



Dimensions of Governance that Shape Operations of Trails Network Organizations

Final Report

Benchmarking study for the AFD project

“Emergence of the first trails network from the Mediterranean”

April 2024

Developed by: Paths of Greece

In partnership
with

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AFD
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JORDAN
TRAIL


درب الجبل اللبناني
LEBANON MOUNTAIN TRAIL


مسار فلسطين التراثي
Palestinian Heritage Trail


TÉTRAKTYS
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1. Introduction

This document provides a comprehensive overview of findings gathered from the benchmarking study highlighting the best practices of existing tourism and hiking routes networks around the world. This study was commissioned by the consortium of organizations¹ that are implementing the AFD funded project "Emergence of the first trails network from the Mediterranean". This project seeks to establish the first network of long-distance hiking trails in the Mediterranean - *Med Trails Network* - fostering regional collaboration on trail management, development, and promotion. It emphasizes hiking-based tourism as a means to boost local economies, improve area governance, and address climate change challenges.

1.1. Purpose of the study

This study is a critical initial step of the project and involves benchmarking existing trails networks to glean best practices and approaches. This benchmarking study is crucial for shaping the new network's objectives, values, vision, governance structure, legal status, economic model, and promotional strategies, drawing insights from both national and international trail networks.

The work unfolded in two main phases: the inception phase, where significant trails networks were identified for potential benchmarking, and the in-depth analysis phase, involving six selected networks. This approach aimed to comprehend their context, challenges, governance, legal frameworks, and economic models, among other relevant aspects.

The project included collaboration with the Med Trails Network's technical team and stakeholders, encompassing documentation review, interviews with key network members, and discussions to tailor the study's focus to the network's ambitions. The outcome is a comprehensive report offering recommendations based on the findings identified in the case studies, intended to guide the development and success of the Med Trails Network.

1.2. Context of the Med Trails Network



Figure 1 Mediterranean basin, Plan Bleu, 2009

¹ The involved organizations are Agence française de développement, Afrat, Tetraktys, Jordan Trail Association, Lebanon Mountain Trail Association, and Palestinian Heritage Trail.

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The Med Trails Network was established in 2023 with the aim to enhance collaboration among Mediterranean trails associations, promoting the development of the region's trails. It seeks to facilitate discussions, information exchange, and research on the economic, social, and environmental impacts of trail development, while engaging in various projects and partnerships.

The founding organisations have committed to a “*Declaration of principles*” that ought to guide operations of the network. The key elements of the declaration are summarized in the below table.

<p style="text-align: center;">Vision</p> <p>The goal is to create a Mediterranean network encompassing the region's major trails, enabling all partners to contribute to and benefit from the Med Trails Network.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Ambitions</p> <p>Boost income for local rural communities through sustainable tourism.</p> <p>Encourage exploration of territories and cultural heritage along the trails.</p> <p>Increase awareness of climate change effects on hiking and promote ecosystem and biodiversity preservation.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Mision</p> <p>Mediterranean hiking trails drive sustainable economic growth, social development, and environmental conservation.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Values</p> <p>Integrity and transparency Respect and collaboration Inclusiveness Participation</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Objectives</p> <p>Promote collaboration and knowledge sharing among Mediterranean trail organizations for sustainable management and collective challenges.</p> <p>Enhance local trail associations' abilities and resources for sustainable tourism management and promotion.</p> <p>Create common tools for trail standards, promotion, sustainability, economic growth, and conservation.</p> <p>Participate in regional discussions on principles of sustainable tourism and trail development.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Activities</p> <p>Support sustainable trail creation and upkeep.</p> <p>Organize training, meetings, and workshops.</p> <p>Enhance staff and volunteer skills.</p> <p>Seek funding for members.</p> <p>Boost cooperation projects.</p> <p>Facilitate knowledge sharing among associations.</p>

Figure 2 Summary of the Declaration of Principles signed by founding members of the Med trails Network.

1.2.1. Med Trails Network's trails ecosystem

Ecosystem of hiking trails is characterized by a complexity of interacting elements – it is referred to as a nested ecosystem. The basic factors that make up the ecosystems of trails are depicted in Figure 3. Furthermore, and of paramount importance, the trail users – the hikers – must be acknowledged, as their interests and requirements are the essential cornerstone of the trails' value chain.

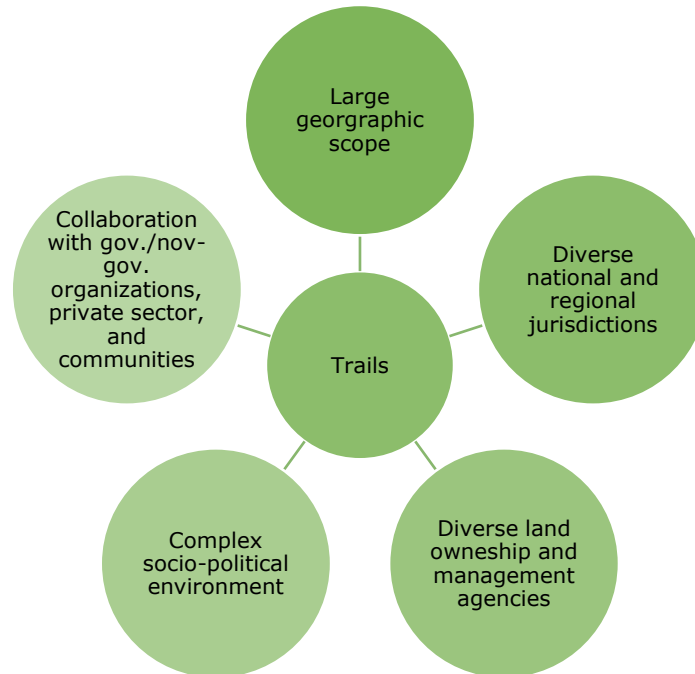


Figure 3 Foundational aspects of trails ecosystems.

Med Trails network operates within a complex interplay of economic, social, policy, and environmental factors that need to be addressed with strategic, inclusive, and sustainable approaches.

Some of the key considerations include:

Economic Context:

Local Economies and Rural Development: Many areas along the included trails are very rural and rely on small-scale and community-based tourism. The network aspires to play a crucial role in diversifying income sources through sustainable tourism, which can lead to improved livelihoods and economic resilience. However, given the inherent volatility of small-scale tourism, marked by unpredictable visitor patterns and reliance on a less mass-market approach, it's imperative that comprehensive, well thought-out strategies be developed and implemented to mitigate risks and manage expectations.

Tourism Trends: The global and regional tourism landscape, influenced by factors like travel restrictions (e.g. due to pandemics or armed conflicts) or changing tourist preferences towards outdoor and nature-based activities, will affect the network. There's an opportunity to capitalize on the growing interest in sustainable and ecotourism but any global or regional instabilities in a destination significantly undermine its potential and thus limit an envisioned impact.

Social Context:

Community Involvement and Benefits: Ensuring that local communities are engaged and benefit from the trails is essential for the network's success. This involves creating realistic income-generating

opportunities, enhancing social cohesion, and ensuring that development provides opportunity for the education of visitors and also does not disrupt local residents' quality of life.

Cultural Heritage: The Mediterranean is steeped in history and culture. The network has the potential to promote cultural heritage sites, but it must also address the challenges of preserving these sites while increasing their unrestricted accessibility.

Policy and Governance Context:

Regional Collaboration: Given the cross-border nature of the network, effective governance requires collaboration among countries, regions, and local authorities. Navigating the administrative asymmetry (e.g. different policies, regulations, and interests) will be crucial.

Sustainable Tourism Policies: The success and operations of the network are closely tied to how well they align with current sustainable tourism policies, environmental regulations, and international standards. More importantly, the network must actively enhance the integration of trails' well-being and related issues into wider policy discussions. This is crucial, especially in areas with underdeveloped policies on sustainable tourism and environmental protection. By advocating for and influencing these policy discussions, the network can significantly contribute to the advancement of sustainable tourism practices and environmental stewardship. This proactive involvement also supports the development of stronger policies, ultimately benefiting both the environment and local communities.

Environmental Context:

Biodiversity and Conservation: The Mediterranean region is known for its rich biodiversity and unique ecosystems. The network must navigate conservation efforts, ensuring trails development and activities minimize environmental impact and promote preservation.

Climate Change: With the Mediterranean facing significant climate change impacts, such as increased temperatures and altered precipitation patterns, the network's activities must adapt to and mitigate these challenges, particularly in promoting sustainable tourism practices.



Figure 4 Palestinian Heritage Trail; credit: David Palazon



2. Approach and Methodology

Acknowledging the vast spectrum of governance structures characterizing existing trails networks worldwide, this research applies a specialized approach and methodology tailored specifically to the needs of the study. It leverages the unique contextual factors encountered across different regions and integrates a wide array of operational practices with the aim to encapsulate the multifaceted dimensions of trails networks' operations.

To begin with, broadly, four dimensions of sustainable development were considered (Figure 5):

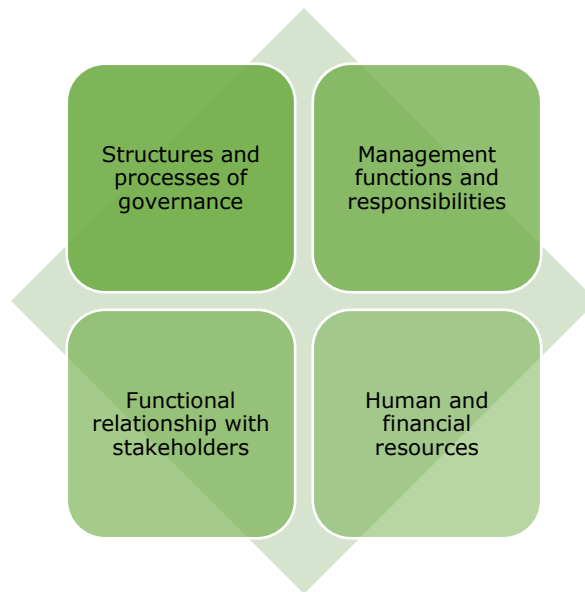


Figure 5 Broad dimensions of sustainable development

Keeping in mind those dimensions, an initial survey, attached as Annex A, was distributed to the trails organisations worldwide to glean insights into their operations. The overview of results is attached as Annex B.

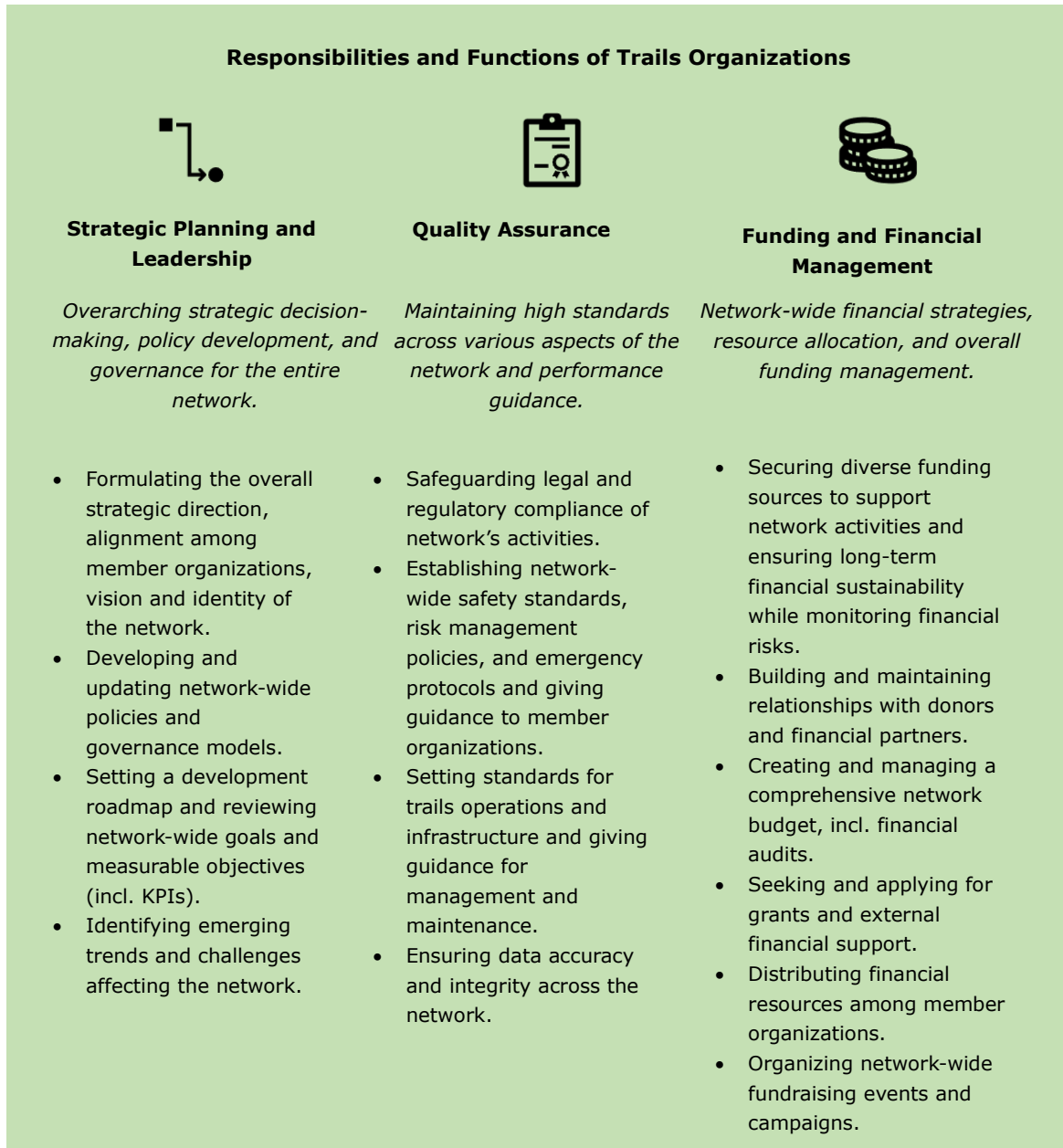
One-country trails:

- Trans Canada trail, Canada
- National Scenic and Historic Trails, USA
- Schweizer Wanderwege, Switzerland
- Thousand Miles Association, Taiwan
- Culture Routes Society, Turkey
- Appalachian Trails Conservancy, USA
- Bruce Trail Conservancy, Canada

Multiple-countries trails:

- European Ramblers Association, Europe
- Via Francigena, Europe
- Via Mariae, Europe
- Sultans trail, Europe/Asia
- Great Himalaya trail, Asia
- Jerusalem way, Europe/Asia
- Asia Trails network, WTN
- Hub for the Americas, WTN

A mixed-method approach was applied to develop a comprehensive overview of the responsibilities and functions of trails organizations. This involved analysing primary data gathered from surveys and stakeholder consultations within the trail community, as well as secondary data from desktop research.





