

Case Study on the Importance of Sustainability in MICE Tourism

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study developed within the Erasmus+ project MICE.N.E. (MICE Next Evolution), conducted between 2024 and 2025 across four European countries. The study is grounded in the premise that sustainability should be systematically integrated into all phases of event planning. Particular attention is given to often overlooked dimensions such as intergenerational cooperation and the use of local resources in MICE tourism.

The purpose of the study is to evaluate how environmental, social, and digital sustainability principles can be integrated into MICE event planning and to identify lessons applicable to sustainable event management in regional destinations. A qualitative case study methodology was applied, drawing on project documentation, participant observation, stakeholder discussions, and event-planning materials.

Findings indicate that practices such as digital communication, carbon-awareness measures, local sourcing, and zero-waste catering can contribute to improved sustainability performance and stakeholder engagement. The study further highlights the importance of intergenerational cooperation and local stakeholder involvement as mechanisms supporting sustainable event development. The findings suggest that integrating sustainability into MICE event planning may contribute to community involvement and support destination positioning, while also providing practical guidance for future sustainable event management.

Keywords: MICE tourism, sustainability, local resources, intergenerational cooperation, digitalisation, stakeholder engagement

1 Introduction

The MICE sector, comprising meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions, has become one of the most influential segments of contemporary tourism, generating significant economic impacts while facilitating knowledge exchange, innovation, and destination promotion (Davidson & Cope, 2003). Traditionally, both professional practice and academic research focused primarily on the economic contributions of MICE tourism, while less attention was devoted to sustainability issues. Increasing environmental concerns and growing stakeholder expectations have, however, accelerated the need for more sustainable approaches to event management.

Sustainability in tourism is commonly understood as a multidimensional concept encompassing environmental responsibility, social equity, and economic viability. Within MICE tourism, this requires the integration of sustainability principles throughout the entire event lifecycle rather than considering sustainability as an additional operational element (Mair & Jago, 2010; Jones, 2014).

Academic interest in sustainable event management has increased substantially during the past decade. Mair and Jago (2010) argue that sustainability adoption in business events is increasingly driven by stakeholder expectations and competitive positioning. Similarly, Jones (2014) emphasises that sustainability should be embedded strategically within event planning and decision-making processes.

Events affect not only immediate participants but also destination image and long-term destination development processes (Getz & Page, 2016). Consequently, sustainable event planning can support wider sustainable tourism objectives by balancing economic development, environmental protection, and community well-being (Butler, 2006).

Stakeholder collaboration represents another critical component of sustainable event development. Moscardo (2008) highlights the role of community capacity building, while Wallstam et al. (2020) demonstrate the importance of cooperation among stakeholders when implementing sustainable event practices. In addition, digitalisation has emerged as an important facilitator of sustainable event management by reducing resource consumption and improving communication efficiency (Sigala, 2018).

Despite growing scholarly attention, several dimensions remain underexplored, particularly intergenerational cooperation and the use of local resources. Intergenerational collaboration enables knowledge transfer between experienced professionals and younger participants, while local sourcing may strengthen regional economies and reduce environmental impacts associated with transportation (Hall & Gössling, 2016).

Against this background, the purpose of this paper is threefold: (1) to present a sustainability-oriented MICE event developed within the Erasmus+ project MICE.N.E. (MICE Next Evolution), (2) to evaluate how environmental, social, and digital sustainability principles were integrated into the planning and implementation of the event, and (3) to derive transferable recommendations for sustainable MICE event planning in comparable regional contexts.

To achieve this purpose, the study addresses the following research question:

RQ: How can environmental, social, and digital sustainability practices be integrated into MICE event planning, and what practical effects do these practices have on stakeholder involvement and destination-related outcomes?

The study does not attempt to measure destination branding directly. Instead, it explores how sustainability-oriented event practices may contribute to destination visibility and regional positioning through collaboration with local stakeholders, promotion of local resources, and community engagement.

