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Advancing European Capital of Culture evaluation through social impact analysis: the case of SROI Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024

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The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) is the European Union's longest-standing cultural policy programme, yet its evaluation remains methodologically underdeveloped. Over 4 decades, evaluations have been characterised by recurring shortcomings: eclectic data gathering, limited comparability across host cities, underreporting of intangible outcomes and a persistent emphasis on economic indicators. Meta-evaluations have repeatedly called for methodological advancement, but substantive progress remains limited. This article proposes a social impact analysis process model as a conceptual backbone for ECoC evaluations. Rather than prescribing uniform indicators, it provides a seven-step analytical framework, from impact model through impact inquiry and impact measurement to evaluation and aggregation, that accommodates methodological pluralism while ensuring procedural coherence. It thereby offers a middle path between the standardisation sought by EU institutions and the contextual flexibility required by individual host cities and regions. The model is applied to the European Capital of Culture Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024, hosted across 23 municipalities in a rural alpine region, through the first Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis of an ECoC. A stakeholder-based impact model included eighteen affected groups, five of which were prioritised for mixed-methods measurement: project participants, the regional population, tourists, tourism businesses and the regional cultural scene. The partial SROI analysis yielded a ratio of 4.28 (sensitivity range: 2.94–7.02); around two thirds of the monetised value is attributable to stakeholder groups within the region. Given the partial scope, context-specific survey instruments, self-selected samples and the degrees of freedom in monetisation, the ratio should be read as an indication of magnitude rather than a precise measure. The case shows that the process model made the diversity of impacts visible and guided data collection, while monetisation represents only one possible form of valuing impacts. The article argues for procedural clarity, limited standardisation of impact objectives at EU and national levels, and continued methodological flexibility in study design, data collection, analysis and evaluation. The social impact analysis process model is

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proposed as a transferable framework that can strengthen the analytical quality of future evaluations of ECoCs and other large-scale cultural events and, through meta-analytical synthesis, improve their comparability.

KEYWORDS

cultural policy, European Capital of Culture, evaluation, social impact analysis, social return on investment

Introduction

The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) action is the European Union's longest-standing cultural policy programme. Over more than 4 decades, successive legal decisions and guidance have refined its objectives and the expectations for monitoring and evaluation. Formalised in 1985 (Council of the European Union, 1985) with the aim of European integration, the programme began as a celebration of a city's artistic and cultural offerings. Since the 1990s, the competition for the prestigious title has become closely associated with urban and regional regeneration processes (Bianchini et al., 2013), leveraging arts, culture and heritage as drivers of change for societal transformation. The promotion of "unity in diversity" through diverse cultural activities in cities and regions is central to the programme, as is an engagement with the European significance of their respective histories and cultural heritage. Since the early 2000s, citizen participation has received increased attention to foster social impact (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 1999; European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2006; Mittag, 2008).

The development of ECoC evaluations has closely aligned with trends in cultural sector evaluation, which has expanded from metrics of economic output towards broader notions of social impact. Consequently, the format provides an important platform for discussions about the appropriate role of measurement and the dangers of "numbers-driven" rationalities (Belfiore and Bennett, 2007). Decision 445/2014/EU currently applies to all ECoC evaluations between 2020 and 2033, under which the responsibility for evaluations lies with the respective cities (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2014). The evaluation environment combines a strong aspiration for accountability and learning at a European level with continuing flexibility for host cities and regions to design evaluation approaches that reflect their specific contexts. While this flexibility has supported innovation, it has also led to recurring shortcomings identified in meta-assessments: eclectic data gathering, limited comparability, underreporting of intangible outcomes and a continued emphasis on easily communicable economic indicators.

This contribution addresses these issues by proposing a structured social impact analysis process model to provide an analytical backbone for ECoC evaluations. Social impact analysis aims to assess the societal transformation generated by an intervention beyond the mere delivery of activities or outputs. It links inputs and activities to outputs, outcomes, and impacts, and makes counterfactual reasoning explicit. Empirically, this article focuses on the European Capital of Culture Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 (ECoC24A), hosted in a dispersed rural-regional context comprising 23 municipalities across two Austrian federal states.

Our paper proceeds as follows. The remainder of the introduction reviews how evaluations in the cultural sector, and of ECoCs in particular, have evolved, drawing on changes in the legal framework and on meta-assessments. The materials and methods section describes social impact analysis, including the suggested social impact analysis process model, and introduces the case of ECoC Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 and its evaluation, which operationalised the process model through a partial Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis. The results section presents two of the five prioritised stakeholder groups in depth, followed by the overall results. Finally, the discussion interprets the SROI results, reflects on the suitability of the process model, derives policy and practical implications and addresses the limitations, before drawing a conclusion.

Evolution of evaluation in the cultural sector

For decades, evaluation in the cultural sector focused almost exclusively on output metrics and economic impacts. Driven by the desire to legitimise public funding, this led to output indicators becoming the standard measure of value, based on figures for visitors, events, venues, artists, industry representation, and revenue. While an economic contribution is desirable, cultural offerings, as public goods, should not be viewed through the lens of traditional market logic alone, but rather from the perspective of their impact—that is, their contribution to society. With this self-assured approach, a branch of research has emerged over the past 2 decades that goes beyond traditional notions of evaluation (Belfiore and Bennett, 2007; 2010; Galloway, 2009; Ramsey White and Rentschler, 2005).

With growing interest in socio-cultural composition and the democratisation of aesthetic and cultural competencies (Keuchel and Werker, 2020; Schöggl et al., 2023), a subsystem of evaluation focusing on social impact rather than output-based or purely economic legitimacy has gained ground in the cultural sector over the past decade (Brown et al., 2015). Impact-oriented dimensions are being integrated, for example, into the evaluation of the Edinburgh Festival City, the museum sector, public libraries, and EU projects (BOP Consulting, 2011; NEMO, 2022; Schramme et al., 2024).

The paradigm shift from purely output-based legitimacy to broader social impact is clearly reflected in social impact research, which broadens the understanding of evaluation and modifies its political dimension in the cultural sector (Belfiore and Bennett, 2007; Brown et al., 2015; Galloway, 2009). Beyond providing evidence of effects on individuals, organisations, communities and societies,

Abbreviations: ECoC, European Capital of Culture; ECoC24A, European Capital of Culture Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024; SROI, Social Return on Investment.

linked to concepts such as democratic awareness, civic engagement, social cohesion and wellbeing (Colombo, 2016; Grünhaus and Rauscher, 2022), social impact analysis has the potential to positively stimulate dynamics within the cultural sector (Holden, 2023; Teissl et al., 2026). Cultural policy, cultural administration and cultural organisations are partners in achieving impact (Craik, 2007), yet operate at different levels, sometimes with different priorities and approaches. Public policy and funding programmes link them, whereby the intrinsic value of the arts and culture must be balanced against the instrumental motives of public funding (Ramsey White and Rentschler, 2005; Teissl et al., 2026).

From this perspective, social impact research serves as a kind of interface for the coexistence of both material and immaterial impacts. The question of which types of effects, e.g., social, cultural, political, economic, ecological and health, are analysed for which purpose, and which are communicated primarily, depends on the focus of the assessment. We will address this later in our social impact analysis process. Overall, the findings of impact analyses can provide an integrative understanding of the cultural sector within society and policy, thus strengthening cultural awareness (Schindler, 2012; Schindler-Friedrich, 2011), and can support the current effort to establish culture as the 18th Sustainable Development Goal by providing empirical evidence of the sector's importance (UNESCO, 2022; 2025).

These shifts in perspective have also diversified the methodological concepts in cultural sector evaluation. Although quantitative methods continue to dominate, the purpose of analysis has changed. Rather than solely seeking evidence of legitimacy, empirical data on impact are now considered to provide orientation and navigation (Belfiore and Bennett, 2007; 2010; Ramsey White and Rentschler, 2005). Belfiore and Bennett (2007), Belfiore and Bennett (2010) have repeatedly criticised the clash between a numbers-driven rationality and the values of the humanities on which the cultural sector is founded, and warn that public funding based on measured intangible impacts risks instrumentalisation and a convergence of cultural activities. Rather than attempting to rationalise findings on intangible impacts, scholars now recognise their potential to underpin the joint development of policies and offerings (Holden, 2004; Ramsey White and Rentschler, 2005; Teissl et al., 2026).

