

# Event Sustainability Practices Among Professional Company Organizers: An Exploratory Study

Norol Hamiza Zamzuri<sup>a</sup>, Khairil Wahidin Awang<sup>b\*</sup>, Yuhanis Abdul Aziz<sup>b</sup>, Zaiton Samdin<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Graduate School of Management, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.

<sup>b</sup>Faculty of Economics and Management, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

<sup>c</sup>Institute of Tropical Forestry and Forest Products, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor

\*Corresponding author: khairil@econ.upm.edu.my

## Article history

Received :4 April 2013

Received in revised form :  
25 July 2013

Accepted :15 October 2013

## Abstract

The growth of business event results in a potential impact to the environment if the waste from event materials is not properly managed by event organizers. The waste from event materials can create negative impact to the environment. This problem leads to the emergence of several sustainable strategies practiced by stakeholders, however, little is known on the issues involve in the process of organizing a sustainable event. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the issues involved during the process of organizing a sustainable event. Inductive method was used in this study as it gives better insight on the real phenomenon. The data were collected from event organizers through in-depth interviews.

*Keywords:* Business event; event sustainability; event organizer; inductive method

© 2013 Penerbit UTM Press. All rights reserved.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Business event becomes one of the tourism products that plays a role as product attraction for many destinations. In Australia, in 2003, this sector attracts 28.4 million delegates in attending business events which represented a total spending of \$17.4 billion (Deery *et al.*, 2005, cited in Mair and Jago, 2010: 77). This highlights the importance of business event sector as one of the economic contributors for Australia. This is similar in Malaysia as there is demand in organizing business events in Malaysia as it potentially yields high return from government investment (Performance Management and Delivery Unit, 2010: 337). It appears that business event is potentially becoming one of the important tourism products that contributes to the economy. On the other hand, there are also potential negative impacts that result from organizing business events at convention centres. Organizing an event at convention centre involves with the use of paper based materials, providing food and beverage services, the utilization of overnight accommodation, the operation of conference facilities and transport delegates (Whitfield and Dioko, 2011). The disposal process of event materials that must be properly managed led to debates among researchers in discussing about event sustainability (Jones, 2010; Koukiasa, 2011; Musgrave and Raj, 2009). However, based on current literature, there is scarcity of information on the process of organizing a sustainable event. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the issues involved during the process of organizing a sustainable event. This paper begins with the discussion on event sustainability and previous

studies from researchers. This paper will also discuss on the methodology utilized and findings from in-depth interviews with event organizer.

## 2.0 WHAT IS EVENT SUSTAINABILITY ?

The impact from the growth of business event sector leads to debates on finding the best understanding about event sustainability. Understanding event sustainable principle is based on two key words, which are event and sustainability. Some authors define event as an organized occasion such as conferences and exhibitions, arts and entertainment, sports and charitable events (Musgrave and Raj, 2009). Other than this definition, event is also described as “an assembly or reunion of people for private or public celebration, ritual or remembrance” (McCartney, 2010: 6). The event sector plays its roles in the tourism industry as a medium of communication and dissemination of information (McCartney, 2010). Event management is a multidisciplinary phenomenon that involves marketing, catering, finance, security, risk management, logistics and human resource management. It can also be categorized according to sports, cultural, arts, political, business, recreational, special and private event (McCartney, 2010). Other than this categorization, an event can also be categorized according to size e.g. number of visitors, the level of media coverage, economic impact, duration and frequency (once or periodical), occasion (cultural event, sports event, economic event and socio-political event) (Ritchie and Yangzhou, 1987;

Law, 1993; Getz, 1997 and Freyer, 2000; cited in Johnsen, Biegert, Müller, 2004: 27). The described factors show that events are unique but in a way quite similar in terms of purpose. The sustainable practice has emerged as a topic of discussions in event management and is always associated with economic, social and environmental dimensions. These dimensions are well-known as the three pillars in event (Musgrave and Raj, 2009). Among these pillars, environmental sustainability has become one of the important topics of discussions among researchers (Mair and Jago, 2010). As mentioned earlier, there are potential negative impacts to the environment from the growth of this sector. The impacts indicate the importance of understanding the use of sustainability term in event management.

Sustainability is a term which originates from the old French verb ‘sustenir’ which means to support, keep up or maintain something (Musgrave and Raj, 2009: 22) and after the publication of the Brundland Report, the term sustainability was used interchangeably with development (Baker, 2006). As a result of this report, sustainability development was defined as development that “meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Mahajan, 2010: 53). This appears that the term sustainability development is used in discussing the impacts from the growth in economy will not degrade the ability of future generation to use resources. Therefore, in this study sustainability term is used in highlighting the practices from business activities must not create an impact to the environment. In regards to this, in the absence of any widely accepted definition of “event sustainability”, this paper will consider “event sustainability” as the application of sustainable practices for event activities. This is supported by Laing and Frost (2010) who see a green event as any event that has sustainability policy or incorporates sustainable practices into its management and operations, p. 262.

