

Harnessing the power of stories: Evaluating complex tourism interventions through a ‘most significant change’ approach

Luigina Jessica Montano^{a,b}, Xavier Font^a, Corinna Elsenbroich^c, Manuel Aleator Ribeiro^{a,d,e,*}

^a School of Hospitality & Tourism Management, Faculty of Arts and Social Science, University of Surrey, Guildford GU2 7XH, UK

^b Research Institute for the Evaluation of Public Policies FBK-IRVAPP, Trento, Italy

^c Computational Modelling in Social and Public Health, MRC/CSO Social and Public Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK

^d School of Tourism and Hospitality, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

^e Research Centre for Tourism, Sustainability and Well-being (CinTurs), Faculty of Economics, Universidade do Algarve, Campus de Gambelas, 8005-139 Faro, Portugal

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the power of the story-based ‘Most Significant Change’ evaluation method to evidence the impacts of a complex sustainable tourism intervention implemented through the cross-border EU-INTERREG ‘EXPERIENCE’ project across six regions on the French-English Channel. The method provides a participatory evaluation framework to capture contextual changes by collecting and analysing personal stories of change considered significant by those directly affected. As intervention-driven changes are often unpredictable and non-linear, the method supports researchers in exploring and learning about unexpected or complex outcomes emerging from the stories. Findings highlight the effectiveness of this narrative approach in capturing complex, unforeseen changes that may not be quantifiable through pre-defined performance indicators. The study contributes to evaluating EU-funded regional development programmes in tourism.

1. Introduction

Policymakers demand robust evidence of the impacts associated to publicly funded interventions, consequently there is a growing need and interest amongst researchers and practitioners for evaluation methods that facilitate learning and evidence-based actions (Ohkubo et al., 2022). Conventional evaluation methods rarely go beyond simple accountability for budget spending and output reporting (Tonkin et al., 2021). Instead, meaningful evaluations should offer learning opportunities that are less about accountability to funders and more about empowering stakeholders (Crinall et al., 2022). Evaluations with useful learning opportunities can become drivers of change and contribute towards the design of better, evidence-based interventions (Ohkubo et al., 2022).

Few tourism studies effectively evaluate the impacts of tourism interventions (Warnholtz, Ormerod, & Cooper, 2022) and these follow a tradition of quantitative impact assessments (e.g., Baral & Rijal, 2022; Kitamura, Karkour, Ichisugi, & Itsubo, 2020) which are useful to evaluate *what* but not *why* or *how* a certain impact was achieved. Practitioners and policymakers are named as the key audience of tourism

research yet very few articles focus on the *why* and *how* of tourism policies (Aguinis, Kraus, Poček, Meyer, & Jensen, 2023). Interventions are complex, highly context-dependent and feature multi-causal moving parts, yet most indicator-based evaluations in tourism fail to account for local knowledge and experiences (Tonkin et al., 2021). The last decade has seen qualitative approaches to evaluation gain significant momentum, particularly because they allow researchers to better grapple with the elements of complexity within an intervention and go beyond the mere reporting back on performance (Guijt, Brouwers, Kusters, Prins, & Zeynalova, 2011; Warne & Thompson, 2022).

This article highlights the need to expand current evaluation approaches and the usefulness of using a ‘Most Significant Change’ story-based technique as a qualitative evaluation tool to complement the use of quantitative indicators when conducting evaluations of complex interventions. This study aims to demonstrate the effectiveness of the ‘Most Significant Change’ technique as a qualitative evaluation tool for complex interventions in the tourism sector. The objectives are three-fold: (1) to adapt and apply the Most Significant Change technique to collect stories from various stakeholders in six regions across the French-English Channel as part of the evaluation of a cross-border EU-funded

* Corresponding author at: School of Hospitality & Tourism Management, Faculty of Arts and Social Science, University of Surrey, Guildford GU2 7XH, UK.

E-mail addresses: l.montano@surrey.ac.uk (L.J. Montano), x.font@surrey.ac.uk (X. Font), c.elsenbroich@glasgow.ac.uk (C. Elsenbroich), m.ribeiro@surrey.ac.uk (M.A. Ribeiro).

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Interregional (Interreg) project; (2) to illustrate how the collected stories can be presented in the final evaluation report; and (3) to discuss the importance of qualitative evaluation methods in understanding how and why an intervention succeeds, and the role of human agency in creating impact. In the literature review, we explore the benefit of integrating qualitative, story-based evaluation approaches, in complex large-scale interventions which are highly engaging (Chouinard & Hopson, 2015) and accessible even to non-evaluation experts (Wrigley, 2008). In the methodology section, we describe the application and adaptation of the Most Significant Change techniques to collect stories from various stakeholders in a cross-border EU-funded Interreg project. The results section illustrates a selection of collected stories and their incorporation into the final evaluation report. Finally, we discuss how qualitative evaluation methods are more complexity-friendly and pose greater emphasis on *how* and *why* an intervention succeeds, and the role of human agency in creating impact (Tonkin et al., 2021; Vanclay, 2012). In addition to simply measuring the extent of change i.e., the *what*, we demonstrate why Most Significant Change is a useful tool to learn from evaluations to design better, context-sensitive policies. This research is needed in the field of tourism interventions to understand why change occurs and how it can be subsequently harnessed (Waters, James, & Darby, 2011).

2. Literature review

2.1. The power of stories in the context of evaluation

Storytelling represents an ancient technique of lesson learning and sense-making familiar to all cultures. Using personal accounts of change narrated by those directly involved in an intervention not only allows to report on outcomes, but it also creates strong links to personal learning experiences that increase credibility and relatability to the project's achievements (Aquino, Lück, & Schänzel, 2022). If we conceive evaluation as a formative exercise to generate knowledge to improve the design of future interventions and disseminate lessons learned along the way, then story-based approaches can be a powerful tool in communicating impact more effectively (Rossetti & Wall, 2017; Wrigley, 2008).

There are many advantages to adopting a story-based approach within an evaluation context (Vanclay, 2015; Zucchini, Carbon, Bosch, & Felloni, 2022). Firstly, it can prompt the interest of non-evaluation experts and foster dialogues with project stakeholders based on outcomes that appear more tangible (Dart & Davies, 2003; Torres-Delgado & Saarinen, 2017; Waas et al., 2014). In addition, outcome-reporting stories offer direct insights into the value of projects for their stakeholders (Ohkubo et al., 2022), as the process of selecting stories to showcase impacts offers a contextualised meaning (Costantino & Greene, 2003; Tonkin et al., 2021). Finally, stories of impact better persuade higher-level management to pursue certain strategic priorities based on the evidence of outcomes achieved than information provided solely through data (Rossetti & Wall, 2017).

2.2. Implementing a story-based approach to understand the impacts of complex tourism interventions

Tourism interventions are generally implemented as part of wider publicly funded programmes to achieve change on various socio-economic and environmental dimensions, and yet its success is measured in economic terms (Abram, 2010). This over-simplification means that much of the wider unseen and unheard impacts go unreported simply *because of* how we conduct evaluations and report on impacts (OECD, 2012), hence more effective tourism policy formulation methods are needed (OECD, 2020). Tourism interventions generate impact on multiple levels and feature elements of emergence and non-linear causality. Interventions that feature a high number of interacting components, a degree of difficulty and uncertainty in the behaviour of those implementing or receiving an intervention, and a

high degree of variability in possible outcomes are usually defined as complex (Petticrew, 2011). This means that it is difficult to predict with certainty how and whether such interventions will 'work' in delivering expected results. The funders, designers and implementers of tourism interventions ought to humbly acknowledge that little control can be exercised over the achievement of desired results (Aguinis et al., 2023).

