Designing Experiential Tourism Strategies in Rural Areas: A Systemic and Data-Driven Framework

Sara De Menech(✉), Asja Aulisio, Silvia Barbero, and Alice Barreca

Department of Architecture and Design, Politecnico Di Torino, Turin, Italy
sara.demenech@polito.it

Abstract. Rural areas across Europe are increasingly affected by long-term processes of demographic decline, economic marginalisation, and territorial fragmentation. In this context, tourism is often considered a potential driver of development; however, conventional tourism models have shown limited capacity to generate lasting benefits for fragile rural territories. In recent years, experience-based tourism models has emerged as an alternative paradigm, emphasising authenticity, local resources, and meaningful interactions between visitors and host communities. Despite growing academic interest, existing approaches to this field in rural areas remain fragmented and rarely translated into integrated, operational frameworks capable of supporting territorial decision-making. This paper addresses this gap by proposing a systemic design framework aimed at supporting the strategic development of tourism initiatives in rural contexts. The framework integrates territorial analysis, assessment of the local tourism offer, and systemic design tools within a coherent analytical process. Its objective is to move beyond isolated tourism products and toward the construction of territorial strategies grounded in local systems of resources, actors, and practices. The methodological approach adopted in this paper was originally developed in the framework of the SYSTOUR Interreg Europe project, and is here applied to the Lea-Artibai area (Basque Country, Spain). By constructing and analysing a knowledge base of tourism initiatives and integrating systemic design and evaluation tools, the approach supports the identification of leverage points and strategic directions for sustainable tourism development. The results show that a systemic and place-based perspective improves the understanding of these initiatives as a relational and co-designed process rather than an isolated product.

Keywords: experiential tourism · place-based strategies · economic development

1 Introduction and Research Background

Many rural and inner areas across Europe are currently facing long-term structural challenges, including demographic decline, limited economic opportunities, reduced accessibility and fragmented governance [1]. These dynamics have progressively weakened

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local communities and territorial systems, while at the same time intensifying the concentration of tourism flows in a limited number of highly pressured destinations, often associated with unsustainable development models [2]. In this context, the revitalisation of inner areas requires territorial-based strategies capable of redistributing tourism flows, strengthening local economies and preserving environmental and socio-cultural assets, but also of supporting processes of economic enhancement, territorial valuation, and value generation rooted in local specificities [3] [4] [5]. Over the last decades, tourism has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from mass-oriented models towards more sustainable, slow and experience-based forms [6]. The growing demand for authentic and locally grounded experiences has positioned experiential rural tourism as a potential lever for the revitalisation of inner areas, as it is strongly embedded in local landscapes, cultures and communities [7]. By focusing on meaningful interactions with places and local actors, experiential tourism can contribute to reinforcing territorial identity and supporting local economic systems, while responding to increasing concerns related to environmental sustainability and socio-cultural impacts [8]. In particular, walking paths and slow mobility infrastructures have emerged as strategic tools for structuring and connecting local experience offerings in rural contexts [9]. From the perspective of economic evaluation, these infrastructures and experiences can also be interpreted as territorial assets capable of activating local value chains, enhancing the value and attractiveness of places, and contributing to broader processes of sustainable territorial development [10] [11]. In this context, small and medium-sized enterprises play a key role as drivers of territorial development, often leveraging local knowledge, socio-cultural assets, and place-based traditions within local supply chains [12]. However, despite their strong territorial embeddedness, such enterprises frequently face limitations in terms of innovation capacity, skills, and access to resources, highlighting the need for integrated strategies capable of strengthening local economies through sustainable and experience-based tourism. In this sense, economic valuation becomes essential for understanding how experience-based tourism can contribute not only to visibility and attractiveness, but also to the consolidation of local entrepreneurial ecosystems, the enhancement of territorial capital, and the long-term sustainability of development processes [8]. At the same time, digital platforms play a central role in shaping how tourism experiences are communicated, accessed and perceived. They represent the primary interface between destinations and visitors, influencing visibility, narratives and decision-making processes, especially in less-known rural and inner areas. Beyond their promotional function, platform-generated data provide valuable insights into tourism practices, experiential patterns and information accessibility, offering new opportunities to analyse how experiences are communicated and discovered by potential visitors [13] [14]. Despite the growing relevance of experiential tourism for rural and inner area revitalisation, existing studies increasingly rely on platform-based data to analyse tourism dynamics [15] [16], yet their integration into holistic, data-driven frameworks capable of supporting territorially grounded strategies in inner areas remains limited. Current research tends to address either the promotional dimension of digital platforms or the qualitative dynamics of rural tourism separately, without bridging the two into a coherent analytical and strategic framework. As a result, the potential of platform-generated data to inform place-based policy design and territorial decision-making in

rural contexts remains largely unexplored [1] [2]. To address this gap, this paper proposes a systemic design framework aimed at supporting the strategic development of experiential tourism in rural contexts. The framework integrates territorial analysis, experiential tourism assessment, and design tools within a coherent analytical process. Its objective is to move beyond isolated tourism products and toward the construction of territorial strategies grounded in local systems of resources, actors, and practices. This desk-based investigation is complemented by field research, including on-site visits and interviews with institutions and professionals operating in the tourism sector, and is validated through a territorial case study focused on walking paths in the Lea-Artibai area, Basque Country, Spain. Overall, the framework is intended to support not only the interpretation of local tourism dynamics, but also the economic evaluation and strategic valorisation of territorial resources within a place-based development perspective. Against this backdrop, the main objective of the research is to develop an analytical framework capable of supporting the strategic design of this kind of tourism in rural areas through an integrated, data-driven, and evaluative approach. Specifically, the research aims to:

- structure and integrate heterogeneous territorial data within a coherent knowledge base;
- analyse experiential tourism initiatives in relation to territorial systems, local resources, and value-generation processes;
- apply systemic design tools to identify leverage points and strategic directions for sustainable tourism development;
- incorporate elements of economic evaluation and territorial valuation in order to interpret the development potential of experiential tourism initiatives;
- test the framework through an applied case study within a European policy context.

By addressing these objectives, the paper seeks to contribute to both academic debate and policy-oriented practice, offering a transferable framework for rural and mountain territories facing similar challenges. In particular, it contributes to advancing the dialogue between design, tourism studies, and economic evaluation, showing how experiential tourism can be analysed not only as a cultural and social phenomenon, but also as a driver of territorial enhancement, local value creation, and informed decision-making for inner-area development. The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 introduces the research background and problem. Section 2 presents the research framework and objectives. Sections 3 and 4 describe the methodology and case study. Section 5 discusses the results, which are interpreted in Section 6. Conclusions outline implications for policy and future research.

2 Methodological Approach

This research adopts a mixed-method approach aimed at analysing how experiential tourism can contribute to the revitalisation of rural territories [17]. The study is framed within a systemic perspective, which considers tourism as part of a broader territorial ecosystem composed of interconnected actors, resources and infrastructures [18]. Within this perspective, tourism dynamics are interpreted through the relationships between

local stakeholders, territorial resources and experiential offerings. The methodological design combines desk research, data analysis and field investigation in order to explore tourism dynamics in rural contexts. The research process follows a structured workflow articulated in several stages, including the definition of the theoretical framework, the analysis of digital tourism platforms, the implementation of qualitative field research and the interpretation of results through the integration of different sources of evidence (Fig. 1).

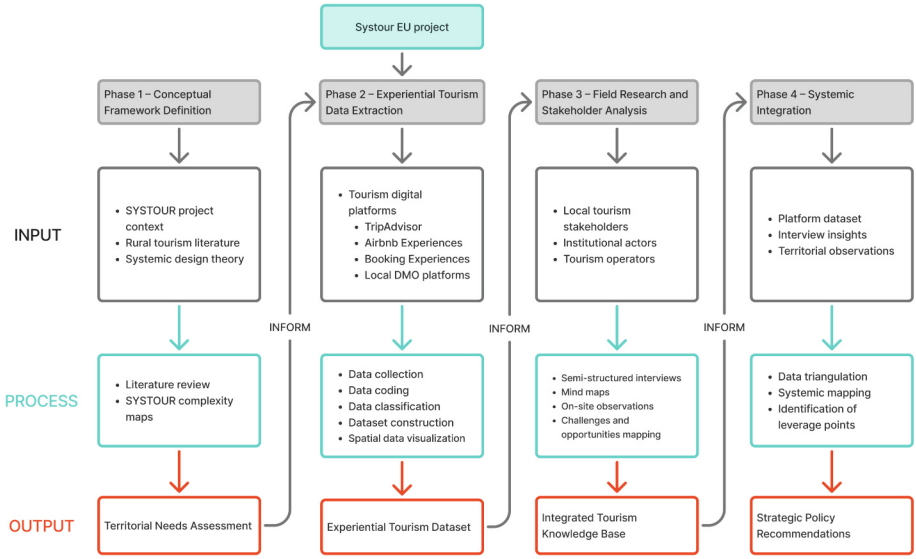

Fig. 1. Methodological workflow (Authors' elaboration)

The first phase consisted of defining the analytical framework and the main objective of the analysis through a targeted literature review in the framework of the Systour project [19, 20]. The second phase consisted of a desk-based analysis of digital tourism platforms presenting experiential tourism offers in rural contexts [20]. Digital platforms increasingly represent a key interface between destinations and visitors, particularly in rural areas where traditional marketing and distribution channels are often limited. Beyond their promotional function, these platforms constitute valuable sources of data for research, as they provide structured and comparable information on tourism experiences, including descriptions of activities, thematic categories, user feedback and spatial distribution [21]. For this reason, platform-based data were used as a primary analytical source to explore how the offers are structured, communicated and made accessible to potential visitors. To complement the desk research, the study was further developed through a qualitative field investigation conducted within the selected case study area (Third phase). The objective of this phase was to gain a deeper understanding of the local tourism ecosystem by collecting qualitative insights from actors directly involved in tourism development and territorial management. Additional qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders operating within