Event sustainable practices can be observed during event operations from several areas such as purchasing, waste management, energy production, water management and transport. These areas can be observed as one of the strategies in reducing the environmental impact. For instance, the use of energy efficient equipment, smart power planning, switch-off campaigns, careful planning and distribution of mobile generators during an event can reduce the amount of energy use during an event (Jones, 2010). This shows that event sustainability is a process of reducing the environmental impact by using environmental friendly materials during an event. However, event sustainability principle cannot be achieved without the commitment from all event stakeholders.

The commitment among event stakeholders such as convention venue providers in practicing sustainability becomes an added value for event businesses. The commitment among convention venue operators for sustainable practices can be observed from the involvement of Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre in an “EarthCheck” benchmarking programme (Corporate Social Responsibility Report, 2010). It is clear that sustainable practices do exist at the convention centres, but the depth of the adoption of sustainable practices among convention venue providers is still questionable. This is because, based on literature, there are several issues pointed out by the researchers that may hinder sustainable practices. Such issues are motivations, obstacles, and outcomes in adopting sustainable practices among business event stakeholders. The studies in understanding the sustainable practices in the event industry lead to discussion about several sustainable issues. For instance, the discussion on the process of greening an event is still limited (Mair and Jago, 2010). This shows that there are other contexts

that need to be explored by researchers in understanding event sustainability practices among business event stakeholders. There is a need to integrate all event sustainability issues in order to have an in-depth understanding of the process of event sustainability at convention centres.

## 2.1 Previous Studies On Event Sustainability

Evaluation becomes a topic of discussion among researchers in the event sector especially in evaluating economic and social impact. Among these impacts, the studies on social and economic impact are well established compared to environmental impact. However, there is an espouse of discussion among researchers in debating issues about environmental sustainability (Mair and Jago, 2010).

Currently, there are many standards that are being used by venue operators namely Earth Check, Environmental Management System (ISO 14001), Food Safety Certified (ISO 22000) and Social Responsibility Management System (ISO 26000) (Corporate Social Responsibility Report, 2010). These standards are used for evaluating sustainable performance through various aspects namely food and beverage, building and operation.

There are also sustainability evaluations that able to demonstrate the different degrees of sustainability. The degree of sustainability is evaluated through several indicators such as heritage, infrastructure, enterprise, community, visitor and administrator. However, there is a challenge in evaluating the degree of sustainability as the data collection involves various agencies (Griffin, edited in Musgrave, 2009: 54). This highlights that there are several sources in collecting the data.

## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative in nature as the aim of this study is to explore the issues involved during the process of organizing a sustainable event. This study is a case study as according to Yin (2009) a case study is a study about “individuals,” “organizations,” “processes,” “programs,” “neighborhoods,” “institutions” and even “events. The informant is event organizer. The data were collected by using unstructured interviews with four informants as it is suitable in getting the first view about a phenomenon as there is a lack of literature and empirical finding about the issues involve during the process of organizing a sustainable event. Furthermore, unstructured interview was chosen as data collection strategies as the researcher does not know enough about a phenomenon to ask relevant questions and it is usually used at an early stage of a study (Merriam, 2009).

The lists of informants to be taken in this study are based from the lists of event organizers that registered under the Malaysia Convention and Exhibition Bureau (MyCeb) Malaysia. Interviewees were event organizers located around Malaysia. These particular individuals were chosen because of the depth of experience in the business events industry in Malaysia.

Each interview was carried out within an hour by using one on one interview. One on one interview is a data collection process in which the researcher asks questions and records the answer from one participant as this study is only an exploratory study at the beginning stage of a study. This type of interview is also suitable “for participants who are not hesitant to speak, who are articulate, and who can share ideas comfortably” (Creswell, 2012: 218). Interviewees were asked several questions to gauge the opinions about the issues involve during the process of

organizing a sustainable event e.g. What drives your firm to organize a sustainable event? All data were coded according to themes. There are several themes found during the data collection.

#### ■4.0 FINDINGS

The findings from this study indicate that there is a demand in organizing a green or sustainable event. Therefore by achieving green certificate will be an added value for business event. The interviewee stated,

*“International conferences organizers are very concern on green certificate. It is a plus point for convention centre venue provider to have green certificate. It depends on the customer”.*

It seems that there is a need for convention venue providers to have green certificate as it shows that the convention venue provider is committed to practice sustainable at their venue and this indirectly will assist event organizer to implement event sustainability principle. Applying sustainability practices at convention venue means involvement of all departments at the convention centre such as culinary, operations and administration department. The sustainability practices at the convention centre requires event organizer to manage all wastes from event materials during their function. Apart from this, the dry waste that generates by event attendees or those who are visiting the convention centre will be recycled and organic waste from washing processes during food preparation will be re-used for animal feed and composting (Corporate Social Responsibility Report, 2010). However, organizing an event that applies event sustainability principles will not only involve venue providers but must also involve other stakeholders. This is revealed from the interview as, the interviewee stated,

*“Sustainability needs a lot of participation in order to practice for example participants, organizers and PCO the importance of preserving the environment. We should start educating people from young. The government should educate people the importance of applying sustainability during business activities. Education is very important. I think when the government starts forcing the use of green material, the people will accept it but the problem is the cost of using green material is high. It depends on the profitable, and implementing sustainability may defer from the aim of gaining profit because it is the private sector”.*

This highlights the importance to have full commitment from event stakeholders although this is not easy to achieve. In order to have stakeholders' commitment, these stakeholders must be educated on the importance of preserving the environment. This education may begin at a young age, therefore focusing on the young generation would be worthwhile. It shows that there is a need to develop strategies that increase the commitment all stakeholders in applying sustainable practice.

