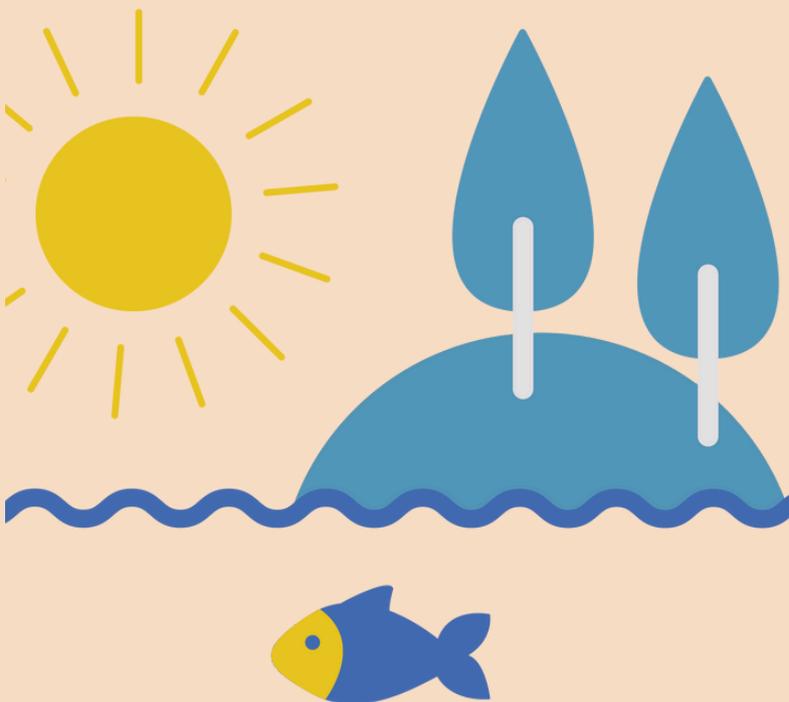


MEDLAB THEMATIC TALKS

Sustainable Tourism: Balancing growth with preservation

Advancing sustainable tourism requires a united effort - Interreg programmes in the Mediterranean are making it happen by joining forces with other EU funds. Through collaboration, strategic action, and innovative solutions, partners in the region are enhancing tourism sustainability, preserving cultural and natural heritage, and promoting climate-conscious travel experiences across the Mediterranean.



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ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

Through this publication, we highlight how Interreg programmes contribute to addressing Mediterranean challenges by working together with other EU funds. Whether supporting sustainable tourism, enhancing green infrastructure, or tackling climate risks, cooperation amplifies impact.

Sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean relies on cooperation to balance economic growth with environmental and social well-being. By fostering synergies between Interreg programmes and other EU funds, stakeholders can develop responsible tourism models that prevent over-tourism and environmental degradation.

The MedLab Thematic Week held in December 2024 gathered practitioners, the EU Commission, and Interreg programmes representatives to exchange experiences and explore collaborative solutions. Discussions highlighted the need for cross-programme cooperation, green tourism initiatives, and strategic alignment to enhance sector resilience. Successful initiatives such as Tourism4Cooperation and multi-programme coordination mechanisms demonstrate the value of structured collaboration.

Lessons from projects like MEDITHEATRES, CROSSDEV, Tourism4Cooperation and SARC show how cooperation extends beyond programme boundaries, reinforcing the need for coordinated funding, territorial linkages, and integrated planning.

This publication presents key insights on sustainable tourism, reflecting broader opportunities for cooperation in the Mediterranean. Through ongoing dialogue and partnerships, MedLab supports a more resilient and sustainable tourism sector.

DEVELOPING COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES FOR A MORE SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Interreg programmes play a crucial role in advancing sustainable tourism by complementing and integrating efforts with other EU funds, such as Horizon Europe, LIFE, and ERDF. By aligning funding streams and fostering collaboration between various initiatives, these programmes create a more coordinated and impactful response to tourism sustainability challenges, preserving cultural and natural heritage and mitigating tourism-related environmental pressures across the Mediterranean.

Discussions among practitioners highlighted that continuity, cooperation, and capitalisation are the foundation for synergies between initiatives, as there is always a connection to build on between projects.

