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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FROM AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE: A REVIEW OF SCIENTIFIC THEORIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MEETINGS INDUSTRY

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to synthesise the main scientific theories and concepts relating to sustainable development and to indicate their relevance to analyses of enterprises and the meetings industry. Theories and concepts are organised according to three levels of analysis: macro, meso, and micro. The theoretical part discusses, in sequence, ecological economics, the limits to growth, the planetary boundaries concept, the distinction between weak and strong sustainability, socio-ecological systems theory, resilience, the commons approach, ecological modernisation, industrial ecology, cleaner production, the socio-technical transitions perspective, transition management, the capability approach, doughnut economics, and degrowth. The article then analyses the most significant business and management theories used in sustainability research, including stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory, institutional theory, the resource-based view, the natural-resource-based view, dynamic capabilities, the sustainable value concept, the paradox perspective, stewardship, political CSR, and theories of sustainable and circular business models. The article also highlights the contribution of Polish researchers and proposes an interpretative framework that links the concept of sustainability with the category of legacy within the MICE sector. The study is review-based and integrative in nature. However, the use of theory in relation to the meetings industry serves not as a rhetorical justification of practices, but as a means of defining boundary conditions, stakeholder coordination mechanisms, evaluation criteria, and design directions for creating a sustainable event legacy. The review indicates the need to treat sustainable development simultaneously as a normative, systemic, institutional, and strategic category, while maintaining a distinction between global constraints and operational organisational decisions.

Keywords: sustainability; meetings industry; MICE; event legacy; stakeholder theory; resilience; sustainable business models

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development belongs to a group of scientific categories that have undergone significant change in recent decades. Its presence in public discourse has led to its transformation into one of the central concepts used to describe the relationship between the economy, society, and the environment. Contemporary debate on sustainability transcends the boundaries of individual disciplines, drawing upon the achievements of economics, management sciences, sociology, environmental sciences, political science, and transition studies. Consequently, the concept of sustainable development currently serves normative, analytical, strategic, and regulatory functions simultaneously.

The classical understanding of sustainable development refers to the ability to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs¹. In contemporary approaches, however, the definition has been expanded and further refined by numerous theories that place emphasis on different aspects: some highlight the biophysical limits to growth, others focus on intra- and intergenerational equity, while still others analyse the institutional, organisational, and technological conditions that enable sustainable transformation. For this reason, a review of sustainable development theories cannot be limited to a single research tradition.

In this context, the category of transformation assumes significance. It is understood not as an incidental correction of economic or organisational practices, but as a complex, multi-level, and long-term process of restructuring social, technological, institutional, and cultural systems (Grzeszczyk, 2016: 31; Sadłakowski, 2016: 22). An additional explanatory framework is resilience theory, which explains an enterprise's ability to respond to disruptions, learn, adapt, and maintain economic, social, and environmental performance under conditions of uncertainty. In the case of enterprises and business events, resilience enables analysis of the capacity to respond to crises, regulatory changes, cost pressures, stakeholder expectations, and environmental risks (Grzeszczyk, 2016: 32–34).

¹ The Brundtland Commission's classical definition presents sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs; this definition remains a fundamental point of reference for subsequent operationalisations of sustainable development.

Transformation, however, indicates a broader direction of change: from one-off process optimisation towards the redesign of the logic of value creation, collaboration, and accountability.

From a sustainable development perspective, transformation implies not only a change in tools and procedures, but also a change in the underlying operational logic, value creation criteria, and methods of coordination among actors in economic and social life. This approach allows sustainability to be viewed as a process that requires the simultaneous consideration of environmental constraints, social justice requirements, regulatory pressures, and the organisational capacity for learning and adaptation. For this reason, the category of transformation serves as a significant cohesive element of this article: it links the analysis of sustainable development theory with reflections on the enterprise and the business events sector, where lasting change requires not only the implementation of individual environmentally friendly solutions, but also the redesign of relationships, operating models, and the long-term effects generated by event organisers (Hausner and Zmysłony, 2015: 88–89; Rudnicka, 2016: 57; 2018: 110).

The article synthesises the main scientific theories and concepts relating to sustainable development and indicates how, and for which analytical functions, they can be used in research on enterprises and the business events sector. The study does not treat business events as a direct “test” of global theories, such as the planetary boundaries concept, but rather as a field in which selected theoretical frameworks help to: first, describe the sources of environmental and social pressure; second, assess the alignment of organisational decisions with sustainability principles; and third, design a formula for improving events in terms of processes, stakeholders, and the long-term perspective. The study is based on a review of classical and contemporary literature and on the integration of two analytical frameworks: on the one hand, the achievements of business and environmental theories, and on the other, reflections on the design of sustainable conferences and event legacy². The adopted perspective allows for a transition from a general theory of sustainability to the question of which elements of these theories can serve descriptive, evaluative, and design functions within organisational practice.

