

OUR APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE EVENTS

01/2020

A comprehensive study and toolbox of recommendations for sustainable events

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CASE STUDY: THE EXAMPLE OF ASSOCIATIONS

Ever wondered why associations are not leading the way in sustainable event practices?

After all, association members meet for various purposes beyond the pursuit of profit. Their common interests and aspirations integrate a host of other aspects that will, in turn, shape the organisation's mission and be reflected in its agenda. As forces of good, one would expect associations to be leading the way when it comes to creating a positive impact on people and the environment at their events.

But too many associations fail to communicate their concerns for societal improvement and environmental protection at the meetings they organise. The event management industry is failing to significantly reduce its environmental impact alongside the associations that have yet to implement sustainable policies.

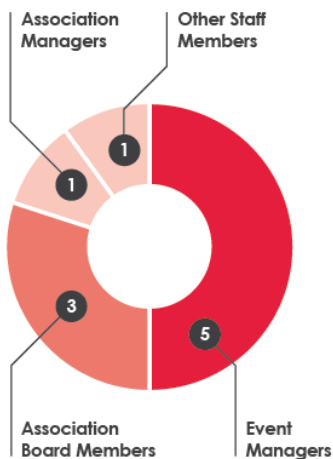
We wanted to understand where this inconsistency comes from and identify ways to promote sustainability amongst associations.

In 2018, we reached out to 10 European and international associations which successfully integrated sustainable event practices into their events.

This is what we found.

Position of the interviewee:

(Figure 2)



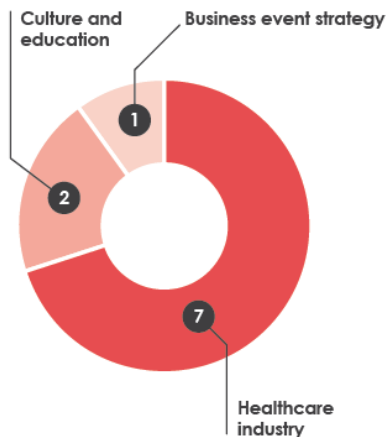
Headquarter location:

(Figure 3)



Respondent associations' fields of activity:

(Figure 1)

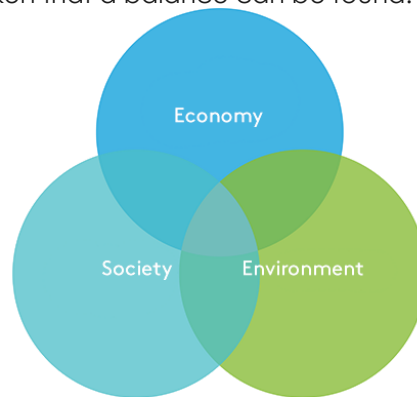


WHAT ARE THE OBSTACLES TO OVERCOME?

1. Lack of information and awareness

“Sustainability is just one of these buzzwords and actually it's different to sit down and think of what it really means.”

There still are misconceptions around the notion of sustainability. The three pillars of this motif are Planet, Profit and People. However, this last social aspect is too often neglected. Our study participants mentioned plenty of event practices they engage in to reduce the meetings' impact on the environment, such as eliminating printed signage and programmes, using individual bottles and cups, recycling and reusing whenever possible. However, the only real social action reported was the donation of food surplus and leftovers. This should be improved as only when the threefold approach to sustainability is taken that a balance can be found.



Our recommendations:

- Remember to also consider the societal impact of your meetings.
- Build a positive event legacy. There are numerous possibilities for you to build economic, social and environmental benefits to the host community and for participants to bring back home, before, during and after an event. By raising your participants' awareness of the reality of local territories and actors, you are also designing a unique attendee's experience that will be remembered in the long run. This can be done by organising donations or creating volunteering opportunities for attendees to help local charities. Favouring local sourcing (like material and food) is another powerful way for event organisers to highlight local producers and suppliers.
- Keep in mind that smaller associations also have the power to make a significant impact on the host communities. In other words, events are never too small to implement sustainability.

