

Interreg



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NEXT Black Sea Basin

INTERSMARTS MENTORING COLLABORATORIES

EXPERIENCE SHARING REPORT



What is INTERMARTS?



INTERSMARTS is an initiative that brings together partners from Bulgaria, Greece, Republic of Moldova, and Türkiye. Our goal is to transform tourism into a driver of smart and sustainable growth in the Black Sea Basin.

We envision a future where knowledge, innovation, and collaboration create added value for coastal communities.

It is established by the project partners:

- 1 Varna University of Management
- 2 International Hellenic University,
Department of Organization Management, Marketing and Tourism
- 3 Moldova State University, Faculty of Economic Sciences
- 4 Istanbul Development Agency

The Challenge

Tourism and the blue economy face mounting pressures: environmental degradation, waste, and outdated practices. Seasonality strains local communities and infrastructure, while poor cooperation between academia, business, and institutions limits innovation. We saw a clear gap — and an opportunity to act.

Our Solution

INTERSMARTS builds an interdisciplinary network based on the Quintuple Helix model, bringing together academia, business, government, civil society, and the environment. Our Innovation Management Platform serves as a digital hub for knowledge exchange and technology transfer — turning research into tangible solutions tested through pilot actions.

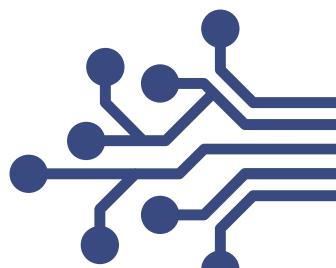
Why Now

The Black Sea region is at a turning point. Environmental urgency meets digital transformation, creating the momentum we need for action. With global and EU frameworks such as the Green Deal and Blue Economy Strategy in place, this is the right time and place for INTERSMARTS to make an impact.

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Mentoring Collaboratories in INETRSMARTS

Mentoring collaboratories are structured, facilitated environments—both physical and digital—that combine mentoring, collaborative learning, and co-creation to address complex, real-world challenges. They are particularly well suited to sectors such as blue-growth tourism, where innovation requires cross-sector knowledge, experimentation, and continuous capacity-building.

In INTRESMARTS, the mentoring collaboratories are used as structured mechanisms for validating and demonstrating the logic and usability of the INTERSMARTS Innovation Management Platform - <https://innoplatform.intersmarts.eu>. They are designed to engage stakeholders from the project countries and beyond in hybrid (on-site and online) interdisciplinary discussion events that encourage collaborative problem-solving and adoption of digital innovations in the tourism and services sectors. These events are based on guided experimentation with tools and resources integrated in the platform to demonstrate how real issues and problems in business can find solutions via crowdsourcing of ideas, both in digital and physical settings.

The Mentoring Collaboratories represent forums for dialogue and co-creation among representatives of academia, the private sector, public authorities, and civil society. They support the overarching aim of the INTERSMARTS project to promote sustainability and blue growth through smart, inclusive approaches that address shared challenges in tourism-related services across the region of the Black Sea Basin.

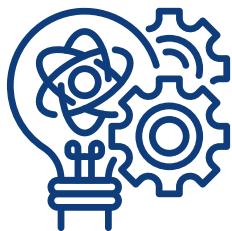


A screenshot of the INTERSMARTS Innovation Platform website. The header features the project logo and navigation links for Home, About, Best Practices, Resources, Challenges, English, Log in, and Register. The main content area is titled "INTERSMARTS Innovation Platform" and describes the platform as a dynamic online hub for interdisciplinary solutions in smart, sustainable tourism and services. It highlights features like challenges, case studies, and expert contributions. A large image of a woman sitting cross-legged, using a laptop, is prominently displayed, with a callout bubble showing "Best Practices 99" and another bubble showing "Challenges 30". A "Learn more" button is located at the bottom left of the main text area.

