



Unlocking systems thinking for destination sustainability performance

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GLOBAL
**DESTINATION
SUSTAINABILITY
MOVEMENT**

Executive Summary

Tourism destinations are complex, dynamic systems. To address "wicked problems" like climate change and social inequality, a systems thinking approach to sustainability is essential. The GDS-Index is a world-class programme for measuring and improving performance, but its true power lies not just in its individual criteria, but in the invisible connections that bind them together. This White Paper, a pioneering collaboration between the University of Exeter and the GDS-Movement, reveals these connections for the first time through the **GDS-Index Systems Map**: a strategic tool that unveils dynamic roadmap for systemic change from the GDS-Index.

This map, which models all 76 GDS-Index criteria and over 160 causal connections, was developed by systematically analysing the Index's internal logic and was rigorously validated through a series of participatory workshops with GDS experts, assessors, and destination managers.

This systems analysis delivers four key insights for destinations and the GDS-Movement:

1. **Performance is an Ecosystem, Not a Scorecard.** The map makes visible the "ripple effects" of any single action, proving that the most transformative gains are made by understanding the relationships between criteria, not by tackling them in isolation.
2. **Not All Actions Are Equal.** The project identifies the top 10 most influential "leverage points"—criteria like Climate Action at Sector Level and Circular Economy—where focused effort can create a "domino effect" of positive change. Critically, this analysis distinguishes between criteria that are merely *popular* and those that are truly *influential*, providing a new strategic filter to help destinations prioritise resources.
3. **The Map Provides "Leverage Pathways" to Action.** This White Paper introduces "Leverage Pathways"—practical, evidence-based stories co-created with stakeholders for key influential GDS-Index criteria. These pathways serve as a strategic roadmap, illustrating how DMOs can design interventions that create multiple co-benefits and drive systemic change.
4. **The DMO's Role as a "Systemic Catalyst."** The map helps solve the "control vs. influence" dilemma felt by many DMOs who are measured on criteria (like city-wide emissions) that they do not directly control. The map provides the evidence to enable DMOs as active *conveners and influencers* of collecting and acting on key performance indicators. It is a tool for connecting performance to purpose, empowering DMOs to build compelling business cases and lead the multi-stakeholder collaboration required for a regenerative future.

Ultimately, this White Paper provides recommendations for both destinations and the GDS-Movement, offering a new, systemic lens to enhance performance reports, evolve the Index's methodology, and strengthen its role as a global catalyst for transformative change. More importantly, this white paper provides a practical guide to support DMOs drive systemic change in the Appendix A The DMO Playbook for systemic change.

Acknowledgements

This White Paper, and the research behind it, would not have been possible without the deep and collaborative partnership of the GDS-Movement. This was a truly participatory project, and we are deeply grateful for the generous commitment of time, data, and invaluable experience shared by their entire team.

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Finally, we extend our sincere appreciation to Professor Xavier Font for lending his leading academic expertise and rigorous feedback to the review of this White Paper.

Introductory words from Guy Bigwood

CEO and Chief Changemaker, Global Destination Sustainability Movement

The research and methodology presented in this paper mark a game-changing moment for the GDS-Index and the destinations that use it. For years, we have spoken about its power to catalyse transformation — to turn sustainability ambition into real, systemic change. Yet, until now, we lacked the evidence-based tools to fully explain and visualise how this happens.

This white paper changes that. It reveals, for the first time, the hidden architecture of the GDS-Index: a living system where every action, every policy, and every collaboration creates ripple effects across an entire destination. It shows that **performance is an ecosystem, not a checklist**, and that **not all actions are equal**.

By embracing systems thinking, we can move beyond surface-level actions and focus on the leverage points that truly drive transformation — from circular economy to climate action, to community engagement and beyond. This work gives destinations, and the GDS-Movement itself, a powerful new framework to prioritise, to connect, and to lead more regeneratively.

It also strengthens our shared mission: to move from measurement to meaning, from compliance to impact, and from sustainability to regeneration.

My sincere thanks go to Jose Melenez Roman and Christopher Kwesi Appiah from the University of Exeter for their exceptional research and partnership; to all the destination leaders and GDS assessors who contributed their insight and experience; and to my colleagues Claudia Bustinza and Anne Seeberg at the GDS-Movement for enabling and guiding this collaboration.

Together, we are not just improving a methodology — we are shaping the future of how destinations measure, manage, and magnify their impact.

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1. Introduction

Tourism destinations are complex and dynamic systems. They are intricate webs of environmental and cultural assets, social pressing issues, economic drivers, and governance structures, where a change in one area inevitably and invertedly ripples through others¹. Thus, to address "wicked problems" like climate change or social inequality, which are central to the GDS-Index, this White Paper aims to provide tools that support destination stakeholders, who often face significant resource constraints and complex political environments, in designing impactful and efficient sustainability actions with systemic impacts².

The GDS-Index has long been recognized as a world-class performance improvement programme. Its comprehensive criteria create a clear sustainability transition and leadership path for destinations. Yet, its true power extends beyond measuring performance of individual indicators, but in the invisible connections that bind them together and can unlock long-lasting sustainability actions. This White Paper introduces a pioneering collaboration between the University of Exeter and the GDS-Movement to make those connections visible.

This White Paper aims to provide destinations with resources to reveal the GDS-Index underlying structure as an interconnected system and reflect on the crucial and challenging role of destination management organisations in driving ripple effects within their unique governance and resource limitations. This paper's objectives are to:

1. **Reveal the hidden connections** between the GDS-Index criteria, providing a new, systemic view of destination performance that moves beyond isolated metrics.
2. **Illustrate practical and strategic pathways** for sustainability transformation, empowering destinations to identify "leverage points" where focused action can create a domino effect of positive change.
3. **Equip destination leaders and assessors** with an evidence-based tool to enhance performance reports, helping to shift from incremental improvements to high-impact, systemic interventions.

To achieve these objectives, a rigorous review of the GDS-Index was conducted to unveil the causal connections that emerge from the criteria, indicators and guidance. This approach has been underpinned by a strong participatory focus by engaging GDS experts, assessors and destinations to share, discuss and co-create the **GDS-Index System map**. This map shows how the GDS-Index criteria are interconnected based on the specific actions and evidence destinations are evaluated on—connections that are crucial to

¹ B. McKercher, "A Chaos Approach to Tourism," Article, *Tourism Management* 20, no. 4 (Aug 1999), [https://dx.doi.org/10.1016/s0261-5177\(99\)00008-4](https://dx.doi.org/10.1016/s0261-5177(99)00008-4).

² Gloria Crabolu, Xavier Font, and Sibel Eker, "Evaluating Policy Complexity with Causal Loop Diagrams," *Annals of Tourism Research* 100 (2023), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2023.103572>.

achieving destination-wide sustainability outcomes. The tool does not just visually represent these links; more importantly, it helps stakeholders understand and design sustainability actions that have greater opportunities to foster multi-faceted changes in the whole destination. This provides destinations with evidence for resource-efficient pathways and data-driven narratives to engage wider stakeholders in sustainable tourism actions. Finally, this white paper provides insights for the continued evolution of the GDS-Index, enhancing its rigour and effectiveness as a tool for driving the global transition towards regenerative tourism.

This white paper is based on academic research conducted by the University of Exeter and is underpinned by key assumptions:

- **A Systems Thinking Lens:** the white paper underscores the importance of systems thinking to understand tourism sustainability and foster actions for sustainability transitions. This means going beyond linear models and considering that both problems and solutions are holistic, interconnected, emergent, and evolving³.
- **A Participatory, Evidence-Based Approach:** the white paper is guided by a participatory approach grounded in evidence from the GDS-Index criteria. This means the GDS-Index Systems Map was developed by unpacking the internal logic of the GDS-Index, relying on its 10 years of continued improvement to represent the most pressing sustainability issues for destinations. GDS experts, assessors, and destinations were engaged to test and validate the map, ensuring its practical applicability. While the white paper presents a deep-dive analysis of past performance data from Circular Economy-related criteria (to show how the tool can unpack data patterns), the map itself was not created from past performance data but through an iterative discussion of a systemic understanding of the GDS-Index.
- **A Global-to-Local Framework:** the tools and analysis are presented with a global focus, providing a high-level understanding of the GDS-Index's structure and how actions can be deployed to kickstart systemic sustainability changes. While a wide number of destinations from 9 countries were engaged in developing the GDS-Index Systems map, contextual adaptations will still be needed to ensure local issues are clearly represented in decision-making.

Considering these assumptions, this paper constitutes a first step towards providing a systems thinking framework for destination managers to unlock a deeper understanding of the GDS-Index and help destinations accelerate their sustainability transitions.

³ Fritjof Capra, and Pier Luigi Luisi, "The Rise of Systems Thinking," in *The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision*, ed. Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

This white paper is structured around the creation of the GDS-Index Systems Map and its application as a sustainable tourism management tool as follows:

1. **The GDS-Index System Map** is presented, explaining its creation and key assumptions.
2. **Leverage Points** are analysed, identifying the most system-defined influential criteria as validated by participants.
3. **Leverage Pathways** are illustrated using four sub-maps and co-created transformation stories.
4. **A Deep Dive** into the Circular Economy cross-analyses the map's insights with past performance data.
5. **Recommendations** are offered for both destinations and the GDS-Index itself.
6. **The DMO Playbook for systemic change** is provided in Appendix A as a step-by-step guide for DMOs to apply the GDS-Index System Map in their local conditions and depending on their development or resource level.

