

Institutional frameworks and public organizational arrangements supporting social innovation in rural tourism

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Abstract

This study examines the role of institutional frameworks and public organizational arrangements in supporting social innovation within rural tourism in the Marrakech–Safi region, using the theory of change as the central analytical framework. In a territorial context marked by persistent socio-economic vulnerabilities, strong heterogeneity across rural areas, and increasing dependence on tourism activities, social innovation represents a key lever for promoting inclusive and sustainable territorial development. Public action plays a structuring role by defining strategic orientations, norms, and organizational instruments that shape the emergence and diffusion of innovative initiatives at the local level. The study adopts a qualitative approach based on the lexicometric analysis of institutional discourses related to public action in support of social innovation in rural tourism. Results drawn from lexical frequency distribution, correspondence factor analysis, similarity analysis, and word cloud visualization reveal an institutional discourse strongly structured around normative and instrumental registers. Institutional frameworks emerge as central inputs in the change process, guiding territorial development objectives toward social inclusion, sustainability, and territorial embeddedness. Public organizational arrangements act as intermediate mechanisms, translating these orientations into concrete action capacities through governance, financing, and support for local initiatives. However, the findings also highlight a limited explicit articulation of learning, adjustment, and evaluation mechanisms—elements that are essential in the theory of change—suggesting that the prevailing conception of change remains largely linear and top-down.

Keywords: institutional frameworks; public organizational arrangements; social innovation; rural tourism; theory of change; Marrakech–Safi.

JEL classification: L83 ; O35 ; R58 ; Z32.

Introduction

In the Marrakech–Safi region, rural tourism occupies a strategic position within territorial development policies, due to the richness of the natural, cultural, and social heritage that characterizes rural and mountainous areas. However, these territories remain marked by persistent



structural fragilities, such as economic precariousness, weak infrastructure, seasonal dependence on tourist flows, and the fragmentation of local actors. In response to these constraints, social innovation has gradually emerged as a relevant lever for rethinking tourism development models by articulating social inclusion, the valorization of local resources, and the creation of territorial value. In this context, regional and national public action plays a decisive role in structuring the conditions for the emergence and diffusion of innovative initiatives. Institutional frameworks, through tourism strategies, territorial development policies, and regulatory arrangements, define the general orientations of change, while public organizational arrangements translate these orientations into operational instruments such as multi-actor governance, financing mechanisms, technical support, and labeling schemes. Nevertheless, the actual capacity of these instruments to sustainably support social innovation in rural tourism in Marrakech–Safi remains a central question. It therefore becomes necessary to analyze public action not only through its stated intentions, but through the causal chains linking objectives, means, and territorial effects, in order to understand how change is conceived and implemented in this specific regional context.

From this perspective, the theory of change constitutes the analytical framework mobilized to systematically examine the role of institutional frameworks and public organizational arrangements in the Marrakech–Safi region. This approach allows public action to be understood as an intentional process structured around inputs, intermediate mechanisms, and expected outcomes, rather than as a simple juxtaposition of sectoral policies. Applied to rural tourism, the theory of change highlights how institutional orientations define the goals of territorial development, particularly with regard to social innovation, inclusion, and sustainability. Public organizational arrangements then appear as essential mediation mechanisms, ensuring the translation of these orientations into concrete action capacities at the local level. This perspective is especially relevant in the Marrakech–Safi region, where tourism dynamics are based on complex interactions among territorial authorities, deconcentrated state services, cooperatives, associations, and local communities. By mobilizing a qualitative analysis based on institutional discourses, this research seeks to understand how regional public action structures the conditions for change and to what extent it effectively supports social innovation in rural tourism. The objective is thus to identify the consistencies, tensions, and limitations of the causal chains mobilized by public action within this territory.

1. Literature Review

1.1. Theory of Change and Innovation in Rural Tourism

Within the theory of change, institutional frameworks constitute the fundamental inputs from which processes of social and territorial transformation unfold. Weiss (1995) shows that any public policy oriented toward change relies on the prior articulation of causal assumptions linking objectives to expected outcomes. Applied to rural tourism, this perspective makes it possible to analyze institutional frameworks—national strategies, regional plans, and legislative arrangements—as initial conditions that structure the space of action available to local actors. North (1990) emphasizes that formal institutions define the rules of the game and reduce uncertainty, which is particularly decisive in rural territories characterized by economic and organizational fragilities. In the field of tourism, Hall (2008) highlights the central role of the state in defining strategic orientations and regulating tourism development trajectories. The theory of change thus provides a lens for understanding how these institutional frameworks orient priorities toward objectives of social inclusion, sustainability, and the valorization of local resources. With regard to social innovation, Moulaert et al. (2013) demonstrate that the institutionalization of social issues within territorial policies is a prerequisite for the emergence of



collective solutions. From this perspective, public institutional frameworks do not directly produce social innovation in rural tourism, but they enable its emergence by defining shared goals, legitimizing certain practices, and structuring expectations around territorial change.

