

Academic Paper

# Convention Bureaus and Their Influence on Sustainability: Shaping a Responsible Event Industry

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## Commentary Paper

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## ABSTRACT

The convention and events industry has a unique opportunity to make a positive impact in an era when sustainability and environmental consciousness are gaining paramount importance. Convention bureaus, as key players in this industry, have a crucial role to play in promoting and fostering sustainability practices. This article explores the influence convention bureaus wield in shaping a sustainable event industry, examining their role, initiatives, challenges, and the potential benefits of their efforts. Convention bureaus serve as intermediaries between event organisers and destinations, providing support and resources to navigate the destination and engage with local suppliers. The Strategic Alliance of the National Convention Bureaus of Europe recognises the urgent need for transformative change and is committed to sustainability efforts. They advocate for action, collaboration, and alignment with international goals and initiatives. Convention bureaus can implement certification programs, provide education and training, and foster collaboration and partnerships to drive sustainable initiatives. Sustainable practices offer benefits such as reducing environmental impact, promoting social responsibility, and creating economic opportunities. However, challenges include financial constraints, lack of awareness, and measuring impact and accountability.

## KEYWORDS

*Responsible Events, Legacy, Sustainability Practices, Environmental Impact, Strategic Alliance*

## Introduction

In an era when sustainability and environmental consciousness are gaining paramount importance, the convention and events industry has a unique opportunity to make a positive impact. Convention bureaus, as key players in this industry, have a crucial role to play in promoting and fostering sustainability practices. By embracing sustainable strategies, convention bureaus can lead the way in organising eco-friendly events, encouraging responsible tourism, and driving meaningful change. This article explores the influence convention bureaus wield in shaping a sustainable event industry, examining their role, initiatives, challenges, and the potential benefits of their efforts.

### I. The Role of Convention Bureaus

Convention bureaus serve as intermediaries between event organisers and destinations. They are responsible for marketing and promoting a destination as a suitable location for conferences, meetings, and conventions. Convention bureaus offer vital support and resources to event planners, helping them navigate the destination, secure venues, and engage with local suppliers and service providers. This intermediary role gives convention bureaus the opportunity to promote sustainable practices to event organisers and drive change throughout the industry. While the role of destination management organisations (DMO) has been widely investigated academically as well as by practitioners, the leverage of convention bureaus fostering sustainability in the event industry is an emerging area that warrants attention and focus (Pavlukovic et al., 2020).

The Strategic Alliance of the National Convention Bureaux of Europe, a group of 29 national member organisations, recognises the urgent need for transformative change in response to the climate crisis. They believe that business events have a crucial role to play in contributing to sustainability efforts and addressing environmental and social impacts. The alliance is committed to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the European Green Deal (Ejdys & Szpilko, 2022), and they believe that Europe can lead the way in transitioning to a low-carbon, regenerative, and socially just economy.

The alliance acknowledges that business events, such as conferences and trade fairs, are essential for collaboration and communication but also have significant environmental and social impacts that need to be addressed. They emphasise the importance of taking action now to change the conversation about sustainable events and align efforts with international goals, frameworks, and industry movements like the Net Zero Carbon Events Initiative. They highlight that acting now means embracing innovation and new business models, while failure to act risks being left behind by changing expectations and demands.

The Strategic Alliance published a whitepaper that envisions the role of national convention bureaus

in the year 2030 and outlines their future purposes and responsibilities. This whitepaper reflects the alliance's trust-based collaboration and shared vision for a sustainable future. They aim to share their good practices, plans, and ideas with peers, partners, and stakeholders in the business events industry worldwide. They invite others to join them in creating a more sustainable, equitable, and successful business events landscape and emphasise the importance of dialogue and cooperation on this vital topic. The Strategic Alliance of the National Convention Bureaux of Europe calls for collective action in the business events industry to address the climate crisis and contribute to sustainability efforts. They invite collaboration and knowledge exchange to make a difference for themselves, their communities, and the planet (Kim et al., 2020; Santopietro & Scorza, 2021).

## II. Sustainable Frameworks and Initiatives

### Frameworks

The future of business events in Europe is closely tied to key initiatives like the European Green Deal and the Net Zero Carbon Events. The Strategic Alliance of the National Convention Bureaux of Europe is committed to working within existing policy frameworks and maximising alignment with industry initiatives, aiming to add value rather than duplicating efforts.

