

SUSTAINABLE EVENTS, THE GATEWAY FOR ONLINE EVENTS

Daniel Moise¹, Amelia Diaconu², Svetlana Platagea Gombos³ and Silviu Diaconu⁴

^{1), 3), 4)} Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

²⁾ Artifex University, Romania

E-mail: moisedaniel@mk.ase.ro; E-mail: diaconu.amelia@gmail.com

E-mail: svegombos@yahoo.com.sg; E-mail: sdiaconu@gmail.com

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Abstract

Events play a very important role in the development of any country, but any gathering of people does not result only in the economic and socio-cultural evolution of a city, region, but comes together with some drawbacks the carbon footprint and environmental problems that can badly and irreparable influence the ecosystem. Qualitative researches were deployed among direct audience that took part in different types of events, no matter the size or the type of the events. This research is aimed at discovering, on one hand, the degree in which the direct audience might influence event organizers to realize sustainable events and the steps needed to be taken in order that this could happen.

Keywords

Sustainable events, green events, waste, pollution, interaction, online events

JEL Classification: M30, O31, Q01, Q53

Introduction

The frequency and the intensity of events are increasing each year in most countries and cities, all around the world, no matter if they are sport events, religious, corporate, or non-corporate events, or events that are targeting internal or external stakeholders (Angheluta et al., 2019). MICE industry (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Events) has a growing trend as shown in Table 1, events organized in most representative cities. We can clearly see that the number of meetings per cities has doubled, or in the case of the capitals of Lithuania and Romania rose 4 and respectively 7 times. The general trend was the increase in organized events per cities. The international trend (ICCA, 2013) regarding the average number of direct audiences for association meetings is getting smaller, it has dropped from 1,253 participants per event, in the period of 1963-1967 to 424 in the period of 2008- 2012. Nevertheless, the rate, at which attendance is shrinking, is much lower than the rate of the growth in the number of meetings.

Table no. 1 Number of international meetings per cities from 2001 up to 2017

Year	2001	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Country									
USA	478	623	877	833	829	831	925	934	941
Germany	301	542	626	649	722	659	667	689	682
U.K.	237	399	487	477	525	543	582	582	592
Spain	223	451	496	550	562	578	572	533	564
Italy	277	341	428	390	447	452	504	468	515
France	279	371	476	469	527	533	522	545	506
Japan	217	305	244	341	342	337	355	410	414
China P.R.	84	282	343	311	340	332	333	410	376
Canada	155	229	268	273	290	265	308	287	360
Lithuania	6	38	40	41	57	53	34	42	47
Romania	17	39	60	54	44	68	77	69	70

Source: adapted after ICCCA Reports: 2000-2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017

Literature Review

This industry is one of the fastest-growing industries and if it is properly used, especially in the case of organizing mega events, it can be a crucial synergy force of improving the economy, the infrastructure and the socio-cultural development. Local governments (Pereira, 2018) are increasingly justifying the hosting of mega-events for their legacy value, assuming that all local residents' benefit (Bran et. all, 2018) from those events. Events (Sungsoo & Jongwoo, 2016) attract visitors to event-hosting cities and further induce more people to visit even after the event has passed. The gathering of people means not only logistics problems, or even terrorist threats, events being seen as good targets for those who want to transmit a message through terror (Bodislav et al., 2019). Nevertheless, events can have a negative impact on nature, as most of these gatherings can produce a lot of waste (Bran et al., 2018)

We should not disregard the carbon footprint that is resulting as a consequence of creating, deploying and taking part in the event either by the individuals, organization or the whole community (Rădulescu et al., 2018). If the event's organizers are not obliged, or do not have norms or requirements to fulfil this task, it is very unlikely for them to appeal to green event checklists. Alternatively, creating and deploying sustainable events means reducing the costs. In general, bio-based and biodegradable plastics are more expensive than fossil-based plastics on a weight basis, bearing in mind that most bio-based plastics have a higher density that contribute to this higher price (Burlacu et al., 2019). Another factor contributing to the increase or decrease of fossil-based plastics is the fluctuant oil prices, while biomass prices are more stable. (Oever, et al., 2017)

Sustainability has become one of the main issues preoccupying societies and economies worldwide. Moreover, there is a growing (Caiado, et al., 2018) pressure to improve quality, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of services. It is an industry, which accounts for more than 50% of gross domestic product in the big economies around the world (Jianu et al., 2019).