The type of results one seeks to evaluate determines which evaluation methodology should be used. Mayne (2004) identified two types of results: 1) *outputs*, which refer to products or services directly produced by the projects' activities (e.g., a piece of infrastructure); and 2) *outcomes*, which are the effects of a project's outputs on society (e.g., well-being of residents). Since outcomes of complex interventions are uncertain and emergent, it is unrealistic to report on outcomes by using predetermined quantitative methods and by setting numerical targets as we would for outputs. Whilst the achievement of outputs (often also referred to as deliverables of a project) are within a project's sphere of control, in this paper we refer to outcomes as the change that happens as a consequence of certain outputs. Moreover, an additional distinction however is to be made between outcomes and impacts which are often thought of as synonyms, but where the latter refer to wider, indirect effects of a policy, project, or intervention. The anxiety created by the uncertainty and ambiguity of outcomes often leads to choosing simple logic models and generic performance indicators to prove results, even if they are not appropriate to evaluate nor account for the complex aspects of an intervention (Rogers, 2008).

Another aspect to consider is that change is not always immediate, and hence, identifying plausible indicators to quantify change a-priori is not always effective to report on certain changes (Costantino & Greene, 2003; Mayne, 2004), for example, many community-based tourism interventions aiming to increase capacity of local actors through training. In these cases, stories of training, told by those impacted by it, reveal rich stories about why and how change came about, providing a deeper meaning to quantifiable data on how many training sessions were delivered (Tonkin et al., 2021a; Wrigley, 2008). Moreover, even where change is more visible, such as in infrastructure work, story-based approaches can uncover important unseen narratives around the impact it has had on local livelihoods (Baú, 2016).

The limited availability and application of complexity-aware evaluation methods to report on the impacts of tourism interventions on larger society is an issue raised by government actors, academia, and the industry (Dredge & Jamal, 2015; Dyson & Todd, 2010; Jenkins, Hall, & Mkono, 2014; OECD, 2012; Phi, Whitford, & Reid, 2018; Warnholtz et al., 2022). In complex, large-scale multi-stakeholder tourism interventions, agreeing on pre-established common indicators to report on project outcomes is often problematic (Farrington, Mosse, & Rew, 2005; Stoffelen, 2018). Relational distances and cultural and institutional incompatibilities often constrain the achievement of consistent change across all contexts (Liberato, Alén, Liberato, & Domínguez, 2018) and the longevity of results (Stoffelen, 2018).

2.3. Most significant change

Most significant change is a 'story-based approach' to evaluation (Vanclay, 2015) that uses the collection of individual stories to capture change occurring because of a project through the stories of those impacted by an intervention (Wrigley, 2008). It involves generating and analysing account change from the perspective of individual stakeholders. The story-based technique was devised by Davies and Dart (2005) to make up for the shortcomings of traditional evaluation methods in capturing non-quantifiable change, to engage stakeholders in discussing, analysing, and recording change together. Most Significant Change is a powerful tool to gain a deeper understanding of the difference a project has made from the wider perspective of the local community benefitting from a given intervention (Baú, 2016; Limato, Ahmed, Magdalena, Nasir, & Kotvojs, 2018; Willetts & Crawford, 2007). Most Significant Change prompts stakeholders to share stories which

they value as representative of significant impact over time, which not only provides insight into which changes are valued by project stakeholders, it is also responsive to the ongoing complexities and changes (Dart & Davies, 2003). Dart and Davies refer to it as a ‘dialogical, story-based evaluation tool’ that swaps ‘conventional monitoring against quantitative indicators’ (Dart & Davies, 2003, p. 138).

Most Significant Change is both a monitoring tool, since it occurs throughout the project cycle, and an evaluation tool, as it provides data on project impacts which can be used to assess overall outcomes (Overseas Development Institute, 2009). Based on similar theoretical underpinnings of a Theory of Change framework, where participatory approaches are implemented to identify direct and indirect causal pathways to change (e.g. Montano, Font, Elsenbroich, & Ribeiro, 2023; Warnholtz et al., 2022), Most Significant Change goes beyond reporting on accountability and performance (i.e. reporting on *what* change happened). It allows the researcher to focus more deeply on the so called ‘mechanisms’ of an intervention and on learning how and why the intervention brought about change from the personal accounts of the beneficiaries involved (Tonkin et al., 2021). So far, Most Significant Change has been implemented to evaluate international development programmes (Dart & Davies, 2003; Overseas Development Institute, 2009; Wrigley, 2008; Zucchini et al., 2022) and healthcare interventions (Abodunrin et al., 2020; Crinall et al., 2022; Limato et al., 2018; Ohkubo et al., 2022; Tonkin et al., 2021). It is worth noting that whilst Most Significant Change contributes towards evidencing a projects’ outcomes and wider impact more holistically, it is not intended to be implemented as a stand-alone evaluation tool (Dart & Davies, 2003).

3. Method

3.1. Study context: Implementing Most significant change to evaluate an EU-Interreg project

To the best of the authors’ knowledge, this is the first study in the field of tourism and EU-funded regional development programmes implementing ‘most significant change’ story-based technique as an evaluation tool. We adapted the Most Significant Change technique to complement the evaluation of a cross-border EU-INTERREG project

called ‘EXPERIENCE’, worth €24.5 million. It involved fourteen project partners based in six pilot regions across the French-English Channel: Cornwall, Kent, Norfolk, Brittany, Compiègne and Pas-de-Calais. Partners were a mixture of governmental and non-governmental actors such as businesses, regional councils, Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), charities, and members of the community. A common denominator in all regions of the project was seasonality.

The project aimed to support these pilot regions to adapt and design sustainable tourism products to decrease tourism seasonality. However, it must be highlighted that the aim of the project was not to simply increase visitors during the winter, but to better distribute visitors across all months of the year. The six regions delivered multiple types of activities and events as part of the project, so we needed a context-sensitive tool to build into our evaluation framework, allowing each partner to report on change in their specific area. Activities funded included training on how to create winter tourism experiences, adapting and testing marketing materials and campaigns specifically targeting the low-season, and increasing accessibility of outdoor facilities such as walking and cycle routes.

3.2. Implementation process

Evaluation research took place from 2020 to 2023. This study was carried out following ethics approval from the lead author’s institution (reference number 956732–956714-104,619,498). Our data collection and subsequent analysis followed and adapted the main steps illustrated in previous studies (Crinall et al., 2022; Davies & Dart, 2005), as summarised in Fig. 1.

We implemented Most Significant Change in conjunction with quantitative indicators, following convention (e.g., Crinall et al., 2022; Davies & Dart, 2005), although reporting such quantitative indicators falls outside the scope of this article. The quantitative data reported on visitor numbers, expenditure, and residents’ perception of tourism, while Most Significant Change allowed us to learn more about how change was experienced by project beneficiaries (Baú, 2016; Limato et al., 2018; Willetts & Crawford, 2007).

Stories should be collected by project beneficiaries, clients, or field staff (Dart & Davies, 2003), hence we held training sessions for all

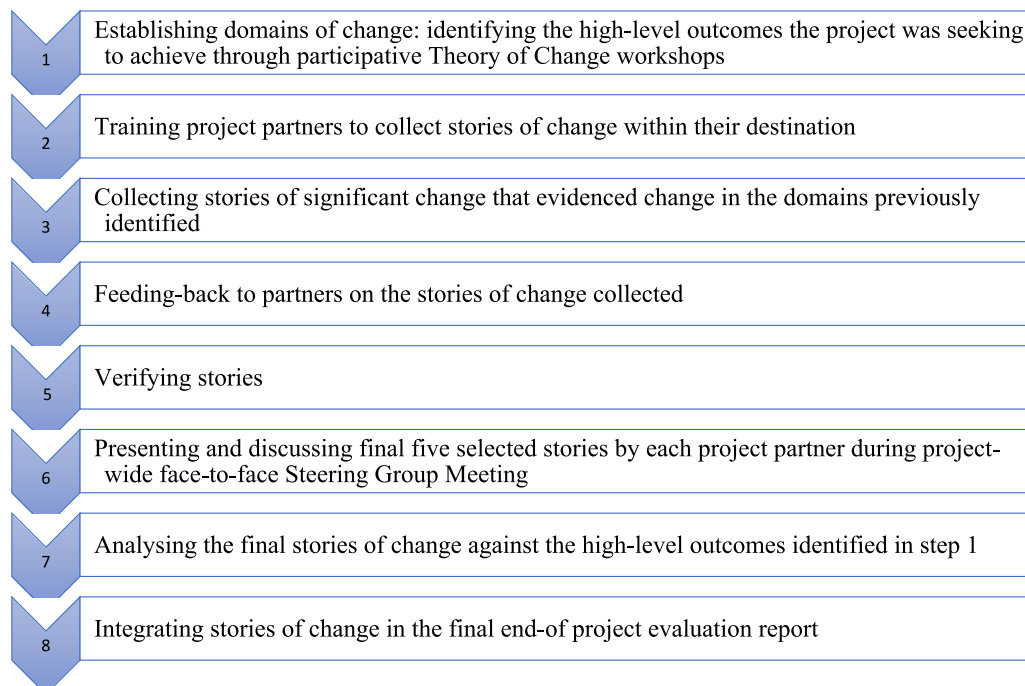


Fig. 1. Summary of Most Significant Change implementation strategy. Author’s own.