This White Paper serves as a foundational step. The GDS-Index System Map is a static model of the 2024 criteria. The authors acknowledge that in practice, these systemic relationships are not neutral; they are dynamic, evolving over time, and mediated by local political authority, institutional mandates, and funding priorities. As the GDS-Index criteria evolve, the leverage points and pathways presented here will need to be re-evaluated.

The 'Transformation Stories' in Section 3 are, therefore, illustrative models, not empirical proofs. The essential next step is to apply this framework in longitudinal, real-world case studies to empirically validate how acting on these leverage points leads to measurable, system-wide improvements over time.

Furthermore, while this analysis identifies key social leverage points like Community Engagement and DEI Strategy, a crucial area for future research is to apply a more explicit equity lens, exploring who participates in these processes and how the benefits—and burdens—of change are distributed.

Finally, this study does not fully explore how the act of measurement itself can shape behaviour. A natural next step to implement the GDS-Index Systems map would be to investigate how the GDS-Index, as a transformation story itself, can address “performative compliance” and foster deeper, more reflexive learning systems required for regenerative transitions.

2. The GDS-Index System Map: A New Lens for Performance

The GDS-Index System Map (figure 1) is a visual model representing all 76 GDS-Index criteria from 2024 and 163 causal connections between them. The map includes three types of connections depicted by arrows.

1) Complex (blue): A blue arrow indicates that while two criteria are believed to be related, the relationship is not always certain and may not apply to every destination or context, or it may depend on specific conditions being met.

2) Negative (red): A red arrow signifies a relationship where an increase in one criterion is expected to cause a decrease in the other, or vice versa.

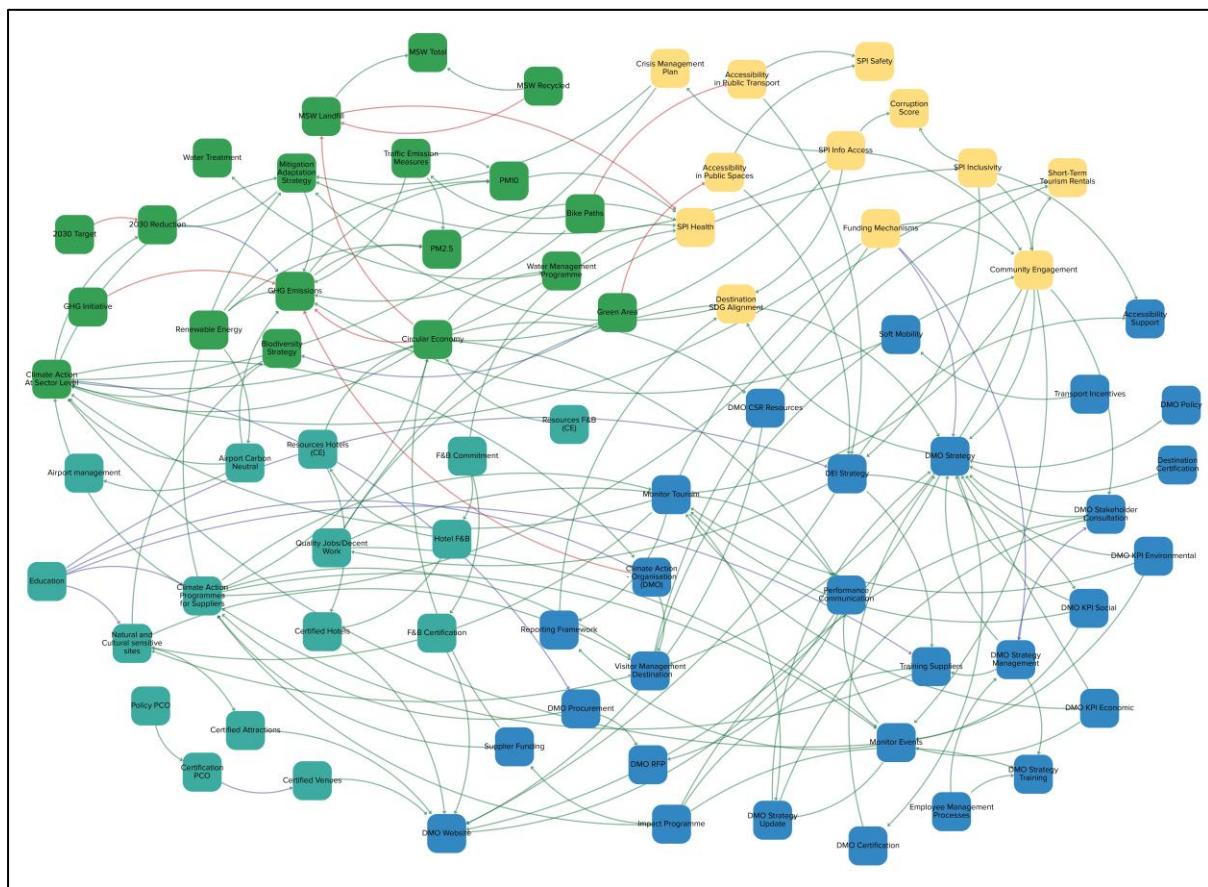
3) Positive (green): A green arrow, the most common type on the map, represents a relationship where an increase in one criterion is expected to lead to an increase in the connected criterion.

Furthermore, each criterion on the systems map is color-coded in boxes by its respective category within the GDS-Index: green for Environmental, yellow for Social, turquoise for Supplier, and blue for the Destination Management pillar.

The creation of this map followed a collaborative and rigorous process designed to ensure its accuracy and practical relevance. First, the map was built by the research team by systematically analysing the logic embedded within the GDS-Index's official criteria, indicators and guidance for 2024. It was then subjected to a multi-stage validation process, engaging the very people who use and shape the index every day. This included:

- **Individual validation meetings (4)** with GDS-Movement's internal experts.
- **Internal workshops (2)** with 8 GDS Assessors to test the map's logic against their practical experience.
- **External workshops (3)** with managers from 9 destinations participating in the GDS-Index, who provided real-world context and feedback.

Figure 1 The GDS-Index System Map



Source: authors own

This rigorous stakeholder engagement produced more than a map; it created a shared model for understanding and action. The GDS-Index System Map is a strategic tool for DMOs to elevate the performance measurement of the GDS-Index into a dynamic roadmap for transformation. It unveils the related benefits and risks of specific sustainability actions, offering a new tool to help destinations build compelling business cases to engage stakeholders, invest in sustainability across the value chain, ideate sustainability innovations, and tell an evidence-based story of their impact as explored next.

3. Strategies for Systemic Change: The GDS-Index System Map in action

This section demonstrates how to use the GDS-Index Systems Map as a strategic tool for change. First, the Index’s most influential criteria are revealed. These are defined as “leverage points” where focused interventions can spark the greatest systemic transformation. These leverage points are expanded presenting “leverage pathways”—practical narratives co-created with destination managers and GDS assessors. These stories illustrate how specific actions can generate powerful “ripple effects,” providing

a clear, evidence-based guide to enhancing sustainability performance. The systems thinking approach presented in this section is further applied in Appendix A “**The DMO Playbook for systemic change**”. This playbook provides a step-by-step process for DMOs on How to use the GDS-Index System Map to drive system change. The Playbook presents specific guiding actions for every destination regardless of their current development stage.

3.1. Leverage points spotlight for change

A key part of this analysis was to identify leverage points within the system. The analysis unveils that while important not all criteria have the same role in achieving destination-wide sustainability. Some criteria have many direct connections, while others are more influential, acting as critical bridges that connect disparate parts of the sustainability ecosystem. Using social network analysis, the most influential criteria are identified (table 1)—those that, if improved, are most likely to create a positive domino effect across the entire system. Focusing on these influential factors allows DMOs to be proactive leaders by applying resources where they will generate the most significant and widespread impact. Thus, prioritising actions that can catalyse broader, systemic change, ensuring that efforts are not just effective, but transformative.

Table 1 Most Influential GDS-Index Criteria

Rank	Influential Criterion	Category
1	Climate Action at Sector Level	● Environmental
2	Climate Action for Suppliers	◆ Supplier
3	Monitor Tourism	● Destination Management
4	Circular Economy	● Environmental
5	Visitor Management – Destination	● Destination Management
6	GHG Emissions	● Environmental
7	DEI Strategy	● Destination Management
8	DMO Strategy	● Destination Management
9	Monitor Events	● Destination Management
10	Community Engagement	● Social

Source: social network analysis of the GDS-Index System Map

A systems thinking approach allows for a crucial distinction between criteria that are *popular* (have the most direct connections) and those that are truly *influential* (act as critical bridges connecting disparate parts of the system)⁴. During the validation workshops, stakeholders frequently expected DMO Strategy to be the most influential criterion. This intuition is understandable, as DMO Strategy is the most *popular* criteria in the entire network, acting as a central hub for management activities. However, the systems analysis reveals that popularity and influence are not the same. While, in terms of influence DMO Strategy ranks 8th, the analysis identifies Climate Action at Sector Level is the most influential. This is because influential criteria serve as vital "bridge," creating ripple effects between otherwise disconnected areas—such as linking high-level environmental goals with tangible supplier programs and municipal policy. This distinction is the key value of the systems map: it provides an evidence-based starting point to help destinations look beyond the most evident hubs and identify the true leverage points where a focused effort will catalyse the greatest systemic change.