The key elements of sustainable development that can influence society, economy and environment, presented in figure number 1 can contribute to a different extent. The foundations of the concept of sustainable development include (Kwasiborska and Stelmach, 2014):

- Economy – the benefits are gained for the general public, harmonized by social and environmental costs;
- Environment – the use at the minimum of the non-renewable natural resources, or even finding non-pollutant methods, or bio products, with the aim of decreasing the negative impact on the ecosystem;
- Society – improving the quality of life of the community by creating and developing new businesses and jobs.

The emphasis (European Commission, 2018) on economy associated with environment must lead to sustainable economy, or a viable world, while society and economy must lead to social equity, or a fair world, meanwhile society and environment must lead to local environment, or a livable world. We might state that the synergy resulted from suitability of social equity, sustainable economy and local environment results the sustainable development.

Other specialists consider that even Institutions play a very important role regarding sustainable development. For the reason that laws must be given in order to determine the society, organizations and all the stakeholders to adopt, or to act towards a sustainable development. The institutional criteria of sustainability depend on the (Čiegis and Gineitienė, 2008): justice within the frame of one generation and between different generations; international justice; integration of social, economic and ecological requirements; participation of all social groups and the entire community in the formulation and implementation of strategies.



Fig. no. 1 Key elements of sustainable development

Source: Kwasiborska, A., Stelmach, A., 2014. Analysis of Airport Traffic in The Context of Environmental Throughput, Transport Problems, Vol. 9 Issue 1

Events are created for the communities, with the help and support of the communities, and most of the times, the communities are those who are directly involved and benefit from the deployment of events (Costache et al., 2015). However, not all the times, events have only benefits, as it is very likely to encounter downturns like the construction of “white elephants”. The white elephant concept is (Turró and Penyalver, 2018) used to qualify public investments representing a severe misallocation of society's resources or expenditures that can be deemed to reduce the wellbeing of its future members. Nothing is (Robinson and Torvik, 2005) as depressing in a developing economy as the presence of white elephants seen as investment projects with negative social surplus, being a particular type of inefficient redistribution of resources.

The buildings constructed (Gezici and Er, 2014) for mega events become “white elephants” due to their inability to reach full capacity in the post-event period, as they have a high cost

for maintenance, and without public subsidy, they can not be financially viable.

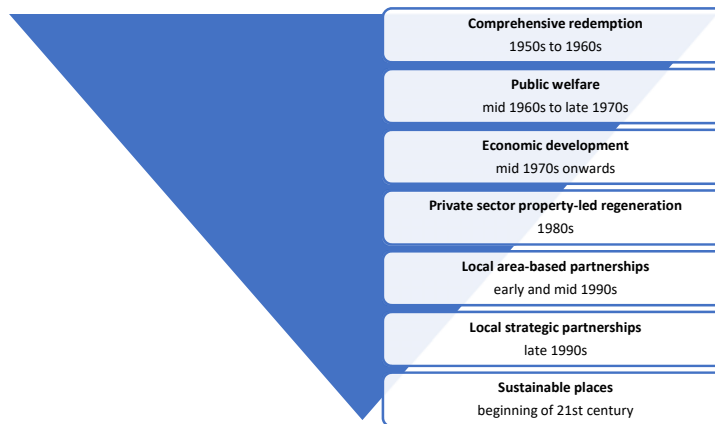


Fig. no. 2 Evolution of urban regeneration policy

Source: McDonald, S., Malys, N. & Malienė, V., 2009. *Urban Regeneration for Sustainable Communities: A Case Study, Technological and Economic Development of Economy*

Usually cities that host (deLisle, 2009) mega events like the Olympic games face the risk of the common Olympic hangovers of white-elephant projects. Many cities establish their policy objectives to host (Lindau, et al., 2016) mega events in order to thrive in economic development, urban regeneration, to reposition themselves in the global tourist market, remodeling the transport and service infrastructures, create vibrant cultural quarters and establish a network of high-grade facilities (Androniceanu et al., 2017).

Although the benefits of hosting mega events are clear, the appeal of hosting this kind of events seems (Maiello and Pasquinelli, 2015) to be decreasing. Recently four European cities have recently dropped off the bid for the 2022 Winter Games: Oslo, Stockholm, Lviv and Krakow. The most common concerns for the opportunity cost are not taken into consideration only the financial, but also the social and environmental costs and they determine the officials to withdraw, or abstain from the bidding process (Ioniță, et al., 2009). Some of the direct consequences involved are eviction and gentrification, thus intensifying the existing inequalities. The inequalities amplify especially when there is (Zhang and Zhao, 2009) a lack of common desires between the residents of the city and the city government.