Key Features

The following features define the INTERSMARTS Mentoring Collaboratories:

- → **Interdisciplinary Structure**
- → **Stakeholder Engagement**
- → **Experiential Learning**
- → **Problem-Oriented Focus**
- → **Transnational Perspective**
- → **Digital Innovation and Capacity Building**
- → **Feedback-Driven Improvement**



Interdisciplinary Structure

The mentoring collaboratory is to integrate expertise from tourism, environmental sustainability, digital innovation, and public policy, creating a multidisciplinary foundation that enables more robust and future-oriented solutions. By bringing together sector-specific knowledge, operational experience, and strategic perspectives, it encourages stakeholders to examine challenges from multiple angles and to design interventions that are both practical and scalable. This convergence of competencies not only strengthens the analytical depth of the process but also supports the development of holistic, evidence-based approaches to problem-solving that reflect the complex realities of contemporary socio-economic systems.



Stakeholder Engagement

Broad representation from all key target groups—research institutions, SMEs, business support organizations, and local and regional authorities — ensures a multiperspective dialogue.

Experiential Learning



The laboratories function as dynamic 'living laboratories' that enable participants to test platform functionalities and methodological tools through direct engagement with real-case challenges. This experiential learning dimension is central to the effectiveness of mentoring laboratories, as it allows learners to move beyond theoretical knowledge and apply concepts in authentic, practice-driven contexts. By working with actual business scenarios, operational constraints, and stakeholder expectations, participants develop a deeper understanding of sector-specific dynamics and strengthen their decision-making skills. Such hands-on immersion not only accelerates learning, but also fosters critical thinking, adaptability, and the capacity to co-create solutions—competencies that are essential for professionals operating in complex and rapidly evolving environments.

Problem-Oriented Focus

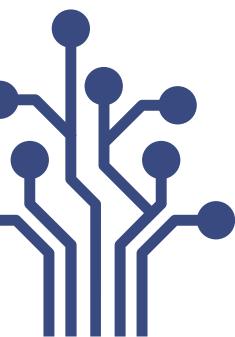


The problems addressed by the mentoring laboratory are the ones that fall in the main sustainability challenges for tourism in the Black Sea Basin, identified in the INTERSMARTS project and evaluated in the needs assessment surveys, performed by the INTERSMARTS Network - e.g. over-development, pollution and waste, seasonality, and low innovation absorption.

Transnational Perspective



Although the mentoring laboratories in INETRSMARTS are designed to address primarily the needs of the national contexts of Bulgaria, Greece, the Republic of Moldova and Türkiye, the real-time collaboration on the INTERSMARTS Platform enables participants to engage with knowledge, experience, and perspectives from all project partner countries. Access to shared case studies, research outputs, and practical resources from diverse settings supports comparative analysis, fosters mutual learning, and facilitates the identification and transfer of solutions with relevance and applicability across the region.



Digital Innovation and Capacity Building



The collaboratories promote the use of digital tools for sustainability, while simultaneously strengthening local capacities to engage with innovation ecosystems.

Feedback-Driven Improvement



Embedded evaluation mechanisms ensure continuous refinement of both the platform and the co-working methodology based on participant input.

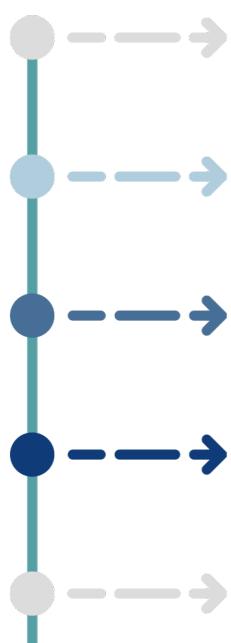
Methodological Framework

The methodological framework guiding the INTERSMARTS Mentoring Collaboratories is designed to foster interdisciplinary collaboration, stakeholder engagement, and applied testing of digital innovation tools in the field of sustainable tourism and blue growth. Rooted in principles of **co-working, co-creation, experiential learning, and collective intelligence**, the methodology ensures that all mentoring sessions—national and transnational—are coherent, inclusive, and results-driven.