fourteen project partners on how to collect stories and what themes the stories should cover (Step 2, Fig. 1). We provided guidelines and questions for partners to follow when collecting the stories of change. For example, we acknowledged that for stories to be remembered, they must follow a logical, standardised sequence; hence we trained partners in story-writing following well-established principles that a story must have a beginning, define relationships, describe a sequence of cause-and-effect events, and finally end by offering insight into some type of learning (Costantino & Greene, 2003; Shaw, Brown, & Bromiley, 1998). We also requested that all storytellers include a 'top tip' section to share any lessons learned from their approach, to ensure policy learning and transfer.

We required partners to collect at least one story for each of the domains in which we had promised to deliver change to our funders, however, stories were not limited only to these domains of change. Once a first round of stories had been collected, we provided feedback either verbally during online meetings, or on the share-point documents containing the selected stories. Through a continuous dialogue, we supported project partners in writing-up and editing their stories to be included in the final end-of-project evaluation. The project partners had already developed close ties and were more familiar with the project's beneficiaries, such as businesses, community groups and individuals who could be the potential narrators of the stories of change. This made project beneficiaries more approachable and comfortable in telling their stories.

Although it is not a requirement identified in the Most Significant Change guide devised by Dart and Davies (2003), domains of change were established through participatory Theory of Change workshops in which we identified with the partnership, which were the high-level outcomes the project hoped to achieve, as well as inputs, activities and outputs that would be implemented towards the achievement of identified outcomes (Step 1). We found this step particularly useful to gain a comprehensive understanding of the *what* of the project and to create a shared vision of change (see Montano et al., 2023). Once domains of change were identified, and project officers were trained (Step 2), we asked each partner to collect stories of change (Step 3) and select a final five stories that responded to the aims of our funded project: increased well-being of local community; increased accessibility of tourism products; increased capacity of businesses to offer low-season tourism experiences; and increased sustainability within tourism offer. Each partner received training from the evaluation team and guidelines on what the structure of each story be:

- A title
- An individual who benefited from the project's activities (e.g., a business owner)
- A brief overview of what their business does
- A description of what changed/ what they do differently because of the project (e.g., as a result of training/ receiving a specific grant)
- A top tip, i.e., a lesson learned they wished to pass on from their experience, to help
- three to 5 photos: one of the individuals, at least two showing the business activity.

Once partners were clear on *what* a story was, members of the team who had undergone training collected stories following this guide. We provided feedback and worked collaboratively throughout the collection phase on improving the structure and coherence of stories, when necessary, through an iterative process. In this way, we implemented a participatory bottom-up approach which saw partners proactively collect and select their 'best' stories of change (see Fig. 2 below), showing the funder the richness and diversity of outcomes and wider impact achieved through the project.

Stories were selected using a three level transparent process of hierarchical selection (Dart & Davies, 2003): 1) the EXPERIENCE project officers working on the evaluation work-package in each region; 2) through an iterative process, we, the research team leading the evaluation work-package provided feedback to refine the stories collected (Step 4); 3) the final collection of stories was presented and discussed at a steering group meeting to ensure selection was fully representative of the project's overall outcomes. The steering group meeting was held in Pas-de Calais (France) in October 2022, five months before the project ended. We did not opt to use a selection panel for the choice of stories as has been done in previous studies (see Crinall et al., 2022). Instead, during a two-hour face-to-face workshop we asked a representative from each partner to present their final five case-studies to learn from each other about change that had happened, rather than to vote for which story was *most* representative of the projects' change (Step 6). Stories from all project partners were given the same level of importance and space if they were representative of changed attributable to the project. This was done to avoid resentment or jealousy amongst partners, and to foster a more formative discussion to learn from what other partners had achieved.

To provide a holistic understanding of what the stories of change collected told us about the project's wider impacts, the lead author of this study also conducted a secondary analysis of the stories against the

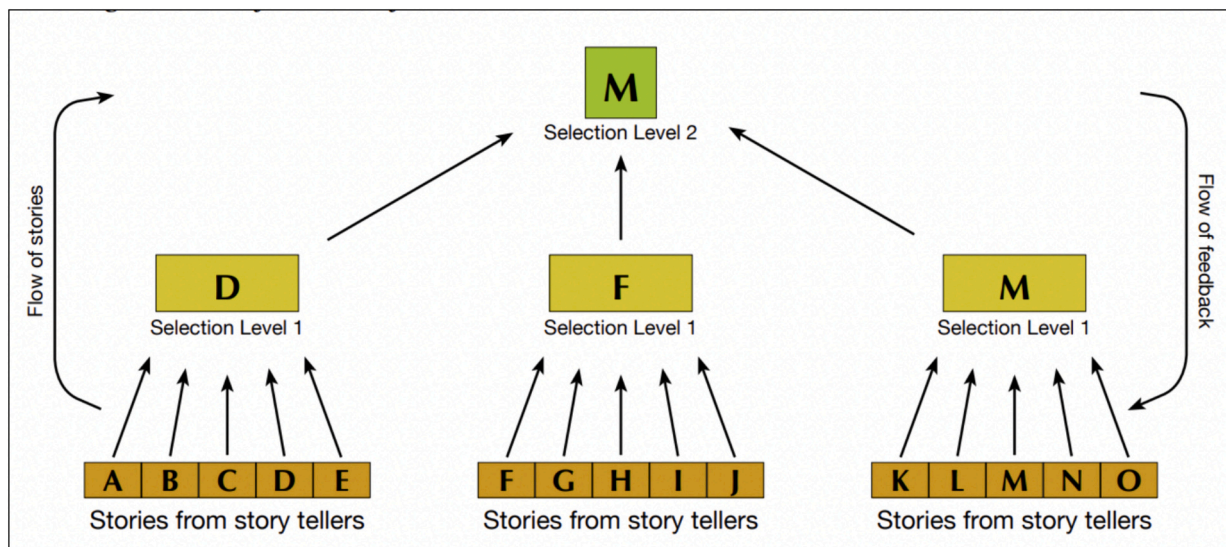


Fig. 2. Flow of Stories Most Significant Change. Source: Davies and Dart (2005).

initial high-level outcomes identified at the beginning of project implementation (Step 7). Themes were identified across the entire set of case studies. For example, who the stories came from; how partners accounted for impacts; what type of impacts were deemed most meaningful. Although this step is not critical when implementing Most Significant Change, it was extremely useful to further legitimise and add rigour to the process. This step was less participatory and was done by the research team through a manual inductive analysis of the 38 case studies selected. Finally, the research team wrote an end-of-project evaluation report titled ‘Best Practice Guide’ featuring the stories collected from project partners along with lessons learned from the process (Step 8). We ensured that stories from all project partners were featured. This manual was free of charge and made fully accessible on the project’s website for anyone to download and use for inspiration to take a similar approach.

Describing the results of an Most Significant Change evaluation is a difficult task. Unlike other methods of evaluation which reduce the complexity of outcomes and impacts achieved by project partners into numbers and percentages, Most Significant Change aims to preserve the element of richness and individuality of each story. Dissecting and summarising the latter under the label of ‘final results’ would go against the ethos of this evaluation method. Studies adopting a Most Significant Change approach typically discuss results in subsections that classify themes that emerged from the stories, integrating these with direct quotes from the storytellers (e.g., Henry et al., 2022; Tonkin et al., 2021). We adapted this approach but instead of using quotes, we integrated some examples of the stories collected, as they were told by the storytellers, as they feature in the ‘Best Practice Guide’. We detail the impact that our Most Significant Change evaluation had on the project, and on how we reported on impact.