In order to overcome these issues, the cities officials around the world should follow (McDonald, et al., 2009) the steps of the UK communities, as represented in figure 2, from comprehensive redemption up to becoming sustainable places, that emphasis that an urban renaissance should be founded on the principles of design excellence, economic strength, environmental responsibility, good governance and social well-being, resulting economic sustainability and environmental sustainability, as well.

Research methodology

We have conducted a qualitative research to find out the degree, in which the stakeholders of the events adopt a sustainable way of living, and if they are also concerned about how green the events that they attend are, and also to see if they are reluctant towards online events. The primary data was collected through in-depth interviews from respondents being part of Generation Z, or iGeneration as they were named by Cheryl Russell (Horovitz, 2012), or Digital Generation (Francis and Hoefel, 2018). They are digital native, being used to social

networks, and are heavy internet users from early ages. We have conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews, with 16 respondents with ages between 22 to 25 years old. We wanted to discover what their main opinions and perceptions are with the view to being eco-friendly, but at the same time, how they regard sustainable and online events.

Some of the most important objectives of the research that we took into discussion are:

1. how and in which manner the respondents adopt a green attitude towards nature, companies and brands.
2. the steps that they take in order to be eco-friendly as much as possible.
3. the events, that they took part in, were sustainable or green events.
4. instruments and techniques used by organizations to promote the fact that their events are green

Appealing to qualitative research, the primary data can be collected both through in-depth interviews, or focus group. The sampling was done using the simple random method, selecting members of the generation Z, being more open-minded and heavy internet users and on the same time, being more preoccupied by the environment changes and worldwide pollution. The recruitment of the respondents for the achievement of the information gathering stage was done by identifying those who take part in events and have accounts on several social media networks. An interview guide was used, divided into 3 main sections: environment issues and the respondents' behavior towards ecology, sustainable events and the percentage in which they are organized and perceived by the participants, and the possibilities of taking part in different online events using the technology at hand. The interview guide has been built to solve the decision-making issue from which this research has begun and to achieve all of the proposed goals. In the first module the participants were asked open questions regarding their attitude towards being eco-friendly, or having a green behavior. Most of them answered that they acknowledged that we have only one planet; the resources are limited and most of them non-renewable ones and considering this we all must take good care and we should protect the environment and the ecosystem, in general. Some of them said that they usually purchased eco and bio products, despite the fact that they had to pay more for them. They prefer to acquire led light bulbs and install smart home technologies as long as their budget allows them. They admire companies with zero waste production, or the organizations that recycle. It was mentioned IKEA Company that started a very interesting campaign of renting some type of furniture. Others mention that they take part in activities like cleaning a protected area that is full of garbage, like a forest, or even planting trees, recycling the garbage selectively and at the same time, reducing the consumption of water and energy, also not littering. They mention Earth Hour movement, when they switch off the lights for an hour. Although a study shows (Pelau and Acatrinei, 2019) that with more modern technologies such as frequent internet use, decreases the energy consumption. They would like to use electric scooters, cars or using bicycles, and some of them use this alternative means of transportation already. What can be most important to be mentioned is the fact that some of them even promote and teach their peers, meaning colleagues, friends, but also their relatives, neighbors to adopt a greener behavior. The majority of the respondents sustained that they were influenced by public figures, researchers, mass media VIP's, their peers, NGO's, the companies where they work, and less by the public policies and national legislation. Some of the reasons mentioned as an excuse for not adopting a greener behavior, was lack of information, time and even the deficit of infrastructure of recycling offered by the authorities. A respondent mentioned about the perceived and planned obsolescence that makes products, especially electronic devices to be replaced in an accelerated rate. What is even more interesting, not only planned obsolescence is taken (Durand, 2017) in discussion by the European Parliament, but also software obsolescence, "which plays a major role in the lifespan of most household devices". Products should be more user friendly and easier to be repaired and upgraded and more durable or robust, while the customers should easily order

spare parts to repair them by themselves “at a price commensurate to the nature and life-time of the product”. Consumers would like to benefit (Cerulli-Harms, et al., 2018) from durable and easily repairable products as they will also be regarded as ‘high-quality products’ and ‘money cost-savings’ in the long-term. In 2014, there was issued a report where it was discovered (European Commission, 2014) that 77% of the Europeans would like to try to get broken appliances repaired before buying new ones. In 2016, the world generated (Baldé. et al., 2017) 44.7 million metric tons of e-waste and merely only 20% was recycled through appropriate channels, with a total value of raw materials present in these appliances and devices at around 55 Billion Euros. Despite the fact that 66% of the world’s population is covered by e-waste legislation, it seems it is not only enough to enforce, implement, and encourage a green behavior, but this might be backed up with more strict laws that should heavily fine not only companies, or organizations, but also people.

