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Events and sustainability: why making events more sustainable is not enough

Judith Mair^a  and Andrew Smith^b 

^aBusiness School, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia; ^bSchool of Architecture and Cities, University of Westminster, London, UK

ABSTRACT

The special issue dedicated to events and sustainability is introduced here. We provide synopses of the papers, preceded by an introductory essay that examines how event studies has approached the relationship between events and sustainable development. Existing work too often assumes that sustainability means reducing negative environmental impacts with other aspects of the sustainability paradigm neglected. And whilst social issues have risen to prominence in events research generally, this work is usually considered outwith sustainability debates, and without considering environmental and economic interrelationships. We argue that event scholars should examine how events might contribute to sustainable development, rather than merely exploring how individual events could be made more sustainable. Accordingly, there needs to be further work addressing how events might change attitudes and behaviours by promoting sustainable lifestyles, communities and technologies. Following this discussion, we justify the focus on social sustainability in the special issue, clarify what this actually means, and question whether this is always the most appropriate way of framing research on the social impacts of events. Given the timing of the special issue, there is also a short review of how the coronavirus crisis affected the events sector, and what the implications might be for sustainability.

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Introduction

There is growing academic interest in events, a trend which reflects their importance to contemporary tourism, but also their wider significance. This maturing field of study is not merely growing in size, it is becoming more global, more sophisticated and more critical. Just as tourism studies emerged from a field more narrowly focused on tourism management, there is now a body of work that goes well beyond managerial analyses towards critical research that examines events as phenomena that are important socially, culturally, politically, environmentally and economically. This special issue of the Journal of Sustainable Tourism contributes to this emerging field by examining the relationship between events and sustainability. A broad perspective characterises our perspective on sustainability and our definition of events. By events we mean

CONTACT Andrew David Smith  a.Smith@westminster.ac.uk  School of Architecture and Cities, University of Westminster, London, UK

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planned, themed, time-limited occasions, including (more leisure oriented) arts and cultural festivals, sports events, and (more business or education-oriented) conferences and exhibitions. We recognise that different event types have their own characteristics and impacts, but we also acknowledge that the boundaries between genres have blurred, with sports events incorporating cultural programmes; festivals including conferences; and educational and business events made more festive. This helps to justify the catch all discussion of *events* and sustainability we present here.

In the introduction to their edited book *Events, Society and Sustainability*, Pernecky and Luck (2013, p. 2) wrote that “in the domain of event studies, information continues to emerge on what ought to change so that events can be declared ‘sustainable’, but with little thought and research.” There has been further thinking and some important texts since then, but the special issue presented here aims to address the **limited ambitions** and **narrow focus** of existing research. With respect to the former, we highlight the need to go beyond merely making events more sustainable, to consider how events might contribute to the wider sustainability agenda. As Mair (2019) and Getz (2017) argue, we should no longer merely be trying to run “sustainable events”; rather, we should focus on how events can contribute to the sustainable economic, social and environmental development of the places which host them. In terms of the narrow focus, discussions on events and sustainability tend to focus on how individual events might be made more environmentally sustainable. This reflects the ways the term “sustainable events” is used within the events industry to refer to reducing environmental impacts. This issue is also apparent in academic research. Pernecky and Luck (2013) highlight the predominance of texts that assess environmental impacts and the need to green the events industry. The conflation of sustainability and environmental impacts in events research is highlighted by a recent paper by Boggia et al. (2018) where the terms sustainability and environmental effects are used interchangeably. In a more recent review of the gaps in event management research, Kim and Kaewnuch (2018) connect event sustainability and conservation, but only mention one study on social capital, suggesting that studies on the “social” dimension of sustainability are still lacking. To be clear, we are not arguing that social issues and social impacts have been neglected within events studies: on the contrary, there has been a substantial amount of research in these fields over recent years. And some authors have considered social issues within a wider discussion of event sustainability (e.g. Getz, 2017). But there is not enough research that addresses social considerations within wider discussions about events and sustainable development. Even when authors do discuss the social sustainability of events, research tends to divorce social aspects from environmental and economic considerations.

This special edition aims to make a more ambitious, broad-based contribution by examining how events can contribute to sustainability ambitions more generally, including interrelated social and economic development goals. Given the climate emergency and the biodiversity crisis, there is understandable attention at present to environmental issues. However, we were keen to ensure that this collection of papers did not solely focused on natural environments, but addressed the contribution of events to sustainable cities, communities and societies, including issues such as social equity and cultural inclusion. We also wanted to devote sufficient attention to the role of events in sustainable economic development. This focus on the social and economic dimensions of sustainability reflects the spheres where events can play the most significant roles. Rather than treating these as separate domains from environmentally focused studies, it is important to recognise that the value of the sustainability paradigm is that these are considered as inherently integrated. This is also reflected in more recent thinking, such as “doughnut economics” which proposes that we should build adequate social and economic foundations to sustain quality of life, but in ways that do not overshoot the ecological ceiling (Raworth, 2017). A move away from a “siloed” approach is overdue (Mair, 2019), and there is perhaps scope here to emulate the way tourism studies matured to consider social sustainability, alongside environmental and economic considerations.