From a theory of change perspective, public organizational arrangements play a key mediating role between institutional frameworks and expected outcomes. Chen (2022) underlines that public policies generate effects only when the intermediate mechanisms linking resources, actors, and actions are clearly identified. In rural tourism, these arrangements take the form of territorial governance structures, public–private partnerships, decentralized financing mechanisms, or technical support schemes. Dredge and Jenkins (2007) show that tourism governance relies on organizational arrangements capable of coordinating a plurality of actors with heterogeneous interests. This coordination lies at the heart of social innovation, which, according to Mulgan et al. (2007), emerges precisely in spaces where public, associative, and community actors interact to address unmet social needs. Ostrom (2010) highlights that polycentric arrangements foster collective learning and local adaptation, two dimensions that are essential in rural territories. Within the theory of change, these organizational arrangements function as intermediate levers: they transform institutional orientations into concrete action capacities. Their effectiveness depends on their flexibility, clarity, and ability to integrate local knowledge. When they are overly rigid or excessively technocratic, they disrupt the causal chain of change. Conversely, when they promote cooperation and experimentation, they strengthen the territorial embeddedness of social innovation in rural tourism.

The final stage of the theory of change concerns the institutionalization of the effects produced by public action and organizational arrangements. According to Rogers (2003), the sustainable adoption of an innovation depends on its gradual integration into existing structures, norms, and collective practices. In rural tourism, this institutionalization is reflected in the stabilization of social innovation initiatives through regulatory frameworks, sustainable financing mechanisms, or official recognition schemes. Sabatier and Weible (2019) emphasize that public policies evolve through coalitions of actors capable of transforming dominant policy paradigms over the long term. From this perspective, social innovation becomes a vector of institutional change when it is embedded in territorial policies. However, Moolaert and Nussbaumer (2013) warn against the risk of excessive normalization, which may reduce the transformative capacity of local initiatives. The theory of change makes it possible to identify this tension between stabilization and adaptability. In rural tourism, effective public action is that which institutionalizes core principles—such as inclusion, participation, and sustainability—while leaving room for experimentation by local actors. In this way, institutional frameworks and public organizational arrangements support social innovation when they foster an evolutionary form of change that is capable of adapting to territorial specificities and to the social dynamics inherent in rural areas.

1.2. Institutional Frameworks and Social Innovation in Rural Tourism

Lawrence et al. (2013) highlight that organizational models constitute a central lever of social innovation insofar as they enable the coordinated involvement of actors from multiple sectors, particularly public and private ones. This perspective implies that, in rural tourism, public organizational arrangements play a structuring role when they facilitate the formation of networks and partnerships capable of supporting collective dynamics. This view is consistent with Lukesch et al. (2020), for whom social innovation is embedded in transformations of policies, governance, and institutional structures aimed at improving public services and civic engagement. They suggest that public institutional frameworks can create favorable conditions for the emergence of innovative solutions when organizational arrangements are designed to support local actors in addressing societal challenges, including those related to tourism. In the same



vein, Behrens et al. (2002) show that cooperative regional development processes are based on bottom-up or mixed approaches that mobilize internal resources while relying on a facilitating institutional framework. The implication is that public organizational arrangements, when they prioritize capacity building at the local level rather than strictly top-down logics, foster more sustainable forms of social innovation in rural areas. Public institutional and organizational structuring thus constitutes a condition for the emergence of social innovation in rural tourism when it facilitates cooperation, engagement, and the territorial embeddedness of initiatives.