4. Findings

The outcome evaluation question we sought to answer through collecting stories of most significant change was “How did ‘Experience’ contribute towards the creation of a more authentic, accessible, experiential, low-season tourism offer in pilot regions of the project”. After a 12-month iterative data collection process, we collected approximately 60 stories. Of these, 38 were selected to feature in the ‘Best Practice Guide’, a project legacy document [link to be inserted after peer-review] told by local business owners or individuals who had used their skills to offer their own tourism experience (22), and from staff within the councils and destination management organisations implementing the project (16).

Below, Table 1 summarises the main themes and the overall changes that emerged from the stories, as well as the lessons learned for each domain of change. Amongst the themes highlighted, we would like to draw attention to the theme ‘collaboration’. Unlike the other themes, which correspond largely to the domains of change established at the beginning of project implementation (Step 1, Fig. 1), this theme was an emergent domain of change. Nevertheless, many of the stories we collected highlighted that the collaboration and networking amongst local businesses part was an important legacy brought about by the project’s activities that enabled significant change to happen in how they had offered and marketed their tourism offer up until now, as exemplified in the story in Fig. 3 below.

4.1. Making sustainable tourism more tangible and achievable

The main aim of the project was to promote a sustainable low-season tourism offer, through training and funding opportunities to better equip local businesses and infrastructure in pilot regions. Transitioning to sustainable forms of tourism is a vague, often overwhelming concept which sounds expensive, and the complexity of which often dissuades stakeholders from acting. We found that collecting stories of change helped make this concept more tangible. We found that the stories

Table 1
Summary of themes and learnings from stories of most significant change collected from EXPERIENCE. Author’s own, adapted from Crinall et al. (2022).

Theme	Changes	Lessons Learned
Business self-efficacy	Confidence to open in the low-season; confidence to start own business; confidence to open-up business to visitors and offer workshops and visits.	Look at your offer and identify aspects of it that can be better in winter and promote those aspects to visitors. Include winter photography of your offer, do not under-sell the low-season as second best, enhance the unique elements of the experience in the low-season.
Sustainability	Choosing local suppliers; repurposing existing infrastructure; creating year-round revenue; attracting cycle-friendly visitors and people who travel less far-afield.	A sustainable tourism offer is achievable for everyone through small, cost-effective incremental changes.
Accessibility	Accessible outdoor facilities; accessible experiential activities; inclusive photography showcasing accessibility.	Work with interest groups and those who benefit from accessibility to ensure the changes you make are well-targeted to their needs.
Local’s well-being	Infrastructure build or refurbished with locals in mind; artwork and itineraries co-designed with locals; working with locals to promote natural and cultural assets.	Involve your locals when designing spaces and tourism experiences so that they can benefit from a tourism intervention as much as potential visitors. Your offer will be automatically more authentic.
Collaboration	Business networking events; new packaged experiences; support system.	Don’t be afraid of collaborating with other businesses. Collaboration is crucial to learn from one another, increase your own creativity, offer better experiences.

played an important role in integrating and more importantly validating local knowledge and lived experiences. Fig. 4 features a sail sewing business who decided to offer workshops to repurpose sail materials and teach participants how to make bags out of them. It is a prime example of how a small independent business used its skills to create an additional revenue stream whilst also offering an experiential activity to locals and visitors. Whilst sustainability is not advertised directly, it lies at its core. In this sense, the use of stories to evidence impact contributed towards changing the narrative of sustainability as something out of reach or too complex for ordinary people to achieve, into simple, cost-effective hacks that are relatively easy to implement.

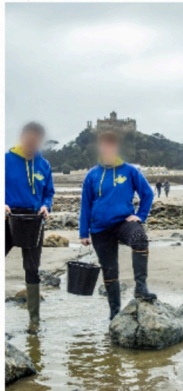
As is also highlighted in the story in Fig. 5 below, the findings show that Most Significant Change is particularly powerful in unleashing local knowledge to collect evidence of impact and opportunities to reflect collectively. It is the small actions and transitions like the ones told by the stories we collected that help integrate the concept of sustainability in tourism as something everyone can slowly contribute towards.

4.2. Powerful stories by members of the community

Most Significant Change grants evaluators the opportunity to permeate beneath the surface of what a project achieved, to learn about who are the people who delivered the change and how people were impacted by it. Most Significant Change allowed us to pose greater emphasis on the pivotal role of human agency in delivering change.

By joining a local network, we were able to realise our ambition to adapt our existing product to fit a different coastal area of Cornwall

Dr *NAME SURNAME* is the co-founder of the *PLACENAME* Project



Our tip

If you want to expand your business in a new location, seek out the local networks. By entering these groups, you will create new partnerships and collaborations. Make sure to facilitate those contacts early and set up a good working relationship with landowners and other businesses close by.

What we do

The *PLACENAME* project is a not-for-profit community interest company (CIC), passionate about connecting people of all ages and backgrounds to the incredible wildlife found around our coastline. We currently run our rockpool safaris in Falmouth and Plymouth and have been looking to expand our offer to attract new customers in another coastal location in Cornwall.

How we do it

I took part in an EXPERIENCE product testing session to create a new or adapted experience. As part of this session, we discussed the initial obstacles with setting up the safari in a new location, with one major task being to obtain permission from the landowner to ensure the sessions could take place.

We were able to gain permission to test out the session at *PLACENAME* located in Mounts Bay. This unique site is home to an ancient underwater volcano accessible at low tide on Marazion beach.

Once all the permissions were in place, we invited local businesses and individuals to test out our rockpool safari in this new location. This helped us adapt our product and has expanded our network.

The support provided by EXPERIENCE has allowed us to adapt our offer, connect and develop new potential activities in the Marazion area with local partners and also gain valuable feedback from testing it out with a group of local businesses and organisations.



Fig. 3. Story illustrating benefits of collaborating with other close by businesses to offer low-season experiences. Author's own (2023).

We turned our business into an experiential local crafts workshop

NAME SURNAME, entrepreneur and craftswoman of the micro enterprise *NAME OF BUSINESS*



Our tips:

Don't be afraid to exchange knowledge with people from other fields, and put yourself and your business out of your comfort zone. Exchanging ideas pushes you to develop your creativity.

There is no risk in leaving your comfort zone and opening the doors of your business. Meeting people while remaining humble is the element that will make you and your business progress and evolve in your projects.

Without others, we are nothing.

What we do

After being trained by ***, master sailmaker in Carantec in Finistère, I started my own business designing, manufacturing and repairing sails. Since 2004, we have been making custom-made sails for caravels, racing boats and houseboats. We have since diversified our catalogue by giving a second life to sails by recycling them into bags, poufs, hammocks, deckchairs, etc.

Today, our daily routine is essentially carried out on a raised floor, 9 by 6 metres, specially fitted out for cutting and assembling sails.

How we do it

On the occasion of the first edition of the Economic Tourism and Know-How Week in Brittany in October 2021, we opened our doors to the public offering a workshop of sail sewing.

Under my supervision, participants are all immediately hands-on involved in making their own bag from old sails. Following the success of this event, we decided to develop use this format to offer 4-hour workshops to locals and visitors in the low season.

With a colleague of mine, we also integrated a section on how to make sailor knots, to give an even more immersive experience in the world of sailing whilst making the bags.

Most of our work is done in the spring and summer. This is the tourist season, but also the season for offshore races. There is less work in the low season, so we use this time to offer experiential workshops.

We took advantage of the Economic Tourism and Know-How Week, initiated by the Brittany Region, to open our doors to the public for the first time and test our sail sewing experience idea. The winter season is ideal to propose these workshops, the participants are sheltered in a calm space and yet open to the horizon.

Participants learn to design objects by repurposing materials specifically designed to be used out at sea, some sails being donations from the biggest regattas and ocean races in Europe such as the Vendée Globe for example.

We also offer locally sourced teas and refreshments during breaks between two cuts.