Synergies extend beyond thematic priorities and individual projects; they depend on shaping processes that empower beneficiaries. By promoting more inclusive and flexible collaboration, we can enhance impact and achieve long-term, meaningful outcomes in sustainable tourism development across the Mediterranean.

Diverse tourism realities in the Mediterranean

When discussing tourism in the Mediterranean, we must recognise its complexity - there is no single reality. The region encompasses a diverse range of destinations, each with unique characteristics, distinct needs, and differing degrees of economic dependence on tourism. A one-size-fits-all solution simply does not exist.

This is where people-centered cooperation becomes essential. By fostering inclusive dialogue, empowering local communities, and integrating stakeholders at all levels, we can build resilient and sustainable tourism models that address specific regional challenges. Long-term change can only be achieved through collaboration that prioritises local expertise and strengthens the cultural and environmental fabric of Mediterranean destinations.

Turning knowledge into action:

Sustainable tourism emerged as the sector where synergies are most advanced. Progress is evident both at the programme level - through the multi-programme coordination mechanism linking seven Interreg programmes - and at the project level, where cross-collaboration is naturally fostering integration.

Effective cooperation ensures that knowledge is not only shared but strategically applied to drive meaningful and lasting change. Partners and beneficiaries play a crucial role in fostering synergies and complementarities, ensuring that decision-makers, implementers, and citizens remain actively engaged throughout the process.

During the MedLab Thematic Week, discussions highlighted Interreg's pivotal role as a bridge between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners - transforming scientific insights into concrete, actionable solutions. A key focus was on strengthening connections across programmes to ensure continuity in project development and maximize long-term impact.

Sustainable tourism as a powerful tool for community engagement

Tourism in the Mediterranean is diverse, requiring a multifaceted approach to ensure its sustainability and long-term impact. Different funding mechanisms play a key role in engaging a wide range of people and organizations, fostering synergies and enhancing cooperation across sectors. The active involvement of local authorities, communities, and citizens is essential for the success and sustainability of tourism initiatives.

Creating synergies beyond a single programme area's boundary is crucial in achieving broader, lasting results. Ensuring that the outcomes of one programme are sustained and expanded through additional funding sources strengthens the overall impact of tourism initiatives. A focused approach on the Mediterranean can shift territories from competitors to collaborators, encouraging regions to work together.

INTERREG PROGRAMMES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN SUPPORT OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM - SOME FACTS

To provide a clear overview of projects contributing to the sustainable tourism topic, we focused on two key themes from the keep.eu database and applied them to the Interreg programmes active in the Mediterranean region:

- Cultural heritage and arts
- Tourism

It is important to emphasize that not all these projects are explicitly designed to promote sustainable tourism. The figures also include more traditional projects that address the broader tourism industry or other areas that may not be directly related to sustainability. Despite this, they still offer valuable insights into how tourism and its related sectors can evolve within the context of sustainability.

We cannot overlook the fact that projects classified under other themes may also include actions that indirectly contribute to sustainable tourism. Sustainable tourism is an inherently cross-cutting sector, seamlessly integrating with economic, environmental, and social dimensions. Its impact extends far beyond traditional tourism initiatives, fostering synergies across multiple domains.

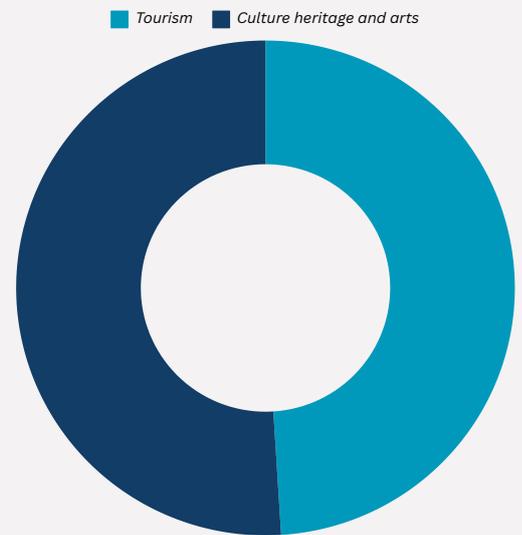
Projects and partners working on tourism and culture sectors in 2014-2020

Project incidence and distribution

The share of projects aligned with tourism and culture stands at 25% (358 out of 1,420), though this varies significantly across programmes.