2. Lack of support from leadership

“We set our own goals because we want to achieve a certain level of sustainability, but it is, unfortunately, not always a priority to the board.”

One of the first barriers to the adoption of sustainable practices is the lack of support from high-level decision-makers who would have the capacity to initiate change. Association board members eventually have the final say on decisive aspects such as the format of the event, destination, venue, etc.

Our recommendations:

- Build a clear sustainable event policy. Write down all sustainable actions you are already implementing, set a vision and commit to doing a bit more each year. Issuing an official statement gives credibility and coherence to your efforts and binds your organisation to a consistent and growing level of commitment.
- Create a measurable overview of your event's global performance. A way for raising board members' awareness on the importance and potential benefits of sustainably managed events is to calculate the impact of implemented practices. Developing a set of metrics and reporting about the outcomes certainly requires extra time and knowledge but it will reveal the savings induced by optimising resources and highlight the long-term benefits for the association.

3. Fear of participants' resistance to change

“Initially, people were quite reluctant, especially older generations of [associations] member.”

Associations sometimes hesitate over promoting sustainable practices among attendees because they fear a lack of interest or reduced membership, even though there is no evidence that this is a potential risk. Sustainability is a global concern, meaning that attendees are experiencing it on a daily basis in their home country too, and are therefore

familiar with it more and more. After a transition period and a few adjustments, those still reluctant will eventually adhere to the message.

Our recommendations:

- Ask your participants! Start to collect attendees' feedback on your sustainable actions consistently. This can mean making a few calls or simply adding two or three questions to the event satisfaction survey.
- Engage participants prior to the event. Be sure to exceed their expectations by letting them know what to expect at the event. Provide options for the attendees during registration on whether or not they would like to receive a printed programme or a conference bag.
- Communicate about sustainable actions implemented. Focus should be placed towards communicating how money is saved (digital signage, vegetarian lunches, recycled event furniture, etc.) and how it is re-invested into the conference. This is to reassure attendees that the value of their experience at the event is maintained.
- Informing is good; educating is better. Events are wonderful opportunities for associations to help participants understand the 'why' and the benefits of sustainable practices.

4. Lack of time and money

"Although we are a non-profit society, we will always try to make efficiencies in cost."

Lack of time and money is often perceived as a barrier to sustainability. However, associations that are committed to sustainability understand that it is not more expensive to be more sustainable, quite the opposite. They would continue to support sustainability even when there is a cost difference, such as spending more on one item which will lead to a much bigger impact and implementing purchasing policies to review all budgets and how money is getting spent overall.

Our recommendations:

- Keep in mind that some of the benefits of event sustainability are only appreciable in the long run, such as legacy, image enhancement and organization awareness.
- Calculate your savings. Organisations often fail to evaluate the savings induced by better optimisation of resources and socially responsible policies such as less printing, replacing plastic bottles with water fountains, eliminating single-use, tableware, reducing food portions, promoting car sharing, choosing sustainable suppliers and so much more!

5. Lack of control over partners and suppliers

"If you go to a place where sustainability is high on the providers' agenda, it is easier to work with them towards change."

Committing to more sustainable meetings requires organisers to source appropriate suppliers and to reach out to sponsors and partners who have the capacity to meet their requirements (in terms of energy tracking, environmental performance, recycling policies, diversity training, social impact, etc.). Depending on the chosen destination, this can remain a challenge.

Our recommendations:

- Start by asking your suppliers what they can do and base your decisions on their responses.
- Include sustainability in your Request for Proposal. Contractually require a certain level of sustainability from your partners such as committing to the [Ten principles of the UN Global Compact](#)
- Look for certifications. It is recommended that organisers look for partners and providers who comply to international and national standards such as the ISO 2012:1, Fairpflichtet (Sustainability Code of the German-speaking events), ASTM, etc. A growing demand for standards will bring more event industry practitioners to adopt improved management system standards and will contribute to the emergence of sustainable practices in the sector.
- The Global Destination Sustainability Index (GDS-Index) can help you find more information on venues' and convention bureaus' actions taken towards sustainable goals.