Setting-up these workshops has enabled us to share our business more widely with the general public and beyond.

We have also developed a collaboration with a sewing training school, trainees now benefit from our know-how to learn and discover other alternative routes in the sail sewing business.



Fig. 4. Story illustrating the sustainability aspect of a low-season only experience. Author's own (2023).

Storytelling helps highlight how without people, no project activity or funding would be able to achieve any impact. This emerged clearly during the plenary discussion with project partners (Step 6, Fig. 1)

where the elements which constituted *most significant change* to them were found in the stories told by members of the community. Whether the stories were about increasing accessibility, well-being of locals, or

We use our local assets and history to introduce visitors to a hidden gem of Roscovite culinary heritage

Brother and sister *NAMES & SURNAMES*



What we do

Starting from a vegetable plant which is a "commonplace product" in French cuisine, we propose to discover the stages of culture and history which have influenced the town of Roscoff, but also to forge links between Brittany and a large part of Great Britain.

Through numerous experiences to be lived on site and online, we offer a dive into the local know-how and an experiential journey with passionate people who have made it their profession since 1850.

How we do it

We offer visitors the opportunity to meet a Roscoff PDO onion producer and offer various experiences. We organise visits to the property and give explanations on the cultivation, the lifecycle of this plant throughout the seasons and how it differs from other onions. Tasting tips as well as a recipe booklet and storage recommendations are also shared with visitors.

We teach the mastery of techniques such as cleaning and braiding that have been passed down through generations. We give onion braiding classes which are always a convivial moment to share with our visitors.

Throughout the experience, we offer the most curious an immersion in the history of the "Johnnies". The Johnnies are Breton farmers who started crossing the Channel as soon as the Continental Blockade was lifted in the middle of the 19th century. The first men loaded their jigs with vegetables and made the journey from Roscoff to Plymouth.

The Covid crisis led us to change the way we deliver our products. Firstly, we have developed a crowdfunding service which allows visitors to adopt a plot of onions from our property and receive their crop of Roscoff PDO onions at home. A newsletter of the crop with photos ensures that the link is maintained over time. Then, we launched our online shop for our customers and a system of drive to the farm was also created.

Finally, every month during the Roscoff onion season (September to April) we travel to Paris to deliver to restaurant customers by bike (and play Johnnie) in order to reduce our carbon footprint and strengthen the links between Producers and Restaurateurs.

Fig. 5. Story illustrating the power of local knowledge to collect evidence. Author's own (2023).

businesses' self-efficacy and low-season marketing strategy and presence on social media platforms, all partners agreed that the stories that came from the people were the most powerful.

By emphasising the role of human agency in delivering change, we found that Most Significant Change provided richness to the quantitative

evidence collected in parallel. Fig. 6 is a prime example of this. Before this story was shared, we had recorded that 112 businesses had received the Cycling-UK cycle-friendly accreditation through the project. However, it was the story below that gave meaning and context to what the receipt of this accreditation meant to a social enterprise and how it

We got a cycle-friendly accreditation to attract more cycle visitors to our social enterprise café

NAME SURNAME, CEO

We are a Kent-based charity that supports adults with learning disabilities. We provide day care services for around 150 students on two sites in the beautiful *PLACENAME* near Canterbury.

What we do

The *PLACENAME* day care services are offered at two skills centres at *PLACENAME* and *PLACENAME*, located close by each other in an area of outstanding natural beauty.

Through enjoyable and productive work in the local community and in our vineyard and *PLACENAME* café, complemented by a broad range of creative and educational activities, our students develop essential life skills and the confidence to make their own choices, both large and small. This approach applies equally to our staff, and we encourage them to develop their own skills and experience.

How we do it

To raise additional revenue to fund the quality and breadth of services we seek to deliver, we have developed our own social enterprises.

The garden centre and café are both limited companies owned by the *CHARITY NAME*. We serve homemade meals with vegetables grown in our garden centre and produce only from local suppliers. From our gift show you can buy arts and crafts made by our students and our own sparkling and still wine made from the vineyard overlooked by the café.

Through EXPERIENCE we have achieved the Cycling UK accreditation of cyclist friendly café. The accreditation and training we received allows us to attract more cycle visitors. Any surplus generated by the two operations is reinvested to support our work with students.

Importantly, both provide work opportunities for students, as well as selling what they make and grow.

Our tips

Celebrate and bring back to life existing assets. Think about how your business can give back to the local community. Choose local suppliers and make sure to include the needs of your locals as well as those of visitors to ensure you maximise impact.



Fig. 6. Story exemplifying the importance of collaborating with social enterprises to deliver community impact. Author's own (2023).

impacted on the lives of those who work there. The story highlights how it is the *people* who have the power to use project activities and funding to create positive change. The existence of a cycle-friendly accreditation scheme alone is not enough to produce that positive change within a community. Moreover, it shows how by choosing the right type of businesses to support and collaborate with, councils and DMOs can play a decisive role in creating a legacy and positive impact through social interventions.

Fig. 7 further illustrates how a story provided richness and relatability to quantitative data. All partners had committed to making 33% of tourism products and itineraries accessible. This percentage, however, does not provide information on how accessibility was achieved nor any context on how to best to approach the task. All our stories detailing improvements to accessibility of infrastructure, itineraries and experiences include tips which provide a contextualised meaning to how one may go about improving accessibility within their context by adapting our approach to accessibility improvement. This story highlights how working with interest groups who are directly affected by change is essential to improve accessibility and illustrates that creating change directly *with* those involved ensures that funding is better targeted, better spent and truly responds to the need an intervention is seeking to address.

4.3. Learning to better evidence impact

When we introduced the use of stories to complement the quantitative evaluation of project results, partners were on board and open to experimenting with this unconventional approach, even if it was new to all. After holding individual training sessions (Step 2, Fig. 1), we found that initially most partners struggled to fully integrate the human aspect within the stories, over-emphasising the *what*, i.e., the activities, rather than the *who* and the *how* behind the change. This was not surprising, since partners had been used to reporting so far were long lists of trainings provided, itineraries designed, and infrastructure work funded. Instead, we had asked them to go back to those who had benefitted from

project activities to tell their story.

The iterative process of collecting and analysing stories of change saw stakeholders working together to discuss and interpret qualitative data and make judgements on which aspects constituted significant change that were attributable to the project. Following the first round of story collection, during the two-hour workshop (Step 6, Fig. 1), feedback was provided on individual stories presented by each partner and in this instance, some important learning took place. At the end of the session, the project manager commented:

‘This session was great! it really brought to life what impact EXPERIENCE has actually had...we get so caught up in budget lines and outputs lists... it is hard to know how what each partner is doing is making a difference in people’s lives. I think the people and photos make impact so much more meaningful [...] It’s great to see so many partners being proactive with this! Thank you for this, I really need to get my team working to collect some good stories now! Some of the ones we saw today have made ours look so poor, but I get it now, I think next phase will be easier!’.

Because of the workshop and feedback, we began to receive new and revised stories. The review process was a useful learning opportunity for partners who became eager to improve stories to better capture impact. Instead of stating just *what* the project activities had been, the stories became increasingly more nuanced and personalised. The following collection of stories became much more focused on *who* was behind the change and *why* that change was significant rather than *what* change had been achieved, demonstrating that partners had upskilled their capacity to conceptualise and capture meaningful impact from the project. Moreover, we found that partners began to understand how stories with a clear protagonist were more powerful in demonstrating impact and easier to resonate with, as the ones shown in Figs. 8 and 9.

Both stories show two strong female protagonists who share a passion for making a difference, even if in different contexts and roles. In Fig. 8, we hear the story of a female who benefited from EXPERIENCE to use her skills and start her own business, empowering people with mobility issues to explore nature and the outdoors. In Fig. 9, a member

We made changes to our experience to make it accessible

NAME & SURNAME is the Operations Manager at ***PLACENAME***

What we do

PLACENAME was the last mine to work the famous St Just Mining District, the site of the largest number of undersea tin and copper mines in the world!