International Collaboration and Coordination

Coordinating and managing relationships with international partners and across member organizations.

- Building alliances with international partners and negotiating international agreements and partnerships.
- Increasing the network's global visibility and recognition.
- Participating in global forums and conferences.
- Managing cross-border projects and collaborative initiatives.
- Sharing knowledge and best practices, and providing training, within network members and international partners.
- Facilitating exchange and (volunteer) programs.
- Harmonizing standards and practices within the network.



Public Relations and Communication

Overseeing public relations and developing network-wide communication strategies, overseeing public relations.

- Managing the network's public image and media relations.
- Purposeful advocacy activities supporting network's vision and mission.
- Coordinating internal and external communication efforts at network level.
- Crafting an integrated marketing and branding strategy for the network.
- Ensuring consistent and clear messaging across media platforms.
- Organizing network-wide events and promotional activities.
- Establishing marketing partnerships and collaborations.
- Distributing promotional materials and campaigns.



Strategic Planning and Leadership

Building and maintaining relationships with stakeholders and managing broad community engagement.

- Fostering strong relationships and maintaining transparent communication with all stakeholders.
- Building partnerships with local organizations and groups (incl. public and private sector, and community).
- Organizing specific community engagement events and initiatives.
- Enquiring stakeholders input for the network's decision-making process and facilitating stakeholder feedback and community consultations.
- Hosting public meetings and informational forums.



**Human Resources and
Volunteer Management**

Managing the network's human resources policies, volunteer programs, and development.

- Recruiting skilled staff and managing human resources.
- Coordinating training programs for education and development.
- Coordinating volunteer engagement.



**Environmental Stewardship
and Cultural Preservation**

Network-wide environmental and cultural policies, setting sustainability goals and promoting the cultural and historical aspects of trails.

- Establishing network-wide environmental sustainability policies and promoting their implementation across the network.
- Promoting conservation efforts, biodiversity and cultural preservation.
- Educating stakeholders about environmental conservation and cultural heritage.
- Collaborating with environmental experts and cultural organizations.

Subsequently, this overview was screened in the light of a typological framework (Figure 6) to select suitable organizations for the in-depth analysis.

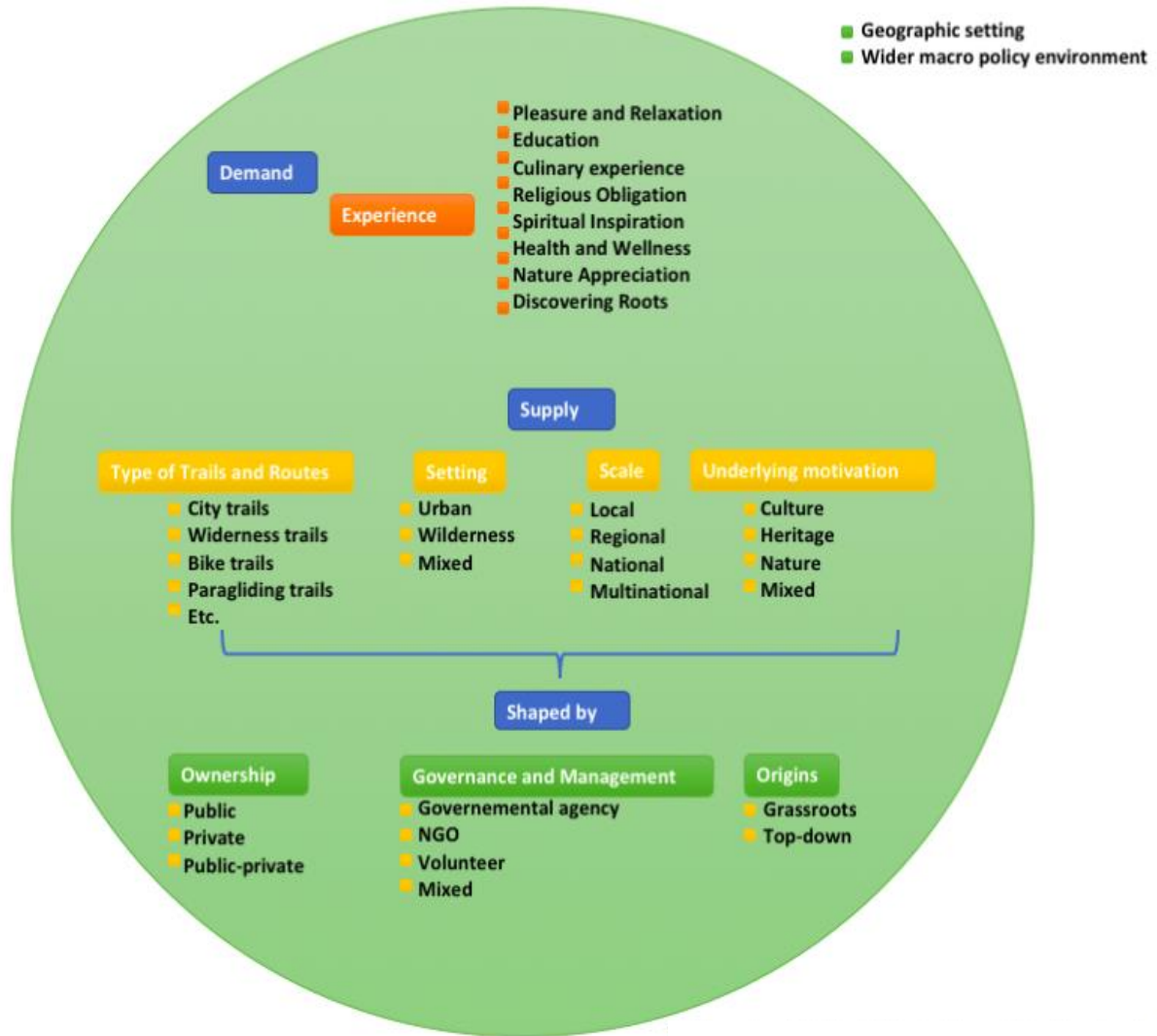


Figure 6 Trails ecosystems typology

Selected trail networks organizations:

- National Scenic and Historic Trails, USA²
- World Trails Network, global
- European Ramblers Association, Europe
- Great Himalaya Trail
- Asia Trails Network
- European Association of Via Francigena ways

The selected organizations cover the broad range of elements that make up the trails ecosystem. They present diverse experiences on the demand side, and offer a broad scale of supply side elements, such as type of trails routes, settings, trail genesis, as well as different governance and management arrangements or ownership types.

² For the purposes of this study, a representative from the Bureau of Land Management was interviewed. The information provided in this report is based on the details supplied by this agency, which are relevant to understanding how the entire trails system operates.

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To facilitate interviews with the representatives of these selected organizations, a comprehensive data collection tool (Annex C) was developed, focusing on key thematic domains (Figure 7).



Figure 7 Thematic domains of the data collection tool

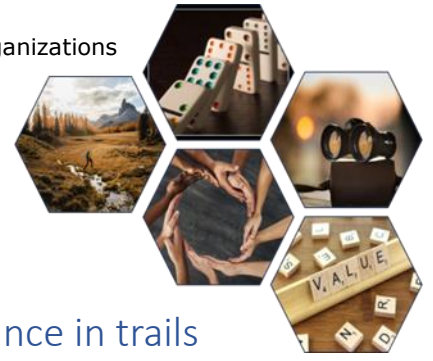
As part of the in-depth interviews process, a second survey was disseminated amongst the trails organizations, inquiring details about organizational culture - modus operandi (Annex D).

And finally, in preparation for the progress update presentation to the consortium members, a short survey was disseminated amongst the project members to gauge their anticipations and beliefs concerning the forthcoming activities of the network (Annex E).

Ultimately, the goal of this study³ was to:

- Provide insights into which arrangements are more frequently associated with successful outcomes in certain contexts
- To offer recommendations for the context of Med Trails network

³ As a disclaimer, it is crucial to acknowledge that the information provided herein should not be construed as indicative of causality. The insights offered are derived from identified patterns, bearing a strong dependence on context and are inherently subjective in nature.



3. Synthesis of key findings on dimensions of governance in trails networks organizations

This chapter presents a comprehensive synthesis of the key findings derived from our investigation into the governance dimensions that significantly influence the operations of trails networks organizations. The primary aim of our research was to understand the governance frameworks that shape these organizations and to identify which particular arrangements yield the most favourable outcomes within specific contexts.

In the course of this study, we analysed various governance structures, processes, and relational dynamics that collectively contribute to the operational efficacy of trail networks. The findings detailed in the following sections are the result of an extensive examination involving comparative assessments and qualitative insights, aiming at understanding of the interplay between governance and organizational performance.

The significance of this analysis lies in its utility for stakeholders involved in the design, implementation, and management of trail networks. By exploring the governance arrangements that are most often associated with successful outcomes, this research offers valuable insights that can inform decision-making processes and strategic planning. Specifically, the context of the Med Trails network is addressed, providing tailored recommendations that are expected to enhance its operational sustainability and success.

Ultimately, the insights included in this study are intended to serve as a guide for the newly founded Med Trails Network as it is seeking to establish and optimize its governance structures. By adopting governance frameworks that are aligned with the proven arrangements identified in this research, Med Trails Network can improve its envisioned outcomes and better fulfil its strategic objectives.

In below chapters we will explore a different dimension of governance, presenting the data-driven conclusions drawn from our analysis and the implications of these findings for the Med Trails network.

3.1. Elements enhancing and sustaining operations of trails networks organizations

In synthesizing the data collected through our study, we have identified three core factors that are crucial for the effective management and sustainability of trails networks organizations. These elements are foundational to developing a robust framework for governance and operational success. They are categorized as follows:

1. **Defining a Clear Organizational Purpose:** Central to effective trails networks management is a well-articulated mission, or *raison d'être*, which guides all strategic decisions and initiatives. This clarity of purpose is essential for aligning the objectives of diverse stakeholders and for steering the organization towards its long-term goals.
2. **Establishing Solid Governance and Stakeholder Engagement:** The strength of an organization's governance structures and the quality of its stakeholder relationships are critical determinants of its operational efficacy. Effective governance establishes clear roles, function, and processes essential for accountability and adaptability to change. Strong stakeholder relationships are crucial for collaboration, securing resources, and leveraging expertise to meet the needs.
3. **Ensuring Resource Sustainability:** The viability of trails networks organizations heavily relies on the sustainable management of human and financial resources. Long-term sustainability involves strategic resource allocation, investment in human capital, and the development of financial resilience to support ongoing and future projects.

Each of these strategic areas encompasses a range of practices, structures, and relationships that together construct a comprehensive governance framework designed to support the operational stability and growth of trails network organizations. Elaboration on those three elements is provided on page 27.

For each examined network, we systematically present comparative overview of those elements (Figure 13, Figure 21, Figure 29), articulating their operational implications by providing examples that illustrate their practical impact – chapters 5.1.1. – 5.3.6. This comparative approach not only highlights the distinctive features of each network but also underscores the commonalities that are critical for effective management and sustainability of operations in general.

Beyond those primary factors, we include additional considerations drawn from the interviews, which encompass a range of pertinent issues affecting trail network operations – chapter 5.1.7., 5.2.7., 5.3.7. These considerations form an integral part of the analysis, offering insights that contribute to a holistic understanding of the dynamics at play within trails networks ecosystems.

By presenting these findings, we aim to offer a framework for assessing and enhancing the functionality and resilience of the trails networks, thereby offering tool to support the objectives of the Med Trails network.

3.2. Summary: A Well-defined purpose

The governance of trails networks organizations is a multifaceted effort, requiring a well-struck balance between strategic direction and operational flexibility. A well-defined purpose is key to provide a direction, guide strategic decision-making and operational methodologies, but also to align all activities with the overarching objectives of the organization. Key aspects of considering an organizational purpose are shown in Figure 8.

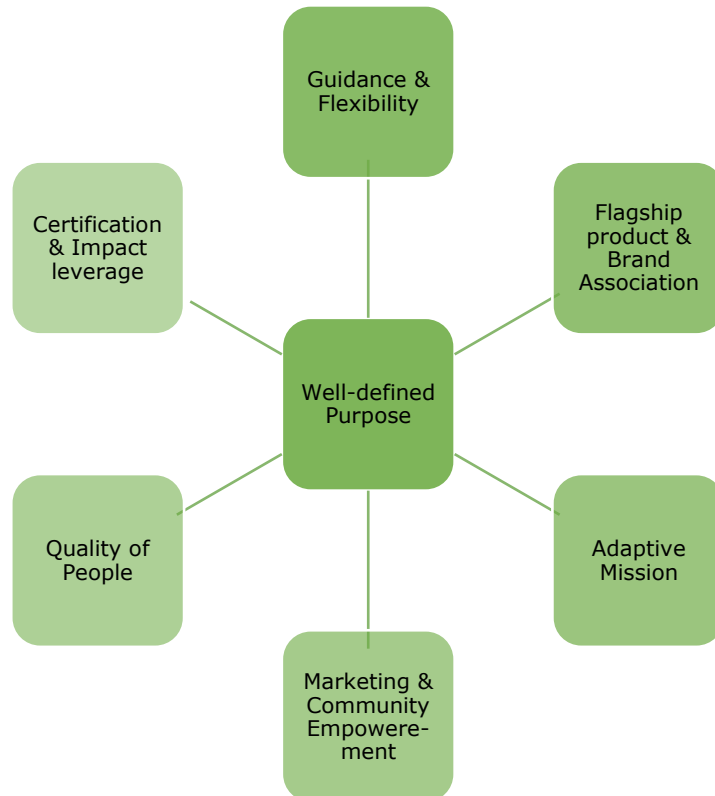


Figure 8 Aspects of an organizational purpose

➤ **Guidance and Flexibility**

At the heart of effective governance lies a structured chain of command complemented by a system designed to provide clear guidance. This foundational structure ensures that operational decisions and strategic initiatives are informed by a consistent framework. However, it is the incorporation of flexibility within this system—allowing for local interpretation based on specific regional contexts—that truly enhances its effectiveness. This dual approach ensures that while overarching goals and standards are maintained, local nuances are respected and integrated, fostering a sense of ownership and relevance at the community level.

➤ **Flagship Product and Brand Association**

The development and promotion of a flagship product or experience (e.g. an event or a specific trail segments) are vital for creating a strong association with the trail network. This key element serves not only as a central point of identity but also as a powerful marketing tool, continuously attracting interest and engagement. The consistent promotion of this flagship experience reinforces the network's brand, ensuring it remains top of mind for both new and returning users.