Apart from this, the interviewee indicates that the government to the public must also enforce applying sustainable practice during an event. This is argued by Porter's (1991) as the benefit of practicing environmental management is more than the cost involve by an organization but the enforcement will lead to innovation (cited in Montabon, Sroufe and Narasimhan, 2007: 999). However, the result may be different between organizations. It shows that there are different results

on organization performance for other industry. For instance, the result from the study of López-Gamero, Molina-Azorín, and Claver-Cortés (2009) revealed that environmental management practices contribute to firm performance. Nevertheless the result varies depending on the sector. The inconsistency in the result becomes the major hindrance in assessing the performance among all stakeholders. The promotion of sustainable practices among industries requires investments in applying sustainability principle during their activities. This is similar for event industry as there is a need for event stakeholders to invest in providing event materials that are environment friendly.

In general, there are several issues found in the study. The issues are categorized according to several themes. The themes are demand, commitment and enforcement.

#### ■5.0 CONCLUSION

The growth in demand for organizing a business event shows result in potential negative impact to the environment. In order to overcome the problem, several initiatives were taken by stakeholders such as implementing sustainability policy, evaluating the event and proposing several standard indicators. This study revealed that demand, commitment and enforcement are some of the issues involve during the process of organizing a sustainable event. The awareness of the importance of preserving the environment must begin with educating young children at an early stage.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge as the result produces an overview of the practices of event sustainability in Malaysia. Apart from this, the result will contribute to event organizers in finding strategies on how to increase awareness and knowledge on preserving the environment as there is demand in organizing a sustainable event. This study indicates that there is limited information about event sustainability practices among event organizers in Malaysia.

This study only focuses on event organizers. It is suggested that future research should explore other business event stakeholders such as convention venue providers, the government and the customers.

#### Acknowledgement.

We would like to thank Universiti Teknologi MARA and Ministry of Higher Education for supporting this study.

#### References

- [1] Baker, S. 2006. *Sustainability Development*. New York: Routledge Taylors & Francis Group.
- [2] Creswell, J. W. 2012. *Educational Research Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- [3] Corporate Social Responsibility Report. 2010. Available: [www.klccconventioncentre.com](http://www.klccconventioncentre.com). Accessed: 08-Apr-2013.
- [4] Jones, M. 2010. *Sustainable Event Management A Practical Guide*. Sterling: Earthscan.
- [5] Johnsen, H. J. , T. Biegert and H. Miller. 2004. Sustainability of Mega Events: Challenges, Requirements and Results. The Case-study of the World Ski Championship St. Moritz 2003. *Tourism Review*. 59(4): 27–36.
- [6] Koukiasa, M. 2011. Sustainable Facilities Management within Event Venues. *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*. 3(3): 217–228.
- [7] Laing, J. and W. Frost. 2010. International Journal of Hospitality Management How Green was My Festival : Exploring Challenges and

- Opportunities Associated with Staging Green Events. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*. 29: 261–267.
- [8] López-Gamero, M. D., J. F. Molina-Azorín, and E. Claver-Cortés. 2009. The Whole Relationship Between Environmental Variables and Firm Performance: Competitive Advantage and Firm Resources as Mediator Variables. *Journal of environmental management*. 90(10): 3110–3121.
- [9] Mahajan, A. 2010. *Environmental Economics*. New Delhi: Centrum Press.
- [10] Mair, J. and L. Jago. 2010. The Development of a Conceptual Model of Greening in the Business Events Tourism Sector. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*. 18(1): 77–94.
- [11] McCartney, G. 2010. *Event Management An Asian Perspective*. Singapore: McGrawHill Higher Education.
- [12] Merriam, S. B. 2009. *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. San Francisco: Wiley Publishers Since 1807.
- [13] Montabon, F., R. Sroufe and R. Narasimhan. 2007. An Examination of Corporate Reporting, Environmental Management Practices and Firm Performance. *Journal of Operations Management*. 25(5): 998–1014.
- [14] Musgrave, J. and R. Raj. 2009. *Event Management and Sustainability*. Oxfordshire: CAB International.
- [15] Performance Management and Delivery Unit. 2010. *Economic Transformation Programme A Roadmap for Malaysia*. Putrajaya: The Prime's Minister Department.
- [16] Whitfield, J. and L. A. N. Dioko. 2011. Discretionary corporate social responsibility: introducing the GREENER VENUE. *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*. 2(2): 170–183.