A key insight from the workshops is the strong presence of criteria related to climate and the environment. This reflects the interconnected nature and structural weight of these issues within the GDS-Index itself. Critically, many of these high-impact criteria, such as Climate Action at Sector Level, often fall outside the direct control of a DMO, residing instead with municipal or regional authorities. This list does not suggest DMOs are solely responsible for these areas; rather, it highlights their essential role as conveners, influencers, and strategic partners rather, it highlights an opportunity for them to act as conveners, influencers, and strategic partners. This is crucial because these relationships are mediated by political authority, institutional mandates, and funding priorities⁵. The map, therefore, provides a clear pathway for DMOs to understand where their influence can be most effectively applied to *begin or advance* these crucial conversations, build coalitions, and demonstrate co-benefits to other city departments.

The inclusion of social and strategic criteria like DEI Strategy, DMO Strategy, and Community Engagement in this list is equally significant. During the workshops, participants repeatedly emphasized that the social dimension of sustainability is critical, even if it is sometimes harder to measure. The presence of DEI Strategy and Community Engagement as leverage points validates their systemic importance. Furthermore, while DMO Strategy is often considered the starting point for all action, its 8th position on this list suggests that its true influence is unlocked not in isolation, but through its active

⁴ Pete Barbrook-Johnson, and Alexandra S. Penn, *Systems Mapping*, 1 ed. (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, XVII, 186, 2022).

⁵ Jose Melenez-Roman et al., "Co-Creating Sustainability Innovations in a Tourism Destination: A Participatory Research Design from Barcelona," *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* (<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2025.2587264>).

integration with monitoring tourism and events, stakeholder consultation, and community-focused programs.

Conversely, the analysis reveals that the least influential criteria tend to be those that are systemically isolated, falling into four main groups:

- **Simple Commitments:** Criteria like GHG Initiative, which act as "yes/no" answers rather than guaranteeing wider, interconnected action.
- **Static Municipal/Government Data:** Technical data points like Renewable Energy, MSW Recycled, and Bike Paths, which participants confirmed are often outside a DMO's direct control.
- **National-Level Metrics:** Criteria such as SPI Info Access, which are entirely beyond a DMO's scope of influence.
- **Narrowly-Defined Criteria:** Criteria like Funding Mechanisms or Education (currently limited to undergraduate provision), whose specific definitions limit their potential to connect broadly to other criteria.

This analysis thus provides a new strategic filter, allowing the GDS-Movement to refine the Index's methodological development by focusing on true cross-cutting leverage points and ensuring criteria guidance is more distinctly linked to the overall narrative of GDS-Index and its systemic impacts. Ultimately, this list of leverage points should be viewed as a strategic guide that shall be contextually adapted, not a rigid ranking. It provides DMOs with a new lens through which to view their sustainability efforts, helping them identify where to prioritize actions for the greatest systemic return.

3.2. Leverage pathways for sustainable tourism transformation

While the full GDS- Index System Map reveals the system's complexity, its practical utility is best realized by examining its constituent parts. To translate the complexity of the GDS-Index System Map into a practical tool for strategic planning, this section introduces the concept of "Leverage Pathways." A Leverage Pathway is a visual and narrative tool that illustrates how focused action on a single, highly influential criterion—a leverage point—can create a cascading, positive transformation across a destination's sustainability performance. These focus areas—including Circular Economy, Climate Action, Community Engagement, and DMO Strategy—were selected based on their identified systemic influence and their thematic importance to destination managers. This approach moves from overwhelming complexity to actionable clarity. This approach was developed and tested during our validation workshops, where destination managers and GDS assessors successfully used submaps to build tangible stories of change.

To best illustrate the strategic pathways for each, two distinct map styles are used: Upstream, and Downstream. The choice of map style is tailored to the nature of the criterion and the typical level of DMO influence, a nuance highlighted during our participatory workshops.

- **Upstream map:** for a criterion like Climate Action at Sector Level, where DMOs often have limited direct control over creating rapid change. This focuses on all the potential causes and contributing factors, empowering DMOs to identify pathways of influence to drive change on a larger scale.
- **Downstream map:** for a criterion like Community Engagement, which falls more directly under a DMO's remit. This approach highlights the wide-ranging effects and co-benefits that result from investing in robust monitoring practices, making a clear case for action.

In some sub-maps, a critical **feedback loop** is also shown (a connection that flows in both directions). This is to highlight a particularly powerful reinforcing relationship that was validated by stakeholders as a key dynamic for destinations.

Each Leverage Pathway presented in this report is illustrated using a “Transformation Story”, which was a hypothetical destination example of how a DMO can use the individual systems map to enhance sustainability performance. The story presents a clear, step-by-step narrative based on the Leverage Pathway. It follows a logical sequence from a strategic challenge to a successful outcome, showing a direct line of action. Finally, practical managerial implications that stem from the individual submaps are discussed.

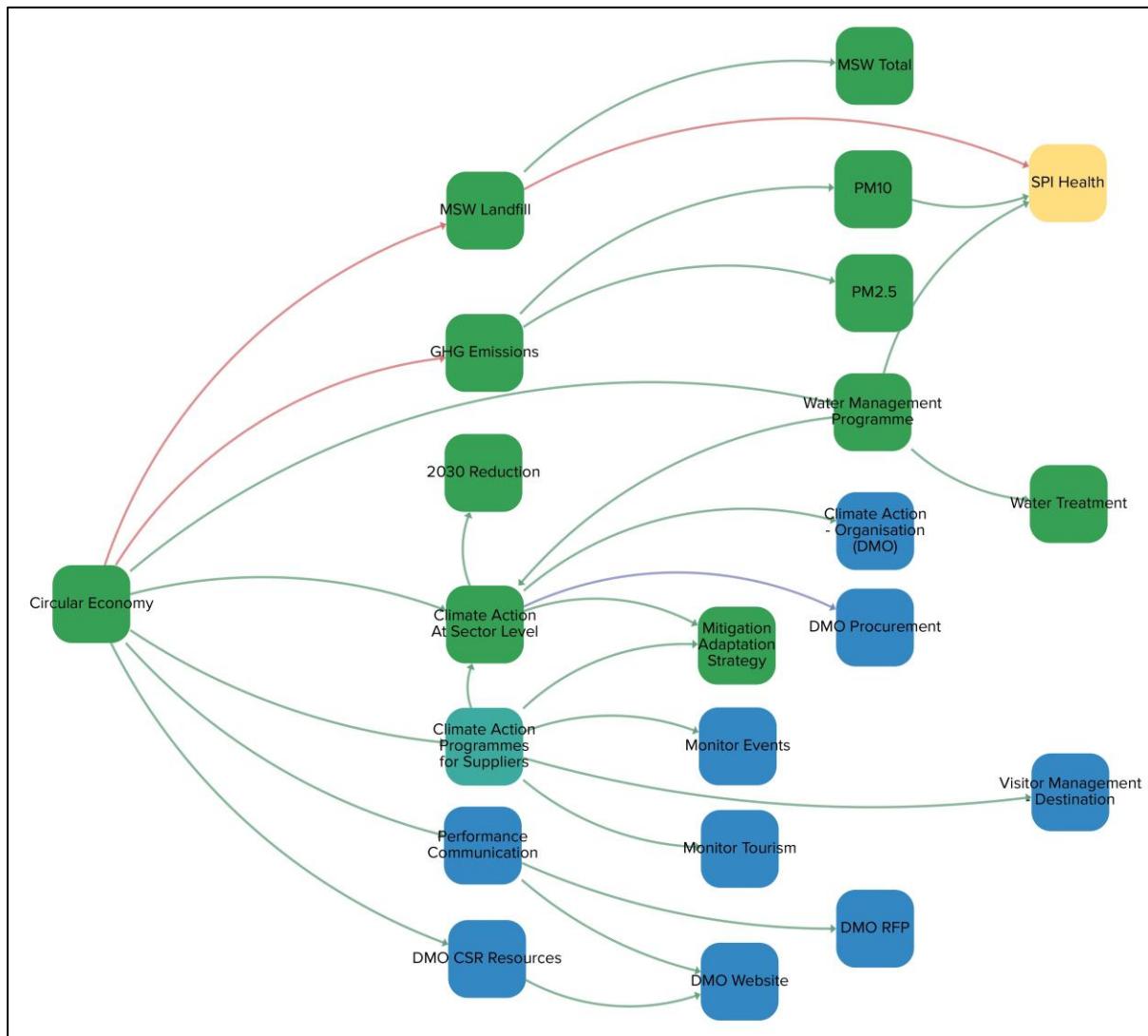
Leverage Pathway: The Circular Economy

The Circular Economy Challenge

Tourism destinations face mounting pressure from landfill waste, single-use plastics and increased CO2 emissions through the tourism value chain⁶. This has devastating effects for the environment and the visitors experience, which underscores the critical role of the Circular Economy criteria as the fourth most influential criteria of the GDS-Index. The participants revealed that, while DMOs actively encourage suppliers to act, engagement can be low if there is no city-wide governance and awareness, illustrating the power of using leverage pathways as strategic tools. The following strategic change story, inspired by the workshops, is one of many potential pathways a destination could explore. Based on the richness of the map and the specific context of specific destinations, these stories can and should be adapted.