² In this article, legacy refers to a lasting, tangible, and intentionally designed effect of an event; the concept is narrower than the broader term impact.

The key methodological assumption is therefore the separation of the three functions of reference to theory. The descriptive function allows for the identification of the types of dependencies and pressures that shape the activities of event organisations. The evaluative function enables the formulation of criteria for the alignment of organisational practices with sustainability principles. The design function, meanwhile, supports the development of directions for improving events in terms of organisation, environment, stakeholders, and legacy. This assumption limits the risk of overgeneralisation and allows for a distinction between global frameworks and operational tools.

To avoid ambiguity, it is necessary to clarify the use of the terms “theory”, “concept”, “approach”, and “model”. In this article, theory refers to a relatively coherent set of assumptions explaining a specific type of phenomenon or relationship, such as stakeholder theory, institutional theory, or resilience theory. A concept denotes a conceptual framework or an organising proposition that may have strong scientific foundations but does not always function as an explanatory theory in the strict sense, as exemplified by planetary boundaries or doughnut economics. An approach, on the other hand, denotes a normative-analytical perspective that indicates which questions should be asked and which values should be taken into account; an example is the capability approach developed by Sen (1999). A model represents a simplified depiction of the relationships between system elements or of the operational logic of an organisation, such as a sustainable business model or a circular model.

Such a distinction is important because sustainable development is understood in this article as an integrating category within which explanatory theories, normative concepts, analytical frameworks, operational models, and measurement instruments coexist. This does not, however, imply an eclectic application of all theories to every phenomenon. Each framework is used within a scope corresponding to its level of generality: boundary and durability concepts define the macro-assumptions of the assessment, institutional and systemic theories describe coordination mechanisms, and management theories and business models support the operationalisation of organisational decisions. For this reason, in the remainder of the article, the terms “theory”, “concept”, and “approach” are not treated as synonyms. Each serves a different function: theories help to explain mechanisms, concepts organise the scope of the problem, approaches indicate the normative orientation of

the analysis, and models enable the translation of general assumptions into organisational processes.

GENESIS AND EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The modern origins of the concept of sustainable development are linked to the growing awareness, since the 1970s, that economic growth is not a process that is neutral with regard to the environment and society. The Club of Rome's report, "The Limits to Growth", demonstrated that the expansion of production, consumption, and population must be considered in the context of finite resources and the limited capacity of ecosystems to absorb the impacts of human activity (Meadows et al., 1972). This debate was advanced by the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, which shifted the emphasis from ecological warnings themselves towards the category of intergenerational responsibility (WCED, 1987).

The subsequent development of the concept was associated with the increasing institutionalisation of sustainability. The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals introduced a clear nexus of environmental, social, and economic dimensions into the global debate (United Nations, 2015). In parallel, within the European Union, there has been a transition from policy documents towards increasingly precise and binding legal instruments, such as the Taxonomy Regulation and the new corporate sustainability reporting obligations. As a result, sustainability has ceased to be treated solely as a voluntary language of responsibility and has been integrated into the logic of the contemporary regulatory order.

This evolution has significant theoretical consequences. It also demonstrates that sustainable development is not a stable and uniform concept, but rather a field of interpretative disputes concerning what should be maintained, within which time horizon, and whether, and to what extent, natural capital can be replaced by social, human, or manufactured capital. Therefore, not only the definition of sustainability itself is of fundamental importance, but also the set of theories that explain the mechanisms of persistence, constraints, and transformation.

SCIENTIFIC FOUNDATIONS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Ecological Economics, Limits to Growth, and Planetary Boundaries

Ecological economics remains one of the most important scientific foundations of sustainable development. Unlike neoclassical economics, it does not treat the economy as an autonomous system, but rather as a subsystem embedded within the biosphere and dependent on energy and matter flows (Daly, 1991: 12). This assumption gives rise to the thesis that the sustainability of development cannot be assessed solely through the lens of gross domestic product growth or allocative efficiency, but must also account for the capacity of ecosystems to regenerate and absorb the impacts of human activity.