The highest concentration is found in Greece-Albania (45%), while the Med Sea Basin ENI CBC programme reports the lowest share at 9%. Other programmes with a strong emphasis on tourism & culture include Italy-Albania-Montenegro (41%), Greece-Cyprus (40%), and Croatia-BiH-Montenegro (39%).

Not all of these projects are explicitly designed to promote sustainable tourism. A small number focuses on more conventional aspects of the tourism industry or areas not immediately linked to sustainability.



Projects per sector (14-20)

Financial investment

The overall investment in the sector is equal to €528 million, which constitutes 24% of the overall budget of all projects (EU + co-financing, equal to €2,239 million)

Partner involvement

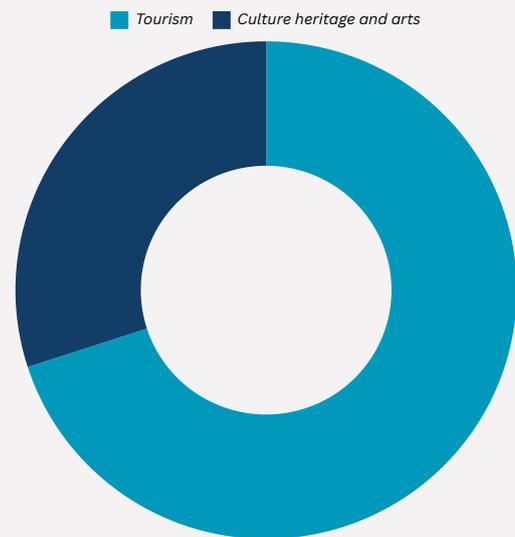
Tourism and Culture are equally addressed by the totality of the projects and programmes.

Of the 2.033 partners involved in tourism and culture projects, 24% of the total (8.427), proportionally, the highest concentration is still in the Italy-Albania-Montenegro programme (43%) and Greece-Cyprus (42%).

2021-2027 PROGRAMME TRENDS

At the end of 2024, six Mediterranean programmes had uploaded project data for the 2021-2027 period, with 67 projects listed on keep.eu.

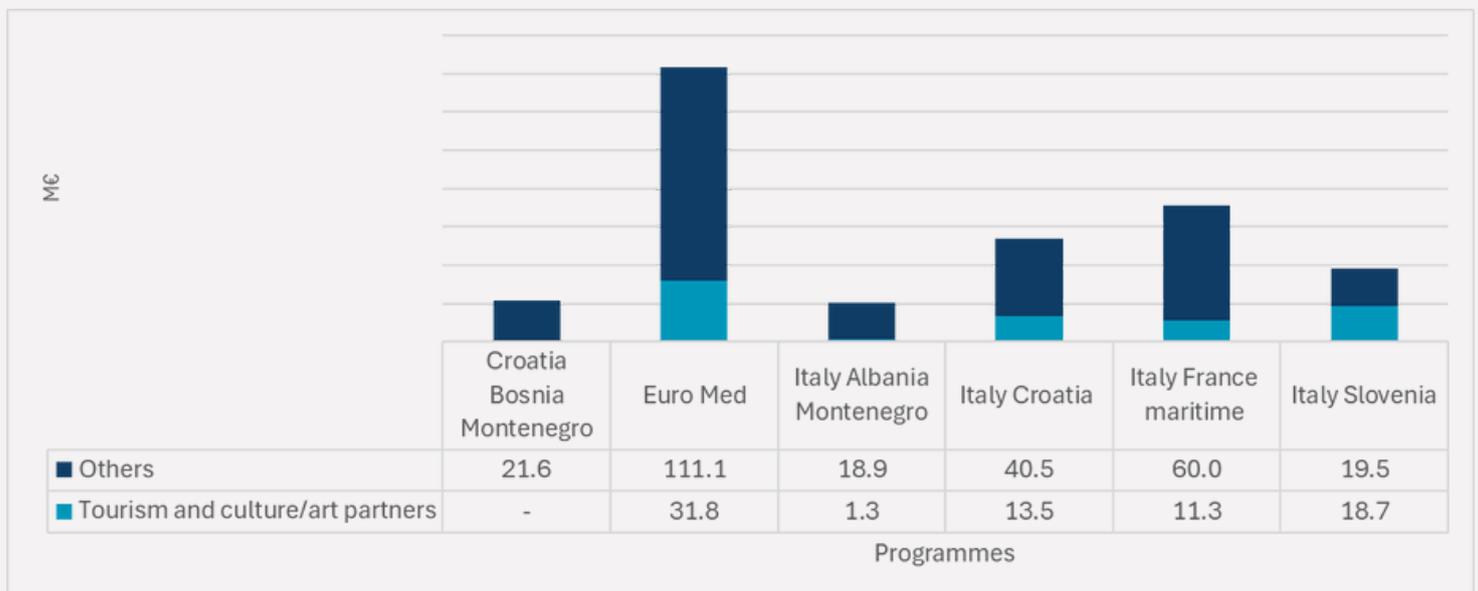
- More than 20% of all projects approved in the first calls address culture and tourism topics, with some programmes addressing the topic up to 25%, like Interreg Euro-MED.
- Overall, the intensity of projects focusing on topics of tourism, and cultural heritage and arts in the first calls has remained largely comparable to the previous period.
- Referring to these still very partial 21-27 data, 70% concern tourism, and 30% culture. We will see how this evolves.