⁶ Y. Y. Sun et al., "Drivers of Global Tourism Carbon Emissions," *Nat Commun* 15, no. 1 (Dec 10 2024), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1038/s41467-024-54582-7>.

Figure 2 Downstream Map of Circular Economy



Source: authors own

The Circular Economy Transformation Pathway Story

The journey begins with a DMO recognizing that its isolated requests for suppliers to improve waste management are failing. Seeing the systemic nature of the problem, the DMO shifts its role from purely educating to actively championing a city-wide *Circular Economy* strategy, using its influence to build the governance and legitimacy needed for broader action by creating a dedicated multi-stakeholder taskforce and a collaborative strategy. With this formal strategy in place, the DMO can then launch a legitimized and targeted *Climate Action Programmes for Suppliers*. These programs succeed because they are jointly developed with suppliers and framed not just as a cost of compliance, but as a pathway to creating business value through resource efficiency and innovation. This successful collaboration allows the DMO to engage in powerful *Performance Communication*, reporting on measurable reductions in waste and emissions and forging a new reputation as a responsible and forward-thinking destination.

Sustainability Performance Implications of Circular Economy:

This pathway reveals that a Circular Economy strategy is far more than a waste management plan; it is a catalyst for broad climate action. The workshops highlighted that DMOs often feel disconnected from municipal environmental policies. This map provides a clear pathway for DMOs to engage key stakeholders and lead tourism specific actions. By championing a city-wide and stakeholder-informed circularity plan, a DMO can directly influence outcomes in Water Management and GHG Emissions by engaging suppliers in climate action initiatives. This shifts the DMO's role from reporting city data to an active partner in achieving climate targets, demonstrating that environmental leadership can be a core function of destination management. This transformation, however, is not automatic. It depends on the DMO's ability to use its convening power to build political capital and demonstrate shared value to municipal partners who may not initially see tourism as a priority for climate action.

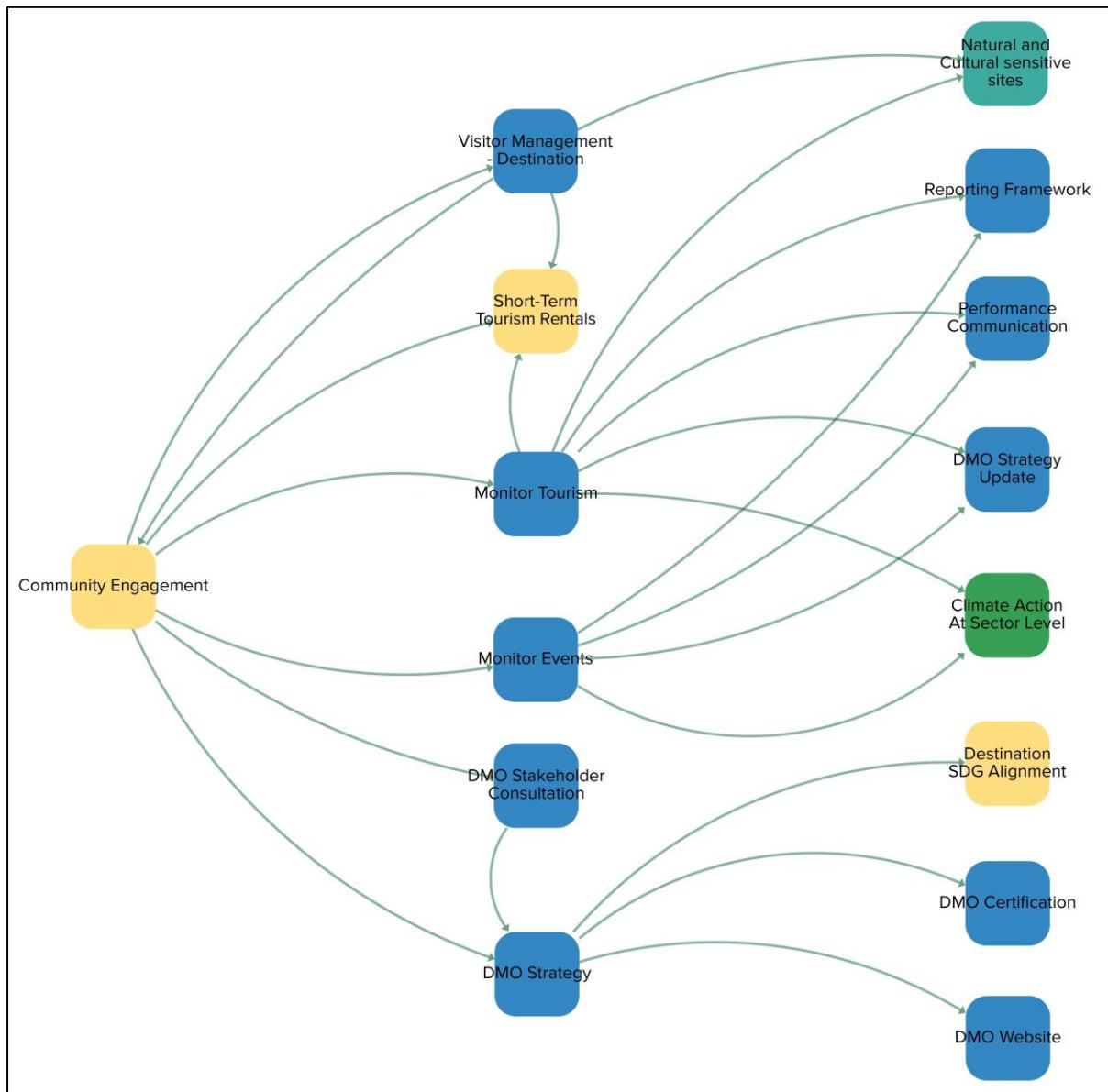
Leverage Pathway: Community Engagement

The Community Engagement Challenge

Tourism destinations are increasingly threatened by experiencing the negative impacts of overtourism, leading to a decline in resident quality of life and deteriorated tourism infrastructure⁷. Most destinations have started to develop tools to consider their community's view in tourism development, however its full transformation effects are difficult to visualise due to the complexity of engaging communities in the long term, understanding deep social norms and measuring impact of such engagement. The following strategic change story, inspired by the workshops, is one of many potential pathways a destination could explore to justify and enhance community engagement. Based on the richness of the map and the specific context of specific destinations, these stories can and should be adapted.

⁷ Tanja Mihalic, "Conceptualising Overtourism: A Sustainability Approach," *Annals of Tourism Research* 84 (2020), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2020.103025>.

Figure 3 Downstream Map of Community Engagement (with Key Feedback Loops)



Source: authors own

The Community Engagement Transformation Pathway Story

This transformation begins when the DMO makes *Community Engagement* its central strategic goal to address overcrowding. Instead of imposing a top-down solution, the DMO initiates a collaborative process to *Monitor Tourism*, working directly with residents to measure tourism's impact on resident's quality of life. This helps the DMO understand the true carrying capacity of a destination. This shared data and dialogue empower the destination to co-design an effective *Visitor Management* solution, such as a remote park-and-ride system. The implementation of this resident-supported plan leads to immediate, tangible improvements, reducing pressure on *Natural and Cultural Sensitive Sites* and lowering *GHG Emissions*. The success of this community-led initiative provides the foundation for powerful *Performance Communication*, enhancing the destination's

reputation and building the trust needed to strengthen the overall *DMO Strategy* with a mandate for sustainable management.

Sustainability Performance Implications of Community Engagement

This pathway demonstrates that Community Engagement is not a peripheral or passive objective but a critical driver of long-lasting outcomes. The validation workshops revealed that destinations often struggle to quantify the impact of community engagement. This map makes those impacts visible. A pathway that starts with in-depth dialogue with residents naturally leads to more effective Visitor Management and provides crucial social data to enrich Monitoring Tourism efforts. This transforms community engagement from a consultation exercise into co-design process to leverage data and inform DMO policies, embedding resident sentiment at the core of destination management. Achieving this requires a genuine commitment to ceding a degree of control to residents, a political step that can be challenging for some institutions but is essential for building the long-term trust required for systemic change.