➤ **Adaptive Mission**

Maintaining a solid structure and system is crucial, but the ability to adapt the organization's mission in response to changing trends and expectations is what ensures its continued relevance and success. This adaptive capacity allows trails networks to navigate the evolving landscape of user needs, environmental challenges, and societal values, thereby securing their place as a relevant actor.

➤ **Marketing and Community Empowerment**

A strategic marketing approach that aligns with user demand and emphasizes community empowerment reflects a comprehensive understanding of the ecosystem within which trails networks operate. This strategy ensures that marketing efforts not only drive engagement and usage but also support local communities, fostering a collaborative relationship that benefits all stakeholders. Empowering communities through marketing initiatives not only strengthens the network but also cultivates a loyal base of supporters and advocates.

➤ **Quality of People**

The significance of human capital cannot be overstated in the governance of trails networks organizations (or any other organization for that matter). The right people in the right roles are the lifeblood of any organization, driving strategy, relations, and day-to-day operations. Their skills, dedication, and passion are indispensable, highlighting the importance of strategic human resource practices in recruiting, training, and retaining individuals who are not only capable but also deeply committed to the network's mission.

➤ **Certification and Impact Leverage**

Affiliation with recognized certifications, such as cultural route designations or quality labels, provides trail networks with a mark of distinction that can enhance their status and attract further interest and support. More importantly, these certifications offer a platform for leveraging the network's visibility and influence for broader societal impacts, such as environmental stewardship and climate change advocacy. This strategic use of certification not only elevates the network's profile but also contributes to its role as a change agent within the community and beyond.

In chapter 5.1. a comparative overview of those aspects can be found (Figure 13) alongside illustrative examples from each analysed network – chapters 5.1.1 – 5.1.6.

3.3. Summary: Governance Structures and Stakeholder relationships

Structural frameworks and stakeholder relationships are another key component of good governance – they play integral role in fostering a collaborative environment conducive to achieving envisioned impact. Key aspects of considering governance structures and stakeholders relationships is shown in Figure 9.

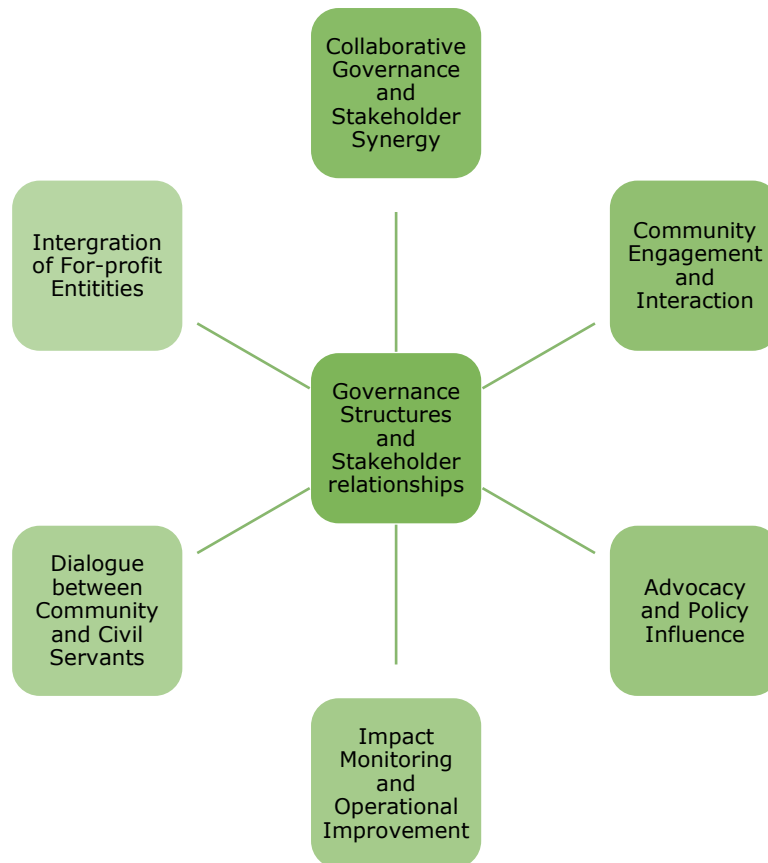


Figure 9 Aspects of governance structures and stakeholder relationships

➤ **Collaborative Governance and Stakeholder Synergy**

At the forefront of effective governance lies a collaborative approach, combining together the interests and efforts of various stakeholders to create a cohesive strategy. This synergy is important in realizing the full spectrum of benefits that trail networks can offer. By facilitating positive interactions between hikers, local communities, and other stakeholders, trail networks can enhance the overall experience of everyone involved, thereby contributing to a cycle of benefits that reinforce the value and sustainability of the trails.

➤ **Community Engagement and Interaction**

The cultivation of a strong sense of community is vital, achieved through the formation of task teams and other platforms designed to stimulate interaction and exchange among members. These platforms serve as catalysts for community engagement, encouraging active participation in the stewardship and enhancement of trails networks. By fostering a collaborative environment, these teams enable the sharing of ideas, resources, and best practices, further strengthening the governance structure and operational efficiency.

➤ **Advocacy and Policy Influence**

Ensuring that the needs and priorities of trails networks and their stakeholders are reflected in the policy agendas of civil servants and governmental bodies is critical. This requires a concerted effort to engage in

advocacy and relationship-building with policy makers, highlighting the importance of trails in community development, environmental conservation, and public health. By securing a place on policy agendas, trails networks can better advocate for the support and resources needed to maintain and expand their infrastructure and impact.

➤ **Impact Monitoring and Operational Improvement**

The continuous monitoring of the trails network's impact on both the environment and the community is essential for informing operational improvements and strategic adjustments. This process not only helps to quantify the benefits and challenges associated with the trails but also provides valuable insights that can guide decision-making and policy development. Through systematic impact monitoring, trail networks can demonstrate their value, secure funding, and adapt to changing needs and conditions.

➤ **Facilitating Dialogue Between Community and Civil Servants**

Creating channels for open dialogue between the community and civil servants is crucial for aligning interests and fostering mutual understanding. This dialogue enables the sharing of perspectives, concerns, and aspirations, facilitating collaborative problem-solving and the co-creation of solutions that benefit both the trail network and the broader community. By bridging gaps between stakeholders, trail networks enhance their relevance and impact.

➤ **Integration of For-Profit Entities**

Incorporating for-profit entities into the organizational structure represents a strategic approach to improving operations and enhancing overall impact. This integration can provide additional resources, expertise, and innovation, driving operational efficiencies and expanding the network's capabilities. Or, by partnering with other for-profit entities, trails networks can leverage business acumen and investment to further their mission, enhance the trail experience, and contribute to sustainable development.

In chapter 5.2. a comparative overview of those aspects can be found (Figure 21) alongside illustrative examples from each analysed network – chapters 5.2.1 – 5.2.6.

3.4. Summary: Human capital and Financial sustainability

The ultimate sustainability of trails networks organizations depends on the effective management of human capital and financial resources. These twin pillars support the operational infrastructure, enabling these entities to fulfill their mission while maximizing their impact on local communities and the broader ecosystem. Key aspects of considering human capital and financial sustainability is shown in Figure 10.



Figure 10 Aspects of human capital and financial sustainability

➤ **Valuing Volunteer Contributions and Enhancing Funding**

The cornerstone of successful trail network organizations is the invaluable contribution of volunteer time. Recognizing and quantifying the value of this volunteer effort is crucial, not only for articulating the organization's value proposition but also for securing funding. By leveraging analytical tools to measure and communicate the impact of volunteer contributions, organizations can enhance their fundraising efforts, attracting both public and private support. This dual approach underscores the symbiotic relationship between recognizing volunteer efforts and catalyzing financial support.

➤ **Balancing Volunteerism and Professional Management**

Achieving an equilibrium between volunteer contributions and the necessity for professional management is essential for operational excellence and strategic growth. While volunteers bring passion, local knowledge, and cost savings, certain aspects of trails networks management require professional skills and oversight. Striking this balance ensures that organizational objectives are met with both efficiency and a deep commitment to the mission, fostering a sustainable model of operation.

➤ **Diversifying Funding Sources**

Financial sustainability demands a diversified funding strategy. By exploring various revenue streams—ranging from government grants and private donations to membership fees and corporate partnerships—

trails networks can build a resilient financial foundation. This diversification not only mitigates risks associated with reliance on a single funding source but also opens up new opportunities for growth and development.

➤ **Strategic Development Stages**

The strategic unfolding of operations through a sequence of stages—*market understanding, product development, capacity building, and marketing and promotion*—provides a structured pathway to sustainability. This sequential approach ensures that the organization remains focused and effective at each stage of development, ultimately benefiting the local communities through enhanced trail experiences, conservation efforts, and economic opportunities.

➤ **Rotating Secretariat for Organizational Management**

Considering a rotating secretariat as a managerial approach can offer fresh perspectives and distribute leadership responsibilities, ensuring that no single entity becomes overburdened. This model fosters a dynamic governance structure that can adapt to changing needs and challenges, promoting inclusivity and shared ownership among stakeholders.

➤ **Community Connection Events**

Integrating events that foster community connections into the operations of the organization is a vital strategy for building trust, engagement, and support. These events serve as platforms for dialogue, feedback, and celebration, reinforcing the bond between the trail network and the communities it serves. By dedicating resources to these gatherings, organizations can strengthen their social fabric and enhance their impact.

In chapter 5.3, a comparative overview of those aspects can be found (Figure 29) alongside illustrative examples from each analysed network – chapters 5.3.1 – 5.3.6.

3.5. Recommendations for Med Trails Network

For a newly established trails network organization navigating the process of organizational development, it is important to adopt a holistic and strategic approach. Recognizing the complexity, we recommend focusing on four strategic pillars—*Ecosystem*, *Product*, *Supporting Structures*, and *Awareness*—as essential elements of a foundational blueprint. These pillars, depicted in Figure 11, are designed to guide the Med trails Network in systematically addressing the critical aspects of their strategy and operations by offering a structured pathway to concentrate efforts on what is essential.

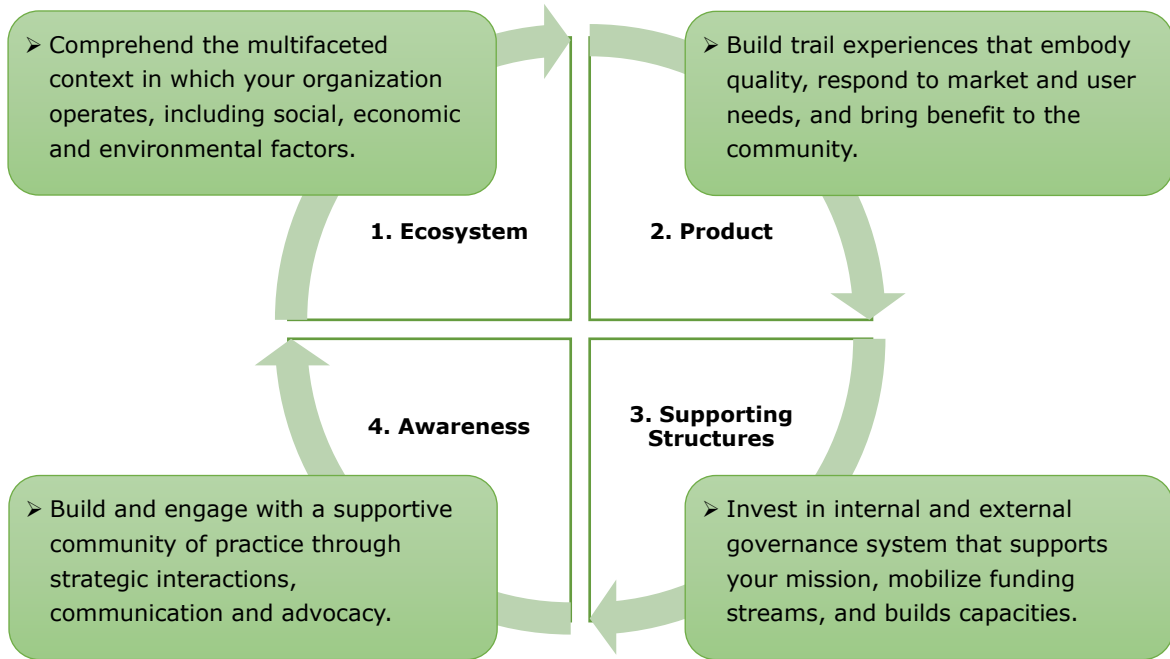


Figure 11 Strategic pillars of the Med Trails Network’s foundational blueprint



Figure 12 Lebanon Mountain Trail; credit: Waren Singh-Bartlett

Strategic Pillars Recommendations

1. Ecosystem

- i. *Comprehensive assessment:* Begin with a deep understanding of the economic, social, policy, and environmental aspects of your trails ecosystem to inform strategic and operational decisions.
- ii. *Understand stakeholder needs and engage them:* Actively engage with a broad range of stakeholders to ensure diverse perspectives are considered, aiming at the overall health of the entire ecosystem.
- iii. *Communicate Value Proposition Clearly:* Develop a value proposition that resonates with your stakeholders, emphasizing the benefits, and articulate it clearly in order to garner widespread support and systemic embeddedness.
- iv. *Adopt a Community-Centric Approach:* Facilitate community ownership through participatory governance and decision-making, ensuring the ecosystem serves those it's intended to benefit.
- v. *Adaptive Strategies:* Implement flexible strategies that can adapt to changes within the ecosystem, ensuring resilience and sustainability.

2. Product

- i. *Develop a flagship product:* Develop a standout trail segment or experience that embodies your mission and meets market demand, serving as the cornerstone of your product offering and attracting attention and resources.
- ii. *Prioritize quality and sustainability:* Ensure that promoted products meet high standards of quality and are developed with sustainability and community benefits as core principles.
- iii. *Align product offerings with market demand:* Regularly assess market trends and user feedback to ensure that the trail experiences remain relevant and in demand.
- iv. *Innovate based on user feedback:* Incorporate user feedback into the development and refinement of your products, ensuring they remain relevant and appealing to your audience.
- v. *Showcase the unique features of offerings:* Highlight the unique aspects of your products to differentiate and assert your position in the market.

