Unboxing Event Sustainability Operations: Habituating Commitment, Branding Governance and Planning for Legacy

Magnus Hultberg
Senior Lecturer, *Service, Hospitality and Tourism Management, Business Academy Aarhu*s.

Palle Nørgaard
PL Research Project *Green Experience Economy* and Senior Lecturer, *Service, Hospitality and Tourism Management*, *Business Academy Aarhus*.

_____

Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to understanding 'the work behind', and the design of, sustainability operations at events. Our object of study is the ongoing global event, *The Ocean Race 2023*, and the relation to its local *Stopover Events*. By analysing empirical data from both own interviews and sustainability related documents from *The Ocean Race*-organisation, we identify key parts of best practice within the event industry. By drawing on this data and relevant theory, we argue for the urgency of such operations and propose three scalable core disciplines: *Habituating commitment*, *Branding governance,* and *Planning for legacy*.

Keywords Event Design, Sustainable Development, Branded Governance, Event Legacy, Sustainability Operators, Ethics.

Track 2 Sustainable Realities

Focus of Paper 'Theoretical/Academic'

Introduction

This paper intends to outline what actual action-oriented sustainability work is in the event industry. How do you move from a strategy that aims to 'do the right thing' to actually 'doing the work'? This *translation-work*, from strategy to praxis, brings our attention to *the sustainability operator*, who we see as a key character in doing the work of sustainable development in the event industry The diversity in work-tasks in implementing a 'green transition' is either described holistically and on a strategic level or is mirrored in long lists of very practical tasks. To succeed in governing such a complex project, as executing on sustainability operations in events, demands a skilled operator. In the following we carve out three core disciplines - *Habituating Commitment, Branding Governance* and *Planning for Legacy* - that, in our perspective, are essential for getting the job done.

Our object of study is the global event *The Ocean Race 2023*(*TOR),* ongoing at paper deadline. An elite sailing competition across the planet by wind power, stopping in seven cities along a six-month route. Each stop with its own event celebrations. Our focus is on the stopover in Aarhus, Denmark in context of this global mega-event.

The assumption is that specialised 'sustainability workers' are becoming more central to event organisations -work and -Studies (Carey 2015, Derom 2015, Jones 2018, Masterman 2022). The work is about building sustainability, (grounded on people, planet, profit-based values), into *planned events* from the beginning. The toolboxes are *Circular economy, Cradle to cradle, Design for disassembly, Sustainable Development Goals and the Doughnut Economy* etc.. They are paradigmatic paths laid out to follow by sustainability workers in the event industry. 'Followed' translates into well-planned, communicated iteratively and governed and maintained during and after the event in conceptual- or community-driven *legacies*, no matter the size of the event.

Understanding Urgency

In a world in urgent need for action-oriented sustainability work, the theory of earth-system science, often represented by the *Planetary Boundaries-* model (Rockström 2009) sets the frame for urgent holistic thinking in terms of future production and consumption. The interrelated areas of this model covers nine must-win battles in a planetary system in danger of collapsing. The consequences of human production- and consumption are clear (e.g., *IPPC 2023*). The unfolding ecological disaster is summed up in new terminology, describing a paradigmatic shift in the way we understand the planetary consequences of human behaviour, such as 'the great acceleration', the 'Anthropocene epoch' and further into the unknown of 'irreversible' dangers when passing interrelated 'tipping points' causing exponential negative effects. Concepts pinpointing that climate politics are moving too slow. Triple bottom line-based business innovation is an important driver for change to make a realistic green transition possible. Political regulation and new performance measurements are on their way, but not fast enough. **The event industry is no exception, it must act.**

In this paper we study best practice, by looking at sustainability communication in event documents such as guidelines and action plans and by conducting interviews with event managers, sustainability program managers, sustainability operators and partner-organisations. We analyse to look for scalability in both practicalities and in the deep design of the event. Which actions does it take to minimise footprints in praxis (waste sorting, power sources, certified food etc.) and how do you plan strategic directions for long term legacies (in actions plans, sustainability guidelines, commitment papers etc.).

Studying the sustainability 'translation work' unfolding in the global-local event *TOR2023/Host City, Aarhus*, we aim to first, understand potentials and barriers in adapting a global sustainability strategy to local practice and to local strategic public/private level. Second, we aim to outline best practice in assignments of the 'translation work' of local 'sustainability operators'. Sustainability strategy without the 'housekeeping' i.e., keeping the basic sustainability of the production in order, does simply not work. This is a huge collective job and will only work through skilled communication, ground-floor-commitment, aligned partnerships, and planning and project skills of the operators.