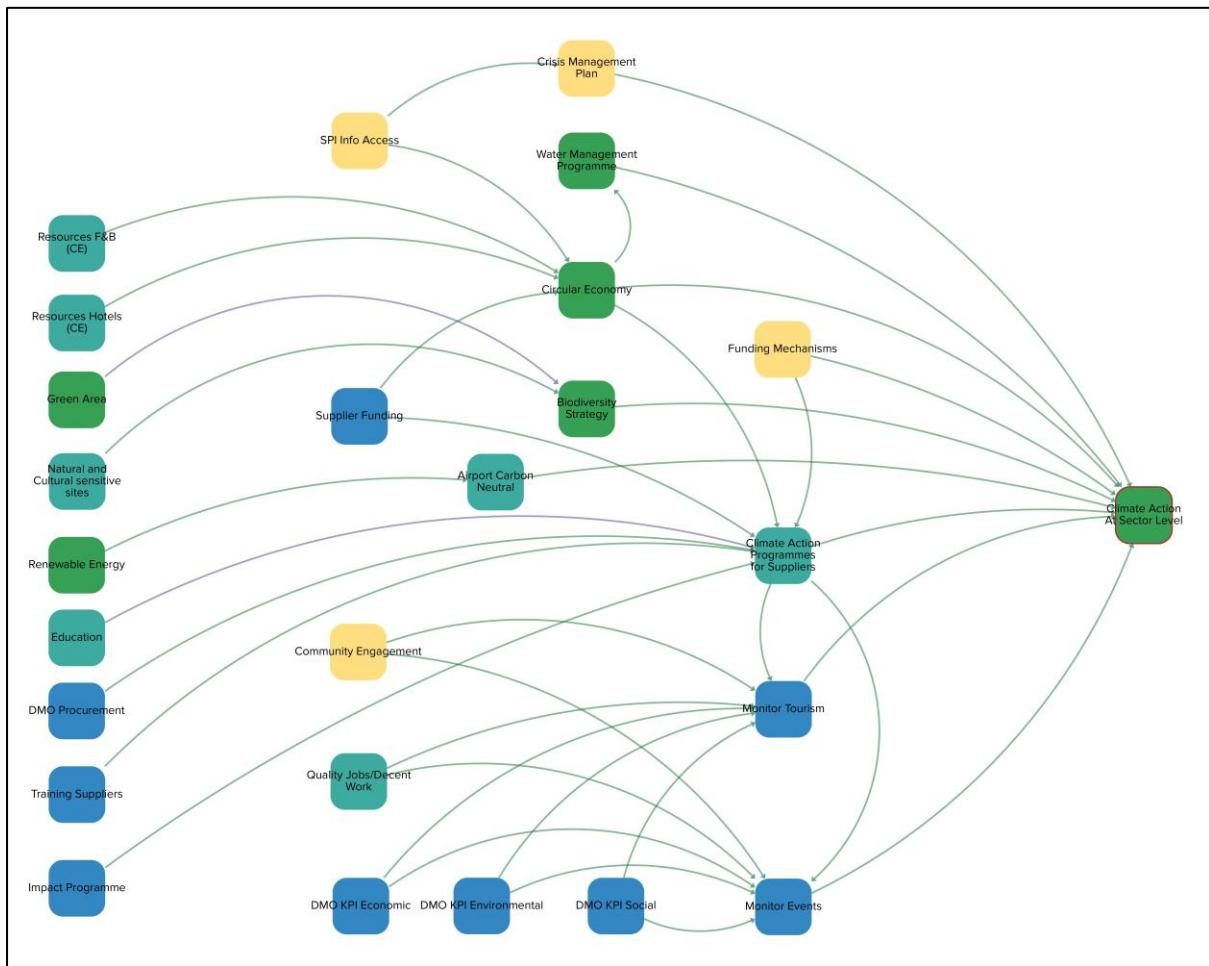
Leverage Pathway: Climate Action at Sector Level

The Climate Action at Sector Level Challenge

Destinations are increasingly recognising their crucial role in driving city-wide policies that ensure the tourism and events sector is represented as a vital player in reducing negative environmental impacts and building resilient communities against climate change⁸. However, the workshops confirm that DMOs find it difficult to both understand the full scope of potential climate action to be deployed by tourism stakeholder and effectively influence city wide policies. The following strategic change story, inspired by the workshops, is one of many potential pathways a destination could explore to elevate tourism role in climate change actions. Based on the richness of the map and the specific context of specific destinations, these stories can and should be adapted.

⁸ Stefan Gössling, and Daniel Scott, "Tourist Demand and Destination Development under Climate Change: Complexities and Perspectives," *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* (2025), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2025.2543953>.

Figure 4 Upstream Map of Climate Action at Sector Level



Source: authors own

The Climate Action at Sector Level Transformation Pathway Story

Participants agree that destinations are increasingly facing climate-related crisis. Thus, the catalyst for this transformation story is a climate-related crisis, such as a storm, which creates an urgent and undeniable need for a coordinated response. Seizing this moment, the DMO acts as a convener, forming a stakeholder group of suppliers, academics, and experts to launch an *Education* program focused on the shared vulnerability of the destination's assets, including its *Natural and Cultural Sensitive Sites*. This DMO-led collaboration then builds the practical capacity for action through a new *Monitoring* System and targeted *Training for Suppliers for Climate Action*. These foundational steps provide the shared knowledge and data needed to inform a collective, sector-wide *Mitigation Adaptation Strategy*. This entire process, orchestrated by the DMO, culminates in a robust *Climate Action at Sector Level* plan, transforming the destination from a collection of vulnerable individual actors into a resilient and coordinated system.

Sustainability Performance Implications of Climate Action at Sector Level

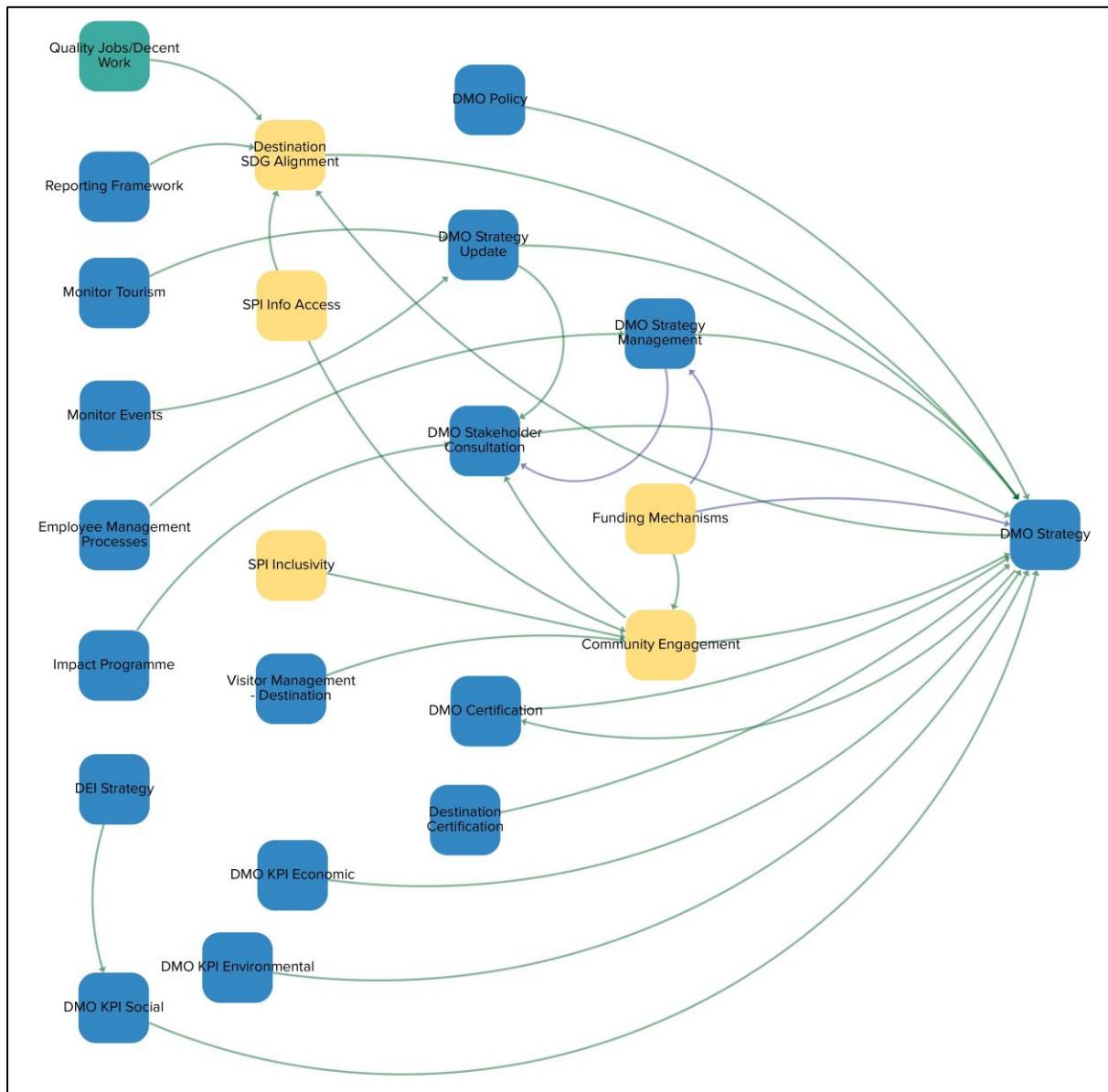
This pathway highlights a crucial insight from the workshops: DMOs often feel they have little direct control over sector-level climate action. This upstream map shows them where to apply influence. Climate Action at Sector Level is not a single action but the end result of a systemic process. By focusing on upstream drivers like *Education*, *Training for Suppliers*, and building *Monitoring* capacity, a DMO can create the necessary conditions for a sector-wide strategy to emerge. This reframes the DMO's role from being solely responsible for the outcome to being the facilitator of the system that produces it, suggesting that influence can be as powerful as direct control. This approach is crucial for DMOs with limited resources, as it reframes their role from 'delivering' a climate plan to 'facilitating' the network that can build one, a more realistic goal when institutional agency is low.

