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# Designing & Delivering Impactful Island Innovation Programmes



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# Table of Contents

01	Contributors	p 03
02	Executive Summary	p 04
03	Context & Purpose	p 05
04	The Session	p 07
05	Fireside Chat	p 08
06	Shared Perspectives	p 11
07	TIDES: A Framework for Design?	p 13
08	Group Work: Testing the Framework	p 17
09	Findings & Recommendations	p 19
10	Limitations	p 21
11	Conclusion	p 22
12	Bibliography	p 24

# Contributors

This paper draws on insights from participants in the **Designing and Delivering Impactful Island Innovation Programmes** co-design lab and side event held at the Global Sustainable Islands Summit, Gran Canaria, 22 April 2026.

We are deeply grateful to each contributor for their time, candour, and commitment to advancing more impactful, inclusive, and equitable innovation across island communities.

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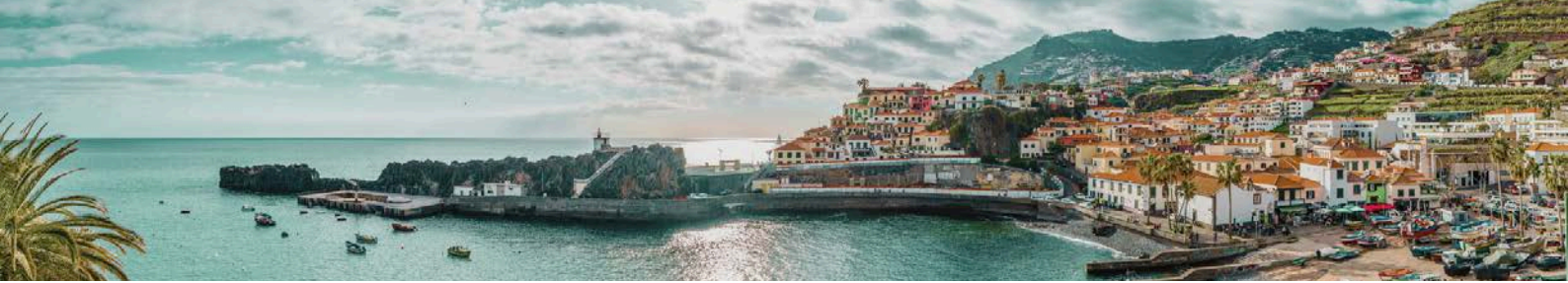
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*All contributors participated in the session voluntarily, and their collective insights are included with consent. The views expressed in this paper do not reflect the positions of any affiliated institutions or organisations.*



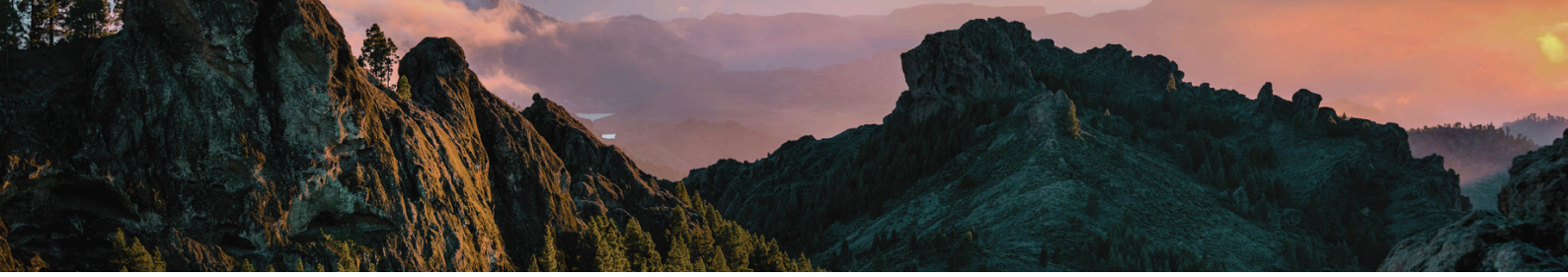
# Executive Summary

Island communities face severe climate impacts, economic fragility, resource constraints, and deepening external pressures. Global frameworks – from the Paris Agreement to the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS – have called for innovation, technology transfer, and capacity building as core responses. Yet translating commitment into action remains a challenge.

Innovation programmes, including incubators, accelerators, fellowships, and challenge funds, have proliferated as delivery mechanisms. Public, private, and hybrid actors have directed significant resources to these interventions in the hope of accelerating sustainable development and building ground-up resilience. However, too often, these programmes underdeliver: they are underfunded, built on imported models, disconnected from communities, and measured against outputs rather than change.