WHO ARE YOUR PARTNERS FOR CHANGE?

1. Event Agencies and PCOs

"It's very much sitting down discussing with our PCO or event agency and the team, using the value of their ideas and experience that we see how we can do things better, be more inventive."

Contracting the professional services of an event organiser is an easy and efficient way to get innovative ideas, high levels of expertise, staffing and other useful resources to bring more sustainability in your events.

2. Association staff members

"Even when the whole team was on board for sustainability at the conference, there is one person from the executive board coordinating."

Staff members have a prominent role in fostering event sustainability. When event managers are not behind sustainable innovation, the task of synchronising effort still falls on them.

3. Other association members

"Recently, we had the convener of one of the science courses wanted us to go paper-free for the course programme. That since has become the norm!"

Other association members can also drive sustainable innovation. Make sure to systematise surveys or conduct interviews to collect members' feedback and their suggestions for improvement of your greening actions.

4. Benchmarking

"We look at what other societies in the same field do."

Sustainability is now one of the major socio-technological trends affecting the events sector. You may want to get inspired by what similar organisations have already implemented.

5. Reaching out to Event Associations

"PCMA and MPI have helped a lot to inspire and guide us in setting greening policy."

Event Associations such as PCMA (the Professional Convention Management Association) and MPI (Meeting Professionals International) provide a large amount of online educational resources for meeting industry stakeholders.

6. Governmental entities

"We talked with the city and they are really working hard on sustainability."

Some convention bureaus and city governments actively promote sustainable practices to event organisers. Policy makers who understand the economic impact of events on their local economy increasingly count on events also to trigger local social and environmental change.

WHY MAKING YOUR EVENTS MORE SUSTAINABLE IS SO IMPORTANT

"The biggest win you can have in terms of sustainability is always within the events department."

To make a change, the priority is to focus on the organisation and execution of events. Firstly, because meetings and conferences create significant amounts of waste, and secondly because they are the moments when almost all stakeholders interact face-to-face. Hence, there is a double interest in sustainably managed events being: **reducing events negative impact** on the environment and society and **inspire participants and other stakeholders involved to make sustainable decisions** for themselves.

Events create the best circumstances for which organisations can express their strong interest and **address the urgency for improvements in sustainable practices** to their most salient stakeholders and the general public.

A COMPLETE EVENT SUSTAINABILITY POLICY

The following policy can be applied to your event and managed by our team from conception to post-event evaluation. We are happy to guide you through the process and help you achieve your sustainability goals. Here is a step-by-step approach, fully adaptable to your needs.

SUSTAINABLE EVENTS POLICY STATEMENT

Recognising that events have economic, social, and environmental impacts on the host country, the organiser prioritises event sustainability as the core of its management process. The organiser and the host country work closely to ensure that the environmental, social and economic impacts of the Annual Meeting on the host country are monitored and continuously improved.

Commitments

- ⇒ The organiser is committed to showing **sustainable leadership** for the entire event, from conceptualisation to post-event review, and to adopting sustainable event management practices, and sharing them with its stakeholders.
- ⇒ The organiser follows a sustainable events management system **conforming to international standards** and best practices to facilitate continual improvement.
- ⇒ The organiser will adhere to the **host country's legal requirements and respect diversity** in implementing the economic, social, and environmental aspects of sustainability, supplemented by international best practice.
- ⇒ The organiser ensures that it engages its stakeholders operating on the principles of inclusivity, stewardship, integrity, and transparency across the entire event management cycle through a complete **Code of Ethics**.
- ⇒ The organiser commits to a **positive sustainability legacy** within the supply chain; it works with its government counterparts, its supply chain, and the host community for their engagement and capacity development, and ensures the long-term improvement of the economic, environmental, and social aspects of the event.