Leverage Pathway: DMO Strategy

The DMO Strategy Challenge

Most destination have a DMO strategy that contemplates key concerns over sustainability. However, workshops and interviews show that destinations either (i) struggle to move from recognising sustainability concerns to developing impact actions or (ii) find it difficult to innovate its strategy to engage wider sustainability issues and integrate it to destination-wide plans. The following strategic change story, inspired by the workshops, is one of many potential pathways a destination could explore. Based on the richness of the map and the specific context of specific destinations, these stories can and should be adapted.

Figure 5 Upstream Map of DMO Strategy (with Key Feedback Loops)



Source: authors own

The DMO Strategy Transformation Pathway Story

This pathway begins with a DMO's desire to evolve its DMO Strategy from a static document into a dynamic tool for change. To do so, the DMO initiates a new *DMO Stakeholder Consultation*, deliberately broadening its reach to include community groups and social enterprises. This deeper engagement reveals a clear mandate to connect tourism's economic impact to social goals, such as creating *Quality Jobs*. To act on this, the DMO expands its *Monitor Tourism* and *Monitor Events* programs to capture new and more sophisticated *social and environmental KPIs*. This enriched data provides the evidence needed to build a more holistic *Reporting Framework* and, ultimately, to revise the *DMO Strategy*. Now grounded in *community needs* and robust data, the strategy becomes a powerful tool that drives a meaningful *Impact Programme*, aligns

with the city's *Destination SDG Alignment*, and is communicated with authenticity on the *DMO Website*.

Sustainability Performance Implications of DMO Strategy

This pathway demonstrates how an integrated DMO Strategy can become a central hub for driving systemic change. The workshops highlighted that a strategy is often seen as the starting point, yet it was not the most influential factor in the system map. This story explains why: its influence is unlocked when it is actively connected to its ecosystem. A strategy that is not informed by deep DMO Stakeholder Consultation or enriched by data from Monitoring Tourism becomes a static document. By treating the strategy as a living system that both informs and is informed by its surrounding criteria, a DMO can elevate it from a planning exercise to the primary engine of its sustainability performance. This, of course, assumes a degree of consensus. For DMOs facing internal resistance, the upstream map (Figure 5) provides the evidence to make the case, showing how a disconnected strategy fails to achieve its goals.

4. Deep Dive Analysis: From Place-Based Circularity to Action

While the GDS-System Map reveals the strategic pathways for transformation, a deep dive into performance data shows more clearly how these systems operate in practice. To deepen the understanding of the real-world challenges and opportunities behind a single influential criterion, this section analyses the Circular Economy (EN-8), identified as the fourth most influential leverage point in the system. By combining an analysis of the 2024 GDS-Index results with in-depth interviews with 5 destinations, this section reveals how benchmarking indicators translate into governance choices, stakeholder dynamics, and implementation challenges. The analysis shows that the Circular Economy is not merely a technical measure of waste and resource recovery but also a catalyst for reconfiguring relationships across the tourism ecosystem, offering a compelling example of how systems thinking can provide a new lens to support place-based action tailored to a destination's unique local context. This deep-dive model—pairing the systems map with performance data—is a powerful, evidence-based approach to understanding sustainability challenges. It can be applied to any criterion to help destinations design impactful, place-based actions.

4.1. The 'Ambition-to-Implementation' Gap

The 2024 GDS-Index data reveals a significant gap between *ambition* and *implementation* in the circular economy. While a majority of destinations (around 88%) report having at least a basic strategy, and 74% have an advanced one (integrating reuse or repair), the operationalisation of these strategies is inconsistent.

For instance, only 58% had produced a circular economy performance report in the past three years. This gap highlights a key challenge: many destinations have a strategy on paper, but struggle with the data, governance, and resources to fully execute it.

4.2. Confusion Between 'Basic' and 'Advanced' Action

Interpretation challenges further complicate this picture. Destinations often struggled to distinguish between 'basic' (e.g., recycling) and 'advanced' (e.g., closed-loop supply chains) approaches⁹. This ambiguity shows that many in the sector are still adopting surface-level actions rather than the systemic transformations required for genuine circularity.

This confusion, however, points to a significant opportunity: by creating a clearer, shared definition of what makes a practice 'advanced', destinations can develop more effective strategies and benchmark their progress more consistently.

4.3. The 'Tourism-Specific' Gap

The analysis also shows a consistent challenge in integrating tourism into city-level plans. Most destinations (over 50%) present general municipal strategies that leave tourism "implicitly covered rather than explicitly addressed".

Yet, without clear, specific reference to tourism, these strategies rarely translate into GDS-Index recognition or measurable impact for the sector. The data reveals that tourism-specific evidence often focuses narrowly on food waste and single-use plastics, leaving broader opportunities in reuse and repair underexplored. This gap shows the need for DMOs to move beyond simple recycling initiatives and become strategic *coordinators* of circular practices across the entire tourism supply chain. This reveals a persistent tendency within the tourism sector to adopt surface-level sustainability actions rather than addressing the systemic transformations required for genuine circularity¹⁰.

4.4. The Geographical and Regulatory Imbalance

A further pattern is the geographical disparity in performance. European destinations, which often benefit from strong regulatory frameworks like the EU Circular Economy Action Plan¹¹, dominate the advanced rankings.

This suggests the GDS-Index, in its current form, may inadvertently favour the regulatory advantages of advanced economies. This structural asymmetry highlights the need for more context-sensitive pathways that also recognise the voluntary, bottom-up ingenuity of destinations operating with fewer institutional supports.

⁹ Nancy Bocken et al., "A Review and Evaluation of Circular Business Model Innovation Tools," *Sustainability* 11, no. 8 (2019), <https://dx.doi.org/10.3390/su11082210>.

¹⁰ Rossana Strippoli, Teodoro Gallucci, and Carlo Ingrao, "Circular Economy and Sustainable Development in the Tourism Sector – an Overview of the Truly-Effective Strategies and Related Benefits," *Helion* 10, no. 17 (2024/09/15/ 2024), <https://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e36801>.

¹¹ *Circular Economy Action Plan*, by European Commission (2020).

4.5. Beyond the Metrics: Circular Economy as Governance Mechanism

Qualitative findings from interviews and workshops reinforced the data-driven evidence. DMOs noted that circular initiatives produced stronger outcomes when integrated with suppliers, yet they often felt constrained by their dependence on city-level data, with limited ability to shape or contextualise responses. In practice, this meant metrics often captured the *presence* of a strategy rather than its *effectiveness*. This highlighted an opportunity to enhance the indicator's diagnostic power. The analysis shows that without a sharper definition to separate foundational practices from systemic ones; the scoring cannot always capture the significant difference in a destination's progress. Moreover, participants emphasised that even in high-scoring destinations, real-world frictions persisted: a lack of trust between operators, misalignment between policy and practice, and limited channels for dialogue. These challenges underscore the importance of complementing quantitative metrics with qualitative measures that can account for these real-world governance dynamics and political frictions.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the Circular Economy criterion functions most effectively not as a simple compliance measure, but as a governance mechanism. This reveals a powerful strategic opportunity for DMOs: by shifting from a focus on *reporting* municipal data to *convening* multi-stakeholder action, DMOs can unlock the full potential of circularity as a vehicle for systemic change. This deep dive demonstrates that sustainability indicators reach their fullest potential when they are embedded in systems of collaboration, guiding destinations away from "performative compliance" and towards genuine regenerative transitions. Specifically for the Circular Economy, this systems-plus-data approach reveals clear opportunities to enhance the GDS-Index:

- Refining definitions of strategy maturity to better distinguish between foundational and advanced practices.
- Incorporating allowances for diverse governance contexts, recognizing that not all destinations have the same regulatory support.
- Placing greater emphasis on impact evaluation over documentation.

5. Recommendations: Enhancing Methodological Rigour and Destination Impact

The GDS-Index System Map is more than an analytical model; it is a practical tool for strategic action. The insights from its design and validation reveal clear pathways to enhance sustainability performance for destinations and to evolve the GDS-Index itself.