This paper documents findings from a collaborative design session hosted by Metta and Island Innovation at the 2026 Global Sustainable Islands Summit in Gran Canaria. Drawing on a multistakeholder fireside discussion, live audience survey, and facilitated group work with 22 practitioners spanning the Mediterranean, Atlantic, Caribbean, Indian Ocean, and Pacific, eight findings emerge with consistency and force:

- The gap between ambition and impact is structural, not ideational, often driven by bureaucracy, short funding cycles, imported models, and decision-making power held far from the ground.
- Real impact is defined by the communities it touches: sovereignty, continuity, ownership, and equity, not cohort numbers or ventures launched.
- Programmes are one instrument within a broader system. They cannot substitute for the ecosystem conditions they depend on: policy, finance, culture, and governance.
- Identity and inclusion are design requirements. Who benefits must be answered explicitly, accounting for historical exclusion and unequal access to resources.
- Programme integrity is measured by what is left behind: capability, relationships, institutional memory, and locally-owned processes.
- Island innovation programmes should also help identify, protect, and responsibly value the natural and cultural assets that underpin long-term prosperity. For many island economies, resilience depends on the ability to steward natural assets while creating fair economic value from them.



- Data should be treated as core programme infrastructure; programmes must build or strengthen the local ability to collect, manage, and use data so that outcomes can be measured, verified, financed, and sustained.
- Well-designed innovation programmes can bridge the gap between local ideas and finance by building capacity, improving data, and creating investable pipelines. They help communities move from concepts to bankable, nature-positive projects.

In response, this paper presents the TIDES framework, a diagnostic and design tool structured around seven dimensions: Territory, Intent, Intervention, Impact, Dependencies, Endurance, and Stakeholders. The framework was tested and extended by participants during the session, with significant contributions around systems thinking, identity and agency, and the politics of programme design.

Recommendations include:

**For programme designers:** begin with Territory. Diagnose before designing. Build knowledge transfer from the start.

**For funders:** shift toward patient, flexible, non-extractive capital. Fund organisational capacity, not just project delivery.

**For policymakers:** co-design with communities. Simplify access to public funding instruments. Measure what actually changes.

# Context & Purpose

Islands are at the forefront of many of the most pressing challenges of our time. These include, but are not limited to, climate change, environmental degradation and overexploitation, economic vulnerability and lack of diversification, resource constraints, and remoteness and isolation; all of which are compounded by external pressures beyond their control ([UNDP, 2024](#); [Greening the Islands, 2025](#); [OECD, 2026](#)).

Global policy frameworks, such as the Paris Agreement (2015), the Samoa Pathway (2014), and the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (2024), recognise the importance of innovation, technology transfer, and capacity building as essential mechanisms for increased resilience and sustainable development. Translating these commitments into practical action, however, requires institutions, programmes, and enabling conditions that support the development, testing, and scaling of innovation at the community level.

Innovation programmes are among the broad range of interventions through which this potential can be realised. The term "innovation programme" lacks a universally accepted definition; however, for the purposes of this paper, we adopted the following working definition, drawn from innovation systems and policy literature ([Mazzucato, 2018](#); [Miles & Cunningham, 2006](#)):

*An innovation programme is a structured, goal-directed intervention, operated by public, private, or hybrid actors, that mobilises resources, institutions, knowledge, and networks to address market or system failures in the production, diffusion, and use of innovation, in support of economic, social, ecological, or technological objectives.*

What distinguishes an innovation programme from a one-off project or initiative is its systemic intent. Instead of focusing on changing a single outcome, programmes aim to influence the conditions, actors, or relationships that shape many outcomes over time.

Programmes operate at different levels; some work directly with individual entrepreneurs and early-stage ventures through interventions like incubators, accelerators, fellowships, and challenge funds. Some programmes target enabling conditions through policy sandboxes and digital transformation initiatives; whilst others operate at the scale of entire innovation systems, directing large-scale investment towards defined societal challenges across institutions, borders, and sectors. Understanding at which level a programme is designed to operate, and whether that level aligns with the problem it seeks to solve, is itself a foundational design question.

Yet evidence of how that ambition translates into actual impact remains limited. According to [Hernandez et al. \(2025\)](#), a stakeholder-driven report exploring climate innovation and entrepreneurship in small island developing states (SIDS), challenges such as fragmented funding, rigid short-term finance, and externally imposed models and metrics have left many island innovation programmes unable to deliver lasting change.

This reflects a broader pattern in which local communities are consulted rather than empowered to lead, and terms of support are set by external actors disconnected from island realities – a dynamic documented across capacity-strengthening initiatives in SIDS more broadly ([Wilkinson et al., 2025](#)). The groups most consistently excluded from programme benefits are often those who stand to gain most: marginalised communities, young people, and those furthest from existing networks of capital and institutional support.

It was against this backdrop that Metta and Island Innovation convened a two-hour working session at the 2026 Global Sustainable Islands Summit in Gran Canaria, bringing together those closest to programme design and delivery to examine these challenges honestly and in practice. Organised by Island Innovation and the



Cabildo de Gran Canaria, the GSIS offered a unique opportunity to bring together funders, programme managers, policymakers, entrepreneurs, researchers, and community representatives from across the Mediterranean, Atlantic, Caribbean, Indian Ocean, and Pacific. In a context where funding and resources are limited and challenges are urgent, ensuring strong programme design is critical to making the most of every resource and effort invested.