Given the ongoing debates about how the term “sustainability” is used and understood, and the greenwashing that has undermined its credibility, some might dismiss sustainability as vague rhetoric. Indeed, one of the participants in Richardson’s (2019) recent study of music festivals highlighted a widespread view that, due to its ubiquitous use, sustainability has become “almost a meaningless term.” However, it is important to remember and recover some of the valuable principles at its heart; in particular the way it highlights key relationships between humans and their environment, but also between present and future generations and inequity within current populations. The issues of inter-generational, but also intra-generational, equity are key elements of sustainability and are addressed by many of the papers presented here. Events and festivals offer opportunities to build social inclusion (Laing & Mair, 2015) and social capital (Mair & Duffy, 2018), but can also be agents of social exclusion (Finkel, 2010; Mair & Duffy, 2015). As Duffy (2014) notes, festivals and events tend to operate simultaneously as a set of inclusionary and exclusionary practices, and this “double edged sword” warrants further investigation.

Events and sustainability

Perhaps understandably, given the damaging environmental impacts of large-scale events, much of the literature on events and sustainability is framed negatively. However, rather than merely trying to understand how best to limit negative impacts, there is a need for research on the potential of events as tools for promoting, provoking and delivering sustainable development. As Zifkos (2015, p. 14) notes in his provocative paper on festivals, sustainability commitments in the field of events privilege the ethics of minimising negative environmental impacts, “not an ethics of producing greater good, as the principles of sustainability would suggest.” This neglects the potentially transformative effects of events. Sociological and anthropological texts highlight the established role of festivals and events as agents of *communitas* and social bonding (e.g. Turner, 1969, 1974, 1984), and as vehicles for achieving transgression, transcendence and collective effervescence (Giorgi & Sassatelli, 2011; Sharpley & Stone, 2012). In their pioneering report, Fredline et al. (2006) explored the social impacts of events, considering these as any that affect people’s quality of life. Their research revealed a general consensus amongst host communities that events have “fairly substantial economic, entertainment, social and development benefits.” Events are also powerful modes of communication, engagement and affiliation, and researchers have explored the ways sport events help to nurture community development (Warner & Dixon, 2011), shared values and social identities (Lee et al., 2016). The ways events generate social capital is now widely recognised too, even beyond the events literature. For example, Raworth (2017, p. 76) identifies international festivals as one vehicle for building “norms, rules and relations that enable us to cooperate with and depend on one another,” helping us to “meet our fundamental human needs such as for participation, leisure, protection and belonging.”

Whilst some events are inherently about commemorating the past, others face forward and promote innovation, experimentation and transformation (Larson, 2009). These qualities indicate that events could provide useful vehicles to promote more sustainable technologies, attitudes and behaviours (see for example Mair & Laing, 2013). However, it is important to recognise some of the inherent contradictions between events and sustainability. Events are, by definition, temporary phenomena; whereas sustainability promotes enduring and resilient forms of development (Smith, 2012). Sustainability encourages us to think about the plight of future generations, but events are not only time limited, they are also precarious in that they tend to be cancelled or discontinued (Getz, 2002). Temporary occurrences have long lasting consequences if they exploit natural, built and socio-cultural resources in an unsustainable way; but it is harder to make the case that transient events contribute positively to long term sustainable development. However, this argument is increasingly being made by researchers. Several texts have explored the enduring effects of temporary events (Kassens-Noor, 2016), with some researchers espousing

the advantages of “flexible” festival-led initiatives over traditional forms of development (Wynn, 2015). Increased attention to recurring events, better acknowledgement of the relationships between events and the everyday, and greater acknowledgement of the significance of the pre- and post-event periods mean that the potentially positive roles of events in sustainable development are now better understood.

Alongside the recognised principles of social equity, economic efficiency and environmental integrity, some authors claim that culture should be a fourth pillar of sustainable development (Perry et al., 2020) and the fact culture is now prominent in several of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals suggests this is now formally accepted. Acknowledging the significance of culture to sustainable development is relevant to this special issue as it highlights how events can make more positive contributions to sustainability. Events play a crucial role in cultural activity, not only encouraging cultural development, but visibilising cultural forms and allowing a wider range of people to participate. As such, cultural festivals and events are regarded as ways of making places more inclusive. For example, in Neal et al.’s (2015) research, cultural events encouraged people from different ethnic groups to visit local parks and instigated feelings of connectivity to culturally different others. Following the sustainability logic that socio-cultural, economic and environmental systems are intertwined, there are knock on benefits of cultural events too. As Perry et al. (2020, p. 613) note in their recent paper: “linking a cultural event with natural and/or built heritage can build people’s sense of belonging and pride, especially if focused at a local or regional audience. This in turn can have positive impacts on citizens’ approach to stewardship of their environment over the longer term.” As Lefebvre (1991, p. 203, cited in Zifkos, 2015) argues, festivals and events are not just about joyful togetherness, they have always been linked to communal engagement with the places we live and “co-operation with the natural order.”

Beyond sustainable events: the role of events in sustainable development

Just as analyses of sustainable tourism have moved from merely assessing the sustainability of tourism, towards understanding the role of tourism in wider sustainable development, it is important that studies of events adopt a similar perspective. Of course, it is important that individual events are made more sustainable, but to focus solely on this consideration shifts attention from a more important mission: making human habitation of the world more sustainable. Whilst events are often represented as “bounded” phenomena, confined to specific places and times, they are embedded within wider processes and everyday lives. A good example is the travel dimension: if we confine analysis to assessing an individual event’s sustainability, this tends to ignore elements outside the space-time of the event, including audience travel which is reported to contribute 80% of CO₂ emissions attributable to UK festivals (cited in Collins & Potoglou, 2019). Focusing merely on making an individual event more sustainable also ignores the potentially positive contribution events can make to wider sustainable development, most notably through educating and inspiring people, and by provisioning temporary experiences that might encourage people to adopt more sustainable ways of living. Multi-disciplinary work – particularly that which incorporates robust models of behaviour change – is required to assess whether temporary events really can provoke these sustainable transitions.