the local tourism system, including institutional actors, tourism operators and organisations involved in territorial development. To support the interview process, a structured questionnaire was developed in advance. The formulation of the questions followed the S.M.A.R.T. framework [22], ensuring that each question addressed at least one of the criteria related to specificity, measurability, achievability, relevance or time-bound objectives. This approach helped structure the interview process while allowing flexibility for respondents to provide qualitative insights based on their roles within the tourism ecosystem. The interviews were complemented by on-site observations and exploratory visits to relevant locations within the case study area. The qualitative information collected during this phase was subsequently synthesised through visual mapping tools, including mind maps, allowing the identification of key relationships, recurring themes and relational dynamics within the local tourism network. The final phase (4) of the research consisted of integrating the results obtained from the desk research and the field investigation. The triangulation between the theoretical framework derived from the literature review, the analysis of digital tourism platforms and the qualitative insights collected through stakeholder interviews enabled a comprehensive interpretation of experiential tourism dynamics in rural territories. This integration of different data sources supported the identification of opportunities and challenges related to tourism development and provided the basis for the formulation of strategic reflections aimed at strengthening sustainable experiential tourism in rural areas.

3 Case Study and Data Sampling: Lea-Artibai, Spain

Within the broader framework of the European SYSTOUR project, the Leartibai Fundazioa provided the institutional setting for testing and refining the proposed methodological framework within a real governance context. The foundation is a local development body operating through a multi-stakeholder governance model, positioned between public institutions and private actors. It acts as an intermediary organisation supporting rural development, innovation, entrepreneurship, and sustainable tourism strategies, translating strategic objectives into territorially adapted actions. This institutional context offered a relevant environment in which to apply the framework and assess its usefulness in relation to actual local development dynamics. The Lea-Artibai area was selected as the case study. It is a rural comarca located in northern Spain, characterised by a dispersed settlement structure and a population of approximately 26,000 inhabitants. Despite a relatively diversified economic base and a strong industrial legacy, the area faces structural challenges common to many European inner territories, including demographic ageing, limited international visibility, and seasonal tourism patterns [23, 24]. The unit of analysis adopted in this research is the experiential tourism initiative, defined as a tourism activity explicitly offered to visitors through digital platforms and organised by local actors. The platform analysis was initially conducted across six European rural regions involved in the broader research framework [2]. In order to ensure methodological consistency, TripAdvisor was selected as the common international platform for the comparative analysis across all regions. In addition, eleven national or regional tourism platforms were consulted in order to capture locally specific tourism offers that may not be fully represented on international platforms. For comparative purposes, the “Experiences” sections of Airbnb and Booking were also explored; however, in the analysed

rural contexts, these platforms presented a significantly smaller number of activities and largely reflected patterns already visible on TripAdvisor. Based on this platform selection, a structured dataset was created to systematically collect and organise information on tourism experiences available in the selected regions. A structured dataset composed of 90 experiences and 37 descriptive variables was constructed to analyse the characteristics of this specific sector across six European rural regions. Following a comparative cross-regional phase, this research focused more specifically on the Spanish case study to explore local dynamics in greater depth. For each of the six regions, the selection of the 15 experiences followed a two-stage process conducted within the geographical boundaries of the respective area. In the first stage, TripAdvisor was searched using the regional area as the reference and applying the eligibility criteria defined for the broader dataset. Where the number of results meeting the selection criteria on TripAdvisor was insufficient, a second stage was conducted on the corresponding national or regional DMO platform, which provided a more comprehensive and locally representative catalogue of experiences. Experiences were selected in the order in which they appeared on each platform until the target of 15 was reached, ensuring a sample that reflects the actual digital visibility of the local offer rather than a curated selection. This two-stage approach proved particularly relevant in the case of Lea-Artibai, where only two experiences met the eligibility criteria on TripAdvisor, and the Leartibai Turism platform — the official regional DMO — constituted the primary data source. The resulting dataset retains full analytical coverage of the dimensions central to this study: platform distribution, experience typology, operational characteristics, geographical reach, accessibility, cost-related aspects, management of the experiences, and the evaluation of sustainability and community embeddedness (Table 1).

Following the platform-based analysis, the methodology was further implemented through field research conducted during a two-month working period within the foundation. This phase was based on semi-structured interviews and direct on-site observation, with the aim of comparing digital representations of tourism experiences with on-the-ground dynamics. A total of five semi-structured interviews were conducted directly within the case study area with tourism operators, institutional representatives, and local professionals. In addition, the research was complemented by insights derived from a broader interview campaign conducted by an external consultancy across the 13 municipalities of the region, within which specific questions related to experiential tourism were integrated. This made it possible to access a wider range of qualitative perspectives on local tourism dynamics, stakeholder relationships, and place-based development opportunities. The interviews provided a deeper understanding of how experiential tourism is operationalised at the local level, how coordination among relevant actors takes place, and which structural barriers constrain territorial efficiency. At the same time, they helped identify latent opportunities that have not yet been fully leveraged within the local tourism ecosystem.