The limits-to-growth thesis is closely linked to ecological economics and demonstrates that exponential growth within a finite system leads to structural tensions and the risk of exceeding the environment's carrying capacity (Meadows et al., 1972). The subsequent concept of planetary boundaries expanded this debate by identifying categories of biophysical thresholds whose crossing increases the risk of destabilising the Earth system, and by introducing the concept of a "safe operating space" for humanity (Rockström et al., 2009). In this article, this concept is not used to measure individual business events directly. Its function is primarily orienting and diagnostic: it helps justify why organisational decisions regarding mobility, energy, materials, food, or waste should be analysed in light of material and energy constraints, rather than merely in terms of cost, convenience, or reputation.

From the perspective of business research, the implication is fundamental yet indirect: neither an enterprise nor a single event can be analysed as an entity functioning outside the material and energy constraints of the biosphere, nor should the scale of its impact be equated with the scale of the planetary system. Even the most innovative market strategy ultimately remains dependent on the quality of natural capital, climate stability, resource availability, and the resilience of socio-ecological systems. Ecological economics therefore forms the basis for a critique of reductionist understandings of economic efficiency.

With regard to business events, this primarily entails the need to identify those decisions that remain within the organiser's sphere of

influence while also generating significant environmental pressures: venue selection, participant mobility, venue standards, waste management, procurement, catering, and communication. The concept of planetary boundaries does not provide a ready-made indicator for assessing a single conference here, but rather justifies the need to design its parameters in such a way as to limit the event's material and energy footprint.

Weak and Strong Sustainability and the Problem of Natural Capital

A key development in the debate was the distinction between weak and strong sustainability (Neumayer, 2025: 23). In the weak sustainability approach, it is assumed that different forms of capital are substitutable to some extent: the depletion of natural resources can be compensated for by an increase in human, technological, or infrastructural capital. The strong sustainability approach, however, rejects the thesis of the full substitutability of natural capital and points to the existence of critical resources and ecosystem functions, the loss of which cannot be compensated for by other forms of capital (Neumayer, 2025: 23–27).

This distinction is of both scientific and practical significance. It makes it possible to differentiate between modernisation strategies based on efficiency improvements and approaches that recognise the need to preserve certain ecological resources and processes as conditions for further development. From a management perspective, this means that not all environmental damage can be treated as an “external cost” that can subsequently be neutralised through investment or compensation. Some damage is, by its nature, boundary-related and systemic.

From a corporate perspective, the debate regarding weak and strong sustainability also reveals the limitations of the popular “green growth” narrative (Daszyńska-Żygadło and Ryszawska, 2015: 69; Becla and Czaja, 2016: 130). Where an organisation bases its business model on critical resources, the discussion of sustainability must encompass not only efficiency improvements but also questions regarding the scale of operations, consumption patterns, and the risk of irreversible damage to natural capital.

Socio-Ecological Systems, Resilience, and Commons Theory

The theory of socio-ecological systems, according to which society and the environment are not separate orders but deeply interdependent systems, has strongly influenced contemporary sustainability research. In this view, sustainability depends not only on the quantity of resources, but also on the quality of institutions, coordination patterns, learning capacities, and adaptation mechanisms. This perspective is complemented by resilience theory, in which resilience denotes the ability of a system to absorb disturbances, reconfigure, and maintain core functions despite environmental variability. Resilience and sustainability are not conceived as a simple return to a previous state of equilibrium, but as the ability of a system to absorb disturbances, reorganise, and maintain core functions despite environmental variability. Walker et al. (2004: 5) emphasise that resilience is linked to adaptability and transformability, and thus to the capacity of a system both to adapt to changes and to create a new configuration when the existing one becomes ineffective or unsustainable. The resilience approach is particularly important, as it shifts the focus from the ideal of equilibrium to the category of adaptive capacity. An organisation or system does not need to return to its previous state to maintain sustainability; it can survive through changes in structure, competencies, or the way resources are used. This logic applies to research on cities and supply chains, as well as to sectors that are highly dependent on external shocks, including the business events market. Ostrom's theory of the commons is associated with this trend. Its significance for sustainable development lies in demonstrating that the sustainable management of common resources need not rely solely on either central state control or full privatisation, but may result from polycentric and self-regulating institutional arrangements (Ostrom, 2010: 552). In sustainability research, this serves as an argument for the thesis that an effective response to environmental crises requires multi-level governance, cooperation, and experimentation with locally embedded solutions.