The organiser ensures that this sustainable events policy is available and communicated to stakeholders for adherence in event management operations and decision making. The organiser also ensures that its staff members and host country's personnel involved in organising the event are aware of the impact and consequences of actions within the event management cycle and contribute towards making these impacts more sustainable.

THE THREEFOLD APPROACH: ENVIRONMENTAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT ACTION POINTS

Environmental Impact

- ⇒ The organiser and the host country take measures to reduce the carbon emissions associated with the event, such as reducing the amount of paper and publications used, reducing shipments, reusing stand structures and recycling paper and other meeting materials.
- ⇒ The organiser encourages the host country to contribute to making the event greener, by using environmentally friendly transport (e.g., the subway, if any), encouraging hotels to implement policies such as reusing bed linens and towels, using china cups instead of paper ones, reducing the amount of cleaning products and adopting environmentally friendly ones, placing recycling bins in the venue, and using recycled paper.
- ⇒ Any environmental policies implemented in the host city and venue should be highlighted on the event website.

The organiser strives to make the event greener, taking into account environmental considerations and budget implications. The participation of the host country, PCO or events agency, meeting venues, and hotels is essential to implement any environmental conservation or reduce-reuse-recycle measures.

Some possible “**reduce-reuse-recycle**” measures are set out on the next pages. The organiser also ensures appropriate communication and “**raises awareness**” on the implemented sustainability policy to all participants, customers, exhibitors, speakers and suppliers through onsite information (e.g.: projected slide before sessions, information on the online programme & newsletters, etc.).

REDUCE, REUSE, RECYCLE guidelines for events

REDUCE

- Reduce the number of publications taken to the meeting.
- Reduce the printing of documents onsite & print double-sided.
- Encourage the use of electronic files instead of paper ones.
- Send invitations, notifications, guidelines, newsletters and correspondence electronically whenever possible.
- Encourage online access to list of participants, presentations, exhibitors map, etc.
- Reduce the volume of air and sea shipments to and from the meeting venue.
- Reduce the number of shuttle buses to be used at the event and encourage the use of public transport.
- Provide participants with a free public transport pass, where appropriate.
- Encourage environmentally friendly measures at the venue, such as using an onsite electricity co-generation system and recycling water.
- Limit air conditioning use whenever possible.
- Plan the setting of the offices in a way that maximizes the use of natural light, such as working stations close to windows or coffee areas with natural light.
- Use locally grown and non-frozen food and drinks.
- Use eco-friendly cleaning products and limit the use of chemicals
- Encourage catering companies to prepare meals with locally grown, organic produce when available.
- Use water dispensers in refreshment areas
- Provide lowest possible number for catering. Inform caterers of the exact number of participants and re-evaluate quantity needed during the meeting to avoid waste.
- Ensure that noise level is bearable or within the allowable limits; otherwise appropriate sustainable solutions should be implemented.

REUSE What you can't reduce

- Use rented furniture for exhibition, shell scheme and free build stand.
- Reuse boxes for return shipment, if possible.
- Request hotels and participants to reuse their sheets and towels.
- Request caterers to use china cups instead of paper ones.
- Use local/rented furniture and equipment. Avoid new, custom-made or imported furniture and equipment.
- Use reusable carpet tiles instead of carpet rolls which can't be recycled.
- Use fold-up furniture for easier transportation from one location to another. If possible, choose multifunctional models of furniture for offices and meeting rooms.
- Use environmentally friendly materials in the construction of offices and rooms, including legally and sustainably harvested materials. Materials should be recyclable.
- Use sustainable decor, such as potted plants instead of cut flowers.
- Avoid decor that might be related to animal cruelty or use of parts of animals or plants from endangered species (e.g. fur, rare flowers).
- Switch from printed signage to digital & avoid using PVC, adhesive polystyrene.
- For goodies and gifts, select reusable items and partner with Fair-Trade suppliers.

