

From Strategy to Impact: Delivering Sustainable and Resilient Tourism

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This session focuses on the gap between sustainability strategies and real operational impact. It shows that tourism destinations do not need more reports only, but stronger execution, better impact measurement, and sustainability integrated into daily decisions.

1. Introduction

Good afternoon everyone.

Tourism is an industry that often talks about the future: trends, forecasts, strategies, and scenarios.

But today I would like to focus on a different question.

Not what we say we will do, but what actually happens.

Many destinations already have strategies. Sustainability reports are increasing every year.

Sustainability is also becoming a legal and reputational requirement.

However, the key challenge is that operations often do not change enough, and measurable impact remains limited.

Key message:

Strategy is where we start. Impact is created or lost in operations.

2. Challenges facing tourism destinations

Tourism is under increasing pressure.

Different destinations experience these pressures differently, but the main challenges include:

- climate variability
- strained infrastructure
- energy costs
- supply chain costs
- food and transport costs
- wage pressure
- geopolitical instability
- changing demand
- reputational risks

The world looks very different from five years ago, and even from two years ago.

Tourism destinations can no longer assume that conditions will be stable.

Resilience is no longer optional. Destinations need to understand risk and include it in everyday planning and decision-making.

3. The strategy-impact gap

The uncomfortable truth is that most destinations already have strategies.

They may have sustainability plans, reports, targets, and policy documents.

But a strategy on paper does not automatically change operational reality.

Reporting, even when it is sophisticated, does not by itself change a single decision.

Until sustainability is connected to how things actually run, it remains disconnected from real outcomes.

This is the gap we need to close:
What we say we will do versus what actually happens.

4. Sustainability as risk management

Sustainability should not be framed only as a value question.
It is also a risk management question.

When sustainability is unmanaged, several risks increase:

- operational disruption
- cost exposure
- reputational damage
- demand volatility
- infrastructure stress
- weaker community support

In other words, unmanaged sustainability means unmanaged risk.

This is not only an ethical problem. It is a business problem.

Destinations and tourism organisations therefore need to ask: where are the risks in our operations, and how can sustainability help reduce them?

5. From activity measurement to impact measurement

Tourism has invested heavily in measuring activity.

For example:

- how many sustainability reports were published
- how many projects were launched
- how many meetings were held
- how many actions were listed

But measuring activity is not the same as measuring impact.

The better question is not:

How much did we do?

The better question is:

What actually changed?

This means linking sustainability data to decisions:

- what gets funded
- what gets stopped
- what gets scaled
- what needs to be adapted
- what did not work as expected

Honest evaluation is essential, including honest reflection on actions that did not produce the expected results.

6. Two key concepts: impact and intensity

Two concepts are useful for managing sustainability in tourism.

Impact means actual value creation.

For example:

- did the ecosystem improve?
- did the community benefit?
- did the visitor experience improve?
- did the destination become more resilient?

Intensity means efficiency per unit of output.

For example:

- are we doing more with fewer resources?
- are we reducing waste, energy use, or emissions per visitor?
- are we improving quality without increasing pressure?

Both concepts matter.

Impact without efficiency is difficult to scale.

Efficiency without impact is only optimisation.

Together, they provide a more meaningful basis for decision-making.

7. Four actions that move the needle

There are four practical actions that can help move from strategy to impact.

1. Align incentives

Sustainability must be connected to accountability.

It cannot remain only an aspiration. It needs to influence targets, responsibilities, and decisions.

2. Make sustainability part of organisational DNA

Sustainability cannot sit in one team while finance, operations, HR, and management work separately.

It must be integrated across the organisation.

3. Test and adapt

Do not wait for the perfect plan.

Pilot, measure, adjust, and improve. Even small improvements can show whether the organisation is moving in the right direction.

4. Build flexibility

More shocks are coming, whether small or large.

Tourism systems need to be designed to absorb disruption. Flexibility should be built into organisations, destinations, and value chains.

8. Tool example: Tourism Community Impact Index

One useful example is a benchmarking tool developed by the Social Progress Imperative in cooperation with the Arctic Europe Tourism Cluster, with support from the European Union.

The tool helps communities understand how tourism affects local well-being.

It combines two complementary indexes.

The first is the Tourism Intensity Index.

It measures the significance of tourism in a specific area, such as a country, region, municipality, or community.

It may include indicators related to:

- the share of tourism in the economy
- accommodation intensity
- tourism activities
- tourism supply

The second is the Tourism Community Impact Index.

It assesses tourism's impact across five dimensions:

- well-being
- economy
- infrastructure and services
- environment and resilience
- governance and inclusion

Examples of indicators include education, knowledge, elderly care, crime rates, health access, local business density, youth employment, poverty risk, tax collection, connectivity,

access to services, waste, energy, water discharge, protected land, accessibility, destination management, and sustainability certification.

The main value of the tool is that it helps destinations see tourism as part of a wider ecosystem.

Tourism affects communities in both positive and negative ways. Destinations need to be aware of both.

9. Key takeaway

- Strategy sets the direction.
- Operations are where impact is created or lost.
- Execution is the discipline of following through, measuring, learning, and adapting.
- Sustainability is a capability built day by day, decision by decision.
- What matters is not only what we say we will do, but what actually happens.