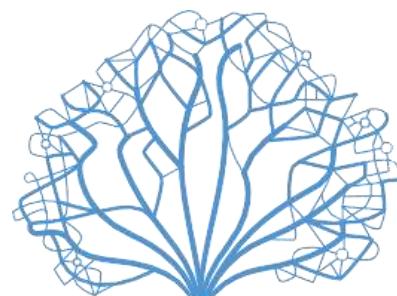


# A Comparative Analysis of Governance Models and Their Effectiveness in Fostering Multi-Helix Co-Creation Within the SIRR Hubs

## INTERNSHIP REPORT

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Summary: This report explores how SIRR hubs organise decision-making and collaboration, and how this affects stakeholder engagement over time. By comparing three hubs at different stages of development (L'Arobäse, TrENDi, Sotenäs), and highlights how hub maturity and institutional context influence engagement practices and informs the development of a phase-sensitive governance framework.



## Abstract

Rural innovation centers are currently advocated as a means of enhancing local resilience by multi-helix cooperation. Nevertheless, numerous hubs are unable to put this vision into practice in the form of persistent stakeholder involvement in practice, which is known as the engagement paradox in this report. This paper looks into ways in which governance arrangements define the nature of engagement in the Sustainability, Innovation and Resilience in Rural Areas (SIRR) hubs and how varying institutional environments affect the likelihood of mobilising and retaining various stakeholders in the long-term.

The study is based on a qualitative comparative case-study approach via document analysis and semi-structured interviews to be carried out in the course of an internship experience in the SIRR project. Three contrasting hubs were considered: L'Arobasse in Louvigné-du-Désert (France), a sprouting social entrepreneurship hub, TrENDi at the University of Vechta (Germany), a rooting academic hub and Sotenäs Symbioscentrum (Sweden), a mature municipal-industry hub. A deductive thematic analysis of the interviews was carried out to determine the common patterns to do with formal and informal governance, engagement practices, co-creation mechanisms, resilience orientations, and performance measurement.

The findings suggest that no single governance model guarantees sustained engagement. Instead, engagement outcomes depend on the alignment between hub maturity, institutional anchoring, and stakeholder expectations. Across cases, governance is largely host-anchored, engagement tends to fluctuate over time, and informal practices play a key role in enabling coordination and flexibility. While these arrangements support adaptability, they also raise questions about continuity, inclusiveness, and systematic learning.

The report concludes by outlining implications for municipalities and SIRR partners, emphasising phase-sensitive governance development, clearer decision arenas, and lightweight monitoring practices. It also highlights the need for future research to examine how governance frameworks can evolve as hubs mature and how engagement can be sustained beyond project-based funding cycles.

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## 1. Introduction

This report presents the main results from a five-month internship carried out within the SIRR project, focusing on how three different hubs are governed and how this affects collaboration and engagement. The work is relevant for municipalities and partners who want to understand not only what hubs do in terms of projects, but also *how decisions are made, whose voices are heard and how hubs can better support local rural development over time*. The overall purpose is to provide a clear and practical picture of current governance models in three SIRR hubs and to offer ideas for how these models can be strengthened in the next phases of the project.

Within the SIRR project, there is a problem that continues to occur that we identify as the engagement paradox in this report. Although the core of the hub is to unite several helices, municipalities, businesses, civil society, academia and citizens, in reality they may find it difficult to transition between intent to continued engagement. Some of the stakeholder groups, including the youth, associations or specific business players are often hard to mobilise or maintain in the long run. This paradox is urgent, because the effective co-creation is not only based on the project activity, but on the constant integration of various voices into the decision-making and cooperation processes.

The three main questions that are central for local decision-makers have been looked in for this study with:

- 1. Who decides and how?** This includes formal structures (such as boards and committees) and informal practices (everyday coordination, key persons, informal networks).
- 2. What helps and what hinders engagement?** Here the focus is on what makes it easier or harder for different groups- associations, citizens, youth, businesses, schools- to take part in hub activities and influence directions.
- 3. How do hubs understand and measure “success”?** This covers both project outputs (activities, participants, partnerships) and broader outcomes, such as social cohesion, innovation, skills and attractiveness of the municipality.

To explore these questions, the internship used a comparative case-study design covering three hubs in the SIRR “inner circle”: Sotenäs Symbioscentrum in Sweden, TrENDi at the University of Vechta in Germany and L’Arobase in Louvigné-du-Désert in France. In the analysis, these hubs are described as being at different stages of development or “growth”. Sotenäs

Symbioscentrum is presented as a **thriving/mature hub**, with a wide portfolio of circular-economy projects, long-standing industrial partnerships and an established role in the municipal organisation. TrENDi is characterised as a **rooting hub**, gaining visibility as a university-based entrepreneurship and innovation platform that is gradually building more stable regional ties and internal structures. The Louvigné-du-Désert hub is seen as a **sprouting hub**: a relatively new multifunctional space focusing on social cohesion, access to services and digital support, which is still developing its governance model and external partnerships. Comparing these three stages makes it possible to draw lessons that are realistic for younger hubs, while also showing how mature hubs can learn from the experiments and innovations emerging in newer ones.

A central message from the internship is that the main bottleneck for SIRR hubs is often **not** a lack of political will or goodwill among local actors, but the absence of clear, shared procedures for working together over time. In other words, *it is not a matter of will, but a matter of form and procedure*: how should these hubs be governed to systematically enable the multi-helix collaboration they seek? This question is directly linked to SIRR's Work Package 1.1, which aims to remodel hub structures for long-term inclusion of many different actors- municipal services, associations, companies, schools and citizens- rather than relying only on short-term projects and individual champions. The internship contributes to this task by combining document analysis and interviews to map who currently has a seat at the table, which stakeholder groups are missing or under-represented, and which practical governance options could help hubs move step by step towards more inclusive, robust and locally anchored collaboration.

Against this background, the aim of this study is to analyse and compare the governance models of selected SIRR hubs in order to understand how they shape stakeholder engagement and co-creation. The primary research question guiding the analysis is-

### **How do different governance models in SIRR hubs influence their ability to engage diverse stakeholders in meaningful co-creation?**

This question is supported by sub-questions examining:

1. the conceptual link between a multiple-helix approach and meaningful co-creation;
2. the formal and informal governance arrangements in the selected hubs;
3. the specific mechanisms used to include stakeholders in practice; and

#### 4. the perceived barriers and enabling factors influencing engagement.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The report is based on four key concepts, which include multiple-helix innovation, collaborative governance, co-creation and resilience. Collectively they offer the prism through which the SIRR hubs can be analysed in terms of how they organise the decision-making process, engage various stakeholders, and contribute to the rural development.

Multiple-helix innovation emphasises that innovation is a product of contact between state and civil society as well as business and academic institutions and not individual organisations. This is articulated in SIRR in the form of rural hubs, which serve as local arenas where municipalities, associations, companies, schools and residents collaborate to achieve a common purpose, like green transition, social cohesion and local attractiveness (Carayannis and Campbell, 2012; SIRR, 2024; SIRR, 2025).

The issue of authority, responsibilities and coordination shared between actors in such platforms are the areas of collaboration and network governance. This also indicates that it requires inclusive participation, clear institutional arrangements and trust-based relations, and also mention tensions between speed, transparency and opening up to new stakeholders (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh, 2012; Provan and Kenis, 2008; OECD, 2020).

Co-creation is a process where the involved parties including the public play a role in defining the problems, design solutions and activity implementation in addition to the consultation process. The report calls the phenomenon the engagement paradox, which formulates the creation of hubs to expand the participation as struggling to mobilise and retain major customer segments like youth, marginalised residents and small businesses in the long term because of time, resource and appropriate formats limitations (Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers, 2015; Innovation Caucus, 2019; Puerari et al., 2018; SIRR, 2025).

Resilience focused and mission based concept of rural innovation also conceptualizes hubs as part of broader initiatives to assist the local community to adjust to environmental, economic and demographic transformation. Resilience in this context can be described as the ability to absorb shocks and restructure whilst being able to sustain social, economic and ecological functions, such as by means of circular economy efforts, skill development and enhanced social connection (Karlstrom and Runeson, 2005; SIRR, 2025). In the case of SIRR hubs, the industrial symbiosis, entrepreneurship competence or rural social cohesion are missions that

influence the prioritisation of the stakeholders, measurement of success, and trade-offs of efficiency and inclusion (SIRR, 2024; Maldonado et al., 2024).

