



ISO 20121

Events Sustainability Management Systems

Guide to understanding the international standard

Meegan Jones & Jane Fullerton-Smith



Involvement in the Sustainable Event Management movement is fast becoming expected of all event production and delivery.

Best practice has moved away from ad-hoc issues management towards a systems approach. This new approach offers a strategic way to manage sustainability and embed continual improvement. It ensures the inclusion of strategies, policies, processes, systems and actions that intertwine to support and manage event sustainability issues more efficiently, effectively and professionally.

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This guide, written by author of *Sustainable Event Management: A Practical Guide* Meegan Jones, offers a plain-language interpretation of the steps involved in implementing ISO 20121 and helps you to understand how this new international standard can be included in your event planning and delivery.

So what is ISO 20121?

ISO 20121: Events Sustainability Management Systems is a document developed by participating 'standards bodies' from various countries around the world. The purpose of the standard is to provide a framework to implement a system to manage an event's sustainable development issues.

Rather than being a checklist, *ISO 20121* requires a systematic approach to addressing sustainable development issues in relation to event planning. It can be implemented by event organisers or owners, a single event, or a venue. Supply chain such as waste contractors, AV suppliers, power generator contractors, staging and infrastructure companies, or even caterers can also implement the standard.

Implementing the standard requires the establishment of processes and procedures, and documentation of them to ensure future streamlined implementation. Engagement with stakeholders and disclosure of performance is key.

What is ISO?

ISO stands for the *International Organisation for Standardization*. It is comprised of a network of the national standards institutes of member countries. www.iso.org

What is Sustainable Development?

Sustainable Development is development that '*meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*'. It is the process of providing an enduring, balanced approach to economic activity, environmental responsibility and social progress. By ISO definition '**sustainability**' is the '*degree of sustainable development in the context of the organisation*'.

Why do we need ISO 20121?

There is increasing pressure to address sustainability in all sectors of community, government, industry and commerce.

As the level of understanding of sustainable development increases in society and in the events industry specifically, we will find an increasing need to formalise the processes needed to identify and manage the sustainability impacts of our organisations.

The *ISO 20121* standard is not mandatory, however it's envisaged it will become minimum accepted practice in the event industry. By implementing the standard you will improve sustainability performance, have a framework to manage issues, and be able to demonstrate responsible business practice to your stakeholders.

How can the standard help me?

Taking a systematic approach to problem solving is a natural next step as our industry gains understanding of sustainable development issues relating to event production.

The establishment of a management system provides a proven pathway to identifying and successfully managing sustainable development issues and importantly, to embed those learnings into the event organisation for continued improved success.

The benefits of implementing a management system around events for sustainability means you'll not miss any important steps in identifying event sustainability issues, impacts, risks and opportunities.

It will facilitate or set up a higher likelihood or success in meeting sustainable development goals. It means you are not treating issues in an ad hoc way, rather you will track through the process in a systematic way, leaving no stone unturned...

With the transient nature of the event sector, embedding a management system ensures the sustainability knowledge and processes are kept within the organisation, and don't leave when the event manager leaves.

Can I save money?

Yes. Being 'sustainable' can mean being resource efficient, which invariably means saving money. There may be some trade off with higher labour demands or procurement choices, however it is very likely that a resource-efficient event will mean a cost-efficient event.

Can I become certified?

Yes. Your organisation can be audited for conformity with the standard. Conformity with the standard is through ensuring your systems are in place. **Read more about conformity assessment [here](#).**

How do I use it?

ISO 20121 is a standard to comply with, rather than 'use'. A major part of the management system is to ensure the team implementing it has the skills, knowledge and competence to successfully implement it, and that processes are documented and performance measured and reported.

The following pages will help you understand the steps and move you towards conformity with the standard.

What are the steps?

