

The contribution of festivals and events towards the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

Background to the special section

By addressing economic, social and environmental issues, festivals and events are delivering short- and long-term benefits for stakeholders as well as society. According to the United Nations (UN), implementing innovation is the key to facilitating sustainable development and to address complex global issues related to society, the economy and/or the environment (United Nations, 2021).

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by all UN member states in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. The SDGs listed below, which are integrated, recognise that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance economic, social and environmental sustainability. The festivals and events industry will require creativity, knowhow, technology and financial resources from all of society in order to achieve these ambitious targets in their contexts.

The 17 SDGs can be clustered into the following five areas of significance (Visser, 2015):

- (1) *People*: no poverty (SDG1); zero hunger (SDG2); good health and well-being (SDG3); quality education (SDG4); gender equality (SDG5); and clean water and sanitation (SDG6).
- (2) *Prosperity*: affordable clean energy (SDG7); decent work and economic development (SDG8); industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG9); reduce inequalities (SDG10); sustainable cities and communities (SDG11); responsible consumption and production (SDG12).
- (3) *Planet*: climate action (SDG13); life below water (SDG14) and life on land (SDG15).
- (4) *Peace*: peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG16).
- (5) *Partnership*: partnerships for the goals (SDG17).

Festivals and events have an opportunity to respond to the SDGs as a driver of societal change and business growth. As Jones (2018) claimed, “we are at a moment in time where events can be critical players in the global effort and act as a monumental pivot to a sustainable future that we so desperately need” (pp. xix). This should be of even greater significance in the post-coronavirus disease 2019 (post-COVID-19) period of recovery for the industry.

Yet, despite the advances in awareness of sustainability and the SDGs, the event literature on these topics is still limited and narrow in focus. Mair and Smith (2021) noted a need for research on the potential of events as tools for promoting, provoking and delivering sustainable development. They called for further work to address how events might change attitudes and behaviours by promoting sustainable lifestyles, communities and technologies. A journal special issue on this topic highlighted the need to go beyond merely making events more sustainable, to consider how events might contribute to the wider sustainability agenda (Mair and Smith, 2021).

While sustainable development has become gradually incorporated into the objectives of hosting mega-events (Hall, 2012), mega-event studies have predominated in the area of economic and environmental sustainability and predominantly in the urban development



context (Liang *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, there has been far less attention paid to smaller scale events and festivals, but they are important as well in building a sustainable future.

The aim of this special section is therefore to address the literature shortcomings relating to events and festivals in sustainable development. The section showcases how festivals and events are embracing innovation in order to achieve SDGs in their context. The guest editors have collected conceptual and empirical research articles that show how festivals and events achieve one or more of the UN SDGs.

In light of the devastating impact on the event sector globally as a result of the novel coronavirus during the period 2020–21, it is important to highlight the timing of this special collection and the relationship of this topic within the context of the pandemic. The original call for papers was distributed in December 2019, before the advent of the pandemic. The research presented here is therefore based on the work that was conducted before the pandemic. However, due to the significant impact of the pandemic on the events industry, the papers were revised to include conclusions and recommendations that address the sustainability challenges faced as a result of the pandemic. The findings of the papers therefore present relevant implications for the future of the field of study and the events industry in the recovery period, post-COVID-19.

Indeed, the topic of sustainability and sustainable development through events and festivals is of even greater importance given the need for an industry reset. It is our desire that the revival period for events and festivals will be characterised by more intentionally aligned sustainable development. It is imperative that researchers and industry stakeholders embrace the latest developments in knowledge and innovation in this field in order to transform the world we live in through events and festivals.

Synopsis of the collection of papers

Rossetti takes on a broader perspective in her study on the role of festivals in participants' health and well-being, addressing one way of contributing to SDG 3 which calls for ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being. Using a literary festival in Ireland, Rossetti makes several important contributions to our understanding of the festivals' role in generating well-being. First, she proposes five-interconnected well-being dimensions and that they influence each other; therefore, festival design must consider all these interrelated dimensions in order to generate well-being outcomes. Second, Rossetti argues that five factors contribute to these dimensions, specifically festival programme, the social environment, place, weather conditions and attendees' background. These findings are important to both festival organisers who plan events to maximise benefits for participants as well, as policymakers as using festivals is one way of inducing positive social outcomes.

Intason *et al.* address SDGs 6 and 12 by examining the dilemma facing the Songkran Festival: to uphold the traditions of the event by placing water as its central core of activities while facing water shortage issues. Although the role of water splashing is an act of spirituality and well wishing to one another, it has evolved into much-anticipated water fights across the country attracting masses of local people and tourists. This article presents the development and implementation of water-saving practices and outlines the challenges facing the organisers of these festivities. Intason *et al.* identify a number of water-saving practices and challenges facing the Songkran Festival, and illustrate three key water-saving practices for Songkran stakeholders: raising awareness of water shortage, education initiatives by the government on saving water and imposing quota-based activities during the festival to minimise water wastage. The study extends the literature of sustainable event practices, which can be used as a reference of responsible behaviour to other festivals around the world, particularly those which create resource wastage in their way of celebrating heritage and traditions, while minimising impacts to the environment.

Venske focuses on industry–education relations and how this contributes to SDG 4, which calls for quality education. Using South Africa as a case, her research is informed by key informants in the event industry in how curriculum design in undergraduate event management programmes instil sustainability concepts and practices, which are extremely vital to the healthy growth of the industry grooming tomorrow’s leaders who are aware of potential environmental impacts and work on solutions to mitigate these issues. Venske’s findings show reflective practice and critical thinking as appropriate pedagogic approaches in the event management curriculum aiming to instil sustainability concepts. Specifically, the conclusions pinpoint to knowledge, skills, values and attitudes encompassing elements of SDGs 3, 4, 8, 9, 13 and 17. Although the study is based on a South African context, these research findings are essential considerations for educating future graduates and can be applied in other cultural contexts, particularly in the event management curriculum.

Celuch makes a substantial contribution as he addresses a number of goals through their bibliometric review, in particular SDG 9, which calls for innovation in industry and infrastructure. Celuch identifies four distinctive features of technology to encourage sustainability in events through his review of research studies over the last 30 years. He argues that virtual events, artificial intelligence, big data as well as virtual and augmented reality are key research areas for innovation in the future event industry. Celuch maintains that technology is at the forefront of efforts in event sustainability and that both the academia and the industry share the responsibility in shaping future events.

Synthesis and proposed future directions for research

Given the numerous roles of events in contributing to the UN 2030 agenda, whether in a practice level of organising events, academic or research role this special edition is a timely initiative. It is time to act now for everyone who works within the events industry to embrace sustainability and unite as an industry to embed the UN sustainability goals into our events. Events can perform a two-fold responsibility in relation to the SDGs and sustainability. The physical organisation of the event itself should be implemented in a more sustainable manner, whilst events can be used as a platform to educate towards sustainability. This should become second nature, part of the planning and delivery process of organising events.

The UN sustainability goals should not be seen as being divisible, not separable into parts; one must view the SDGs and the agenda as a consolidated package, entwined together as an integrated platform. It is important for the industry to show its commitment to the UN 2030 agenda, as it applies to all countries and actors to gain momentum to change the world and to improve people’s lives and prosperity and to eradicate poverty and to reposition to sustainable development.

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