

Sustainable Events: Impacts, Planning and Communication

Development of Impact-oriented Destination Models

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Presentation script

Introduction

This session explores the role of events as powerful drivers of economic activity, social engagement and destination development, while also recognising their significant environmental footprint. Events — particularly in the MICE sector and large-scale special events — are increasingly scrutinised for their sustainability performance. As expectations from participants, sponsors, regulators and communities rise, sustainability is no longer optional, but a core component of professional event planning and management. The session provides an overview of the economic, social and environmental impacts of events, and introduces practical frameworks for planning, mitigating and communicating sustainability in a credible and transparent way.

Objective of the session

The presentation aims to:

- Explain the role of events within tourism and the wider economy
- Identify positive and negative economic, social and environmental impacts of events
- Highlight the dominant drivers of event-related environmental footprint, especially travel
- Present concrete mitigation strategies and planning tools for sustainable events
- Provide guidance on effective sustainability communication while avoiding greenwashing

Main content

The session starts by positioning events within the broader tourism and business context, with particular emphasis on the MICE industry and special or mega-events. These events generate substantial economic value, employment and destination visibility at both European and global levels. At the same time, they concentrate impacts in short timeframes and specific locations, making their effects highly visible to local communities.

Building on this, the presentation examines the economic impacts of events, acknowledging both benefits and risks. Positive effects include visitor spending, job creation, infrastructure investment and destination branding. However, these are often accompanied by negative outcomes such as price inflation, crowding-out of regular tourism, public debt and profit leakage, particularly in the case of large-scale events with cost overruns.

The discussion then moves to social impacts, highlighting the potential of events to foster community pride, volunteering, skills development, cultural exchange and social cohesion. At the same time, poorly managed events can disrupt residents' daily lives, limit access to public spaces, increase security concerns and risk excluding vulnerable groups. Social impacts therefore depend heavily on governance, inclusion and stakeholder engagement.

The environmental dimension forms a core part of the session. While events can act as showcases for best environmental practices and catalyse green innovation, they also generate significant negative impacts related to energy use, waste, water consumption and biodiversity pressure. A key insight emphasised throughout the presentation is that travel and transport typically account for 60–80% of the total carbon footprint of international events, making mobility the most influential leverage point for sustainability action.

In response to these challenges, the session presents a hierarchical mitigation strategy based on the principles of avoid, reduce, and offset/report. This approach encourages organisers to design out emissions early, operate events more efficiently through sustainable logistics and operations, and finally address remaining impacts through credible measurement, transparency and compensation mechanisms. Practical examples from sport events illustrate how these strategies can be applied in real contexts.

The presentation then introduces a sustainability planning framework, stressing that sustainability should be embedded within the overall event or organisational strategy, rather than treated as a standalone document. Key elements include a clear vision aligned with environmental, social and governance pillars; a dedicated sustainability team involving relevant stakeholders; and a concrete action plan with defined responsibilities, metrics and targets.

Finally, the session addresses communication and transparency, highlighting the critical role of honest reporting in building trust. Organisers are encouraged to publish verified sustainability data, set measurable targets, communicate both achievements and shortcomings, and actively engage participants and communities. At the same time, the presentation warns against greenwashing practices, such as vague claims, selective disclosure or over-reliance on offsets without prior reduction efforts. Particular attention is given to the importance of communicating social impacts, which are often more tangible and meaningful to participants than environmental metrics alone.

Conclusion

The session concludes by reinforcing the idea that events are powerful economic and social engines, but only deliver long-term value when their impacts are consciously planned and managed. Sustainable events require a balanced understanding of economic benefits, social responsibility and environmental limits, with special emphasis on mobility, governance and transparency. By embedding sustainability into strategy, operations and communication, event organisers can reduce negative impacts, strengthen legitimacy and contribute positively to destinations and communities. Ultimately, credible sustainability in events is not about perfection, but about rigour, honesty and continuous improvement.