3. Supporting Structures

- i. *Clear Governance Model:* Establish functional internal governance structures that define roles, responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms.
- ii. *Mobilize and Diversify Funding:* Beyond a funding strategy that combines grants, donations, sponsorships, and revenue-generating activities, actively mobilize community and stakeholder support through compelling advocacy, enhancing your financial sustainability.
- iii. *Lobby for Support and Recognition:* Engage in lobbying efforts and strategic partnerships to elevate the importance of your needs and interests in public policy agendas and facilitate regular interaction through dedicated platforms, enhancing your institutional sustainability.
- iv. *Professional and Volunteer Development:* Invest in the professional development of involved actors and the effective engagement of volunteers to build strong capacities as an organizational foundation.
- v. *Operational Efficiency:* Implement systems that enhance operational efficiency, enabling the organization to scale its impact.

4. Awareness

- i. *Strategic Communication Plan:* Develop a comprehensive communication plan that articulates the organization's mission, values, and achievements, engaging a wide audience.
- ii. *Build a Loyal Community for Amplified Impact:* Focus on creating a critical mass of supporters who can act as ambassadors for your trails, leveraging their networks and influence to enhance visibility and support.
- iii. *Community Engagement Initiatives:* Launch initiatives that engage the community in meaningful ways, fostering a sense of ownership and support for the trails network.
- iv. *Digital Presence:* Utilize digital platforms and social media to raise awareness, share stories, and engage with users and supporters, using monitoring and analytical tools to optimize.
- v. *Advocate for Policy and Social Change:* Position your organization as a thought leader in the space, advocating for broader support for trails and outdoor recreation through strategic communications and partnerships.



4. Trail profiles

This chapter provides an overview of the organisations selected for the analysis, detailing their foundational aspects, legal structures, and operational approaches. Through the medallions, we highlight key information such as governance, membership processes, and the characteristics of the trails they oversee, including length, type, and involved entities. These insights aim to encapsulate essential information about each entity.

National Scenic and Historic Trails



<https://www.blm.gov/programs/national-conservation-lands/national-scenic-and-historic-trails>

- **Foundation:** 1968
- **Legal Status:** National Trails System Act
- **Governance approach:** Centralized through strategic partnerships, with the central managing agency, e.g. BLM, coordinating among diverse stakeholders including state agencies, local governments, and nonprofit groups. Operational management is decentralized, allowing local entities to oversee day-to-day activities such as maintenance, conservation, and visitor services.
- **Legal documents:** Annex F
- **Organizational chart:**
<https://www.blm.gov/about/organization-chart>
- **New members:** Congressional approval and presidential designation following feasibility study
- **Membership fee:** not established
- **Type of Trails & entities:** 32 long-distance hiking trails & routes connecting tangible and intangible heritage; organized in partnership
- **Length of Trails:** almost 30 000 km
- **Character of Trails:** Wilderness, Rural, Historical, Spiritual, Scenic, Recreational, Cultural

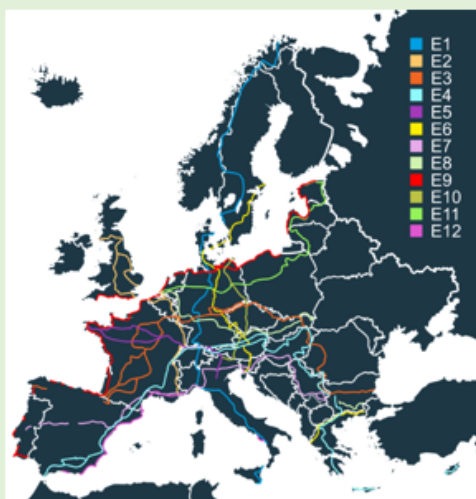
World Trails Network, Global



<https://worldtrailsnetwork.org/>

- **Foundation:** 2015
- **Legal Status:** Non-profit organization
- **Governance approach:** Centralized through managing board (International Board) consisting of elected members and overseeing the strategic direction. Members (either individuals or entities) enjoy autonomy and operate flexibly within the local conditions and needs as they see fit.
- **Legal documents:** Annex G, Annex H
- **Organizational chart:** NA (WTN organs listed in the Statutes)
- **New members:** Approval by the International Board following an application
- **Membership fee:** 20 USD (individuals), 100 USD (organizations and businesses)
- **Type of Trails & entities:** 50+ individuals and trail organizations worldwide; organized autonomously
- **Length of Trails:** thousands of kms
- **Character of Trails:** Wilderness, Rural, Historical, Spiritual, Scenic, Recreational, Cultural

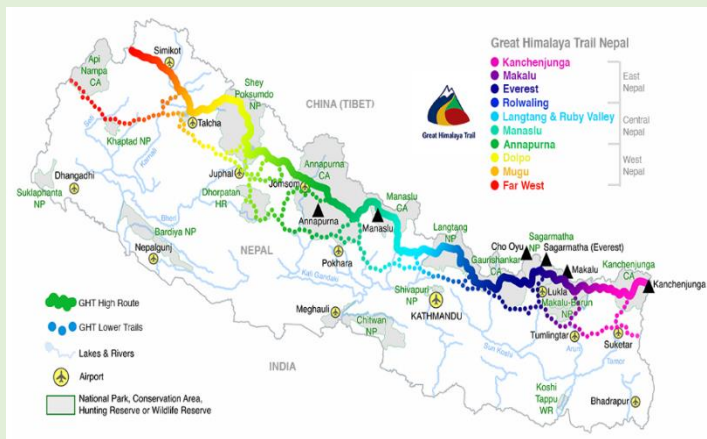
European Ramblers Association, Europe



<https://www.era-ewv-ferp.org/>

- **Foundation:** 1969
- **Legal Status:** Association of legal entities
- **Governance approach:** Centralized through the General meeting, the Presidium, and the Board (tasks of all listed in the Constitution) that can appoint a director and managers for specific tasks
- **Legal document:** Annex I
- **Organizational chart:** NA (ERA organs listed in the Constitution); membership matrix: Annex J
- **New members:** General meeting decides on the application after examination by the Board
- **Membership fee:** 568 – 677 EUR (based on the type of membership)
- **Type of Trails & entities:** 12 certified e-paths; other trails represented by member entities (e.g. national tourism club)
- **Length of Trails:** almost 60 000 km
- **Character of Trails:** Wilderness, Rural, Historical, Spiritual, Scenic, Recreational, Cultural

Great Himalaya trail, Himalayas



<https://www.greathimalayatrail.com/>

- **Foundation:** 2010
- **Legal Status:** Cooperative association – without legal status, community-based
- **Governance approach:** Decentralized, volunteer-led approach based on community leadership and input
- **Legal document:** NA
- **Organizational chart:** NA
- **New members:** Recognition process
- **Membership fee:** not established
- **Type of Trails & entities:** GHT high route and lower trails; community-based organization
- **Length of Trails:** 1 700 km
- **Character of Trails:** Wilderness, Rural, Spiritual, Scenic, Cultural

Asia Trails Network



<https://www.facebook.com/asiatrailnetwork/>

- **Foundation:** 2014
- **Legal Status:** Non-profit organization
- **Governance approach:** Role of the secretariat - the administrative and coordinating body of the network - rotates among member organizations over defined periods
- **Legal document:** Annex K
- **Organizational chart:** Annex L
- **New members:** Approval by the Steering Committee following an application
- **Membership fee:** 500 USD
- **Type of Trails & entities:** 28 trail organizations representing national and regional trails
- **Length of Trails:** thousands of kms
- **Character of Trails:** Wilderness, Rural, Spiritual, Scenic, Cultural

European Association of the Via Francigena Ways



<https://www.viefrancigene.org/en/about-us/>

- **Foundation:** 2001
- **Legal Status:** Non-profit association
- **Governance approach:** Centralized through the Meeting of Association members, Office of the President, and the General Secretary, with the management office
- **Legal document:** Annex M
- **Organizational chart:** NA (EAVF organs listed in the Statutes)
- **New members:** Approval by the Assembly following an application (various membership types based on the profile of an applicant)
- **Membership fee:** 1950 – 4650 EUR (based on the membership profile)
- **Type of Trails:** trails represented by organizations in areas that the VF traverses
- **Length of Trails:** more than 2000 km
- **Character of Trails:** Wilderness, Rural, Spiritual, Scenic, Cultural



5. Findings

In this chapter, we detail the findings from our analysis of the six trails networks, informed by rigorous data collection and stakeholder interviews. Our research has identified three principal factors that significantly influence trail network operations: 1. a well-defined purpose (*raison d'être*), 2. solid governance structures and stakeholder relations, and 3. the sustainability of human and financial resources.

1. Well-defined purpose

A clear and articulated purpose serves as the north star for a trail network, guiding decision-making, strategy, and daily operations. It is also related to a establishing and actively promoting a clear connection with an experience or a product that creates a clear association in peoples' hearts and minds.

It answers the fundamental question of why the network exists, which is pivotal for aligning the efforts of diverse stakeholders and securing ongoing support.

Without a well-defined purpose, trail networks risk becoming directionless, which can lead to inefficiencies, wasted resources, and a lack of engagement from both stakeholders and users.

2. Governance Structures and Stakeholder Relations

A sense of governance lays out the blueprint for how a trail network is managed and operated. It defines roles, functions, and processes that ensure accountability, transparency, and responsiveness.

Strong governance is critical for adapting to changing environmental conditions, stakeholder expectations, and user needs.

Moreover, healthy functional stakeholder relationships are crucial for systemic integration of the organization: for collaboration, securing resources, and advocacy. Stakeholders facilitate not only funding and support but also local knowledge and expertise that are essential for the network's adaptability and responsiveness to regional needs.

3. Sustainability of Human and Financial Resources

The sustainability of human and financial resources is the bedrock of any trails network's operations. Human capital, including staff, volunteers, and community members, is the engine that drives maintenance, promotion, and the day-to-day operations. Their skills, dedication, and passion are irreplaceable assets.

Financial sustainability, on the other hand, ensures that these human resources are supported, and that the infrastructure can be maintained over the long term. Without financial stability, even the most popular and well-intentioned trails networks can falter, as they may struggle to manage operational costs, invest in necessary actions, or respond to emerging needs and trends.

5.1 A well-defined purpose

A well-defined purpose is a fundamental answer to the essential question: How can a trail network succeed in generating a real added value for its constituents? By extension, it also serves as the foundation for strategic decisions and actions, aligning all activities towards a common goal and providing a benchmark for measuring success.

Overview of the key elements that characterize trails networks' reasons to exist is presented in Figure 13. Further, we include representative examples per each trail network to illustrate the point, and finally an overview of additional aspects for further consideration.



Figure 13 Key elements of the trails networks' purpose

5.1.1. National Scenic and Historic trails (NSHT)

The National Trail System in the United States is established and protected by law – it was created by the National Trails System Act in 1968. It calls out partner organizations to manage the trails in partnership. There are now 32 trails that are administered by either one, or in combination, by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), National Park Service, and Forest service.

BLM manages the trails through partnerships, community involvement, citizen action and agency commitment. This collaborative approach involving government agencies, non-profit organizations, volunteers and local communities allows for an effective management, maintenance, and enhancement of the trails.

For example, the Federal Interagency Council is one of the coordinating mechanisms from the government side, the Partnership for National Trails works through multiple assistance agreements with the non-profit trail organizations.

NSHT trails do not have a guaranteed annual budget in the sense of a fixed, earmarked amount of money allocated to them each fiscal year. Instead, funding for these trails is subject to the federal budget process, which involves proposals from the President, considerations by Congress, and eventual appropriation of funds. This process can be influenced by several factors and advocacy plays a major role in it.

The National Trail System

The model begins with administrative agencies tasked with the creation of comprehensive plans. These plans provide overall guidance for the development, maintenance, and sustainability of trails. As these trails often traverse various jurisdictions, local management becomes essential. This localized management adheres to the overarching guidance but operates independently. The primary goal of local managers is to protect and preserve the resources for which the trail was established, tailoring their strategies to the specific needs and challenges of their respective areas. This ensures that trails are not only maintained according to a unified national vision but are also adapted to the unique environmental, cultural, and recreational requirements of the communities they serve.

The structured chain of command in U.S. trails management is essential for harmonizing nationwide conservation efforts with local needs. It intends to facilitate efficient resource allocation, responsive decision-making, and effective on the ground operations. Moreover, this structure supports vital collaborations among federal, state, and local agencies, alongside non-profits and community volunteers, combining expertise and resources for the trails' sustainable use and enjoyment. This approach not only safeguards natural and cultural resources but also enriches community engagement and outdoor experiences, demonstrating the power of organized, cooperative stewardship. As an example, entities involved in operations of the Pacific Crest Trail are named in Figure 14.

Hike the Hill®: 25 Years of Trails Advocacy for the Future

This advocacy-focused event is a joint effort between the Partnership for the National Trails System and American Hiking Society. It brings together the trails community to advance shared trail priorities with congressional and Federal agency leaders including trails funding, public lands management and conservation, equitable access, and other top priority issues that sustain trails and improve access to National Trails.

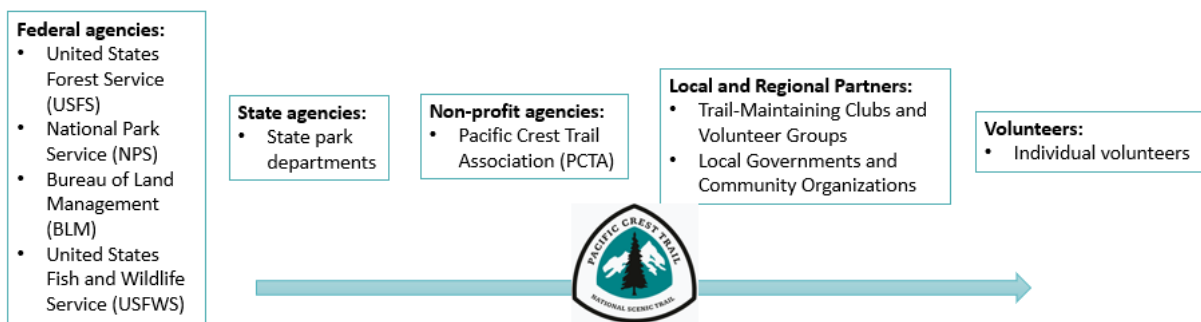


Figure 14 Entities involved in operations of the Pacific Crest Trail.

5.1.2. World Trails Network (WTN)

WTN is dedicated to promoting sustainable development and collaboration across global trails networks. Its overarching mission is to enhance trail management practices, advocate for environmental conservation, and support the growth of trails communities worldwide. This broad purpose sets the stage for WTN's initiatives, which are designed to address the complex challenges facing trails today, from preservation and access to cultural and ecological sustainability.



Figure 15 Invitation to the WTN conference in Ottawa

WTN's focus centers on its globally recognized conference, which serves as a key platform for addressing shared challenges in trail management and development. Through this event, the organization facilitates the exchange of experiences and best practices from various contexts, contributing to the advancement of the trail community. This conference, renowned for its broad attendance by trails professionals worldwide, is the main conduit through which the organization delivers its value, emphasizing collaboration and innovation in tackling common issues faced by trail organizations globally.

