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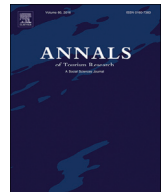
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## Research article

## Contested discourses in social tourism: A relational political economy perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Social tourism initiatives often have economic as well as objectives, particularly national schemes such as the Spanish IMERSO programme, designed to stimulate off-season tourism in mass coastal tourism destinations. Yet, there is little evidence of how such schemes responded to crises or that explores the effects on the tourism industry actors responsible for programme delivery. This article applies a relational political economy approach to assess the contested discourses surrounding the governance of the scheme. We examine the evolution of the IMERSO programme longitudinally following the global financial crisis and up until the COVID-19 pandemic to assess the relational dynamics at play social tourism governance on destination stakeholders, outlining implications for social tourism policies internationally.

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## Introduction

Tourism has long been embraced by governments as a means to drive export-led economic growth and development. However, the intended outcomes of tourism development policies have often fallen short of desired goals and their ability to deliver lasting socio-economic benefits frequently exaggerated (Hall & Jenkins, 1995). This discrepancy may partly be attributed to the failure of policy makers to fully grasp the factors that influence the ability of the tourism industry to contribute to economic prosperity and achieve positive social outcomes. These factors include: the effects of external shocks on the system (such as the Covid-19 pandemic); inefficiencies wrought by policy decisions and an unpredictable business environment; the weighting of different forms of tourism in the visitor economy sector (such as resorts); and the wider effects of socio-economic and political context (including leakages) (Li, Jin, & Shi, 2018). Historic policies and development goals influence the ways that successive national governments implement strategies to maximise the competitiveness and performance of the tourism sector and its contribution to the achievement of overarching policy goals. Thus, it is important to consider tourism policy initiatives within the wider socio-historical and political economic context.

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Social tourism is an area of tourism policy that has a long tradition in some European countries (and beyond) and has been presented as an effective mechanism through which governments can achieve social objectives (increased citizen wellbeing and social inclusion) and overcome some of the weaknesses in the economic performance of the tourism sector (McCabe & Qiao, 2020). Government investment in support of wider social participation in tourism can be considered a political act and subject to the vagaries of public opinion and political/economic pressures (Diekmann, McCabe, & Ferreira, 2018). Yet, to date research on social tourism has paid scant attention to the policy, political and economic context in which such programmes operate. As a result, we know little of the relationships between social tourism programmes and changing governance dynamics or delivery mechanisms, nor the implications for social tourism policy and programmes resulting from these evolving relationships. This lacuna provides the impetus for the current study.

Spain offers a highly pertinent context to explore these issues. In 2019, Spain received the second highest number of international tourism arrivals globally at 83.5 m (UNWTO, 2020). Tourism spending contributed 154bn euros, equivalent to 12.4 % of GDP, and generated 2.72 million jobs, or 12.9 % of total employment in the country (INE, 2019a), making it the world's most 'competitive' tourism destination (World Economic Forum, 2019). However, it is a highly variable picture, with 61.74 % of the tourist demand concentrated in the coastal destinations and Islands (INE, 2019b). Tourism businesses in most of the major destinations face considerable economic challenges due to inherent seasonal elasticities in demand. Additionally, recent research has shown that coastal provinces and a low domestic tourism intensity rendered some destinations more vulnerable to the pandemic-induced downturn from April 2020, exposing a lack of resilience to externalities (Duro, Perez-Laborda, Turrión-Prats, & Fernández-Fernández, 2021). Therefore, despite the undoubted strengths of the Spanish tourism industry, it manifests deeply ingrained structural weaknesses in the economic organisation of the sector and unequal distributive outcomes (Murray Mas, 2015).

Since 1985, Spain has pursued a stimulus policy for domestic tourism demand through a social tourism programme, designed primarily to improve wellbeing and quality of life for users (largely, but not exclusively, senior citizens), but also explicitly to ameliorate negative seasonality effects and contribute to a more sustainable visitor economy, organised through the Spanish Institute of Social Services and the Elderly 'Instituto de Mayores y Servicios Sociales' (widely referred to as a noun, the IMSERSO). Thus, the IMSERSO tourism programme is structured around both a well-being/welfarist dimension common to many social tourism programmes, together with an emphasis on supply-side support and destination sustainability. However, there is remarkably little information on whether the activity contributes to a reduction in seasonality (an exception is Cisneros-Martínez, McCabe, & Fernández-Morales, 2018) or to stimulating regional visitor economies. Instead, research has focused on quality-of-life outcomes for users (Sedgley, Haven-Tang, & Espeso-Molinero, 2018).

In recent years, critiques of the programme have emerged particularly around the use of public funds to support hotel operating costs in the off-season, despite invocations of its progressive credentials as a scheme to support workers and employment (Gascón, 2014). There have been increasing signs of disquiet around the unequal distribution of benefits among the various stakeholders in conjunction with concerns over the tendering procedure for delivery of the programme, periodically leading to a suspension of the bidding process for IMSERSO contracts (cf.: Expansión, 2021). Moreover, the tensions between different actors and institutions involved in the delivery of the scheme have been further exacerbated by the repercussions of the 2008 global financial crisis/sovereign debt crisis, on public funding and more recently, the collapse of tourism from late March 2020 following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gago-García, González-Relaño, Serrano Cambroner, and Babinger (2021)).

The aim of this study is to explore the contested discourses surrounding the organisation and delivery of Spain's social tourism programme, with particular reference to the Costa del Sol in the province of Málaga, to assess how it has responded to external pressures wrought on the entire tourism industry through recent crises, contributing to debates on tourism development policies and the role of stimulus programmes in achieving tourism policy goals. The study integrates a relational, actor-oriented, political economy and tourism governance perspective in social tourism policy for the first time and apply a multidisciplinary approach based on analysis of discourses. We examine the implications of recent crises and concomitant transformations of Spanish tourism for the governance and outcomes of the programme in the context of the underlying conflicts which have surfaced (cf. Bramwell, 2006; Bramwell & Meyer, 2007; Dredge, 2006).