2 Methods

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, which is appropriate for investigating complex processes within real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). Qualitative case studies enable an in-depth understanding of sustainability practices, stakeholder interaction, and contextual influences that shape MICE events (Getz & Page, 2016).

The empirical research consists of two competing student-developed case studies on the same topic: preparing a blueprint for a local event. Both student groups consisted of students coming from four different universities located in four different EU countries participating in Erasmus+ MICE.N.E. project (2024-2025). Besides the four European universities, the project involved four industry partners from the MICE sector. Within the project framework, eight thematic case-study areas were developed, where each topic was independently addressed by two competing international student teams who were working parallelly on the same topic, namely on elaborating suggestions, how to conduct a local event following the 3BL.

The event the students have prepared the suggestions for, has been realised two months after the project was completed, and several suggestions the students have prepared, were realised in practice.

Within the project, eight thematic challenges related to sustainable MICE event development were assigned to student teams. Each challenge was independently addressed by two teams working in parallel. All student groups were meeting regularly online together with the supervisors from the local university and from the local tourism organisations that are involved in event planning- and management.

The present study is limited to only one thematic challenge concerning sustainable event planning and compares two student-developed event concepts created within this framework. Both concepts addressed the same sustainability objectives but proposed somewhat different implementation approaches. The analysis therefore focuses on identifying common sustainability practices emerging across the two teams rather than comparing their performance.

Data collection included:

- two student case-study reports;
- project documentation and planning materials;
- sustainability plans and event documentation;
- participant observation during planning and implementation phases;

- informal semi-structured discussions with twelve stakeholders representing educational institutions, tourism organisations, catering providers, and event organisers;
- focus group assessment, consisting of four local university supervisors and two supervisors appointed in the local tourism board that was planning the annual meeting of tourism stakeholders (approx. 150 persons).

The questions were tackling the sustainability practices related to event planning- and management, the intergenerational cooperation, and the digitalisation of events. The limitation we need to mention here was the number of interviews conducted (4 university supervisors, 2 employees of the local tourist board and 24 students).

To enhance research validity, methodological triangulation was employed by comparing findings across multiple data sources (Yin, 2018).

Qualitative content analysis was conducted using a coding framework derived from four sustainability dimensions:

- environmental sustainability;
- social sustainability;
- economic sustainability;
- digital sustainability.

Coding focused on identifying sustainability practices, implementation mechanisms, stakeholder involvement, and observed outcomes. A combination of deductive and inductive coding was used to allow both structured analysis and the identification of emerging themes.

3 Results

The findings are organised according to the sustainability dimensions used in the coding framework and directly address the research question concerning the integration of sustainability practices into MICE event planning.

Table 1. Sustainability Practices and Observed Outcomes

Sustainability Dimension	Practice Implemented	Observed Outcome
Digital sustainability	Online registration and digital communication	Elimination of printed registration forms and programmes
Environmental sustainability	Paperless event management	Reduced use of physical materials
Environmental sustainability	Promotion of public and shared transport	Increased awareness of travel-related emissions
Environmental sustainability	Local sourcing of catering ingredients	Support for regional suppliers and shorter supply chains
Environmental sustainability	Zero-waste catering concept	Reduced food waste and use of disposable materials
Social sustainability	Intergenerational cooperation	Knowledge exchange between students, academics, and practitioners

Social sustainability	Participation of culinary students	Practical learning opportunities and skills development
Social sustainability	Stakeholder collaboration	Stronger cooperation among educational and tourism stakeholders

The analysed event took place in Maribor, Slovenia, and involved approximately 150 participants. Sustainability measures were incorporated throughout planning and implementation processes.

Digital sustainability was most visible through the implementation of a fully digital communication and registration system. Invitations, programmes, registration materials, and feedback forms were distributed electronically, eliminating the need for printed documentation. This contributed to reduced material consumption and improved communication efficiency.

Environmental sustainability measures focused on resource reduction and responsible consumption. Participants were encouraged to use public transportation and car-sharing options. Although no formal carbon-footprint assessment was conducted, basic emissions-awareness information was communicated to participants in order to encourage more sustainable travel behaviour.

