which active participation and community leadership are no longer peripheral but the central axis of sustainability (Malek and Costa, 2015). However, these transformative processes do not emerge spontaneously, requiring coordinated action among various actors, such as civil society, public authorities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local networks (Butzin and Terstriep, 2018; Tardif and Harrisson, 2005; Cloutier, 2003; OECD, 2021). These interactions are fundamental to institutionalising innovation, ensuring that sustainable development is not just a rhetorical goal, but a practice rooted in the territory.

Despite theoretical advances, there are still gaps in our understanding of the organisational mechanisms that enable these networks to transform intentions into effective sustainable practices. The literature emphasises community involvement but offers little clarity on how mediating organisations articulate this transformation in contexts of vulnerability. Considering these issues, this study investigates how participatory governance is coordinated to promote social innovation and sustainable development, using the Brazilian organisation Raízes Desenvolvimento Sustentável (RDS) as its object of analysis. The article contributes to the field of study by:

- deepening the role of mediating organisations in sustainable tourism;
- establishing the theoretical and practical link between the mitigation of overtourism and social innovation; and
- offering empirical evidence from a Global South context, often underrepresented in international literature, in addition to proposing an analytical model derived from empirical research.

This article is organised as follows. The first section situates the study within the existing literature, offering a critical review of studies on social innovation and participatory governance, with a special focus on the role of stakeholders and collaborative networks as central dimensions. This is followed by a conceptual discussion of the intersections between social innovation and community-based tourism. The next section details the methodological approach adopted in this study,

including the rationale for the case study, data collection and analytical procedures. The article concludes with the presentation and discussion of the empirical results, as well as with the proposition of an empirical model of the “organisational intermediation ecosystem”. Finally, the main contributions of the study are highlighted, and possible avenues for future research in this area are outlined.

Theoretical framework

Social innovation and participatory governance

The disorderly growth of tourist flows has been widely discussed under the concept of overtourism, a phenomenon that compromises the socioeconomic, cultural and environmental integrity of destinations and the quality of life of residents (Milano *et al.*, 2018; Mihalic, 2020). More than just a quantitative excess of visitors, overtourism highlights a crisis of governance: traditional management models, focused on growth and immediate profit, fail to consider the carrying capacity of territories and the needs of local communities (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Milano *et al.*, 2024). This scenario highlights the need for tourism development and governance models that preserve territories, based on innovative forms of coordination and the involvement of multiple actors (Malek and Costa, 2015; Leite, 2022).

In this context, social innovation emerges as a strategic and disruptive approach, capable of generating collective solutions to these complex challenges. By promoting changes in social relations and the balance of power, social innovation allows host communities to transition from mere recipients of tourist flows to protagonists in local political decisions (Mulgan, 2006; Murray *et al.*, 2010; Nicholls and Murdock, 2012; Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2005). Its effectiveness lies in its ability to articulate participatory processes that generate territorial value, transforming destination management through the involvement of multiple actors: civil society, the public and private sectors, universities and local networks (OECD, 2021; Reimers *et al.*, 2023).

For Malek and Costa (2015), contemporary tourism requires methods that integrate new concepts of citizenship and rights. Social innovation serves as a tool for community empowerment, in which beneficiaries are not merely “targets” of policies but active co-creators. This participation, fuelled by continuous feedback and collaboration mechanisms, reinforces the legitimacy of initiatives and stimulates systemic changes that top-down management models cannot achieve (Font *et al.*, 2016; Mahato *et al.*, 2021). Thus, social innovation emerges as a tool for community empowerment, articulated by collective and creative exploration focused on social utility, connecting the knowledge and skills of various actors to promote well-being (Guida and Maiolini, 2013).

Social innovation networks, therefore, play a central role in fostering community leadership and self-regulation, as well as in co-creating social policies and initiatives (Butzin and Terstriepe, 2018; Tardif and Harrisson, 2005; Cloutier, 2003). The active participation of beneficiaries, through feedback and collaboration, reinforces the legitimacy and effectiveness of initiatives, strengthening communities and stimulating systemic change (OECD, 2021; Font *et al.*, 2016; Mahato *et al.*, 2021). In tourism, these dynamics promote the resilience of destinations, ensuring that cultural development and income generation are aligned with the preservation of local identity and the empowerment of communities (Howaldt *et al.*, 2018; Sofield, 2003). Through effective intermediation, fragmented participation by various actors is transformed into organised and lasting governance, consolidating social, economic and

environmental transformations in tourist territories (Moulaert, 2009; Dandolini *et al.*, 2020).