We ask, what are the 'institutional rules of the game' shaping different actors' (hotels, travel agencies, public authorities, destination management organisations, trade unions) interaction with the programme (cf. Wan & Bramwell, 2015). The analysis takes a longitudinal perspective, examining the evolution of the programme from 2007 to 2019 through an analysis of IMSERSO documents, media reports and interviews with different actors implicated in the institutional governance arrangements, delivery and outcomes to assess implications for the future of the programme. In order to provide historical-political context for the later analysis of social tourism governance dynamics, the relationships and tensions among its constituent parts, the following section outlines the diverse organisational and institutional characteristics of social tourism schemes.

## Social tourism, a political economy perspective

Social tourism, in its broadest conception, refers to the inclusion of disadvantaged sections of society in tourism participation, "...through financial or other interventions of a well-defined and social nature." (Minnaert, Diekmann, & McCabe, 2012, p. 29). Therefore, social tourism is differentiated from other forms of related activities, including accessible tourism, by a distinct social purpose aligned with redistributive and social policy concerns (e.g., health and well-being).

The character and organisation of social tourism schemes varies substantially, and is linked to the socio-political traditions, ideologies and state systems in each country (Minnaert, Maitland, & Miller, 2006). European social tourism policies can be categorised into three broad types: those associated with Central and Eastern European countries during the era of state socialism,

whereby domestic tourism was state sponsored, tourism participation was seen as a social right based on its contributions to a health and wellbeing for the workforce (Hall & Brown, 2006). The Northern European model, where social tourism is conceived on principles of universal access for all in society (Minneart, Diekmann, & McCabe, 2012). Social tourism institutions were developed along commercial lines to create cheap, practical and basic holiday opportunities. The third type incorporates mostly Mediterranean countries whose social tourism systems grew out of trades unions, cooperatives and employees' clubs, which effectively invested in accommodation structures and travel businesses to provide non-profit holiday opportunities for members (Diekmann & McCabe, 2011).

Such a broad characterisation of the differences in social tourism systems can do little more than provide a gloss on what is in effect a hugely diverse array of activities and policies, targeting a wide range of needs and users (Diekmann & McCabe, 2011). Yet, this indicates how social tourism systems are intrinsically connected with the socio-political modes of governance, approaches to welfare, distributive justice and rights that prevail in different countries, warranting attention to these issues. Indeed, there are critical voices questioning the extent to which social tourism schemes can contribute to social equality, as Fletcher et al. (2021, p. 10) note: 'social tourism has displayed contradictory and ambivalent dynamics from an emancipatory perspective'. The IMSERSO scheme is a prime example as demand for places far outstrips availability or how the assessment criteria (a points-based system within a framework of equal opportunities based on age, disability status, economic situation, participation in the programme in previous years and belonging to a large family (Imsero, 2022)) are applied. In 2019/20, 900,000 trips were supported, out of a total of almost 4 m applications to the scheme (IMSERO, 2021a).

The integration of the commercial sector into the delivery of state funded social tourism provision, the extent to which targeted beneficiaries can access places on schemes, and the shifting orientation of policies to prioritise economic alongside social welfare goals are just some of the unresolved issues surrounding continued support for many social tourism programmes (e.g., Kakoudakis and McCabe, 2020). Social tourism initiatives involve a plurality of actors and institutions, often working in conjunction with each other, ranging from charities, voluntary organisations, community groups and trade unions, to state departments and private businesses. Thus, a detailed examination of governance and political economy of social tourism is long overdue.

### *Governance and political economy*

While there is no single definition of governance, it often refers to the rescaling of state power in the context of neoliberal policy reforms, resulting in an increasingly diffuse institutional and regulatory landscape (Bramwell, 2011). This approach sees the state as not merely a passive victim of globalisation and the intensification of market forces, but rather as an active participant in the continuous production of a heterogeneous institutional landscape through which the (renewed) conditions for capital accumulation are continuously created, or indeed challenged by a multitude of actors (Bramwell, 2006). This follows Jessop's (2008, p. 1) 'strategic-relational' framework which "starts from the proposition that the state is a social relation" that, while embedded in economic practices, engages in building institutions that embody conflicting sets of ideas and contradictory power relations (see also Pastras & Bramwell, 2013). Similarly, Rey-Araújo (2020) deploys post-Marxist accumulation theory to highlight the balance of social forces and institutional structures which sustained the economic expansion of Spain between 1995 and 2008.

The concept of governance has been deployed in number of different tourism development settings to analyse and explain how increasingly diverse constellations of actors, working across multi-level institutional landscapes, conceive and enact tourism policy within specific political-economic contexts (Bramwell, 2011; Hall, 2011; Hall, 2004). The emphasis on governance highlights the role of the diverse 'relational networks' that shape institutional structures and influence the policy dynamics of tourism development (Dredge, 2006). Long's (2001) 'actor-oriented' political economy, deployed by Bramwell (2006) in his analysis of public policies to restrict tourism growth in Malta, is instructive. Long (2001) foregrounds the ability of differentially empowered groups of actors to shape institutional-structural conditions and to pursue different agendas framed by shared meaning and interpretations of, for example, broader policy debates. Stevenson, Airey, and Miller (2008) foreground the importance of examining communication and social interactions, including informal relationships, in order to understand the enactment of tourism policy making from the perspectives of those involved.

A 'relational' political economy focuses analysis on the "complex nexus of relations among actors and structures" within a specific yet changing institutional context (Bramwell & Meyer, 2007, p. 766); in this case, the IMSERSO social tourism programme. Moreover, it connects the study of this institutional context within which social tourism policies are enacted, with both the values and meanings ascribed by actors implicated in a changing policy landscape and the specific patterns of resource distribution and allocation that result. Hence, the 'path-dependent' characteristics and institutional inertia of the *corporatist* social tourism programme can be analysed in the light of contested discourses framing the evolving agenda of the IMSERSO in response to changing socio-economic and political circumstances, in this case the global financial crisis and ensuing sovereign debt crisis after 2008.

### **Methodology and data**

#### *Approaching relational political economy through discourse*

Broadly speaking, political economy analysis explicates the forces determining the organisation and structure of economic activities, dynamics of markets and their regulation by the state. However, there is no single approach to doing political economy while discursive methods are relevant but infrequently applied. In the context of economic geography, Pike, MacKinnon, Cumbers, Dawley, and McMaste (2016) outline that an evolutionary political economy framework might include: identifying

the regulatory actors involved and explaining their powers; categorising the actors that are subject to the regulation to understand how they react to and seek to influence the regulatory process. This might be extended to wider analysis of socio-spatial relations of actors who have an interest in attempting to shape the regulation, and wide-ranging historical analysis to map the changes to the system and to track how the different parties have adapted to the regulatory changes.