Herrmann and Neumeier (2007) demonstrate that organizational arrangements and governance frameworks play a decisive role in the participation of local actors in rural tourism projects, particularly when tools such as Web-GIS are mobilized. They indicate that the presence of a central actor or a core group, evolving throughout the process, constitutes an organizational condition that enables engagement and collective learning. This finding aligns with Tresiana and Dudaji (2022), who emphasize that the governance of social innovation in cultural tourism relies on institutional frameworks capable of framing and supporting initiatives based on local resources, such as forest coffee or historical heritage. They suggest that social innovation cannot develop without public arrangements that ensure coherence among actors, resources, and territorial objectives. Similarly, Pikkemaat et al. (2018) show that legal regulations and bureaucratic processes strongly influence social innovation in community-based tourism destinations, which are often located in rural areas. They demonstrate that institutional rigidity and administrative burdens can hinder these dynamics, implying that public organizational frameworks must be adapted and enabling in order to support social innovation. The capacity of public arrangements to organize participation, reduce institutional constraints, and structure local interactions conditions the development of social innovation in rural tourism.

Neumeier (2012) emphasizes that social innovation emerges through co-evolutionary learning processes within hybrid networks that associate human and non-human actors, and that it should be fully integrated into rural development research. This perspective implies that neo-endogenous frameworks, which combine local initiatives with external inputs, require public organizational arrangements capable of supporting these complex interactions. This argument is reinforced by Von Schnurbein et al. (2023), who show that social innovation develops through collaborative processes based on frameworks that facilitate cooperation among a plurality of stakeholders. They indicate that public organizational arrangements play a role in orchestrating the synergies necessary for the production of social innovations. Complementarily, Ludvig et al. (2018) highlight that social innovation initiatives are framed by multiple sectoral and structural policies, whose interactions can either support or hinder their development. They stress the importance of knowledge-based, financial, and networking instruments to reduce risks, develop infrastructure, and connect actors from the tourism, environmental, and institutional sectors. The implication is that public institutional frameworks must be designed to support collective learning, coordinate policies, and strengthen interaction capacities among actors in order to foster social innovation in rural tourism.

Malek and Costa (2015) conceive social innovation in tourism as a strategy that enables local communities to integrate into planning and decision-making processes within destinations. They show that this integration relies on organizational arrangements that facilitate the effective participation of local actors, implying an active role for public institutional frameworks. This is consistent with Baker and Mehmood (2015), who argue that the public governance of sustainable places depends on institutional frameworks that foster stakeholder engagement and the adaptation of public policies to support transformative initiatives. Their approach suggests that public organizational arrangements must be sufficiently flexible to accompany local dynamics of social innovation. From a complementary perspective, Cavicchi et al. (2013) highlight the role of higher education institutions as public actors involved in addressing complex



issues related to rural development and territorial branding. They show that institutional partnerships constitute organizational arrangements that foster social innovation in rural regions. Public institutional frameworks, when they support participation, co-construction, and territorial partnerships, strengthen local capacities to develop forms of social innovation rooted in rural tourism.

Živojinović et al. (2023) demonstrate that the dispersion of responsibilities among a plurality of institutional actors reduces the effectiveness of public policies on social innovation and contributes to the emergence of informal institutional voids. They emphasize that the development of social innovation depends not only on institutional systems, but also on their interaction capacities, implying a central role for networking instruments. This perspective aligns with Mu (2013) and Wang (2013), who show that social enterprises are strongly influenced by government policies and that governments constitute major cooperative partners, involving shared responsibilities. They suggest that institutional frameworks and public organizational arrangements directly condition the capacity of social initiatives to develop. In the same line of reasoning, Pitarch-Garrido (2022) defines social innovation in tourism as a process of mobilizing local and external resources aimed at transforming collective action logics. This approach implies that public support plays a structuring role by fostering cooperation among actors and creating an institutional environment conducive to the emergence of social innovations. Institutional coordination and public organizational arrangements thus constitute essential levers for supporting social innovation in rural tourism.

Pue et al. (2015) emphasize the role of structural drivers in social innovation, understood as the institutional and contextual frameworks that influence the emergence and diffusion of initiatives. Their approach implies that institutional support is decisive in enabling social innovations to develop, particularly in sectors such as rural tourism where public collaboration facilitates network creation. This resonates with the framework proposed by Cajaiba-Santana (2014), who conceives social innovation as oriented toward social practices and conditioned by the structures that enable or constrain agents' actions. It follows that public institutional frameworks must legitimize and facilitate new collaborative practices by acting on the organizational arrangements that structure relations among actors. Complementarily, Gallouj et al. (2018) stress that the transformation of rural areas into tourist destinations relies on processes of co-innovation and the empowerment of local communities. They show that organizational arrangements fostering value co-creation and the inclusion of local actors support social innovation. Public institutional frameworks, when they support collaborative practices, collective learning, and territorial co-creation, constitute essential foundations of social innovation in rural tourism.

