

9

Business Events and Diplomacy

Conferences are the soft power assets that allow us to sell Sydney and NSW to the world and, following the global pandemic, this is now more important than ever.

Lyn Lewis-Smith, CEO, Business Events Sydney

From a narrow perspective, business events may be seen as isolated events occurring within particular industry sectors (i.e. science, business, agriculture, education, finance etc.). However, there is increasing awareness that, in reality, they are multifaceted assets to economies, government entities, communities and industries, and that they are able to make significant contributions to broader societal and diplomatic outcomes. Business events not only deliver direct economic benefits (via delegates occupying hotel rooms and spending tourist dollars) (Foley *et al.*, 2019) but serve to strengthen international relationships in respect of both delegates and institutions, showcase local expertise (Foley *et al.*, 2010; Foley *et al.*, 2013), attract investment and trade, bring focus to global issues (Edwards *et al.*, 2011), advance international research agendas (Edwards *et al.*, 2017), and promote places and locations to strengthen place branding and attraction (Edwards *et al.*, 2016).

The following case study considers the role of a major international business event, the 11th China-LAC Business Summit, in creating and/or establishing mutually beneficial trade partnerships among government representatives, investors and business operators from China and Latin American (LA) and Caribbean (C) countries. It also discusses the contribution the event made toward raising the profile of the host city, Punta del Este, as a meetings industry destination and the ways in which it acted as a catalyst for regional economic growth and development in Uruguay.

Whilst there is considerable anecdotal evidence suggesting the event was impactful in each of these areas of legacy, capturing and measuring the extent to which it contributed is more difficult. There were no processes, tools or human resources allocated toward formally capturing research data in the planning

phase or from participants during the event itself. It was only decided nearly two months after the event had concluded that it would be useful to gather some primary data (interviews) and use existing secondary data (reports and statistics) to collate a report. Even then, few resources and a very short timeframe were allotted, which meant the primary data were limited to interviews with event organisers.

Despite these challenges, the information upon which the case study is built still offers valuable insights into the ways in which the China-LAC Business Summit contributed to legacy creation for those parties involved. It also offers a useful base on which similar studies may build. Future researchers will benefit from the perspectives it presents in terms of how the business event was positioned and executed to achieve specific legacy outcomes. Industry practitioners and event professionals will also benefit from the opportunities it offers to deepen their understanding of diverse markets and subsequently create similar outcomes in other settings. Against the background of this case study, soft power, and particularly the links between a country's foreign policy, culture and business events, is discussed in the theoretical considerations section, with specific reference to China.

Case study: Investing in business events for regional growth and development

| | |
|---|--|
| Business event | 11th China-LAC Business Summit 2017 |
| Location | Punta del Este – Uruguay |
| Type of event | Commercial/trade business summit |
| Business event purpose | To improve trade and investment pathways and opportunities between the countries involved |
| Primary audience | Chinese, Latin American and Caribbean developers, business representatives, government (local, regional and national), investors, planners and the media (2315 delegates in total) |
| Primary business event legacy | Generated and consolidated strategic commercial ties between investors, government organisations and businesses from China, Latin America and the Caribbean to support economic development and infrastructure growth |
| Additional legacies (beyond tourism) | Promotion of Punta del Este and surrounding regions as a business meetings and tourism destination; creation of a more stable local economy as a result of 'de-seasonalising' the tourism industry; more effective allocation of available global resources in major infrastructure projects |
| Summary quote | "(This business event) was and still is a powerful tool, showcasing Punta del Este at an international level. It's a perfect example of the benefits that countries and communities can obtain through international business." |

This case study (CS) was adapted from: Alvez, M. J., Sinigaglia, I., Lourdes, A. and Perrier, G. (2019).

Background

Punta del Este is a beachside city in southeast Uruguay, Latin America. In summer its resident population of around 10,000 swells to nearly five times that, as thousands of wealthy tourists head to what is sometimes referred to as 'The St. Tropez of South America'. Property prices, rents and the cost of living in the city are incredibly high and there is no public housing. This has forced low and even middle income earners to the fringes, creating a unique and relatively sociologically homogenous community profile and a playground for the rich.

About the China-LAC business summit

The China-LAC Business Summit is an annual business event organised by the Chinese Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT), with the cooperation of the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB). The first edition of this highly successful business event took place in Santiago in 2007. It focuses on key issues facing Chinese, Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) business communities in light of broader international economic and trade development trends. Political leaders, experts, representatives of international organisations and financial institutions, as well as entrepreneurs from China and LAC countries, are invited to discuss trade and investment policies, market opportunities, and mutually beneficial cooperation. The summit is held annually in China and LAC countries on a rotating basis and attracts more than 1000 delegates from nearly 30 LAC countries each year.

It is the most important annual business event for businesspeople, entrepreneurs and the governments of China, Latin America and the Caribbean, with regard to the exchange of business and investment prospects. Its 11th edition was held in Uruguay from 30 November to 2 December 2017 and was organised by Uruguay XXI (the investment, export and country brand agency) and Grupo Elis. Uruguay was chosen as host destination of the business event in recognition of the country's long history of trade and diplomatic relations with China. The initiative was identified as an important element of the 2015-2019 China-Latin America Cooperation Plan, promoted by the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States.

The rationale behind establishment of this annual business event was based on regional features that suggested improved relations between the countries would be mutually beneficial.

Features that gave China a place in the relationship were:

- A growth rate significantly higher than the world's average;
- One of the world's greatest food exporters and importers;
- A strong middle class;
- Strategic partner for the promotion of global trade; and
- Great opportunities for complementarity.