Consequently, the value of impact analysis lies in fostering a shared understanding of cultural policy and organisations. Incorporating the expertise of cultural professionals helps to overcome the dichotomy between intrinsic and instrumental thinking (Deplazes-Zemp, 2024; Newsinger and Green, 2016; Teissl et al., 2026). Transdisciplinary impact analysis reveals which relational values and forms of expertise are already in place, and which need to be developed and integrated further (Schöggl et al., 2023; Teissl et al., 2026), and can identify impacts previously overlooked or undervalued in policies (Papastergiadis, 2012; Teissl, 2025). Similarly, it is essential to consult stakeholders affected by the impact, beyond the audience, to develop an integrated perspective on cultural activities and the policy programme (Schöggl et al., 2025).

Development of ECoC evaluation

For more than 4 decades, the development of ECoC evaluations has been shaped by an interplay of legal decisions, guidelines and recommendations proposed by meta-evaluations, compilations of evaluations of two to three ECoCs per year (City of Chemnitz, 2025; Council of the European Union, 1985). Historically, there has been a progression from isolated, ad hoc approaches towards more theoretically grounded, mixed-methods-based, longitudinal inquiries. The addressees of ECoC evaluations are policymakers at various levels, the title cities themselves, and future ECoCs.

Decision 445/2014/EU, which applies to all ECoC evaluations between 2020 and 2033, provides a hierarchy of goals with two general objectives: "(a) to safeguard and promote the diversity of cultures in Europe and to highlight the common features they share as well as to increase citizens' sense of belonging to a common cultural area; (b) to foster the contribution of culture to the long-term development of cities in accordance with their respective strategies and priorities." Four specific objectives concern the range, diversity and European dimension of the cultural offering in cities, access to and participation in culture, the capacity of the cultural sector and its links with other sectors, and the international profile of cities (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2014). Cities and regions usually add aims of their own local cultural policies. Accordingly, the evaluations address a broad set of aims, ranging from cultural participation and access, image and branding, and economic effects, to governance and policy learning, impact on heritage and infrastructure, European added value and identity, wellbeing and social inclusion, and volunteer engagement (see also Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016; Garcia and Cox, 2013; Smith, 2012).

Often, a standardised set of indicators and/or methods is proposed (see, e.g., recommendation No. 24 of City of Chemnitz, 2025). However, the wide range of objectives makes this impractical on a reasonable scale. Nevertheless, evaluation projects run by local universities have developed "implicit" standards, such as the Impacts 08 research team for Liverpool 2008 (University of Liverpool, 2015), making baseline data, event-year data, audience surveys, interviews, focus groups, media analyses, administrative data integration and post-event follow-ups more or less a common benchmark for title cities. Currently, all evaluation projects use a mixed-methods approach, complemented by socio-economic indicators, input-output analyses, cost-benefit analyses, and network analyses.

Five core challenges recur in ECoC evaluations. First, one-size-fits-all indicators risk misinterpretation across diverse urban and regional contexts. A cross-city synthesis instead requires typologies and case clusters that take different governance models, city scales and national policy into account. Second, intangible impact dimensions such as identity formation, civic pride, cultural rights and policy learning are inherently difficult to quantify and cannot be fully captured by indicator dashboards, making mixed-methods designs with sufficient qualitative depth essential. Third, the benefits of ECoC projects often concentrate in central districts and flagship institutions. This increases the risk of gentrification and peripheral exclusion, a spread of effects average indicators often hide. Fourth, short evaluation windows underestimate social and institutional legacies, not least because the organising units are usually closed down shortly after the title year. Fifth, there is still an overemphasis on economic effects: political incentives and media coverage favour headline-ready figures such as GDP growth, jobs created and tourist numbers, which cannot capture intangible dimensions (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016; Garcia and Cox, 2013; Liu, 2014).

Looking at the three relevant ex-post meta-evaluations in 2004 (Palmer-Rae Associates, 2004), 2013 (Garcia and Cox, 2013) and 2021 (European Commission, 2021), the first interim report in 2025, and the 40 recommendations of Chemnitz2025 (City of Chemnitz, 2025), we observe a remarkable continuity in asking for further development in method and methodology. Palmer-Rae Associates (2004) identified a laissez-faire approach to evaluative practices with significant variation in quality, and argued for adequate planning resources, clear objectives, monitoring criteria, independent professionals and a willingness to learn. Garcia and Cox, writing for the European Parliament (2013), argued that evidence regarding cultural vibrancy, image, and the economy is easier to assess than the social, physical, and political dimensions because "appropriate methodologies for capture are also more complex" (2013, p. 196), and called for a "more robust and objective data collection mechanism, with clearer specifications as to what [. . .] and, importantly, how this should be collated and subsequently presented" (Garcia and Cox, 2013, p. 196). This is consistent with the guidelines and indicators for the ECoC's own evaluation, relevant for all ECoCs from 2020 to 2033 (European Commission, 2018 demanded for in Decision 445/2014/EU, Article 16, of the European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2014).

With Decision 445, it became obligatory for ECoCs to develop their own evaluation frameworks, while the Commission's guidelines provide guidance on what to strive for in detail. Previously, according to Decision 1622/2006/EC (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2006), every ECoC between 2007 and 2019 had to undergo an independent, external ex-post evaluation the year after its title year. The new guidelines introduce a hierarchy of objectives (see above) with a set of recommended indicators at each level, require cities' own evaluations to adhere to the SMART principle (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound), and list possible sources. Although some of these are qualitative by nature, datasets for core indicators "are intended to capture their essence whenever possible in a quantified form" (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2014, p. 6). Thus, the new regulation opened up space for more experimental approaches and at the same time restricted it.

In 2021, the European Commission published a compilation of recommendations resulting from ex-post evaluations of the ECoCs from 2007 to 2019, which shows how little has changed. It describes the evidence on the impact of ECoCs as still relatively limited and the data on attendance, visitor spend, satisfaction and wider economic impacts as partial at best, and urges future ECoCs to generate impact data, including "big data" on their cultural programmes, in order to evidence the achievement of their objectives, to understand the real difference the ECoC has made and to articulate to a wider audience the power that culture can have on a city (European Commission, 2021).

It further recommends investing in gathering baseline data early on and reinforcing monitoring and reporting through annual implementation plans and milestones. The situation in 2025 is not profoundly different. The staff document accompanying the first interim evaluation states that the limits of the available data make it difficult to measure and aggregate the tangible impact of the ECoCs, as each uses a different set of data, and suggests that the Commission could provide cities with clear, measurable, qualitative and quantitative targets and indicators, for instance through a handbook, in order to obtain "comprehensive, coherent and comparable data", particularly for criteria that cities struggle to grasp, such as long-term impact and EU added value. It also notes that the Action places great focus on its legacy, yet no monitoring framework is in place for it (European Commission, 2025, 36f). The strategy thus appears to be a "refinement" of metrics in support of the already established aim of evaluative data generation, in line with recommendations No. 9, 10 and 24 of the Chemnitz White Paper (City of Chemnitz, 2025).

These reports reveal a remarkable continuity in diagnosis: eclectic data gathering and a lack of comprehensiveness and comparability that has persisted for decades and that EU institutions view as an ongoing disappointment. The suggested remedy is better metrics within a more standardised framework. Yet these shortcomings arose even while evaluations focused largely on outputs and indirect economic returns. As research has increasingly shifted towards social impact analysis over the past decade, including more stakeholders and intangible effects, complexity has grown further, making comprehensiveness and comparability even harder to achieve through metrics alone. The social impact analysis process model proposed in the following therefore seeks to establish both through a standardised process rather than uniform metrics. To date, no ECoC project has broadly mapped its impact on key stakeholders using such an approach. This contribution addresses this gap by presenting and critically discussing the process model as a promising approach for capturing and demonstrating the social impact of ECoC projects.