The European Economic and Social Committee (2016) emphasizes that agriculture and crafts can structure regional value chains linking local production, tourism, and commerce, highlighting the role of integrated policies in promoting social innovation in rural areas. This perspective implies that public institutional frameworks can foster social innovation by supporting complementarities across sectors. This argument is reinforced by Domanski et al. (2020), who highlight the importance of social innovation ecosystems and infrastructures in generating sustainable systemic change. They emphasize the role of institutional environments and support arrangements in ensuring the long-term viability of social initiatives. Finally, Gustafsson and Amer (2023) propose a public-private-people partnership model as a form of circular governance for a sustainable cultural tourism strategy. Their approach illustrates the role of public organizational frameworks in articulating actors and structuring forms of cooperation conducive to social innovation. Institutional frameworks and public organizational arrangements, when they support integrated ecosystems and multi-actor partnerships, constitute a structuring foundation for social innovation in rural tourism.



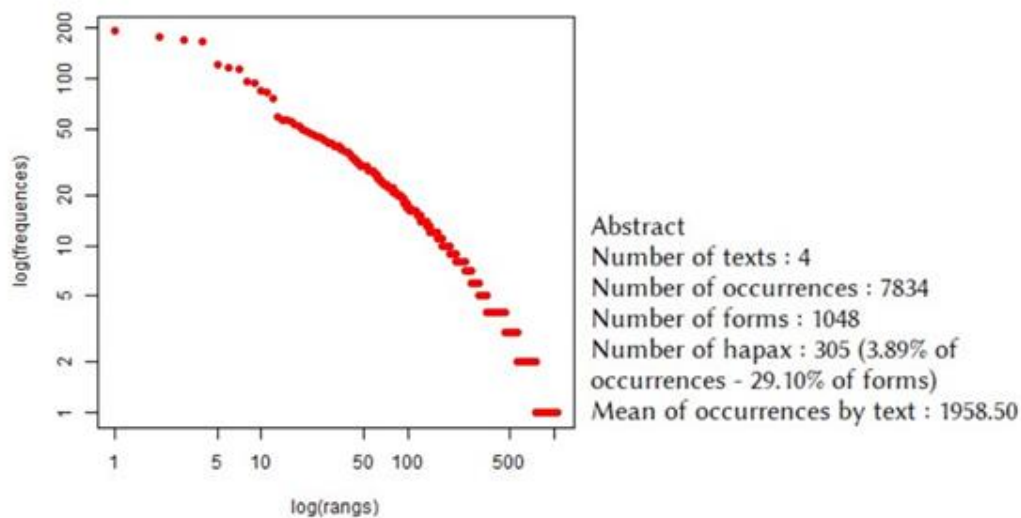
2. Study Objective and Population

The population of this study consists of institutional actors holding positions of responsibility in the public governance of tourism within the Marrakech-Safi region, whose functions place them at the center of the mechanisms for planning, coordination, and oversight of rural tourism. It includes the Regional Delegate of Tourism of Marrakech, the Provincial Delegate of Tourism of Safi, the Provincial Delegate of Tourism of Essaouira, and the Governor of Al Haouz Province. The choice of this population is explained by the very nature of the object under study, which focuses on the institutional frameworks and public organizational arrangements supporting social innovation in rural tourism. Indeed, these public officials possess direct knowledge of the strategic orientations, intervention instruments, forms of administrative coordination, and territorial dynamics that structure public action in this field. Their positions provide access to institutional discourses that shed light on how tourism policies are conceived, translated, and implemented at different territorial levels. This population therefore presents particular analytical value, as it makes it possible to capture the coherence, tensions, and articulations between the regional and provincial levels in public support for social innovation, territorial inclusion, and the development of rural tourism in Marrakech-Safi.

3. Methods (Qualitative Study)

3.1. Lexical Frequency Distribution

The figure illustrating the distribution of lexical frequencies makes it possible to quantitatively assess the density and structuring of the institutional discourse related to the governance of social innovation in rural tourism. The analyzed corpus consists of 7,834 occurrences distributed across 1,048 distinct forms, with a notable proportion of hapax reaching 305 forms, representing 29.10% of the total. This configuration simultaneously reflects a strong degree of conceptual stabilization and a significant level of lexical diversity. The regular shape of the logarithmic curve reveals a coherent hierarchical organization of the vocabulary, dominated by recurrent terms associated with the notions of innovation, tourism, rurality, and public action, while still allowing space for more specific expressions that reflect the diversity of contexts and initiatives described. This lexical organization suggests the existence of a structured, normative, and intentional discourse, consistent with the principles of the theory of change, according to which the achievement of expected outcomes depends on the clarity of objectives, the coherence of the mobilized means, and the legibility of causal chains. The high average number of occurrences per text, estimated at 1,958.50, further reinforces the idea of sustained discursive engagement, reflecting an institutional willingness to formalize, coordinate, and strategically steer social innovation in rural tourism.