When you go through the standard, and implement a management system, you will quickly realise that it's not a journey you'll go on from A to B. You'll need to double back, and re-address various concerns. For example, you may have policy or objectives set, but when you do further stakeholder engagement or issues identification, you'll have to re-look at some policy elements or re-shuffle priorities of issues management. None the less, the steps include:

1. Gaining top management commitment and leadership
2. Defining your governing principles of sustainable development
3. Informing and engaging stakeholders, and understanding their needs and expectations
4. Ensuring that resources are provided to enable success, including competencies, time and budget
5. Establishing awareness and designating roles and duties
6. Establishing policies
7. Identifying & evaluating issues, impacts, risks and opportunities
8. Establishing objectives and making plans to achieve them
9. Creating procedures & processes and documenting evidence of requirements
10. Implementing plans and taking action to correct and improve performance
11. Performance measurement
12. Management review and continual improvement

Who is it for?

The standard has been designed to be flexible, so it can apply to all types of events and the supply chain that service them. If you have any kind of event-related activity, then the standard is right for you.

Events: One-off or recurring events, whether owned and self-managed, or managed by an external organisation.

Event Owner/Sponsor: Those organisations that own events, but contract external organisations to manage and deliver their events can implement an event sustainability management system for all their organisation's event-related activities.

Event Organiser: Companies that are contracted to produce events on behalf of clients can have a management system in place that guides the production of events they manage.

Venues: Venues that host client's events, or who run venue-owned events.

Suppliers: Those that supply products and services to the event industry. This can include labour supply companies such as waste and security staffing, waste companies, power companies, staging and infrastructure, amenities providers, décor and dressing, caterers, food and beverage stallholders and bar operators.

1. Commitment and Resourcing

ISO SAYS: Leadership & Commitment; Provide resources.

WE SAY: Get the go ahead to get sustainable.

Getting commitment from top management and engagement by the team for the event's sustainability journey is essential.

Having the time, resources and knowledge needed to get going is the first step. The boss (or whomever gives the final nod – the board, sponsors, clients, local councillors, department head etc) must give the go ahead and offer the team the encouragement, leadership, resources and support they need to ensure successful sustainability outcomes.

Top management's interest in the event's sustainability performance is essential, with them actively seeking results and encouraging continual improvement.

It's a confident and enthusiastic team embracing sustainability that will also contribute to success. Hopefully there are emeralds dotted throughout your team – those that are green-at-heart and ready to focus on your event's sustainability performance.

RELEVANT CLAUSES: 4.5, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.4, 9.4, 10.2

2. What's Your Situation?

ISO SAYS: Understanding organisational context.

WE SAY: Setting the scene for your sustainability ambition.

It's important to determine any internal or external issues that could affect the ability to meet the intended sustainability outcomes. This could include things such as;

- the non-existence of solutions in your region
- a head office corporate policy under which you have to operate, which may conflict with best practice options
- a climate of unrest in an area which makes some aspects impossible to achieve
- a requirement to have sponsors which may conflict with some of the operational sustainability ambitions
- a cultural aspect which may impinge on best practice
- safety concerns

You should ensure this organisational context has been documented such as in a policy or strategy.

RELEVANT CLAUSES: 4.1

3. Stakeholder Engagement

ISO SAYS: Identify and engage interested parties.

WE SAY: Get everyone engaged with sustainability.

The production of most events relies on the coming together of many stakeholders external to the core event production organisation. These stakeholders can include contractors, venues, caterers, performers, talent, local government, attendees, community, associations, neighbouring businesses, etc.

Having these many stakeholder groups engaged in and committed to the event sustainability processes will be pivotal to the success of your plans. They are integral to the identification of event sustainability issues – the issues identified through the engagement process will inform aspects of your objective setting, policy, actions and operational control. By purposefully planning the recruitment of stakeholders into your event's sustainability plans, you will have a greater chance of success.

The communication and engagement process will also have the twin benefit of educating your event's stakeholders with the deeper issues around sustainability and (hopefully) ignite their active participation in developing solutions alongside you.

RELEVANT CLAUSES: 4.2, 5.3, 7.2

DOWNLOAD: [INTERESTED PARTIES PROCEDURE TEMPLATE](#)

4. What are you talking about?

ISO SAYS: Determine scope of the management system.

WE SAY: Work out the boundaries of management.

Before you launch into setting up your management system you need to define what will be included and what will not. Does the management system cover a single event, a company and their year's worth of events, or an event organiser who will apply a management system to all their client's events?

Are you just concerned with what happens in the four walls of your venue, or are you scoping in all the activities in which attendees to your event will be involved? (e.g. delegates at a conference). By articulating this scope, boundary or frame of reference, you can then establish parameters within which all your event sustainability concerns will fall.