Materials and methods

Social impact analysis and SROI

Social impact analysis aims to assess the societal changes generated by an intervention beyond the mere delivery of activities or outputs, by identifying, measuring and evaluating changes experienced by individuals, organisations or society as a whole, as a result of a given set of actions. Social Return on Investment (SROI) constitutes a distinctive form of social impact analysis that, grounded in a stakeholder-based impact model, systematically measures and monetises the broader social value generated by a given intervention within society (Rauscher and Grünhaus, 2026; Then et al., 2017). Both differ significantly from other evaluation domains, such as need, theory and design, implementation and costs (Rossi et al., 2018). While a social impact analysis judges whether a programme is effective and an SROI assesses whether it is good value for money, neither evaluates whether a programme is warranted, well-conceived or well delivered.

Expanding on traditional cost-benefit analysis to encompass broader societal impacts, the methodology captures economic, social and environmental value within a single framework (Cordes, 2017), building on Emerson's (2003) concept of "blended value", the idea that true value comprises economic, social and environmental components. Within the broader field of social impact measurement, which also incorporates methods such as logic

models, randomised controlled trials and theory-based evaluation approaches (Arvidson and Lyon, 2014), SROI distinguishes itself through its emphasis on stakeholder participation and the monetisation of outcomes that typically lack market value, such as improved wellbeing, social cohesion and enhanced self-esteem (Maier et al., 2015; Nicholls, 2017). The field has professionalised and expanded rapidly, accompanied by a persistence of conceptual and technical ambiguity in valuation and impact claims (Corvo et al., 2022; Gutiérrez-Nieto et al., 2025).

SROI has been applied to diverse fields including public health (Banke-Thomas et al., 2015), physical activity and sport (Gosselin et al., 2020), mental health interventions (Kadel et al., 2022), cultural heritage and tourism (Ariza-Montes et al., 2021), and the cultural sector. Reported values in the cultural sector include £0.67 to £4.40 per £1 invested for sub-programme items of Coventry UK City of Culture 2021 (MB Associates, 2023) and 1.84 for a public lighting project in US cities (Refki et al., 2020), through 2.97 for the Bradford Literature Festival 2017 (Goodspeed, 2018) and 3.41 for the Luxor Theatre Institute in Rotterdam (Moschatos, 2023), to 4.66 for an exhibition at the Auckland Museum (Allpress et al., 2014) and between 2.88 and 5.15 for the Turner Contemporary Arts Gallery in Margate (UK) (Jackson and McManus, 2019).

Conceptually, social impact analysis builds on the logic of the impact value chain or theory of change (Weiss, 1995), linking inputs and activities to outputs, outcomes and impact. While outputs refer to directly delivered services or products, impacts capture the net changes attributable to an intervention, taking into account what would have occurred in its absence. Thus, social impact analysis explicitly addresses counterfactual reasoning (Morgan and Winship, 2014), which is essential for distinguishing gross outcomes from net impact in SROI analyses (Nicholls et al., 2012). Four adjustments are commonly applied. Deadweight denotes the share of an outcome that would also have occurred in an alternative scenario without the intervention. Attribution denotes the share of an outcome that is due to other actors or interventions. Displacement captures outcomes that merely shift activity or benefit from one place or group to another. Drop-off describes the decline of an outcome over time when impacts are counted for more than 1 year.

Social impact analysis constitutes an analytical framework rather than a single method, providing a structured logic that can be operationalised through different conceptual frameworks (e.g., IOOI, Logframe, SROI), research designs, data sources and valuation approaches. A defining characteristic of a broad impact analysis is its broader stakeholder orientation. Rather than focusing exclusively on intended beneficiaries, it considers multiple stakeholder groups that may be positively or negatively affected, including indirect or unintended effects (Arvidson et al., 2013) and so-called secondary stakeholders (Parmar et al., 2010) or impact-affected groups (Grünhaus and Rauscher, 2022). The aim is to locate the effects of an intervention broadly within society. SROI analysis is such a "broad form of social impact analysis".

Despite the diversity of approaches labelled as impact analysis, a common stepwise logic can be identified, comprising the core steps from impact model to study design, evaluation and representation. A robust social impact analysis typically follows seven analytical steps (Grünhaus and Rauscher, 2022; Then et al., 2017), as illustrated in Figure 1. In this social impact analysis process model, steps 1–3 and 7 must be completed, otherwise the analytical background is lacking, and the analysis appears pointless without any presentation of results. The remaining steps are optional and are performed depending on the purpose and depth of the analysis. Thus, prior to the steps of the impact analysis, the purpose of the analysis must be clarified, as this influences its scope.

The first step in the impact analysis process is to reflect on and present the underlying impact logic or theory of change of the intervention to gain an initial understanding. The second step is to identify the relevant stakeholders and impact-affected parties, encompassing all groups that may experience effects from the intervention. The third step is to develop a hypothetical impact model, specifying the causal pathways between activities and the expected changes for each group. This model constitutes the conceptual centre of the analysis and provides the basis for subsequent empirical work.

The fourth step is the first optional one and comprises a prioritisation of elements of the impact model, often necessary when the focus is on specific impact objectives. Step 5 comprises impact inquiry and impact measurement, from study design and data collection to data analysis. Impact inquiry, typically qualitative, examines the occurrence and nature of anticipated and unanticipated impacts (5a), while measurement quantifies their breadth, i.e., what share of a stakeholder group is affected, and intensity, i.e., how strong the changes are, drawing on primary, administrative or secondary quantitative data (5b). Sixth, the impacts are assessed or evaluated, which can range from qualitative assessments to scoring models or monetary valuation. Finally, in step seven, the impacts are aggregated and presented in a form suitable for interpretation, comparison and communication.

Crucially, these steps are analytically distinct. Modelling does not include empirical work, measurement does not imply evaluation, and evaluation does not necessarily require monetisation. The chosen form of representation should align with the purpose of the analysis. In an SROI analysis, all steps of the process model are systematically addressed and combined into an integrated analytical process. Stakeholder identification and impact model development are conducted more comprehensively, often resulting in multiple parallel impact chains that reflect the complexity of the intervention (Then et al., 2017), and the empirical verification and measurement focus on both intended and unintended outcomes, with the adjustments described above ensuring that only net impacts are included (Nicholls et al., 2012).

A distinctive feature of SROI lies in the sixth step, where evaluation is operationalised through monetisation. Non-financial outcomes, such as wellbeing, social inclusion or cultural participation, are assigned monetary values using financial proxies derived from, for example, market price differences, avoided costs or stated preference methods. This allows heterogeneous impacts to be aggregated and related to total investment: an SROI value of 5 would mean that the monetised value of the impacts corresponds to €5 for every €1 invested. However, step 6 also entails a specific limitation of SROI analysis, the increased degrees of freedom in monetisation. Although there is a common set of monetisation methods, there is barely any standardisation, as this could never cover the specific context of each case, which makes it difficult to robustly monetise intangible social outcomes (Gargani, 2017; Maier et al., 2015). This can be mitigated by following the quality characteristics of SROI