Social innovation and community-based tourism

Social innovation in tourism is recognised by multiple dimensions that make up this concept, involving processes, knowledge, types of innovation (Pikkemaat *et al.*, 2019), technologies (Gomezelj, 2016), stakeholder participation (Trunfio and Campana, 2019), community development (Malek and Costa, 2015) and new solutions to socio-environmental problems (Moulaert *et al.*, 2013). It is operationalised through policies, programs and practices that seek to create jobs, value local culture and preserve natural resources, promoting new forms of cooperation between individuals and organisations and generating significant impacts on social dynamics and power relations, especially in regional development contexts (Benevides *et al.*, 2018; Wirth *et al.*, 2023).

Tourism, as a sector that relies heavily on innovation, has invested in innovative practices to remain competitive (Razafindravelo, 2017). From this perspective, social innovation emerges as a strategy capable of improving resource distribution, shaping policies and addressing contemporary challenges (Sharma and Bhat, 2023). In addition, it helps mitigate the negative impacts of tourism by implementing improvements and expanding the benefits it generates (Aquino *et al.*, 2018).

A recurring example of social innovation is community-based tourism, characterised by the direct involvement of residents in the formulation of social, environmental, political and cultural responses (Castillo and de Macário, 2015). This model seeks to strengthen communities' voices, support collective decision-making and preserve local identities. Based on experiences and autonomy, community tourism encourages initiatives that are not only aimed at profit but also at solving problems neglected by public authorities (Dandolini *et al.*, 2020). In this sense, public and private organisations have also established planning teams to strengthen ties with local actors and promote changes that improve the quality of life (Malek and Costa, 2015). Thus, community-based tourism integrates social elements and strengthens empowerment and participation, which are important for sustainable development (Sofield, 2003).

Social innovation emerges especially in diverse and challenging contexts, such as peripheral communities where multiple perspectives meet and stimulate new ideas (Surman, 2018). However, limitations such as lack of training, scarcity of resources and lack of technical knowledge still represent barriers (Howaldt *et al.*, 2018). Tourist destinations are complex systems, full of stakeholders who interact under various factors, which requires a multidisciplinary view to understand innovation as a contextual and continuous phenomenon (Trunfio and Campana, 2019).

By challenging traditional power structures and unsustainable practices, social innovations respond to local needs and strengthen community decision-making processes (Partanen *et al.*, 2023). They enable integrated spatial development, promote creative practices and expand communities' capacity to influence decisions. In this sense, the centrality of people becomes essential: the active participation of communities is fundamental to the sustainability of tourism, making them central agents in the social, economic and cultural construction of territories (Cole, 2006; Costa and Brandão, 2011; Rodríguez, 2009; Terstriepe *et al.*, 2015).

From a territorial perspective, social innovation involves the exchange of identities and cultures in space, incorporating techniques that improve quality of life, reduce inequalities and contribute to the sustainability of destinations (Moulaert, 2009; Farfus and Rocha, 2007). It is characterised by open innovation, collaboration, shared vision and the integration of

multiple participants in the creative process (Mosedale and Voll, 2017). Thus, the planning and development of sustainable tourism depend on interactions among residents, businesses and associations, and community participation is influenced by local conditions and the level of integration among stakeholders (Costa and Brandão, 2011).

Costa and Albuquerque (2017) argue that tourist destinations must be competitive, valuing urban tourism that respects host communities. The promotion of products and services should consider the area as a “business”, with interaction between facilities, services and the local economic environment. Since tourism is an industry of people for people (Costa and Albuquerque, 2017), social innovation is fundamental to its success (Costa and Brandão, 2011).