While the conference remains a cornerstone event, serving as the primary flagship product, complementing this key offering is the WTN Film Festival, which brings multiple strategic benefits: it caters not only to trail managers but also directly to hikers, enhancing the organization's outreach through its audiovisual appeal—an essential in today's digital age. The festival also stimulates creative endeavours, can be showcased in various locations as a roadshow in between conferences, and generates financial returns.

Sustaining Impact

through Quality

In a context where WTN's operational capacity is often constrained by volunteer availability (see page 48), the organization acknowledges that the pathway to influence and recognition lies through the quality of offered services and products.

This commitment to excellence is defined as a strategic pursuit aimed at establishing WTN's reputation as a serious and impactful player in the international trail community. By consciously associating high-quality outputs with its operations, WTN aims to reinforce trust and encourage engagement from a broad spectrum of stakeholders, enhancing its capacity to advocate for trail networks globally.

through Continuity

WTN leverages the power of consistency with its annual conference (held biennially since 2010), showcasing a commitment that resonates throughout the year. This continuity of action is instrumental in fortifying the organization's impact. Regularity cultivates anticipation, engagement, and, most importantly, trust within the global trails community. It signals WTN's presence and dedication to trail advocacy and collaboration, which in turn solidifies the network's role as an actor in the ongoing discourse on trail management and development.

5.1.3. European Ramblers Association (ERA)

ERA stands at the forefront of enhancing hiking experiences across Europe, driven by a multifaceted value proposition that extends well beyond trail connectivity. At its core, ERA aims to promote sustainable tourism, cultural exchange, outdoor recreation advocacy, conservation efforts, and community building among its network of member organizations. These pillars collectively underpin ERA's mission, reflecting its commitment to fostering an inclusive and environmentally conscious hiking culture.

Central to ERA's strategic initiatives is the development and promotion of the 12 European E-paths. This flagship project exemplifies ERA's unique role in facilitating cross-border collaboration and trans-border walking, connecting diverse European landscapes and cultures. The E-paths are designed to pass through multiple countries, offering hikers an immersive experience that blends natural resources with cultural heritage. This network not only serves as a physical manifestation of ERA's vision for a united and accessible European hiking trail system but also acts as a catalyst for sustainable tourism, promoting low-impact travel and supporting local economies along the routes.



Figure 16 Logo of E-paths by ERA

Adapting to Change

In 1969, ERA was established to facilitate trans-border walking in a fragmented Europe, pre-dating the European Union. This initiative sought to unify the continent's hiking trails, making nature more accessible despite national borders and varied regulations.

Over the years, as Europe's political landscape transformed and societal values shifted, so too did ERA's strategic focus. While remaining true to its original mission and established goals (guided by strategic plans), the organization has incorporated new priorities such as addressing climate change and engaging younger generations, alongside its commitment to trails accessibility.

This strategic agility ensures ERA remains at the forefront of promoting sustainable outdoor experiences. By continually reassessing and realigning its goals with current environmental and social imperatives, ERA exemplifies how responsive strategy can sustain an organization's relevance and impact amidst evolving trends.

Moreover, E-paths initiative underscores ERA's dedication to conservation and outdoor recreation advocacy. By linking protected areas, national parks, and cultural sites, the E-paths foster a deeper appreciation for Europe's environmental diversity and historical richness. They also highlight the importance of preserving these spaces for future generations, aligning with ERA's broader conservation goals.

Establishing a Flagship Experience

To elevate its profile and appeal, Med Trail Network could consider promoting a flagship experience or product, drawing lessons from ERA. Here are some key insights and strategies:

E-paths as a Flagship Product: ERA's E-paths were envisioned as a comprehensive European hiking experience but haven't achieved uniform recognition across Europe. This is partly due to its 'closed system' governance, where the inclusion of trails is decided top-down by a committee rather than by member consensus.

Leading Quality Trails – Best of Europe: This newer certification system represents an 'open' approach, where any trail can be nominated for certification. It not only provides income for the ERA through certification fees but also sets high standards for quality. However, the high costs and stringent criteria limit participation, although efforts are being made to broaden the accessibility of this label.

Strategic Takeaway for the Med Trails Network:

Highlight Premium Trails: Identify and promote "premium" trails from national and regional networks based on distinct values or superior hiking experiences. This targeted marketing can enhance the visibility and reputation of selected trails more effectively than promoting extensive, varied networks.

Marketing Focus on Quality and Trust: Prioritize marketing efforts on these flagship trails to build trust and provide a tangible, consistent product to hikers. This approach helps differentiate the network by offering reliably high-quality experiences that meet hiker expectations.

Adaptable Certification Criteria: Consider a flexible, inclusive certification system that accommodates a broader range of trails but still emphasizes high standards to maintain the prestige and allure of the flagship designation.

5.1.4. Great Himalaya Trail (GHT)

GHT is dedicated to offering an unparalleled hiking experience, connecting diverse ecosystems, cultures and communities, across the vast expanse of the Himalayan region. The overarching purpose of the trail is to create a trail system that not only appeals to hikers worldwide but also brings socio-economic benefits to local communities, fosters environmental conservation, and promotes cultural understanding.

Central to GHT's mission has been the implementation of well-crafted marketing and promotional campaigns that are grounded in a good understanding of market dynamics. Recognizing the nuanced demands of the hiking and adventure tourism market, GHT has successfully positioned itself through strategies that highlight the trail's distinctive experiences — from high-altitude treks to rich cultural immersion. By aligning their promotional efforts with targeted market analysis, GHT has not only increased its visibility but has also attracted a growing number travellers, contributing to the trail's reputation as a world-class trekking destination. This focused approach to marketing and promotion and its overall strategic business approach is instrumental in realizing GHT's intended impact.



Figure 17 GHT's planning tools available online

Balancing Growth with Community Empowerment

GHT initially thrived by capitalizing on the growing demand for hiking in Himalayas with its development of resources, particularly maps and navigational tools, available online, playing a pivotal role in its business model. This approach not only set GHT apart but also underscored the trail's commitment to enhancing the hiking experience.

However, GHT's success attracted the attention of the Nepali government, which saw potential beyond hiking, repurposing trail maps for infrastructure development: paved roads. This governmental interest presented a nuanced challenge, illustrating the unforeseen consequences of the trail's popularity, where increased recognition led to developments that could alter the very landscape GHT sought to preserve.

As a response, GHT has recently sharpened its focus on community empowerment, recognizing it as crucial to sustainable trail development. By implementing impact monitoring tools and promoting strategies that prioritize local community benefits, GHT aims to navigate the delicate balance between growth and conservation. This strategic shift emphasizes an approach where the trail's success and community development go hand in hand.

5.1.5. Asia Trails Network (ATN)

Asia Trails Network (ATN) strives to elevate the quality of hiking experience across Asia's diverse landscapes, with a focus on promoting sustainable tourism and cultural appreciation through its network of trails. ATN's primary goal is to develop a network that not only provides outstanding trekking experiences but also supports the economic development of local communities, environmental preservation, and a deeper understanding of Asia's cultural heritage.



Figure 18 Jeju Olle community gathering

Integral to ATN's effectiveness is the factor Thousand Miles Association terms as the "quality of people". This refers to the capability and commitment of the individuals involved—whether they are trail planners, local community advocates, environmental stewards, or cultural ambassadors (ATN was founded through an initiative of a single individual, Ms. Suh). It's the dedication and expertise of these people that empower ATN to fulfil its mission.

The emphasis on "quality of people" underlines the belief that the right people in the right roles are crucial to the network's success. It's these individuals who ensure that the trails do not merely exist but thrive as conduits for sustainable tourism, community well-being, and cultural exchange. This human dimension is fundamental to achieving ATN's intended impact, ensuring the network's operations are both effective and resonate with the genuine spirit of Asia's trail communities.

Activating Members in Trail Networks

Trail networks showcase different member engagement strategies. For example, ATN leans towards a more flexible model, encouraging members to pursue individual goals, fostering innovation and diverse contributions within the network's unified vision. It's a tendency towards nurturing a culture of innovation and personal investment in the network's success.

ERA, on the other hand, tends towards a more structured engagement strategy, channelling member efforts towards specific, pre-defined goals and projects. This direction ensures that collective actions are strategically aligned, maximizing the coherence and cumulative impact of their initiatives. ERA's approach underscores the value of a united front in advancing the network's objectives.

For Med Trails Network, integrating these approaches could be key: empowering member-driven initiatives for richness and variety while maintaining focus on shared objectives for strategic coherence. This balanced strategy aims to leverage the best of both worlds, creating a dynamic and purposeful trail network.

5.1.6. European Association of the Via Francigena Ways (EAVF)

European Association of the Via Francigena Ways is focused on protecting, promoting, and enhancing the Via Francigena, an historic route stretching from Canterbury to Rome. This mission is anchored in the preservation of the route's deep historical and cultural significance, which has connected pilgrims, traders, and travellers across the continent for centuries. EAVF is dedicated to maintaining the route's historical and cultural integrity, while also fostering sustainable tourism along its path.



Figure 19 Logo of the Via Francigena

Central to the Association's recognition and its strategic initiatives is the Via Francigena's status as a "Cultural Route of the Council of Europe." This valued certification underscores the route's role in enhancing European cultural integration and dialogue, marking it as a cornerstone for cultural exchange and mutual understanding across borders. It's this designation that bolsters the Association's efforts in responsibly developing the Via Francigena, making it accessible to a modern audience while preserving its intrinsic value. EAVF thus stands at the intersection of heritage conservation and modern engagement, ensuring the route remains a channel for cultural discovery and community development across Europe.

Bridging trails and purposes

Owing to its certification as a Cultural Route, Via Francigena transcends traditional hiking, offering a multifaceted journey that resonates across diverse motivations. From spiritual quests to wellness retreats, cultural exploration, and even corporate social responsibility initiatives, the trail speaks to a broad spectrum of travellers seeking more than just a walk.

For example, its partnership to promote zero waste principles with a local supermarket chain shows how Via Francigena aligns with modern values, making a tangible impact beyond the trail. Such partnerships are a testament to the trail's commitment to environmental stewardship and social responsibility, proving that trail may embody multitude of meanings.

5.1.7. Additional relevant considerations

As illustrated, defining a clear organizational purpose is critical. This clarity not only directs strategic initiatives but also ensures coherence in operational practices. A key element in aligning these practices with the organization's mission is the implementation of effective guidance systems for trail management. Waymarking, as a principal example, involves providing clear and navigable signs that are indispensable for accessible and user-friendly trails.

ERA has contributed to standardizing this practice by publishing the guide to a "*Good Practice for Signing and Marking Footpaths*." This guide embodies the association's role in setting high standards for trail marking across Europe, enhancing safety, clarity, and enjoyment for trail users. It serves as an exemplary model of how organizations can provide direction and foster uniformity in trail management practices.

However, effective guidance can also be achieved through various other methods. For instance:

4. **Educational and Capacity-building Programs:** Offering workshops and training sessions that promote unified method on cross-organizational standards that all members of the network subscribe to and commit to pursuing a coordinated approach.
5. **Centralized Trail Information Systems:** Establishing a centralized digital platform that collates trails data and serves as a single reference point.
6. **Collaborative Partnerships:** Working with local authorities and environmental organizations to co-develop trail policies and conservation strategies to broaden the impact and integration of trail activities.

The ERA's guide is included as Annex N and offers a concrete example of practical guidance. Organizations are encouraged to consider this guide as a framework for developing additional, diverse methods of guidance that cater to varying local conditions and organizational goals.



Figure 20 Jordan Trail; credit: atwaan

5.2. Governance Structures and Stakeholder Relations

Considering the governance structures and stakeholder relationships is crucial for the effective operation of trails networks. This chapter examines how these organizational frameworks and partnerships impact trail management, sustainability, and community engagement. Effective governance involves a collaborative network of local communities, governmental bodies, NGOs, and users, ensuring decisions benefit both the environment and stakeholders.

Key to this structure are the relationships among stakeholders, underpinned by mutual trust, clear communication, and shared goals. These elements are essential for addressing access issues, sustainable development, and conservation efforts collectively. By exploring these governance and stakeholder dynamics, we aim to highlight their significance in trail network operations and the strategies for fostering productive collaborations.



Figure 21 Key elements of the trails governance structures and stakeholder relationships

5.2.1. National Scenic and Historic Trails (NSHT)

The operational efficacy of NSHT is rooted in their structured governance and proactive stakeholder engagement. These critical factors enable a beneficial cycle for communities linked to the trails, illustrating the impact of well-managed trail systems on local and regional development.

Central to the NSHT's operational model is a collaborative approach to governance. This involves a coalition of agencies at multiple levels of government, non-profit trail organizations, local communities, and associated businesses. Each entity plays a critical role in the strategic planning and management of the trails, ensuring that the trails are not only enjoyed by users but also bring tangible benefits to the communities they touch.

It is this collaborative governance and the ensuing stakeholder relations that facilitate the positive cycle of economic and social benefits. When hikers have rewarding experiences on the trails, their expenditures

and feedback spark community enhancements, which in turn draw more visitors. The cycle continues as these improvements lead to greater economic activity, with success stories amplifying the community's profile and influence on broader policy and funding decisions.

Figure 22 gives an example of how the Pacific Crest Trail exemplifies this governance and stakeholder engagement model, effectively translating hiker satisfaction into broader community prosperity and trail sustainability.

