

BEST PRACTICE THE SOCIAL HUB BARCELONA POBLENOU

Submitted by: Dom Spain

An aerial photograph of a rugged coastline with rocky cliffs and clear turquoise water. A large, semi-transparent blue circle is overlaid on the right side of the image. In the center, a white circle contains the text 'CIRCULAR ALBANIA TOURISM'.

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INTRODUCTION



SECTION 1: BASIC INFORMATION

- Title of the Best Practice: The Social Hub Barcelona Poblenou
- Website of the Practice: www.thesocialhub.co
- Social Media links: <https://www.instagram.com/esimperfect/?hl=es>
- Location: Street Cristobal de Moura 49, 08019, Barcelona, SPAIN

SECTION 2: PRACTICE OVERVIEW

• Short Description of the Practice:

The Social Hub (TSH) is a hybrid hospitality concept combining hotels, long-stay residences, co-working spaces, and event venues. Founded in 2012 by Scottish entrepreneur Charlie MacGregor (CEO), TSH began as The Student Hotel and now operates across Europe, including Amsterdam, Barcelona, and Berlin, among other locations. MacGregor also co-founded Movement on the Ground (MOTG), an NGO aiding refugees.

TSH in Barcelona (Poblenou) reflects its Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) commitment, which led to obtaining a B Corp certification. Key initiatives focus on sustainability: optimising energy/water use, cutting waste, and promoting circular economy practices. Innovations include AI-driven food waste reduction, water-saving solutions, and upcycling food waste into new products—showcasing TSH's dedication to minimising its environmental footprint within its unique hospitality model.

To illustrate this, TSH (in Barcelona) collaborated with renowned designers and chefs for its project "TSH Goes Circular". The goal, transform eggshell waste into 3D-printed logo plates incorporating circular design principles within their food and beverage operations, reducing waste at its source and fostering innovation in the supply chain. Additionally, TSH fights food waste via Too Good To Go, saving 65 meals in FY23-24, and uses Orbisk's AI technology in kitchens to track and reduce waste. These partnerships reflect TSH's commitment to circular economy solutions.

- **Implementation Period:** Ongoing, with specific initiatives launched or evaluated during the FY23-24 period and more goals for 2025 and the future.

- Status:

☐ Planned ☐ Pilot phase ☐ Fully implemented ☒ Ongoing and evolving

• Thematic Areas Addressed:

☐ Farm to Fork / Sustainable Food Systems

☒ Waste Management

☒ Resource Efficiency

☐ Other: _____

• Describe how the practice aligns with the selected Thematic Areas:

TSH Barcelona Poblenou aligns strongly with the thematic areas of waste management and resource efficiency through a range of comprehensive strategies.

Regarding water management, TSH Barcelona Poblenou notably uses desalinated water for its swimming pools. This demonstrates a direct and proactive measure to reduce reliance on scarce local freshwater resources, thereby mitigating its contribution to water scarcity in the area. Across its portfolio, TSH also closely tracks water usage to gain insights into consumption patterns and identify opportunities for improved efficiency.

For waste management, Barcelona serves as a significant location for TSH's waste reduction initiatives. The hub has adopted the AI-powered food waste monitor, Orbisk, to precisely identify, measure, and consequently reduce food waste in its restaurant kitchens. This has contributed to company-wide savings of 1,401 kilograms of food from being discarded, preventing 10,316 kilograms of CO₂-eq emissions and saving 9,807,000 litres of water. Furthermore, TSH Barcelona Poblenou launched the "TSH Goes Circular" project, an innovative initiative that repurposes eggshells from its restaurant into new, functional 3D-printed plates, clearly embodying circular product design and the principle of viewing waste as a valuable resource. The hub also actively participates in the Too Good To Go app, saving 65 meals from waste in FY23-24. Overall, Barcelona's absolute waste volume decreased by 8.1% in 2024.