### **3. Methodology**

The present study has a qualitative comparative case study research, which involved an overall description and a detailed discussion of the governance and engagement practices used in three SIRR hubs. The way it was done was meant to come up with much information on the way the maturity of hubs and the context influence the governance structure and engagement of stakeholders.

#### **3.1 Case Selection**

Three hubs were chosen to illustrate different starting points and pathways of governance and engagement within the SIRR project. In SIRR, hubs are described along a maturity continuum as sprouting, rooting and thriving, which reflects their degree of institutionalisation, stakeholder anchoring and experience with multi-helix collaboration (SIRR, 2025).

1. **L'Arobase**, Louvigné-du-Désert (France) is classified in SIRR as a sprouting hub, representing an emerging urban–rural centre. The case study focused on the historic Users Committee in order to understand how a newly established hub can formally integrate citizen input into its governance arrangements.
2. **TrENDi**, University of Vechta (Germany) is characterised as a rooting hub, anchored in an educational institution that is consolidating its role in the regional innovation ecosystem. Here, the research examined university-based governance structures and documented both obstacles and opportunities for organising cooperation with business and civic stakeholders.
3. **Sotenäs Symbioscentrum** (Sweden) is considered a thriving municipal hub, reflecting a mature configuration with a long history of industrial and social innovation activities. In this case, particular attention was paid to the use of associations and civil-society engagement, highlighting strategies for sustaining participation and redistributing governance responsibilities in more established hubs.

This selective procedure enabled comparative analysis of hubs at different maturity stages, while also generating lessons that can be adapted to a variety of territorial and institutional settings.

### 3.2 Data Collection

The collection of data was done by combining document analysis and semi-structured interviews-

#### 3.2.1 In-Depth Document Analysis

This will be the basis of our study. We will undertake a methodical analysis of-

- Every hub pitch of the September 2025 meeting
- Other SIRR reports (Organisational Diagnosis, Strategy Workshops, Surveys)
- Any publicly available official documents, websites or charters.

#### 3.2.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

To further enrich and complement the document analysis, semi-structured interviews were used in each hub with actors who bear relevant responsibilities in governance and decision-making processes and day-to-day coordination including hub coordinators and municipal officials, university staff and active stakeholders. The interviews were able to offer strategic and governance decisions as well as context specific information on daily practices, tension and engagement processes. These descriptions were further compared and triangulated with the document material to enhance the validity and depth of the general analysis. The following table summarises the interview count and the perspectives delivered-

Hub	Number of interviews	Main interviewee roles/perspectives
L'Arobase, Louvigné-du-Désert (France)	3	Hub coordinator, municipal development officer, association representative
TrENDi, University of Vechta (Germany)	2	Entrepreneurship/service lead, project manager
Sotenäs Symbioscentrum (Sweden)	3	Symbiosis coordinator, municipal strategist, industrial partner representative

Table 1- Summary of the interview sample

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The data collected was subjected to a deductive thematic analysis. Coding and interpretation were based on predetermined themes, which were identified as a result of the research focus on the topic of governance and stakeholder engagement (*Refer 5.1 Thematic Findings Introduction*). This method made it possible to identify patterns between hubs, as well as to

take hub-specific specificities into consideration, which would then enable a sound comparative analysis.

### **3.4 Expected Outcomes**

The methodology helped to come up with a number of important outputs:

- Comparative Case Study Report - outlining the governance and engagement practices in the three hubs, including successful practices and the main challenges.
- Governance for Engagement Action Framework - a practical guide, sprouting, rooting, and thriving hubs governance options (e.g., user committees, advisory boards, rotating steering group) and implementation, such as agile management practices.

### **3.5 Relevance of the Study**

The strategy guaranteed quality, viable, and effective results within the project parameters. The case study under comparison does not just offer practical information to the management of the hub of SIRR but also presents a good empirical basis to subsequent scholarly publications. The study combines documents and interviews to capture both formal and lived lives of the stakeholders and give evidence-based recommendations on how effective governance and engagement can be achieved.

### **3.6 Limitations and Contribution**

This study looked at three areas and used information from a small number of interviews. It also used research papers and survey results. However, this limits how well the results can be applied to situations. The study did not fully capture the views of some groups, such as young people, people who are struggling with barriers to participation and small businesses. The study did not fully capture the views of some groups, such as young people, socio-economically disadvantaged residents and small businesses. This is actually a problem that the study is trying to understand, which's that some people do not get involved. The perspectives of youth marginalised residents and smaller businesses are not well represented in the study, which's a problem because these are the people who are often affected the most. One can do research on this in the future. This research could involve talking to people and asking them questions. We could also ask people for their opinions at times to see how things change. It would be an idea to compare our results with other projects, like SIRR.

The research is based on three hubs; it relies on a rather limited number of interviews, and it is followed by research reports and survey materials, which does not allow generalising the

results to other contexts. Specifically, the viewpoints of young people, socio-economically disadvantaged residents and small businesses are not fully represented, despite the fact that these groups are typically severely influenced by the activities of hubs and local development patterns. This under-representation has a very direct connection with the engagement issues that the study aims to examine, i.e. the challenge of engaging some groups in sustained and structured means. Future studies might thus focus more on specific qualitative research among these stakeholders and cross-cutting studies that can extrapolate the analysis to other hubs and programmes other than SIRR.

Irrespective of these constraints, the research is part of the SIRR action-research aspirations to offer an empirically based narrative of how various hubs are already structuring governance and engagement and to outline tangible facilitators and impediments to multi-helix collaboration in the rural environment (Ferns et al., 2022; SIRR, 2023; SIRR, 2025). The comparative approach produces practically oriented implications that could inform the optimisation of the hub design, the creation of the participatory mechanisms and the creation of simple monitoring tools in the project. The work was also a work-integrated learning experience to the interns who applied and critically reflected theoretical perspectives of governance, stakeholder engagement and rural innovation to the real transnational project setting.

## **4 Case Descriptions of the Hubs**

This chapter provides structured case descriptions of the three SIRR hubs, summarising their local context, governance arrangements and engagement practices as a basis for the subsequent cross-hub analysis (*Refer 5.3 Cross Hub Comparison by Themes*).

### **4.1 L'Arobase, Louvigné-du-Désert (France)**

#### **4.1.1 Local Context and Hub Positioning**

L'Arobase is a coworking hub and third-place, recently set up in a rural municipality in Brittany, Louvigné-du-Desert. The local setting can be defined as granite-based manufacturing economy, dearth of academic presence and various problems of youth migration and diversification of economy. L'Arobase, opened in March 2024 as a planned municipal experiment to provide a visible and accessible space of renewal, a combination of digital innovation, entrepreneurship, and community action. In terms of SIRR maturity, L'Arobase can be termed as a sprouting hub, still in their early years of consolidating their identity, partnership, and routines of operation.

#### **4.1.2 Governance Incorporated in Municipal Structures**

L'Arobase is a publicly owned company that is integrated into the local government without having a legal status and self-governing budget. Political leadership, in this case the mayor and councillors dealing with attractiveness and development, therefore has a great influence on strategic orientation. The coordination of the operations is done by a development manager who will also serve as a lead of the programme and as an interface connecting political decision-makers and the users of the space. This structure offers institutional legitimacy and stability during the launch phase however such structure leaves the hub highly vulnerable in terms of political dependence. A users' committee was formed in the design stage on purpose to reconcile conflicting expectations: social inclusion, economic development, and cultural or educational use: and to arbiter political sensitivities.

#### **4.1.3 Pathways and Selectivity of Engagement**

The participation around L'Arobase has over time resulting in a more selective participation. The initial co-design actions entailed residents, associations, and businesses envisioning the future "digital villa" to establish a shared ownership. This was supplemented by open discovery formats i.e. breakfast meetings that were meant to familiarise local actors with the space. In the course of time, however, some open-ended forms of participation were not maintained in their attendance, and were abandoned. Curated cultural events, more specific workshops, and entrepreneurial support programmes were more successful. This development implies that an open format can be desirable in the initial stages, although in the long term, continued interaction in a rural hub might need explicit value propositions instead of long-lasting open-door formats.