Contrary to the 'value-neutral' approach of neoclassical economics, markets are embedded in 'multiplex social relations' (Narotzky, 1997, p. 94–8). Cultural norms and values are thus constitutive of political economic relations insofar as they give meaning to and structure the nature, scope and components of economic exchange. Social tourism policies are influenced by the prevailing norms governing a society's approach to equality of access and participation in leisure travel, and sustained by discourses, which serve to reproduce a moral economy of rights and duties of social provision. Social tourism programmes are implemented by and through vested political, business and social actors or networks, which contribute to diverse social tourism discourses, thereby framing and underpinning its governance and delivery.

In his review of emergent theoretical frameworks in the analysis of tourism, globalisation and power, Hannam (2002) notes the significance of discourses in moulding the institutionalisation of norms and ideologies in tourism policy. Equally, while Mosedale (2014, p. 61) admonishes critical tourism scholars to interrogate the role played by language and the 'discursive strategies used to reproduce political projects', there is a danger that the explanatory role and significance of discourse becomes decoupled from political economy and the workings of power in specific institutional contexts (Bianchi, 2009). Rather, discourses, and more specifically, language consists of a set of representational practices, which are constitutive of the economy, the institutions that comprise them and the policies and institutions that shape economic behaviour (Holmes, 2016). Such relational and actor-oriented political economy perspectives emphasise both the contingency of discourses as well as the capacity of actors to challenge dominant narratives and indeed to transform structural conditions to their own advantage (Bramwell, 2006). By exploring the ideas and language through which diverse actors engage with and shape the institutionalisation of tourism policy, discourses are seen as neither 'free floating' nor neatly aligned with the interests of hegemonic classes and ruling elites. This defines our approach to examining the relational political economy of the IMSERSO social tourism programme.

### *Materials and data*

To facilitate an analysis of the governance dynamics of the IMSERSO scheme and a deeper understanding of the effects following the global financial crisis up until the Covid-19 pandemic, the research consisted of a multi-method, multidisciplinary approach. This comprised; a relational political economy analysis of Spanish tourism development; document analysis of policies and related media reporting and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders in order to apply an interpretive, analysis of "‘meaning-making’ within a contested tourism governance arena" (Fazito, Scott, & Russell, 2016, p. 2). Our study focuses on the Costa del Sol, a region located in the province of Málaga, as one of the largest recipients of the IMSERSO social tourism programme.

The analysis involved a detailed examination of the available literature on Spain's political economy, alongside statistical data and reports obtained from IMERSO and other sources to explicate the evolution of the programme within the context of tourism development in the region. This was supplemented by an interpretive analysis of media items relating to the programme, comprised of three types of information sources: general press, financial press and specific sectoral press (tourism). This document and news media dataset covered articles published between November 2012 and November 2022 (although analysis focused on the period January 2019 onwards (a sample of the material and themes is provided as Appendix 1), specifically those pieces whose level of detail included contrasting actor perspectives, enabling a comprehensive overview of the various approaches, dimensions and implications of policies, procedures and contracting regulations affecting the operation of the programme. The media analysis involved identification of key themes inferred inductively from published sources and further contextualised with codes drawn from the software analysis of interviews (below). Topics covered included: 1) public sector funding cuts to the IMSERSO programme; 2) tensions between stakeholders over the tendering process and pricing of packages; 3) significance of IMSERSO programme for off-season hotel operations and employment; 4) changes in the consumer behaviour of beneficiaries; and 5) pressure for reform of the programme. The media analysis served to provide further insight into the governance dynamics of the IMSERSO programme from the perspectives of different actors and to contextualise their viewpoints in relation to wider narratives around the purpose and sustainability of the scheme.

Additionally, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 key actors linked to social tourism in the Costa del Sol: participating hotels, the Costa del Sol Hotel Association, municipal tourism offices (Benalmádena, Fuengirola, Torre del Mar), Málaga City Council, the Association of Travel Agencies and the Workers' Commission trade union. Interview questions revolved around the history, current and future of social tourism on the Costa del Sol, its social and economic impacts, management model and the perceptions of actors on the programmes' implementation. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, transcribed and then translated into English. The transcription of the interviews was analysed with Atlas.ti software (V.9.1). Applying the theoretical-methodological tenets of Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), a hermeneutic unit was configured resulting in a total of 183 quotes, 71 different codes based on a combined coding process (automatic and manual), and 92 links between codes (by simple co-occurrence), in order to generate textual-descriptive (textual quotes) and structural-cognitive outputs (thematic maps representing structure and connections between discourses). The approach taken to coding was twofold, combining top-down categorisation generated by the research team with the bottom-up categorisation arising from the interviewees' own words.



## Findings

### *Political economy context of tourism development in the Costa del Sol (Málaga)*

The province of Málaga, specifically the coastal region of the Costa del Sol, hosts one of the largest concentrations of tourism development in Spain. In 2019 the province had a total (regulated) bed stock capacity of 405,504 beds, of which 25.7 % comprised hotel beds, representing a total increase of 131.3 % since 2015 (Turismo y Planificación, 2019, p. 4 & 67). However, the province exhibits one of the lowest levels of per capita income in the country, alongside other notable centres of tourism activity, Benidorm and Marbella (Navarro-Jurado et al., 2019).

From the late 1950s, rapid development along Málaga's coastline induced a profound transformation in the provincial economy and structure of the labour market as the construction and tourism sectors absorbed millions of workers from the agrarian sectors (Pack, 2006). By 1972, tourism comprised nearly 15 % of the province's economic activity (Jurdao, 1990). From an early date these processes set in motion the underlying imbalances in the provincial (and national) tourism political economy. These include chronic over accumulation of real estate capital, over-supply of low-grade accommodation stock and labour markets skewed towards construction and tourism. These processes, when accompanied by endemic seasonality created the structural weaknesses which the IMSERSO tourism programme was partly devised to address.