Ecological Modernisation, Industrial Ecology, and Cleaner Production

One of the most influential responses to the question of whether economic development can be reconciled with environmental protection is the theory of ecological modernisation. It assumes that the environmental crisis can be mitigated through the technological and institutional restructuring

ing of modern economies, that is, through the ecologisation of production, consumption, regulation, and organisational practices. In contrast to approaches emphasising the need to limit growth, this school of thought highlights the role of innovation, standards, market instruments, and social pressure (Mol and Spaargaren, 2000: 39).

The concepts of industrial ecology and cleaner production are associated with the aforementioned perspective. Industrial ecology proposes treating production systems as models of ecosystems, in which the flows of energy, materials, and waste should be designed in a more circular and symbiotic manner (Frosch and Gallopoulos, 1989: 150–151). Cleaner production, in turn, focuses on environmental prevention, i.e. reducing raw material and energy consumption and emissions at the process design stage, rather than focusing solely on remedying damage after it has occurred (UNEP, 1994: 6–9).

The significance of these trends for enterprise research is twofold. Firstly, they demonstrate that sustainability can be designed into the structure of processes, technologies, and operating models, rather than merely communicated through declarations. Secondly, they bridge the gap between environmental sciences and management sciences, indicating that the greening of organisational activities can become a source of efficiency, innovation, and competitive advantage.

Socio-Technical Transitions and Transition Management

In recent years, socio-technical transition theories have become increasingly significant. Their common assumption is that lasting change towards sustainability is not achieved solely through the actions of a single organisation, but results from the interaction between niche innovations, dominant socio-technical regimes, and the broader institutional and cultural landscape. The multi-level perspective helps explain why the transition towards sustainability can be protracted, conflict-prone, and uneven (Geels, 2019: 189).

An extension of this perspective is transition management, understood as a prescriptive, complexity-based approach to governing long-term processes. Its essence lies in combining long-term strategic orientation with experimentation, learning, and multi-actor coordination (Loorbach, 2010: 163). Unlike classical planning models, transition management does not assume full predictability of the system, but instead emphasises adaptability, reflexivity, and the incremental building of new practices.

Socio-technical transition theories are particularly useful in research on sectors where sustainability depends on the interaction of multiple actors: regulators, customers, suppliers, organisers, technologies, and infrastructure. They make it possible to understand that the change leading to a sustainable model does not consist merely of improving a single indicator, but of restructuring entire institutional and market configurations.

Capability Approach, Doughnut Economics, and Degrowth

Theories focusing on justice, well-being, and growth boundaries are an important complement to systemic and environmental approaches. The capability approach, developed by Sen, shifts the emphasis from income levels alone to the actual opportunities to lead a meaningful life (Sen, 1999: 24–25). More recent literature indicates that the capability approach may constitute a promising theoretical foundation for sustainable development, as it links the dimensions of freedom, quality of life, and justice with the question of the conditions required for their long-term maintenance (Seckler and Volkert, 2021).

Doughnut economics develops this line of thinking by proposing a development framework situated between the social foundation and the ecological maximum of the pressure exerted on the biosphere. Its significance lies in the fact that it integrates planetary boundaries with distributive and justice dimensions, moving away from a vision of an economy in which the sole measure of success is output growth (Raworth, 2017: 43–45, 49). In business research, this trend inspires the search for models that are regenerative and distributive by nature, rather than merely less harmful.

A more radical development of the critique of the growth paradigm is degrowth. This school of thought argues that when environmental carrying capacities are exceeded, developmental sustainability cannot be equated with the continuous expansion of material and energy flows, but rather requires a socially just reduction of the pressure exerted on ecosystems (Kallis, 2011: 879). Although this approach is sometimes contested from the perspective of mainstream management, its analytical value lies in the fact that it raises questions regarding the scale of economic activity, the limits of technological efficiency, and the need to re-define economic value.

BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT THEORIES RELATING TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Stakeholder Theory, Legitimacy and Institutional Theory

In the field of management sciences, stakeholder theory remains one of the most important points of reference. From this perspective, an enterprise is an organisation operating within a network of relations with numerous stakeholders who have legitimate expectations regarding its actions, rather than merely a tool for maximising owners' benefits (Freeman, 1984: 52). Sustainability fits into this logic, as it requires the simultaneous consideration of the interests of customers, employees, suppliers, local communities, regulators, and future generations.

This perspective is supplemented by legitimacy theory and institutional theory. The former explains that an organisation maintains social legitimacy only when it is perceived as being aligned with the norms, values, and expectations of its environment (Suchman, 1995: 608). The latter shows that enterprises implement sustainability practices not only because of their internal profitability, but also under the influence of regulatory pressure, professional norms, and mechanisms of isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983: 152).