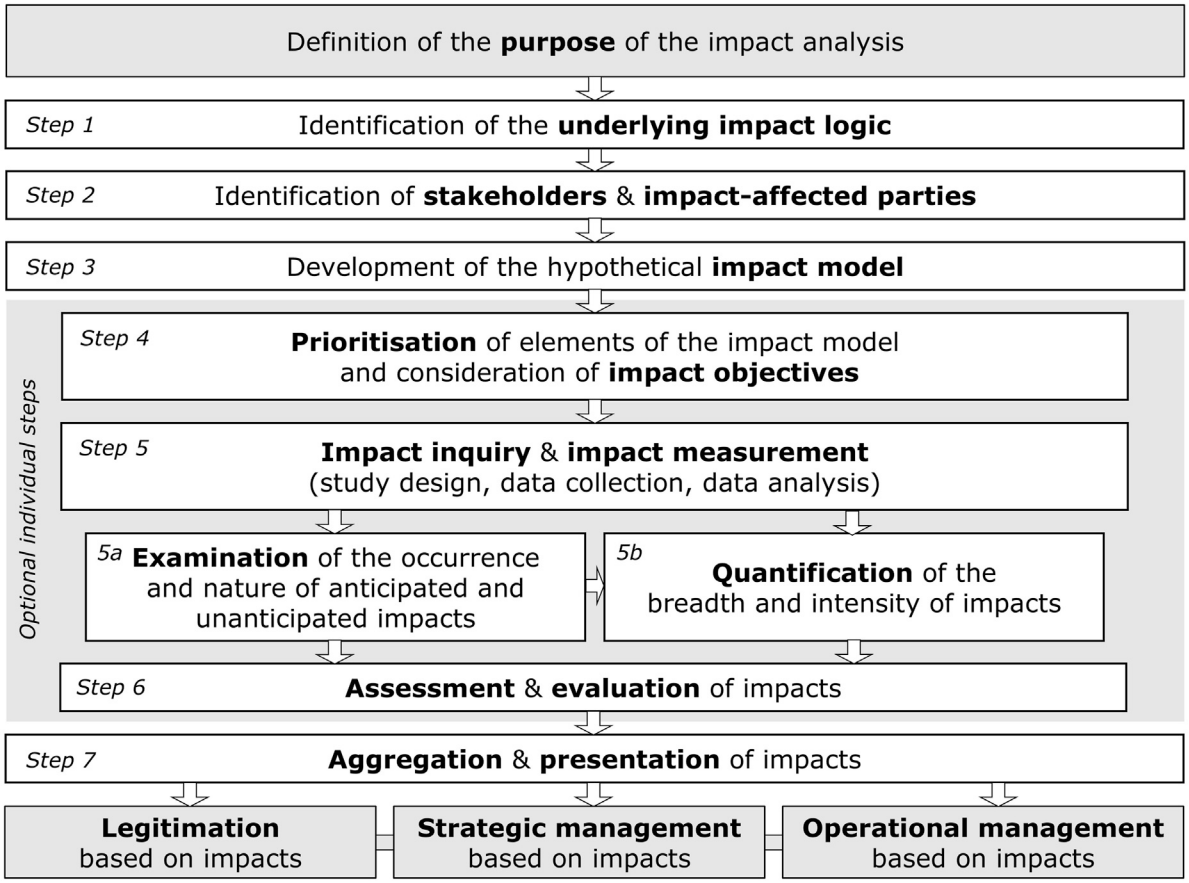

FIGURE 1
Social impact analysis process model, adapted in content and design from Then et al. (2017), p. 387.

analyses described by Maier et al. (2015): process transparency, especially of valuation procedures, appropriateness of methods, empirical grounding of impact value chains, explicit recognition of limitations and reflective interpretation.

In summary, the SROI value is the result of an analytical process that first builds up contextual and empirical complexity, then condenses it into an aggregated indicator. Although this can be communicated easily, it involves comprehensive prior analysis and evaluation. SROI is thus a specific conceptual application of the social impact analysis logic, applying all analytical steps of the process model, focusing on quantification and employing monetisation as its evaluation strategy. However, this is only one possible configuration of the process model. An alternative approach would be a purely qualitative analysis resulting in a democratic evaluation by stakeholders and a graphical representation. Thus, the social impact analysis process model, with an impact model as a conceptual starting point, provides a robust framework that can be applied across different methodological traditions and settings.

The case of Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024

In 2019, Bad Ischl-Salzkammergut won the Austrian bidding process for the 2024 title. The selection committee (European Commission, 2019) justified its decision with the region's pioneering role not only for the Austrian arts and culture context, but also for the entire ECoC programme. The pioneering potential was derived from the bid's regional and rural identity. While the ECoC programme was initially associated with large-scale capital cities and later reconceptualised as a regenerative tool for medium-sized cities (Garcia and Cox, 2013), recent hosts have extended it to urban hinterlands and wider metropolitan regions (Rudolf et al., 2023), beginning with Essen for the Ruhr 2010 (Parr, 2012).

Building on this regional perspective, Bad Ischl-Salzkammergut added the "rural" to the conceptualisation of the event. The project involved 23 municipalities, ranging from Bad Ischl as the largest city with 14,000 inhabitants to villages with as few as 750, and positioned the region as a model for the contemporary challenges of European rural environments, thereby expanding the understanding of who can be an ECoC and what influence culture can have in a rural regional context.

An independent company founded in 2020 prepared and delivered the event. While key individuals from the bidding process carried the bid's ethos forward, a change of artistic director in 2022 had a major impact on the final delivery. Informed, but not bound, by the ambitions outlined in the bidding documents, ECoC24A positioned the alpine region

"between a laboratory and future space" (Kulturhauptstadt Bad Ischl Salzkammergut, 2024, para. 2), delivering an artistic programme of 314 projects across the year.

Guided by the slogan "Culture is the new Salt", referring to the centuries-long importance of salt production in the region, four programme lines captured the innovation that the original bid envisioned. "Power and Tradition" referred to cultures of remembrance and power relations. "Culture in Motion" introduced culture as a resource and a process of continuous meaning production. "Sharing Salzkammergut" represented the "art of travelling" in a region with partial overtourism. "Globalocal" promoted the idea of learning from rural regions, the region as a microcosm of Europe.

The legacy organisation "Aufbruch Salzkammergut!", founded at the close of the ECoC, aims to connect municipalities, organisations and people in the region and to leverage arts, culture and creative industries for regional development.

Methodological approach of SROI ECoC24A

The evaluation of the ECoC Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 was designed as an SROI analysis. Since the size and complexity of an ECoC, with thousands of individuals and organisations involved in numerous projects, with hundreds of impacts, exceeds the typical scope of full SROIs, a partial SROI was carried out. This means that not all stakeholders and impacts were included in the data collection and calculation, but were prioritised once the hypothetical impact model had been developed.

Four years prior to the ECoC year, there were already plans to carry out a broad impact analysis. Therefore, workshops were conducted with a broad and diverse range of participants from the region, aiming to identify the basic impact logic (step 1 in Figure 1), the stakeholders and impact-affected parties (step 2), and their hypothetical impacts (step 3). This resulting draft of a hypothetical impact model formed the basis of the subsequent evaluation project, which began the year before the ECoC took place. However, neither the draft nor the impact objectives included therein influenced the programme design or operations of the ECoC.

At the start of the evaluation phase, the draft hypothetical impact model was refined collaboratively by researchers and representatives of the Capital of Culture, and updated to reflect prior developments. Five stakeholders and impact-affected parties were then prioritised (step 4) for inclusion in the SROI calculations and subsequent data collection, as they were deemed the most relevant and expected to receive the most benefit: 1) the project participants, i.e., all individuals and organisations involved in the ECoC, including artists, 2) the regional population, including both ECoC visitors and non-visitors, 3) the regional cultural scene composed of all sectors (folklore, state-run and independent), 4) tourists, both day tourists and those with overnight stays, and 5) tourism businesses of varying sizes, from large hotels to small private accommodations. Thirteen other groups were excluded, with only their hypothetical impacts being presented in the final report in the form of an impact map (Schöggl et al., 2025). Table 1 lists all stakeholders and impact-affected groups and whether they were included. Subsequently, the hypothetical impacts of the five included stakeholders were ranked by priority.

TABLE 1 Identified stakeholders and their inclusion in the SROI.

Stakeholder	Inclusion in SROI
Project participants	Included
Regional population	Included
Regional cultural scene	Included
Tourists	Included
Tourism businesses	Included
European Union	Excluded
Tourism associations	Excluded
Environment/nature	Excluded
State politics	Excluded
General population in Austria	Excluded
Businesses/Chamber of commerce	Excluded
Federal government (federal politics)	Excluded
Educational institutions	Excluded
Sponsors	Excluded
Local politics	Excluded
ECoC family	Excluded
Public employment service, social insurance	Excluded
Project team	Excluded

Impact inquiry and impact measurement (step 5) followed a mixed-methods approach with a predominantly quantitative study design. The qualitative part (step 5a) comprised interviews, open discussion rounds and open text fields in surveys. It was not intended to produce findings in its own right, but to create a deeper understanding of the context and to check the plausibility of the hypothesised impacts. Quotations from the surveys and from a fishbowl discussion with approximately 60 diverse attendees, held in Bad Ischl at the end of the title year, are reproduced below in translation from German.