5.1. Recommendations for Destinations and DMOs: From Measurement to Systemic Action

To support the implementation of these recommendations, a step-by-step guide is provided in **Appendix A: The DMO Playbook for Systemic Change**:

1. **Adopt a Systemic Mindset:** The primary recommendation for destinations is to move beyond a "checklist" approach. The GDS-Index is an interconnected system, not a list of isolated tasks, while all consulted stakeholders agree with this, they find it difficult to action on the systemic dimension of the GDS-Index. By using the GDS-System Map, DMOs can see, for example, that a single action like investing in a Supplier Training program is not just one item to check off; it is a "leverage point" that creates positive, cascading effects on Climate Action, GHG Emissions, and Circular Economy practices.
2. **Use the Map as a Strategic Planning Tool:** The sub-maps and "leverage pathways" (Section 3) should be used as templates for creative strategic planning. DMOs can use these maps to identify co-benefits and design interventions that generate multiplier effects. For destinations that see stagnation in their sustainability performance, the map provides a new way to find alternative, "upstream" pathways to influence criteria that seem out of reach. To facilitate this process, Appendix A: The DMO Playbook provides a practical, 4-step method to help teams identify these upstream pathways and trace their ripple effects.
3. **Use the Map to Tell a New Story of Value:** The GDS-Index System map is a powerful narrative tool. As revealed in the workshops, DMOs are often the "heroes" of the transformation narrative, acting as the central convenor who connects disparate stakeholders (municipal, private sector, and community). The map provides the visual evidence to communicate this crucial, systemic role. DMOs can use it to draw on evidence that helps them navigate internal politics, justify their work, build compelling business cases for funding by framing them in the language of other municipal or regional departments, and engage stakeholders by showing how their collective efforts contribute to a larger, shared purpose.
4. **Beyond Scores to Systemic Leadership:** The GDS-Index System Map provides a critical starting point for destinations at every stage of their journey to identify where their limited resources can have the greatest impact. More importantly, it provides emerging and maturing destinations with evidence (i.e. visual, narratives and a playbook) to convene other tourism and destination-wide stakeholders to reflect and act on the critical role of DMOs to drive sustainability transformation in business, the environment and the society. Thus, accelerating performance and devising creative and cost-effective solutions at every resource or

development stage. The DMO Playbook (Appendix A) expands on this framework, offering specific 'starting questions' and tailored actions for destinations at each of the following stages:

- **For Emerging DMOs:** This tool can feel overwhelming. The recommendation is to start small. Use the map to identify 1-2 leverage points within your immediate control (e.g., Supplier Training). Use this as a starting point to build capacity, show a "win," and begin a new conversation.
- **For Maturing DMOs:** Your focus is on bridging silos. Use the map to find "upstream" pathways to influence criteria outside your direct control, aligning your actions with other municipal departments. This it can help them plan, design, and evaluate sustainability actions with a systemic impact.
- **For Advanced DMOs:** For destinations that already score highly, the map offers a new challenge. It encourages a shift in focus from *maintaining scores* to *deepening systemic impact*. These destinations can use the map to identify opportunities to strengthen feedback loops, innovate in under-leveraged areas (like the social criteria), and act as mentors by sharing their successful pathway models with the wider GDS-Movement community

5.2. Recommendations for the GDS-Movement: Evolving the GDS-Index

1. **Embed Systems Thinking into Performance Reports:** The "control vs. influence" gap was the most consistent theme from all stakeholder workshops. DMOs feel accountable for metrics they cannot directly control (e.g., MSW Landfill). The GDS-Movement can address this by using the map's insights to enhance its Performance Improvement Reports. Reports can be reframed to provide strategic recommendations that show a DMO how to *influence* a city-wide criterion (an "upstream" pathway) rather than describing scores. Further, reports can focus on helping destinations design novel sustainability under their control (by focusing "downstream" pathways) by discovering new connections of their potential impacts. Overall, as shown in the workshops this can help contextualise best practices to the specific needs of destinations, while embedding evidence-based discussion emerging from the GDS-Index. The 'DMO Playbook' (Appendix A) provides a framework of guiding questions that can be used to facilitate feedback sessions and help destinations translate their scores into systemic action.
2. **Enhance Methodological Clarity and Focus on Impact:** The "Deep Dive" (Section 4) revealed several opportunities to enhance the criteria, which can be applied to other criteria on the Index:

- **Refine Definitions:** Clarify the distinction between "basic" (e.g., recycling) and "advanced" (e.g., closed-loop) strategies, as in the Circular Economy criterion. This provides a clearer roadmap for destinations to submit relevant evidence and helps enhance consistency of evaluations.
- **Prioritise Impact over Documentation:** Shift criteria weighting, where possible, to reward the *practice and impact* of a strategy over the *existence of documentation*. This guides destinations away from performative compliance and towards tangible, systemic change.

3. **From a Reporting Tool to a Strategic Learning System:** A challenge for *all* sustainability benchmarking worldwide is the risk of unintentionally encouraging "performative compliance". As the "Deep Dive" (Section 4) revealed, there can be a gap between the existence of strategies in documentation and the extent to which these are implemented. This White Paper's findings offer a powerful pathway to address this. The GDS-Movement can use the GDS-Index Systems Map to evolve the Index from a powerful *reporting tool* into a dynamic *strategic learning system*. This means using the map's logic to inform the assessment process itself. For example, rather than asking *if* a strategy document exists, the criteria and guidance could prompt DMOs to demonstrate *how* that strategy is systemically connected—how the DMO Strategy informs Supplier Engagement, how it is updated by Monitoring data, or how it is co-created with Community Engagement. This reframes the act of "reporting" for the DMO: it becomes a reflexive, strategic exercise in understanding their own system. By embedding this systems-thinking approach, the GDS-Movement can more effectively guide destinations towards the genuine, transformative action that is the core of their mission.

4. Address Systemic Imbalances in the GDS-Index:

- **The Social "Void":** Stakeholders repeatedly noted the Index's "strong focus on climate action" over social issues. The GDS-Movement should consider how to elevate the systemic influence of social criteria. For example, a powerful proxy criterion, similar to Climate Action at Sector Level, could be created for the social pillar (e.g., "Social Impact at Sector Level") to drive broader DMO actions on DEI Strategy, Community Engagement, and Quality Jobs. Furthermore, this "social void" represents a key opportunity to more clearly embed equity and social inclusion into the Index. The GDS-Movement can encourage DMOs to use the systems map to explicitly trace how their environmental and economic actions (e.g., Circular Economy) might create positive or negative ripple effects on social criteria like Quality Jobs or Community Engagement, ensuring that

distributive justice and resident well-being are at the heart of their strategies.

- **Contextual Diversity:** The data shows European destinations benefit from strong regulatory frameworks (e.g., the EU Circular Economy Action Plan). The Index should "incorporate allowances for diverse governance contexts," creating pathways that also recognise and value the voluntary, bottom-up innovations pioneered by destinations with less institutional support.
- **The "Least Influential" Criteria:** The analysis identified criteria that have very little systemic connection. These should be reviewed to either integrate them more explicitly into the Index's narrative (connecting them to leverage points) or consider their removal to streamline the Index and allow DMOs to focus their limited resources on what matters most.

4. Provide a Methodological Pathway to a Regenerative Lens

The GDS-Movement is a global leader in the shift from sustainability (reducing negative impacts) to regeneration (creating net-positive value). This project's findings provide a clear methodological pathway to support that evolution. The current Index, while world-class, primarily measures sustainability actions and their direct outputs. The GDS-Index Systems Map, however, provides the tool to measure the next step: systemic impact. By using the map to trace the "ripple effects" and co-benefits of an action (like the Leverage Pathways), the GDS-Movement can begin to evaluate how destinations are not just managing their footprint but are actively contributing to enhancing the well-being of their entire ecosystem. This systems-thinking approach, which reveals how a DMO's actions can strengthen Community Engagement and Circular Economy loops simultaneously provides the foundational evidence for evaluating regenerative principles. The recommendation is to use this systems-mapping framework as the methodological foundation for more distinctly embedding measurement of regenerative tourism principles in the GDS-Index to evidence its role in catalysing wider and profound transformations.

6. Conclusion: Connecting Performance to Purpose

The research and stakeholder engagement undertaken for this White Paper reveal four key lessons that, together, show how the GDS-Index performance improvement programme can foster dynamic systemic change.

The first lesson is that **performance is an ecosystem, not a checklist**. The GDS-Index is more than a list of individual criteria; it is a complex, interconnected system where actions in one area create cascading effects, or "ripple effects," elsewhere. The most transformative sustainability gains are not made by tackling criteria in isolation, but by understanding their relationships. The GDS-Index System Map makes these invisible

connections visible, equipping destinations with evidence to move beyond a compliance mindset to a more strategic, holistic approach.

Second, **not all actions are equal**. The systems analysis revealed that certain criteria act as powerful "leverage points." These are not always the most obvious or popular criteria, but they are the most influential, acting as critical bridges within the system. Focusing resources on these influential areas—such as Climate Action at Sector Level, Circular Economy, and Community Engagement—is more likely to create a "domino effect" of positive change across the entire system. This provides a strategic filter for DMOs, helping them prioritize efforts for the greatest possible impact.