# The Session

The session at the GSIS 2026 – **Designing and Delivering Impactful Island Innovation Programmes** – combined a multistakeholder fireside chat, live audience surveying, a presentation on a practical programme design and delivery framework, and facilitated group work in which participants stress-tested the framework against programmes in their own contexts.

The audience spanned funders, policymakers, programme managers, entrepreneurs, researchers, academics, ecosystem builders, and community representatives from islands across the Mediterranean, Atlantic, Caribbean, Indian Ocean, and Pacific – with 22 participants actively contributing insights to this paper.

The following section describes how insights were captured, synthesised, and validated across the session's three components.



# Fireside Chat:

## Perspectives from the Field

The session opened with a fireside discussion designed to ground the conversation in lived experience – drawing on practitioners who have built, funded, and navigated island innovation programmes across very different contexts.

The fireside was moderated by **Gabriella G. Hernandez**, Head of Communications and Sustainability for Metta and lead author of *Strengthening the Support Ecosystem: Accelerating Climate Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Small Island Developing States* ([The Islands Project, 2025](#)).

Panellists included:

- **Ashaki Goodwin**, Director of Government Affairs at the **PUBLIC Foundation** and UN Representative for the **Development Bank for Resilient Prosperity**, who brought a global perspective on how international institutions and funding bodies can better serve island communities;
- **Andreia Rosa Collard**, Director of Competitiveness, Innovation and Sustainability for the **Government of Madeira**, who offered a policymaker's perspective on how governments can design the conditions for innovation to thrive, rather than simply funding programmes and hoping for the best; and
- **Alessandro Silvestri**, Managing Partner, **MALTAccelerate**, who leads one of the Mediterranean's most active accelerator programmes and brings deep experience in building and scaling island-based innovation ecosystems.

Drawing on their combined experience across government, development finance, and programme delivery, the conversation surfaced three interconnected themes: what genuine programme success looks like, why copy-paste models fail, and what conditions allow innovation to take root and last.





## **What Does Programme Success Actually Mean?**

Alessandro opened with a provocation: many island innovation programmes celebrated as successful are, in practice, successful primarily at marketing themselves. He recounted a case where a well-known international programme ran two cohorts over two years – with the programme manager rarely on the ground – before disappearing, leaving startups inadequately supported, mentors unpaid, and the ecosystem disillusioned.

The challenge, he argued, is not simply identifying bad actors, but building the critical infrastructure – within governments, development agencies, and local communities – to evaluate what a programme is actually delivering, and for whom, before and during design and delivery.

Andreia offered a counterpoint from inside government. When Madeira's tourism economy shut down during the COVID-19 pandemic, she led the island's digital transformation – starting not from a blueprint, but from direct observation. What she found was a land registry still running on handwritten records, creating months-long delays for property transactions and disconnecting the diaspora from assets they owned on the island.

The decision to digitise it fully, including a drone-based land survey, was designed from scratch (i.e., not imported from elsewhere) in response to a real, locally understood problem. Processes that took months now take days, and representatives from the mainland government subsequently came to Madeira to learn from its approach. This reversal, with a small island becoming the reference point for the mainland, is, Andreia argued, what genuine programme success looks like.

Ashaki broadened the frame to development finance. The dominant model, she noted, has long prioritised growth metrics over resilience or equity, and the pandemic didn't create island vulnerabilities; it revealed them. From the perspective of the Development Bank for Resilient Prosperity (also known as the Nature Bank), this approach centres on revaluing what islands actually hold: forests, oceans, biodiversity, and other natural capital assets that, with the right data infrastructure, can become the basis for responsible capital mobilisation.

However, Ashaki cautioned that natural capital should not be treated as a new frontier for extraction. Instead, she said it should be valued in ways that protect ecological integrity, strengthen local ownership, and ensure that benefits flow back to the communities and countries that steward these assets.



This reframing is itself an innovation, requiring both technical capacity and a cultural shift in how value is understood. Emerging frameworks for valuing island natural assets have begun to address this gap, demonstrating how nature-based approaches can be structured to generate financing flows while supporting ecological resilience ([Hafferty et al., 2025](#)).

### **Why Copy-Paste Models Fail**

All three speakers converged on this theme independently. The pattern is familiar: a programme proven in a high-resource, well-connected ecosystem – Silicon Valley, London, Berlin, Barcelona – is transplanted to an island with minimal adaptation, and either fails quietly or is kept alive until its funding ends. This pattern is well-documented in the development learning literature: externally designed interventions in SIDS consistently underperform when they fail to account for local institutional context, governance structures, and community knowledge systems ([Lindsay, 2026](#)).

Alessandro was direct: it is simply not possible to copy and paste a programme from one ecosystem into a fundamentally different one. The barriers are structural as much as cultural: different talent pools, capital availability, institutional capacities, and definitions of success.