To minimise negative impacts and promote community-based tourism, it is essential that communities actively participate, in collaboration with other stakeholders, implementing inclusive practices. Tourism planning increasingly requires integration between social, economic and environmental factors (Hall, 2005; Li *et al.*, 2021; Moleiro, 2020). Cooperation between stakeholders and the use of innovative practices accelerate local development and increase benefits, while reducing negative impacts. Thus, social innovation brings together strategies and actions that, involving various territorial actors, create environments conducive to sustainability and equitable growth (Howaldt *et al.*, 2018). In this way, social innovation, articulated through the active participation of multiple actors and networks, provides a theoretical framework for understanding how collaborative practices can contribute to sustainable tourism in destinations.

Methodology

Methodological framework

To understand how actors and participatory governance of social innovation influence sustainable practices in tourism, a qualitative case-study methodology was adopted. The qualitative approach, which is inductive in nature, allows explanations to be constructed and patterns to be understood through direct field observation (Pacheco, 1993; Creswell, 1994), without seeking statistical generalisations, while maintaining analytical rigour (Shaw, 1999). This strategy aligns with the study’s proposal, as it enables us to analyse how actors and networks interact and how these interactions promote social innovation, participatory governance and sustainable development in tourist destinations.

The decision to develop a case study arose from the need to deepen understanding of social innovation practices, particularly about governance processes and networking promoted by a specific organisation. This methodological approach enables the capture of dynamics, relationships and nuances that would be difficult to grasp through structured questionnaires or a broad set of isolated interviews. In this context, a Brazilian company was selected for integrating multiple actors and strengthening local participation in the territories where it operates. The analysis of its practices allowed us to collect detailed empirical evidence, contributing to clarify and deepen aspects identified in the literature review and, above all, to establish a consistent link between theoretical concepts and their operationalisation in the real context.

The case study: rationale and characteristics

The company RDS was selected as the subject of study due to its strategic role as a mediator of social innovation in the Brazilian context. According to Yin’s typology (2017), this work adopts a single case study of an instrumental nature, since RDS offers a privileged perspective on how social innovation networks are operationalised in territories under tourist pressure.

Three fundamental criteria justify the choice of this organisation. Firstly, RDS stands out for its hybrid organisational nature. As a Certified B Corporation, it operates at the

intersection of the private sector and social impact, enabling us to analyse how social entrepreneurship can fill the gaps left by traditional public policies in combating overtourism. This duality is essential to understanding the “institutionalisation” of social innovation, a point often overlooked in studies focused solely on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or grassroots movements.

Secondly, RDS acts as a central hub in a multisectoral network. The organisation does not work in isolation; it coordinates complex dialogues between community associations, large companies in the extractive or tourism sector and government authorities.

Studying the RDS, therefore, allows us to map the practical mechanisms of “active listening” and participatory governance that the theoretical framework identifies as essential for the resilience of destinations.

Finally, the geographical context of Brazil offers a critical analysis scenario. Unlike European destinations, where the debate on social innovation and tourism is often linked to smart cities, in the case of SDA and Brazil, this debate focuses on territorial sovereignty and the empowerment of traditional communities (indigenous peoples, quilombos and small producers). Thus, the RDS represents an exemplary case for testing the applicability of social innovation theories in the Global South, offering insights that expand the dominant discussions in international literature.

RDS was founded in the early 2000s by recent tourism graduates interested in developing initiatives focused on sustainable territorial development. Since its inception, the organisation has been inspired by the concept of social business proposed by Muhammad Yunus, adopting a model focused on generating social impact and reinvesting the results in socio-environmental projects.

The motivations for creating the company transcend the sustainable purpose itself, as they are also related to the identification of a gap in the tourism sector: the absence of organisations with this profile. Since its foundation, the institutional proposal has included conducting territorial diagnoses, creating governance bodies, supporting local associations and promoting territorial development, with an emphasis on tourism, cultural heritage and the formulation of public policies. Over time, the organisation has undergone structural reform and currently operates with a multidisciplinary team, mobilised according to the specificities and demands of each project.

Its main objective is to enhance the value of people and territories by recognising local potential and encouraging creative solutions to complex challenges. The company also focuses on promoting connections between initiatives, ideas and diverse actors, with sustainable development as the guiding principle of its activities. In this sense, it develops projects with traditional communities and vulnerable groups, covering topics such as sustainable tourism, entrepreneurship, income generation, female empowerment and collective governance.