The empirical focus was on collecting the quantitative data necessary for quantification (step 5b) for the SROI calculations. Table 2 shows the quantitative survey instruments used to collect primary data, dates of implementation as well as sample size and response rate, where applicable. Additionally, wherever feasible, secondary data were used, be it internal data of ECoC24A or data from prior publications, a common practice in SROI analyses for both the quantification and the monetisation of impacts (Nicholls et al., 2012; Then et al., 2017).

The analysis of the survey data was descriptive throughout. The SROI calculations require point estimates of the breadth of an impact, i.e., the share of a stakeholder group affected, and of its intensity, for which mean values were expressed as a percentage of the maximum possible score (POMP) (Cohen et al., 1999). All quantification and monetisation steps, including the sources of all financial proxies, are documented in the final evaluation report (Schöggl et al., 2025).

The six survey instruments used to collect primary quantitative data had a combined sample size of n = 985. The project organiser

TABLE 2 Survey instruments used in SROI ECoC24A

Survey instrument	Date	Sample size (response rate)
Project organiser survey	02/2024-01/2025	n = 186 (94%)
Visitor survey	03/2024-02/2025	n = 267 (–)
Street survey	05/2024	n = 133 (–)
Tourism businesses survey	04/2025	n = 248 (21%)
Regional cultural scene survey	06/2025	n = 134 (27%)
Infrastructure survey	06/2025-10/2025	n = 17 (81%)

survey and the tourism businesses survey merit further description, as they were the primary data sources of the two stakeholders presented below. Apart from these two surveys, data from other survey instruments and secondary data were used for the quantification of certain impacts of these stakeholders.

The project organiser survey formed a central part of the primary data collection process, containing administrative questions and questions relating to the impact evaluation. It had to be completed for every project by the respective project organiser after the project had concluded, and thus formed part of project reporting. The aim was to obtain information about the projects themselves and to quantify the impact of the project participants. It included nominal scale items, items to be rated on a five-point Likert scale (e.g., 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree") and open text fields. With a sample of n = 186, a response rate of 94% was achieved.

A short survey was distributed to tourism businesses in the ECoC24A region to collect quantitative data on the perceived benefits. To maximise the response rate, it comprised only eleven key questions, alongside items characterising the businesses, with most responses recorded on a scale from 0 ("not at all") to 10 ("very strongly"). The survey was sent to 1,150 businesses, yielding 248 valid responses and a response rate of just over 21%. Representativeness by business size was assessed using secondary data on the distribution of accommodation types in the region; deviations were deemed acceptable, indicating the sample was sufficiently representative.

Distinguishing gross outcomes from net impacts required the counterfactual adjustments described above (deadweight, attribution, displacement and drop-off). Deadweight was estimated for every monetised impact, and attribution was subsumed within these deadweight estimates rather than modelled separately, a common simplification in many SROI analyses. Displacement was not calculated as a distinct adjustment for each impact for reasons of complexity, although several negative impacts included in the model, such as funding gaps for cultural activities outside the ECoC, capture displacement-type effects. Impacts were counted for 1 year unless the primary data indicated that they persisted. In that case, an annual drop-off was applied whose cumulative value corresponds to 2.5 times the first-year impact. A sensitivity analysis examined this assumption by restricting all impacts to 1 year.

Results

Results of two main stakeholder groups

This article presents only a subset of the SROI calculations due to space constraints and the article's objectives. Full details are available in the final evaluation report (Schöggl et al., 2025). The brief overview given here demonstrates the process model using the example of SROI ECoC24A as a basis for the subsequent discussion. Two stakeholders are highlighted: project participants, selected due to their central role in delivering the ECoC programme, and tourism businesses, whose inclusion illustrates how traditional economic indicators, such as tourism profits, are integrated into SROI analysis and complemented by further social impacts.

Project participants

Based on the hypothetical impact model, data collection on project participants revealed a variety of impacts, starting with strengthened visibility and the valuable opportunity to experiment with and explore new ideas, enabling the development of artistic skills. This carte blanche for creativity was supported by practical benefits, including a more stable and higher income during the ECoC year. Cooperation within and beyond the cultural sector was fostered, with some projects continuing beyond the ECoC year, leading to a strengthened network and increased awareness of the Salzkammergut among project partners from outside the region.

Participants also benefited from increased professionalisation across project development, implementation and marketing, integrated a stronger European dimension into their work, and reported increased appreciation by the regional population and heightened awareness of ecological issues. Despite these benefits, the intensity of the project resulted in feelings of exhaustion. Nevertheless, participants reached diverse target groups, including marginalised and younger audiences, and developed their content through critical themes such as colonisation and the culture of remembrance.

Table 3 documents the SROI calculation for the project participants' three most substantial positive impacts and their negative impact, setting out for each the approaches to quantification of breadth and intensity (step 5b) and monetisation (step 6) and the deadweight applied. To further illustrate the process, the calculation of the largest impact, strengthened visibility, is described in more detail below.

The project participants' biggest impact, strengthened visibility, was quantified at project level through the project organiser survey results, in which respondents were asked to what extent, on a scale of one to five, they felt that ECoC24A had increased their visibility at regional, national, and international level; own projects of the ECoC were excluded in order to prevent distortions. Internationally, 70.0% of respondents felt at least somewhat more visible (selecting a score of two or higher), with an average intensity of 66.4%. Data on regional and national visibility were combined, resulting in a

TABLE 3 Quantification and monetisation of the three most substantial positive impacts and the negative impact of the project participants; own representation based on Schöggl et al. (2025).

Outcome	Quantification indicator	Quantified impact	Monetisation indicator	Monetised impact
Strengthened visibility	Project participants that felt more visible (share and intensity)	International: 70.0% (intensity: 66.4%)/ national & regional: 91.0% (intensity: 72.0%)	Advertising value of international and national news reports	**€11,618,731** (after deduction of 10% deadweight)
Opportunity to experiment and explore new ideas	Artists that benefited from an opportunity to experiment and explore new ideas (share and intensity)	77.1% (intensity: 70.8%)	Innovation Voucher by the Austrian research promotion Agency (FFG) as financial value of experimental and innovative work	**€6,979,815** (after deduction of 10% deadweight)
More stable and higher incomes in the ECoC year	Artists that benefited from higher income (fair pay gap) or more stable income (Austrian cultural workers with unstable income)	Higher income: 21.0%/ more stable income: 54.6%	Project personnel costs	**€5,169,986** (deadweight already included in the calculation)
Feeling of exhaustion (negative impact)	Project participants that suffered from exhaustion (share and intensity)	83.0% (intensity: 62.9%)	Compensating income variation (CIV) for moderate exhaustion	- **€2,783,367** (after deduction of 85% deadweight)
Sum of other impacts				€10,061,408
Total social added value of project participants				**€31,046,573**

Bold values indicate the monetised value of each impact presented individually and the total social added value of the stakeholder project participants, which also includes the sum of other impacts.

breadth of 91.0% and an average intensity of 72.0%, which shows that strengthened national visibility was perceived by more project participants, and more intensely, than increased international visibility.

Monetisation was conducted using a revealed preference approach, which is common practice in SROI valuations (Then et al., 2017). The advertising value of ECoC24A (APA-Comm, 2024) was used as the monetisation proxy, split between the international and national level, the latter including regional reporting. News reports were assigned a monetary value based on the cost of comparable-sized news advertisements, which rests on the assumption that a news report increases visibility to the same extent as an advertisement in a news medium. Since the reporting addressed the Capital of Culture as an institution and framework as well as individual projects, the conservative assumption was made that around a quarter of it could be attributed to specific projects and artists. The advertising value was reduced by 75% and divided by the total number of project participants, resulting in a monetisation proxy corresponding to the outcome at full intensity per participant. Applying this proxy to the number of project participants who experienced the impact, adjusted by its intensity, and deducting a deadweight of 10%, derived from the share of project organisers who stated that their project would have been realised in its entirety or in a similar form even without the ECoC, yields a monetary impact value of €11,618,731.