Just because you can't control something completely, the issue or impact may still have a considerable significance and be deemed relevant by your stakeholders. Do they see it as your responsibility? If so, you must factor these potential sustainability impacts, issues, risks and opportunities into your plans. Remember, what is included in your management system needs managing! Don't be too whimpy though and scope everything out and then call yourself a brilliant performer!

RELEVANT CLAUSE: 4.3

5. What do you stand for?

ISO SAYS: Define governing principles of sustainable development.

WE SAY: Establish social and environmental standing.

The boss is on board, the team is into it, stakeholders are identified, but what is it you're trying to ultimately achieve? Establishing the higher principles to which the organisation subscribes, will make decision making easier down the track. So what are these principles?

Sustainable Development principles can include aspects such as **Inclusivity, Integrity, Stewardship, Transparency, and Legacy or Leadership.**

Embracing these at an organisational level is the first step, next comes embedding these principles into the operational, procurement (and possibly content) aspects of event production.

RELEVANT CLAUSE: 4.5



The UN has identified the sustainable development principles that organisations can use to guide them, including the **UN GLOBAL COMPACT** and the **Sustainable Development Goals**.



6. What's the issue?

ISO SAYS: Issue identification and evaluation.

WE SAY: Identify and plan for event sustainability issues.

So what's the issue and who's responsible? Who cares about it and how big an issue is it really? Working out what should be focused on, what is relevant, where the biggest gains will be and where the 'must-takes' are (regardless the size of the impact), is next.

Do a thorough analysis of your event's and organisation's 'business as usual' performance. You're looking for risks and opportunities, and don't forget that issues can be positive or negative. There may be barriers to improvement and that is of course an issue. Legalities and regulations may impact on plans. This process will also allow you to uncover what you're already doing well.

Understand which issues have greatest significance – just how big are the potential impacts, especially if you fail to act? Identifying and acknowledging issues is key. You may decide on a staged approach to managing issues over the course of several editions of your event. Just make sure you declare that you're aware!

RELEVANT CLAUSE: 6.1

[DOWNLOAD: ISSUES IDENTIFICATION PROCEDURE TEMPLATE](#)

[DOWNLOAD: EVENT SUSTAINABILITY CHECKLISTS](#)

7. Who knows what to do?

ISO SAYS: Ensure sufficient competencies and awareness.

WE SAY: Undergo professional development training.

The end game for sustainability in event management is to have it embedded into all operational and procurement decisions. But the pathway there is going to require people in the team to know what they're doing and to drive the organisation toward sustainability.

If you're just starting out it is likely you'll need to gain new skills in and knowledge of sustainability to be able to know which issues are important and how to manage them.

Undertake professional development training, engage expert guidance or employ an in-house staff member to focus on sustainability and bring learnings back to the team.

You'll then know the right questions to ask, be able to effectively identify and manage issues, and roll out plans to achieve them. Competence also includes in understanding what ISO 20121 is and how to effectively implement it

RELEVANT CLAUSE: 7.2

[DOWNLOAD: DELEGATION OF DUTIES TEMPLATE](#)

[DOWNLOAD: COMPETENCY LOG](#)

8. How Formal Can You Get?

ISO SAYS: Establish and document policy.

WE SAY: Create an Event Sustainability Policy.

Developing a sustainability policy for your event and/or event organising company is an important step in formalising and articulating your commitment to sustainable event management. It is a good document to have to disseminate publicly, to give for student enquiries, and to new contractors and staff.

The policy can be a one-pager and visionary in scope, but we like to get some meat on the bones and suggest a more detailed approach.

The Sustainability Policy should indicate your commitment to sustainable development and describe your pathways to sustainability. It should include an overview on procurement, energy, transport, waste, water, venues, light and sound, ecology, heritage, community, destination, and any other aspects relevant to the organisation or event. It should include a statement of goals and a description of key sustainability indicators that performance will be measured against.

RELEVANT CLAUSE: 5.2

[DOWNLOAD: SUSTAINABILITY POLICY TEMPLATE](#)

9. Reach for the Stars, Blast Off!

ISO SAYS: Set objectives and plans to achieve them.