By the mid-1980s, despite improved macro-economic performance and growth in employment, spurred in part by the neoliberal economic reforms ("Boyer Reforms") designed to prepare Spain for entrance into the EC, between 1982 and 1996 unemployment remained between 16 and 22 % while labour's share of national income fell (Recio & Roca, 1998). The growth of tourism was boosted by state investment and policies designed to open the economy to foreign investment and improve social welfare provision. In 1985, social tourism began to be organised through the IMSERSO, beginning initially through 16,000 Christmas breaks in 19 hotels (Sedgley, Haven-Tang & Espeso-Molinero, 2018), but which then rapidly expanded in scope and scale. However, rather than address the structural imbalances in Spain's tourism economy, economic liberalisation intensified weaknesses in the tourism economy by driving real estate-driven tourism development, which was especially pronounced along the Costa del Sol.

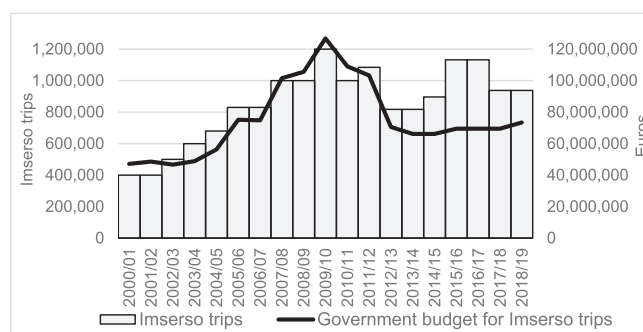
Although unemployment began to fall in the mid-1990s, the contradictory dynamics of sustained growth on the one hand, and higher living costs and stagnating wages on the other, continued well into the new millennium (Cámara Izquierdo, 2007, p. 556). This paradox was exacerbated by the over-supply of low grade, under-performing hotels as investment became increasingly oriented towards residential self-catering and second homes in such locations as Torremolinos and Mijas (Jurdao, 1990). This precipitated the closure of many small, independent Hotel establishments, some of which were absorbed by larger chains. The period also witnessed the privatisation of state-run hotels and the consolidation of Spanish hotel capital into larger holdings (Bote Gómez et al., 1999, pp. 159–60), accompanied by a reduction in labour intensity brought about by increased self-catering provision (Salmon, 1995, p. 243). By this time, highly concentrated seasonality was endemic in Spanish coastal destinations.

On the eve of the 2008 global financial crisis, total bed stock in Spain reached 3 million with hotel beds alone increasing from just over 1 million in 1992 to 1.5 million in 2007 (Murray Mas, 2015, p. 245). European integration and ever-increasing flows of foreign investment, bolstered by European structural funds for infrastructure upgrading and resort improvement, had turbo-charged real estate markets from the mid-1990s (Fernández Durán, 2006). Between 1993 and 2011, foreign investment in the Spanish real estate and construction increased 350 % (Hof & Blázquez, 2015, p. 775). Much of this growth was concentrated along the littoral and in smaller cities, including Málaga (García, 2010, p. 969).

Simultaneously, over-saturation of accommodation stock, European monetary integration and heightened competition from new markets meant that many hotels were struggling with profitability and high levels of debt (Murray Mas, 2015, p. 268). However, despite continued obstacles to maintaining profitability (in 2005, the occupancy rate in the Costa del Sol (69.39 %) reached its lowest level since 2000) there were 29 hotel construction projects in progress (Greenpeace, 2005, p. 19). The impact of the Eurozone crisis was keenly felt in Spain and Andalusia in particular, as the state was forced to bail out over-exposed regional banks heavily invested in real estate (Charnock, Urcell, & Ribera-Fumaz, 2014, p. 107). By early 2010, unemployment had risen to 4 million (20 %), with levels particularly high in Andalusia (28 %) (Salmon, 2010, p. 48). The response to the economic collapse by successive governments – budget cuts, austerity and wage restraint – further entrenched unemployment while failing to contain the growth in public debt (Salmon, 2017).

However, Spain's economic situation subsequently began to recover, and unemployment peaked in 2013. Tourism itself was embraced as an instrument of economic recovery and arrivals grew significantly during the 2010s. Yet, much of this growth was the result of the emergence of online rental platforms, enabling investors to take advantage of the crisis to generate new avenues of capital accumulation (Blanco-Romero, Blázquez-Salom, & Cànoves, 2018). Moreover, despite economic growth prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, labour precarity, wage stagnation and exploitative working conditions in the tourism and hotel sectors have intensified (Martínez-Gayo, 2021). Meanwhile, continued budget cuts to the social tourism programme led to increased tensions between tour operators, travel agencies and participating hotels over the distribution of the funding. Furthermore, construction and real estate development along the coast continued unabated. Even following the Covid-19 pandemic, in Málaga there are currently 20 hotel projects under construction (Sánchez, 2021).

The implications of these developments are that additional pressures on the effectiveness of the IMSERSO programme in mitigating seasonality and delivering economic benefits to the accommodation sector have increased, to the extent that increases in accommodation stock reduces the amelioration effects on seasonality. An oversupply of accommodation has decreased the average accommodation occupancy. Hotels with low occupancy levels have lower annual revenues and therefore find it harder to



**Fig. 1.** Number of IMSERSO trips and the annual budget assigned to the program by the Spanish Government (generated by the authors based on data from IMSERSO, 2020, 2021a, 2021b).

maintain the fixed costs of remaining open all year. The attraction of less seasonal segments, such as IMSERSO tourists can maintain hotel viability in the low season.

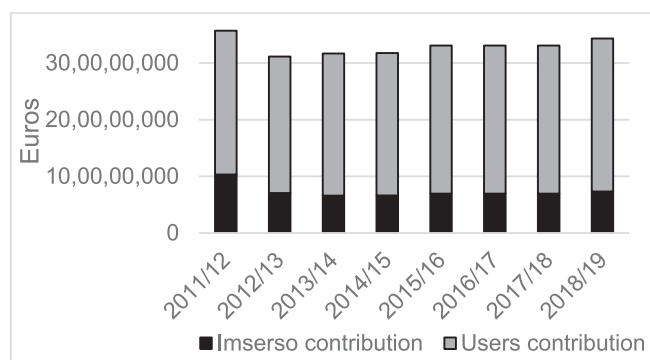
#### *Evolution of the IMSERSO social tourism programme*

As outlined previously, the scheme began in 1985 and in the subsequent 15 years, it supported 4.7 million holidays until the 1999/2000 seasons (PwC, 2004). Fig. 1 outlines the evolution of IMSERSO activity, and the annual budget allocated by the Spanish Government.