The combined application of these theories helps explain why climate issues, human rights, responsible supply chains, and non-financial disclosures have become an integral part of contemporary corporate governance. Organisations implement them not only because being responsible is "profitable", but also because responsibility is becoming a condition of legitimacy and institutional standing.

CSR, Triple Bottom Line, Shared Value, and Political CSR

Corporate social responsibility and the triple bottom line model have had a significant impact on the development of research into business sustainability. Their joint contribution was the expansion of organisational assessment criteria beyond a strictly financial dimension and the categorisation of results into three areas: economic, social, and environmental (Elkington, 1997: 73). This way of thinking laid the foundation for subsequent attempts to operationalise sustainability, also with regard to indicators, reporting, and impact measurement.

At the strategic level, an important development was the concept of creating shared value, according to which an enterprise can simultaneously build competitive advantage and address social challenges (Porter and Kramer, 2011: 75–76). This perspective opposes the view that responsibility is solely a cost or a philanthropic activity; instead, it points to the possibility of designing shared value for the company and its environment.

Political CSR complements these considerations by emphasising that, in the context of globalisation, enterprises increasingly co-create norms, participate in the provision of public goods, and fill regulatory gaps (Scherer and Palazzo, 2011: 908–909). This theory is of considerable importance for sustainability, as it shifts the focus from the question of the scope of voluntary responsibility towards the question of the enterprise's role within a system of co-governance of social and environmental issues.

Resource-Based View, Natural-Resource-Based View, Dynamic Capabilities, and Sustainable Value

From a strategic perspective, the resource-based view of the firm, the natural-resource-based view, and dynamic capabilities theory are of key importance. According to these approaches, the source of sustainable competitive advantage lies not only in the resources themselves, but also in the organisation's ability to combine, renew, and reconfigure them within a changing environment (Teece, Pisano and Shuen, 1997: 514).

The natural-resource-based view develops this logic by indicating that a firm's relationship with the natural environment can serve as a source of unique competencies, such as pollution prevention, product stewardship, or the development of clean technologies (Hart, 1995: 992). Sustainability ceases to be merely an external constraint here and becomes a space for building strategic resources.

An extension of the aforementioned trend is the concept of sustainable value, according to which an organisation can create long-term value by simultaneously mitigating environmental risks, developing innovation, addressing social needs, and strengthening legitimacy among stakeholders (Hart and Milstein, 2003: 57). This concept demonstrates that sustained strategic value does not arise solely from short-term cost optimisation, but from the ability to operate under increasing environmental and institutional constraints.

Paradoxes of Sustainability, Stewardship, and Sustainable Business Models

Contemporary literature increasingly indicates that the management of sustainable development is paradoxical in nature. Organisations do not eliminate tensions between economic, social, and environmental goals; instead, they learn to manage them, maintaining a productive balance between partially conflicting values (Hahn et al., 2018: 237). The paradox perspective accurately explains why sustainability requires the continuous balancing of considerations, rather than a one-off choice of an “optimal” solution.

A useful complement is stewardship theory, according to which managers may act as trustees of the organisation’s enduring value, rather than merely as guardians of their own interests or of shareholders’ interests (Davis, Schoorman and Donaldson, 1997: 24–27). This approach reinforces the understanding of sustainability as a process requiring a long-term decision-making horizon, concern for the common good of the organisation, and intergenerational responsibility.

At the intersection of strategy and innovation, concepts of sustainable business models, sustainable business model archetypes, and circular business models have also been developed. Research by Bocken et al. shows that an enterprise can design its logic of value creation and capture in accordance with the principle of sustainability by increasing resource efficiency, moving from product sales to service provision, replacing non-renewable resources with renewable ones, or developing socially inclusive solutions (Bocken et al., 2014: 53). Meanwhile, studies dedicated to circular models emphasise that a circular economy requires not only new technologies but also a change in business logic itself (Geissdoerfer et al., 2020).

The contemporary ESG³ framework has become a practical expression of some of the theories discussed above, as it constitutes a set of criteria for assessing a company in terms of *environmental*, *social*, and *governance* actions. Its role consists primarily in the operationalisation and measurement of these actions, rather than in the formulation of an autonomous theory explaining social phenomena. In this sense, ESG serves rather as an instrument for translating sustainability theory into the language of reporting, risk, and investor assessment.

³ ESG is not an autonomous scientific theory, but rather a conceptual framework used to operationalise selected environmental, social, and governance dimensions of organisational activity.