Objectives

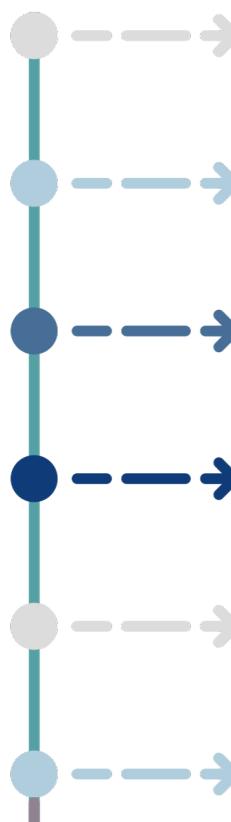
- → To provide a structured process for collaborative problem-solving around key sustainability challenges in tourism
- → To validate the operational logic and usability of the INTERSMARTS Innovation Management Platform
- → To facilitate knowledge exchange among diverse stakeholders in the Black Sea Basin (BSB)
- → To capture insights and feedback to improve both the platform and associated co-working processes

Guiding Principles



- Interdisciplinarity:** Encouraging participation from varied fields (tourism, technology, policy, environment).
- Inclusiveness:** Ensuring representation from all relevant stakeholder groups—researchers, SMEs, public authorities, NGOs, and civil society actors.
- Equal participation:** All voices are given equal weight in group discussions and decision-making.
- Transparency:** Methodological steps, objectives, and expected outcomes are communicated clearly in advance.
- Practical orientation:** All sessions are designed around real-case problems with clear links to actionable solutions.

Structure of the Collaboratories



- Introductory Sessions:** Presentations of the INTERSMARTS platform, its purpose, and thematic orientation.
- Challenge Mapping:** Identification and prioritization of local or regional sustainability issues in tourism.
- Presentation of best practices:** inviting innovative companies to present their solutions to the audience and discuss the success factors and challenges that influence the sustainability of their business.
- Hands-on Sessions:** Guided use of the INTERSMARTS Platform by participants assuming roles as "Users" and "Contributors" in real-time.
- Feedback and Refinement:** Structured feedback sessions aimed at collecting participant experiences with the platform.
- Planning for Uptake:** Discussions on how to integrate the platform into national and regional innovation ecosystems.

Model agendas are provided to each partner to ensure methodological consistency, while allowing space for national contextualization.

Role Definition

Participants are encouraged to assume defined roles during the mentoring sessions:

- **Users:** Stakeholders who formulate and present practical sustainability challenges.
- **Contributors:** Participants who propose solutions, insights, and resources to address the identified problems.
- **Facilitators:** Moderators trained to guide the process, support collaboration, and ensure adherence to the methodological flow.

These roles are the same as the roles users can take online while using the INTERSMARTS Innovation Management Platform. During a mentoring-collaboratory event, the co-working process can take place entirely online via the Platform or in a moderated hybrid format that combines real-time interaction with online activities. This approach supports participants who may initially feel uncomfortable engaging fully in a digital co-working process, allowing them to transition gradually while still contributing effectively.

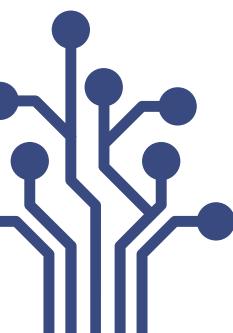
Data Collection and Evaluation Tools

The framework integrates a multi-method approach to data collection:

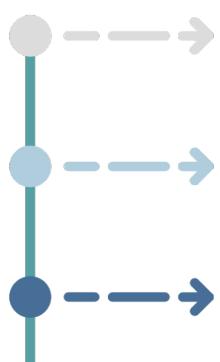
- Participant feedback forms to capture experiences, suggestions, and platform usability ratings.
- Post-event evaluation questionnaires and certificates to formalize stakeholder participation.
- Narrative reports from each partner summarizing national insights, with consolidated synthesis at the transnational level.