Table 1. Metadata description of tourism platform dataset (authors' elaboration based on [20])

DATASET METADATA			
Macrocategory	**Data content**	**Data value**	
Variable		**Type**	**Levels**
Experience Provider and Governance			
ATTRACTION/EXPERIENCE	The proposed activity is identified either as an experience or as a physical attraction to visit.	Text	ATTR, EXP
EXPERIENCE NAME	Title of the experience (EXP) as indicated on the platform	Text	–
PROPOSING SUBJECT	Organization or company proposing the experience	Text	–
PUBLIC/PRIVATE	Indicates whether the organization is public or private	Text	Public, private
PARTNERS	If applicable, external subjects involved in the experience and their respective roles	Text, close	YES/NO/NA
SCALE	specification of the geographical scale covered by the experience.	Text, close	Local, Regional, National, European, Global
AREA OF INTEREST	Specification of the geographical area of interest and the potential reach of the experience	Text, close	National, International
Experience Profile and Operational Characteristics			
TYPES OF EXPERIENCES OFFERED	Description of the main characteristics of the experience, indicating the type of proposed activity.	Text, open	Tour, Nature, Tastings, Architecture and Museums, ...
Municipality	Specification of the municipality where the experience takes place, and possibly the related province	Text, open	
Availability	Availability throughout the year, as recorded at the time of data collection	Text, close	Always available. Not available, Seasonal, NA
Duration	Duration of the experience indicated as hours.minutes	Number	

(*continued*)

Table 1. (*continued*)

DATASET METADATA			
Age range	Minimum and maximum age range requires to participate in the experience	Number	
Ticket	Whether a ticket is required to purchase or book.	Text	Yes/no/NA
Price	Ticket price per day	Number	
Languages	Language(s) in which the experience is delivered	Text, open	*Spanish, English,…*
Accessibility	Level of accessibility indicated on the platform	Text	Low…Total
Informative material	Availability of a written guide, brochure, or live guide	Text	live guide, written guide, NO, NA
Experience Evaluation and Territorial Value			
Valorisation	EXP makes possible to learn about, deepen and enhance local heritages and activities	Text	YES/NO/NA
Local reality	EXP is promoted by a local reality (at the most the region it belongs to)	Text	YES/NO/NA
Natural resource	EXP is based on a unique/rare natural feature of the territory	Text	YES/NO/NA
Testimony	EXP allows to get in touch with the local population (direct testimonies), narratives	Text	YES/NO/NA
Mobility	EXP allows to explore the territory through sustainable means of transport	Text	YES/NO/NA
Youth/women	EXP promotes/is promoted by/from the work of women/youth realities	Text	YES/NO/NA
Climate change	EXP raises awareness on climate change	Text	YES/NO/NA
Enogastronomy	EXP promotes traditional food and beverage-related experience	Text	YES/NO/NA
Inclusivity	EXP facilitates the accessibility to this area to more types of people/different types of abilities	Text	YES/NO/NA

4 Results

4.1 On-Desk Research: Digital Platforms Analysis

The platform-based analysis provides an initial overview of how experiential tourism is currently structured, communicated, and distributed across the Lea-Artibai area. The 87% of the tourist experiences were promoted through the Leartibai Turismo platform, while only two experiences, that satisfied the criteria, were founded on TripAdvisor. The DMO platform, managed by the Leartibai foundation, promotes all the touristic information of the comarca, including a section for the experiences, divided into Nature with offering for Active Tourism, Natural Heritage and Routes, Heritage that comprehend Cultural Heritage, Museums and Visits, and the last section for highlighting the peculiarity of Basque Identity. Each experience has a brief description, contact information and useful links. The organisations promoting the activities are almost entirely private, with one exception of a public entity, and the activities are available throughout the year (87%), although some outdoor activities may be more difficult at certain times of the year and are therefore part of the seasonal offer (13%). Despite the strong preservation and promotion of the Basque language (Euskera), the area of influence of the experiential offer extends to 60% of an international audience, with experiences extending locally in 67% of cases, regionally (Bizkaia) in 27% of cases and finally nationally in 6% of cases, with a single experience. The experiences offered are also quite affordable, with an average price of €6.30, and the need to book in advance or purchase an admission ticket was reported as positive for one-third of the experiences. Fig. 2 illustrates the distribution of the initiatives across the municipalities of the Lea-Artibai area, where each arc represents a different local context. The visualization highlights an uneven territorial distribution of experiences and reveals variations in thematic presence across municipalities, supporting a systemic interpretation of the tourism offer and the identification of spatial imbalances.