POLISH THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In Polish literature of the last decade, no single dominant theory of corporate sustainability has emerged with a standing comparable to that of classical Western theories. However, there has been a clear development of original concepts, models, and operationalisations that adapt the global theoretical body of work to the realities of Polish organisations. This strand of research output can be interpreted as the development of middle-range theory, focused on business models, determinants of organisational development, and tools for measuring sustainability practices.

Agata Rudnicka has made a significant contribution to the Polish debate, emphasising that a sustainable business model cannot be limited to declarations of responsibility, but should instead describe the logic of value creation while taking social and environmental consequences into account (Rudnicka, 2016: 55). An extension of this research direction is her work on the circular economy, in which circularity is treated not as an operational add-on, but as an element of business model ontology which, under current macroeconomic conditions, must transcend the linear business model (Rudnicka, 2018: 107).

An important ontological proposition was also presented by Ku- biński, Zgrzywa-Ziemak and Krajewski (2023: 102), who conceptualised the sustainable business model as a distinct logic of operation that maximises benefits while simultaneously minimising economic, social, and environmental harm, and creates value for a broader range of stakeholders. In turn, the research by Misztal and Kowalska emphasises the importance of external and macroeconomic determinants, reminding us that sustainability is a process embedded within a broader institutional structure, rather than solely the result of individual managerial decisions (Misztal and Kowalska, 2020: 171).

Polish researchers are also developing a strand concerned with the operationalisation of sustainable practices. The work of Mazur, Walczyna, and Wilczewska (2024) organises the implementation of sustainable business models in Polish enterprises through the lens of the TBL (triple bottom line) concept, which involves assessing an organisation's activities across three interdependent dimensions: economic, social,

and environmental. Meanwhile, the research by Jaciow et al., (2025) links sustainability with digital transformation and the digital maturity of organisations. The axiological and strategic concept of the idea-firm proposed by Jerzy Hausner and Mateusz Zmyślony deserves separate mention; although it is not a theory of sustainability *sensu stricto*, it strengthens the Polish debate on long-term responsibility, the purpose of action, and relationships as the foundation of enduring value (Hausner and Zmyślony, 2015: 84).

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE BUSINESS EVENTS SECTOR: A LEGACY PERSPECTIVE

The meetings industry constitutes a field of application for selected elements of sustainability theory, yet it requires their selective and hierarchical use. It is therefore not a matter of proving that a single conference can be described by each of the theories discussed, but rather of indicating which perspectives help to capture specific dimensions of organisational decisions. This sector of the economy is sometimes identified with business tourism, congress tourism, or the market for meetings, events, and various types of organised gatherings (Celuch, 2014: 10–11). First, at the management level, it involves many interdependent decisions regarding mobility, energy, procurement, catering, accessibility, waste management, communication, and stakeholder engagement. Second, it generates both short-term economic effects and long-term social, educational, and reputational consequences. Third, its functioning depends on the cooperation of many actors: organisers, venues, destinations, suppliers, public partners, sponsors, and participants.

For this reason, only those theories and concepts that explain a specific type of decision or relationship are used in the subsequent analysis. Planetary boundaries and strong sustainability provide the background for limiting environmental pressure; stakeholder theory helps to identify the entities to which an event creates obligations; governance and transition management explain the coordination of partners; whereas sustainable business models, dynamic capabilities, and legacy serve to translate sustainability assumptions into the design and evaluation of the event.

A sustainable conference can be defined as an event designed and implemented in a manner that minimises negative environmental and social impacts while enhancing positive economic, educational, as well as relational effects. The principle of sustainability by design is crucial here: sustainability is not “tacked on” to a finished design, but rather serves as the starting point for the entire organisational process. From a theoretical standpoint, this does not mean the retrospective application of a conceptual framework to event practice, but rather the organisation of decision-making processes according to three questions: what pressures does the event generate, who bears the costs and who reaps the benefits, and what solutions can sustain positive effects after the event has concluded. Sustainability understood in this way depends on the quality of the design, coordination mechanisms, learning capacity, and the coherence of the entire chain of partners.

The category of legacy adds a long-term dimension to this perspective. In relation to conferences, legacy refers to the lasting impact of an event that extends beyond its immediate course; it may be social, educational, organisational, reputational, or economic in nature. In this article, it serves an operationalising function: it translates the general postulates of sustainable development into questions concerning outcomes that can be planned, assigned to stakeholders, observed, and evaluated after the event has concluded. This concept corresponds well with stakeholder theory, as it refers to the question of who benefits from the value created by the event and in what manner. It is also consistent with resilience theory and the theory of socio-ecological systems, as it highlights the need to build adaptive capacities, relational capacities, and knowledge resources that persist after the project’s conclusion.