This leads to the third and most critical insight: **DMOs can become system catalysts**. A critical theme emerging from all workshop discussions was the distinction between what a DMO can **control** and what it must **influence**. Many of the most influential leverage points, particularly around climate action and environmental policy, reside at the municipal or regional level, outside the DMO's direct authority.

This is where the map provides its ultimate value, revealing the fourth lesson: **the map connects performance to purpose**. The gap between measuring performance and managing for impact was a recurring theme in discussions. The storytelling exercises revealed that DMOs often aspire to be the "heroes" of the transformation narrative, connecting disparate city departments and mobilizing suppliers. The systems map helps bridge this gap by reframing the "control vs. influence" challenge as a strategic opportunity. For example, it shows how investing in a Supplier Training program is not just about certification numbers but is a tangible way to contribute to the city's climate targets and improve resident well-being. By revealing these pathways, the map provides a new form of evidence DMOs can use to build compelling business cases and tell a more meaningful story to stakeholders. It enhances the powerful reporting and benchmarking role of the GDS-Index by providing a dynamic roadmap for transformation, empowering DMOs to embrace the opportunity to be effective catalysts for change.

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Appendix A: The DMO Playbook for systemic change

This White Paper demonstrates that the GDS-Index is a systemic tool. But how can a destination, regardless of its size, development stage, or resources, put these insights into action?

This Playbook offers a simple, step-by-step process. It is designed to be a "practical guide" to help *all* destinations use the GDS-Index System Map to impactful decisions.

How to Use This Playbook

1. It's a Cycle, Not a List: Systemic change is iterative. Once you complete Step 4 (Learning), you return to Step 1 with new knowledge and capacity.

2. Match the Step to Your Reality:

- **If you CONTROL a criterion** (it is internal to the DMO), you are looking **Downstream** to find value and co-benefits.
- **If you INFLUENCE a criterion** (it is external/municipal), you are looking **Upstream** to find drivers and partners.

3. Check Your Stage: Use the "Staged Approach" at the end of this appendix to decide the scope of your actions. You may be "Advanced" in Social criteria but "Emerging" in Environmental ones—adjust your ambition accordingly.

A 4-Step Method for Systemic Action

Step 1: Map Your "Circle of Control vs. Influence"

The "control vs. influence" gap is the most common challenge DMOs face. This step grounds your strategy.

Guiding Actions:

1.1. Map Your Control: Look at the Top 10 Leverage Points (Table 1). Which of these are **100% within your DMO's direct control** (e.g., DMO Strategy, DMO Website, Climate Action for Suppliers, etc.)? *Mark these for "Downstream" analysis in Step 2.*

1.2. Map Your Influence: Which points do you have **influence** on, but *no direct control* (e.g., Climate Action at Sector Level, Circular Economy, GHG Emissions, etc.)? *Mark these for "Upstream" analysis in Step 2.*

1.3. Universal Check - Identify Power-Holders: Whether you control or influence the criterion, systemic change is often a shared responsibility that requires collaboration. Who *specifically* holds the power, budget, or political mandate? (e.g., *Is it the City's Transport Department? A hotel association? Your own Board of Directors?*) This identifies your target audience for Step 3.

Insight in Action: The MSW Recycled Problem

Stakeholders flagged static municipal data like MSW Recycled as a key frustration because it is outside DMO control (Category 1.2). Instead of focusing on this static and out of reach metric, this method helps you identify it as an "Influence" point, prompting you to look for upstream drivers you can affect. While DMOs should still monitor these metrics, this approach helps shift the focus on actions that can lead to change.

Step 2: Trace the "Ripple Effects" (Upstream & Downstream)

This step uses the GDS-Index System Map to find hidden opportunities and build a "business case." Customized downstream and Upstream maps for selected criteria might be required and will be available through the GDS-Movement. Follow the path defined in Step 1 to address the guiding actions.

Guiding Actions:

2.1. If you have Control (From 1.1), Find "Downstream" Co-Benefits: Use the sub-maps (like Figure 3 or 5) to trace the *effects* of your action. For example, how does your work on DMO Stakeholder Consultation *already* (perhaps invisibly) support DMO Strategy and DEI Strategy?

- *Goal:* Use this to justify funding and demonstrate value.

2.2. If you rely on Influence (From 1.2, Find "Upstream" Pathways: Use the "Upstream" maps (like Figure 4) to find the *drivers*. What are the 1-2 smaller actions you *can* take (e.g. Training Suppliers, Impact Programme) to start moving a major city-wide metric?

- *Goal:* Find a realistic entry point for action.

2.3. Universal Check - Find the "Equity Blind Spot": Regardless of the pathway, ask: How might this action create a *positive or negative* ripple effect on social goals? For example, does your Circular Economy plan support Quality Jobs? This ensures a just transition.

Insight in Action: Justifying the "Social" Work

DMOs often struggle to quantify the impact of community engagement. By using Action 2.1, you can use Figure 3 to prove that Community Engagement is a critical downstream driver of "hard" outcomes like Visitor Management and Monitoring Tourism.

Step 3: Convene a New Conversation

This step uses the GDS-Index System Map as a political and storytelling tool. The nature of the conversation depends on your Step 1 analysis.

Guiding Actions:

3.1. The "Control" Conversation (Strategic Leadership): For criteria you control (from 1.1), use the map to show stakeholders (suppliers, board members) how their participation in your program creates wider city benefits.

- *Sample Script:* "By participating in our DMO Strategy consultation, you aren't just helping us write a document; the GDS-Index System Map (see Figure 5) shows you are directly influencing the city's SDG Alignment."

3.2. The "Influence" Conversation (Coalition Building): For criteria where you need help (from 1.2), use the map to frame the "ask" in *their* language.

- *Sample Script:* "I see your department is measured on MSW Recycled. Our analysis based on the GDS-Index System Map (Figure 2) shows my DMO's work on Climate Action for Suppliers can directly support your goal. How can we support our efforts?"

3.3. Focus on Enhancing, Not Inventing: Before creating new actions, use the map to find **overlapping circles** of interest. For example, can the DMO and the municipal government department use a single report that satisfies both of your needs? What minor adjustments would need to be made to align such report for both goals.

Insight in Action: The Circular Economy Catalyst

The "Deep Dive" found that for many DMOs, the GDS-Index was their "first introduction to their own city's circular economy policies". This is a perfect example of Action 3.2. The DMO can now convene a new conversation with the city, using the map to show how a tourism-specific action plan helps the municipality achieve its goals.

Step 4: Institutional Learning & Governance

The goal is to move from "performative compliance" (ticking a box) to "purpose-driven change". The outcome is a *learning process*.

Guiding Actions:

4.1 Document the Governance Shift: Don't just report the data point. Document the *new relationship*. How can you report a *new collaboration* (i.e. *action, project, commitment*) with a municipal department as a tangible outcome? How can you scale-up this relationship-building process to other areas of the GDS-Index?

4.2 Create a Learning System: Use the process to reflect. What worked? Did the "Upstream" driver (Step 2.2) actually move the needle? What insights did you gain from aligning with other municipal departments or stakeholders? Use this reflection as foundation to engage with other GDS-Index criteria like DMO Stakeholder Consultation.

4.3 Institutionalise the Agency: Ensure this knowledge is shared widely within the DMO team and collaborators. Embed the process into your onboarding and strategic

reviews to build long-term institutional agency. Feel free to use the GDS-Index System Map as visual aid to discuss and trace your impact in such meetings.

A Staged Approach to Catalytic Leadership: Where to Start?

DMOs are "system catalysts", but this role looks different for every destination based on their context, resources, and development stage. Furthermore, destinations may be "Advanced" in one area (e.g., Social) but "Emerging" in another (e.g., Environmental). This staged approach helps focus DMO efforts and resources to maximize impact.

Check your stage for the **specific topic** you are tackling:

If you are... EMERGING in this area

- **Focus:** Mapping & Internal Alignment.
- **Action:** Focus heavily on **Steps 1.1 and 2.1**. Identify leverage points **100% within your control** (e.g., DMO Procurement, Training Suppliers). Use the maps to show your own team the value of this work.
- **Goal:** Secure an "easy win" to build the internal confidence needed for the next stage.

If you are... MATURING in this area

- **Focus:** Bridging & External Influence.
- **Action:** Shift focus to **Steps 1.2 and 2.2**. Identify a city-wide criterion you are "stuck" on. Use the "upstream" maps to find drivers you can influence. Use **Step 3.1** to convene your first targeted meeting with a municipal partner or other external stakeholder group.
- **Goal:** Move from "control" to "influence" and build a "coalition of the willing."

If you are... ADVANCED in this area

- **Focus:** Systemic Leadership & Regeneration.
- **Action:** Apply the method to the *hardest* challenges (Systemic Imbalances, Equity). Use **Step 4** to pioneer the "Regenerative Lens" and act as a mentor by sharing your "Leverage Pathways" with the wider destination stakeholders.
- **Goal:** Deepen your impact by addressing the root causes of sustainability challenges.