Andreia added the dimension of trust. Programmes arrive, generate activity, and leave, taking their knowledge with them. The cumulative effect is a justified scepticism toward anything that promises transformation. Rebuilding it requires staying, transferring knowledge, and designing for continuity from the outset. Ashaki cautioned against overconfidence even amongst well-intentioned actors. Cultures are not monolithic; governmental structures differ; community needs vary even between apparently similar islands. Time spent in genuine understanding, she argued, is not a delay to delivery – it is a prerequisite for it.

### **What Is Actually Required for Innovation to Last**

From the discussion, three conditions emerged as necessary (though not individually sufficient) for lasting impact:

- **Design that begins with local reality:** The consistent failure mode is a mismatch between programme design and local situational context. The consistent success factor is its opposite: a patient, honest assessment of what a specific place actually needs, what assets it holds, who is already doing relevant work, and what the cultural, political, and institutional landscape looks like.



- **Knowledge that stays:** Skills, frameworks, relationships, and institutional memory must be embedded locally: in people, organisations, and documented systems, rather than departing with the external delivery team when the contract ends. The importance of embedding knowledge locally rather than extracting it is a consistent finding across capacity-strengthening work in small island contexts: without deliberate transfer mechanisms, programme value departs with the delivery team ([Wilkinson et al., 2025](#)).
- **Finance is designed for context:** Domestic funding is absent in most island settings. Building the capability to access and deploy finance – EU recovery mechanisms, climate funds, and other instruments – should be a programme priority from inception, not an afterthought.

Ashaki closed with a framing that sits at the intersection of innovation and stewardship. For islands whose primary assets are ecological, innovation must ask how value can be generated without depleting what makes those places distinctive – and how islands can be compensated for conserving what the rest of the world depends on. For many islands, this is not a peripheral agenda. It is the central one.

# Shared Perspectives: From the Session

To test whether these perspectives resonated beyond the panel, participants were invited to share their own experiences directly – broadening the fireside's practitioner voice to the room as a whole.

The survey was facilitated by **Wil Benton**, Metta Co-Founder & Director. Participants represented a wide range of programme types, from incubators and accelerators to fellowships and other models, reflecting how broad the "innovation programme" category is, in practice. They were asked to share thoughts and feedback on their motivations, how programme impact should be measured, areas that existing resources should be redirected away from and what they personally needed to create deeper lasting impact.

On motivation, responses fell into two broad orientations: those who saw programmes primarily as a mechanism to access resources, connections, and knowledge;



and those focused on what programmes can enable – capacity building, entrepreneurial capability, resilience, and locally relevant solutions. Across both, a genuine sense of responsibility to their islands came through clearly.

On impact, responses revealed a vision notably different from how most programmes are currently designed and measured. Participants described genuine impact in terms of sovereignty and self-sufficiency, reduced dependency on mainland systems, equitable access to opportunity, and restored ecosystems that future generations can inherit. The consistent thread shared: real impact is not delivered to a community, but built with and by it – designed to outlast any funding cycle, and measured by whether communities have greater agency over their own futures.

On what to redirect resources away from, responses coalesced around familiar frustrations: bureaucracy, short funding cycles, fragmented approaches, and initiatives that have long stopped working but continue to receive support.

On what participants personally needed to create more lasting impact, answers were consistent across very different contexts and roles: patient, flexible funding; the right people and relationships; and a public sector willing to collaborate on bottom-up initiatives.

The picture that emerged is of practitioners who know what good looks like, and are frustrated by the structural conditions that prevent them from building it. The gap between ambition and impact, they suggested, is not a lack of ideas or effort, but of structure, incentive, collaboration, and trust.



# TIDES:

## A Framework for Design

With a clearer picture of what practitioners experience on the ground, the session turned to the question of design: how might these insights be structured into a tool that programme teams can actually use?

**Gabriela Matic**, Co-Founder & Director at Metta, presented a framework for the design and delivery of an innovation programme. Developed from over ten years of experience across diverse global contexts – and informed in part by Hernandez et al. (2025), which mapped innovation ecosystems across island communities – the TIDES framework offers a diagnostic and design lens for constrained ecosystems: places where resources, talent, infrastructure, and institutional capacity are limited, and where the gap between programme ambition and ground-level reality tends to be widest. Islands represent a particularly acute version of these conditions, but the framework travels.

It is structured around seven dimensions organised under five headings: **Territory, Intent, Intervention, Impact, Dependencies, Endurance, and Stakeholders.**

### **T: Territory**

**Territory** is the foundation on which every subsequent design decision rests. One of the most persistent failure modes in innovation programming is transplanting models developed in mainland, urban, or high-resource environments into contexts with fundamentally different structural realities.

Territory asks practitioners to begin with a diagnosis rather than a design: What are the geographic, governance, cultural, and ecosystem characteristics of the host context? What has outside engagement left behind, or failed to leave? What assets, networks, and initiatives already exist that a well-designed programme would complement rather than duplicate?