#### **4.1.4 Enablers and Structural Constraints**

Political determination has been an ultimate facilitator especially following failed entrepreneurship efforts in the municipality in the past. Presence of an experienced Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) cluster has also offered capacity in the design of the programme which the municipality has not been able to offer on its own. The central location and multi-use infrastructure of this hub minimises the access barriers and incorporates the economic support into the daily community life. Simultaneously, L'Arobase functions on a very tight budget: they have limited city funding, have to run on an annual budget cycle, and are in constant need to show tangible outcomes. Such circumstances limit experimentation and

promote activities that can be demonstrated in a short period of time at the possible cost of long-term capacity building.

#### **4.1.5 Emerging Practices, Risks and Tensions**

The early institutionalisation of the user involvement, the hub acting as a local relay of neutrality between rural project holders, and support mechanisms that combine collective ideation activities with tailored individual follow-up. Nevertheless, there are a number of tensions. The hub needs to constantly strike a balance between being a social service, a driver of its own endeavours and a cultural or educational venue. Political cycles and cycles bring about uncertainty on the priorities in the long run and the small personality-based core team poses vulnerability to staff turnover. In general, L'Arobase depicts the opportunities as well as the vulnerability of municipality-based hubs in their initial stages of development.

### **4.2 TrENDi, University of Vechta (Germany)**

#### **4.2.1 Local Context and Hub Positioning**

TrENDi is an embedded entrepreneurship service to the University of Vechta, which is an institution mainly oriented to teacher education and social service in rural Lower Saxony. The area is mostly agrarian, and the idea of entrepreneurship is not something self-evident to students or other stakeholders in the area. Within the SIRR framework TrENDi would be outlined as a rooting hub: anchored and operationally secure, but still trying to make its identity and a presence in the region. A recent shift from "Startup Service" to "Entrepreneurship Service" marked a critical strategic correction, reframing entrepreneurship as a transversal competence rather than business creation.

#### **4.2.2 Governance through Informality and Autonomy**

The governance structure of TrENDi is very informal and centralised and is based on a small core leadership. The process of making decisions is both quick and responsive and there is no official steering committee to supervise the day-to-day operations. This enables quick adjustment, like the move or repositioning, without bureaucratic process. Meanwhile, bottom-up impact is also high since the staff members responsible for organising other externally-funded projects influence what is done by writing proposals. Another factor that has given TrENDi some autonomy within the university is that entrepreneurship is not well comprehended by the central administration, which creates some ambiguity that provides freedom and strategic space.

### **4.2.3 Patterns of Engagement**

The activity at TrENDi is project-based and high-activity levels will occur during funded projects and drastically lower when funding is discontinued. This forms what the leadership refers to as a project trap as long-term relationship building is a challenge as there is no committed partnership management activity. TrENDi also had internal issues, such as difficulties in reaching the university community, particularly since it was not a part of the university. This barrier was specifically dealt with by moving to a very visible container space on campus greatly enhancing accessibility and symbolic presence.

### **4.2.4 Enablers and Structural Constraints**

The enabling factors are the organisational agility, permanency in leadership position of the university, and the capacity to selectively participate in a project. Nevertheless, there are still structural issues. The bureaucracy of universities restrains the normal entrepreneurial activities and the barrier of culture and language means that the concept of entrepreneurship has to be translated all the time. The Living Lab concept of TrENDi with its working engagement with the Municipality of Lemwerder is a very robust practice of theory and practice. Internationalisation is also strategically employed to make the local actors more open to innovation as they are exposed to similar situations in other countries.

### **4.2.5 Emerging Practices, Risks and Tensions**

TrENDi does not have performance indicators that are used across the hub, and it is based on project-driven reports and internal qualitative decision-making. The measure of success is based on partner satisfaction and deliverable completion as opposed to the impact on the region in the long-term. This supports the continued conflicts between qualitative competence formation and external requirements of quantifiable economic results, and between long-term ecosystem aspirations and short-term project rationality.

## **4.3 Sotenäs Symbioscentrum (Sweden)**

### **4.3.1 Local Context and Hub Positioning**

The Sotenäs Symbioscentrum is an advanced form of industrial and social innovation in a small coastal municipality. It has been in operation more than 15 years hence can be categorized as a mature hub under the SIRR framework. The hub was originally concerned with industrial symbiosis, especially the process of waste streams and by-products exchange, energy exchange between companies. The scope of its mission, however, over the years has grown to include

industrial optimisation to what can be termed as social symbiosis. Such reorientation is representative of a wider emphasis on developing long-term societal resilience, with collaboration being expanded to include the actors of the public, local communities, and civil society, and where collective values, trust, and collective problem-solving have become the main focus of the hub in terms of augmenting the long-term appeal of the municipality.

#### **4.3.2 Between Trust and Formalisation Governance**

Sotenäs is dependent on informal networks and a built-up trust with important actors to govern. There was a formal steering committee which, however, disbanded later on, which means that coordination now rests on interpersonal relationships. There is a separation of strategic power: municipalities establish general goals, whereas physical investments are managed by individual companies. Recent political upheaval has seen the demand to have a professional mediation and the need to revisit the idea of having a formal Symbiosis Council to bring about transparency and continuity.

#### **4.3.3 Dynamics of Engagement with Time**

The interest was at its highest level when symbiotic infrastructure was under construction and later faded away when the systems were operational. The external shocks, especially the energy crisis, have brought about renewed interest recently in the light of the resilience benefits of the model. Such a high trust capital allows mobilising quick; however, the informal form of governance makes it hard to have new actors in the established networks, particularly younger entrepreneurs.

#### **4.3.4 Best Practices, Constraints, and Enablers**

The physical symbiosis structure forms powerful interdependence and long-term commitment between firms. Close cooperation is further enhanced by municipal capacity to handle complicated EU-funded projects. Among the constraints are the political instability, lack of transparency in decision making and lack of time among the business leaders and aging municipal infrastructure. Among the best practices is the issue-driven engagement approach, wherein the hub resolves tangible operational issues to gain trust, and the fact that it is a go-between between the municipal, industrial, and the academic logic.

#### **4.3.5 Emerging Practices, Risks and Tensions**

There are formal measurement tools that are not much present. Continuous presence of the firm, investment and involvement are considered a measure of success instead of systematic

assessment. Operational tensions still exist between visibility and privateness of operation, informality and transparency, and political vision and industrial reality.

#### **4.4 Shared Lessons Across Hubs**

The three hubs can be analysed to identify a set of common lessons that are applicable in various settings and levels of maturity.

1. **Governance should be balanced and not rigid** - Speed, trust and experimentation are possible under informal governance and are especially useful during initial stages. But, in the absence of formal formations of the steering committees, especially clarified jobs, or advisory bodies, hubs will be exposed to political transformation, employee turnover, and marginalisation of new participants. Selective formalisation of the steering committees helps in continuity, without compromising flexibility.
2. **Political support is needed but has to be buffered**- City support gives a hub legitimacy and resources, but it also presents the hubs with temporal demands and electoral politics. Consistent leadership in operations and relationships are canons that preserve long term goals against evolving political agendas.
3. **Long-term engagement relies on value propositions**- Open activities will be good in the short-run, but not in the long-run. When people are assured that the activities are well-defined and their time is significant, they remain active. Long-term engagement therefore requires targeted formats rather than permanent openness.
4. **Place and visibility matter**- The open and accessible physical space reduces barriers to participation, and reinforces a sense of legitimacy, particularly in rural or institutional contexts where innovation can seem vague or an abstract concept.
5. **Project funding encourages innovation but undermines continuity**- Although projects allow experimentation, overreliance on them generates periods of involvement and inactivity. Hubs also have the advantage of retaining core relational functions across individual periods of funding.
6. **The failure to measure success is a weakness**- Informal assessments are flexible and reduce learning and accountability. The use of simple and common tools of reflection can assist in linking the activities to the overall popular objectives without too much bureaucracy.

The observations made here are the empirical foundation of the subsequent thematic analysis to explore how governance, engagement, performance measurement, and resilience are conditioned in various institutional and territorial settings.