That the reporting reached individual projects is also reflected in the open answers of the project organiser survey, where one respondent noted that the exhibition in question "was covered by [two national daily newspapers] as well as by [the local newspaper]". Visibility was frequently described as closely linked to networking, as a representative of a regional association put it in the fishbowl discussion: "For us, as a small and well-connected association in the region, it was a chance to network further and to become even more visible."

Tourism businesses

Data collection on tourism businesses based on the hypothetical impact model highlighted a wide range of impacts. The most significant was the generation of additional income, resulting from an increased number of guests throughout the year. Beyond direct financial gains, the project contributed to the region's tourism expanding in a more sustainable and balanced way. The prestigious title served as a valuable marketing tool, enabling businesses to refine their branding and to offer guests something unique, in addition to the standard regional attractions, and it attracted a more diverse range of guests, particularly those interested in art and culture.

Organisational benefits included increased intercultural competence among staff and management, and stronger interconnections with the local and regional cultural sectors. Furthermore, the Capital of Culture's thematic focus on sustainability partly acted as a catalyst for ecological awareness within individual businesses. However, the influx of visitors also presented challenges, with some businesses

TABLE 4 Quantification and monetisation of the three most substantial positive impacts and the negative impact of tourism businesses; own representation based on Schöggl et al. (2025).

Outcome	Quantification indicator	Quantified impact	Monetisation indicator	Monetised impact
Additional income due to increased number of guests	Number of additional overnight stays and day visitors compared to the previous year	Additional overnight stays: 119,244 Additional day visitors: 560,000	Expenditure per additional overnight stay and expenditure per additional day visitor	**€14,126,285** after deduction of deadweight: 55% (overnight stays), 86% (day visitors)
Sustainable and balanced expansion of tourism	Number of additional future overnight stays by guests who will return to the region because of their experiences during ECoC24A	40,474 (34% of additional guests)	Expenditure per additional future overnight stay	**€3,692,048** after deduction of 55% deadweight
Diversified guest composition, more arts and culture tourists	Increased number of overnight stays by cultural tourists, short-term (during ECoC24A) and medium-term (through positioning)	Short-term: 20,497 (17% of additional guests were cultural tourists), medium-term: 18,808 (46.2% of businesses now more positioned towards culture, intensity: 37.2%)	Additional expenditure by cultural tourists per overnight stay compared to non-cultural tourists	€**825,974** after deduction of 55% deadweight
Overwhelmed by the number and type of tourists (negative impact)	Tourism businesses that were burdened by ECoC24A guests (share and intensity)	26.9% (intensity: 29.8%)	Costs of stress-related staff turnover (weighted by size factor)	- **€827,800** after deduction of 55% deadweight
Sum of other impacts				€617,785
Total social added value of tourism businesses				**€18,434,292**

Bold values indicate the monetised value of each impact presented individually and the total social added value of the stakeholder tourism businesses, which also includes the sum of other impacts.

feeling overwhelmed by the number and type of tourists during the ECoC year.

Table 4 shows the quantification (step 5b) and monetisation (step 6) of tourism businesses' three most substantial positive impacts and their negative impact, following the structure of Table 3. The reasoning behind the calculation of the biggest impact, additional income due to an increased number of guests, is described below.

The largest impact on tourism businesses is the additional income generated by an increased number of guests, comprising income from overnight stays and day tourists. To quantify the additional overnight stays, the number of overnight stays in the ECoC region during the title year was compared with the previous year. The same approach was taken for day tourists, using anonymised mobile phone data for the banner city of Bad Ischl (Schöggl et al., 2025). Monetisation was achieved by multiplying the additional overnight stays by the average tourism expenditure per overnight stay in Austria (BMWET, 2025), and multiplying the number of additional day tourists by the average expenditure per day tourist in Upper Austria (T.A.I., 2018). A substantial deadweight was deducted from both components, as tourism in the region would have increased even without the ECoC title: 55% for overnight stays, corresponding to the increase in the rest of Austria (Statistics Austria, 2025), and 86% for day visitors, derived from the percentage increase in arrivals to Vienna in 2024 (Statistics Austria, 2025), which provides a conservative estimate given its strong tourism growth.

The additional guests and their changed composition were also reported qualitatively. A long-standing resident of Bad Ischl described it in the fishbowl discussion as follows: "I have never seen so many people, with the exception of 1980 [. . .]. It has been the best tourism year in modern times. And the people were dressed completely differently [. . .]. It really was an entirely different audience." A tourist guide pointed to the mechanism behind additional stays in a region already at capacity in high season: "We have just over 2,000 guest beds in Ischl. You cannot fill more than that in August anyway. [. . .] But it is the extension of the whole season."

Overall SROI results

Table 5 shows the monetised social added value of ECoC24A, aggregated across the five included stakeholder groups and grounded in micro- and meso-level data. Together, they benefit from impacts equivalent to €129,689,185. The biggest share falls to the regional population, with €42,143,596 or 33% of the total added value, followed by the project participants (€31,046,573, 24%) and the tourists (€28,632,895, 22%). Impacts on tourism businesses amount to €18,434,292 (14%), and those on the regional cultural scene to €9,431,830 (7%). Relating this to the total investment in ECoC24A of €30.3 million yields a partial SROI value of 4.28, i.e., the monetised social value attributed to the five stakeholder groups corresponds to €4.28 per euro invested. Given that ECoC24A was evaluated only partially and took place in a culturally and

TABLE 5 Investment and monetised added value of the ECoC Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 – overall view (Schöggl et al., 2025).

Stakeholder	Impacts	Share of total added value	
Regional population	e.g., Discourse creation & strengthened sense of regional community, Awakened and increased interest in arts and culture, increased entertainment and enjoyment	€42,143,596	33%
Project participants	e.g., Strengthened visibility, opportunity to experiment and explore new ideas, more stable and higher income	€31,046,573	24%
Tourists	e.g., Strengthened awareness of European values, Awakened and increased interest in arts and culture, increased knowledge	€28,632,895	22%
Tourism businesses	e.g., Additional income due to increased number of guests, sustainable and balanced expansion of tourism, diversified guest composition through more arts and culture tourists	€18,434,292	14%
Regional cultural scene	e.g., Infrastructure for arts and culture developed further, increased artistic and cultural diversity, better visibility of the region's cultural diversity	€9,431,830	7%
SROI	Total investments: €30,298,713	**Added value: €129,689,185**	**4.28**

Bold values indicate the total monetised added value across the five stakeholder groups and the resulting partial SROI value.

touristically mature region, where added value is harder to generate, the ratio should be interpreted as an indication of considerable magnitude rather than as a precise measure.

To examine the robustness of the results, a sensitivity analysis was conducted by calculating two scenarios that adjust key levers of the calculations and thereby establish a credible range for the partial SROI value. A minimum scenario served as a highly conservative lower bound: it reduces the attribution of advertising value for project participants to 5% (down from 25%), assumes no impacts beyond 1 year, increases the deadweight for tourism businesses and assumes a lower unique visitor count. Under these conditions, the total monetised impact falls to €89.19 million, resulting in a partial SROI of 2.94, which remains above the break-even threshold of 1.0. An optimistic scenario increases the attribution of advertising value to 33%, halves the negative impacts on the regional population, adjusts unique visitor numbers upward, and decreases tourism deadweight, yielding a total monetised impact of €212.71 million and a partial SROI of 7.02. The width of this range also reflects the degrees of freedom involved in the underlying assumptions.

Discussion

The European Capital of Culture Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 commissioned the first Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis of an ECoC, examining a more holistic picture of its impacts. This decision reflects broader international policy developments, notably the 2022 MONDIACULT Declaration (UNESCO, 2022), which reaffirms culture as a public good and calls for stronger stakeholder engagement and more integrated ways of measuring culture's contribution to sustainable development, as well as the general trend towards social impact analysis in the cultural sector and in ECoCs in particular.

We first interpret the SROI results of ECoC24A in the context of the cultural sector and then reflect on the suitability of the underlying social impact analysis process model. This forms the basis for the subsequent policy and practical implications.