From a thematic point of view, the Lea-Artibai area is characterised by a relatively balanced distribution of experiences across different categories, with the exception of "Festivals & Events" and "Food & Wine tastings", which are less represented. In particular, the limited presence of food-related experiences appears inconsistent with the broader regional context, as the Basque Country is internationally recognised for its gastronomic excellence, hosting 24 Michelin-starred restaurants for a total of 34 stars [25]. This mismatch suggests a potential under-exploitation of gastronomy as a strategic asset within the local experiential tourism offer. Fig. 3 highlights the prevalence of nature- and outdoor-based activities within the local tourism offer, reflecting a strong connection between tourism practices and the natural landscape. This pattern confirms the role of environmental resources as a primary driver of the local tourism offer, while also indicating a potential lack of diversification toward other experiential domains.

A complementary perspective is provided by Fig. 4, which presents the aggregated scores across different fields of investigation. The results show a clear emphasis on local development and local business support, indicating that existing initiatives are strongly embedded within the local economic system. Natural resources, mobility, and diversification display moderate scores, suggesting partial integration of environmental and infrastructural dimensions. Conversely, aspects such as digitalisation, inclusivity, food

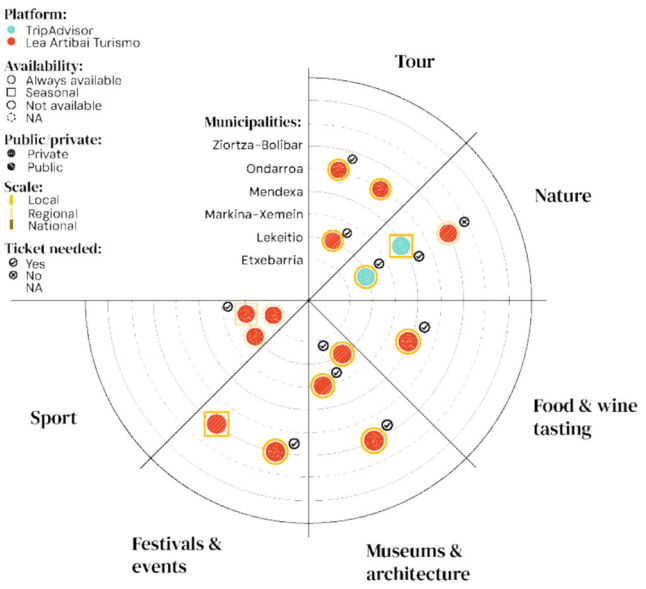

Fig. 2. Radial representation of experiential tourism initiatives across the municipalities of the Lea-Artibai area, showing the distribution of experience categories within the local territorial system (authors' elaboration based on [20])

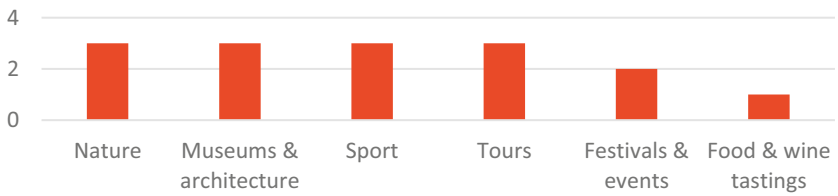

Fig. 3. Distribution of experiential tourism initiatives by type in the Lea-Artibai area, (authors' elaboration based on [20])

accessibility, and accessibility for diverse users remain underdeveloped. This distribution highlights animbalance, where strong local embeddedness is not yet matched by an equally developed set of enabling conditions, particularly in terms of accessibility and digital communication.

4.2 Results On-field Research: Stakeholders' Interviews

To complement and contextualise the findings of the digital platform analysis, a qualitative on-field research phase was conducted in the Lea-Artibai area, in collaboration with the local foundation. A total of five semi-structured interviews were conducted in person, in a one-to-one format, with stakeholders representing different roles within the local tourism ecosystem: tourism office representatives from the municipalities of Ondarroa

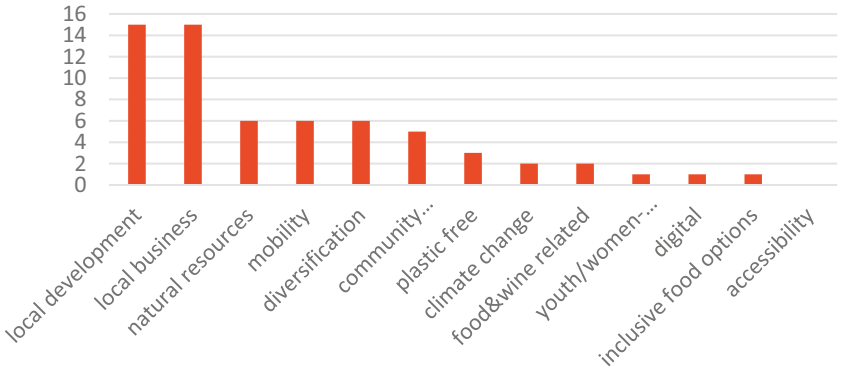

Fig. 4. Total scores of experiential tourism initiatives across the investigated dimensions in the Lea-Artibai area, showing the relative weight of local development, local business, natural resources, mobility, diversification, accessibility, and digital-related aspects (authors' elaboration based on [20]).