Projects per sector (21-27)

Based on data reported to keep.eu by six out of seventeen Interreg programmes in the region, 22% (€77 million out of €348.2 million) of the budget allocated to projects addressing topics considered in this analysis and related to the tourism and culture sectors has been contracted so far for the 2021-2027 period.

In the Mediterranean Interreg programmes, including ENI CBC programmes, one project out of four concerns tourism or cultural heritage and arts



Tourism and culture projects share in relation to the overall committed budget to projects (21-27). Data as of Dec 2024

Explore keep.eu yourself

The statistics presented here are not fixed; they can change based on filters and parameters used, and they evolve as more data from the 2021-2027 programming period is added. We encourage users to explore keep.eu and apply different filters to generate insights relevant to their needs.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM PRACTITIONERS



Anna Belan

Building on the work of the **MEDITHEATRES** project co-financed by Interreg Italy-Tunisia

Synergies are crucial because they enable multi-sector collaboration and partnerships across various levels, optimizing resources and efforts to achieve sustainable development goals, including fostering inclusive tourism and creating resilient, beneficial networks for communities and tourists alike.

Inclusive tourism enhances the social equity pillar of sustainable development - which balances economic prosperity and environmental protection. It ensures accessibility and equitable benefits for all, engages all stakeholders and empowers marginalized communities.



Joelle Barakat

Building on the work of the **CROSSDEV** co-financed by the ENI CBC Med Sea Basin programme

Sustainable tourism should take a 'helicopter approach': landing deeply within local communities to understand and nurture their skills and traditions, then rising to the regional level to foster collaboration across the Mediterranean, creating a richer, more connected destination where organizations work as partners, not competitors."



Josep Rodríguez

Building on the work of the project co-financed by the Interreg Euro-MED

When talking about transnational cooperation we have to be aware that we are competitors and cooperators at the same time. We need to identify what are the relevant fields where there are incentives for transnational cooperation: a clear transnational dimension, joint projects to get better results or a panoply of topics where the mutual learning and development of joint solutions can improve the performance in our destinations. Even competences lie on the shoulder of national and regional authorities. Currently there are some roadmaps at the international and European level. On the one hand, the Glasgow Declaration on tourism and climate change and on the other, the European Tourism Transition Pathway, which basically states the green transition, digital transition and resilience as the main challenges. These are our lighthouses.



Vasileios Papaioannou

Building on the work of the **SARC** project co-financed by Interreg Greece-Italy

Synergies in sustainable tourism can be developed using the following four pillars:

- Use of "out of programme area" expenditures between all Mediterranean Operational Programmes for everyday activities of Projects
- Promotion of co-financing of actions through different national and transnational Programmes.
- Bottom-up approach from Partners to Managing Authorities for call ideas for specific actions-projects
- Promotion of alternative tourism categories and synergy between different tourism categories

MEDLAB - FOR STRONGER COOPERATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN



© CORALLO project co-funded by Interreg Italy-Malta programme

About the MedLab

[Seventeen Interreg programmes](#) operate in the Mediterranean Sea Basin. To maximise the impact and efficiency of EU funds, Medlab was established in 2020 to strengthen cooperation, foster synergies, and promote a fresh approach to territorial cooperation. It has progressively evolved into a platform for multilevel dialogue, bringing together stakeholders from various levels of governance.