At the heart of the NCBV's joint action plan for sustainability lies the European Green Deal, an ambitious and comprehensive plan by the European Commission. Its overarching goal is to make the EU the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. The European Green Deal encompasses various sectors and policies, ranging from energy and transport to industry, agriculture, trade, and finance. It aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels, as outlined in the "Fit for 55" strategy. Additionally, the European Green Deal seeks to foster green innovation, enhance competitiveness, and ensure social justice, leaving no person or region behind during the transition.

With the rising rates of climate change, the European Union has recognised the need for more active action and has developed a new strategy known as The European Green Deal. This comprehensive plan aims to make the European economy climate-neutral while also prioritising social and economic sustainability dimensions, such as improving citizens' quality of life by protecting their natural living environment. One focal point of The European Green Deal is addressing issues in the energy sector. Implementing these measures will not only reduce emissions but also lead EU countries towards achieving energy independence with significant impacts on both regional policies as well as on adjusting market dynamics.

The business events industry, which encompasses professional meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions, is directly impacted by the European Green Deal due to its significant environmental footprint. The industry consumes substantial resources, generates waste, and emits greenhouse gases (Bossdorf et al., 2010; Guterman, 2009; Streb, Lively, Llewellyn, Matsumoto, Mazzotti, Pini, &

Coasne, 2022; Kloewer, Hoplins, Allen, & Higham, 2020). To remain sustainable and competitive in the long term, the business events sector must adapt to the new regulatory frameworks and market conditions arising from the European Green Deal. Furthermore, it must respond to the growing demand for sustainability from customers and stakeholders. To effectively respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by the European Green Deal, convention bureaus must adopt sustainable frameworks and initiatives.

Anticipating the challenges and opportunities that will arise from the transformative changes in energy, waste management, circular economy, travel, and logistics is still challenging. However, it is clear that the European Green Deal will reshape the definition of a successful business model. As a prominent player in the European business events industry, NCBV embraces and promotes the European Green Deal as a catalyst for innovation, competitiveness, and social responsibility. The alliance believes that this commitment is the most effective way for its industry to secure a future that is truly sustainable and resilient. While it is important to consider its potential advantages, such as fostering innovation, competitiveness, and social responsibility within this industry, there are concerns regarding its long-term feasibility. It is crucial to carefully assess whether this commitment truly guarantees a sustainable and resilient future for our sector.

## **2. Initiatives by Convention Bureaus**

If there's one key takeaway from the Strategic Alliance's 2021 positioning paper titled "The Future Role and Purpose of Convention Bureaux," it is the understanding that the roles and self-perceptions of NCVBs are currently undergoing a transition (The Strategic Alliance of the National Convention Bureaux of Europe, 2021).

When envisioning the future, three crucial aspects define how NCVBs can shape their ideal form and create value: adopting a truly global outlook, maintaining a big-picture perspective on emerging trends in the broader business events landscape, and striving to provide leadership and guidance for the successful and sustainable development of their respective markets and stakeholders. By combining these three aspects, NCVBs position themselves at the forefront of shaping the transition of the MICE platform into the next generation. Based on these essential factors and goals, the NCVB of the future can be characterised by four fundamental roles: strategist, facilitator, expert, and communicator.

What does all of this mean in the context of urgent climate action? The alliance believes that in order to drive the sustainable transition in the business events industry, NCVBs must fully leverage the aspects of their new roles. By staying informed about the latest industry trends and developments and providing leadership as strategists, fostering collaboration and building bridges among traditional and new stakeholders as facilitators, acting as hubs for expertise and resources as experts, and disseminating relevant information and news throughout their markets as communicators, NCVBs can effectively coordinate and align their stakeholders during the upcoming transition while ensuring that

diverse voices are heard and represented.

The ongoing climate crisis poses an even greater threat than the gradual emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. It demands that NCVBs quickly adapt to their new roles, acquire knowledge rapidly, and become actively engaged. Successfully addressing these challenges enables NCVBs to deliver unique value to their stakeholders, strengthen their competencies and unique selling points, and secure public support and legitimacy for the future. Ultimately, NCVBs need to demonstrate to governments and other public and private stakeholders that business events are a force for good and an essential component in building sustainable societies and industries.

