

Event case study

Insights Drawn from COP26–COP28 Best Practices

This case study explores how sustainability principles from recent global climate conferences (COP26, COP27, and COP28) can inform and strengthen the planning and delivery of events by NGOs and associations. The focus is on practical, mission-aligned event strategies that generate measurable sustainability outcomes, enhance credibility with stakeholders, and support organisational values.

The case study is structured to (1) contextualise the selected reference events, (2) outline a sustainability framework informed by recognised standards, (3) analyse key lessons and practices, and (4) propose a scalable model for NGO/association event delivery.

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SUSTAINABLE EVENT MANAGEMENT
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WHY COP26–COP28 MATTER FOR NGOS & ASSOCIATIONS

While NGOs and associations vary in scope, mission, and resources, they increasingly face expectations to demonstrate that their operational practices – including event delivery – align with their advocacy on climate, equity, and sustainability. International climate conferences such as:

COP26 in Glasgow (2021) – which achieved independent certification to the international standard for sustainable event management, ISO 20121, demonstrating consideration for environmental, social, and economic impacts; COP26 achieves ISO 20121 certification (GOV.UK)

COP28 in Dubai (2023) – which underwent third-party auditing against the ISO 20121 sustainable events standard and integrated sustainability across planning and operations;

provide current, high-visibility reference points for sustainable event practice.

These events are relevant because they:

involved NGOs, civil society and public sector actors
were delivered under intense public and stakeholder scrutiny

applied recognised sustainability frameworks (e.g., ISO 20121)

publicly documented their approach and outcomes

Importantly, this case study uses these events as illustrative examples – not as projects delivered by the authors – ensuring proper attribution and ethical use of external cases.

METHODOLOGY

Rather than simply describing COP events, we apply a sustainability management framework based on:

ISO 20121 – Sustainable Event Management Systems: internationally recognised criteria for planning, implementing, monitoring, and improving sustainability across events

Triple Bottom Line thinking: evaluating environmental, social, and economic dimensions of event impact

Ethical transparency and stakeholder credibility principles, crucial for NGOs and associations

ISO 20121 has been used for global events including COP26 and COP28, with auditing and certification determining compliance against structured sustainability criteria throughout the event lifecycle.

This consultancy framework emphasises governance, measurement, stakeholder engagement, responsible procurement, and continuous improvement, ensuring relevance for mission-driven organisations with varied capacities.

ANALYSIS & INSIGHTS: KEY LESSONS FROM COP EVENTS

1. Governance & Leadership

What COP shows: Both COP26 and COP28 embedded sustainability into governance processes, aligning operational decisions with guiding sustainability principles and management systems.

NGO/Association Insight:

- Adopt a governance structure for sustainability that begins in early planning phases
- Define clear objectives and KPIs linked to organisational values
- Allocate roles and responsibilities for sustainability performance

2. Carbon & Travel Impact

What COP shows: International travel is a major source of event emissions, prompting hybrid and virtual participation strategies. Public reporting on carbon neutrality efforts reflects growing expectations for measurable outcomes.

NGO/Association Insight:

- Offer hybrid participation to reduce emissions and broaden access
- Use carbon estimation tools to communicate travel impacts to stakeholders
- Align travel decisions with inclusion and accessibility goals

3. Procurement & Supply Chain

What COP shows: COP28 applied circular economy principles, prioritising recycled/recyclable materials, local sourcing, and asset reuse plans (e.g., donating materials to community beneficiaries).

NGO/Association Insight:

- Set sustainability criteria for suppliers and vendors
- Prioritise local, ethical partners who reflect organisational values
- Use material life-cycle thinking to reduce waste and maximise positive impact

4. Waste & Resource Management

What COP shows: Side events and hubs at COP conferences often include dedicated waste management zones and zero-waste strategies led by specialist groups.

NGO/Association Insight:

- Implement simple, visible waste segregation systems
- Share waste targets with attendees to encourage responsible behaviour
- Reuse or donate residual event materials where possible

5. Stakeholder Engagement & Transparency

What COP shows: Organisations participating in COP events often use public sessions and side events to share sustainability practice insights with global audiences.

NGO/Association Insight:

- Communicate sustainability goals and outcomes openly to donors, partners, and attendees
- Frame sustainability as a continuous journey, not a one-off achievement
- Integrate feedback mechanisms for learning and improvement

ADAPTED SUSTAINABLE EVENT MODEL FOR NGOS & ASSOCIATIONS

Based on the above insights and aligned with sustainability best practice, the following model is proposed for event planning and delivery:

Core Components

1. **Values-Aligned Governance** — Define sustainability commitments rooted in organisational mission
2. **Low-Carbon Design** — Hybrid formats and accessible participation options
3. **Responsible Procurement** — Local, ethical sourcing aligned with sustainability criteria
4. **Visible Waste Management** — Segregation, reduction, and reuse of materials
5. **Transparent Reporting** — Share outcomes, challenges, and lessons learned with stakeholders

This scalable model is suitable for events of different sizes and budgets and can be adapted by NGOs and associations to meet donor, member, or partner expectations while remaining mission-aligned.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES (INDICATIVE, NOT GUARANTEED)

Using this model, NGOs and associations can reasonably aim for:

- 30–40% diversion of waste from landfill through segregation and responsible materials choices
- 20–30% reduction in event-related emissions through hybrid participation and localised logistics
- Enhanced credibility among stakeholders through transparent sustainability reporting

These outcomes reflect current practice in sustainability-orientated events and align with expectations documented in public COP sustainability reporting.

CONCLUSION

By applying sustainability principles inspired by COP26–COP28 and structured through recognised frameworks like ISO 20121, NGOs and associations can deliver events that are both credible and mission-aligned. Sustainability becomes a management discipline — measurable, defensible, and strategically integrated — rather than an aspirational tagline.

Adopting structured sustainability practices will help organisations demonstrate responsible leadership, build trust with donors and communities, and strengthen the alignment between advocacy and operational delivery.

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

- GCOP26 achieves international sustainability standard (ISO 20121) – [GOV.UK](#)
- Audit of COP28 sustainability management – [BSI Group](#)
- COP28 Sustainability Report – [UNFCCC](#)
- COP27 post-event sustainability review – [No Burn](#)