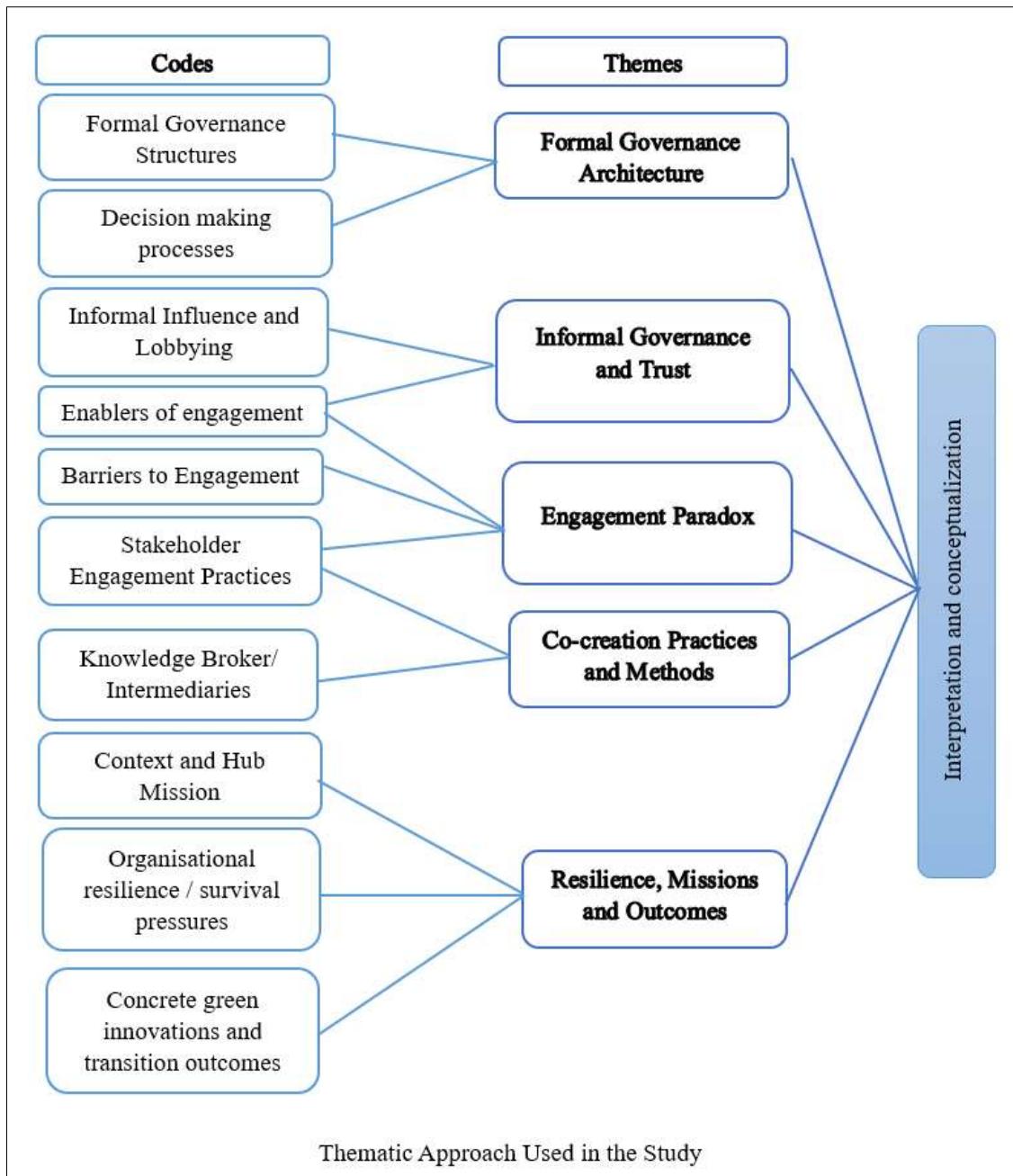
## **5 Findings**

### **5.1 Thematic Findings Introduction**

This section provides the key empirical results of the deductive thematic analysis carried out on the transcripts of interviews, project documentation and stakeholder notes related to the three SIRR Pilot Hubs. The data was analysed according to the general research interest of stakeholder involvement in the rural and coastal innovation platforms in a systematic manner through codes, theme formation, and cross-case analysis. The deductive methodology enabled the use of pre-defined theoretical constructs (i.e. governance, engagement, co-creation and resilience) to drive the interpretation process and still be receptive to patterns in the data as it existed. The findings are structured around five related themes which jointly explain the way in which hubs implement stakeholder engagement and in which structural, relational and contextual conditions influence their performance. The themes are based on the Multiple-Helix model of innovation and rural development pursued by the SIRR project focusing on cooperation between municipalities, academia, actors in the private sector, and civil society to create sustainable and resilient rural societies (SIRR, 2025).

### **Thematic Approach Used for the Study**

The themes in the study were developed from the shared learning across the hubs, highlighting the key patterns and insights from the interviews conducted. The figure below illustrates the thematic approach, showing how the main themes were identified and how they interconnect.



*Figure 1 - Thematic Approach Used in the Study*

### **5.1.1 Theme 1- Formal Governance Architectures**

Formal governance architectures imply the visible organisational frameworks, functions, and processes by which hubs integrate the involvement of multiple-stakeholders and decision-making. In all three hubs, the institutional anchor is very strong, be it the municipal-based or university-based, which provides legitimacy and long-term stability on governance.

In Sotenäs, the strategic authority is concentrated mainly in the municipal structures and the industrial partners are very active. The TrENDi is based on a university chain of command that

offers effective coordination and restricts formal involvement of outside actors. L'Arobase integrates the leadership of the city with a committee of users, which is to reconcile the interests of social, economic, and culture. Ultimate decision-making in any of the hubs is host-centred, which is a characteristic of formal governance providing clarity and validity and limiting collective authority (Carayannis and Campbell, 2012; SIRR, 2025).

### **5.1.2 Theme 2- Informal Governance & Trust**

Informal governance relates to the relational and frequently intangible forms that decisions are influenced under non-formal structures. At the hubs, trust, personal networks and informal communication were also used as a key approach in facilitating collaboration.

In Sotenäs, due to long-term trust, the alignment took place quickly, but new members could not be as transparent. TrENDi was overly dependent on the informal conversation and the face-to-face communication to advance fast. L'Arobase used negotiated neutrality and informal agreements to maintain collaboration among diverse local actors. These tendencies point to the duality of trust: it fosters flexibility and efficiency at the same time, it may also restrict the inclusiveness in case the informal practices are not accessible (Emerson, Nabatchi & Balogh, 2012).

### **5.1.3 Theme 3- Engagement Paradox**

The engagement paradox explains how it is challenging to maintain the involvement of stakeholders even with their good intentions of inclusion. This difficulty was evident in every hub.

Sotenäs had problems with maintaining time-constrained business actors, TrENDi suffered a decreasing participation once the project funding was over and L'Arobase had decreasing attendants to open events in the long run. Engagement was always episodic and not ongoing despite the fact that the contexts varied. This implies that the problem of engagement is structural, associated with time limits and project cycles and not lack of motivation (Innovation Caucus, 2019; Puerari et al., 2018).

### **5.1.4 Theme 4- Co-Creation Practices and Methods**

Co-creation is used in referring to the practical forms in which the stakeholders collaborate. Sotenäs played on issue-based workshops and informal interactions, TrENDi invested in common spaces and flagships and L'Arobase used play discover breakfasts and community activities.

Around hubs, co-creation was arranged in discrete events, as opposed to a participatory design process. Although this was a good strategy to start the engagement, it is an event-based strategy, which led to a reduction in participation in due course. This strengthens the fact that co-creation should be considered to be an ongoing and adaptive process in line with thematic objectives (Voorberg, Bekkers & Tummers, 2015).

### 5.1.5 Theme 5- Resilience, Missions & Outcomes

The different hubs expressed their missions according to the needs of the region: industrial and social symbiosis in Sotenäs, entrepreneurship and skills development in TrENDi, and social cohesion and inclusion in L'Arobase. These mission stories formed the priorities of engagement and the role of stakeholders.