Within this context, the Strategic Alliance of the National Convention Bureaux of Europe serves as a platform for co-learning, mutual support, and the exchange of good practices and experiences. The Alliance members have come together in a series of online and in-person workshops to establish a shared set of positions, as outlined in the following. This forms the foundation of their collaborative activities.

#### **a. Certification Programs and Standards**

Convention bureaus can implement certification programs and standards to encourage sustainable practices among event organisers. The Strategic Alliance report on National Convention Bureaux of Europe highlights that many European convention bureaus have developed their own sustainability standards and guidelines. For example, the Norwegian Convention Bureau has introduced the “Sustainable Destination” certification program, which provides a comprehensive framework for evaluating and promoting sustainable practices in the country’s event industry. By providing certification for events that meet specific sustainability criteria, convention bureaus incentivise event organisers to adopt eco-friendly practices.

#### **b. Education and Training**

Convention bureaus can play a pivotal role in educating event organisers, venues, and suppliers about sustainability best practices. The Strategic Alliance report emphasises the importance of training programs offered by convention bureaus to raise awareness and enhance the knowledge and skills of industry professionals. For instance, the Scottish Convention Bureau has partnered with Glasgow Caledonian University to develop the “Sustainable Glasgow” training program, providing event professionals with the tools and knowledge to organise sustainable events. By sharing information and resources, convention bureaus empower stakeholders to make informed decisions and embrace sustainable practices in their operations.

#### **c. Collaboration and Partnerships**

The Strategic Alliance report highlights the significance of collaboration and partnerships in driving sustainable initiatives. Convention bureaus can collaborate with local governments, environmental

organisations, and industry associations to create a united front for sustainability. By forging partnerships, convention bureaus can leverage collective expertise and resources to drive sustainable initiatives, such as waste reduction, energy efficiency, and responsible sourcing. These collaborations can also facilitate knowledge sharing and the development of innovative solutions for sustainable event management.

### **III. Benefits of Sustainable Practices**

#### **a. Environmental Impact**

The adoption of sustainable practices by convention bureaus and event organisers can significantly reduce the environmental footprint of events. The Strategic Alliance report emphasises the importance of minimising waste, conserving energy, and reducing carbon emissions in the event industry. By implementing waste management strategies, encouraging recycling and composting, and minimising energy consumption, events can become more environmentally responsible. These efforts contribute to mitigating climate change, conserving resources, and protecting fragile ecosystems.

#### **b. Social Responsibility**

Sustainable events prioritise the well-being of local communities and stakeholders. Convention bureaus can advocate for responsible tourism practices, emphasising the importance of cultural sensitivity, supporting local businesses, and respecting indigenous rights. The Strategic Alliance report highlights the significance of inclusive practices in the event industry, promoting diversity and fostering positive relationships between visitors and the host community. By incorporating social responsibility into event planning, convention bureaus can ensure the long-term benefits of tourism are shared equitably.

#### **c. Economic Opportunities**

Sustainable events have the potential to stimulate economic growth and create new opportunities. The Strategic Alliance report emphasises that convention bureaus can position destinations as attractive locations for conferences and events focused on sustainability. By actively promoting their sustainable practices and highlighting the environmental credentials of their venues, convention bureaus can attract a niche market of environmentally conscious event organisers and participants. These events bring economic benefits to local businesses, hotels, and service providers while also enhancing the destination's reputation as a sustainable choice.

## IV. Challenges and Opportunities

### a. Financial Constraints

One of the primary challenges faced by convention bureaus and event organisers is the perception that sustainable practices are cost-prohibitive. However, the Strategic Alliance report highlights that convention bureaus can overcome this challenge by working closely with venues, suppliers, and other stakeholders to identify cost-effective, sustainable alternatives, making eco-friendly options more accessible and financially viable.

### b. Lack of Awareness and Resources

Many event organisers may be unaware of sustainable practices or lack the necessary resources to implement them effectively. Convention bureaus can bridge this knowledge gap by providing comprehensive resources, guidelines, and toolkits that offer practical solutions and best practices for sustainable event management. Additionally, they can establish dedicated sustainability departments or personnel within their organisations to provide expert advice and support to event planners.