We can move beyond merely aiming for more sustainable events, towards maximising the contribution of events to sustainable development, by thinking about how events might change attitudes and behaviours. Events can perform this role in different ways: for example, by promoting more sustainable ways of living and associated technologies, or by providing direct experiences of more sustainable lifestyles or communities. We live in the age of the experience economy, and experiential marketing companies now “stage” their products to maximise engagement with potential consumers. Therefore, to encourage different attitudes and behaviours, it is important

to consider how we might also stage demonstrations of sustainability. Several authors note the potential of events to educate participants and accelerate transitions to higher standards of living. As Mair and Laing (2013) note, some events have been deliberately established to encourage sustainable behaviour such as the “ecofests” discussed in their work. Other events have a strong sustainability focus, even if their main purpose is to provide fulfilling experiences more generally. World Expo events (which tend to adopt sustainable development themes) are good examples, particularly as they often host experimental installations that provide models for more sustainable urbanism (Monclus, 2009). Novac’s (2018) work on the Hannover 2000 Expo explores what kind of sustainability was “staged” here, and with what effects. This event is renowned for the development of the Hannover Principles, a series of sustainable design principles commissioned by the organisers which were presented to the 1992 Rio Earth Summit (McDonough & Braungart, 1992). However, Novac (2018) suggests that political and economic imperatives subsequently usurped environmental agendas, with the Expo used to open new capitalist terrain. Therefore, whilst staging sustainability might theoretically offer opportunities for advancing sustainable development, the sustainability outcomes of politicised mega-events tend to be disappointing (Monclus, 2009).

Some new event franchises have been conceived with sustainability in mind. For example, The Formula E motor racing series uses electric cars, glamourising these vehicles and advancing related technologies (Robeers, 2019). In such cases, there is always a danger that sustainability is used superficially as a marketing tool or form of differentiation. Nevertheless, there are many examples of festivals and events that adopt sustainability as their guiding principle rather than merely a tokenistic gesture. In these instances, it is crucial that organisers stage events in sustainable ways even if their main objective is to inspire sustainable transitions post-event. Events can be easily vilified if they promote sustainable practices but fall short themselves. A good example was the 2008 International Expo staged in Zaragoza, Spain. This event was dedicated to the theme Agua y Desarrollo Sostenible (Water and Sustainable Development) but was criticised for the hypocritical way it neglected environmental issues, including the way it damaged the riparian ecosystem used to stage the event (Rollin, 2008).

The established role of events as experimental settings where new ideas and practices can be experienced is key to optimising the potential contribution of events to sustainable development. In recent years, experiments have been increasingly used as research designs to explore the viability of sustainability transitions. As Browne et al.’s (2019) recent work shows, events are particularly suited to these endeavours, as they comprise “actually existing experiments” that can be assessed without having to artificially construct a contrived exercise. For example, music festivals provide ideal settings for research which explores how people adapt to less resource intensive ways of living. Browne et al.’s (2019) work highlighted this potential perfectly by using the setting of music festival campsites to explore how attendees handled the restricted availability of a water supply (the average water consumption at Glastonbury is 13.69 litres/day, whereas the UK average is 195 litres/day). Other types of events – such as World Expos – are also famed for the way they allow people to experience experimental or utopian visions of the future. Events and the everyday are inherently linked and this highlights that events might help to change everyday habits. Zifkos (2015) suggests that events can contribute to sustainability by acting as *incubators of change*. There are obvious and dramatic examples of this such as the Burning Man Festival which aims to promote alternative lifestyles (Rowen, 2020). But events can also perform this role in more subtle ways. For example, the ways that car users are required to use public transport during mega-events produces temporary experiences that might shape future behaviours (Smith, 2012).

In recognising the potential role of events in sustainability transitions, we also need to be realistic about whether such changes take place. The evidence for events stimulating or inspiring sustained behavioural change is relatively scant, and where it does exist the results are not particularly positive. An example is the poor track record of sport events in inspiring people to

participate more in physical activities. Mair and Laing (2013) highlight a key limitation with the proposition that events might encourage people to live more sustainably: events that aim to advance this agenda tend to attract those people already engaged in sustainable behaviours. In other words, these events are preaching to the converted, and this skewed appeal does limit the effects of events. Additionally, some aspects of the rationale for using events to advance sustainability seem a little far-fetched. For example, the notion that the relaxed atmosphere at leisure events may mean attendees are in the mood for learning something new (cited in Mair & Laing, 2013) seems less likely than the alternative scenario – that people are so engrossed in having a good time that they are less likely to absorb calls to amend their unsustainable lifestyles. There are links here to debates regarding how motives for tourism experiences such as escapism, hedonism and freedom limit the capacity of consumers to engage with serious sustainability issues and amend their travel behaviours accordingly.