WE SAY: Set objectives and make a plan.

Setting objectives and supporting targets provides not only an end goal, but can help gauge how you have improved and whether your undertakings are having a positive effect.

If you're in the first year of implementing sustainability at your event, you will be in base-lining mode. Your overarching objective will include gathering performance data in order to establish a baseline from which to assess future improvement.

Establishing Key Sustainability Performance Indicators is another aspect to setting objectives. The GRI has worked to create these.

RELEVANT CLAUSE: 6.2



The **Global Reporting Initiative Event Organizers Sector Supplement** has over 30 indicators of sustainability.

Choosing ones right for you will form the basis of not only how you will report on your successes, but what aspects you should focus on managing. For more information: www.gri.org



10. Keep on Talking

ISO SAYS: Maintain internal and external communications.

WE SAY: Make sure you keep talking to stakeholders.

You need to keep talking to the boss, keep talking to the team, and keep talking to your stakeholders, or as ISO calls them 'interested parties'. You'll go around in several loops when doing your 'communications' step of the management system.

At first you'll be trying to get everyone tuned into going on the sustainability journey. So just what are the benefits? **Reputation, cost savings, meeting industry best practice, stakeholder's expectation, and parent organisation's policies and CSR requirements.** You'll be talking to everyone when doing the diagnostic and again when discussing ideas and plans of action. You'll talk to folks about what should be in the policy and what's mandatory to uptake, then having more discussion when working out the objectives or targets, and of course when you roll out your plans and initiatives.

Talking's not your only tool of trade. Formalize requirements or expectations in contracts, encourage participation through newsletters, online, social media and onsite at the event through various communications mediums at your disposal.

RELEVANT CLAUSES: 4.2, 5.3, 7.3, 7.4

[DOWNLOAD: COMMUNICATIONS PROCEDURE TEMPLATE](#)

11. Maintaining Control

ISO SAYS: Establish and implement process for operational control.

WE SAY: Get cracking and roll out your initiatives.

The chunkiest and most rewarding part of implementing sustainability into event management is rolling out your initiatives to reduce impacts and enhance legacies. ISO calls the doing 'Operational Control'. We call it delivering your event.

This section of the standard asks that you have processes in place to control the various issues you are managing and initiatives you are implementing.

For example, when managing waste, that you have all the steps that would need to be taken, from ordering bins, to siting and signing them, and waste removal steps.

So what to do? This is where a small pdf document is not going to be able to do-the-doing any justice. Assuming you've learnt what's what about sustainability or have someone to hold your hand on this journey, that you've undertaken a diagnostic of your situation to uncover issues, impacts and opportunities, and you have some great creative and logistical talent in the room, then you'll be brimming with ideas! Look at www.greeneventbook.com for ideas.

RELEVANT CLAUSE: 8.1

12. Procurement

ISO SAYS: Enable suppliers to demonstrate their capability to support sustainability objectives.

WE SAY: Source sustainable suppliers and include sustainability requirements in tenders.

Many aspects of events are delivered through the supply chain, such as venues, caterers, signage and décor providers, exhibition infrastructure, sound and lighting suppliers, waste and sanitation companies, and generator suppliers.

A lot of the an event's sustainability performance will rely on solutions being available and provided through the supply chain – both materials, products and services.

To meet the requirement of this clause of the standard, you'll need to influence suppliers to support sustainability objectives, through inclusion of requirements in tenders, through contract stipulations, rewards, penalties or wholehearted engagement!

RELEVANT CLAUSE: 8.3

DOWNLOAD: [SUSTAINABLE PROCUREMENT POLICY](#)

13. Measure and Report it

ISO SAYS: Monitor and evaluate system performance.

WE SAY: Determine how you went, tell others, set goals.

Monitor, measure and report your efforts. Performance measurement can be in metric terms (volume, dollars, percentages or proportions) as well as in observational reporting (generally about participation and behaviour change or social impact).

Choosing how you will measure the event's performance is important to couple with plans to manage issues. Begin with the end in mind. Know what is important for report readers to understand and you'll have uncovered the issues needing management. Next make sure you have the systems in place to measure performance.

Conduct a management review, and identify areas for continual improvement, set new goals and objectives to achieve for the next event.