The organisation demonstrates concern for measuring social impact and adopts qualitative indicators as assessment tools. Among the services offered are lectures, workshops, training programs, applied research, mentoring and project implementation. From an institutional standpoint, the company holds relevant certifications, such as Sistema B, and participates in collaborative networks focused on sustainability, demonstrating its commitment to recognised standards of social and environmental responsibility.

This commitment is also reflected in the organisation’s internal structure. As disclosed on its institutional website, the company has an internal committee dedicated to evaluating and continuously improving its processes and methods. According to the organisation itself, “the purpose is to become increasingly inclusive, equitable, and regenerative, focused on actions that generate benefits for people and the environment” (Raízes Desenvolvimento Sustentável, 2023),

reinforcing its orientation towards reflective management committed to continuous improvement of its practices.

Data collection

For the collection of primary data, semi-structured interviews were used, a technique selected for its flexibility and openness to the emergence of new themes and questions throughout the investigative process. This instrument favours dialogic interaction between interviewers and participants, enabling access to detailed and contextualised information that would be difficult to obtain through closed-ended questionnaires or strictly standardised interviews ([Silverman, 2000](#)).

The interview guide was structured around 11 main questions, developed from a review of the literature, covering the central themes of the study:

- company history and objectives;
- responsible and proximity tourism;
- partners and beneficiaries;
- sustainable projects;
- community empowerment;
- challenges of networking; and
- social innovation in tourism.

Initial contact with the organisation was made via institutional email, in which the invitation and detailed information about the study were presented. After formal acceptance of participation and submission of the consent form, the interview was conducted remotely in July 2025 via the Microsoft Teams platform with a manager responsible for the organisation. The interview lasted approximately 47 min, enabling the collection of rich, contextualised information essential to the analysis of social innovation processes in tourism. The interview transcript was generated using the platform's resources.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two complementary stages:

- (1) analysis of public content available on the company's institutional website; and
- (2) analysis of empirical data obtained through semi-structured interviews.

To this end, content analysis was adopted as the central analytical method, following the guidelines proposed by [Bardin \(2011\)](#), to ensure systematisation, interpretative rigour and methodological consistency throughout the process. The corpus of the analysis consisted of institutional materials extracted from the company's website, covering organisational identity, areas of activity, projects developed and impacts generated, as well as the full transcript of the interview.

The analytical process was organised into three sequential and interdependent phases, as recommended by [Bardin \(2011\)](#):

- (1) Pre-analysis: all the material collected was skimmed through to familiarise us with the content and identify elements relevant to the research objectives. Next, the transcribed material was organised and systematised, defining the final corpus for the investigation.

- (2) Exploration of the material: this phase involved identifying and constructing categories and analytical codes linked to the research objectives and the concepts discussed in the literature review. From the content excerpts, representative passages were selected that illustrated the organisation's practices, the challenges faced and its social innovation strategies in the context of tourism.
- (3) Treatment and interpretation of results: the emerging categories were articulated with the reviewed literature and the research objectives. A critical analysis of the relationships among actors, networks and sustainable practices was conducted to understand how the investigated company positions itself and acts within these dimensions. Finally, the results were constructed and discussed based on an integrated reading of the entire corpus analysed.

The systematisation of the data allowed the identification of emerging categories and codes, organised according to the central themes of the study, as presented in [Table 1](#).

Based on the categories and codes presented in [Table 1](#), we synthesised the main patterns into an empirical model, the "Organisational Intermediation Ecosystem", presented in the results of this research. This model illustrates how intermediary organisations enable