At all hubs, however, performance measurement was informal or undeveloped. Perceptions and anecdotal evidence were usually used to measure success instead of using structured measures. Although this helped to be flexible, it hindered learning and accountability. Lightweight reflection and monitoring tools might be introduced to enhance the adaptive learning process without implying too much bureaucracy (SIRR, 2025).

## 5.2 Hubs as local platforms

In order to shed light on the various contexts, mandates, and governance anchors of the three SIRR hubs, this table provides a brief summary of each:

Hub	Country / setting	Main thematic focus	Governance anchor	Key stakeholder groups involved	Noted strengths	Main challenges
Sotenäs Symbioscentrum	Sweden - coastal, industrial municipality	Circular economy, industrial and social symbiosis, green transition	Municipality in close partnership with major industrial actors; strong	Municipal departments, industrial companies, regional actors, emerging civil-society	Clear mandate around industrial symbiosis and circularity; strong political support;	Integrating civil-society actors into formal governance; limited staff capacity; balancing industrial

			role of public sector in steering	ty organisati ons and schools	concrete projects linking environment and economy.	priorities with broader social goals.
TrENDi - University of Vechta Start-up Service	Germany - small universit y city and rural region	Entrepreneurship education, start-up support, innovation competences for students and local actors.	Universit y of Vechta with regional public partners; academic governance and project-based funding.	Students, university staff, regional authoritie s, SMEs, support organisati ons and mentors.	Strong knowled ge base and training offer; establish ed networks with regional innovatio n actors; ability to activate students.	Short-term student involvement; limited formal influence for SMEs and citizens; dependence on project cycles for continuity
Louvigné-du- Désert Hub	France - small town, rural municipa lity	Social cohesion, access to services, culture and digital resources, local democracy.	Municipa lity with participat ory structures such as a users' committee and close collaborat	Municipal services, participatio ns, individual citizens, schools, cultural and social organisati ons.	Strong civic orientatio n; visible participat ory mechanisms; hub perceived as a local	High dependence on municipal staff and funding; difficulty reaching some groups (youth, newcomers, marginalised

		ion with local associations		meeting point.	residents); managing expectations of participants.
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Table 2: Summary of the hubs participating in the SIRR, mainly based on project notes and interviews conducted; Source: Own elaboration.

### 5.3 Cross Hub Comparison by Themes

#### 5.3.1 Formal Governance Architectures

Formal governance architectures across the SIRR hubs have manifested variations in the allocation of authority and representation of stakeholders, mainly informed by the institutional anchoring. Sotenäs has a municipal governance structure in which strategic powers are still concentrated at the board level. Although an emerging steering committee seeks to unify various sectors, decision-making procedures and put more emphasis on coordination and scalability than on speed. TrENDi, which is set within a university setting, follows a simplified three-level governance system (scientific, operational, and project-based) based on a leader configuration of a professor-director. This allows quick decision making, though limits formal participation to mainly internal academicians. L'Arobase is a mixture of municipal leadership and advisory committees that represent the interests of the users and communication with the aim of balancing the social, economic, and cultural goals and retaining the ultimate power in the municipal council.

Comparatively, the municipal-based models (Sotenäs and L'Arobase) consider more comprehensive representation and inclusiveness, and the TrENDi academic model focuses more on the speed of decisions and consistency. Nevertheless, in all hubs, power is host-centric, which restricts the level of communal strength. It is indicative of a wider conflict that is found in collaborative governance literature, and inclusivity is frequently coupled with retained institutional power as opposed to actual redistribution of power (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012).

### **5.3.2 Informal Governance & Trust**

The informal governance structures are crucial in all the hubs, usually filling the gaps in the formal structures. The local relations between people and high level of trust capital that have been developed over a long time allow the rapid practices of problem-solving and lobbying over the phone in Sotenäs. This is more efficient, but it also decreases transparency and can exclude newcomers on accident. TrENDi is also very dependent on expertise-based influence, which is characterized by credibility and personal authority and low-friction decision-making. Nonetheless, this individualistic approach brings inconsistency into these systems because informal power is centralized in primary actors. L'Arobase follows a comparatively neutral strategy, through hosting arrangements and association-based structures, which allocate informal influence more equally between actors.

Trust within hubs always increases the pace of collaboration, which agrees with the findings that informal relations traditionally are the key to the success of collaborative governance (Emerson et al., 2012). Meanwhile, the analysis identifies exclusion, opaqueness risks, and dependency risks. This data indicate that informal trust provisions need to be supported with some formal protection, like documentation and more transparent entry points, to allow just participation instead of strengthening closed networks. Trust within hubs typically increases the pace of collaboration, which aligns with findings that informal relationships are often crucial for successful collaborative governance (Emerson et al., 2012). Nurturing such informal ties requires repeated low-threshold interactions, transparent communication and consistent follow-through on promises, so that stakeholders experience reliability in everyday cooperation.

### **5.3.3 Engagement Paradox**

The engagement paradox is a condition that affects all the hubs as high motivation and shared commitment to collaboration coexist with recurring limitations in terms of time, finances and organisational capacities. In Sotenäs, politics are defined by change of leadership and less business involvement whereby dissatisfaction can be registered informally as opposed to formal feedback systems. It is also evident that TrENDi experiences cyclical patterns of engagement tied to project life cycle which has led to the disengagement after the project is over even after a clear focus on transparency and measurable results. L'Arobase also faces a lack of participation and financial strain, which is partly addressed by the cyclical EU funding programmes.

The origins of instability are varied, i.e. political, project-based or territorial, but the hubs are similar in that they rely upon temporary drivers of engagement. This is similar to the co-creation research which revealed that episodic mobilisation, though temporary in the short run, tends to weaken in the long term, unless it is integrated in stable institutional set-ups (Voorberg, et al., 2015). The results lead to the fact that structural engagement stabilisers are needed instead of repeated use of short-term incentives. The origins of instability are varied – political, project-based or territorial – but the hubs are similar in that they rely on temporary drivers of engagement. This points to the need for more structural “engagement stabilisers”, such as standing advisory bodies or recurring co-creation arenas, rather than repeated short-term incentives.

#### **5.3.4 Co-Creation Practices and Methods**

The co-creation practices in the contexts of the hubs are enclosed with the contexts of governance and the territorial realities. Sotenäs uses problem-based workshops and informal contacts to help in collaboration among municipal and industrial players, and is pragmatic, problem-based approach. TrENDi focuses on the high-visibility flagship gatherings and innovation container space to generate contact between the academic and regional stakeholders. L’Arobase concentrates on the access using third place formats like joint breakfast, cooperative initiatives and bilateral bridging activities.

Nevertheless, regardless of such differences, all hubs rely on intermediary positions - actors that mediate between sectors, disciplines or institutional logics. This confirms the results of the literature on public innovation that suggests that the effectiveness of co-creation is not limited to techniques, but also relational brokerage and alignment of objectives (Voorberg et al., 2015). Without these elements, participation tends to decline even when participatory designs are carefully structured.

#### **5.3.5 Resilience, Missions & Outcomes**

The hubs define resilience and mission in a manner that comprises their territorial and institutional interests. When operating in conditions that can be characterised as politically bumpy, Sotenäs conceptualises industrial symbiosis as a crisis resilience mechanism, specifically biogas systems and circular flows of resources. Competence development and knowledge generation are the main results of TrENDi, which provides a shield against the variability of funds. L’Arobase targets the rural vitality and social inclusion and uses the regional and EU-level networks to maintain the engagement.

Although results can be operationalised in both tangible infrastructural or intangible capacity building impacts, every hub must contend with a constant external strain in the form of politics, funding and institutional limitations. Their missions act as inspirational reference points, but the continued effect depends on governance frameworks that are able to integrate resilience, engagement and flexibility within a coherent structure.

#### **5.4 Synthesis of the Cross-Hub Findings**

The cross-hub thematic analysis demonstrates that stakeholder involvement in SIRR hubs is not a product of coincidence, but the result of specific combinations of governance arrangements, relational practices, engagement routines and mission discourse. Although the hubs vary in terms of maturity, institutional anchoring, and territorial setting, the common themes would all be aimed at a range of recurrent patterns that would influence the manner in which engagement is enabled, constrained, and maintained over time.