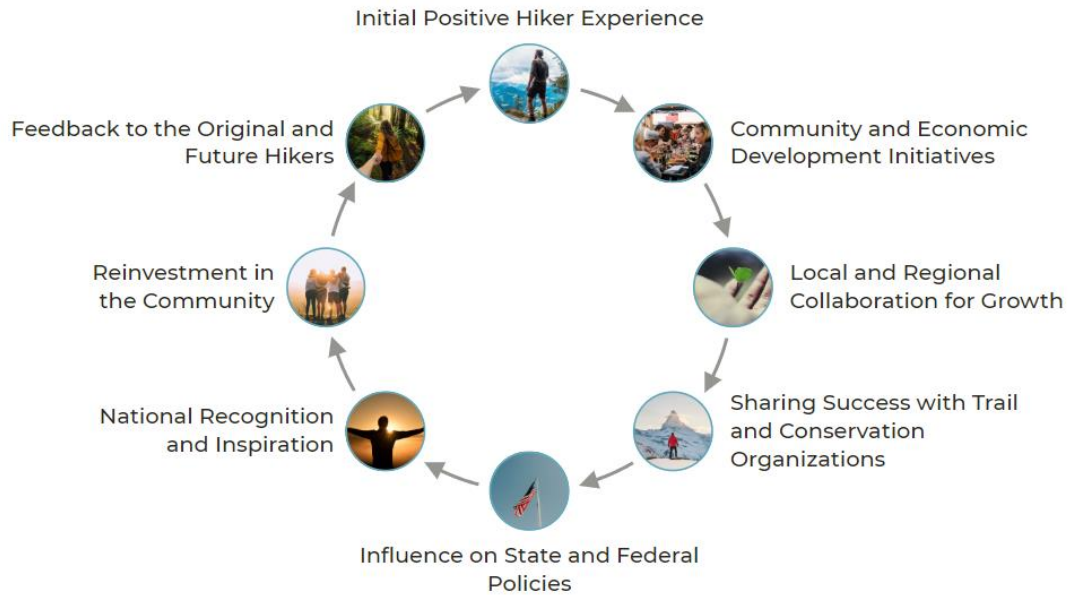


Figure 22 The Cycle of Community Benefit from a Hiker's Positive Experience

Gateway communities

Gateway communities serve as essential access points to NSHT, playing a pivotal role in the ecosystem of hiking tourism. These communities, strategically located near the trails' entry and exit points, reap significant benefits from their status, catalysing economic growth and fostering a vibrant local culture and exemplifying how trails can be conduits for broader community benefits, demonstrating the transformative power of hiking tourism.



Figure 23 Example of a gateway community application: [Continental Divide Trail](#)

The Cycle of Community Benefit from a Hiker's Positive Experience

Initial Positive Hiker Experience:

A hiker's enjoyable visit to a gateway community on the PCT initiates the cycle. Their spending on local services and positive feedback provide an immediate economic benefit and highlight the community's potential as a hiker-friendly destination.

Community and Economic Development Initiatives:

Motivated by the hiker's positive experience, the community invests in enhancements (like better amenities and events) that further attract hikers. These investments lead to increased visitation, boosting local businesses and creating a more vibrant community atmosphere.

Local and Regional Collaboration for Growth:

As economic activity increases, local and regional stakeholders collaborate to expand services and infrastructure, further increasing the area's attractiveness to hikers and other visitors. This collaboration leads to broader economic growth and job creation.

Sharing Success with Trail and Conservation Organizations:

The community's success story, backed by economic data and social benefits, is shared with organizations like the Pacific Crest Trail Association. This partnership amplifies the community's achievements and garners support for further enhancements along the trail.

Influence on State and Federal Policies:

The demonstrated economic and social benefits influence state and federal agencies, leading to policy adjustments or increased funding for trail-related community development projects, benefiting not just the community but potentially others along the trail.

National Recognition and Inspiration:

The community's success becomes a model nationally, inspiring other gateway communities to adopt similar approaches. This recognition also attracts additional visitors, including those who come to experience the well-publicized hiker-friendly environment.

Reinvestment in the Community:

The cycle completes as the community reinvests the economic gains into further improvements, enhancing quality of life for residents and the experience for future hikers. The ongoing cycle of feedback and reinvestment fosters a sustainable relationship between the community and the PCT.

Feedback to the Original and Future Hikers:

Finally, the cycle's success feeds back to the original hiker and future visitors through even better trail experiences, enhanced community services, and a continued welcoming atmosphere, ensuring a self-sustaining loop of positive interactions and growth.

5.2.2. World Trails Network (WTN)

WTN, while known for its global conference, also aims to foster an environment conducive to continuous learning and collaboration. This is achieved through the establishment of dedicated task teams, which are integral to the network's governance structure and stakeholder engagement strategy.

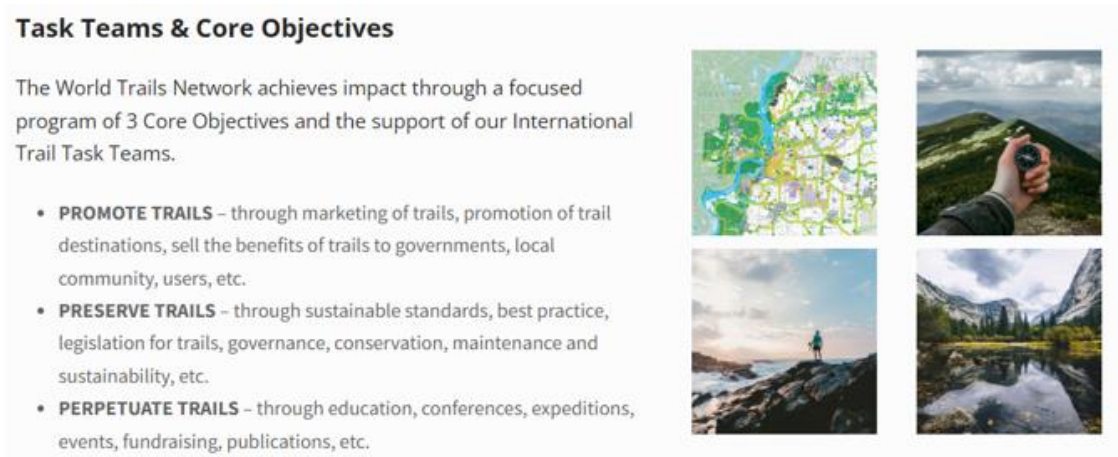


Figure 24 WTN core objectives supported by task teams

WTN Task teams:

- Education & Inclusive Engagement
- Tourism
- Knowledge
- Media
- Sustainability
- Communities
- Arts & Culture
- Conservation
- Digitalization and Technology

WTN's governance is designed to facilitate effective international cooperation among trails organizations. The creation of task teams allows for focused efforts on specific areas of trail management, conservation, and development. By delegating responsibilities to specialized groups, WTN aims to leverage a wide array of expertise, promoting efficiency and innovation within the network's operation.

Key to the success of any task team is the active involvement of a diverse range of stakeholders, including trail experts, conservationists, community leaders, and government officials. These teams offer a platform for stakeholders to contribute their unique insights, learn from each other's experiences, and work collectively towards common goals, especially in between important events, such as the conference, to stimulate involvement and cohesion. The collaboration within and between these teams strengthens the network's capacity to address the evolving challenges and opportunities in the field of trail management.

Revitalizing Connections: Potential Establishment of the WTN's Mediterranean Hub

Potential establishment of the WTN's Mediterranean hub has gained significant interest within the WTN community. This anticipated hub represents a strategic asset for the newly established Med Trails Network. Connecting with the hub offers a unique opportunity to mutually revitalize and leverage untapped potentials:

- *Building on Foundations:* The hub's framework (there were steps taken in the past to establish the hub), even if dormant, offers a starting point that can be built upon, avoiding the need to create new structures from scratch.
- *Synergistic Revival:* Engagement between Med Trails Network and the WTN can spark a reactivation, using the new network's momentum to start the hub's operations.
- *Shared Strengths:* Collaboration can lead to a symbiotic relationship where both entities benefit from each other's strengths, resources, and networks.
- *Joint Advocacy and Visibility:* Together, the hub and Med Trails Network can amplify their voice and visibility, advocating more effectively for trail conservation and sustainable tourism.

5.2.3. European Ramblers Association (ERA)

ERA is distinguished by its structured and formal arrangements, which plays an important role in facilitating intergovernmental dialogues and incorporating the interests and needs of trails into the policy agendas of its member countries. This structured approach is essential for harmonizing the multifaceted aspects of trail management across different legal and administrative jurisdictions found in Europe.

A significant added value of ERA's methodical organizational style is its capacity to broker state-to-state conversations which is essential for trail interests to be included in wider policy discussions. These efforts lead to supportive legislation and funding, aligning trail development with environmental, economic, and social goals at national and European levels. Consequently, the ERA helps enhance the visibility and integration of trail-related issues in policy agendas, promoting a unified approach to outdoor recreation, tourism, and land use planning. This work not only strengthens the position of trails within governmental priorities but also supports a more cohesive environment for the trail community.

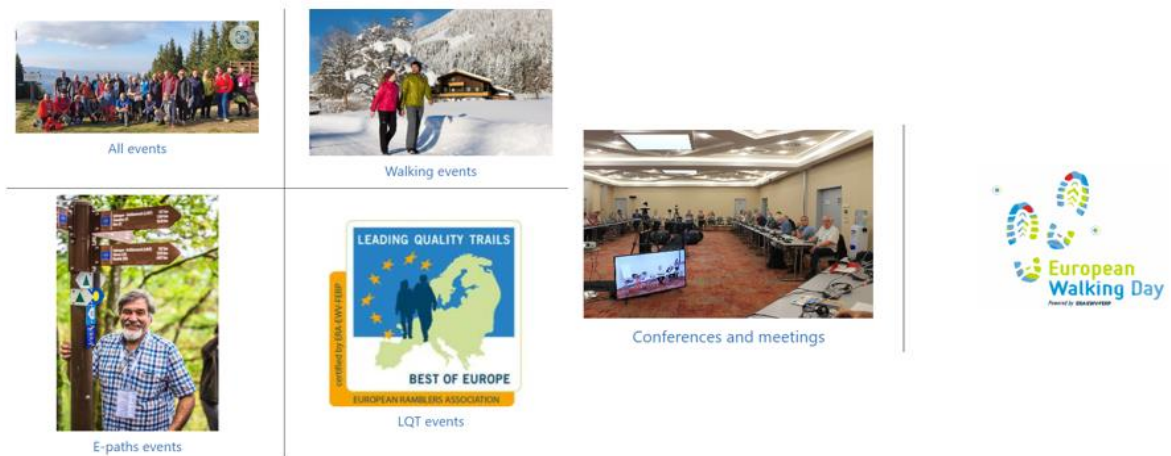


Figure 25 Examples of events organized by ERA

Governance and User connection

ERA benefits from a robust governance structure, enabling it to pursue ambitious objectives with a coordinated strategy. This framework, while instrumental in achieving large-scale goals, naturally introduces a degree of separation between the organization's leadership and the individual trails users (and ERA acknowledges that). Such a structured approach, prioritizing strategic alignment and collective action, can create challenges in directly engaging with the diverse and dynamic needs of the hiking community.

Enhancing direct engagement and feedback mechanisms could enrich ERA's understanding of user needs, fostering a more inclusive and responsive community as well as ERA's capability to adapt better to changing user expectations and emerging trends in outdoor recreation. Balancing organizational coherence with user-centric engagement presents an opportunity for any trail organization to deepen its impact and relevance.

5.2.4. Great Himalaya Trail (GHT)

GHT exemplifies a significant evolution in its operational focus, highlighting the dynamic nature of trail organizations and their need/ability to adapt to changing objectives and impacts.

Initially launched with the primary aim of promoting the Himalayas as a premier hiking destination, the GHT has since undergone a strategic change. While destination promotion remains a key aspect of its business model, the GHT's emphasis has shifted toward creating direct and measurable impacts on local

communities. This shift represents a broader trend in the trail industry towards more community-centric models, where the success of a trail is increasingly measured by its socio-economic contributions.

This reoriented approach has led the GHT to develop new strategies and partnerships that prioritize community well-being alongside trail maintenance and promotion. The governance structure now integrates more deeply with local stakeholders, from individual villages to regional tourism boards, to align the trail's operations with the needs and ambitions of the communities it intersects.

GHT Positive Impact Journeys

Be thoughtful and responsible on the trail and make your Great Himalaya Trail trek good news for others too. We calculate the social impact, and CO2 and waste footprints of every GHT trek, plus we help you to find ways to leave a positive legacy after you've gone home.



Give Something Back – Leave a positive legacy



The Impact of Your Trek – Social, CO2 and Waste



The MyGHTI Project – Benefiting communities

Figure 26 GHT's community impact initiatives

Improving operations through impact monitoring

Since GHT introduced its impact monitoring system, the organization has gained an invaluable source of information, significantly enhancing its leadership and decision-making processes. This system has shed light on several critical areas:

- **Role of Women in Tourism:** Insights into how women contribute to and are affected by the tourism industry in the Himalayas, highlighting their needs and potential for empowerment.
- **Educational Priorities:** Data on local communities' educational needs and priorities, enabling targeted support and interventions.
- **Cultural Exchange:** Understanding the exchange of cultural norms and values between tourists and local communities, fostering respect and mutual appreciation.
- **Gender Issues:** Awareness of gender-specific challenges within communities, guiding the development of more inclusive strategies.
- **Infrastructure Needs:** Detailed information on the infrastructure needs of remote areas, essential for sustainable tourism development.
- **Climate Change Impact:** Assessments of how climate change affects operations and local ecosystems, informing adaptive strategies for resilience.

Information sourced directly from the communities are crucial for trails to enhance their leadership, ensuring that the operations not only support sustainable tourism but also bring tangible benefits to local communities, addressing their unique needs and challenges.

5.2.5. Asia Trails Network (ATN)

The Taiwan Thousand Miles Trail Association, currently acting as the secretary of the ATN, presents an insightful case study in navigating the "strong state and weak society legacy" syndrome. This scenario represents a common challenge where government institutions hold predominant influence, and civil society organizations historically have less engagement in policy and public affairs.



Figure 27 TMI Trail; credit: <https://www.tmitrail.org.tw/>

In response to this challenge, the association has initiated an innovative cross-sector and inter-municipal collaboration. As an NGO, it has adopted a proactive stance, recognizing that to foster trail development effectively, both community-led initiatives and public sector involvement are essential. This dual approach is critical in environments where shifting the balance towards more inclusive governance requires persistent effort.

The association has strategically engaged with government actors through systematic visits and lobbying efforts. By establishing a cross-sector platform with designated contact windows, the Association has created a structured channel for ongoing dialogue and cooperation with the state.

To ensure broader public engagement, the association has organized great assemblies, effectively bringing the voice of the public into the trail development conversation. These assemblies serve not only to engage the public but also to strengthen civil society's role in trail management, highlighting the benefits of a society actively involved in its shared spaces.

Clarifying Value Proposition and Roles

At the heart of the TMI operations is strategic engagement with both the public and private sectors through various interactions. Since assuming the secretarial role in the ATN, the TMI has observed a significant increase in inquiries from trail users, particularly regarding international hiking. This surge aligns with ATN's mandate to promote the international dimension of hiking, yet it presents challenges, particularly when specific expertise is not readily available.

It's crucial for any trail organization to establish a clear consensus on its value proposition and the specific types of services and products it offers to members and users. This clarity will help avoid mismatches in expectations and reduce confusion about roles and functions, ensuring a cohesive and effective operation that benefits all stakeholders involved in the community.

5.2.6. European Association of the Via Francigena Ways (EAVF)

EAVF illustrates a strategic approach to trail management by integrating a non-profit entity with an entrepreneurial arm. In 2017, EAVF established Francigena Service S.r.l, a limited liability operative structure, to augment its institutional activities with entrepreneurial services related to Via Francigena.