and Lekeitio, the tourism manager of Leartibai Fundazioa, and accommodation operators. Each interview was structured around a set of open-ended and semi-structured questions, organised thematically according to the four pillars of sustainability: environmental, social, economic and cultural. Given the diversity of profiles and the voluntary nature of participation, not all questions were addressed in every interview, and respondents were encouraged to prioritise the topics most relevant to their experience and role. Interview duration ranged approximately between 30 and 60 min. The qualitative data collected were subsequently analysed through thematic coding, identifying recurring patterns, emerging challenges and shared opportunities across the different stakeholder perspectives. The analysis highlights a shared orientation toward a territorially grounded and community-oriented model of tourism. Across stakeholders, experiential tourism is closely linked to local identity, with particular emphasis on Basque culture expressed through language, traditions and intangible heritage, alongside natural landscapes, gastronomy and maritime heritage as key attractors. Within this framework, different local strategies emerged through discussions with some key local actors. One of these is Ondarroa, which foregrounds the historical role of women in the port and canning industries as a distinctive experiential narrative, while Lekeitio focuses on maritime culture and gastronomy, with increasing attention to linguistic accessibility and inclusion. At the same time, inland actors such as Antsotegi Hotel illustrate how heritage conservation can be integrated with rural accommodation and active tourism, contributing to a partial redistribution of tourist flows toward less-visited areas.

To interpret the complexity of the local tourism system, the qualitative insights collected through interviews and field observations were organised through a thematic clustering process based on key sustainability dimensions (Fig. 5). Specifically, the identified elements were grouped into four main domains, social, economic, environmental, and cultural, allowing for a structured reading of challenges, opportunities, and ongoing initiatives within the Lea-Artibai area. This clustering approach supports the holistic

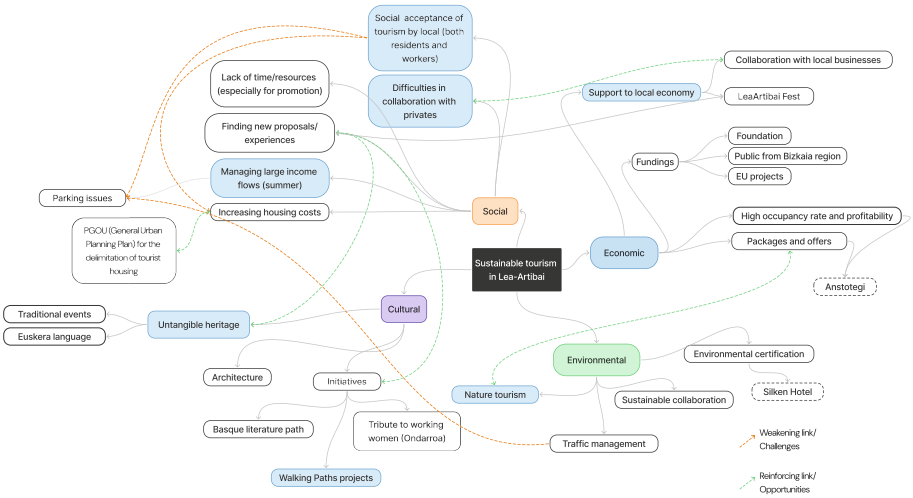

Fig. 5. Key insights mind map, categorised by the four sustainability pillars (authors' elaboration based on [20]).

interpretation of tourism development, highlighting the interconnections between different components of the territorial system and enabling the identification of critical issues and potential leverage points. These mappings reveal a diversified tourism offer, including outdoor activities such as hiking, cycling, canoeing and surfing, alongside cultural experiences and local gastronomy, which aligns with the predominantly domestic visitor profile. Secondary sources further support this alignment: according to the IBILTOUR Ocio 2023 study [26], tourism demand in the Basque Country shows a strong preference for nature-based and active experiences, typically associated with medium-length stays. At the same time, the analysis highlights a set of structural challenges affecting the development of the local tourism system. Governance fragmentation emerges as the most critical issue, as the multiplicity of actors involved, including public administrations, cultural organisations and private operators, generates a diversified but weakly coordinated offer. This condition limits the development of integrated strategies, reduces access to funding opportunities and weakens overall system coherence. Additional criticalities include the management of seasonal peaks, particularly in coastal areas such as Lekeitio and Ondarroa, where summer overcrowding and pressures on housing and mobility infrastructures generate increasing social tensions. Limited sustainable mobility options and an underdeveloped digital communication strategy further constrain the visibility and accessibility of tourism experiences. A central element emerging from the analysis is the strategic role of the walking path network within the territorial system. Across all stakeholder perspectives, these routes are recognised as key infrastructures capable of connecting landscapes, cultural heritage and local communities, enabling the development of distributed and experience-based tourism models. The area includes a network of six main trails crossing coastal and inland areas, among which the Lea Path (GR 38.3, where GR stands for Grande Randonnée, the European long-distance trail classification system [27]) represents a particularly significant case. Extending for