RECYCLE What you can't reuse

- Print documents on 100% recycled paper using natural inks, where possible.
- Place labelled recycling bins at the meeting venue and encourage participants to sort their waste.
- Recycle badges and lanyards.
- Donate documents to depository libraries and universities.
- Donate leftover food whenever possible.
- Create a Donation area for Exhibitors at the end of the show and partner with a local NGO to pick-up the goods.
- Compensate for carbon emissions through a certified sustainability programme.
- Offset non-renewable energy consumption by purchasing Green Certificates (or *Renewable Energy Certificates*) which renewable producers earn for generating clean energy.

Social Impact

Employees: ensure that all staff, consultants, contractors and suppliers involved in working on the event are engaged under terms and conditions consistent with the [Ten principles of the UN Global Compact](#), with a focus on working age, hours, rest time, staff development and training. Employers should ensure adherence to occupational health and safety standards and provide first aid and access to medical services as well as relevant employee benefits including medical insurance. Employers should have an equal opportunity policy, including provisions for employees with special needs.

Local community: involve the local community so that they know about the event and understand its purpose. Wherever possible, local staff are engaged to support the organiser and local community specifics are included in the event programme. Efforts are also made to ensure that the event does not inconvenience the local community by closing roads or parts of the host city or blocking access to their homes or workplaces.

Participants: ensure that participants from overseas have opportunities to experience and learn about the host country's culture. The event provides a window on the host country, showcasing its history, culture, food and traditions through exhibits, cultural shows, and special events. Wherever possible, local produce is selected over imported produce, and local small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are encouraged to display -- and even sell -- their wares at the event. Participants have a clean, safe and comfortable environment at the venue(s), the hotels and in the transport provided for their use by the host country. The organiser puts in place efficient and effective facilities including communications to ensure a high-quality work environment for all participants. The host country should provide the list of nearby restaurants in the venue and hotels to participants.

Accessibility: commit to facilitate the needs of participants with special needs by providing the relevant information and making sure the event is accessible to all. Provide a comprehensive guide on the different modes of transportation for getting around the host city, personal assistance, and practical information (health information, equipment hires, free admission, restaurants & public places, etc.) for delegates with disabilities.

Economic Impact

Purchasing policy: bring as much business as possible to host country companies and businesses by engaging local contractors to supply goods and services for the event. The procurement policies and regulations of are followed in selecting suppliers who adhere to the **Fair-Trade** principles of the [World Fair Trade Organization](#).

Ensure that local businesses and companies associated with the event in any way adhere to relevant business and labour laws, and that they have good governance and transparency policies and procedures in place.

Opportunities are also provided to encourage investment and showcase local businesses by holding events such as a business or investment summit, host country seminars, exhibits, and setting up a business matching hub where local companies can meet overseas companies with similar interests.

Economic data are gathered on the number of overseas participants and the average cost of hotel rooms and expenses during the event period. If available, data may be captured on additional travel and extended stays to estimate the impact of the event on the local economy.



WHO WE ARE

K.I.T. Group, founded in 1986, has become a leading organiser of national and international conferences and events as well as being the preferred partner for many associations, societies and organisations. Since 2011, K.I.T. Group has been committed to integrating sustainability into its core values and processes. We not only believe it is the right way to do business but know that most of our clients share this vision. We take the quote of Mahatma Gandhi to heart – “Be the change that you wish to see in the world”. Through our internal Sustainability Taskforce, drawn from staff from across the company, we initiate action to create a positive impact and ensure that sustainability is not just theory but also practice.

K.I.T. Group Sustainability Research Report | January 2020

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The research on event sustainability policy was conducted by Jelena Milovic, Senior Consultant in Sustainable Event Management.

Sources:

ADB Green Book on meetings and events
United Nations Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact
United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030
World Fair Trade Organization



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