The limits to what might be achieved using events might be addressed if events are integrated with other events, and within wider public policy initiatives, rather than regarded as standalone interventions. Some of the most famous examples of sustainable event legacies are those where events were integrated into, and used to realise, wider plans – for example, the Barcelona 1992 Olympic Games (Smith, 2012). Events also need to be linked together if they are to make meaningful contributions to sustainability goals (Getz, 2017). These principles highlight the value of leveraging as a sustainable development strategy. Although the term leveraging has now been adopted to refer to a wide range of practices and is sometimes co-opted as part of the way events are justified (Smith, 2014), the essence of leveraging is using events strategically to help achieve wider objectives. Events provide a resource, or a window of opportunity, to advance long term policy goals, but associated projects need to be pursued to “lever” desired effects. So, rather than hoping events will deliver positive impacts, leveraging involves bolting on associated initiatives in conjunction with events to ensure that intended outcomes are achieved. Much of the work on leveraging examines how to leverage events to maximise tourism visitation, image enhancement, and business development. There is an emerging body of research on leveraging social development, even if much of this work doesn’t necessarily use the leveraging terminology. However, more work is needed to consider how events, and portfolios of events, might be most effectively levered to encourage sustainability transitions. For example, there is a need to better understand how cycle races, car free days and other street events can be levered and integrated into transport policies to encourage people to walk and cycle more (Smith & McGillivray, 2020).

An emerging paradigm which might also allow events to make a more positive contribution to sustainable development is a process oriented approach. Traditionally events research has focused on what happens during events and the impacts of events in their aftermath. A process or systemic perspective focuses attention on the ways that events are made. The pre-event period (sometimes referred to as advent) is when many positive event legacies can be secured, as participation in event preparations is often one of the most powerful ways to realise positive social impacts. There are now numerous social enterprises and cultural agencies that adopt this as their guiding principle – these organisations stage events but they do so to nurture community participation, local creativity and social networks rather than merely to create great experiences for audiences. Indeed, transitioning from thinking about how to attract and satisfy event audiences towards building event communities is a good example of how events might be more aligned with sustainable development goals. UK organisations such as Handmade Parade and Walk the Plank now provide a blueprint for how organisers can work with communities to allow local people to put on great events for themselves. These innovative enterprises even organise additional outreach workshops to ensure that disadvantaged or marginalised people are included. A street parade or community festival provides the focus and impetus for activities and participation, but the making of the event and other forms of participation pre-event become the most important vehicles for bringing people together. Participation is critically important

when considering the relationship between events and sustainability and, rather than merely trying to encourage superficial involvement, the best way to do this is to facilitate the co-creation of events, allowing communities to plan, produce, organise and participate in them (Smith & Vodicka, 2020). The challenge is to see whether this approach to organising small-scale cultural festivals and street parades can be scaled up and translated across to larger business and sport events.

Social sustainability

One defining feature of this special issue is the attention dedicated to social sustainability. Of the 16 papers included, 10 are particularly focused on the social or community dimensions of events. Although there is not necessarily an agreed upon definition in an events context, there is agreement that social sustainability relies on understanding and addressing the wide range of social impacts that are caused by events and festivals (Mair et al., 2021). Fredline et al. (2003, p. 6) consider social impacts to be “any impacts that potentially have an effect on the quality of life for local residents.” However, this all-encompassing definition is arguably too broad to be of practical use in understanding social sustainability. Ritchie et al. (2020) categorise social impacts at the level of society affected, so that issues of participation or civil liberties can be considered as individual-level impacts, gentrification may be thought of as a community-level impact, civic pride can be best understood at the level of the host town/city, and some impacts, particularly of the largest events (such as destination image) may even relate to the national level. Social impacts can be positive for the communities that host events, but at the same time, a range of negative impacts have been identified, including increased traffic, noise, congestion, financial and opportunity costs and potential disenfranchisement from the event planning process (Chien et al., 2012). These issues highlight the value of examining how events might assist the development of sustainable communities.

In a pioneering special issue of the *Journal of Sport and Tourism* dedicated to sustainability Smith (2009) contributed a paper on the social sustainability of major sports events. This paper was significant in that it seems to be the first example of an events paper that used social sustainability as its central framework and it paved the way for social sustainability to emerge as a key consideration in event studies. Smith (2009, p. 111) highlights that “sustainable development requires long-term benefits that are distributed equitably, and on both these criteria the social effects of events are questionable.” However, following the line of argument we have developed above, he suggests that events could potentially contribute to social sustainability if their temporality was better understood and more effectively leveraged, concluding that “the benefits of social leverage, much like social effects generally, are perhaps underestimated during the build up to events, but rather overestimated in the long term” (Smith, 2009, p. 118).

Over the past decade, the amount of work published on the social dimensions/social impacts or social legacies of events has mushroomed. Recent work by Mair et al. (2021) in the context of mega-events has identified an important distinction in the way that events affect host communities between those impacts felt directly by the local community and those impacts which are indirect effects. This is important because many indirect impacts have previously been left out of discussions on social impacts, yet can affect the lives of community members. Direct event impacts include volunteering and upskilling opportunities; enhanced social cohesion and social capital; improved inclusion and tolerance of diversity; and improved levels of sports participation and infrastructure. These have long been recognised as social impacts of events (see for example Fredline & Faulkner, 2001). However, indirect event impacts also have the potential to affect local communities (positively or negatively) including new business and government networks; the showcase effect of destination branding; disaster preparedness; and better accessibility for people with disabilities. Creating new business and government networks, such as those between

small business and local government, or between sporting associations and local governments, is a crucial part of successful event delivery, but maintaining these new networks after the event is over can bring long-term economic and social benefits to local residents. There are good links here to Orefice and Nyarko (2020) who analyse how events create social value through the interactions involved. Destination branding may not seem to have much to do with sustainability, but can enhance trade and inward investment, bringing jobs and economic security to local communities (Knott et al., 2015). Activities such as disaster management may seem, at first glance, unrelated to the social impacts of an event, but the disaster preparation and prevention measures that are developed in partnership between event organisers, local government and the emergency services can be maintained after the event is over and can contribute to greater community resilience in the face of future natural or other disasters. Finally, hosting an event (particularly a major or mega event) requires significant consideration of the needs of visitors with disabilities, which in turn leads to accessibility legacies for the host community (Dickson et al., 2016).