Identification of Real-case Sustainability Challenges

The identification of real-case sustainability challenges constitutes a foundational component of the INTERSMARTS Mentoring Collaboratories, ensuring that all participatory activities are grounded in empirical relevance and contextual specificity. This process enables the direct application of the INTERSMARTS Platform to tangible issues affecting tourism and related services within the Black Sea Basin.

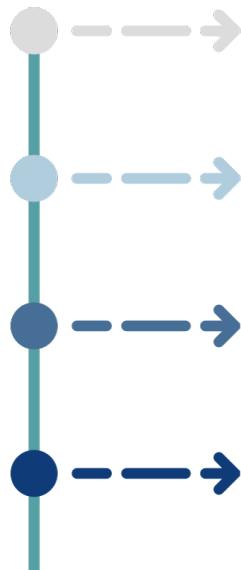


Purpose of Challenge Identification



- To anchor the Mentoring Collaboratories in real-world sustainability problems that reflect local and regional priorities.
- To stimulate interdisciplinary dialogue and co-creation among stakeholders.
- To facilitate a problem-solving approach that links digital innovation with policy and practice.

Thematic Scope



- Overdevelopment:** Manifested in urban sprawl, loss of biodiversity, or pressures on infrastructure due to uncontrolled tourism growth.
- Pollution and Waste:** Including inadequate waste management systems, water and air contamination, and insufficient recycling infrastructure in tourism zones.
- Seasonality:** Reflected in economic instability, workforce fluctuation, and inefficient use of resources linked to seasonal tourism patterns.
- Low Innovation Absorption:** Characterized by the slow uptake of digital tools, low awareness of sustainability innovations, and barriers to cross-sectoral knowledge transfer.

Criteria for Challenge Selection

To ensure relevance, the following criteria guide the selection of real-case challenges:

- **Context specificity:** Challenges must be clearly linked to the regional realities of each partner country;
- **Stakeholder relevance:** Issues should reflect the experiences and priorities of local actors in tourism, public administration, and civil society;
- **Cross-cutting potential:** Selected cases should enable the exploration of interdisciplinary solutions;
- **Digital applicability:** Challenges must be suitable for input into the INTERSMARTS Platform as test cases for its functions (e.g., challenge mapping, contributor interaction).

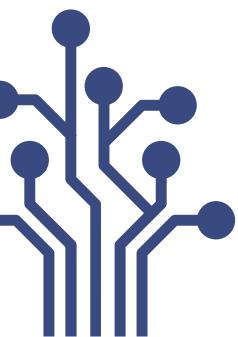
Criteria for Challenge Selection

The identified challenges serve multiple purposes within the collaborative methodology:

- **Scenario Development:** They form the narrative basis for hands-on exercises, enabling participants to apply the platform in simulated or real scenarios.
- **Role Activation:** Participants engage with the challenges either by uploading them as "Users" or addressing them as "Contributors," reflecting real-life roles in the innovation ecosystem.
- **Collaborative Analysis:** The cases stimulate dialogue during group work, encouraging participants to jointly define root causes, propose responses, and evaluate solutions.
- **Platform Evaluation:** Interaction with these challenges provides a live environment for testing the usability, responsiveness, and practical value of the INTERSMARTS Platform.

Outcome and Contribution

Each mentoring collaborative in the INTERSMARTS Project is rooted in its national context while benefiting from active cross-border collaboration through the INTERSMARTS Platform. By engaging with shared case studies, research insights, and practical experiences from all partner countries, participants are exposed to diverse perspectives that support mutual learning, comparative reflection, and the exchange of solutions with relevance and applicability across the wider region.



Mentoring Collaboratories In Action



Mentoring Collaboratory

1

Chisinau, Moldova
25 September 2025

Organised by the Moldova State University

Scope: National event

Audience: 45 participants representing a balanced mix of stakeholder groups, including business support organisations, SMEs, local and regional authorities, academics, students, and technical experts.