We base the study on empirical insight of all public sustainability-related *TOR*-documents (see TOR 3, Collected public portfolio) and through interviews with partners, managers and operators. Ultimately, we propose a set of necessary focal points for any sustainability operations in getting the job done. In this brief paper it comes down to understanding the urgency of this work and implementing the core disciplines of; *habituating commitment, branding governance* and *planning for legacy.*

Empirical insights

Sustainability is a central issue and tied to 'the right thing to do' (*duty*) in *TOR*-web-communication:

"Hosting a sailing race which runs for six months, with nine global stopovers, hundreds of staff, and millions of visitors to our race villages, obviously comes with its own footprint. We have a *duty* to operate sustainably, and we strive to be a leader in sports, events, and sustainability - testing new ways to produce our Race with the maximum positive impact possible" (TOR1).

Besides the operational impacts by *TOR*, the *Footprint*-pillar, the *Action Plan*-framework (TOR3) describes two other pillars, *Impact* and *Legacy*. They contain the engagement of people and the outreach of efforts like these:

"[…]advocating for *Ocean's Rights* to be recognised through our *Summits* and Policy work, our *One Blue Voice* campaign and through *Relay4Nature*. We're also recruiting a whole new generation of ocean champions through our Learning Programme and adding vital data on ocean health through our Science Programme" (TOR1).

To illustrate both challenges in the *translation-work* of the local sustainability operator as well as the branding potentials for partners, campaigning on sustainability and its dimension as *legacy planning*, we turn to our empirical insights. First, the *Action Plan* lays down, at global event level, the normative performance levels and reporting tasks (Figure1) and second, through our interviews with involved Sustainability Operator at local level and with a Sustainability Program Manager of an (unnamed) Race Partner:
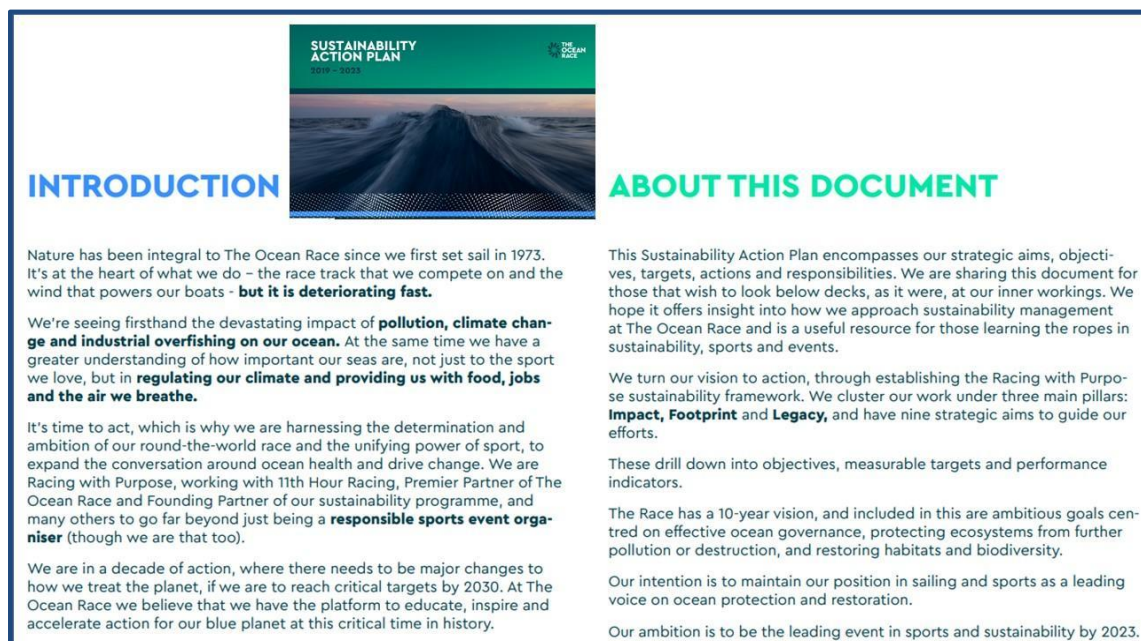

