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Sustainability, evaluation and industry trends

Learning objectives

On completion of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Explain the importance of event sustainability
- Discuss the business case for sustainability
- Recognise the scope of event sustainability and the three pillars of sustainability
- Discuss imperatives for reducing the carbon footprint associated with all stages of the conduct of planned events
- Explain current industry trends, recognising the potential of planned events to initiate real change in all aspects of sustainability
- Examine practices in all areas associated with sustainability and explain current industry trends that move beyond sustainability to a focus on regeneration.

Sustainability has been defined as *“the process of living within the limits of available physical, natural, and social resources in ways that allow the living systems in which humans are embedded to thrive in perpetuity”* (Sustain SU, 2010). Hence, in terms of environmental sustainability, there needs to be a focus on the use of renewable rather than non-renewable resources. And even with renewable resources, there needs to be a focus on avoiding over-utilisation and wastage. Sustainability is about more than just ‘being green’. It is about doing things efficiently and effectively, being innovative and creating a positive impact, achieving excellence, and leaving lasting legacies.

With the same focus on the longer term, sustainable development can be defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. With the world's population increasing at an incredible rate, the challenges associated with sustainable development have become enormous. Increases in population naturally lead to increases in energy usage, and adding to that dilemma is the fact that increases in per capita income accelerate energy usage even further. According to the worldometer the current growth in population is approximately 81 million people per year and the fact that the world's two most populated nations, China, and India, are amongst the fastest growing economies, makes that dilemma an even bigger one. The key implications of a wealthier, more populated world are that the world's natural resources are being used up at a far greater rate than the rate at which they can be regenerated. For several years, the carrying capacity of our global ecosystem has been greatly exceeded.

The importance of sustainability

According to the Events Industry Council, sustainability for events means, *“taking action towards preserving our natural environment; promoting a healthy, inclusive society; and supporting a thriving economy”*. Serious attempts at the application of sustainability concepts to mega events can be traced back to at least the early 1990s with the planning and staging of the Barcelona 1992 Olympics. Although sustainability has been taken seriously in the events industry for at least the last three decades, we still have a worsening outlook in terms of climate change, which is highlighted by changes to the way in which it has been framed over the last decade, moving from a 'climate risk' to a 'climate crisis' (Coles, 2021).

At the same time, extreme inequalities exist in the distribution of wealth and natural resources. Large parts of the world are experiencing extreme poverty and roughly 800 million people are starving. And while food production comes at enormous cost in terms of energy usage and climate change, at least a third of the food is wasted. If 40% of that wasted food could be redirected to the starving millions, the problem of world starvation would be solved, making food wastage not only one of our biggest sustainability problems but one of the world's dumbest problems.

The events industry is responsible for a significant proportion of food wastage. Most event managers and event caterers have experienced FORO, (Fear Of Running Out). This drives event caterers and managers to over-cater, and waste one of the world's most valuable resources.



What strategies could be developed to reduce or offset food wastage at events?

While we often hear about the climate change 'debate' there is no real debate. Significant levels of global warming have been recorded for at least the last century, with temperatures now 1° Celsius above per-industrial levels and increasing at a rate of 0.2°C every decade. 1° C may not seem like much but it has already led to significant problems including sea level rises, species extinction, and extreme weather events. Scientists urge for efforts to keep the temperature increase below 1.5°C and indicate that rises greater than 2°Cs above pre-industrial levels would be disastrous.

In addition, multiple studies that have been published in peer-reviewed journal articles clearly indicate that at least 98% of actively publishing scientists agree that global warming is the result of human activity. Planned events are one category of human activity that leads to global warming. Furthermore, global warming will continue well after the causes are brought under control, perhaps by as much as 50 years. Scientists warn that there is a 'tipping point', a point of no return, which may be rapidly approaching. Immediate action is now required.

Did you know? Scotland is positioning itself as a conference destination having hosted the global conference on climate change, featuring a two week schedule including 50 events and focusing on finance, energy, nature, youth and empowerment. In view of the immediate action required by global leaders in the fight against climate change, the destination presented key sustainability initiatives required for event planning. One key consideration was the need for global collaboration to achieve a net zero economy. The United Nations (UN) climate change conference was held in November 2021 in Glasgow, Scotland and set out to unite the world in the battle against climate change. The key goals at the summit included:

- Secure global net zero by mid century
- Protect communities and natural habitat
- Mobilise finance for climate change
- Collaborate to deliver on goals

For more on the COP26 goals visit <https://ukcop26.org/cop26-goals/>



While there are compelling reasons for event sustainability, does the development of comprehensive sustainability policies and practices make good business sense? Why?

The business case for sustainability

While the case for sustainability is compelling in terms of human life on our planet, there is also a business case for sustainability. Yet sometimes in the mistaken belief that the costs outweigh the benefits, environmental and social concerns are ignored or neglected. However, the costs are often short-term while the benefits are often long-term and hence, the real trade-off is not between profits and sustainability but between the short-term and the long-term. In a culture and a time in history in which 'time is money', the short-term often wins out. This is particularly the case when event managers are presented with an extraordinary array of competing demands:

- Market
- Environmental
- Social
- Economic
- Technological.

And all of the associated changes and impacts need to be recognised, addressed, and managed.

But the reality is that the benefits associated with the development of a good track record in terms of social and environmental issues more than pays off financially. The most obvious benefits are:

- Avoiding legal issues and associated costs through compliance with relevant regulations and legislation;
- Reducing the cost of wastage;
- Increasing revenue as a result of greater levels of customer (or event attendee) acceptance and loyalty;
- Becoming an employer of choice and gaining greater levels of acceptance, loyalty, and commitment from employees and volunteers;
- Developing a more positive reputation amongst a broad range of stakeholders;
- Developing a more enlightened vision of the future.

The last of these benefits may take time, and may only occur after sustainability efforts have become embedded within the business, but may also be referred to as enlightened self-interest. These embedded sustainability efforts have a clear, positive, and lasting impact on the business performance of all enterprises including event companies. By embedding