This consideration of social impacts helps to frame any discussion of the social sustainability of events. However, maximising positive impacts and minimising negative impacts are necessary, but not sufficient, preconditions of achieving social sustainability. And whilst social impacts are an important dimension of event sustainability, it is sometimes unclear whether it is that helpful or that relevant to frame these impacts using the idea of social sustainability. As discussed previously, the sustainability paradigm is important because it inherently forces us to think about inter- and intra-generational equity and about the inherent relationships between social, economic, and environmental resources. Work that addresses short term social impacts or that which confines analysis only to social dimensions of events might not have much to do with sustainability at all.

Coronavirus/COVID19 and the timing of this special issue

Given the tumultuous events that have affected the world in the period 2020-21, it is important to point out the timing and backstory of this special issue. The original call for papers was distributed in July 2019, well before most people had even heard of Coronavirus or COVID-19. Abstracts were scrutinised that summer, and full papers were requested by Spring 2020, just as the coronavirus crisis reached its (first) peak in Europe. Therefore, the papers included here do not explicitly address the coronavirus crisis and are generally based on research that was conducted before the pandemic hit. Obviously, the events sector is amongst those that have been affected most by the crisis and there are likely to be enduring effects, even if the vaccination rollout in 2021 is successful. Nevertheless, we think the work presented here is fundamental enough and substantial enough to remain relevant in a post-pandemic world.

At the time of writing, it is unclear exactly how festivals and events will emerge from the crisis, and it is likely that some event organisations may not survive the loss of income and audiences. This is particularly relevant to the special issue presented here. Obviously, sustainability involves a lot more than merely financial viability and sustaining enterprises, but many professionals involved in the events sector do interpret the term in this way. For example, Zifkos (2015) suggests that, from a corporate perspective, sustainability tends to be perceived as a mix of CSR obligations and the “survivability” of event organisations. This is understandable, as events and the organisations involved in producing them are known to be particularly prone to failure. The coronavirus crisis has served to further highlight this precarity. Unfortunately, one of the legacies of the coronavirus pandemic is likely to be that narrow definitions of “sustainability as survival” are likely to become more prominent, with more fundamental issues (e.g. climate change, biodiversity loss, social inclusion, accessibility, wellbeing) relegated down the priority list. Research completed in the immediate pre-pandemic period (e.g. Dodds et al., 2020) suggests that event

organisers already tended to ignore, or under-estimate, sustainability issues, and the pandemic may exacerbate such attitudes. A more positive forecast is that the crisis has encouraged people and organisations to appreciate the value of natural environments, livelihoods and other people more; which may drive the adoption of more sustainable practices in the future. The way the pandemic has disproportionately affected disadvantaged people and ethnic minorities has also served to highlight widespread social inequality: and we hope this will prompt post-pandemic action to address this agenda.

Emerging research in the broader contexts of tourism and sustainable behaviour suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting attitudes and consumption behaviour. For example, in Brazil, Severo et al. (2021) demonstrate the effects of the pandemic on sustainable consumption, environmental awareness, and social responsibility. Chua et al. (2020) found that there was a significant relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and destination attachment, thus suggesting an important link between destination choice and intention to travel and the CSR in place at that destination. Risk perceptions associated with travel are also, not surprisingly, dynamic and varying in times of pandemic, with Neuburger and Egger (2020) identifying a significant increase in perceptions of travel risk. Taking a different framing, Crossley (2020) posits that the pandemic may result in increasing desires to repair the ecological damage caused by tourism, a point underscored by Rastegar et al. (2021) in their call for the use of a justice framework to help rebuild tourism.

Research on the pandemic's implications for festivals and events is currently limited. In a research note, Davies (2021) takes an ecological economics approach and considers a range of potential economic and social scenarios and their outcomes for the events industry. However, the likelihood of any of these scenarios materialising is currently unknown. Rowen (2020) echoes the call by Crossley (2020) and Rastegar et al. (2021) to see the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to re-set and re-consider the way that we view events. Other recent papers include reference to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on festivals, but are not focused on the events themselves – see for example Hoang et al. (2021) on an international public health film competition; Salti (2020) on film festivals and their role in the production of international films; and Anderton (2021) on the impacts of Covid-19 on the live music scene.

Although countless events have been downscaled, postponed or cancelled during the coronavirus crisis, it is interesting to note that organisers have responded in various creative ways to ensure that events have continued in some form. This highlights the ways that events are now embedded in contemporary societies and new (experience) economies and demonstrates the resilience, creativity and *inevitably* of the events sector. In simple terms, there have been four main ways that events have happened despite the restrictions imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19 (Smith, 2020). These four responses; the production of internet, informal, illegal and ingenious events – the four I's – summarise the ways events have continued even when gatherings of people have been prohibited.