- **Explain how this activity fits within the tourism sector:**

TSH operates as a hybrid hospitality concept, integrating hotel accommodation, long-stay options, co-working spaces, and event venues into a single offering. The resource efficiency activities implemented at TSH Barcelona Poblenou are directly embedded within these diverse operational aspects of the tourism and hospitality sector. For instance, the innovative management of water for swimming pools by using desalinated water is a critical and directly applicable sustainability measure for hotel operations, particularly in regions prone to water scarcity. Food waste reduction initiatives, such as the "TSH Goes Circular" project, the use of Orbisk and participation in Too Good To Go, are highly relevant for restaurants, catering services, and event management within any hospitality setting. These activities showcase a comprehensive and practical approach to sustainability that is seamlessly integrated into the core functions of a modern hospitality business, serving as a model for wider adoption across the tourism industry.

- **What learning value for VET training, curriculum development or capacity-building of professionals does the practice offer?**

TSH's business model offers significant learning value for VET and professional development. Its hybrid hospitality concept provides a real-world case study on how to integrate sustainability and circular economy practices directly into core business operations, moving beyond simple initiatives. TSH's numerous collaborations with diverse partners, from non-profits to designers, teach the value of cross-sector innovation and external partnerships to address complex challenges. For example, TSH partners with The Good Roll, a company that donates 50% of its net profit to building toilets in Ghana. By purchasing their toilet paper, which is made of 100% European recycled paper, TSH contributed to the development of five toilets, impacting 200 people's lives and saving 100 trees from being logged.

SECTION 3: CHALLENGES AND ALIGNMENT WITH CIRCULAR ECONOMY PRINCIPLES

- **What challenges or barriers were addressed?**

- ☒ Waste management and disposal
☒ Energy/resource use
☐ Infrastructure limitations
☐ Seasonality
☐ Skills and capacity gaps
☐ Low awareness of CE
☐ Behavioural resistance
☐ Financial or funding constraints
☐ Other: _____

- **How were these challenges overcome?**

TSH addresses various challenges through a multi-faceted approach, integrating Waste Management and Resource Efficiency into its core business model.

For example, in Barcelona, TSH is now using desalinated water to fill its swimming pools to avoid contributing to water scarcity in the area. Even more, TSH combats food waste by partnering with Too Good To Go, an app that allows customers to purchase surplus food at a reduced rate, preventing meals from being discarded. In FY23-24, 6,399 meals were saved across its hubs, avoiding 17,277 kg of CO₂-eq emissions. Additionally, TSH implemented Orbisk, an AI-powered food waste monitor, in its restaurant kitchens across several locations, including Barcelona. This technology identifies and measures discarded food, allowing for data-driven reductions.

- **Which circular economy strategies does this practice address?**

- ☒ Waste reduction / reuse / recycling
☐ Renewable energy / energy efficiency
☒ Water conservation
☐ Circular product/service design
☐ Sustainable food systems / short food chains
☒ Eco-certifications or green standards
☐ Repair, refurbishment, or reuse of infrastructure/furnishings
☐ Digital tools for circularity or sustainability





- **Describe why this practice can be considered as a 'best practice' and how it contributes to one or more circular economy principles:**

TSH's approach can be considered a 'best practice' in circular tourism for VET centres as it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and implementing sustainable business models in hospitality. TSH Barcelona Poblenou integrates circular principles into various operations:

- Through partnerships like Too Good To Go and the adoption of AI-powered Orbisk, TSH actively reduces food waste at its source and diverts surplus food, demonstrating a commitment to resource longevity and responsible end-of-life management.
- The use of desalinated water for pools in Barcelona is a direct example of water conservation.
- For electronic waste management, TSH implements a responsible end-of-life strategy through a partnership with Close The Gap, a social enterprise that collects, cleans, and reconfigures decommissioned hardware. These usable items are then shipped to African countries for educational, medical, entrepreneurial, and social projects, keeping electronics out of landfills and benefiting communities in need.
- The "TSH Goes Circular" project, repurposing eggshells into 3D-printed plates, is a concrete example of circular design within hospitality, transforming waste into valuable products and creating unique customer experiences.

TSH Barcelona Poblenou is a strong model for VET curriculum development in Albania, showcasing how to embed sustainability directly into business operations rather than treating it as an add-on.