To begin with, all the hubs are host-centric, irrespective of the institutional setting. Formal authority, whether in a municipal administration (Sotenäs, L’Arobase) or in a university structure (TrENDi), will be held by the host organisation in the end. This creates a sense of stability and legitimacy but at the same time it restricts the richness of shared decision-making. Whereas there may be advisory structures or user-based structure, they serve more as consultative levels as opposed to distributed power arenas. This implies that multi-helix engagement is usually operationally being practised without being institutionalised which forms a latent tension between the rhetoric of collaboration and the reality of governance.

Second, informal governance and trust are shown to play a primary role in correcting the weaknesses of formal structures in the analysis. In all the cases, interpersonal relations, tacit knowledge and informal negotiations played a crucial role in mobilising actors as well as solving the friction. Yet, this dependency also comes at its cost: informal systems are very efficient to the insiders, but obscure to outsiders, and are largely reliant on particular individuals. The results thus point to a speed/inclusivity trade-off where the efficiency obtained in the case of informality may unintentionally compromise the openness and renewal in the long run.

Third, involvement is episodic in nature, not ongoing, and formed through project cycles, political schedules and even in the form of short-term rewards. Although there was a great intention of wide involvement, all the hubs have had a difficult time in keeping all the stakeholders engaged throughout. The most intense engagement was in times of funding, crisis,

or novelty and diminished when there were no instant incentives. It is a paradox of participation in that participation is not about good will in the first place, but rather, about structural conditions that render engagement meaningful and manageable as well as worth sustained investment by various actors.

Fourth, the principles of co-creation demonstrate that approaches are important, provided they are customised to the place-based situation and existing capabilities. The hubs employed a wide variety of formats, including issue-based workshops and living labs, cultural events as well as visible innovation spaces. Despite the fact that such practices reduced the barriers to entry and allowed the participants to interact early, their efficiency relied on the further facilitation and relevance to the participants. Co-creation thus cannot be seen as a one-time event, but a continuous process of relationships, which must be constantly adjusted and translated between institutional logics, between professional languages and expectations of stakeholders and which must be linked to the missions and objectives of the hub explicitly so that it can continue to be meaningful over time.

Lastly, the mission stories of the hubs as resilience, development of competencies, and rural empowerment can be viewed as valuable legitimising frames, but they do not necessarily lead to quantifiable results and long-term involvement. The issue of success was often measured by qualitative judgments and gut feeling that was connected to the complexity of social innovation, as well as the fact that not a single tool to monitor the situation was shared. Although these types of narratives are effective in mobilisation, the results suggest the lack of a connection between a strategic ambition and the evaluative capacity, which restrains collective learning and accountability.

Combined, the cross-hub results point to the fact that stakeholder engagement in SIRR hubs can be most easily viewed as a balance act between structure and flexibility, formality and trust, ambition and capacity. Such tensions are not failures, but structural features of place-based innovation in rural and coastal settings. They also, however, are indicators of more deliberate convergence between governance arrangements and engagement practices. This Synthesis offers the analytical basis of the next chapter which transforms these understandings into the governance design and engagement strategy implications at various levels of hub maturity.

## **6. Implications**

### **6.1 Governance and engagements implications**

The cross-hub thematic analysis indicates that governance and participation in SIRR hubs cannot follow a fixed set-up but should remain a dynamic set up that is informed by the maturity of the hubs, institutional anchoring and relational dynamics. In all the cases, formal structures are combined with informal practices, involvement is usually episodic and the powers of decision-making are frequently centralised on host organisations. These tendencies show that the governance structures cannot be unified, yet they should be adjusted to the level of development of the hub. Based on this, implications are organised on the matureness categorisation of SIRR Hubs which are sprouting, rooting and thriving which results in phase relevant governance and engagement strategies.

### **6.2 Sprouting Hubs: Making Momentum, but not Over-Structuring**

Sprouting hubs are defined as being enthusiastic, flexible in coordination and heavily dependent on informal relations. Nevertheless, they are weaker, having ambiguous areas of decision and low organisational capability. Results indicate that early-stage hubs enjoy agile trust-based interactions but incur the risk of exclusion and disengagement when the roles and authority is implicit.

At this level, the governance must be light. Strategic orientation can be achieved through informal advisory groups or prototype steering constellations that would not be limiting to experimentation. The decision authority should be apparent even in the short term, by way of mandated conveners or hosts. This is consistent with studies of early ecosystem generation where it is important to have minimal viable governance to facilitate emergence and not to prematurely formalise (Klerkx et al., 2010; Ansell and Gash, 2008).

Participation rituals must emphasise regularity as opposed to formality. Brief, periodic check-ins, informal follow-ups, and quick feedback loops will keep the momentum going and uncover possible dissatisfaction. Role clarification- particularly the issue of who holds the meetings, who makes the decisions, who never follows up, etc. is essential towards not being overly reliant on individual trust. The areas of improvement that should have a priority are simplification of language, making participation pathways clear and having one or two basic indicators (e.g., continuity of attendance or follow-up actions) to facilitate collective learning. Incremental review of small experiments of governance is better at this point than wholesale structural reform.

### **6.3 Rooting Hubs: Stabilising Governance and Authority**

Rooting hubs are centralising their local recognition, finding more partners and building stable sources of funding. Nevertheless, the fatigue in the engagement, the complexity of coordination, and lack of resources become more significant. Formal structures are sometimes formed, but ambiguity over influence and accountability can continue to present themselves, particularly in situations where informal power is at the centre stage.

Rooting hub governance ought to involve light steering groups or hybrid councils that involve combining strategic oversight with stakeholder representation. It is necessary to have clear decision scopes so as to avoid tokenistic participation. The literature on collaborative governance highlights that the legitimacy is more contingent on the articulateness of the relationship between the input and the decisions that the actors make rather than the number of actors (Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015).

The engagement routines are to be shifted towards non-ad-hoc mobilisation to regular rhythms. Scheduled, intentional meetings with clear agendas and summary of meetings after meetings stabilise attendance and lessen cognitive renal burden. Informal connection would be useful but must be supplementary to official procedures. Such priorities as defining decision arenas, capturing important informal practices, and harmonising engagement expectations and resources can be enhanced. Very basic surveillance systems like monitoring project progress after preliminary budgets can also be used in order to see the loopholes before the disengagement becomes entrenched.

### **6.4 Thriving Hubs: Redistributing Power and Long-Term Commitment**

Thriving hubs has created a clear success identity. These successful ones have developed identities, expanded networks, and proven results. However, they are still susceptible to centralisation, coordination overload and reliance on major individuals or institutions. Host-centric control which constrains co-ownership and resilience over time is common even in mature hubs.

The government needs to develop distributed and rotational forms of governance. Power concentration can be diminished with shared leadership or shared facilitation duties that are fenced and have a time limit, and strategic coherence is maintained. This is based on what the literature on network governance has been saying about adaptive capacity and shared stewardship as the preconditions to sustainability (Provan and Kenis, 2008).

Routines of engagement must place greater emphasis on depth than frequency. Intentional communication between the organisation and its stakeholders, like annual reflection meetings or mission reviews, ensures commitment without overwhelming stakeholders. Reviews of roles are essential to make sure that the role changes with hub ambitions. The areas in which the improvement should be given immediate priority are enhancing accountability, integrating learning throughout projects, and preserving continuity beyond champions and funding points. Feedback loops connecting the outcomes with the governance decisions contribute to the legitimacy and adaptive recalibration.

## **6.5 Barriers, enablers for SIRR**

Across the hubs, managers and stakeholders pointed to similar barriers to multi-helix co-creation. Limited staff and time were frequently cited, with comments such as “we are a small team; coordinating all these actors takes time that we often don’t have” and “project funding is temporary, but building relationships is long-term work.” Communication and translation between different logics also emerged as challenges: TrENDi staff noted that for them “innovation is about experimentation and learning,” while some local partners expect immediate economic results, and Sotenäs respondents said that concepts like “symbiosis” or “circular economy” can be “abstract” for some community actors. Power and representation issues were clear. Interviewees noted that municipalities hold the authority while companies bring the funding. They also pointed out that newcomers and marginalised groups are still mostly excluded from decision-making, even though efforts have been made to involve them.