Critically, this is not just about constraint mapping. Islands often offer distinctive strengths: community cohesion, proximity between decision-makers and communities, and the ability to pilot solutions at a scale larger systems cannot. Many islands are also rich in natural capital – forests, oceans, biodiversity, and cultural heritage – assets that, properly stewarded, are as much a foundation for programme design as any institutional or demographic consideration.



## **I: Intent, Intervention, and Impact**

Three dimensions share the letter I, reflecting the centrality of purpose, instrument, and outcome to programme design.

**Intent** asks what a programme is actually trying to accomplish and for whom, and whether those it is designed to serve have been involved in shaping it. Crucially, an intent failure does not necessarily mean a programme never gets off the ground; it can mean a programme runs its full course and still never tackles the problem it set out to solve.

**Intervention** questions whether a programme is even the right instrument, and if so, what type. Whilst very few startups globally ever raise venture capital, many island programmes are designed around venture capital-readiness – a structural mismatch where patient, community-rooted capital is what is actually needed. Intervention asks practitioners to be deliberate about what a programme will do, and what it will explicitly not attempt.

**Impact** queries how success will be defined, and by whom. Cohort numbers, events delivered, and entrepreneurs "supported" remain the dominant currency of programme evaluation. But these metrics bear little relationship to what communities actually care about: jobs created, ownership or knowledge transferred, ecosystems restored, opportunities extended to the next generation. Impact asks practitioners to design their measurement framework before the programme begins. This reflects a broader argument in mission-oriented innovation policy: that programmes must define success by societal outcomes rather than activity metrics if they are to drive systemic change rather than incremental outputs ([Mazzucato, 2018](#)).

## **D: Dependencies**

**Dependencies** surfaces what a programme is working with and against: confirmed funding rather than promised; talent pipelines and brain drain risk; infrastructure, connectivity, and data gaps; and the policy and cultural non-negotiables required for a programme to optimally function. In island contexts, the departure of even one or two skilled individuals can destabilise an entire programme. This fragility is a design reality, not an exception.

## **E: Endurance**

**Endurance** addresses what outlasts the intervention, and whether it needs to. Not



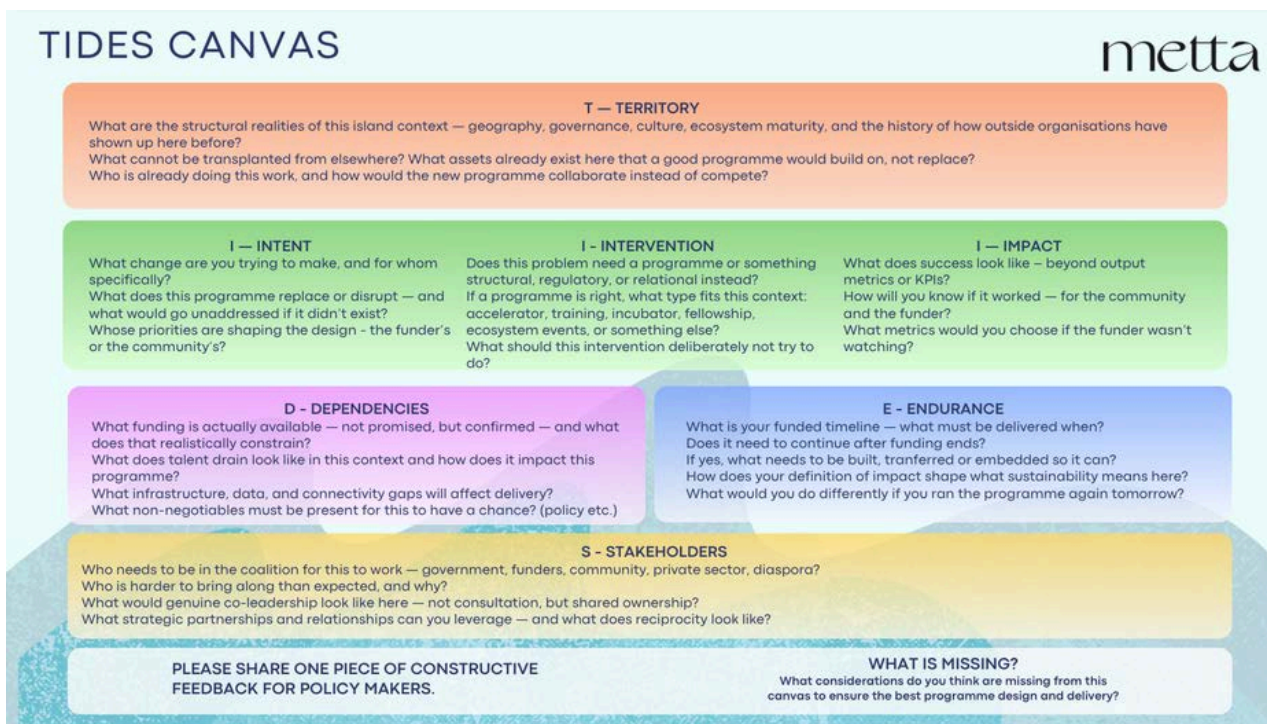
every programme should continue after its funding ends; some of the most effective interventions are deliberately time-bound.