- **Describe why this practice can be considered as innovative. What new, creative or underused approach brings added value to circular tourism development?**

TSH's innovative approach to circular tourism lies in its hybrid hospitality concept, which combines hotel rooms, long-stay options, co-working spaces, and event venues. By integrating these diverse services, TSH can embed its resource efficiency practices directly into the core of its business. This model offers a comprehensive and practical approach to sustainability that goes beyond typical one-off initiatives. It demonstrates how a modern hospitality business can seamlessly incorporate sustainable practices into its daily operations, serving as a valuable model for the wider tourism industry to follow.

SECTION 4: COLLABORATION

- **Describe any collaboration that were involved in the development of this practice? this practice involve local authorities or other groups?**

TSH collaborates with a diverse range of partners to support its ESG strategy and resource efficiency goals. For resource efficiency, TSH partners with several organisations. The company contributes to waste reduction by purchasing from The Good Roll, which builds toilets in Ghana, and by using the Too Good To Go app to prevent food waste, saving thousands of meals. To manage electronic waste, TSH works with Close The Gap, which reuses hardware for educational projects in Africa. The company also uses Orbisk, an AI-powered monitor, to analyse and reduce food waste, among other successful collaborations.

SECTION 5: RESULTS AND REPLICABILITY

- **What measurable results or outcomes were achieved?**

TSH resource efficiency initiatives, including partnerships, have yielded several measurable outcomes:

- **Orbisk (Food Waste Monitoring):** Following a pilot at The Social Hub Amsterdam City, five Orbisk AI-powered food waste monitors were installed across properties in Amsterdam, Berlin, Delft, Madrid, and Barcelona. After benchmarking, The Social Hub managed to reduce 1,401 kilograms of food from being thrown away, which prevented 10,316 kilograms of CO₂-equivalent emissions (equivalent to 77 flights between Amsterdam and Paris) and saved 9,807,000 litres of water (enough to supply 207 people for an entire year).
- **Water Management:** TSH has been tracking its water usage more closely. While some increases occurred due to new hub openings or specific circumstances (like façade retrofit or new hygiene measures for pools), they are now using desalted water to fill pools in Barcelona to avoid contributing to water scarcity.
- **Energy Management:** While The Social Hub's Dutch properties have successfully transitioned to purchased renewable wind and solar energy, marking a 37.4% reduction in carbon footprint, the company has stated its intent to apply this renewable energy standard across all its properties in the future, including Barcelona.





- **Why is this practice relevant to the Albanian tourism context?**

TSH's practice of forming external partnerships to address complex sustainability challenges is a highly relevant case study for the Albanian hospitality sector. By collaborating with non-profits, social enterprises, TSH demonstrates how businesses can achieve significant impact without bearing the full cost. This model encourages Albanian hotels to overcome challenges like waste management by forging strategic alliances with, for instance, local NGOs, thereby building a more sustainable and inclusive tourism economy. It is a high-impact strategy that fosters a collaborative approach to development.

- **What is the practice's potential for further expansion? How can it be applied or adapted to other Albanian tourism destinations or businesses?**

TSH practices have significant potential for expansion and adaptation within the Albanian tourism context. For example, TSH's engagement with The Good Roll (for ethical sourcing) and Close The Gap (for e-waste recycling) highlights the potential for tourism businesses to collaborate with local social enterprises or manufacturers that prioritise circular economy principles. In Albania, this could translate into partnerships with local waste management companies, artisans who repurpose materials, or local producers for "Farm to Fork" initiatives. For example, organisations like the "Feeding Albania Foundation" work to connect food donors (like farms and businesses) with communities in need, a concept similar to TSH's collaborative approach.

- **What advice would you give others looking to implement a similar initiative?**

TSH demonstrates that a commitment to a circular economy can be a core part of a company's business model that can be successful. TSH's success lies in working with a diverse network of passionate partners. This approach shows that no single entity has all the answers; collective action and external expertise are vital for tackling complex challenges and driving real change.

SECTION 6: PICTURES

- **Pictures of the practice:**



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