The programme reached a peak in the 2009/2010 season, with 1.2 million trips and 126.8 million euros allocated. Up until that point both the number of trips and the budget had been growing steadily. However, from the 2010/11 season, a reversal in policy in favour of deep cuts to the budget continued until 2014/2015, until it equated to around half the budget it had been in 2009/2010. The Spanish Government made draconian public spending cuts to deal with the effects of the 2008 global financial crisis and comply with EU bailout conditions. Since 2015/2016, the budget has been maintained with a slight increase in the most recent season reaching 73.4 million euros.

The decrease in the budget in response to the crash was highly criticised by hoteliers according to Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC). These reports maintain the IMSERSO programme generates savings in unemployment benefits and income through taxes, (for each euro invested, 1.8 euros are recovered, PwC, 2004). This, together with the positive impact that the programme has on employment, arguably makes it highly efficient as an economic stimulus. In the 2011–2012 season of the 97.1 million euros invested, 152.2 m were recovered (PwC, 2012). Thus, a significant positive return is generated in the visitor economy. The subsequent budgetary constraints thus appear to be counterproductive and counterintuitive, particularly given the availability of accommodation, and a growing demand for off-season social tourism.

From the 2014/2015 season, the number of holidays offered began to recover. However, this is in the context of a continued decrease in the budget, breaking the correlation between volume and budget for the first time. Since 2011, IMSERSO decreased the proportion of state contribution into the programme, while pressing tour operators and travel agents in the consortia to maintain the number of holidays financed, thus lowering the per capita budget. Up until 2010/2011, the IMSERSO contribution to each trip was approximately 30 % of the total cost to the individual. This contribution has progressively decreased, to 20.7 % in the 2018/2019 season. This effectively pushed the additional costs onto the industry and, crucially, customers, which in turn reduces tourist expenditure in the destination economy. The relative contribution of IMSERSO and users is presented in Fig. 2. The significant decrease in the overall economic impact generated by the IMSERSO programme from 2012/2013 has continued. While the



**Fig. 2.** Economic activity generated by the IMSERSO program (authors composition based on data from IMSERSO 2021a).

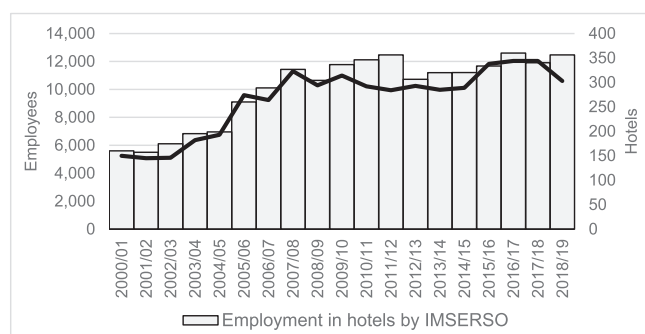


Fig. 3. Hotels receiving IMSERSO trips and employment in hotels generated by the IMSERSO (generated by the authors based on data from [IMSERSO, 2020](#)).

economic impact of the programme remains positive, it is substantially diluted due to the reduction in the proportion of state investment.

Another important facet in terms of the impact of these changes to the funding structure is the number of hotels receiving IMSERSO trips and consequently, the number of jobs created or maintained through the programme. Fig. 3 indicates that the employment attributed to IMSERSO grew significantly from 2002/03, and by the 2011/12 season, had doubled, reaching a peak of 12,471 jobs. However, employment then fell until the 2015/16 season, remaining at levels similar to those immediately prior to the crash. Despite the reduction in employment, the number of participating hotels has remained fairly consistent in the years after the crash with an average of 290 hotels, but with a pronounced increase in the 2015/16 season reaching 338 hotels which was maintained until the dip occurred in 2018/19. This is indicative of the resilience of hotels to winter closure despite the drop in IMSERSO trips and per capita support.

Yet, as we discuss later, the financial pressures placed on the system lead to questions concerning the quality of jobs rather than numbers in employment. In other words, with fewer IMSERSO trips, a lower budget allocated and stagnant employment, participating hotels remained open, but under increased financial pressure, which explains some of the emerging tensions surrounding the programme emerging and the economic damage suffered by these stakeholders, which were exacerbated through the 2020–21 COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Due to the suspension of the IMSERSO programme during 2021/2022 following the lockdown, the winning consortia for that season, Mundiplan and Turismo Social, received compensation worth €13 million ([IMSERSO, 2021a](#)).

The IMSERSO social tourism programme thus in many ways reinforces many of the systemic contradictions and weaknesses in Spain's tourism development illustrated earlier. Despite its undoubted social intentions, it has become politicised as a popular form of subsidised domestic travel, which no major political party has been willing to challenge until recently ([Preferente, 2022](#)). A combination of factors may help to explain this. These include its electoral benefits, and the importance of pensioners