When continuity is the right goal, Endurance asks what must be built or transferred during the funded window – for example, local coaching capacity, documented programme architecture, or institutional knowledge – so that the programme’s viability does not depend on the continued presence of its original team. It also asks how a programme will know when to change course, building in the reflective capacity to pivot rather than persist in the face of evidence.

## S: Stakeholders

**Stakeholders** addresses the relational architecture of a programme: the coalition whose alignment, trust, and shared ownership determine whether impact is possible. In island contexts, this typically spans government, funders, community organisations, the private sector, residents, and diaspora networks – each with different incentives, timelines, and definitions of success.

This dimension moves beyond consultation, which, as the Intent dimension highlights, is often where community engagement stops, toward genuine co-leadership: shared ownership, meaningful participation, and collective pride in what is being built. Designing for genuine reciprocity, ensuring each partner receives real value, rather than solely contributing, is a practical design requirement, not merely an ethical aspiration.



[View framework template here](#)



## The Framework in Practice: Kuwait

To ground TIDES in practice, Gabriela drew on a programme designed and delivered in Kuwait. Whilst not an island, Kuwait shares many of the structural characteristics TIDES was built to address: limited early-stage capital, talent fragility, and a significant gap between programme ambition and ground-level reality.

A rigorous **Territory** assessment (thirty-plus stakeholder interviews, a hundred-plus survey engagements, and a full ecosystem mapping across finance, talent, institutions, digital readiness, and culture) revealed genuine entrepreneurial ambition operating around a fragmented support environment. That diagnosis reshaped the intervention: rather than defaulting to the originally commissioned accelerator brief, the team designed a sequenced platform. Starting with research, then ecosystem activation, and then programme delivery tailored to the local context. A standalone accelerator would have landed in a support vacuum without the prerequisites to sustain entrepreneurial ambition beyond the programme.

The **Intent** was explicit: not to produce investment-ready startups for international venture capital, but to strengthen both sides of Kuwait's startup equation – founders building viable local ventures, and investors developing the capability to back them – in service of the national Vision 2035 economic diversification agenda.

On **Impact**, the first programme year engaged almost 1,000 ecosystem participants. Twenty Kuwaiti startups were launched; over half reported revenue growth three months post-programme; thirteen high-growth technology jobs were created; and gender participation reached parity. The signal cited as most meaningful was institutional: when external geopolitical pressures hit the region, the Kuwaiti government made a deliberate decision to maintain the programme – the one project its host organisation would be permitted to continue while the rest were paused.

On **Dependencies**, the programme was built around confirmed government funding, with explicit contingency design for political priority shifts. Talent fragility was treated as a design parameter, with knowledge transfer to upskill local stakeholders built into the programme architecture.

On **Endurance**, the sustainability question was asked early. The funded period was designed to build what would outlast it: local coaching capacity, government stakeholder capability, documented architecture, and a subsequent accelerator already in design by year one's end. The goal was never to be needed forever; it was to become progressively less necessary.

On **Stakeholders**, the hardest partner to bring along was the private sector, not because of unwillingness but because their return timeline differed from that of every other actor in the coalition. The design response was to build in early-value touchpoints that gave the private sector something tangible before the first cohort cycle concluded.

### **TIDES as a Collaborative Design Tool**

The TIDES framework was introduced as a working tool – not a finished product. Participants were invited to test, challenge, and extend the framework during the GSIS 2026 session. Groups applied the canvas to real or hypothetical programmes from their own contexts, returning with one actionable piece of feedback for policymakers and one thing they felt was missing. The latter question was deliberately designed to feed into this paper.



# Group Work:

## Testing the TIDES Framework

The framework was then put directly to the test. Participants applied TIDES to programmes from their own island contexts — stress-testing its assumptions, surfacing gaps, and proposing extensions that the session's collective experience made possible.

The group work session applied TIDES across four cases: a shipping link between the Falkland Islands and Chile, innovation dynamics in Curaçao, an autonomous ocean-cleaning vessel piloting through MALTAccelerate, and a youth entrepreneurship programme on Gozo. Together, the cases validated the framework and surfaced consistent pressure points warranting further framework development.



**The framework travels:** Participants found TIDES applied readily beyond conventional entrepreneurship support – to infrastructure, mission-driven technical ventures, cross-jurisdictional initiatives, and policy design. The autonomous vessel case made this vivid: when the territory is the ocean itself, the framework must account for a context that is simultaneously universal and fragmented across maritime governance regimes, certification requirements, and cultural norms. Participants also proposed making each island's unique differential value explicit as a negotiating asset, reframing distinctiveness as something to leverage rather than work around.