Figure 1: *THE OCEAN RACE* 2023: *Sustainability Action Plan*

The study of this document shows that *TOR* works holistically with sustainability. Four points are to be made from this: First, the event is understood as a defined area for green transition, and they believe in the possibility of a wider impact: "we believe that we have the platform to educate, inspire and accelerate action". Second, TOR considers transparency a key issue of their sustainability work: "We are sharing this document for those that wish [...] it offers insights into how we approach sustainability

management" and, third, they *plan for legacy*, detailed in this document, but mentioned above as "A 10-year vision..". Last and fourth, is the normative framework that the Action Plan also is, the framework of the three main pillars *Impact, Footprint and Legacy*, the nine strategic aims "to guide our efforts." These drill down into objectives, measurable targets and performance indicators…" These are the rules of the game to which host cities are committed by their 'agreement papers', thus this becoming the object of the 'translation work' of the sustainability operator.

As an empirical perspective to the effect of the work behind this document several interviews were made, among others with a returning Sustainability Manager at a *TOR 2023* Team Partner. He comments on the ongoing changes in the approach to sustainability work:

"…coming back to the event, what's really cool to see in *TOR* this time is, that we moved from […] sort of anecdotal corporate social responsibility with save the albatross or save the turtle, to systemic sustainability taking into account operations and the external opportunities to engage social commitment on the communities, and sustainability is now actually become a very important pillar of the event". (Interview DF, *GreenX*)

He then comments on the campaigning advantages of the systemic approach to sustainability, i.e., the sustainable sourcing, the branding of the program *Racing with Purpose* and the planning for legacy in lobbying for creating juridical *Ocean Rights,* making sustainability a core mission of the event.

[…] *TOR* is every 3 or 4 years […] it is quite hard to bridge from one event to another but now what we are seeing is actually, that sustainability has created the bridge from the last *TOR* to this one four years later (ibid.).

The point here is that the value of sustainability besides reduction in carbon footprint is that it adds value in creating consistency between campaigns.

Third, engaging people consistently in reducing their carbon footprint builds the possibility to see one's own function as part of a larger value chain and consistently aim to improve this year by year.

"The key thing is […] really through sustainable sourcing. […] Sustainability requires measurement, requires reductions, The fact that […] you engage people to ask the question; what are you doing and what help do you need to do better? […] Through the work we have done […]whether it is contributing or investing in reductions in our sector, means that the footprint will be smaller in four years' time[…] and I kind of consider that as *insetting* in other words contributing to reductions within our sector[…] So before we go off planting trees in Oregon or blue carbon in Costa Rica, we should be looking at investing in reductions in our own value chain […] I mean that is really, really important. Insetting[1], is the last word I would say" (ibid.).

Committed sustainability work then is about changing organisational culture and internalising the work through engagement and branding of the program which adds value and connects engagement to legacy work.

But how to translate this from 'the right thing to do' to actually 'doing the work' at the local level? We interviewed a local sustainability operator at the Aarhus stopover about his work in the *Racing with Purpose* program:

---

[1] when organizations start decarbonising their own value chains to include more nature-positive solutions and operations (The World Economic Forum).

"We need to master the basic practical sustainability 'housekeeping' and the impact- and legacy-parts as well. If the practitioners on the floor do not follow the documents, then you are not going to make what the ambition of the plan is" (Interview RHJ, *GreenX*). The job of the sustainability operator becomes executing the plan, implementing the values through being hard on knowledge to communicate 'the why' to local event crew and to govern structures for plastic, waste, power etc. "My job is governing the platform created by TOR but looking into local context, as in how far you can push local partners and what are local and national aims on sustainability [to understand] in what way we can push legacy-wize"[…]But you cannot do the job yourself, you cannot cover all 'housekeeping'. You must get the management processes and governing structures in place. It's all about people. You use this document [Sustainability Action Plan] and you talk with local crew and define your must win battles. [...] The systems need to be there, for people to follow them. (Interview RHJ, TOR Aarhus, GreenX).

This brings us back to the global event-documents. The *TOR* team of the global *Sustainability Program Manager* distributed and shared the sustainability program in various documents and public campaigns. They write:

"We are using our global platform to inspire all those that we can reach to take action to help the ocean. This includes the sailing community, wider sports industry, businesses, host cities, governments, children, fans[…]"(TOR 2).