In the second module, the participants were asked if they took part in sustainable events and the strategies used by the organizers to promote this fact. It was quite a surprise that almost all of them argued that companies do not promote, or do not put an emphasis on advertising whether their event is green, or not. This might seem to be either they do not want to advertise regarding this aspect, or they do not organize green events. Only the events realized for their own employees, like trainings or seminars seemed to be green events as it is the policy of the organization, but it was only the case of multinational companies. Another question was if they know or heard what ISO 20121 stands for, or the terms like sustainable events, green events. Unfortunately, none has heard, or known what they stand for. ISO 20121 - Event sustainability management systems, and was first used (www.iso.org, 2010) for the Olympic Games held in London in the year 2012. All organizations that deploy events of all types or sizes can integrate sustainability or durable development, not only in the activities that they carry on, but also the activities of their suppliers, and what is most crucial leaving behind a positive heritage. Otherwise, events can also generate some negative side effects with a considerable impact on economic, social and environment level. From the point of view of sustainability integrated in CSR means especially the current actions, event sustainability which can include benefits such as (Ajeti & Concio, 2016):

- Financial profit by creating jobs and increase the investments in SME’s enterprises.
- Positive reputation regarding not only the image of the company, but also towards all of its products or services brands.
- Environmental innovation by putting pressure on the research and development of innovative techniques and technologies to better use the resources available.

The respondents reflected and concluded that events, and especially mega events and hallmark events, generate economic development and region growth, but at the same time they have a greater negative impact on the environment as well. Especially when the organizers do not change their policies or the way, they manage to realize events. Some of the participants in the qualitative research admit that the change must come first with them and then with the others. They have heard about The Youth Strikes for Climate movement started by the Sweden’s Greta Thunberg pupil, being the first youth climate striker. Some of their main demands are (Morley, 2019) to be declared a climate emergency and priorities the environmental reforms and the school curricula should teach them about the disadvantages of climate change. Regarding the participation at an event, it is not in their power to enforce drastic changes. They can only choose to attend, or not to. They do not have enough power in forcing the event organizers to create and deliver a green event. As event consumers, they think that they cannot appeal to a pull strategy, as they do not have the right tools and instruments. There must be a law to be enforced that events have to be as green as possible. At the European Union level, some steps have already been taken regarding the pollution with plastic products. One million of the planet’s eight million species of plants and animals, are

threatened (Gerretsen, 2019) with extinction by humans, with alarming implications for human survival (Fears, 2019), according to a U.N. report on biodiversity and ecosystem report released in May 2019. Until 2021 (Leung, 2019) single-use plastic items will be banned, including plastic straws, cotton bud sticks, food containers and other plastic products that are not reusable. All the countries from the European Union can choose (Reuters, 2019) the methods of reducing the use of such plastic products, but they have to reach the target of collecting and recycling at least 90% of beverage bottles by 2029.

Conclusions

As we have discovered, the members from Generation Z, acknowledge their power regarding the environment and behavior towards recycling. They want to change not only their own behavior, but also the attitude of their peers, colleagues and family in order to adopt more eco-friendly actions. Event organizers should put more emphasis on sustainable events and promote the ways they create and deploy events with respect towards nature. Environmentally friendly and sustainable responsible practices regarding creating and deploying events must be a long-term industry movement, not just a trend. As we can notice, steps are being taken, but more restrictive and severe laws must be enforced, not only for companies and organizations, but also for individuals. At the moment, around 60 countries in the world have (Kiunguyu, 2019) banned or partly banned single-use plastic bags including China, France, Rwanda and Italy. In Kenya, in 2017 a very drastic law started to be enforced (Alitash, 2019), with penalties for distributing, selling and even producing single-use plastic bags, which means either 4 years of prison, or a \$ 40,000 fine. Although there are international standards like ISO 20121, Event sustainability management systems, they must become mandatory worldwide, if we really want to change our carbon footprint and to have a cleaner planet to leave behind to our children.

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