Alongside these constraints, the data highlight several enabling factors. Clear value propositions and tangible outcomes were described as strong motivators: TrENDi’s entrepreneurship support offers “very concrete benefits” for students and founders, Sotenäs’ symbiosis projects produce “visible environmental and economic results,” and Louvigné-du-Désert’s community events and co-designed activities help create “a feeling of belonging and shared purpose” around the hub. Louvigné-du-Désert also stands out as a partial deviant case in terms of civil-society involvement: its users’ committee gives associations a formal consultative role and, according to one member, can sometimes lead to the municipality changing things “based on what we say,” even though final decisions remain public.

These mixed patterns have important implications for SIRR. They suggest that moving from institution-centred coordination towards more balanced multiple-helix governance will require deliberate investments in participatory structures, facilitation capacities and long-term

relationship-building, rather than assuming that multi-helix dynamics will emerge automatically from project activities (Maldonado et al., 2024; Schultz et al., 2024). The practical governance guide developed within SIRR responds to these needs by offering phase-specific menus of governance options, agile governance cycles and simple tools such as user-committee terms of reference and annual governance checklists. If hubs and partners use these tools iteratively, SIRR’s ambition of “many cooks improving the broth” can become more than a metaphor and move closer to everyday practice in rural and regional innovation governance.

## **7. Governance for Engagement Action Framework**

### **7.1 Key Concepts**

The following are concepts and its meaning which have been used in the framework-

**Sprints** mean short, time-boxed periods (usually 3-6 months) where the hub tests a small set of clear governance changes, such as trying a user committee or revising decision rules. After each sprint, the team reflects on what worked and what did not, and then adjusts the next cycle, following agile principles of iterative planning and continuous learning (Karlström & Runeson, 2005).

**Kanban-style** boards are simple visual overviews (physical or digital) that show ongoing governance tasks, who is responsible and the current status (for example: “to do - in progress - decided”). They increase transparency for staff, partners and politicians, reduce misunderstandings and make it easier to follow progress in complex hub environments (OECD, 2020).

**Change-management** steps refer to structured ways of guiding people through governance reforms, inspired here by Kotter’s eight-step model. This includes creating a sense of urgency, building a small guiding coalition, developing and communicating a clear vision, planning short-term wins and then anchoring successful new practices in routines and roles so they last beyond individual projects or staff members (Kotter, 2012)

### **7.2 Practical governance guide for hub managers**

#### **7.2.1 Why this guide and for whom?**

This guide is for managers and coordinators of rural or regional hubs that work with innovation, inclusion and co-creation. It is especially aimed at hubs that are no longer just small experiments, but that have not yet settled into a stable way of working with partners and

citizens. The aim is to offer a set of simple options that hubs can try out, adapt and combine to fit their own local reality.

The guide recommends working step by step. Instead of trying to design a perfect governance model from the start, hub teams choose a few changes, test them for a few months, talk about what worked or not, and then adjust. This “try-learn-adjust” approach comes from agile ways of working and from experience with public-sector innovation: short cycles, regular feedback and small decisions are easier to manage than one big reform (Karlström & Runeson, 2005; OECD, 2020).

### **7.3 Step one: Understand what kind of hub you are**

Before changing structures, it helps to know where your hub is in its development. In this guide, three simple stages are used:

- **Sprouting hub**

New hub, few staff, limited visibility. Activities are still experimental, and the focus is on testing ideas and building first relationships with users and local partners.

- **Rooting hub**

The hub is becoming known in the municipality or region. There are more users and partners, and at least one bigger project or funding source. However, roles, rules and long-term funding are not yet fully secure.

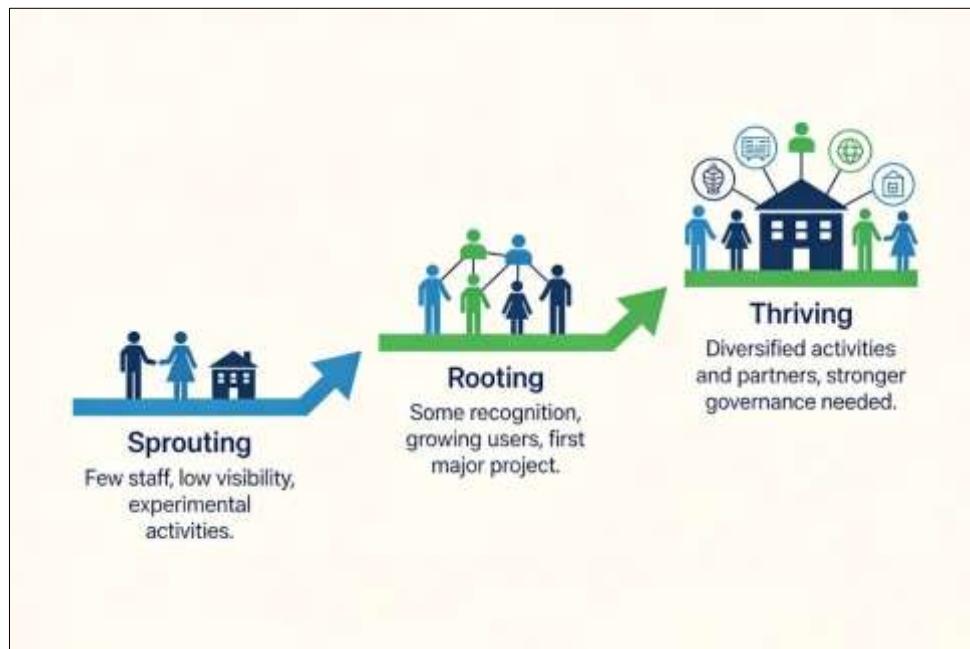
- **Thriving hub**

The hub has many activities and projects, several funding sources and a dense network of partners. At this stage, coordination and transparency become harder, and more formal structures are often needed to keep everyone aligned.

A short self-check can help managers decide which stage fits best. Questions might include:

- How many core staff work regularly at the hub?
- How is the hub talked about in the municipality, the university or local media?
- Do we rely mainly on short projects, or do we also have some stable base funding?
- Do we already have formal bodies such as a user committee, advisory board or steering group? If yes, how active are they?

Once you have a rough idea of whether your hub is sprouting, rooting or thriving, you can choose from the governance options in the next section. This avoids copying models that are too heavy for a young hub or too weak for a complex hub.



*Figure 2. Simplified maturity path from “sprouting” to “thriving” for rural innovation hubs,  
Source- own elaboration.*

#### 7.4 Step two: Choose governance options that fit your stage

This section offers a “menu” of options for each hub type. You do not need to use all of them. The idea is to pick a few, try them in practice and then adjust.

##### 1. Sprouting hubs - keep it light and flexible

Useful options for sprouting hubs include:

- A small founders’ circle that meets informally a few times per year to discuss direction, opportunities and risks.
- Prototype user sessions, for example inviting a small group of users or citizens to test activities and give feedback, instead of setting up a formal committee.
- One or two “buddy” advisors (for example, from the municipality, a business or an association) who regularly support the hub team with advice and contacts.

These simple arrangements help build trust and legitimacy without creating a lot of administration. They keep the hub flexible while it is still discovering its role.

## **2. Rooting hubs - broaden voice and connection**

When a hub starts to root, more structure can help:

- A user committee with a clear and simple mandate (for example: advise on programming, opening hours, use of space, communication).
- A small advisory board with representatives from the municipality, key associations, education and possibly business, to link the hub to local and regional strategies.
- Project steering groups for major funded projects to share responsibility and bring in different perspectives.

In the SIRR hubs, early steering committees, user groups and project boards have already been used in places like Sotenäs, TrENDi and Louvigné-du-Désert to broaden participation while the formal legal responsibility remains with the municipality or the university. These structures help ensure that decisions are not made by a small inner circle only.

The risk at this stage is “meeting overload”. To avoid this, each group should have a short-written description of its purpose, members, meeting frequency and decision rights.

## **3. Thriving hubs - share power and keep perspectives fresh**

For more mature hubs, the challenge is not only to involve many actors, but also to keep governance dynamic and fair:

- Rotating steering committees, where some seats change every one or two years to avoid stagnation and to bring in new voices.
- Thematic advisory panels, for example on youth, circular economy, social inclusion or digitalisation, that can be activated when relevant.
- Multi-level alignment, meaning clearer links between the hub and municipal councils, regional partners and universities, so that strategies and decisions support each other.