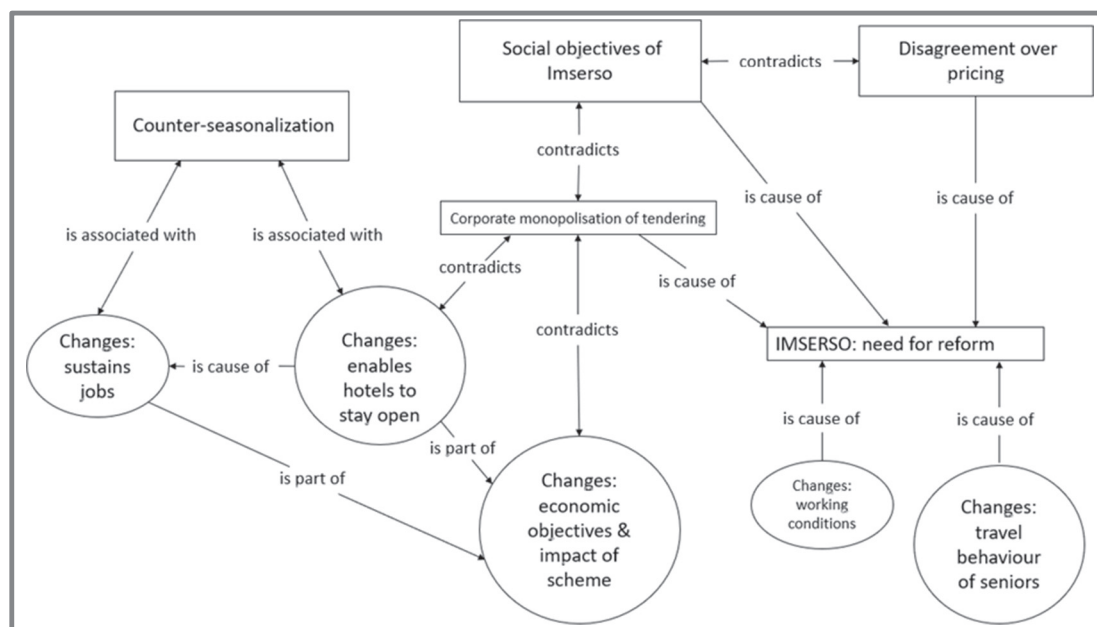


Fig. 4. Stakeholder perspectives on the IMSERSO programme.



votes to all political parties as well as the difficulties in reconciling the various competing interests among the stakeholders and their political alignments to central government parties. The governance and management of the IMSERSO programme has remained firmly rooted in the central state apparatus since its inception. Despite the neoliberal reforms enacted in Spain since the early 1980s, the programme retains a centralised tendering and governance process.

This is somewhat anachronistic in one of the most federalised states in Europe whereby regional administrations have gained significant control across many areas of policy and legislation. Perhaps, one could infer the reasons for this tacit agreement between central and regional administrations is that it allows the central government to take the credit for the social and economic benefits of the scheme. Meanwhile, regional governments in areas of high tourism concentration are content to allow the central state to shoulder the responsibility for addressing unemployment in the low season while continuing to promote further tourism-driven real estate development from which they can prosper, further accentuating the very problems that the programme is supposed to address.

#### *Contested discourses and tensions within the IMSERSO social tourism model*

In this section, we examine diverse stakeholder perceptions of the IMSERSO tourism programme in the Costa del Sol in conjunction with discourses obtained through the media analysis. The circular nodes (Fig. 4) indicate the issues and challenges most frequently cited by interviewees in reference to their engagement in the IMSERSO programme. The rectangular nodes refer to interpretive themes generated through the discourse analysis. The size of the nodes is proportional to the emphasis placed on the issue in the data.

The main findings can be summarised in three broad areas of tensions; around the rationale for stakeholder's involvement in the scheme; perceptions on the positions of the other stakeholders involved; and the need for reform in the governance of the programme.

#### *Rationale for involvement*

Although some interviewees emphasised the social objectives promoted by IMSERSO, as can be seen in Fig. 4, the predominant view of all the actors was instrumentalist, based on its economic rationale; that is, to support hotels and jobs during the off-season. In this regard, the relationship of social tourism to more complex questions of economic development and sustainability, related to, for example, the environment, decent work and broader distributive outcomes of the programme takes a back seat to its instrumental function of maintaining employment and hotel operations. Furthermore, despite the fall in public funding for the programme (see Fig. 1), many respondents indicated that impact of the 2008 financial crisis may well have been more severe had it not been for the mitigating effects of IMSERSO. However, many have questioned the genuine economic benefits of participation, arguing that there is little financial gain made by participating hotels:

“...it is worth remembering that hotels do not profit at all from the programme, in the best case they break even but the majority lose money” (Hotel Employers' Association).

Such is the level of discontent that many of the smaller hoteliers, are threatening to abandon the scheme due to the lack of financial viability implicated by their involvement (Vargas, 2019). More recently, inflation and rising costs (energy, food and labour) have squeezed margins further to the extent that hoteliers argue that the minimum necessary to provide the IMSERSO services and cover operating costs has risen from 27 to 33 euros (Hosteltur, 2022). Such is the discontent in some regions that hotels, for example, in the Catalan and Balearic regions have left the programme, while in Benidorm, the regional hotel association (Hosbec), has threatened to set up a regional equivalent supported by the Valencian regional administration (Bermejo, 2022).

#### *Perceptions on the other stakeholders?*

Stakeholders diverged in opinions on the ways different actors benefit from the scheme, while accepting limited alternatives. While the tour operators (i.e., the consortium) claim that the programme is beneficial for hoteliers, both national and regional hotel employer's associations claimed that the subsidy set by IMSERSO (currently, 22 euros per person per night) is inadequate since it fails to account for the investments needed to improve the quality of hotels, offer the minimum standard of service required (Ortega, 2019) and support decent wages in the hospitality sector. Nevertheless, while some hoteliers bemoaned the paucity of public subsidy, others were adamant that the programme offers vital support in the absence of any viable alternatives to sustaining low season operations:

“If these types of trips did not exist, we would have to close the hotel for approximately 5 months. In this destination we could not be open without these trips.” (Manager, 3\* Hotel).

Additionally, while travel agencies have been less vocal in this respect, and are for the most part happy with the increase in their share in the most recent tendering framework, a high-ranking representative of the Andalusian travel agents' sector noted that travel agencies are caught in perhaps the most difficult position between the majors and destination suppliers:

“In favour [of the scheme] it provides a pile of income in a low season and therefore contributes to the maintenance of activity and employment...[...] Against, well, perhaps the remuneration is not adequate for the, the level of effort required to serve this population segment.” (Travel Agents' Representative).

Trade unions, who represent perhaps one of the most significant target beneficiaries of the scheme – the tourism labour classes – continue to support the IMSERSO scheme, yet in recent times have become increasingly critical of the mercenary attitude of hoteliers, in particular, the obstructionist tactics adopted to bid up the tariff while failing to pass these benefits onto the workforce (Diez, 2019):

“Because, in addition, I believe that when they say that IMSERSO tourism is a subsidy, you get a subsidy, it should be part of employment policies, it is an investment, and not a subsidy.” (Trade Union).