Transparency is connected to the never-ending journey of sustainable development. This gives us access to several key documents, which also indicate the scale of the workload (See Bibliography: TOR3):

This means on a local scale, that the local event host will have their hands full with the demands and requirements of these documents which must be managed according to agreements in internal *Host City agreements*. They must engage local professional sustainability expertise for handling such responsibilities, skilled operators that must be able to turn them into local practices and translate values and excellence boards into internalised virtues and must-win-battles for self-driving staff, hence:

"The guide does not attempt to be a learning device for each of the issues. It is expected the Delivery Partner's Sustainability Coordinator, and prior to that, the Host City [...] along with *TOR*, will guide the decision-making and planning, drawing on their sustainability expertise [and…] it is encouraged that the Sustainability Plan also include the approach to advocacy and outreach around sustainability focuses of the Race and the City, and how this would be delivered in terms of programming, content and communications. The Sustainability Plan should be completed no later than six months prior to the Event Period" (TOR3, *GreenX*).

The global expectations to local planning and governance brings us to what we see as a core discipline, *the branded governance*.

Commitment and Branded Governance

True sustainable development requires a long-run effort, while events are temporary. Therefore, we argue, the traditional economic idea of governance in relation to *the agency problem* (Buchholtz et al. 2009; Thomsen 2008) is not enough. The sustainability-efforts must be branded to create long-term commitment and "consistency between campaigns".

Therefore, we turn to branded governance as we borrow (and develop) from consumer trend studies. Here the argument is that marketing a company's brand through its sustainability initiatives shows that

the company takes responsibility and therefore, apparently, stays present (is the assumption) in the minds of the consumers (Dauggaard 2023, dentsu 2023). This relates to neologisms as 'a ticket to play' or 'keeping a licence to operate' (e.g., Høgh & Nygaard 2021), which points to a shift intended to describe that sustainability must have a pivotal role in strategy and business models.

Branded governance in our perspective, is therefore firstly about the actual governing of the sustainability strategy or program and secondly, about communicating internally and externally to build engagement and commitment on all levels. When doing this in both writing, speaking and acting as in *TOR*, our case in question, then this branded program and all the efforts of the sustainability operators is about "socialising *the idea of sustainability to all stakeholders*"(interview MJ, GreenX) and the program *Racing with Purpose* on all levels.

Aristotle can help us illuminate this, since his virtue ethical approach shows us a way to consistently commit to a given role in a given practice which, we argue, is central to the whole idea behind unfolding governance.

In brief, Aristotle (2004) says that a good person is one who performs his or her function well. Any practice has a telos or an overall aim which determines the purpose of that practice, and the virtues in turn designate what you should do to excel in it and be the best person qua practician you can be. For Aristotle ethics is a practical discipline and hence the virtues are by definition excellences in a given practice and should be made part and parcel of one's character and thus, through practice become habituated. Hence, to commit is, to fully accept and take upon you the responsibilities and requirements that any role demands of you. Moreover, you must accept that more often than not the responsibilities and requirements will deepen as you actively turn the commitment into practice. Thus, it is an ever-continuing process, so habituating commitment through habituating the pertinent virtues is essential.

From an organisational perspective the same counts. If you want to truly commit to e.g., sustainability you must habituate your commitment. To be truly sustainable is never one-dimensional and therefore commitment to it isn't either.

Tightly connected to this then, is the role of the sustainability operator who is responsible for translating global strategy into local practice. This role includes a wide range of tasks that he or she must excel at in order to engage all stakeholders in order to *habituate commitment* through *branded governance* and to temporally stretch commitment, *plan for legacy*.

Planning for legacy
The many tasks of the sustainability operator, our point is, is essentially connected to *legacy planning*. It is this connection we intend to describe (or 'unbox') here. Long term positive effects of events are a central object of study within Event Studies (Faulkner, Chalip, Ritchie in Getz & Page 2020). From mega events to neighbourhood festivals, long term effects are discussed and put into discourse as 'events being catalysts', as 'leveraging events' and maybe in particular as 'event legacy'. Dungan pointed to a distinction between direct/indirect legacies in the *1996 Olympic Games*, that generated large "construction of sporting facilities and urban parks which led to […] new education facilities" (Getz and Page 2020). Furthermore, Faulkner explained the concept of 'leveraging events' as the use of events to exploit broader business benefits, the enhancement of tourist spending and building new relationships (ibid.). Chalip pointed to 'social leveraging of events' i.e., when events collaborate in social- and educational causes (ibid.). An important point here is that the legacy of events is also part

of the catalyst role, it is *planned*. This perspective, as the concepts above, help us to understand the *planning for legacy*.