Medlab started as a top-down initiative, co-led by the Commission, and bringing together heads of joint secretariats and managing authorities of the seventeen Interreg programmes working in the Mediterranean region, with WestMed and EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region.

In 2014-2020 the seventeen Interreg programmes active in the Mediterranean committed over two billion euros to advance joint solutions addressing challenges partners in the Mediterranean region face.

Importance of cooperation

The Mediterranean region has entered a new era of European cooperation with the historic appointment of a dedicated Commissioner for the Mediterranean, Ms Dubravka Šuica. As highlighted by Simona Pohlova and Olivier Baudelet from DG Regional and Urban Policy, this shift from a sectorial to a geographical approach represents a significant political signal with immense potential.

DG REGIO colleagues stressed the need to avoid the “silos approach”, underlining how the various sectors are deeply interconnected, especially where environment is concerned.

Interreg projects play a key role in driving long-term initiatives, complementing other funding programmes, and mainstreaming policies for lasting impact.

Interreg’s people-to-people approach remains the most effective strategy for tackling sustainable tourism and balancing growth with preservation. It also stands out as an ideal tool for balancing territorial priorities, cross-border cooperation, and alignment with broader EU policies.

USEFUL LINKS



The Interreg Mediterranean Multiprogramme Coordination Mechanism is a pilot coordination project involving several Interreg programmes in the Mediterranean area on the topic of sustainable tourism, aimed at strengthening their synergies for better impact and coordination. Find out more here: <https://www.italy-croatia.eu/multiprogramme-mechanism>



Join the Med – a knowledge hub around the topic of sustainable tourism that aims to identify the most tangible tools, methods and solutions for promoting and achieving sustainability in the tourism sector (<https://sustainable-tourism.interreg-euro-med.eu/join-the-med-hub/>)



Become a member of the **Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories**. The Observatories bring together actors, policy makers and institutions in the MED Region sharing data on sustainable tourism and specific tools along with best practices encouraging the transfer and reuse of knowledge. <https://sustainable-tourism.interreg-euro-med.eu/tourism-observatories/>

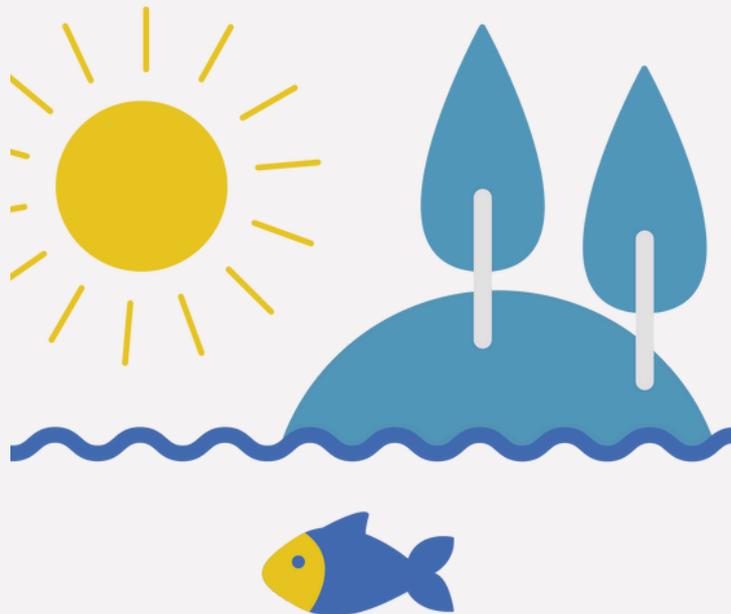


Technical Group on Sustainable Tourism of the WestMED: <https://westmed-initiative.ec.europa.eu/sustainable-tourism/>

GET IN TOUCH

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Disclaimer: Cooperation can be complex, and while Interact's job is to make it easier, Interact cannot offer assurances on the accuracy of our pan-European information in any specific context.

Furthermore, understanding and knowledge evolves throughout the programming period. If you spot something out of date or inconsistent, please contact us at communication@interact.eu

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