The INTERSMARTS task force at the Moldova State University prepared a high-impact event by translating the INTERSMARTS platform concept into a structured, hands-on co-creation activity. To ensure strong local relevance and practical applicability, the team curated real-life Moldovan case studies focusing on eco-rural hospitality, wine tourism, and tourism in protected areas. Participants were guided through structured mentoring rounds that addressed key stages of the innovation process: problem framing, solution ideation, and feasibility assessment. The process was facilitated by the MSU team, ensuring active engagement, knowledge exchange, and effective collaboration across disciplines and sectors.

The event demonstrated how mentoring and collective intelligence can generate innovative solutions for sustainable tourism. Participants recognized the potential of an idea crowdsourcing and innovation management platform to strengthen links between academia, business, and civil society, facilitate policy-oriented dialogue, enhance knowledge exchange and digital innovation adoption, and inspire future joint projects and mentoring networks across the region of the Black Sea Basin.



Mentoring Collaboratory



Organised by the International Hellenic University

Scope: International event

Audience: 70+ students, SME representatives, tourism professionals and experts, researchers, interested citizens

The INTERSMARTS Task force at the International Hellenic University IHU coordinated and delivered the International Mentoring Collaboratory in Thessaloniki – an event that engaged a diverse stakeholder group, ensuring broad representation across the tourism innovation ecosystem. The Collaboratory included collaborative group work, mentoring exchanges, peer-to-peer sessions, and a dedicated results-sharing segment where partners presented the findings of their national laboratories and piloting sessions implemented in Bulgaria, Moldova, and Turkey. IHU facilitated all structured group activities and ensured the consistent use of standardized templates, co-working tools, and feedback instruments across the sessions, enabling coherent documentation and cross-country comparability of results.



Mentoring Collaboratory

3

Istanbul, Türkiye
30 October 2025

Organised by the Istanbul Development Agency

Scope: National event

Audience: 20 participants from various institutions, including business and business support organisations, public authorities

The Mentoring Collaboratory implemented in Türkiye had a strong and tangible impact on stakeholder engagement, innovation awareness, and capacity-building for sustainable tourism. The activity successfully brought together representatives from regional development bodies, the startup ecosystem, academia, and practitioners in a structured, interactive setting. Through hands-on use of the INTERSMARTS Innovation Management Platform, participants actively explored real regional challenges—such as overdevelopment, pollution, waste, seasonality, and slow innovation uptake—and collaboratively worked on solution pathways as both “Users” and “Contributors.” The mentoring-driven co-creation format strengthened participants’ understanding of innovation management processes, demonstrated the practical value of digital platforms for decision-making and knowledge exchange, and fostered cross-sector dialogue between policy, business, and research actors. Feedback collected during the session confirmed increased awareness of the platform’s potential to support regional uptake of sustainable tourism solutions, while networking and discussion segments helped seed new collaborations within the Turkish innovation and tourism ecosystem.



Mentoring Collaboratory

4

Varna, Bulgaria
31 October 2025

Organised by the Varna University of Management

Scope: National event

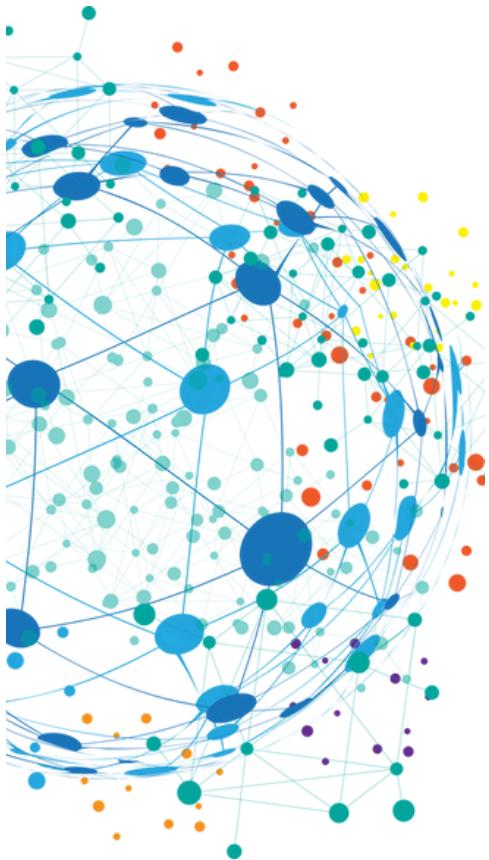
Audience: 23 SME representatives, experts, university researchers, Interest-group representatives