approximately 28 km from Munitibar to Lekeitio, the path follows the Lea River and connects multiple municipalities, integrating natural and cultural points of interest. It is important to acknowledge that participatory approaches carry an inherent risk of reproducing extractivist dynamics if they remain limited to consultation without ensuring tangible benefits for local communities. In the context of Lea-Artibai, this risk is partially mitigated by the institutional role of Leartibai Fundazioa as a locally embedded intermediary organisation with direct accountability to the municipalities it serves. Nevertheless, future implementations of the framework should explicitly consider mechanisms through which local stakeholders can derive concrete advantages from tourism development, whether through governance participation, revenue-sharing models, or community ownership of key assets. The analysis highlights both the potential and the current limitations of this infrastructure. While the Lea Path offers a strong basis for the development of slow and immersive tourism experiences, several infrastructural gaps persist, including irregular maintenance, insufficient signage, lack of service points and limited accessibility through public transport. These issues are not isolated but reflect broader governance challenges, particularly the separation between promotion and maintenance responsibilities, which affects planning capacity and funding allocation. The integration of insights from interviews, visual mappings, on-field observations and secondary sources provides a coherent picture of a territory characterised by high potential but limited systemic integration. The walking path network, and the Lea Path in particular, emerges as a strategic lever for the development of a low-impact tourism model based on slow mobility, local identity and distributed experiences. At the same time, fully activating this potential requires addressing the structural constraints identified, including improved coordination between stakeholders, investment in infrastructure and services, and the development of a coherent communication strategy.

4.3 Strategic Implications for Policy-Design

The findings from both the digital platform analysis and the on-field research converge on a set of structural challenges and opportunities that require targeted strategic intervention [20]. Building on the comprehensive understanding of the Lea-Artibai tourism ecosystem, its assets, challenges, stakeholder dynamics and infrastructural constraints, three interconnected recommendations are proposed. These are specifically oriented toward the sustainable development of the Lea Path as a model for slow, regenerative tourism, and are designed to be scalable to other rural areas facing similar challenges. The recommendations presented in Table 2 are grounded in the empirical findings of both the platform analysis and the stakeholder interviews, and are designed to support policymakers in translating territorial evidence into concrete strategic decisions. As demonstrated by the 2026 Tourism Action Plan recently developed by Leartibai Fundazioa [ref], this type of evidence-based approach can effectively inform local policy processes, contributing to the design of innovative and place-based tourism strategies for rural areas.

R1: Promoting Tourism Awareness through Strategic Communication and Community Engagement A prerequisite for the sustainable development of experiential tourism along the Lea Path is the construction of a shared territorial vision, built through

Table 2. Summary of policy recommendations with implementation parameters (authors' elaboration)

R	Empirical Evidence	Priority	Feasability
R1	Limited international digital visibility (87% DMO only); governance fragmentation; divergence between platform representation and on-field dynamics	Short-term	High — low cost, relies primarily on existing institutional structures and communication tools
R2	Underrepresentation of gastronomy and festivals; seasonal overcrowding in coastal areas; inland areas invisible despite rich territorial assets	Short/ Medium-term	Medium — requires coordination between actors and moderate investment in event design and digital promotion tools
R3	Low scores in accessibility and digital communication; infrastructural gaps along the Lea Path; separation between promotion and maintenance responsibilities	Medium/ Long-term	Low — requires significant investment in physical infrastructure, sensors and institutional coordination across multiple governance levels

the active involvement of local communities and the progressive activation of a coordinated stakeholder network. As emerged from the interviews, the current tourism offer suffers from fragmentation not only at the infrastructural level but also in terms of collective ownership: residents often perceive tourism as an external phenomenon rather than a community-driven process, and collaboration between public entities, private businesses and local associations remains inconsistent and difficult to sustain over time. Addressing this requires targeted communication initiatives, multilingual, place-based and rooted in local narrative, that frame the Lea Path as a resource generating tangible benefits for residents and visitors alike. Participatory processes such as co-design workshops and community mapping events can transform residents from passive recipients into active co-authors of the experience, while simultaneously serving as the entry point for building a structured stakeholder network connecting municipalities, cultural organisations, local businesses and activity providers around a shared development agenda.

R2: Balancing Tourism Flows through Sustainable Event and Territorial Promotion The coastal municipalities of the comarca absorb the vast majority of tourist flows, while inland areas along the Lea Path remain largely invisible to visitors despite their cultural and environmental richness. Addressing this imbalance requires the design of low-impact events and experiential itineraries that activate lesser-known territories and extend tourist stays beyond the summer peak. The existing Leartibai Fest (an annual event engaging over 149 participants that successfully combines local culture, community participation and environmental awareness) represents a proven model that could be expanded into a second annual edition or a series of thematic spin-off formats tied to seasonal rhythms and local traditions. Complementary digital tools, such as the integration of walking route tracks on platforms like Wikiloc or Strava through an official

DMO account, would increase route visibility and connect digital promotion directly to the territorial offer. The introduction of a traveller credential, whether printed or digital, that can be stamped at designated points along the path would further incentivise exploration of the full route, strengthen visitors' emotional connection to the territory and encourage repeat visits.