Table 1. Categories of analysis

Categories	Codes	Related authors
Participatory governance	• Active listening practices • Community participation in decision-making	Malek and Costa (2015) , Leite (2022) , Guida and Maiolini (2013)
Networks and partnerships	• Strengthening traditional communities • Permanent and temporary partners: suppliers, consultants and other private companies • Networking: NGOs, universities, the community and the government	OECD (2021) , Reimers <i>et al.</i> (2023) , Font <i>et al.</i> (2016) , Mahato <i>et al.</i> (2021) , Moulaert (2009) , Dandolini <i>et al.</i> (2020) , Costa and Brandão (2011)
Sustainable and responsible practices	• Valorisation and conservation of territories • Minimisation of environmental and social impacts through community-based and local tourism	Howaldt <i>et al.</i> (2018) , Costa and Brandão (2011) , Moulaert (2009) , Dandolini <i>et al.</i> (2020)
Community empowerment	• Sustainable education and training • Strengthening local leadership • Training • Income generation • Women's empowerment • Autonomy • Creation of governance	Butzin and Terstriepe (2018) , Tardif and Harrisson (2005) , Cloutier (2003) , Guida and Maiolini (2013) , Howaldt <i>et al.</i> (2018) Sofield (2003)
Challenges	• Support for business modelling • Short-term returns • Lack of awareness of value creation • Collective participation and involvement of stakeholders • Impact measurement	Milano <i>et al.</i> (2018) Mihalic (2020)

Source(s): Prepared by the authors

participatory governance and social innovation in tourist destinations, presenting, in a structured and systemic way, the relationships within multi-sectoral networks, collaboration processes, transformation processes and the structural and operational challenges of the ecosystem.

Results and discussion

Participatory governance as mediation and “active listening”

The analysis shows that RDS’s activities are not limited to implementing tourism projects but also involve a model of mediation and active participation among the different actors in the territory. In this sense, the organisation operates as an institutional intermediary, bringing together local communities, suppliers, institutional partners and clients to engage in shared decision-making. As stated by the interviewee:

We believe in interdependence and in the power of building purpose through networking. That is why, over the years, we have been creating and strengthening partnerships that allow us to act in a more comprehensive, complementary, and strategic manner (Raízes Desenvolvimento Sustentável, 2023).

This understanding of interdependence guides an active listening process with local communities and actors, in which demands are designed in line with expectations and territorial knowledge. In this sense, the active participation of beneficiaries is no longer just a normative principle but becomes an operational mechanism for co-production and territorial transformation. This guiding principle reinforces the organisation’s role in structuring beneficiaries’ active roles, thereby strengthening processes of innovation, co-creation and systemic change (Butzin and Terstriep, 2018; Tardif and Harrison, 2005; OECD, 2021).

In this process, the organisation plays a guiding role among diverse interests, translating community needs, market expectations and the objectives of institutional partners. By acting as a bridge, the organisation promotes forms of collaborative governance that approximate the definition of governance as collective action oriented towards the construction of common objectives (Prentice *et al.*, 2019).

By structuring these participatory spaces, the RDS helps strengthen communities’ roles in tourism development. This finding aligns with Malek and Costa (2015) and Prentice *et al.* (2019), who highlight the strengthening and leadership of host communities in the planning and development of destinations, thereby reinforcing their role in territorial decision-making. Thus, the results reveal that this process requires actors who articulate participatory governance networks, thereby sustaining the processes and dynamics necessary for the sustainable development of destinations.

Sustainability in organisational practices

It should be noted that sustainability is an operational practice at RDS, demonstrating a strong commitment to responsible tourism, seeking practices that enhance destinations, make sense for communities and preserve the environment. Instead of prioritising tourist volume, the organisation adopts a tourism model based on small groups, reduced travel and cultural immersion, seeking to minimise socio-environmental impacts in the territories where it operates.

Among the strategies identified by the organisation is prioritising itineraries that encourage slow travel and reduce long-distance travel, favouring road transport over air whenever possible, and considering the carbon footprint of activities. As noted by the organisation:

The tourism promoted does not aim at large volumes, but rather small groups, prioritising unique experiences that preserve traditions and encourage cultural immersion (Raízes Desenvolvimento Sustentável, 2025).

This approach is evident in examples such as silent tours in protected areas, visits to extractive reserves, appreciation of handicrafts and tasting local products. Such initiatives focus on quality, aiming to compensate for visitor limitations, reduce negative impacts and avoid massification in the territories.

Sustainability is understood not only through organisational practices but also as a necessary step for action by both the public and private sectors. Therefore, the importance of collaboration with local businesses to improve services and manage tourist flows is evident. When this is insufficient, the need for public policies that regulate the use of spaces and ensure sustainable tourism practices becomes apparent.