The establishment of Francigena Service S.r.l represents EAVF's response to the evolving needs of Via Francigena's stakeholders, including service providers and those operating in the territories the route traverses. By complementing its non-profit mission with a business-oriented entity, EAVF can engage in activities that extend beyond the scope of safeguarding Via Francigena as a Cultural route, from enhancing visitor services to fostering economic opportunities along the route.

This entrepreneurial extension allows the EAVF to directly influence and improve the quality and range of services available to pilgrims and hikers on the Via Francigena. This connection between the non-profit association and the commercial arm facilitates a more responsive and holistic approach to the development of the trail, ensuring that it meets the standards expected by modern travelers.

Francigena Service S.r.l's entrepreneurial activities drive economic growth by creating new opportunities for local businesses and service providers. This not only contributes to the vibrancy of the local economies but also ensures that the benefits of the increased tourism fostered by the Via Francigena are felt by the communities it connects.

Services and products offered by the Francigena Service S.r.l

- Management of the Via Francigena brand: Management of the official trademark and brand
- Route: Georeferencing, mapping, guides, app, maintenance, signage
- Projects: Acquisition of projects on regional, national, and European level
- Communication and marketing: Creation and distribution of material
- Training: Trainings for local entities, communities, research institutions and economic operators
- Travel events: Event animation and organization
- Studies, research, publications

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5.2.7. Additional relevant considerations

An important intersection between establishing a well-defined purpose and effective governance with stakeholder relationships is the decision regarding the specific areas of responsibility the organization opts to undertake. These decisions are instrumental in shaping the operational dynamics of the organization, influencing "what" activities are prioritized, "how" these activities are executed, and "with whom" the organization collaborates.

We have delineated eight key areas of responsibility crucial for trail network organizations (see page 9 for the full overview). An accompanying chart (Annex O, Figure 1) assesses the relative importance of these responsibilities for each organization and shows that the most highly rated areas of responsibility, in terms of the importance, are:

1. Funding and Financial management
2. Strategic planning and Leadership & Public Relations and Communication
3. Quality Assurance

It is also possible to observe an indication of a trend suggesting a correlation between the level of formality of the organization and its focus on strategic direction. However, the sample is too small to draw definitive conclusions on this matter (Annex O, Figure 2).

Important questions

What to Do – Operational Focus:

Choosing areas of responsibility defines the core functions of the organization, whether focusing on environmental conservation, trail safety enhancements, or education. These choices outline the primary objectives and direct all subsequent operational planning, albeit with the understanding that these areas are inherently interconnected.

How to Do It – Methodological Approach:

The "how" involves selecting the strategies and technologies used to fulfil these responsibilities. This may include developing frameworks, creating unified policy guidelines, or setting up collaborative decision-making platforms that enhance organizational coherence and efficiency.

With Whom to Collaborate – Partnership Development:

Decisions about responsibilities also guide "with whom" the organization collaborates. This may include forming partnerships with local businesses for economic development, cooperating with environmental NGOs for conservation efforts, or working with government bodies to influence public policies affecting trail management.

By articulating these responsibilities within the framework of "what," "how," and "with whom," organizations can ensure that their actions are coherent with their strategic vision and governance structures. This alignment is crucial not only for maintaining operational efficiency but also for adapting to the evolving demands of the environment and community needs.



Figure 28 Palestinian Heritage Trail; credit: <https://phtrail.org/>

5.3. Human Capital and Financial Sustainability

The vitality of trail extends beyond the physical paths—they are brought to love by people who use them, by the people who steward them, and they are sustained by the resources that support them. This chapter will address the dual pillars of human capital and financial sustainability, foundational elements that underpin the operations and long-term success of trail organizations.

Human capital represents the collective skills, knowledge, and dedication of the individuals who manage, maintain, and advocate for these trails. From local volunteers to international coordinators, it is the commitment and expertise of these people that drive the functions and strategic development of the organization. The cultivation of this capital, through training and engagement, is paramount for adapting to the challenges and opportunities that trails face.

Equally important is financial sustainability, which ensures the functional viability. Diverse funding streams, effective financial management, and the generation of economic value within local communities are central to a trail network's ability to thrive. Sustainable finances not only secure the network's future but also reinforce trail's role as a catalyst for regional development.

Together, human capital and financial sustainability create a reinforcing loop: skilled and passionate individuals attract funding and resources, which in turn further empower the people. In the following sections, we will explore how various trail networks have approached these critical aspects, examining case studies that illustrate the impact of human and financial resources on trails operations.



Figure 29 Key elements of the trails human capital and financial sustainability

5.3.1. National Scenic and Historic Trails (NSHT)

Within the framework of the NSHT, the significance of volunteer work is not just an act of community service but a quantifiable asset recognized by the federal government. This tangible acknowledgment underlines the value of volunteer hours as a core component of human capital and a key influence on trails operations.

The federal government assigns a monetary value to each volunteer hour, a practice that elevates the importance of volunteer contributions from mere assistance to an essential part of the trails' operational worth. This valuation is not just a theoretical figure; it's a concrete metric that agencies report to Congress annually, documenting the substantial number of volunteers and the collective hours they dedicate to maintaining and enhancing national parks and trails.

The aggregated data of volunteer hours serve as compelling evidence to legislators of the trails' value proposition. A high count of volunteer hours signals strong community engagement and support, bolstering the case for trails as a beneficial investment. This demonstration of value has a direct correlation with the funding allocated to trails, as legislators can clearly see the return on investment from federal dollars.

Quantifying volunteer efforts also amplifies the NSHT's fundraising capabilities. When trail organizations can showcase the volume and worth of volunteer contributions, they strengthen their position in funding applications and discussions with potential donors. This data provides a transparent record that assures donors of the effective use of their contributions and the community's investment in the trails' success.

Moreover, tracked volunteer hours are an invaluable analytical tool. They allow trail organizations to measure engagement, identify trends, and understand the allocation of human resources across the trails. This insight informs strategic planning and the distribution of both human and financial resources, ensuring they are directed to where they can have the greatest impact.

Table 2
Federal appropriated funds, value of volunteer time, and private financial contributions to National Scenic Trail management: Five-year average of trail "budgets" (2016-2020).

National Scenic Trail (NST)	Appropriated funds	Value of volunteer hours	Private contributions	Total annual "budget"
Appalachian Trail	\$1,591,000	\$5,263,614	\$8,681,421	\$15,536,035
Pacific Crest Trail	\$1,827,800	\$2,291,421	\$2,686,454	\$6,805,675
Ice Age Trail	\$841,000	\$1,898,270	\$1,050,003	\$3,789,273
North Country Trail	\$981,000	\$1,997,405	\$587,480	\$3,565,885
Continental Divide Trail	\$1,675,800	\$1,060,225	\$484,535	\$3,220,560
Florida Trail	\$1,300,000	\$1,032,669	\$237,892	\$2,570,561
Arizona Trail	\$493,200	\$535,877	\$594,275	\$1,623,353
Pacific Northwest Trail	\$836,800	\$325,776	\$58,241	\$1,220,817
New England Trail	\$128,000	\$222,988	\$31,620	\$382,608

Figure 29 I.L. Cervený at al. (2020) Financial contributions to the NSHT

Leveraging Resources for Impact

NSHT exemplify the strategic utilization of both human and financial resources to achieve impacts. Governed by a structured framework provided by legislation, the NSHT leverages partnerships and funding to enhance its operations and extend its reach. This model is built on a foundation of collaboration and mutual benefit, highlighting three key elements:

- **Government Framework:** The initial structure and operational guidelines are established by government legislation, providing a solid foundation for the trail's activities.
- **Partner Funding:** Financial contributions from partners are crucial. These funds are matched through formal agreements, amplifying the impact of each dollar spent on development and maintenance projects.
- **Local Engagement and Revenue:** At the local level, the use of the trail generates income, which in turn supports the community and further investment in the trail's infrastructure and services.

This process of investment and return not only sustains the trail but also empowers users. When hikers and local residents see the benefits of the trail, such as improved amenities and increased tourism, they're more likely to support and advocate for it. Satisfaction among users leads to active lobbying for more resources and better management, focusing on electing representatives and supporting policies that favour the trail. This feedback loop reinforces the importance of the NSHT and ensures its continued success and relevance to the communities it serves.

5.3.2. World Trails Network (WTN)

WTN is a prime example of an organization where volunteer efforts are central to sustaining its operations. The WTN's board is managed by volunteers, reflecting a strong commitment from the trails community. However, this model faces challenges when it comes to scaling up and expanding the network's reach and impact—a concept tied to the fourth pillar of sustainability which highlights the importance of institutional capacity.

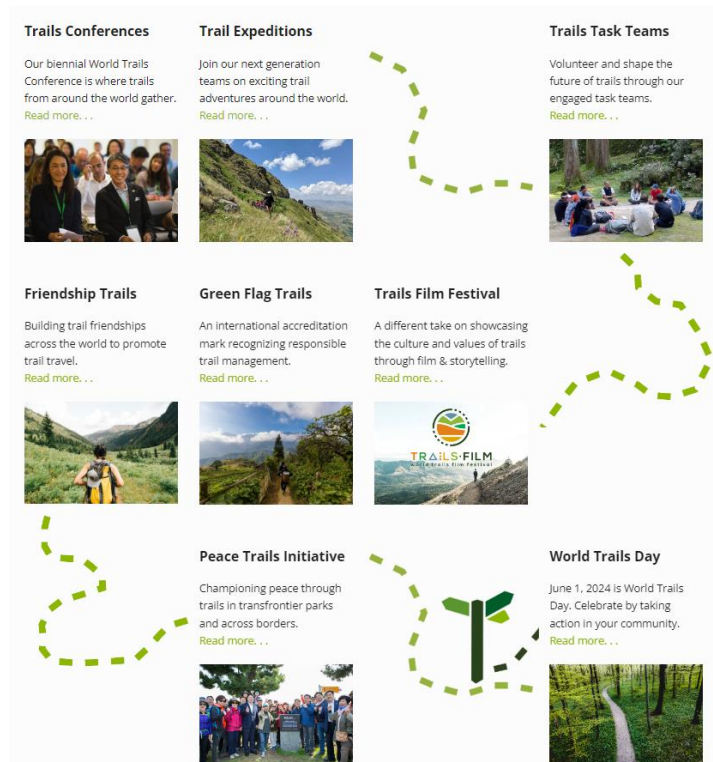


Figure 30 WTN's mission approach

While volunteer leadership brings passion, dedication and significant contribution of their own resources to the WTN, it also highlights the limitations of relying solely on volunteerism for expansion and professionalization. Without a sufficient flow of financial resources, the network struggles to "cross the bridge" from a volunteer-based structure to one with the institutional capacity needed to broaden its scope and enhance its initiatives. The WTN's flagship event, the conference, stands out as a significant achievement, bringing together a dedicated community of trail enthusiasts and professionals. Yet, the operational aspects of the network are constrained by limited financing, which restricts its ability to fulfill its potential. The lack of adequate funding means that while the network can maintain its current activities, its capacity for growth and increased influence is hindered.

The Dynamics of Resource Management and Strategic Focus

There are strategic decision-making implications concerning the importance of aligning a network's strategic focus with its management and operational model, especially when considering the balance between volunteer contributions and the need for professional management to meet customer expectations and achieve organizational goals:

- **Independent management office model:** The WTN operates with a 'member-independent' office, which often results in the board being more actively involved in day-to-day operations. Due to financial constraints, this model tends to rely heavily on volunteer-based management and coordination and this setup can lead to a varied levels of engagement.
- **Member-Operated Management:** In the ATN model, having the secretariat or management office operated by a member organization grants significant influence to that member within the network but such an arrangement can lead to a more stable overall operation due to the vested interest and resources of the managing member.

Strategic Implications:

Volunteer vs. Professional Management: The reliance on the volunteer management raises questions about the ability to serve as a collaboration platform, tourism promoter, or service provider. If the goal leans towards tourism promotion or service provision, relying solely on volunteers may not be sustainable due to the need for consistent availability and professional service to customers.

Defining the Mission:

For trails networks, deciding whether to focus on collaboration, tourism promotion, or service provision is crucial. This decision will significantly influence their resource management strategy and operational model. Collaboration platforms may operate effectively with volunteer management, but tourism promotion and service provision require a dedicated, possibly professional, management team to ensure service quality and reliability.

5.3.3. European Ramblers Association (ERA)

ERA presents a contrasting case to the WTN in terms of financial sustainability due to its partnership model. ERA's collaborations with primarily national hiking or tourism agencies, which benefit from regular funding streams through national organizations, position it differently in the landscape of trail management.



Figure 31 Funding sources of ERA

ERA, while it does face financial challenges, operates with a more diversified funding structure. It draws contributions from a broad spectrum of sectors, encompassing governmental support, European Union funds, membership fees (which represent a significant contribution), corporate sponsorships, and public donations.

This varied financial base enables the ERA to navigate operations with greater resilience and flexibility compared to organizations relying on a narrower range of funding sources. The strategic partnerships with agencies that have established funding mechanisms allow the ERA to undertake comprehensive projects and initiatives across its network. These partnerships not only provide financial stability but also facilitate a higher degree of operational capacity, supporting the ERA's mission of promoting and protecting the extensive network of European trails.

Additionally, it offers members guidance on accessing funds by publishing dedicated guidelines on accessing funding (Annex P).

Despite a diversified funding portfolio, the ERA still reports financial pressures, reflective of the wider context in which non-profit organizations operate. Adapting to changing financial landscapes, securing ongoing funding, and exploring new revenue streams remain critical tasks for any organization to sustain and expand its activities.

Cultivating Cross-Generational Support for Trails

While recognizing the importance of securing diversified and regular funding, the crucial balance between financial resources and actively engaging community members across all ages is key. ERA observes a trend where younger generations display a preference for independent travel, often unaware of the organizations that maintain the paths they explore. Coupled with time constraints, this demographic is less likely to commit to traditional volunteering roles.

Conversely, individuals nearing the end of their careers may have more time and a desire for organization but might lack the initial drive to engage deeply with trail activities. The ERA sees the value in harnessing the unique contributions of both groups to support trail networks.

By tailoring engagement strategies to meet the diverse needs and motivations of involved communities, the goal is to foster a sense of ownership and connection to the trails across generations, ensuring the sustainability of these resources.

5.3.4. Great Himalaya Trail (GHT)

GHT adopts a comprehensive approach to its resource model, where investment in capacity building is a centerpiece, facilitating sustainable development and operations. This emphasis on capacity building reflects a deep understanding of the trail's operational needs and the broader market in which it functions.