**Systems thinking is the prerequisite, not an add-on:** One of the most substantive methodological contributions was a proposed island metabolism framework as a complement to TIDES: mapping an ecosystem's inputs (e.g., resources, funding, talent, knowledge), transformation processes, and outputs (e.g., economic, social, ecological, and cultural outcomes). This lens makes circular flows visible, highlighting where value is extracted rather than retained, and surfaces interdependencies typically treated in isolation.

This approach is consistent with resilience thinking frameworks ([Folke et al., 2010](#)), which emphasise adaptive capacity and circular system flows over linear programme logic. The Curaçao case illustrated this differently: the collapse of established trade relationships with Venezuela forced new supply routes and economic pathways, a crisis that served as an involuntary reset. In the TIDES context, programmes that avoid naming trade-offs don't eliminate them; they leave them unexamined.

**Timelines need more granularity:** The Endurance dimension would benefit from an explicit "now versus later" axis to help teams stay operationally grounded without losing strategic direction.

**Identity, agency, and inclusion need to be prioritised:** Participants raised a foundational distinction between identity that emerges organically from a community and identity imposed upon it. Drawing on Curaçao's colonial history, one group noted that programmes risk reproducing the dynamics of imposition they claim to address. Even locally grounded programmes tend to channel resources toward those with existing wealth, social capital, or institutional proximity.



It is not enough to ask whether a programme reflects a community's identity; it must ask whose version of that identity is being centred.

**The politics of design must be named:** Risks of political capture, greenwashing, and funder-driven optics were raised unprompted across numerous participant groups. The Intent dimension would benefit from making these tensions explicit, giving practitioners tools to design against them – including clarity about what a programme chooses not to do and what one group gains at another's expense. EU regulatory frameworks were specifically cited as routinely creating compliance burdens for the early-stage businesses they are designed to support.

**Policymakers need lived experience and a genuine shift in posture:** The clearest consistent feedback was a call to move from top-down, office-based policy design toward genuine bottom-up co-development. The ask was not for less policy, but for policy designed with rather than for communities.

**Collaboration over competition is the design principle that endures:** The Gozo youth programme (now in its eighth year) was built on a specific insight: that the island's young people were talented but increasingly drawn away for opportunity elsewhere. Rather than replicating national programmes, it created an entry-level platform rooted in the island's own context, designed explicitly as a feeder into larger national initiatives rather than as a competitor to them. This model, building ecosystem capacity rather than extracting attention and resources from it, emerged independently across groups as a principle warranting explicit inclusion in future iterations of TIDES.

# Session Findings & Recommendations

Taken together, the fireside discussion, audience survey, and group work produced a set of findings that emerged consistently across very different island contexts, roles, and programme types; and that point clearly toward a shared set of practical priorities.

## Key Findings

Across the fireside discussion, audience insights, and group work, eight findings stand out for their consistency and force.



**The gap between ambition and impact is structural, not ideational:** Bureaucracy, short funding cycles, imported models, misaligned metrics, and decision-making power held far from ground realities consistently undermine even well-resourced efforts.

**Real impact is defined by the communities it touches, not the people funding it:** Participants described genuine impact in terms of sovereignty, continuity, ownership, and equity – not cohort numbers, activity counts, or ventures launched.

**Programmes are one instrument within a broader system, not a substitute for it:** Infrastructure, policy, finance, culture, and governance must be aligned. Programmes designed as standalone solutions, rather than components of that system, are set up to underdeliver.

**Identity and inclusion are design requirements:** Whom a programme is built for, and who actually benefits, must be answered explicitly – accounting for socioeconomic inequality, cultural and historical context, and the structural exclusion of marginalised groups.

**Programme integrity is measured by what is left behind:** Capability, relationships, institutional memory, locally-owned processes and assets. The question is consistent across contexts: has this programme actively built the conditions for impact to continue beyond its own existence, or has it simply delivered within its funded scope and moved on?

**Island innovation programmes should also help identify, protect, and responsibly value the natural and cultural assets that underpin long-term prosperity:** For many island economies, resilience is not separate from nature; it depends on the ability to steward natural assets while creating fair economic value from them.

**Data should be treated as core programme infrastructure:** Programmes should build or strengthen the local ability to collect, manage, and use data, including geospatial and ecological data, so that outcomes can be measured, verified, financed, and sustained.

**Well-designed island innovation programmes can help bridge the gap between local ideas and finance:** By building local capacity, improving data, strengthening institutions, and creating investable pipelines, these programmes can help communities move from concepts to bankable resilience and nature-positive projects.

These findings point directly to a set of practical actions, for funders, policymakers,



and programme designers, that would begin to close the gap between what practitioners know works and the structural conditions that currently prevent it.

### **Recommendations**

**For programme designers:** begin with Territory. Invest in diagnosis before designing any intervention. Identify trade-offs early and build knowledge transfer from the start – not as an afterthought – to ensure impact that outlasts the funded period. Ensure data is integral to each intervention before, during, and after delivery, so that outcomes can be measured, verified, and, where appropriate, financed.