For each of these options, it is important to be clear about when it is useful, what time and skills it requires and how it will be introduced. This helps prevent confusion and disappointment.

Hub type	Recommended governance options	Main benefits	Main risks / limits
Sprouting	Founders' circle; prototype user sessions; buddy advisors	Builds legitimacy and early user insight with low admin	May rely too much on a few people
Rooting	User committee; small advisory board; project steering groups	Broadens voice; links hub to municipal/university agendas	Risk of “meeting overload” if mandates unclear
Thriving	Rotating steering committee; thematic advisory panels; multi-level alignment	Shares responsibility, keeps perspectives fresh	Needs more coordination and skills

Table 3: Example governance options for sprouting, rooting and thriving hubs

### 7.5 Step three: Use simple tools to manage change

To make governance changes manageable, the guide suggests borrowing a few simple tools from agile and change-management thinking.

- **Sprints (short cycles)**

Plan changes in periods of 3-6 months. For each period, agree on two or three concrete goals (for example: “test a user committee”, “simplify meeting structure”, “introduce rotation rules”). At the end of the period, review what happened and decide what to keep, stop or change (Karlström & Runeson, 2005).

- **Retrospectives (structured reflection)**

After each sprint, hold a short meeting where the team and key partners discuss three questions: What worked well? What did not work well? What should we do differently next time? This keeps learning continuous instead of waiting for a big evaluation.

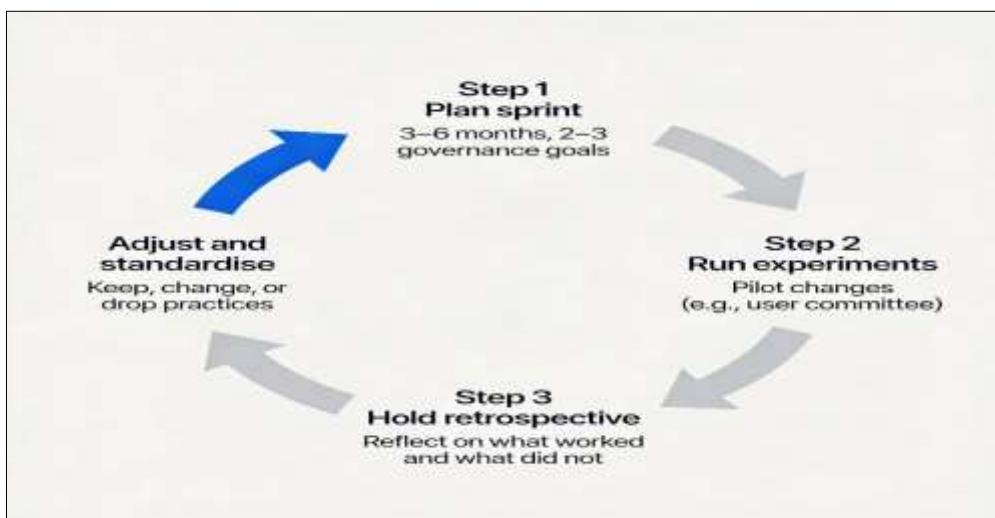
- **Simple visual boards**

Use a whiteboard, pinboard or digital tool to show governance tasks in three columns: “To do - In progress - Done”. This makes the work visible, helps coordinate efforts and makes it easier for politicians and partners to follow progress without reading long reports (OECD, 2020).

- **Light documentation**

Instead of long minutes, keep one-page documents with the most important information: who is in which group, what decisions they can make, when they meet and which questions are still open. This reduces paperwork but keeps institutional memory.

These tools are not complicated. They are ways to break change into small steps and to keep everyone informed and involved.



*Figure 3. Agile governance cycle for hub development: plan, experiment, reflect and adjust (adapted from Karlström & Runeson, 2005; OECD, 2020)*

## 7.6 Step four: Take care of the human side of change

Changing governance is not only about structures and tools; it is also about people and relationships. Research on change-management offers several useful lessons (Kotter, 2012).

Key points for hub managers are:

- Explain why change is needed. Use local examples such as young people leaving, empty premises in the centre or new social or environmental challenges to show why the hub and its governance matter now.

- Build a small core group. Identify a handful of motivated people (politicians, civil servants, association leaders, teachers, young people) who support the hub and are willing to work on governance questions with you.
- Keep the message simple. Agree on a short and clear sentence that explains what the hub is for (“a shared living room for the municipality”, “a testbed for rural innovation”, etc.) and repeat it in meetings and communication.
- Celebrate small wins. Plan and highlight early successes, a co-designed event, a new partnership, a solved coordination problem, so that people see that the new way of working gives real benefits.
- Make new practices stick. Once something works (for example, rotating seats or a yearly governance review), write it into local guidelines and job descriptions so that it continues even if key staff change.

### 7.7 Step five: Review governance once a year

Finally, the guide proposes a short yearly “check-up” to see whether governance still fits the hub’s development stage. Managers can use a simple checklist with questions such as:

- Are public, private, civic, academic and youth actors represented in key groups?
- Do meetings lead to clear decisions and learning?
- Do participants feel that their input makes a difference?
- Which governance experiment will we run in the next period?
- Are we prepared for staff changes or the end of a big project?

This annual review does not need to be long or formal. Its purpose is to keep governance alive and adaptable, so that structures grow with the hub instead of holding it back (OECD, 2020).

Illustrative questions are:

Question (once a year)	Yes	No	Action needed
Representation: Are public, private, civic, academic and youth actors represented in key bodies?			
Effectiveness: Do meetings lead to clear decisions and learning?			

Legitimacy: Do participants feel their input has visible effects?			
Adaptation: Which governance experiment will we run next cycle?			
Sustainability: Are we resilient to staff turnover and project endings?			

*Table 3. Annual governance self-assessment for hub managers (adapted from GIZ, 2021; Boston Consulting Group, 2024)*

## 8 Conclusion and Next Steps

The comparative analysis of L’Arobase, TrENDi, and Sotenäs illustrates that there is no single model that is the best to govern a hub, but the consistency of the alignment amid the maturity of the hub, the anchoring of the institutions, and the expectations of the stakeholders. Light, participatory arrangements, like in L’Arobase, enjoy the lightness and participatory structure, like users’ committees and exploratory formats of engagement, that can establish trust early in the relationship and be adjusted through changing priorities. Agile and mission-oriented governance cores that have enough autonomy to the rooting hubs such as TrENDi are supported by iterative and mission-driven engagement of projects. Conversely, more formalised and transparent hubs like Sotenäs will be needed to incorporate the new voices without altering the effectiveness of well-established informal networks. In all of them, unrelenting conflicts arise between speed and inclusivity, project cycles and ecosystem continuity, and short-term outputs and long-term vision. Although these tensions cannot be entirely resolved, they can be managed effectively through feedback loops and rotating representation, small-scale governance experiments, as well as periodic review.

To SIRR, the results indicate that a strategic opportunity to enhance multi-helix inclusion (WP1) and stakeholder engagement (WP3) is to be supported with phase-sensitive governance other than templates on the same basis. SIRR can subsequently lead hub-type-specific governance agendas on partner municipalities- e.g., by instantiating a Symbiosis Council in Sotenäs and formalising user-committee practice in Louvigné- backed by cross-hub learning exchanges. One of the key gaps that have been realised among all the hubs is lack of systematic measurement where governance effectiveness has been evaluated based on informal judgement and not evidence based. Implementation of light-touch monitoring tools, including individual participant pathways, partner retention, or neighbourhood storytelling of impact, would make the process more accountable and contribute to learning without increasing bureaucracy. The empirical basis of such action is given in this report and the future Governance for Engagement

Action Framework would put these findings into practice to achieve the objective of ensuring inclusive and resilient innovation ecosystems that are not tied to project cycles. The empirical basis of such action is given in this report, while the forthcoming Governance for Engagement Action Framework is intended to translate these findings into practice and to serve as the basis for workshop formats with hub management teams and other key stakeholders, in order to support inclusive and resilient innovation ecosystems that are not tied to project cycles.

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