For MICE⁴ research, transition management, common-pool resource theory, and the governance approach prove particularly useful, as they relate to the meso level: the coordination between the organiser, the venue, suppliers, the destination, public institutions, and participants. A sustainable event is not, after all, the result of a single decision, but rather the outcome of multi-level coordination, experimentation, and polycentric cooperation. The organiser must define objectives and priorities, assign responsibilities, collect data, collaborate

⁴ The acronym MICE stands for meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions/events; in this article, it is used to refer to the meetings and business events sector.

with external partners, and design a process for measuring outcomes. In this sense, legacy should not be treated as a side effect of a conference, but rather as a deliberately planned, measured, and sustained management outcome.

The translation of sustainability theory into the business events sector should therefore be functional. Environmental, social, economic, and governance categories do not function in isolation; rather, each requires a different interpretative tool. Concepts of boundaries and durability indicate why the environmental footprint of an event should be limited; stakeholder theory makes it possible to identify whose interests and costs are being considered; governance and transition management approaches explain how to coordinate multiple partners; whereas the legacy category enables an assessment of whether the event leaves lasting value after it has ended. The choice of destination and venue simultaneously affects the environmental footprint, accessibility, the local economic ecosystem, and the potential for co-creating long-term value. Similarly, purchasing, catering, and communication decisions should be analysed not as technical issues, but as elements of the architecture of responsibility.

DISCUSSION

This review leads to the conclusion that sustainable development cannot be explained using a single, universal theory. This does not, however, imply the need to declare a multi-paradigm approach without qualification. A multi-level interpretative framework, in which individual theories serve different functions, is more appropriate. Macro-level theories indicate the boundaries and the normative direction of development; meso-level theories explain the conditions for coordination, institutionalisation, and learning; and micro-level theories demonstrate how organisations translate these requirements into resources, capabilities, operating models, and decision-making processes.

In this sense, the article builds upon the findings of Mair and Jago (2010: 90), who analysed the motivations, barriers, and organisational context of greening the business events industry. Their model demonstrates why organisations undertake or resist pro-environmental ac-

tions. The framework proposed in this article supplements this model with a broader normative and systemic layer: it indicates that the organiser's motivations should be interpreted in light of environmental boundaries, justice, stakeholders, and long-term legacy. In other words, the question is not merely „what motivates the organiser to take green-ing measures?“, but also „what criteria allow for the assessment of whether these actions are sufficient and sustainable?“.

The findings of the article are also consistent with the work of Foley et al. (2013: 321), which demonstrated that the value of business events extends beyond tourism expenditure to include, among other things, knowledge, networks, collaboration, education, and innovation. The present article clarifies that the legacy of an event should not be understood solely as a positive *ex post* result. It should be an element of the theory of change: the organiser must explain which actions are intended to lead to which effects, for which stakeholders, within what timeframe, and according to which metrics. Without such clarification, the category of legacy may become as vague as the term sustainability when the latter is used without clear criteria.

In comparison with extensive literature reviews of event studies, such as the work of Getz and Page (2016), this article shifts the emphasis from the event as a tourism product to the event as a socio-organisational and institutional project. Such a perspective is particularly important for business events, as their value often lies not in the number of participants themselves, but in the flow of knowledge, relationships, innovation, and the legitimisation of industry activities. At the same time, this approach requires caution: not every event automatically creates a positive legacy, and high attendance is not sufficient evidence of a sustainable impact.

Meanwhile, practical and textbook literature concerning sustainable event management, including the work of Holmes et al. (2015: 133) and the ISO 20121 (ISO, 2024) standard, provides operational tools for organisers. The contribution of this article lies in linking these tools to the theoretical foundations. As a result, actions such as site selection, procurement policy, waste reduction, accessibility, stakeholder consultation, and impact measurement are not treated as a mere list of best practices, but rather as consequences of specific theories and values.

The most problematic issue remains the application of global-scale theories, such as planetary boundaries, at the level of individual events. Criticism of such a procedure is justified: directly attributing planetary

boundaries to conferences would be an oversimplification. The article therefore adopts a more cautious stance. Macro concepts are not intended to calculate the full contribution of an event to global systemic thresholds; instead, they define the criteria for responsible design: reducing pressure at the source, avoiding the externalisation of costs to the environment, exercising caution regarding compensation, and questioning the scale and purpose of the event.