RELEVANT CLAUSE: 9.1, 9.2, 10.1, 10.2

DOWNLOAD: [EVENT REPORTING PROCEDURE AND TEMPLATES](#)

14. Systemize it, Document it

ISO SAYS: Create and maintain documentation and procedures required for system effectiveness.

WE SAY: Get it in order, document your systems.

Many of us fly by gut-feel and years of practical experience rather than procedure manuals and process descriptions. But having a central depository of all information and processes regarding events sustainability is helpful and a requirement of the standard. The system should exist without dependence on information held by any one person.

ISO 20121 requires that systems are established (it is a management system after all) and that you write everything down. Establishing an intranet portal is a great solution for this.

RELEVANT CLAUSE: 7.5

Other Resources



Exhibitions Sustainable Event Checklist

Use our checklist document to help you track through your exhibition or trade fair, to ensure you've addressed sustainability impacts. Get ready for ISO 20121 conformity.

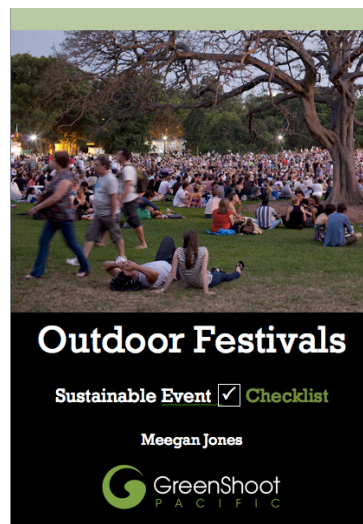
Buy the Checklist



Free Guide to Enduring Event Legacy

An important aspect of an event's sustainability performance is its enduring legacies such as demonstrating sustainability-in-action, encouraging changing behaviors, and leaving new skills and resources with the host community.

Access the Guide

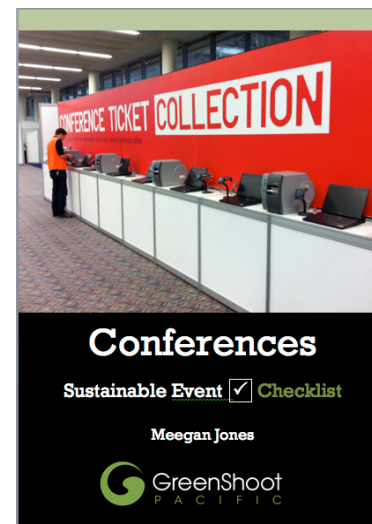


Outdoor Festival Sustainable Event Checklist

Focusing on outdoor festivals this checklist offers a comprehensive list of potential sustainability impacts to consider.

It includes detailed waste checklists, along with site considerations.

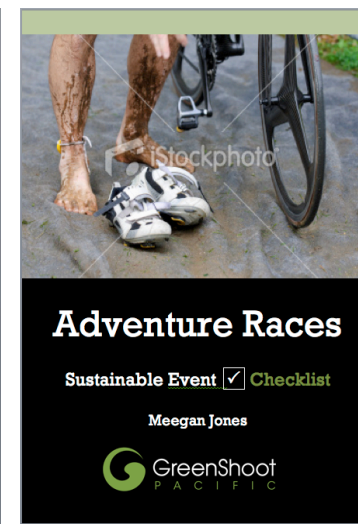
Buy the Checklist



Conference/Convention Sustainable Event Checklist

Use our checklist document to help you track through your conference, convention or congress to ensure you've addressed sustainability impacts. Get ready for ISO 20121 conformity.

Buy the Checklist



Adventure Races Sustainable Event Checklist

Use our checklist document to help you navigate your outdoor adventure race towards sustainability. Get ready for ISO 20121 conformity.

Buy the Checklist



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Thank you, **Meegan Jones**



This is the indispensable one-stop guide for event professionals and event management students who want to adjust their thinking and planning decisions towards sustainability, and who need a powerful, easy to use collection of tools to deliver events sustainably.

"Reference book, text book, check list for green practitioners, professors and inspiring reading for the rest of us. Perhaps the most comprehensive book written on the subject." **Harith Wickrema, Temple University, USA**

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www.greeneventbook.com