First, some events have been taken partly or wholly online, with remote, digital consumption replacing live events. This proactive response has become so widespread that it seems likely to affect the ways events are run in the future, even when there are no restrictions. This highlights interesting sustainability scenarios. Whilst digital events may help to reduce the amount of travel and other unsustainable forms of consumption associated with events, there are significant issues with their restricted inclusivity and limited impacts. Second, whilst formal gatherings have been prohibited, a series of more informal events have been organised to cater for people's seemingly insatiable demand to come together and share experiences. This has involved various neighbourhood events, with performances or activities staged on local streets that can be consumed from doorsteps or balconies. For example, one of the most memorable images for the initial peak of the crisis in Europe was that of people in Italy performing public concerts from their balconies. In the UK, similar events involved distanced gatherings or performances on neighbourhood streets. These events have important sustainability implications, as localised, community,

co-produced occasions are perhaps those that have the greatest potential to act as drivers of sustainable development. Third, some events have been staged that contravene regulations – with various DJ sets, raves, parties and demonstrations organised illicitly. Events are often regarded as experimental, transgressive or liminoid phenomena, which often aim to challenge the status quo, and these events are in line with this tradition. Fourth, and finally, the event industry has shown evidence of creativity, adaptability and ingenuity through the ways that commercial events have been adapted in the era of COVID-19 to make them safe to attend. Examples include the staging of drive-in concerts, film screenings and various other festivals where audiences consume events from the safety of their own cars. The sustainability implications of the revival of these drive-in events are, however, problematic as they involve the use of private, polluting vehicles, and involve atomistic occasions where social interactions between attending individuals/groups are deliberately constrained. Thus, these provide exemplars of dystopian, and unsustainable events.

A synopsis of the papers included in the special edition

Within this special issue there are papers which focus on all elements of sustainability as they pertain to events. However, as discussed above, there is a particular focus on the social and socio-cultural pillars of sustainability. The special issue covers a range of themes relevant to events and sustainability, but it also covers a range of geographical contexts and event genres. Alongside a set of UK and Australian papers, this special issue also features work that addresses Asian (China and Japan) and African (South Africa) cases and contexts. The events covered include some of the world's biggest events, including the FIFA World Cup and one of China's biggest trade fairs, but also small, community-scale events. Rather than focusing on one particular genre, the special issue covers a broad mix of event types: cultural festivals, arts festivals, food markets, sports events and businesses events, with a particular focus on events that aim to benefit marginalised groups (e.g. the elderly, LGBTQ+ communities).

Each article stands on its own; however, we have presented the papers in broad thematic groupings – *community events and social sustainability* (Hassanli et al., 2020; Koenig-Lewis et al., 2020; Musikavanhu et al., 2021; Qu & Cheer, 2020; Stevenson, 2020), *policy, practice and governance relating to sustainable events* (Maguire, 2020; Quinn et al., 2020; Zhong et al., 2020; Werner et al., 2020), *the business/management of sustainable events* (Hatipoglu & Inelmen, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles & Monga, 2020; Orefice & Nyarko, 2020; Wong et al., 2020), and finally *diverse perspectives on events and sustainability* (McClinchey, 2020; Ong et al., 2020; Wood & Dashper, 2020).

A common theme running through the papers on events and social sustainability is the importance of community, whether this is defined as a geographical or place-based community, ethnic community or as a community of interest. Qu and Cheer (2020) examine the role of community arts festivals in sustainable rural revitalisation, taking a small peripheral community in Japan as its focus. Like many other rural communities, Mitarai is struggling with the effects of aging and depopulation. An art festival (Shiosai) featuring local cultural heritage has been developed with the aim of reversing the decline. Qu and Cheer suggest that the festival has increased tourism to the area and has acted as a catalyst for rural revitalisation. However, due to a lack of external investment, the extent to which the festival can continue to provide the benefits to the local community is uncertain.

The contribution by Stevenson (2020) also investigates community-led events and is underpinned by several theoretical concepts including social capital, sense of place and wellbeing. Stevenson (2020) points to the importance of “small scale, incremental, bottom-up, playful and pleasurable” interactions that are facilitated by community events. She argues that there is a case for considering small-scale community events to be a platform for the development of socially sustainable behaviours within a community. However, she also highlights some of the

limitations associated with community events, most notably that such local community events, organised by particular members of a community, do not have the capacity in isolation to resolve existing inequality and injustice in society.

The communities addressed by Hassanli, Walters and Williamson (2020) are refugee and migrant communities in Sydney, Australia. Theoretically informed by psychological sense of community, and taking a qualitative approach, Hassanli et al. analyse a multicultural festival (the New Beginnings Festival) and interrogate the complex interactions between the different communities of place and interest – ethnic communities, migrant communities and what they term the “mainstream” or existing local communities. The location of the festival, in the city centre rather than in an “ethnic neighbourhood” was found to be a very important factor in supporting migrants’ adaptation to the new society and their well-being. However, the key strength of this festival appears to be that it allows a range of migrants to come together and share migration experiences, regardless of their places of origin.

In their contribution, Koenig-Lewis et al. (2020) examine cultural festivals, investigating visitors’ level of behavioural engagement during a festival and how this influences cultural and social post-festival legacies. The study considers whether engaged visitors are associated with longer term impacts, manifested through post-festival cultural and community involvement intentions. It incorporates an array of variables including corporate behavioural engagement, emotions, festival loyalty, and post-festival cultural and social involvement. Findings suggest that there is indeed a relationship between two particular groups of visitors – “Learners” and “Doers” – and intentions to remain involved with cultural and community development post-festival. This suggests that encouraging engagement (rather than simply promoting attendance) is a key factor affecting the sustainability of an event.

The final paper in this section is written by Musikavanhu et al. (2021), and takes as its context the social value of the 2010 FIFA World Cup for the community of Green Point, Cape Town. The authors argue that long term feelings about the event among the local community are mixed, with views emerging from community members that are heavily dependent on their levels of involvement in the event itself. Some local residents felt that any benefits generated were short lived, while others highlighted issues around perceived inequalities in how the benefits were shared among the local community. This reinforces our comments above about the definition and importance of social sustainability. More than ten years after the event, some residents noted that they still felt disadvantaged. Nonetheless, some positive social value has been maintained for the local community, demonstrating the potential for mega events to be transformational for communities.