The practical implications of this discussion are as follows. First, business event organisers should move from declarations to an impact management system encompassing goals, data, responsibilities, and indicators. Second, environmental decisions should be made at the design stage, rather than only during the marketing communication phase. Third, the legacy of the event should be planned with stakeholders and measured post-event, rather than merely described in the final report. Fourth, the business events industry should develop common standards, as a single organiser is unable independently to change the transport, energy, procurement, and data infrastructure upon which the real sustainability of events depends.

The review also shows that sustainable development cannot be explained using a single, universal theory. Ecological economics and planetary boundaries demonstrate the material and biophysical constraints on development, but do not, in themselves, explain institutional and organisational mechanisms. Stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory, and institutional theory provide a good description of the social and regulatory determinants of corporate operations, but they do not address the question of the limits of natural capital substitutability. On the other hand, the resource-based view, dynamic capabilities, and sustainable value explain how organisations can transform sustainability into a source of advantage, but they should not lead to the reduction of the issue solely to strategic logic.

For this reason, a cautious multi-level approach is justified, rather than a broadly defined, eclectic multi-paradigm approach. Its essence lies not in the mechanical juxtaposition of theories or in assigning every theory to every fragment of business practice, but rather in the deliberate separation of functions and levels of analysis. At the macro level, theories of limits and justice address questions regarding the purpose, permissible scale, and boundary conditions of development. At the meso level, institutional, systemic, and transformational theories explain the conditions for coordination, learning, and change. At the micro and or-

ganisational levels, resource theories, business models, the paradox perspective, and stewardship help to design operational decisions and assess their capacity to create sustainable value. The framework understood in this way serves three purposes: describing relationships, assessing the consistency of practices with sustainability principles, and developing directions for improving business events in terms of processes, stakeholders, and legacy.

Particularly interesting is the tension between modernising approaches to sustainability and the currents of strong sustainability and degrowth. The former emphasise the potential of technological innovation, efficiency, and institutional reforms. The latter remind us that modernisation itself may prove insufficient if it fails to account for material throughput, inequalities, and the limits of natural capital substitution. For business research, this implies the need for caution regarding overly optimistic narratives about the “conflict-free” reconciliation of growth and sustainability.

In the business events sector, adopting such a framework entails a shift away from perceiving conferences solely as one-off logistical products. A conference becomes a complex organisational project whose environmental, social, and economic impacts can be described, assessed, and designed using adequate tools at the appropriate level of generality. Its quality depends on the stakeholder network, organisational capacity, institutional pressure, site infrastructure, and the ability to create a lasting legacy. The legacy perspective reveals that sustainability is not only a matter of harm reduction but also of actively creating value that remains after the event has concluded.

CONCLUSION

Sustainable development should be understood today as a multidimensional category: normative, as it refers to intra- and intergenerational justice; systemic, as it concerns the relationship between the economy, the biosphere, and society; institutional, as it is co-shaped by regulations, norms, and social expectations; and strategic, as it influences business models, organisational capabilities, and sources of competitive advantage. Only such a perspective helps avoid reducing sustainability to the language of reputation or reporting alone.

The literature review demonstrated that contemporary research on sustainable development is increasingly moving away from simple dichotomies: economy versus environment, growth versus protection, and profit versus responsibility. In their place, there is growing attention to complex systems of dependencies, boundaries, paradoxes, and multi-level management. For an enterprise, this implies the need to develop competencies that enable not only adaptation to new requirements but also the co-creation of sustainable value amid increasing uncertainty.

The perspective of the business events sector and the legacy perspective confirm the utility of such a tiered approach. They demonstrate that sustainable development should not be analysed solely as the reduction of negative effects, but also as the design and consolidation of positive impact. The reference to theory is intended here not to reinforce the description rhetorically, but to provide a clear distinction between the boundary conditions of activity, stakeholder coordination mechanisms, evaluation criteria, and directions for legacy design. That is precisely why further research into sustainability should more frequently integrate the findings of environmental, organisational, and institutional theories with the analysis of specific sectoral practices, where tensions between efficiency, responsibility, and sustainable value are particularly evident.

Anna Paczos is professionally and academically engaged in the meetings industry, with a particular focus on the organisation of congresses, conferences, and events. In her professional work, she is involved in the planning and delivery of events combining an organisational perspective with an analysis of the needs of various stakeholder groups. Her practical experience provides a foundation for her research on how organisations operate within social and market environments. Her academic interests focus on social communication, relationships between enterprises and their external environment, and issues related to sustainable development in the MICE sector.

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