Figure 1. Distribution of Lexical Frequencies – Public Action and Social Innovation in Rural Tourism

Within the framework of the study devoted to institutional frameworks and public organizational arrangements supporting social innovation in rural tourism, the theory of change constitutes a relevant analytical lens for examining how public authorities anticipate, plan, and coordinate their interventions in order to generate transformative effects in rural territories. The analysis of the collected narratives shows that public action is not limited to general orientations or declarative commitments, but is materialized through specific operational mechanisms, such as the elaboration of concerted regional plans, the establishment of multi-level governance platforms, the use of delegated financing schemes, and the structuring of partnerships involving territorial authorities, national agencies, associative actors, and local cooperatives. From this perspective, public institutions assume a central catalytic role within the causal chains of change, by articulating objectives of social inclusion, economic sustainability, and territorial resilience with action instruments adapted to local realities. When social innovation is embedded in public coordination mechanisms, it becomes a cross-cutting modality of collective action, enabling responses to situations of marginalization and vulnerability in rural areas while fostering the emergence of collective learning processes. The set of mobilized actors thus engages in a bottom-up dynamic structured around a shared vision of territorial development.

3.2. Correspondence Factor Analysis

The correspondence factor analysis used in this study reveals a clear structuring of discourses related to institutional frameworks and public organizational arrangements supporting social innovation in rural tourism. The first factorial axis, which accounts for 70.2% of total inertia, sharply contrasts an institutional and normative register—dominated by terms such as action, public, embody, norm, and anchor—with a more techno-operational register structured around lexemes such as standard, fdt, label, guide, and economic. This polarization reflects two complementary modes of legitimizing public action. On the one hand, there is a prescriptive and symbolic logic, in which the state seeks to durably embed social innovation in rural territories through references to anchoring, territorialization, and the embodiment of public policies. On the other hand, there is an instrumental logic, based on the mobilization of concrete tools for coordination, standardization, and financing intended to frame practices. The observed opposition does not indicate a contradiction, but rather a functional differentiation between public action that produces meaning and public action that organizes instruments. This lexical structuring thus underscores the central role of the state in defining intervention frameworks, while



3.3. Similarity Analysis of Lexical Co-occurrences

The graphical structuring of lexical co-occurrences produced in this study highlights an organization of discourse around five central poles: innovation, social, rural, public, and tourism. This strong semantic concentration reveals an institutional framing in which public action seeks to articulate technical instruments—such as financing, labeling, platforms, or support schemes—with territorialized dynamics based on cooperatives, local circuits, and forms of solidarity-based tourism. The configuration of lexical links suggests a logic of functional coherence in which actors, tools, and objectives appear aligned around a goal of territorial transformation. However, this visualization tends to smooth over the complexity of actual interactions. The dominance of stabilized nodes obscures power imbalances, asymmetric financial dependencies, fragilities in inter-institutional coordination, and tensions related to resource allocation. The role of local authorities and regional institutions, which is nonetheless decisive in the governance of rural tourism, appears weakly differentiated in the mapping, as do issues related to the financial sustainability of projects or their uneven appropriation by local communities. By primarily highlighting established and consensual relationships, the figure tends to render invisible the processes of negotiation, conflictual adjustments, and disruptions in the implementation of public policies, thus offering a partially idealized representation of social innovation in rural contexts.



3.4. Word Cloud

The word cloud produced in this study, based on institutional discourses related to public frameworks and support arrangements for social innovation in rural tourism, reveals a highly coherent semantic structuring. The strong centrality of the terms tourism, innovation, social, public, action, local, and cooperative reflects a clearly articulated strategic orientation in favor of inclusive territorial development. This lexical configuration points to the existence of a shared reference framework in which public action is positioned as a structuring lever of local dynamics. The simultaneous presence of operational notions such as circuit, project, arrangement, platform, or training underscores a willingness to translate policy orientations into tangible intervention mechanisms. Through this lexical density, the word cloud makes it possible to visualize the articulation between the different elements of the causal chain mobilized by the theory of change, from institutional inputs to the expected outcomes in terms of inclusion, territorial valorization, and economic structuring. Social innovation thus emerges as a central interface linking public action to local practices, notably through cooperatives, short supply chains, and forms of solidarity-based tourism. This first level of interpretation suggests a gradual appropriation of this strategic framework by public actors, who increasingly embed social innovation within a logic of coordination, territorialization, and the alignment of interventions across rural areas.