Interpreting the SROI results of ECoC24A

The partial SROI analysis of ECoC24A produced a value of 4.28 (range: 2.94–7.02). As this was the first SROI analysis for an ECoC, direct comparisons are unavailable and the value must be considered on its own merits. The regional population derived the greatest share of added value, followed by project participants (some of whom also belong to the regional population) and tourists. Overall, around two thirds of the monetised social value is attributable to stakeholder groups within the region, in line with the EU's objectives for ECoCs outlined above, which postulate the further development of the designated city or region.

Compared to other SROI results in the cultural sector, the ratio of 1:4.28 fits well within the broader range of previous studies. One might expect a higher value for an event of an ECoC's scale; however, the ratio reflects only a partial SROI value. Furthermore, the Salzkammergut is a region with a strong identity, a pronounced tourism orientation, and an extensive cultural offering, which makes it more difficult to generate additional value while avoiding resistance when established cultural perspectives are challenged.

Reflecting on the evaluation and the social impact analysis process model

Reflecting on the approach of SROI analysis in general, we argue for the suitability of the social impact analysis process model for ECoC evaluation, as it offered sufficient flexibility in terms of data collection and assessment while maintaining procedural clarity. The analysis' primary objective was to achieve external legitimation through holistic consideration of social impacts, and the evaluation therefore focused explicitly on a broad assessment of social added value. In contrast, the appraisal of the scope and quality of the artistic content offered, the efficient implementation of the planned programme, and the overall volume of outputs were not central to the analysis. This distinction proved difficult for some stakeholders to grasp, leading to some misunderstandings.

Social added value is often difficult to operationalise, as frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals and their indicators primarily operate at a macro level, lacking a clear connection to meso-level organisational and project activities. Furthermore, evaluations often address only one or a limited number of dimensions (e.g., economic effects or residents' quality of life). In this context, developing an impact model was particularly valuable for making the diversity of impacts visible, and involving representatives from a wide range of affected stakeholders in its early-stage development ensured that anticipated impacts were adequately considered. Throughout the study, the impact model served as a conceptual basis, guiding methodological and strategic decisions and making clear where data collection was needed, thus counteracting the eclectic data gathering criticised in meta-assessments.

The empirical sequencing of qualitative and quantitative methods also had a positive effect on the overall structure of the study. Due to the necessity of quantification in SROI analysis and the preparatory work invested in the impact model, a mixed-methods approach with a strong quantitative focus was ultimately adopted. Adjustments to the data collection procedures were made during the study, enabled by the conceptual flexibility of the process model: a survey of tourism businesses was added due to insufficient secondary data, and the visitor survey had to be redesigned after a planned visitor database integrated with a ticketing system was not implemented as intended. In addition, an external survey on the regional population's perceptions of the ECoC was coincidentally conducted and incorporated into the quantification. The openness of the process model with respect to the empirical design of impact measurement thus proved beneficial.

The analytical separation of quantification and evaluation was also beneficial, as it prevented the attribution of value to impacts from being confused with their quantitative magnitude. Monetary valuation did not present substantially greater challenges than in smaller-scale SROI studies, particularly because the evaluation focused not on directly produced artistic outputs, but on their consequences. Nevertheless, the contentious nature of assigning monetary values to non-market goods became apparent following the study's completion, as reflected in critical media coverage and local discussions.

This tension points to a more fundamental issue. Evaluations cover a variety of requirements and stakeholder groups: tourism actors and public administrations routinely operate in figures, and cultural policy actors have to argue in figures when cultural budgets are negotiated (Teissl et al., 2026). What distinguishes an SROI ratio from the economic impact studies that have long dominated this terrain is not its monetary form but what enters the calculation: alongside tourism revenues and employment effects, it prices in social and ecological outcomes and subtracts negative impacts, on the basis of an impact model rather than of expenditure flows. Monetisation therefore does not reduce culture to its economic effects; it extends what is counted as an effect. It remains, however, only one possible configuration of step 6, and which configuration is appropriate follows from the purpose of the evaluation and its addressees. The presentation of the findings in the form of a highly aggregated SROI ratio proved effective for external communication and received considerable media attention. In this respect, the original intention behind commissioning the SROI analysis, to support legitimation and public communication, was achieved.

Policy implications

A holistic approach is the most adequate framework for determining the social impact of large-scale cultural activities, such as a European Capital of Culture. Only by considering the diverse stakeholders and the full range of impacts attributable to the event can the magnitude of its social added value be meaningfully estimated. Such an approach overcomes the limitations of previous evaluations that focused narrowly on outputs, economic effects, singular stakeholder groups or flagship activities, and it inherently includes intangible impact dimensions.

However, resource constraints raise the question of how such evaluations can be implemented in practice. Currently, limited resources are accompanied by considerable freedom in defining evaluation frameworks, thematic scope and methodological approaches, which has led to the criticised shortcomings of eclectic data gathering and limited comparability. A structured yet adaptable framework is therefore required, capable of accommodating the diverse contextual conditions of individual ECoCs while ensuring coherence. In this respect, the social impact analysis process model applied in the SROI ECoC24A proved suitable. It established a comprehensive impact model as the conceptual foundation, bringing structure to the complex and heterogeneous impact landscape of a large-scale intervention. Within this framework, stakeholders and impacts could be prioritised when resources did not allow for a comprehensive analysis across all dimensions.

This prioritisation step also represents a potential entry point for EU-level guidance. Defining a limited set of mandatory stakeholder groups or impact objectives would ensure that core social effects are consistently considered across all ECoCs, while allowing for ECoC-specific, national or local objectives. At the same time, it is essential to distinguish clearly between outputs and impacts. Although predefined intended impacts can be helpful for orientation, focusing exclusively on them would be insufficient for capturing holistic social added value, so that a balanced approach combining predefined objectives with emergent, locally grounded impacts is required.

Regarding empirical implementation, methodological flexibility should be maintained. In SROI ECoC24A, adaptations to data collection procedures were necessary during the evaluation process to ensure valid results. The scale and duration of large events, programme changes, evolving data availability and complementary data sources necessitate adaptive approaches. Prescriptive indicator frameworks with clear data requirements risk constraining data collection, misallocating resources and limiting analytical depth.

This contradicts the idea of introducing uniform metrics or one-size-fits-all indicators for all major cultural events or ECoCs. However, methodological flexibility does not mean that comparability should be abandoned. Social impact analysis usually involves quantifying the proportion of stakeholder groups affected by specific impacts, obtained from

administrative sources or through primary empirical research. Such quantification enables comparisons between stakeholder groups and events, while meta-analytical aggregation can identify patterns of effectiveness and thus support strategic learning and policy development at EU level.

Even when impacts are assessed purely qualitatively, they can be evaluated meaningfully in the central evaluation step of the process model. Unlike in our case, this step does not have to involve monetisation. Many other options are conceivable, from interactive stakeholder assessments to democratic voting. This allows intangible outcomes, frequently underreported in previous ECoC evaluations, to be captured even where they resist quantification. To ensure comparability, the results should be presented in relation to the impact model and the selected impacts. The type of presentation itself is less important.

Long-term legacy effects should be explicitly incorporated into evaluation frameworks. The process model is not restrictive in this respect. Impact models can distinguish between short-, medium- and long-term effects, and follow-up data collection can be conducted several years after the event, providing valuable insight into long-term impact. This requires a commitment from the resource-allocating body to such follow-up work and its incorporation into an updated evaluation report, stipulated by future policies, with part of the legacy resources allocated to this.

Practical implications

Developing the ECoC24A impact model through a participatory process at an early stage proved highly valuable. Involving stakeholders in the planning phase meant that the model reflected institutional perspectives, stakeholder expectations and lived realities. However, it was used exclusively for evaluation purposes. Future applications would benefit from closer alignment between programme development and impact modelling, enabling clearer attribution between activities and outcomes.

When considering evaluation as a learning endeavour, we can judge the level at which learning effects occur and how an evaluation can support them. SROI, as employed in our case study, is not a formative process evaluation, but an ex-post impact analysis, which limits the learning effects to the ECoC management level before and during the title year. Essentially, a social impact analysis enables us to systematically identify the various stakeholders and their respective impacts. This "learning" remains even if the analysis does not cover all stakeholder impacts or follow all steps of the process model.