To illustrate this, we point to the local *TOR Stopover* event-organisation in Aarhus that choose to integrate sustainability as themed placemaking and as co-created educational programmes, unrolling them with educational institutions, aiming for lasting impact in their programs. Doing so, 'planning for legacy' is aligned with 'branded governance' i.e., the *Racing with purpose* program of *TOR 2023*. The deep-design lies in the *commitment-work* and the *branded governance,* socialising the sustainability program and in the *planned event legacy*, all aiming for reducing basic event production footprint, longer outreach in impact, and with longer duration when planning for legacy.

Preliminary conclusions

Actually 'doing the work' of 'the right thing', necessitates a skilled operator to make ends meet between practicalities and the deep design of a sustainability program that aim and plan for legacy. To succeed, in minimising the negative impacts of event production and -consumption, demands commitment and ongoing engagement from a collective crew. Such engagement derives only from understanding urgency, from socialising the decided sustainability program, from the iterative commitment work in branded governance and from the, at best, virtue-based habituated practices, "It's all about people" (op. cit.). Only transparent sustainability journeys, as the one of *The Ocean Race 2023* has allowed us to study this.

Bibliography

Aristotle [2004]: *The Nichomachean Ethics*. Penguin. London.

Buchholtz, Ann K. et al. [2009]: *Corporate governance and corporate social responsibility* in Crane, Andrew et al. (eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of Corporate Social Responsibility*, Oxford University Press.

Carey, K. Meaghan et al. [2015]: "The Local and Regional Government' Perspectives" in Parent, Milena M. & Cappelet, J.-L. *Routledge Handbook of Sports Event Management*. Routledge. New York.

Daugaard, J. et al. [2023] "8 Forbruger- og marketingtrends for 2023" *Tid og Tendenser*, (An extract from Trend Study *Pulse23* at www.dentsu.com), No. 01.2023, 68-77.

dentsu, at https://www.dentsu.com/dk/dk/pulse-2023-branded-governance [Accessed 31.03.2023]

Derom; Inge et al. [2015] "The Community's Perspective" in Parent, Milena M. & Cappelet, J.-L. *Routledge Handbook of Sports Event Management*. Routledge. New York.

GreenX project at: https://www.eaaa.dk/forskning-og-innovation/projekter/aktuelle-forskningsprojekter/green-x/

Hoegh, S.M. & S.E.Nygaard [2021]: "Bæredygtig Business – Fra Bundlinjen og en bedre verden". Turbine. Aarhus.

IPPC [2023] *AR6 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2023* at https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-cycle/ [Accessed 29-03-2023].

Jones, Meegan [2018]: *Sustainable Event Management - A Practical Guide*, Earthscan/Routledge. London and New York

Masterman, Guy [2022]: *Strategic Sports Event Management*, Routledge, London and New York.

Stephen J. Page & Donald Getz [2019]: *Event Studies - Theory, Research and Policy for Planned Events*. Taylor And Francis. London.

Rockström, J. [2009]: "Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity" in Ecology & Society and as a special section and feature article published in Nature (2009) https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html [Accessed 30.03.2023].

Thomsen, Steen [2008]: *An introduction to corporate governance – mechanisms and systems*. DJØF Publishing Copenhagen.

TOR 1: The Ocean Race 1: weblink: https://www.theoceanrace.com/en/racing-with-purpose/sustainable-sports-and-innovation#rwp-1 [Accessed 13.03.2023].

TOR 2: The Ocean Race 2: weblink: https://www.theoceanrace.com/en/racing-with-purpose/about [Accessed 13.03.2023].

TOR 3:(*GreenX* Collected Public Portfolio): *The Action Plan 2021-2023*, the central document, includes *Sourcing Code, Sustainability Policy, Greenhouse Gas Emissions Strategy, Turn the Tide on Plastics at Sporting Events, Plastic Stewardship and Footprinting Methodology for Events.* Furthermore the following have been developed: *Sustainability Policy* a *GHG* Strategy, a Sustainable *Sourcing* Code, a Sustainable *Catering Guide*, *Single Use Plastics - Sports Events Guide*, *Reusables Guidelines*, *Plastic Footprint Methodology for Event*, *SDGs infographic*,*Values Charter*, *Supplier Code 2022*, *Code of Conduct 2022, Sustainable Site and Contractor Operations 2022* and *Sourcing Guidelines for Branding and Signage Materials 2021*.

World Economic Forum: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/03/carbon-insetting-vs-offsetting-an-explainer/