**For funders:** shift towards patient, flexible, non-extractive funding. Understand how to value and maintain both natural capital resources and the stakeholder stewardship of these assets. Support consortia and ecosystem-level initiatives rather than individual programmes. Fund organisational capacity, not just project delivery.

**For policymakers:** co-design frameworks with communities and practitioners. Simplify access to public funding instruments for smaller island organisations. Measure what actually changes – jobs, ownership, social inclusion, ecosystem health, intergenerational opportunity – not what is easy to count or promote.

**For all:** adopt TIDES as a diagnostic and design tool, and continue to evolve it. The island metabolism approach, explicit treatment of identity and inclusion, and the distinction between immediate and longer-term impact are priorities for the next iteration.

Before turning to conclusions, it is important to position these findings and recommendations accurately within the scope and constraints of the session from which they were drawn.

# Limitations

This paper is subject to a number of limitations that readers should bear in mind when interpreting its findings and recommendations.

**Sample scope and representativeness:** The insights documented here are drawn from a single session at GSIS 2026. Whilst the session brought together a diverse and



internationally representative group of participants, the sample is not statistically representative of island innovation practitioners globally. Findings should be read as qualitative and indicative rather than generalisable.

**Self-selection bias:** Participants who chose to attend a session on innovation programme design are likely to be those already engaged with and/or motivated by the topic. Perspectives from those with limited engagement with innovation programmes or who have had negative experiences may be underrepresented.

**Session format constraints:** The two-hour format, while intentionally designed to maximise participation, necessarily limited the depth of discussion possible within any single strand. Some themes, particularly ecological impact, inclusion of marginalised groups, and long-term sustainability, warrant more extensive exploration than the format allowed.

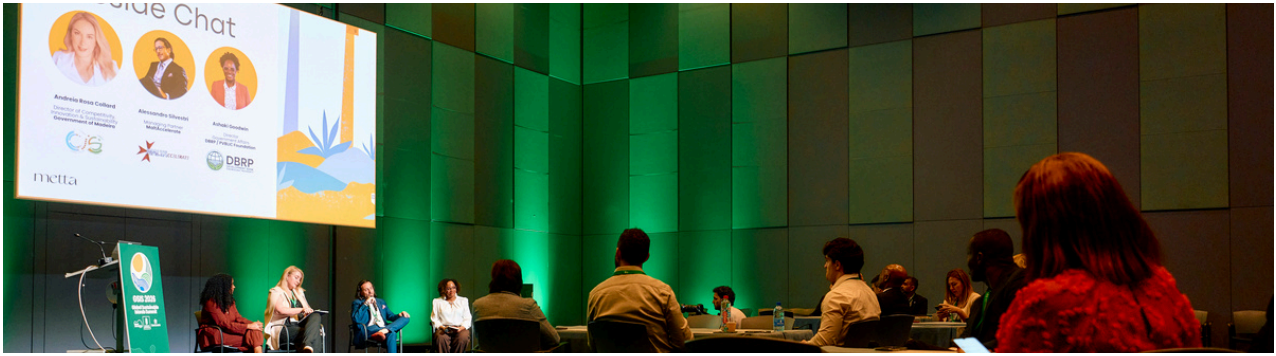
**Literature scope:** The academic literature reviewed focuses primarily on published, English-language peer-reviewed sources. Grey literature, practitioner reports, and research published in other languages, which may contain significant relevant evidence, particularly from non-Anglophone island regions, have not been systematically reviewed.

These constraints are noted not to diminish the findings, but to situate them honestly, as a practitioner-derived contribution to a field that urgently needs more of both rigour and candour.

# Conclusion

The session documented in this paper set out to explore how stakeholders can better design and deliver island innovation programmes. What emerged in Gran Canaria was a lived diagnosis offered by practitioners who have built programmes, funders who have backed them, policymakers who have tried to enable them, and community members who have experienced what happens when they fail.

The interest in innovation programmes, and their potential to help island communities develop and scale innovative solutions to the challenges they face, is genuine and widespread. What is missing is not ambition but structural support: patient capital, deep partnerships, enabling instead of obstructive governance, and the freedom to design from local realities rather than imported blueprints.



The next generation of island innovation programmes should not be designed as isolated interventions.

They should be part of a broader resilience finance architecture that connects local capacity, credible data, natural capital, policy alignment, and long-term investment. This is where programme design and development finance meet.

The TIDES framework is one contribution to closing that gap, a practical tool offered in the spirit of the session itself: not as a finished answer, but as a working resource to be applied, tested, challenged, and improved in the field. The group work session has already extended it in meaningful ways, incorporating systems thinking, identity, inclusion, and the politics of design, and those extensions are part of this paper's contribution.

The collective message of those who contributed is clear: invest in what lasts, design with communities rather than for them, measure what actually matters, and trust that islands, given the right conditions, can be the lighthouses they have always had the potential to become.

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## Thank you for reading!

*If you have any questions or feedback for the authors, please **contact us**.*

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