### c. Measuring Impact and Accountability

Convention bureaus face the challenge of measuring the impact of sustainable initiatives and ensuring accountability throughout the event planning process. By establishing key performance indicators (KPIs) and implementing monitoring and reporting systems, convention bureaus can track progress, evaluate the effectiveness of sustainability practices, and share success stories with stakeholders. Transparent reporting and accountability mechanisms can help build trust and foster a culture of continuous improvement within the industry.

## V. Good Practice Examples: Leading the Way

**Denmark:** The Copenhagen Convention Bureau has positioned the city as a leader in sustainable event management. Through their “Meetovation” concept initiated in 2015, they emphasise the integration of sustainability, participant engagement, and innovative meeting design. In 2019, the Copenhagen Convention Bureau launched the Copenhagen Legacy Lab. Copenhagen developed a methodology, tools, and processes to ensure that a strategic and systematic co-creation process that can create a positive and lasting impact on society is offered to congresses held in Copenhagen (<https://www.wonderfulcopenhagen.com/cll>). Copenhagen’s commitment to sustainable practices has attracted numerous conferences and events focused on sustainability, reinforcing the city’s reputation as a sustainable destination.

**Canada:** From one coast to another, Canadian cities are demonstrating their commitment to implementing environmentally sustainable solutions for events. Each destination has its own unique approach. In Edmonton, event organisers have access to a “Responsible Events Program Menu,” offering easily understandable options for hosting sustainable events. The city takes a leading role in this field and provides the opportunity to create carbon-neutral events. Victoria, the provincial capital of British Columbia, also offers the same option, emphasising its dedication to sustainability.

In Montréal, planners can utilise the Palais des Congrès de Montréal’s Palais Boreal programme to offset their emissions. However, sustainability is not limited to just one convention centre in Canada. The Vancouver Convention Centre, with its impressive six-acre living roof, holds the distinction of being the world’s first double LEED platinum-certified convention centre. The convention centre’s sustainability efforts have not only reduced environmental impact but have also garnered international recognition, attracting sustainable events and conferences to Vancouver.

**Malaysia:** The Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre’s Sustainable Development Goals Legacy Programme is a new initiative aimed at helping international association events create a lasting legacy by connecting with and contributing to the local community, environment, culture, arts and creative industries in Malaysia (<https://www.klccconventioncentre.com/plan/sdgs-legacy-programme>, 2023).

The programme focuses on three main pillars: Caring & Giving, Environmentally-Responsible Events and Creative Industries.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Convention bureaus have the potential to drive transformative change in the convention and events industry by promoting and fostering sustainability practices. Through certification programs, education and training, collaboration, and partnerships, convention bureaus can create a collective movement towards sustainable event management. The adoption of sustainable practices not only reduces the environmental impact of events but also promotes social responsibility and economic opportunities for host destinations. By overcoming challenges and embracing sustainable strategies, convention bureaus can position themselves as leaders in the quest for a responsible event industry that contributes to a sustainable future.

The role of convention bureaus in the context of Destination Management Organisations is an interesting and still under-researched aspect. Understanding the unique contributions each makes, the ways they collaborate, and how their roles differ could be critical to maximising sustainable event practices. Future studies could examine the interplay between these two entities, shedding light on how they can work synergistically to promote sustainability within the convention and events industry.

Future research in this field could also explore innovative solutions to overcome the highlighted

challenges facing convention bureaus. Emphasis could be placed on identifying the most cost-effective and impactful sustainable practices for event planning. Further, there is a need for empirical scholarship assessing the effectiveness of different sustainability practices in diverse contexts, and the role technology could play in augmenting these efforts.

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this paper. While it provides a comprehensive overview of the role of convention bureaus in promoting sustainability, it mainly relies on secondary data from varied sources. An empirical study with first-hand data would likely give a more in-depth insight into this issue. Furthermore, the paper has a global focus, overlooking some details that might be present in specific regional or country contexts. This global approach, while offering a broad perspective, could miss nuanced, location-specific strategies and challenges.

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