Key stakeholders addressed in this special issue not only include communities that host events but also the organisations charged with their governance, and the next thematic grouping of papers in this special issue address local, state and national policy and practice in relation to events. Maguire (2020) on local authority planning for event management in Ireland focuses on sustainable development and the role that events can play in this. Local authorities have statutory responsibilities for event licensing, but at the same time often have significant resources invested in events with the expectation that they will be a vehicle for achieving a range of policy imperatives. Maguire highlights a lack of planning for sustainability in the events domain, and calls for a consistent, transparent and state-wide approach to sustainable planning for event management in Ireland, and one that will inform local and state authorities in other jurisdictions around the world.

Also adopting a public policy angle, Quinn et al. (2020) consider cultural inclusion policy objectives and consider the effectiveness of outdoor festivals in achieving these. Using secondary research derived from a series of case study cities in Europe (Barcelona, Dublin, Glasgow, Gothenburg and London), Quinn et al. highlight a lack of dedicated policy attention to cultural inclusion and the predominance of the market-led approach, which is sometimes perused to the detriment of positive cultural inclusion outcomes. Quinn et al. identify emerging policy rhetoric linking festivals to cultural inclusion; however, they note that these policies are not, as yet, sufficiently “joined up” across the relevant policy domains, rendering this rhetoric unconvincing.

Zhong et al. (2020) also address governance issues in the specific context of business events by investigating value chain governance. The paper explores a case study of the China Import and Export Fair to consider the interplay between stakeholders in terms of greening the event. Key concepts in this study are power and power relations. The findings show that in response to those stakeholders who chose a profit-driven approach, and thus inhibited the promotion of green booths, the Fair was able to use both its institutional and its bargaining powers to engage these key stakeholders, and at the same time used its governance powers to encourage greening through setting green booth standards. There are lessons that can be learned here about greening value chains in other contexts.

In a slightly different vein, but still taking a strategic and macro-level approach, Werner et al. (2020) consider how events can be used by destinations to serve as “prototypes of new ways of living.” Drawing from the Slow Movement, and undertaking a conceptual and empirical review, Werner et al. argue that Slow Events can have a significant impact on a locality, through promoting slower forms of living, supporting local businesses, preserving local traditions and protecting the local environment. As Werner et al. acknowledge, the possibility of the term “slow” being misunderstood remains, and destinations risk being labelled “dull” or “boring” instead. However, Slow Events may also have a positive impact on destination attractiveness, particularly among those market segments who are interested in and aware of alternative lifestyles.

The business and management of sustainable events forms another thematic grouping in this special issue. However, each article focuses on a specific element of business and management, with a range of important issues covered. Orefice and Nyarko (2020) take a holistic perspective and examine sustainable value creation in event ecosystems. This allows them to move beyond simple references to the triple bottom line, and event greening, to consider how stakeholders can create sustainable value for themselves, and for society, beyond any individual event. Grounded in service dominant logic and using concepts from business models literature, Orefice and Nyarko present a conceptual paper using the key components of sustainable value creation as they pertain to events. Acknowledging the complexity of actors and stakeholders in the events domain, Orefice and Nyarko posit that the value generated by an event is a crucial starting point, but that other influences are inseparable from ongoing sustainable value creation.

Wong et al. (2020) examine a different aspect of business and management in their paper – that of consumer behaviour and how attending “green” events may encourage increased uptake of eco-friendly behaviours beyond the event domain. Wong et al. use goal systems theory to consider whether personal involvement and past experience of attending green events might affect one’s attitudes towards attending green events in future and towards pro-environmental behaviour more generally. Although the effect is noted to weaken over time, nonetheless, Wong et al. argue that there is potential for events to act as a “transformative mechanism” by providing attendees with green, or eco-friendly knowledge resulting in future pro-environmental behaviour change. However, as they note, future research is still required to elucidate this thesis further.

Using an analysis of Earth Markets in 14 countries, Hatipoglu and Inelmen (2020) examine the effect of management policies and practices on sustainable consumption and production practices. Earth Markets contribute to all pillars of sustainability, bringing economic benefits to farmers, social benefits to communities and environmental benefits through the conservation of biodiversity. The study found interesting differences relating to the age of the Earth Market, with more established Markets showing higher levels of stakeholder collaboration, and newer Markets relying more heavily on volunteers and focusing on attracting farmers/producers. The study also demonstrated a disconnect between formal control and the management practices of the Earth Markets in relation to their contribution to sustainable consumption and production. Hatipoglu and Inelmen conclude that broad stakeholder participation, through community-based governance, is the strongest predictor of community involvement in and support for an Earth Market.

The final article in the business and management thematic grouping takes a very different approach: Higgins-Desbiolles and Monga (2020) adopt a feminist ethic of care analysis to explore

social entrepreneurship capacity in events management. Taking a social enterprise events business in Adelaide, Australia (GOGO Events) as their case study, Higgins-Desbiolles and Monga demonstrate how the company founder uses their stakeholder network to create and stage event installations with teams of marginalised people. They go on to reveal how such events, and the business itself, contribute to the “purpose economy,” moving beyond corporate social responsibility and creating relationships of care that contribute towards the building of socio-cultural sustainability and wellbeing.