Local sourcing represented another important sustainability measure. Catering services were organised using locally sourced ingredients, thereby supporting regional suppliers and reducing transportation requirements. In cooperation with a local culinary school, a zero-waste catering concept was implemented that sought to minimise food waste and reduce the use of disposable materials.

The social dimension was evident through extensive stakeholder collaboration and intergenerational cooperation. Students, academic staff, tourism professionals, local organisations, and service providers participated in event preparation and implementation. Culinary students actively contributed to food preparation and service under professional supervision, gaining practical experience while supporting event operations.

Stakeholder involvement also contributed to the localisation of event content and sustainability initiatives. Local tourism organisations and educational institutions participated in planning activities, ensuring that sustainability measures reflected regional characteristics and available resources.

Overall, the analysis indicates that sustainability practices were implemented most consistently through digital communication, local sourcing, stakeholder collaboration, and educational involvement. While direct measurement of destination-branding outcomes was beyond the scope of this study, stakeholder discussions suggested that the event supported the presentation of local identity and sustainable destination values.

The findings provide evidence relevant to the research question. Environmental sustainability was reflected in local sourcing, waste reduction efforts, and mobility awareness measures. Social sustainability emerged through intergenerational cooperation and stakeholder engagement. Digital sustainability was evident in the extensive use of electronic communication and registration systems. Together, these practices demonstrate how

sustainability principles can be incorporated into MICE event planning while simultaneously supporting stakeholder participation and regional visibility.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that sustainability can be integrated into MICE event planning in ways that support environmental responsibility, stakeholder engagement, and operational effectiveness. The study confirms previous research emphasising the importance of embedding sustainability within event planning processes rather than treating sustainability as a separate activity (Jones, 2014; Mair & Jago, 2010).

One important finding concerns the role of digitalisation. The use of digital communication tools reduced dependence on printed materials while facilitating information exchange among participants and organisers. These findings are consistent with previous studies highlighting the contribution of digital technologies to sustainable tourism management (Sigala, 2018).

The study also highlights the importance of social sustainability. Intergenerational cooperation enabled practical knowledge exchange between students, educators, and industry professionals. Such collaboration may contribute to professional development and strengthen connections between education and practice within the tourism sector.

Environmental and social sustainability measures were found to be mutually reinforcing. Local sourcing and zero-waste catering not only reduced certain environmental impacts but also supported local suppliers and strengthened community engagement. These findings support broader sustainable tourism principles advocating the integration of environmental, economic, and social objectives (Butler, 2006; Hall & Gössling, 2016).

The findings support several direct implications for MICE event organisers. These include adopting digital communication systems, cooperating with local suppliers, implementing waste-reduction practices, and actively involving students and local stakeholders. These measures were directly observed within the case and demonstrated practical feasibility.

Additional implications, including possible contributions to destination visibility and local positioning, stakeholder commitment, and long-term sustainability capacity, should be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive. Although the case suggests such potential benefits, these outcomes were not directly measured and therefore require additional empirical verification.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is based on a single event context and two associated student-developed case studies, limiting the generalisability of findings. In addition, the qualitative approach does not permit precise measurement of sustainability outcomes.

Future research should compare multiple MICE events across different destinations, organisational models, and event sizes. The inclusion of quantitative indicators such as carbon emissions, waste reduction rates, participant satisfaction, stakeholder engagement measures, and the proportion of local suppliers would strengthen evidence-based sustainability assessment. Further investigation of intergenerational cooperation is also warranted, particularly regarding its influence on knowledge transfer, innovation, and community

engagement. Finally, future studies should examine whether sustainable MICE practices influence destination image, stakeholder commitment, repeat-event attractiveness, and participant perceptions of destination quality.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that integrating environmental, social, and digital sustainability practices into MICE event planning is both feasible and beneficial. The findings highlight the value of local sourcing, digitalisation, stakeholder collaboration, and intergenerational cooperation as practical mechanisms supporting more sustainable event management and regional tourism development.

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