The Mentoring Collaboratory implemented in by the INTERSMART Task Force in Bulgaria demonstrated a strong contextual alignment with local sustainability challenges and highlighted the practical value of the INTERSMARTS Innovation Management Platform for capacity-building along the Black Sea coast. The collaboratory focused on sustainable practices in coastal tourism, with particular emphasis on waste management, food waste reduction, and responsible use of natural and cultural resources—issues of high relevance for Bulgaria, where coastal tourism represents the dominant sector of the blue economy. Through a World Café-style co-creation format, participants worked on real local cases, including a fish restaurant, a family hotel, and an eco-park, using the INTERSMARTS platform to frame challenges and jointly explore solution pathways. The combination of academic input, applied demonstrations (such as zero-waste cooking), and policy- and innovation-oriented discussions enabled participants to connect strategic objectives for blue growth with concrete, implementable practices. The collaboratory strengthened local stakeholder awareness of innovation management approaches, reinforced the role of digital platforms in facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration, and generated practical insights directly applicable to the Varna region and the wider Bulgarian Black Sea context, while also contributing evidence and use cases to the INTERSMARTS knowledge base.



TAKEAWAYS FROM INTERSMARTS

The INTERSMARTS Mentoring Collaboratories clearly demonstrated that co-working and collective intelligence are powerful enablers for addressing complex sustainability challenges in tourism and blue growth. By bringing together diverse stakeholders—academia, SMEs, public authorities, business support organisations, and civil society—within a structured, mentored co-creation environment, the collaboratories transformed fragmented knowledge into shared understanding and actionable solutions. .



The hands-on, problem-oriented format allowed participants to jointly frame real-life challenges, exchange perspectives, and co-develop solutions that are context-sensitive, feasible, and scalable. Collective intelligence emerged not only through idea crowdsourcing, but also through dialogue, peer learning, and iterative feedback, reinforcing trust and mutual learning across sectors and countries. Importantly, the integration of the INTERSMARTS Innovation Management Platform anchored this collaborative process in a digital ecosystem, ensuring continuity beyond the physical events and enabling solutions to be documented, refined, and reused. Overall, the mentoring collaboratories validated the added value of co-working as a capacity-building mechanism and confirmed that collective intelligence—when properly facilitated—can accelerate innovation uptake, strengthen stakeholder ownership, and support more resilient and sustainable tourism development across the Black Sea Basin and beyond.

INTERSMARTS partnership believes strongly in the power of collective wisdom and peer exchange — in research, in business, and in the everyday practices that ultimately solve real problems. The Black Sea region is unique, and our challenges demand solutions shaped by the knowledge, experience and creativity of the people who live and work here. We have already seen promising examples, including successful companies, innovative business models, and conservation practices, emerging across our coastal communities. The task has been to make these bright spots more visible, more accessible, and more inspiring for others to adopt. Sustainability is a holistic perspective that must be integrated into all economic and social activities from the outset, and this is precisely the direction that all INTERSMARTS partners have been consistently striving to advance.

Interdisciplinary Solutions for Smart Sustainable Tourism and Services for Blue Growth in the Black Sea Basin

Project No BSB00332

The **INTERSMARTS** project is a transnational initiative aimed at enhancing sustainability and fostering **Blue Growth** by improving the innovation capacities of the tourism sector in the **Black Sea Region**.

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