Conversely, however, one hotelier claimed that as a result of a recent provincial wage agreement signed prior to the pandemic, wages would rise 14 % over four years (4\* Hotel). Thus, whilst there may be broad agreement between stakeholders regarding the benefits of the IMSERSO programme as far as enabling hoteliers to remain open in the low season, and sustaining basic employment levels, the consensus is brittle.

#### *The need for reform of the governance of the scheme*

The range of views regarding the distribution of financial benefits accruing from the scheme is mirrored by concerns over the lack of transparency and fairness in the annual bidding process for the contracts. For example, while remaining broadly supportive of the programme, senior representatives of the travel agency sector have argued publicly that, rather than maintain the current system of bidding and tendering, the process should be liberalised to enable wider entrants directly, breaking the current duopoly of the consortia. (De la Rosa, 2019a). In 2000, four companies were in fact sanctioned by the Spanish National Commission for Markets and Competition over irregularities in the bidding process (De la Rosa, 2019b). During the interviews, all of the different stakeholders hinted at the precarious situation in which the programme currently finds itself. This has of course been exacerbated by the delays and eventual cancellation of the programme in the 2020/21 season due to the pandemic, as well as, more importantly, the numerous appeals by hoteliers regarding the tendering process and the reduced value of the subsidy set by IMSERSO (Ortega, 2019).

Disagreements over the unit price per person per night set by IMSERSO for accommodation lies at the heart of the current tensions between the various actors and calls for reform. Contrary to the prevailing discourse surrounding the IMSERSO tourism programme as means of bolstering off-season employment in tourism dependent regions, trade unions are critical of the low quality of employment maintained. Indeed, the need to generate meaningful long-term, highly skilled employment, and an ability to counteract seasonality challenges on a more sustainable basis is necessary to ensure greater resilience in the sector in the future. The trade union representative also underscored how the erosion of labour protections via the 2012 labour law reforms together with the shortage of labour following the Covid pandemic had made it difficult to attract workers into the sector, and foregrounded the need to anchor the IMSERSO programme in an “integrated strategy of territorial management”:

“I am not ashamed to say that we are a country of waiters, the problem is that it has to be a qualified, trained waiter ... with conditions and we have here a more sustainable, integral tourism industry, but in all respects; environmentally, socially, everything.” (Trade Union).

Expectedly, the need for comprehensive reform was extensive according to each stakeholder's interests. This is perhaps unsurprising given the bidding process and delivery mechanisms have remained largely unaltered since the programme's inception, even though the political economy context, the structure and organisation of the visitor economy and the tourism industry, as well as external environment has changed dramatically over this period.

Another aspect of reform to emerge in the interviews and potentially one of the most interesting challenges affecting the sustainability of the IMSERSO programme, relates to the stakeholders' views on how the scheme can or should respond to the changing customer characteristics and market demand. The early beneficiaries of the scheme were predominantly working-class pensioners who had very little experience of holidaymaking and few opportunities. Improvements in social welfare and pension entitlements over recent decades, early retirement, increased leisure time and a greater appreciation of the social value of holidays has resulted in a transformation in the characteristics of the general user profile. Yet, some of the stakeholders argued that the programme has not effectively responded to these changing demand trends. The commercial stakeholders (mainly tour operators, travel agencies and hotels) argued that the scheme needs to adapt and diversify its offer accordingly.

Of further relevance is the extent that the IMSERSO scheme is tied into the discourse of post-pandemic recovery strategies for the tourism industry (Gutiérrez, 2021). While this was touted by the Spanish administration, there was little sense that this was a credible approach among respondents. In March 2022, the Spanish Secretary of State for tourism proposed scaling up the social tourism programme to a European level claiming that it would help industry resilience, combat seasonality and deliver EU-wide economic benefits (Tourinews, 2022). Yet, the scheme rarely features in either national or regional tourism development strategies. Some of the hoteliers noted that in strategic terms, social tourism is merely considered as “insurance” against fluctuations in low season demand from other markets. Criticisms were also voiced by some stakeholders, who considered that maintaining the programme without updating the product to meet the needs of a changing society and changing market conditions, is tantamount to a decline in quality of the social tourism offer. However, the regular influx, season after season, of IMSERSO tourists has meant that the host municipalities themselves have often adapted their town planning, services and range of activities to the needs of this market. Other stakeholders, particularly the Hoteliers, noted the symbiotic relationship between the presence of IMSERSO market affording an ability to capture low season demand from international and other domestic segments, however.

## Conclusions

This study examined the evolving policy agendas and institutional arrangements governing the IMSERSO social tourism in Spain, using the Costa del Sol (Málaga) as a case context, to provide a deeper understanding of the relationships between the tourism development context, the governance and operation of the social tourism programme and the implications for tourism industry stakeholders. The integrated analysis facilitated a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of the contested discourses around the programme and its assumed benefits through times of crisis and change to shed light on the structural challenges facing the programmes' future. The study highlighted key stakeholders varying positions, their interests in being involved in the scheme and explored the tensions emerging on the governance of the scheme, responding to calls for research applying political economy perspectives to enhance understanding of relational forces that shape tourism policy (Wan & Bramwell, 2015).

The paper contributes to research on tourism policy through its focus on a national scheme designed to drive economic sustainability. The IMSERSO social tourism programme is a long-established policy instrument that has been lauded for its contribution to enhancing citizen well-being and delivering benefits in region's visitor economies through supporting the tourism industry in the low season, enhancing economic sustainability. In contrast to previous research which has questioned hierarchical forces shaping development policy (Bramwell, 2006), we show how, during an era of external financial and other crises, the power and interest of the regulatory authority becomes paramount to the positions of other implicated actors. Whereas previous research has examined policy from a development (growth) perspective and the relative interests in shaping and determining outcomes, e.g., benefits for local communities (Hall & Jenkins, 1995; Pastras & Bramwell, 2013), our focus on a stimulus scheme that is underpinned by both welfarist and economic sustainability principles highlights the structural imbalances in power between tourism industry actors and the ambivalence expressed by stakeholders involved. The blend of social alongside the economic objectives, which has been hailed as a strength of the programme in the past, has led to a reluctance to adapt despite increasing systemic pressure on public financing of the scheme. The political capital invested appears such that successive changes in national government continue to cling on to the basic structural mechanisms of the scheme.