The last thematic grouping of articles in this special issue is a set of work on equality, diversity and inclusivity (EDI), which includes papers on contemporary topics such as ageing, and multiculturalism. Wood and Dashper (2020) highlight that in events, as with many other areas of life, the experiences of older people are largely overlooked: the importance and contribution of older people to society is often underestimated. With an ageing population, this is a matter of concern. Wood and Dashper take a feminist gerontological framework as their theoretical foundation and, using a qualitative methodology, consider the contribution of “participatory creative events” (such as pottery, painting or origami) to the social sustainability of their participant group. The findings of the study show that these creative events provide a supportive environment for attendees, but also spaces to reminisce with peers. However, as Wood and Dashper note, these positive outcomes require regular events to be sustained, pointing to the importance of continued provision of these participatory creative events.

Multiculturalism in Canada is the context for the paper by McClinchey (2020), which investigates the role of multi-ethnic festivals in contributing to social sustainability. Using sensuous multiculturalism (a form of sensuous geography) and everyday place-making (a collective re-imagining of space), McClinchey shows that members of ethnic communities who take part in these festivals as exhibitors spoke of bonding rituals of festival preparation and bridging opportunities with other ethnic groups through the socio-cultural exchange facilitated by the festivals. Study participants also invoked narratives of embodiment, referring to “sensuous encounters” such as dancing, singing and cooking/eating. While festivals can sometimes be spaces where normative ideas are emphasised and reinforced, McClinchey argues that multi-ethnic festivals are a form of everyday critical multiculturalism which can give voice and hope to the marginalised.

Inclusion/exclusion at events forms the focal point of the paper by Ong et al. (2020). As Ong et al. note, events are typically designed with a target audience in mind, and this can (intentionally or inadvertently) signal the exclusion of potentially marginalised sections of a community. Taking lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) individuals as their focus, and using Social Dominance Theory to underpin the research, Ong et al. examine those elements of events which may heighten, or decrease prejudice and inclusion. Key conclusions from this study are that it is essential to explicitly communicate messages using language that demonstrates inclusivity, that participants feel safe, and that prejudice needs to be considered as a holistic construct as opposed to being binary between a dominant and a specific subordinate group. The study has important practical implications for event managers, as they are in control of marketing, language and security.

Final comments and acknowledgements

We are grateful to the editors of the Journal of Sustainable Tourism for inviting us to curate a special issue dedicated to events. There are now several academic journals that events scholars can submit their work to, but opportunities to publish high quality events research in highly rated journals remain relatively limited – especially when compared to the tourism field. This special issue provides an opportunity for tourism scholars to read some excellent work in events, and a chance for events scholars to publish in one of the most highly rated tourism journals.

Like many other academics in our field, we are scholars that have published work on tourism and events (and, indeed, event tourism) which highlights the connections between the two fields. The relationship between tourism and events is a complicated one and has been driven as much by institutional and disciplinary arrangements, as by genuine conceptual synergies. Event studies has, to a large extent, emerged from tourism studies, and some of the most widely cited authors in event studies, including Don Getz and Greg Richards, are also tourism scholars. The subjects are obviously interrelated, but it is important that events scholars develop their own distinct field which is linked to, but also independent from, tourism studies. There are many researchers that do not have a background in tourism who get understandably frustrated that event studies is merely seen as an extension of tourism studies or, even more offensively, a subordinate and inferior field. Accordingly, the papers that feature in this special issue here are not necessarily contextualised within tourism discourses and tourism concepts but are framed in ways most relevant to the issues discussed. In this sense, the special issue presented here not only aims to advance understanding of events and sustainability, it aims to celebrate and communicate the way events research has advanced beyond its initial fixation on events “as business phenomena, conceptualised mainly through a managerial lens” (Pernecky & Luck, 2013, p. 2) towards a critical, interdisciplinary and autonomous field of study.

In this opening paper we have tried to make the case that we need to (re)think how events might contribute to sustainable development, rather than merely thinking about how to make individual events less damaging to the environment. This call for more ambitious work which is framed more widely is reinforced by the various papers included in the special issue. We think this innovative collection of research papers advances our understanding of events and sustainability, and we would like to thank the authors featured here for responding so thoughtfully to our call for papers. We would also like to thank the dozens of referees who gave up their time to review the papers submitted for consideration.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Judith Mair Associate Professor Judith Mair is Leader of the Tourism Discipline Group of the UQ Business School, University of Queensland, Australia. Her research interests include the impacts of tourism and events on community and society; consumer behaviour in tourism and events; the relationship between events and climate change; and business, major and mega events. She is the author of ‘Conferences and Conventions: A Research Perspective’, ‘Events and Sustainability’, and ‘Festival Encounters’ and the editor of ‘The Routledge Handbook of Festivals’, all published by Routledge, and the co-editor of ‘Image and Reputation Recovery for the Tourism Industry’ (Goodfellow Publishers), as well as over 45 academic papers in internationally recognised journals.

Andrew Smith is Professor of Urban Experiences in the School of Architecture and Cities at the University of Westminster. He currently leads the University’s inter-disciplinary research community dedicated to Sustainable Cities and the Urban Environment. His research addresses city events and urban tourism from a place based perspective. He has written two monographs for Routledge - Events and Urban Regeneration: the Strategic Use of Events to Revitalise Cities, and Events in the City: Using Public Spaces as Event Venues. He has coedited two further texts: Destination London: the Expansion of the Visitor Economy and Tourism and the Night: Rethinking Nocturnal Destinations.

ORCID

Judith Mair  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2447-3377>

Andrew Smith  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5172-3984>

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