GHT's strategy unfolds in a sequence of stages:

- market understanding
- product development
- capacity building
- marketing and promotion

Each stage is pivotal, with capacity building acting as the cornerstone that intends to support the overall structure. By focusing on enhancing the skills (developing the skills and knowledge of local guides, hospitality providers, and other tourism-related professionals to deliver service and to educate them on sustainable practices that align with GHT's ethos) and infrastructure around the trail, GHT ensures that the product offered—the hiking experience—is both high quality and sustainable as well as bringing added value to the communities: "*GHT is amazing for trekkers, so it should be amazing for the locals too!*" Marketing the enhanced trail experience effectively to showcase the tangible benefits, thus attracting more visitors and attention to the trail is the final step in this continuum.

This comprehensive approach not only advances the immediate operational goals of the GHT but also contributes to a more sustainable and economically vibrant trail ecosystem. By equipping local communities and stakeholders with the tools and knowledge they need, GHT is fostering a self-reliant framework that can adapt to future challenges and opportunities.

MYGHTi: Empower Female Dignity – Create Transformative Experiences – Promote Regenerative Enterprises

MyGHTi is a project empowering communities to provide transformative experiences along GHT by promoting thriving female-owned, sustainable, regenerative micro-enterprises. It is based on sustainable tourism practices and incorporates 15 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

THE MyGHTi PATH: STEPS 1-5

Our 5-Step Path involves achievable, incremental steps that gradually propel MyGHTi towards our goal. Experience has taught us that everyone involved must attain the same level of understanding and practice before embarking on the next step.

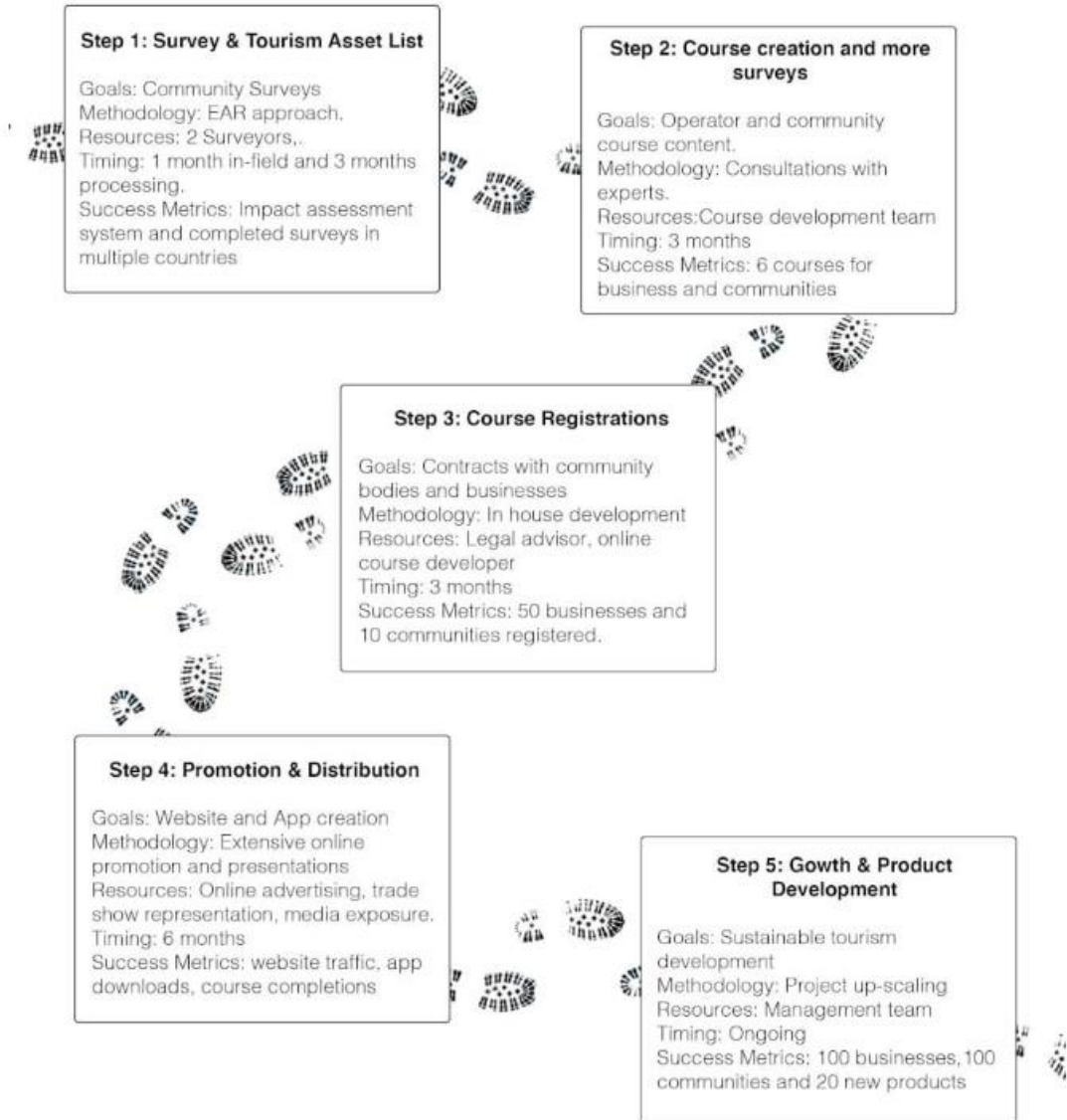


Figure 32 GHT's miGHTi's strategic approach

5.3.5. Asia Trails Network (ATN)

ATN introduces a unique operational model with its rotating secretariat, a system designed to diversify leadership and share the administrative load across its member organizations. Currently, the Taiwan Thousand Miles Trail Association (TMI) holds this position, assuming the role on voluntary basis and managing the responsibilities that come with coordinating the ATN.



Figure 33 TMI promotional material

Positives and negatives of the rotating secretariat model

Pros:

- **Diverse Leadership:** By rotating the secretariat role among member organizations, ATN benefits from a range of perspectives and experiences, enriching the network's strategic direction and innovation.
- **Shared Responsibility:** This model distributes the administrative burden across multiple members, preventing burnout and ensuring that no single organization or individual members are overwhelmed by the demands of network coordination.
- **Fosters Ownership and Engagement:** Organizations are more likely to feel invested in the network's success when they have a direct role in its leadership, enhancing motivation and commitment across the network.
- **Enhanced Collaboration:** The need to transition leadership smoothly encourages strong communication and cooperation among member organizations, building a more cohesive network.
- **Exchange of Ideas:** Each organization brings its unique approach and insights to the network, fostering learning and the adoption of best practices across the entire network.

Cons:

- **Continuity Challenges:** Changes in leadership can disrupt long-term planning and continuity of initiatives, requiring robust transition mechanisms to maintain momentum.
- **Variable Capacity and Expertise:** Not all organizations may have the same level of capacity or expertise to manage the network effectively, potentially leading to inconsistencies in leadership quality.
- **Resource Allocation Complexities:** Balancing the dual responsibilities to both ATN and the organization's national mandate can complicate priority setting and resource distribution.
- **Potential for Strategic Drift:** Varied perspectives, while beneficial, can also lead to shifts in focus that may not always align seamlessly with the network's established goals or strategic plan.
- **Administrative Overhead:** The need for a transition can introduce additional administrative tasks related to handing over responsibilities, potentially diverting resources from other critical activities.

This model ensures that different member organizations within ATN can contribute to and influence the network's direction, fostering a sense of ownership and collaboration. The rotating nature of the secretariat also brings varied perspectives and approaches to the forefront, enriching the network's collective knowledge and strategies.

During its tenure as the secretariat, TMI balances its commitment to both the ATN and its national mandate. This dual responsibility necessitates a nuanced approach to resource allocation and prioritization, ensuring that the needs and objectives of both the ATN and TMI are met.

5.3.6. European Association of the Via Francigena Ways (EAVF)

EAVF underscores the profound impact of a “human connection” in the operational dynamics of trail networks. The act of thru-hiking — trekking the trail in its entirety — organized by the team from the association directly has played an instrumental role in engaging and mobilizing communities and partners along the route.

The physical journey of thru-hikers along the Via Francigena has become a powerful tool for connection. It personalizes the trail experience and this human element has been pivotal in fostering a sense of community and shared identity among the diverse regions that the trail traverses.

The presence of thru-hikers acts as a catalyst for community involvement, drawing attention to the trail and sparking local interest and pride. The EAVF has harnessed this engagement, using the hikers' experiences and stories as a means to deepen the relationship with existing partners and to attract new collaborations. These interactions highlight the trail's cultural and economic significance, inspiring collective efforts to preserve and enhance the Via Francigena.

While solid governance structures provide the necessary foundation for managing the trails, it is the human experiences that truly bring the trail to life. The direct involvement of hikers in community activities, events, and advocacy helps translate the EAVF's strategic goals into tangible outcomes. It reinforces the trail's position as an asset for local development, heritage conservation, and social cohesion.



Figure 34 Hikers on the Via Francigena route

Balancing Act Between Promotion and Preservation

Via Francigena faces the modern challenge of overtourism in some areas. This phenomenon has led to notable issues and the popularity of the route, while beneficial economically, necessitates a careful approach to ensure its sustainability and integrity.

Certain segments of Via Francigena, like those in Tuscany, experience high visitor traffic, leading to concerns over local capacity (e.g. 'regular' visitors using so called Refugio's that are intended for pilgrims) and the preservation of the trail's character. To address that, strategies are being implemented to spread visitor traffic more evenly across the trail. Highlighting less frequented sections and promoting off-season travel are part of these efforts to alleviate pressure on hotspots.

The trail's increasing popularity has sparked debates over the fine line between effective promotion and the risk of commodifying its heritage. The rise in merchandise and commercial offerings linked to the Via Francigena raises questions about the commodification of cultural heritage, juxtaposing economic benefits against the fundamental goal of protecting and respecting the trail's legacy.

This experience underscores the complex interplay between tourism development and heritage conservation. Addressing these challenges requires nuanced strategies that respect the trail's past while embracing its potential to inspire and engage future generations.

5.3.7. Additional relevant considerations

Modus operandi, a Latin term meaning "method of operation," refers to the characteristic way in which an organization conducts its activities. It encompasses the processes, practices, and strategies that define how an organization approaches its goals, interacts with stakeholders, and navigates challenges. This operational blueprint not only shapes the daily functioning of the organization but also has a profound influence on its overall impact, effectiveness, and sustainability.

Figure 36 presents a characterization of the most typical profile, derived from responses across the analyzed trail networks. For a detailed breakdown of responses by each organization, refer to Annex Q.



Figure 35 Palestinian Heritage Trail; credit: Alicia-Rae Light

Dimensions of Governance that Shape Operations of Trails Network Organizations

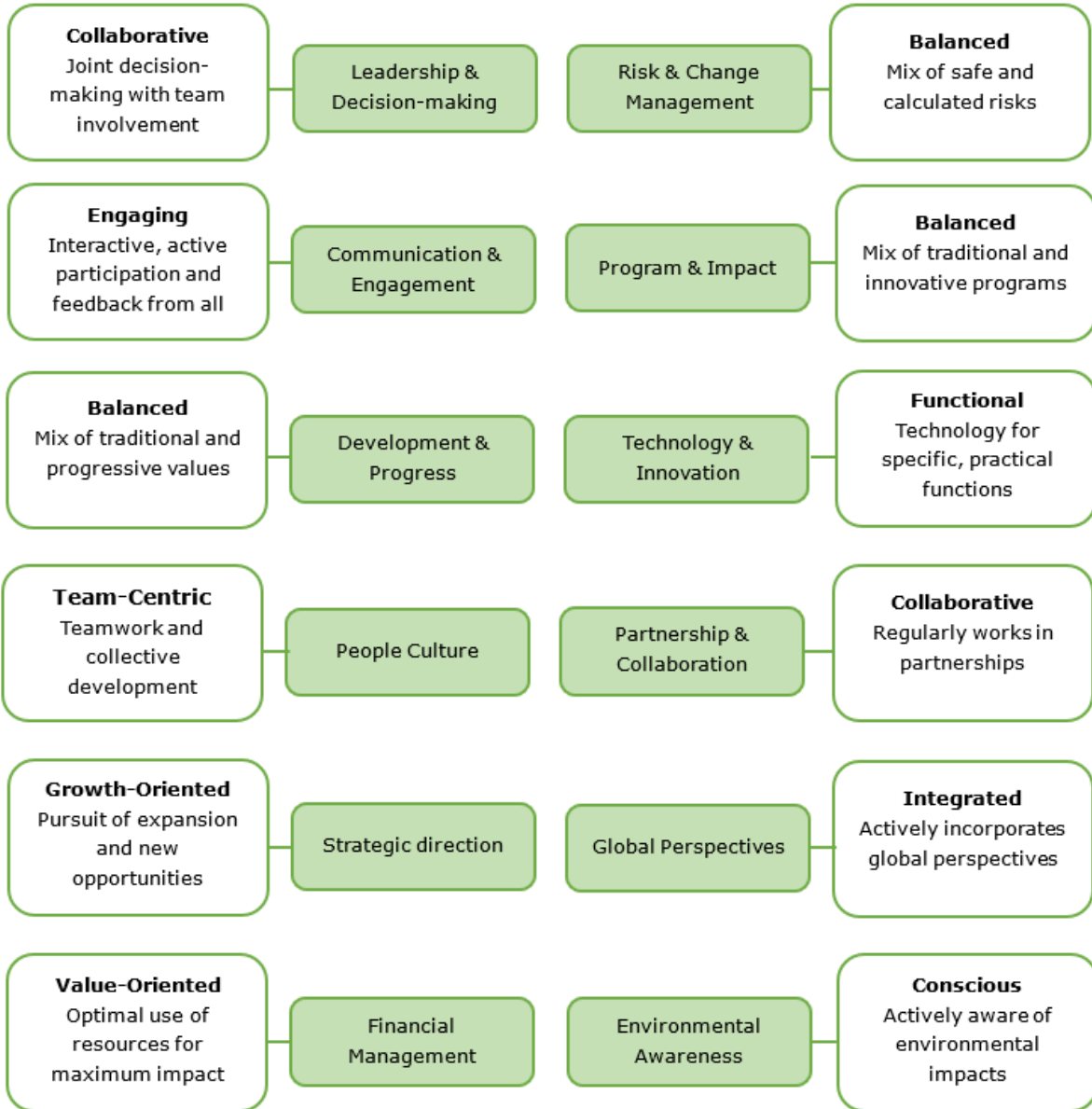


Figure 36 Modus operandi of analysed trails networks