Today ***PLACENAME*** is a family friendly, year-round, multi award-winning heritage attraction and museum. Our rich mining history set in the wild and rugged landscape on the North Atlantic Coast makes ***PLACENAME*** must visit location within the Cornish Mining World Heritage Sites. The site is brought to life with a real underground experience, poignant areas of the site left unchanged, machinery demonstrations, interactive exhibits, and stories from tour guides recalling their time working at ***PLACENAME***. Extensive restoration of the site has taken place since it reopened as a museum in 1993, this year in particular the ***SITE NAME*** has been restored and will be reopened to the public in early 2023.

How we do it

We created the ***PLACENAME*** 360 VR tour – a pioneering 360-degree virtual reality tour, which opened up parts of the site that can be harder to access due to their industrial nature. The VR Tour is provided to improve access to Geever.

The VR “tour”, viewed through an Oculus headset, gives access to parts of the eighteenth century mine-workings and twentieth century mill, in their breath-taking setting upon and beneath cliffs near Land’s End, for people who would not otherwise get to enjoy all ***PLACENAME*** has to offer. The tour gives a chance for even more visitors from far and wide to experience some of the most impactful and engaging parts of a visit to ***PLACENAME***.



Fig. 7. Story that provides richness and relatability to quantitative data of Most Significant Change from ‘Experience’ project. Author’s own (2023).

I offer nature walks to disabled ramblers

NAME SURNAME, CEO of *BUSINESS NAME*

What we do

Since I became no longer able to enjoy the countryside by walking, I became familiar with exploring on an all terrain mobility scooter. I like to meander off the beaten track and overcome obstacles along the way and, with the right equipment and experience, this opens up more opportunities for disabled ramblers to discover.

I established my business *BUSINESS NAME*. I wish to share and promote the freedom to connect with nature and encourage others to do so, whatever the ability.

How we do it

I joined the EXPERIENCE project Experience Makers programme. They helped me focus my business idea to offer nature walks to disabled ramblers. I applied for equipment through the EXPERIENCE business grant and was able to purchase a wireless audio tour guide system, long reachers and magnifying glasses, and rollator.

My experiences are featured on the *PLACENAME* website where you can click through to my page to book events. Thanks to funding, I am currently able to offer free, safe and accessible routes for guided, interactive nature walks for people with disabilities and impairments.

EXPERIENCE invited me to talk at their conference about accessibility and widening participation which enabled me to voice my thoughts on widening participation and influence others to not let disability be a barrier to the enjoyment of life enhancing connection with nature.



EXPERIENCE

European Regional Development Fund



Our tips

Find opportunities to involve those who benefit from your experience in all aspects of your project. They can bring great insight to your work.

Fig. 8. Story showcasing how Experience empowered locals to start their own business through access to training and funding. Author's own (2023).

We created a legacy: artwork that empowers the locals and triggers a sense of place

NAME SURNAME— Former *ROLE SPECIFICATION* Officer at Cornwall Council

What we do

We have learned that commissioning art that is inclusive and engages our residents is key to increase everyone's participation in culture. Our latest example is 'Gwelen', co-created by artist Emma Smith and residents of West Penwith.

How we do it

'Gwelen' is a site-specific artwork made for and by the local community. The artwork is made up of 85 sculptures along the coastal path between Marazion and Penzance. Named Gwelen - gwel means rod, pole, wand and gweles is to see – the artwork is an invitation to rest and imagine the ancient, submerged forest hidden in Mounts Bay, an enchanting phenomenon that is rarely seen, but occasionally uncovered at very low tides.

Each sculpture was tailor-made to support the poses and measurements of over 600 residents who contributed ideas on how they would like to sit or stand whilst pausing along the coastal path.

To create long-lasting place-making, as part of the art commission, the artist ran an ambitious engagement programme within the local community.

This included talks, open studio events, foraging and woodworking workshops. Contributors to the designs include residents, students, parents and community groups and individuals who responded through an open call. Once installed, each participant was sent a map with a number, showing where 'their' sculpture is along the trail.

This unique approach has ensured the artwork's long-lasting legacy, creating a sense of ownership within the local community.



EXPERIENCE

European Regional Development Fund



Our tips

Carefully consider who sits on the selection panel for a public art commission. When writing the brief/tender, build in social engagement as essential to the making and delivery of the artwork.

Fig. 9. Story illustrating the importance of developing the local community when designing artwork. Author's own (2023).

of staff from a destination where over-tourism is exacerbating the host-guest relationship was eager to use EXPERIENCE funding to co-create spaces and artwork that involved and empowered the local community, as an attempt to start rebuilding a healthier approach to tourism where locals come first. These examples show how stories provide localised voices within a community and how when people are empowered to tell their own story of what success looks like, even if it

differs from the norm, we are exposed to richer, diverse, and inclusive ideas around impact.

5. Discussion

This study answers calls for the use of qualitative approaches to evaluate the wider, often indirect impacts of projects, policies and

interventions implemented in the field tourism (Stoffelen, 2018; Van-clay, 2015) and provides a holistic understanding of (1) the ‘unreported’ impacts associated to tourism interventions in the local communities in which they are implemented; (2) the role of story-based techniques in empowering project partners to own the evaluation and showcase change which is meaningful in their context; (3) the advantages of implementing story-based evaluation methods as a means to engage with policy actors for more sustainable tourism policies that enhance benefits for locals; and (4) the challenges faced by small local authorities and tourism organisations when implementing sustainability frameworks to evaluate tourism interventions (Fig. 10).

The findings of this research concur with studies discussing the need to distinguish between different types of accountability and learning in

evaluation (e.g., Lumino & Gambardella, 2020; Regeer, de Wildt-Liesveld, van Mierlo, & Bunders, 2016; Reinertsen, Bjørkdahl, & McNeill, 2022). Impact evaluations of social interventions are organised favour ‘upward accountability’ (i.e. towards funders/ taxpayers) rather than what Regeer et al. (2016) have defined as downward accountability (towards beneficiaries) and horizontal accountability (towards other actors involved in the implementation of an intervention). Moreover, the currently favoured evaluation approaches create few learning opportunities, both in terms of ‘upward learning’ (towards policy development) and ‘horizontal learning’ (at a project level) (Reinertsen et al., 2022, p. 371). Building upon how previous authors have distinguished between the various levels of accountability and learning through evaluation, findings from this study suggest that participatory,