4. Discussion

Lexicometric analyses show that public action is primarily articulated through normative, strategic, and prescriptive registers, reflecting a strong intention to steer change from the top down. This discursive configuration corresponds to the first stage of the theory of change, in which public policies define the objectives, priorities, and rules of the game intended to frame collective action. The results of the correspondence factor analysis confirm that the state seeks to embed social innovation within stabilized reference frameworks, mobilizing notions of territorial anchoring, conformity, and institutional legitimation. From this perspective, institutional frameworks do not directly produce social innovation, but they condition its emergence by reducing uncertainty, setting explicit objectives, and shaping the expectations of local actors. The theory of change thus makes it possible to understand that public action operates upstream of the transformation process, by structuring an environment conducive to social innovation in rural tourism. However, this orientation remains largely top-down, revealing a conception of change based on the diffusion of objectives and norms rather than on the co-construction of local trajectories, which constitutes an initial limitation with regard to the principles of adaptive change advocated by the theory.

The results also highlight the central role of public organizational arrangements as intermediate mechanisms within the causal chain of change. In line with the theory of change, these arrangements ensure the translation of institutional frameworks into concrete action capacities through governance, financing, labeling, or technical support. Similarity analyses and the word cloud reveal a strong centrality of organizational instruments, confirming that social innovation in rural tourism is conceived as the outcome of structured institutional coordination. However, the discussion of the results brings to light the limited visibility of mediation mechanisms that are essential to effective change, such as collective learning, local appropriation, negotiation among actors, or the gradual adjustment of arrangements. This relative absence suggests that the causal chain is conceived in a linear manner, with arrangements assumed to automatically produce territorial effects. Yet, the theory of change emphasizes the non-linear and evolutionary nature of transformation processes, particularly in rural contexts characterized by heterogeneous actors and resources. The findings thus show that while institutional frameworks and organizational arrangements formally support social innovation, their actual effectiveness depends on their ability to integrate reflexivity, flexibility, and feedback mechanisms. In the absence of these elements, the causal chain of change remains incomplete, limiting the transformative scope of public action in rural tourism.

Conclusion

By mobilizing the theory of change as the central analytical framework, this study has made it possible to better understand how institutional frameworks and public organizational arrangements support social innovation in rural tourism, not as isolated factors but as articulated components of an intentional causal chain. The findings show that public action primarily operates at the level of change inputs, by defining strategic orientations, norms, and reference frameworks that structure the space of action available to local actors. From this perspective, institutional frameworks play a fundamental role in framing and legitimizing action, by orienting tourism development objectives toward social inclusion, sustainability, and territorial embeddedness. The theory of change thus makes it possible to move beyond an instrumental reading of public policies and to highlight their structuring function in shaping the initial conditions of change. However, the analysis reveals that this structuring is largely based on a top-down logic, in which objectives and norms are formulated at the central level before being implemented locally. While this approach helps reduce uncertainty and stabilize expectations, it also limits the capacity of institutional frameworks to fully integrate the diversity of territorial trajectories



and the social dynamics specific to rural areas, which constitutes a central tension in the change processes under study.

Furthermore, the study highlights the key role of public organizational arrangements as intermediate mechanisms within the theory of change, ensuring the translation of institutional orientations into concrete actions. These arrangements—whether related to governance, financing, labeling, or support—emerge as essential levers for implementing social innovation in rural tourism. Nevertheless, the results underline that the causal chain of change remains partially incomplete, insofar as mechanisms of learning, feedback, and adjustment are weakly articulated in institutional discourses. Yet, the theory of change emphasizes the evolutionary and non-linear nature of transformation processes, particularly in rural contexts characterized by uncertainty and heterogeneous actors. The conclusion of this research therefore shows that the effectiveness of public action does not depend solely on the robustness of institutional frameworks or the proliferation of organizational arrangements, but on their capacity to integrate reflexivity, adaptability, and local appropriation. From this perspective, strengthening public support for social innovation in rural tourism requires conceiving change as an open process, based on adjustable and territorially embedded causal chains.

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