Previous studies applying a strategic-relational perspective have noted path-dependent and path-shaping actions associated with national government involvement in tourism policy making. Institutional restructuring following neoliberal reforms ultimately leads to greater participation in policy making and a partnership approach (Pastras & Bramwell, 2013). However, the governance of the IMSERSO scheme appears to be entrenched as a hierarchical policy mechanism that limits the agency of the non-state actors (Hall, 2011), contradicting the direction of travel of recent policy research, driven by network approaches and community-led development interests (Joppe, 2018). Our analysis of the stakeholder discourses pointed to a situation whereby all actors appear to be 'locked in' to an outdated and overly centralised programme, while questioning whether it remains fit-for-purpose and indeed, its long-term viability. The inertia which characterises the reluctance of IMSERSO to adapt to changing market conditions, despite reduced funding and increased costs, is suggestive of an institutional straitjacket, rather than a context in which policy emerges dynamically through network relations (Dredge, 2006).

All the tourism stakeholders acknowledged their general support for the programme, recognising the important lifeline it provides in maintaining some economic activity in the low season. Yet, the political economy analysis highlighted the continued intensification of real estate-led capital accumulation in the region, which continues to erode the positive effects of the activity and further concentrates the impact. The industry lacks power to force change or to disengage totally, thus remaining complicit in maintaining the status quo. Yet, it is not totally without agency, and our findings align with theory of new institutionalism in that the different actors do have some freedom to determine strategic actions (Jessop, 2008). The lack of consensus among stakeholders, the critical tensions expressed about the fundamental utility of the programme in achieving its stated economic (not social welfare) objectives and bitter differences in opinion on the distribution of benefits may indicate ongoing stalemate, however, the potential exists for a transformation in the structural relationships that could lead to imminent change in strategic pathways (Pastras and Bramwell, 2013).

The centralised policy context of IMSERSO which has placed continued pressure on the profit margins that each sector stakeholder group is able to achieve, exacerbated by spiralling inflation and energy costs in the current environment, has resulted in increased vocality of opposition to the governance of the scheme. These calls for reforms have intensified throughout the aftermath of the global financial crisis and pandemic recovery process. In practical terms, this points to the need for greater involvement of actors in shaping the policy to enable structural reforms in line with relational policy theory (Bramwell & Meyer, 2007). This will enable it to more effectively respond to future and current challenges (changes in demand and demographic profile; market dynamics and changes in supply) and internal issues (tourism labour market, equitable distribution of benefits among different commercial stakeholders).

The relational political economy approach highlighted the challenges facing the state-regional power dynamics in the context of the real-estate driven growth evolution of development in the Málaga-Costa Del Sol-area and the legitimacy of the IMSERSO governance mechanisms (Bramwell, 2011; Fazito et al., 2016; Hannam, 2002). The recent post-crisis economic restructuring, the pandemic and related public funding cuts have exposed structural weaknesses in the Spanish coastal tourism economy. The continued squeeze on profitability derived from the scheme could *inhibit* innovation and reform of the Spanish tourism sector along more robust redistributive lines, in effect acting as a subsidy to weak hotel and destination business models. Arguably, the programme papers over the cracks in coastal tourism areas that have historically been the focus of speculative real estate-driven tourism development with a tendency towards over-supply, low productivity and job insecurity (Duro et al., 2021; García, 2010; Blanco-Romero, Blázquez-Salom, & Cànoves, 2018). This may avert the need for the Spanish regional and national administrations to address the systemic weaknesses highlighted in the contradictory dynamics of the real estate-based tourism political economy.

Our relational approach also contributes to knowledge on social tourism, examining a key European programme within the context recent socio-economic and political history to understand the complex dynamics involved in the operation of the scheme. Most research on social tourism has focused on the benefits derived to users, rather than the policy context or economic sustainability dimensions (Diekmann & McCabe, 2011; Cisneros-Martínez, McCabe, & Fernández Morales, 2018). It is apparent that within the Malaga region, the main stakeholders agree that the fundamentals of the scheme contribute to a more sustainable visitor economy as argued for in the literature (e.g., McCabe & Qiao, 2020), but that the financial pressures are placing severe stresses on the effective functioning of the system. These were evidenced by a retrenchment in engagement with the scheme, leading to a concentration of IMSESO activity in smaller resort areas with fewer participating hotels, which will inevitably lead to a smaller positive impact on destination sustainability in the long term.

Despite the recognition among stakeholders that the IMSESO scheme did enable the sector to bear the brunt of the worst effects of the financial crisis and Covid, the aftermath has concentrated concerns over the programmes' long-term sustainability. While the scheme continues to maintain employment and reduces social security payments for workers in the sector at a generalised level, the numbers of participating hotels is stagnating, and the spatial distribution of tourists is become further concentrated. Meanwhile, several regional hotel associations are increasingly pushing for decentralized programmes with the support of regional governments. Simultaneously, continued decreases in the level of state investment has reduced tourist spending in destinations and has failed to lift wages and living standards of tourism workers. The findings challenge the prevailing narrative concerning the economic benefits of social tourism schemes.

If the IMSESO social tourism programme is to overcome these dysfunctions and contradictions to become a viable and appropriate model of sustainable social innovation in tourism, then radical change needs to be made across a range of national and regional tourism governance and policy areas. Recent research has argued that social tourism offers a cost-effective solution to 'plug' the gaps created by mainstream tourism markets, particularly in highly seasonal destinations based on sun and sand tourism (Kakoudakis & McCabe, 2020). A re-examination of the roles of the public administration, tourism and other stakeholders could focus on how the scheme can be developed into more democratic, decentralized model of socialised tourism. This should be part of a coordinated tourism development policy and governance system. The recent alignment of the new Spanish Ministry of Social Rights, which has responsibility for IMSESO and explicitly refers to Agenda 2030 (and therefore, potential to engage with the Sustainable Development Goals, e.g., SDG8: "decent work") offers potential promise of transformation towards social justice, economic democratization and a more robust approach to sustainability in Spanish visitor economies. However, without structural reform there is a danger this once ground-breaking programme will continue to tread water as a highly politicised programme of subsidy that none of the major stakeholders can seriously change.

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## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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