From this territorial perspective, social innovation involves processes of interaction and exchange among different actors and cultures, incorporating practices and techniques that improve the quality of life, reduce inequalities and strengthen the sustainability of destinations (Moulaert, 2009; Farfus and Rocha, 2007). In the case analysed, this is evident in its initiatives that value local communities, thereby strengthening the sustainable dynamics of destinations.

Community empowerment

RDS initiatives seek to promote community empowerment by valuing local knowledge and expanding income-generating opportunities in the territories where it operates. In this context, tourism is not limited to offering itineraries. However, it serves as a means to value and integrate different cultural and productive expressions, such as gastronomy, handicrafts, agroecology, original fashion and cultural manifestations.

In addition to valuing these activities, the organisation prioritises community autonomy through participatory governance and business modelling. In this sense, the company works to train residents, contributing to income generation, market access and the formation of commercial partnerships. The organisation states that:

We strengthen the autonomy of communities, structure governance processes, and support business modelling. We work to improve the quality of what they produce, generate income, provide access to markets, and connect commercial partners (Raízes Desenvolvimento Sustentável, 2025).

In the social sphere, RDS promotes female empowerment and develops intergenerational projects, especially in places where cultural traditions are fragile. These projects aim to involve people of different ages in the transmission and appreciation of local knowledge. As highlighted by the organisation:

We seek to develop intergenerational projects involving different age groups, especially in contexts where traditions are at risk of being lost (Raízes Desenvolvimento Sustentável, 2025).

These initiatives highlight the importance of education and training throughout the production chain, aiming to strengthen women and traditional communities in economic activities related to the sector. This approach aligns with the concept of social innovation proposed by Reimers *et al.* (2023), which emphasises the need for sustainable solutions grounded in empowerment, knowledge sharing and active participation, whose success depends on collective engagement and community creativity.

These actions reflect the logic of social innovation, understood as a collaborative process aimed at meeting social needs and improving the quality of life of all those involved (Guida

and Maiolini, 2013). By incorporating social and territorial elements, the company's initiatives align with Sofield's (2003) perspective, which holds that actions integrated with the territory and local culture drive transformations in community development.

The challenge of coordinating multiple projects and interventions

The case study reveals that working in territorial networks and on multiple simultaneous projects poses significant coordination challenges. Community participation tends to be effective only when it generates concrete value for the actors involved. However, in many contexts, participatory networks and councils follow formal processes that do not always lead to practical action, thereby limiting participant engagement.

To address this challenge, the RDS seeks to structure spaces for participation with clear objectives and tangible results. As reported by the organisation:

We seek to structure committees and groups with well-defined purposes and short- and medium-term objectives (Raízes Desenvolvimento Sustentável, 2025).

Another challenge identified relates to the simultaneous presence of multiple projects in the same territory. When coordination between these actions is lacking, there is a risk of overlapping activities, duplication of effort or fragmentation of development initiatives. In this context, the organisation prioritises initial dialogue with all actors, aligning efforts, complementing existing initiatives and avoiding overlapping activities, promoting a more efficient use of resources (Raízes Desenvolvimento Sustentável, 2025).

This action highlights the organisation's strategic and coordinating role in territorial initiatives, promoting alignment among stakeholders and enabling the effective use of local resources. From this perspective, sustainable tourism planning depends on the active participation of communities and the integration of social, economic and environmental dimensions (Li *et al.*, 2021; Moleiro, 2020; Hall, 2005).

To reduce negative impacts and promote equitable development, cooperation between actors and the adoption of innovative practices are essential. Social innovation, therefore, brings together strategies that engage multiple stakeholders and strengthen sustainability and community leadership (Howaldt *et al.*, 2018).

The organisational intermediation ecosystem for social innovation in territorial tourism

Based on the results presented in this section, we propose an organisational intermediation ecosystem that illustrates how the RDS case study operationalises social innovation in territorial tourism. This model shows that, in the Latin American context, social innovation in tourism is not a spontaneous networking process, but rather a deliberate building of bridges, in which the mediating organisation acts as a manager of community sovereignty in the face of global market pressures.