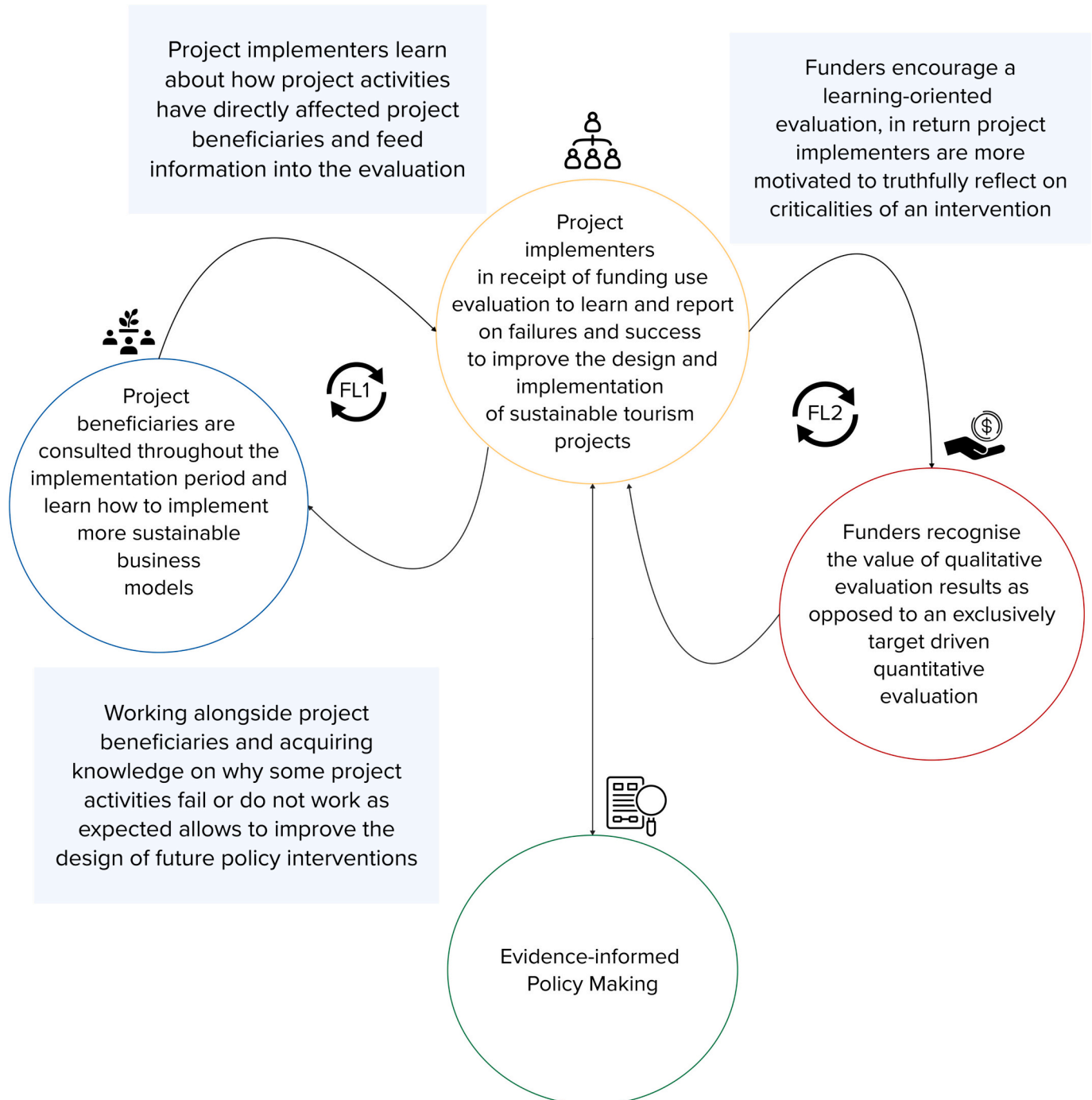


Fig. 10. Three dimensions of change through learning from evaluations. (Source: author's own, 2023).

complexity-aware evaluation approaches can set foster both accountability and learning at different levels and as two concepts complementary to one another. By encouraging an approach to downward and horizontal accountability, participatory approaches such as Most Significant Change also incentivise horizontal and upward learning, making accountability frameworks more responsive and iterative to inform policy decisions locally (upward learning), as summarised in Fig. 9 below.

Fig. 9 distinguishes three different dimensions of learning and two crucial feedback loops (FL1 and FL2) influencing learning and change that occur because of participatory approaches to evaluation such as Most Significant Change. First, at the level of project implementers (e.g., councils, DMOs, charities) who learn to collect purposeful data throughout the project implementation period by also involving project beneficiaries (e.g., through stories of change from the businesses involved in the project and so on), and use the data to better understand why and how certain activities worked better than others and reflect on criticalities towards the end of the implementation period. This dimension is crucial for the creation of locally produced and grounded knowledge which encourages reflexive evaluation (Verwoerd, Klaassen, & Regeer, 2021). Learning feedback loops between the project implementer and the project beneficiaries throughout the evaluation process in turn create both a sense of downward and horizontal accountability.

Fig. 9 then shows how a second dimension of learning also happens at a project beneficiary level (e.g., local businesses, members of the community), who learn how to implement more sustainable business models through project activities such as training and one-to-one consultations organised by project implementers and at the same time, inform the evaluation by recounting first-hand how they were impacted by the intervention and how they experienced change. The type of knowledge around how and why an intervention worked within a certain context, finally (and wishfully) should raise important questions about what constitutes rigour and evidence of impact within evaluations, challenging current hierarchies of knowledge within evaluation (Aston, Roche, Schaaf, & Cant, 2022), accounting for a third layer of learning. When reviewing the final project evaluation report, funders should recognise the added value of complementing evaluation reports with qualitative data, which accompany the quantitative reporting and provide context and explanation to the wider impact brought about by the project.

Most Significant Change allows to conduct a rich, local-scale analysis of project outcomes and wider impact to complement quantitative data. Multiple studies have highlighted the need for evaluation methods that go beyond generic pre-determined indicators, are sensitive to the context and useful to inform local policy (Davies, 2012; Farrington et al., 2005; Liberato et al., 2018; Peeters et al., 2018; Stoffelen, 2018; Twining-Ward, Messerli, Villascusa, & Sharma, 2021; Willetts & Crawford, 2007). In response to this, we demonstrated that MSC is a practical tool to collect rich, context-sensitive qualitative data, representative of the variety of impacts achieved, the provides a better context and understanding to quantitative measurements. Most Significant Change allows researchers to go behind the numbers that have been achieved, by getting at the stories that explain how that degree of change was achieved and how it was experienced by beneficiaries. Partners became more responsive and appreciated the approach to evaluation offered by Most Significant Change through storytelling, along with the freedom in reporting what they considered as most significant. The stories shown in Figs. 6 and 7 offer good examples of the complementarity of stories with quantitative data. By integrating stories about how accessibility was, we were able to contextualise what improving accessibility by 33% meant, and report on wider impacts that indicator-based evaluation methods would not have picked-up on (Limato et al., 2018). We learned that Most Significant Change is a rigorous evaluation method that allows going beyond reporting solely on *what* had been achieved, complementing that information with stories of *how* and *why* that impact was achieved.

Most Significant Change helps unpack the hidden mechanisms and

generally ‘unreported’ impacts of an intervention. Previous studies have highlighted the complementarity of quantitative and qualitative evaluation methods to evaluate sustainable development, as it is impossible to measure human experience through quantitative measurements alone (Vancly, 2015; Waas et al., 2014). We uncovered a wide-range of ‘unquantifiable’ impacts and showed how to evidence and report them using a story-based approach. Partners often had limited business data to demonstrate tangible results of the project in terms of their revenue streams, but the stories provided evidence about how the creation of partnerships was an important factor in building business resilience (an indirect impact arising from the number of business networking events and training, for example). In line with previous studies, we showed how power *with others* contributed positively to the livelihoods of the businesses benefitting from the project (Aquino et al., 2022; Dolezal & Novelli, 2020), who felt stronger and more resilient because of being brought together through the project. Partners acknowledged that surveys to measure businesses’ revenue streams or visitor expenditure alone would not have provided the data to evidence the breadth of impacts. Instead, the data collected using MSC produced powerful insights as they featured a name, a face, and a story of how the project impacted on the lives of businesses in the local communities involved in the project.

By involving those benefitting from the project’s interventions, Most Significant Change provides a voice to learn about impact directly from the local community, allowing a participatory approach to evaluation. It is pivotal to provide all those participating in and impacted by tourism with a platform to voice how sustainable forms of tourism affect their livelihoods (Yasarata, Altinay, Burns, & Okumus, 2010). Most Significant Change facilitated engagement with both those implementing projects as well as those benefitting from project activities. Stories were collected from individuals supported by the project to use their skills to offer unconventional tourism experiences (e.g., poetry walks), diversify their use of social media channels or set-up their own business to offer nature walks for disabled ramblers and accessible sailing experiences. Previous studies have highlighted that impact on personal development and skillsets are crucial intangible outcomes of tourism interventions in host communities (Aquino et al., 2022). This type of impact on personal development and knowledge acquisition transpired clearly through the stories of change we collected across pilot regions.

Evaluating which project outcomes were significant to beneficiaries and why through Most Significant Change supported partners in reflecting on the lessons learned. Scholars have argued that the general lack of longevity of project outcomes could be linked to the lack of lessons learned during the evaluations process (Stoffelen, 2018; Wrigley, 2008). We found that asking partners to evaluate impacts through storytelling encouraged deep reflection. In response to the limitations of previous tourism evaluations that do not always create lasting project legacies (Stoffelen, 2018), as an evaluation tool, we found that Most Significant Change allowed to better capture and learn from unseen and unheard impacts. It is a powerful method towards a more learning-oriented evaluation.