R3: Enhancing Paths Infrastructure and Services with a Data-Driven Approach One of the most critical barriers to the usability of the Lea Path is the lacking tourist services in its more rural segments, rest areas, water points, bike repair stations, adequate signage and sustainable transport connections to trail access points. Rather than pursuing a uniform infrastructural intervention across the entire route, a targeted, data-informed approach is recommended, focused on the identification of strategic nodes where concentrated investment would generate the highest impact on visitor experience and flow management. This approach involves two complementary tools: the installation of sensors at key points along the path to collect quantitative data on visitor flows, peak passage times and usage patterns; and the organisation of community-led mapping initiatives, to gather local knowledge and co-design the location and nature of service interventions. Wayfinding systems and multilingual signage at key intersections, light infrastructure such as rest stops and shuttle parking areas, and where appropriate, low-impact solar-powered lighting for evening use, would collectively enhance both the accessibility and the experiential quality of the route while minimising environmental disturbance.

5 Conclusions

This paper has investigated how experiential tourism can serve as a strategic lever for the revitalisation of rural inner areas, applying a systemic and data-driven framework to the case of Lea-Artibai in the Basque Country. By integrating digital platform analysis with qualitative field research, the study has produced a multi-layered reading of the local tourism ecosystem, revealing both its structural assets and its persistent gaps.

Three main findings emerge from the research. First, the experience-based tourism offer in Lea-Artibai is strongly locally embedded but weakly internationalised: despite a rich and diverse territorial base, the digital presence of local experiences remains largely confined to the regional DMO platform, with very limited visibility on international aggregators. This limits the region's capacity to attract broader visitor profiles and reduce its dependence on domestic, seasonally concentrated flows. Second, the offer is predominantly nature-based and low-cost, reflecting a genuine alignment between territorial identity and tourism strategy, but also pointing to underexplored dimensions, most notably gastronomy, cultural heritage interpretation and accessible tourism, that could significantly enrich and diversify the experiential proposition. Third, and perhaps most critically, a systematic divergence was identified between the image of Lea-Artibai as constructed through digital platforms and the actual dynamics of the local tourism ecosystem as revealed by stakeholder interviews. Platform-based data tend to foreground the most visible and easily bookable experiences, while the deeper relational, community-based and governance dimensions that shape the quality and sustainability

of the offer remain largely invisible to potential visitors and underrepresented in promotional narratives. Taken together, these findings point to a fundamental need for greater holistic integration, between digital communication and local identity, between governance structures and operational capacity, and between the experiences promoted online and the territorial resources that make them meaningful. The three policy recommendations proposed in this paper, community engagement and stakeholder network activation, flow redistribution through low-impact events and slow mobility, and data-driven infrastructure development, address precisely this integration gap, offering concrete and scalable directions for rural tourism strategy. From a methodological standpoint, the combination of quantitative platform analysis and qualitative field investigation proved particularly effective in capturing the complexity of experiential tourism dynamics in rural contexts. The use of visual mapping tools to synthesise interview findings enabled the identification of relationships and leverage points that would not have emerged from desk research alone. This mixed-method approach, grounded in systemic design principles, offers a transferable framework applicable to other European inner areas facing similar structural challenges.

The study presents some limitations that should be acknowledged. Although the platform analysis was conducted across the six rural areas involved in the SYSTOUR project, this paper focuses specifically on the Spanish case study of Lea-Artibai. As a result, the comparative cross-regional dimension of the broader research is not fully discussed here, which limits the extent to which the findings presented in this paper can be generalised. In addition, the accessibility evaluation focused mainly on physical dimensions, while cognitive, sensory, linguistic, and cultural aspects were not systematically addressed. Furthermore, the qualitative data collected through interviews, while providing rich contextual insights, reflect a specific moment in the ongoing evolution of the local tourism strategy and would therefore benefit from longitudinal validation. Future research could build on this foundation in two complementary directions. In the short term, the framework could be extended to the other five European regions involved in the broader research project, enabling a comparative cross-regional analysis that tests the consistency of the findings and the transferability of the methodological approach across different territorial, governance and cultural contexts. In the longer term, the framework holds potential for application to other rural and inner areas beyond the project's scope, particularly those sharing similar structural challenges such as demographic decline, seasonal tourism concentration and limited digital visibility. Further developments could also integrate economic valuation methods to assess the territorial impact of experiential tourism initiatives, and explore the intersection of walking tourism with adjacent sectors such as agriculture, cultural heritage management and health and wellness, as well as the progressive digitisation of rural walking routes through real-time flow monitoring and user-generated data collection, as promising tools for developing more adaptive and evidence-based governance models for inner-area development.

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