As shown in Figure 1, the ecosystem is structured around three interrelated dimensions: multisectoral networks, in which the organisational intermediary acts as a bridge between actors; collaboration processes, which serve as mechanisms for articulating actions; and transformation processes, which constitute the emergent outcomes of the entire ecosystem. It is worth noting that this dynamic process also faces structural and operational challenges, which shape and limit the possibilities for mediation and social innovation in the territory.

In summary, this proposed model shows that social innovation in tourism can be mediated by organisations that articulate through participatory governance networks, promoting collaborative processes. The ecosystem presented demonstrates how these dimensions interact dynamically, while facing operational and structural challenges, reinforcing the organisation's role as a coordinator in promoting sustainable development in tourism.

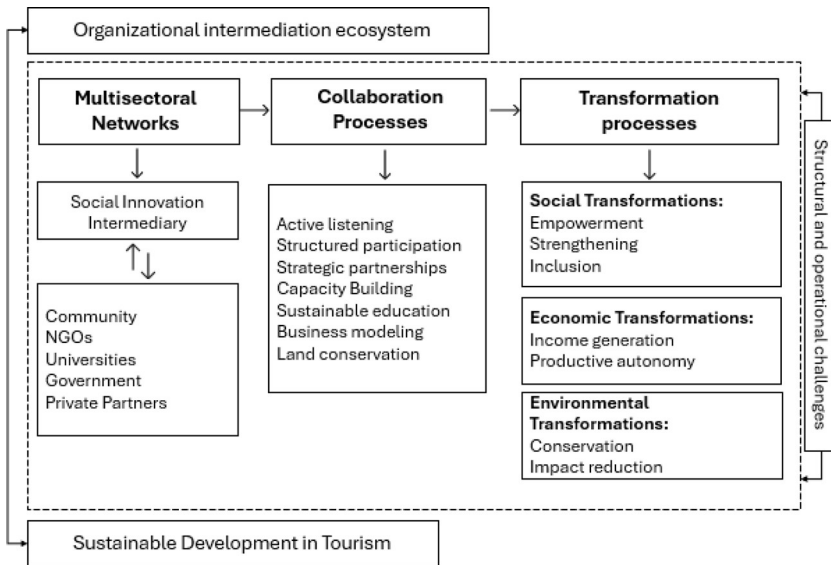


Figure 1. Organisational intermediation ecosystem

Source: Prepared by the authors

Conclusion

This research analysed how intermediary organisations and multisectoral networks foster social innovation in tourism, promoting sustainable practices aligned with community needs. The results show that coordination between community associations, civil society organisations, public authorities and small entrepreneurs is a key element in transforming tourism towards sustainability, strengthening local development and minimising negative impacts on territories.

The study demonstrates that sustainability-oriented organisations, such as RDS, act not only as tourism service providers but also as strategic mediators, structuring networks, promoting participatory governance, empowering communities and coordinating multiple projects. This mediating role, summarised in the proposed organisational intermediation ecosystem, shows how social innovation in tourism is deliberately constructed, dynamically articulating multisectoral networks, collaborative processes and transformative results, while addressing structural and operational challenges. In this context, organisations no longer assume only an economic role but also act as agents of territorial articulation, focused on sustainable tourism and aligned with community needs.

It was also observed that economic motivation is no longer the main driver of these organisations, which are now guided by sustainability, indicating a shift in the entrepreneurial paradigm. Horizontal and participatory leadership proved essential for collaborative governance and community empowerment, driving social advances such as inclusion and local strengthening, as well as environmental advances focused on preservation and regeneration.

Despite the challenges identified, such as the complexity of project management, the need for education, the commitment of actors and limited resources, the study

contributes to the literature through a case study demonstrating how bottom-up approaches, articulated through collaborative actions, can strengthen sustainability in tourist destinations. By highlighting concrete practices in governance, empowerment and networking, the research broadens understanding of how theoretical concepts can be translated into practical actions.

As a limitation, the research focuses on a single case, limiting the generalisability of the findings. Future research should explore different contexts and experiences to test the applicability of the organisational intermediation ecosystem model in other tourist destinations, especially in territories of the Global South, to broaden understanding of the mechanisms of social innovation mediation in tourism.

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