Collecting stories of change from locals demonstrates the crucial contribution government authorities can have in diffusing the concept of social entrepreneurship. Little attention has been given to how local governments can play a fundamental role in encouraging forms of social entrepreneurship in tourism and the positive impacts this can have on the resilience of local communities (Aquino et al., 2022; Dredge, 2017). With policy issues becoming increasingly more complex and interconnected, it has been argued that practitioners need innovative approaches to address social, economic and environmental problems (Bacq & Janssen, 2011) to move beyond the current industrial policy approach to tourism (Pollock, 2015). The stories we collected highlight that when governments work closely to support local independent businesses either through training, grants or promotion, these forms of social entrepreneurship allow for the creation of more resilient communities. What emerged was the pivotal role of local councils and destination

management organisations in partnering with social enterprises and businesses that are committed to giving back to their community to create environments in which these can flourish (as shown in the story in Fig. 2). In line with previous studies, this research found that fostering environments in which governments, civil society, social entrepreneurs and the commercial sector are in sync creates the premises for powerful transformative change from the bottom-up (Dredge, 2017; Shockley & Frank, 2011). Most Significant Change helped evidence how the role played by the local councils and destination management organisations involved was crucial to promote social entrepreneurship amongst members and businesses within the local community.

Adopting Most Significant Change as an evaluation tool empowers project stakeholders. The main purpose of EU-Interreg projects is to promote cooperation between stronger and weaker EU regions to further empower the latter. Yet, evaluations of EU-Interreg projects have highlighted how engagement of weaker regions lags, hindering the achievement of lasting results of projects (Niavis, Papatheochari, Koutsopoulou, Coccossis, & Psycharis, 2022). As a result of being directly in charge of the selection of stories for the evaluation, we found that multiple partners with whom it was initially more difficult to engage with became the most collaborative. They conceived the collection of stories as an opportunity to showcase their achievements and champion their destinations' success. As opposed to further disenfranchising the less-influential members of the partnership, Most Significant Change as a data-gathering tool enhanced collaboration across the partnership and empowered all partners to tell *their* stories but also reflect on the lessons learned. Previous studies have argued that the tourism industry and related tourism policies have often failed local communities either by further marginalising the less powerful or by not living up to the economic needs and social aspirations of those working at the grassroots (Burns, 2004; Dredge & Jenkins, 2011; Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021; Thomas, 2020). Most Significant Change helped us overcome such limitations, unveiling a series of empowering grassroots stories, that highlighted how local communities can be active agents of change if they are granted a *real* opportunity to be involved in local tourism activities through acquisition of knowledge and skills (Aquino et al., 2022).

Evaluating through Most Significant Change opens a dialogue with project partners around the importance of sustainability indicators to inform tourism policies. Sustainability indicators should be understood as decision-making tools to support the making of policy decisions (Waas et al., 2014). Yet, there are destinations and small local councils who do not always have the capacity to meet data requirements to measure performance against sustainability frameworks, nor to understand the usefulness of data. Often sustainability indicators represent a long list of statistics that tourism stakeholders cannot handle (Torres-Delgado & Saarinen, 2017). Collecting data locally to measure performance against sustainability indicators in the hope that they could inform future policy decisions was last on the list of priorities whilst dealing with day-to-day issues. There is a critical gap between the existence of sustainability indicator frameworks to inform tourism policies and whether they are put into practice (Yasarata et al., 2010), but our approach shows that using stories to evaluate progress is generally more engaging and accessible to those implementing policies and interventions. Collecting data through stories of project impact and then discussing how these contributed towards sustainability indicators made conversations about evidence-based policy more accessible.

Most Significant Change helped explain how a project's outcomes can contribute to sustainable development (Torres-Delgado & Saarinen, 2017). Much of the academic literature around sustainable tourism development, as well as sustainability indicator frameworks developed by academics, are often too prescriptive and far-removed from the reality in which they are implemented (Yasarata et al., 2010). Our findings demonstrated that using stories as empirical data to evidence project outcomes and discuss wider impacts did not compromise the rigour of the evaluation report but was more aligned with the capacity of project

partners. Other studies have argued that the limited capacity of tourism stakeholders hinders their willingness and ability to implement sustainability frameworks (Torres-Delgado & Saarinen, 2017) to evaluate interventions. We learned that the frameworks to measure sustainability are often too cumbersome to implement, leading to scarce and not very useful impact evaluations. Most Significant Change helped us in attributing a less-abstract meaning to the concept of sustainability (Niavis et al., 2022; Waas et al., 2014). Most Significant Change thus represents a practical and accessible evaluation tool to report on economic, social and environmental impacts, even for those organisations with limited evaluation capacity.

6. Conclusion

It is pivotal to implement evaluation methods that can influence policy decisions and the development of future tourism interventions. To do so, the usability of the evaluation results by staff implementing projects, stakeholders and policy actors is crucial (Conlin & Stirrat, 2008; Warne & Thompson, 2022). The project outcomes of this intervention were often intangible, emergent and thus difficult to measure. As an evaluation method, Most Significant Change addresses these issues as it is accessible and usable by non-evaluation experts, it is context-focused, engaging, flexible, systematic and transparent. This research has shown how tourism evaluation has a lot to learn from story-based methods to improve how we understand, and evidence, indirect outcomes and impacts of policies and interventions in a way that is more sensitive to the contextual needs of the implementers and beneficiaries of interventions. This research has shown how story-based methods support evaluators in uncovering how an intervention played out on the ground and what mechanisms caused change in a particular context, from the perspective of those directly impacted. Much of the complexity within social interventions is due to the uncertainty of human behaviour, since it is *people* and their *response* to an intervention that bring about change, these mechanisms are better captured through stories that come from people than from outcome measures or indicators.

The research showed that Most Significant Change is well placed as a tool to deal with the complexity of evaluating a large-scale sustainable tourism intervention and is intended to be integrated alongside quantitative indicators to produce a more holistic evaluation of project results. We believe that although the method has been indeed applied in other fields, its novel implementation in the field of tourism is a crucial step towards better understanding the impacts of tourism on wider society. In this sense we demonstrated its value and methodological contribution towards better tourism policymaking. We showed how it was a useful evaluation tool to open-up a meaningful dialogue with project implementers and policy actors around the importance using data from evaluations to inform policy decisions. The findings from this research are the first of its kind in the field of tourism evaluation research and will be disseminated to potential regional and local councils, as well as destination management organisations in the form of a 'Best Practice Guide' to inspire others wishing to undertake a similar approach in their destination.

While we have received much positive feedback for its practical value from stakeholders in the project and made a significant methodological contribution as to how we report on and learn from impact achieved through tourism interventions, this study is not free of limitations. First, of all, partners tended to over-focus and over-emphasise positive change, disregarding or avoiding the collection of stories of negative impacts associated to the project. Although the selection of stories followed a highly transparent iterative process, inevitably, only 'the best' case-studies got chosen to evidence most significant change associated to the project. We feel that there is scope for future research to reconsider all those stories that do not make the final selection to focus on what went wrong and possible lessons learned for the future. While the research attracted participation of all partners and a diverse range of stakeholders from the tourism industry involved in the project,

imposed lockdowns and travel restrictions throughout most of the project implementation period meant that a lot of the long-term, indirect impacts resulting from project activities and outputs would become much more visible three to five years after the end of the project. It would thus be beneficial to liaise with project implementers again in the future to reassess the magnitude of change further down the line.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Luigina Jessica Montano: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Xavier Font:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration. **Corinna Elsenbroich:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision. **Manuel Alector Ribeiro:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

There are no conflicts or potential conflicts of interest.

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- Luigina Jessica Montano**, PhD is a researcher at the Research Institute for the Evaluation of Public Policies FBK-IRVAPP, Trento, Italy. She is interested in evidence-informed policy-making, evaluation and sustainable tourism.
- Xavier Font**, Professor of Sustainability Marketing at the University of Surrey. Interested in sustainable tourism marketing.
- Corina Elsenbroich**, Reader of Computational Modelling in Social and Public Health Science at the University of Glasgow. Interested in complexity social science and evaluation methods.
- Manuel Alector Ribeiro**, Associate Professor in tourism management at the University of Surrey, and associate visiting professor at the University of Algarve (Portugal). He is interested in social impact assessment and sustainable tourism development.