The regional context of Salzkammergut, comprising 23 municipalities across two Austrian federal states, presented specific challenges in terms of data collection. Limited administrative data availability and spatial dispersion required flexible and adaptive methodological approaches. Openness in methodological design was essential for accessing relevant information in these circumstances. Furthermore, distinguishing engaged citizen input from intentional lobbying is challenging, and data collection and analysis require informed judgements based on expertise, experience and reasoned interpretation. Therefore, evaluators should have experience in impact analysis in the cultural sector as well as social science expertise, since every case, stakeholder composition and impact model is unique.

Limitations and further research

The SROI analysis and the proposed process model have several limitations.

Limitations of SROI ECoC24A

A primary limitation of SROI ECoC24A is that it is only a partial SROI analysis, necessitated by the inherent complexity of an ECoC, as well as by time and financial constraints. While the ECoC affected a broad network of eighteen distinct stakeholder groups, outcomes were only quantified for five groups. These constraints were further exacerbated by the suboptimal quality of data provided by the ECoC organisers, whose insufficiency and inconsistency forced the research team to allocate more resources to collecting supplementary data, which limited the scope of impact measurement.

Second, the reported value rests on survey instruments tailored to the specific context rather than on standardised, validated test procedures, which were largely eschewed as they are often too extensive for field surveys and carry a high risk of respondent fatigue and non-response. This allowed for adequately short and context-specific questions, but it lacks the validation and cross-study comparability afforded by standardised scales.

The reliability of the findings is further limited by the small, self-selected sample of the visitor survey. As participation in all surveys except the one for project organisers was voluntary, the data may over-represent stakeholders with polarised views—those with either a high degree of affinity or significant criticism—while failing to capture the perspectives of the majority. The study is also subject to potential social desirability bias, particularly among project partners and beneficiaries whose professional interests or funding were tied to the ECoC. These layers of bias mean that the reported sentiments should be seen as an approximation of the event's impact rather than as absolute certainties.

A specific limitation of SROI analysis lies in the degrees of freedom in monetisation. For each impact, there may be several ways to perform a monetary valuation. This was mitigated in the SROI ECoC24A through a transparent approach and dual control by experienced evaluators over the choice of monetisation method. Nevertheless, an external review of the chosen method could further mitigate this limitation and help with occasionally heated discussions about valuation, which are usually sparked by personal attitudes that consider the postulated monetary value of an impact to be either greatly overstated or understated. An additional review by a second level of independent evaluators could reinforce the claim to objectivity.

Limitations of the social impact analysis process model

Evaluations of cultural events can take various forms. Process evaluations analyse the implementation of planned activities;

performance evaluations examine the achievement of planned outputs, potentially related to the input. The social impact analysis process model, regardless of its configuration, does not incorporate these perspectives, focusing specifically on social added value instead. While conclusions can be drawn regarding the relationship between inputs and social impact, it does not assess implementation efficiency or the appropriateness of resource allocation.

Next, the stakeholder-based impact model developed in this study primarily focuses on hypothesised impacts and their empirical verification. It does not establish detailed causal linkages between individual activities, specific stakeholder groups and corresponding impacts. While such attribution is possible in theory, it would involve substantial resource requirements and complexity, particularly in the context of large-scale cultural programmes. Consequently, the model necessarily retains characteristics of a partial "black box", where causal pathways are inferred at an aggregated level rather than being fully specified at the level of individual activities.

Finally, the proposed approach is not easily adapted for simple, indicator-based benchmarking. Rather than relying on standardised output indicators or easily communicable economic figures, it provides estimates of the proportion of stakeholder groups affected by specific impacts, which must be interpreted in the context of their respective empirical settings. Therefore, comparative analysis across cultural events requires meta-analytical synthesis that explicitly accounts for contextual differences, methodological variation and programme characteristics.

Bringing these limitations back to our case, some important contextual information could not be considered in the SROI analysis. First, prior to the title year, the designated artistic director left the team, causing considerable delays in terms of both content and time. Meanwhile, an open call was launched which was—indeed too—successful, yielding far more project ideas than available funds and leaving many disappointed artists and cultural initiative representatives who, acting as cultural multipliers, amplified negative word of mouth. Second, leadership and communication styles within parts of the organising committee were sometimes perceived as too opinionated, which affected motivation among team members, potential visitors and the local cultural scene. As these dynamics prevented progress rather than producing measurable outcomes, they are only partially captured by the SROI in the form of the negative impact "negative emotions due to rejection" on the regional cultural scene. Third, long-term impact is only just beginning to materialise. An impact calculation conducted 1 year after the event is, by definition, premature. It remains unclear how the successor organisation will consolidate latent potential into lasting legacies.

Conclusion

The SROI ECoC24A study acts as a conceptual and methodological pilot, challenging the dominance of purely economic or output-based evaluations, as well as eclectic approaches that focus arbitrarily on individual or macro-level impacts. It demonstrates how complex cultural policy initiatives can be evaluated through a holistic, stakeholder-based approach that captures both tangible and intangible social impacts, while remaining adaptable to regional contexts. The Salzkammergut case therefore provides a way of refining ECoC evaluation policy, helping to ensure that the programme remains a relevant and credible driver of social transformation.

However, the recommendation is not that all future ECoCs should systematically conduct SROI analyses. Instead, the introduction of a structured social impact analysis process model is proposed, comprising a clearly defined sequence of procedural steps comparable to those employed in an SROI analysis. This would help to address the recurring shortcomings identified in meta-assessments, as it would a) provide ECoC evaluation managers with coherent guidance for social impact analysis covering both tangible and intangible impacts; b) enhance the robustness and analytical quality of such analyses through coherent and adaptive data gathering planned at an early stage; and c) enable greater comparability of methodological approaches and findings across individual ECoC programmes.

Nevertheless, the proposed process model remains a framework for social impact analysis and does not seek to attribute identified socially relevant changes to individual activities, incidents or omissions within a large-scale cultural event such as an ECoC. Rather, it focuses on an evaluation of the overall social added value. An accompanying process evaluation could facilitate more profound learning and improvement, as it can contextualise the results within the socio-political context of each ECoC.

In summary, we recommend procedural clarity and consistency, limited standardisation of defined impact objectives at the EU and national levels, and continued methodological flexibility in data collection, analysis, evaluation, and presentation of results.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval were not required for this study in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The data were collected as part of the commissioned evaluation of the European Capital of Culture Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 by means of anonymous surveys and a publicly announced discussion round. Participants were informed about the purpose of the data collection, only adults were approached, and no personally identifiable information is reported. Participation was voluntary, with the exception of the project organiser survey, which formed part of project reporting; its respondents were informed that their answers would be used for the evaluation. Consent was given by completing the surveys or by taking part in the discussion round.

Author contributions

CG, SS, BG, MH, MP, and VT discussed the structure and focus of the article and provided feedback on each other's contributions. CG wrote the conceptual background on social impact analysis and SROI, as well as parts of the introduction and most of the discussion and conclusion. SS wrote the case's methodological approach and the overall results. SS also wrote the results of the two main stakeholder groups with the support of KW and FW. MH and MP wrote parts of the introduction and the background on the development of ECoC evaluation, as well as parts of the discussion. VT wrote the background on the development of the evaluation of cultural activities, with support from BG. BG also provided the introduction to the case study, with additions by VT. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. During the preparation of this work the authors used Google Gemini 3 Thinking in order to create drafts for the passages on sensitivity analysis and limitations of the methodological approach used in this SROI as a summary of the respective parts in the final evaluation report. The draft version of the abstract was formulated using Claude AI Opus 4.6. Claude AI Opus 4.6, ChatGPT 5.2, and DeepL Write were used to refine the language. During the revision in response to the peer review, Claude Opus 5.5 was used to analyse the reviewers' comments, to draft revised and additional passages, to translate the quoted statements from German, to shorten the manuscript to the word limit, and for proofreading. All content generated with AI assistance was reviewed, edited and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Any alternative text (alt text) provided alongside figures in this article has been generated by Frontiers with the support of artificial intelligence and reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, including review by the authors wherever possible. If you identify any issues, please contact us.

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