

## Sustainability Process and Certification in the Swedish Event Tourism Industry

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**Abstract:** In society today there is a heated debate about sustainable development. It is argued that event organisations must take responsibility for sustainability, although they may lack appropriate development tools. The purpose of this article is to study how event companies and organisations can develop a sustainability process in a societal system context and the need for certification in their events. The analysis was based on the study of relevant literature, an investigation in Sweden and a systems analysis. A triangulation technique was used to combine the different methods. It is argued that there is a sustainability event system in a societal context, within which event organisations have a central role. A model of sustainability and certification process for an event organisation and its events is developed, which consists of criteria, activities, certification, effects and obstacles. This recognised certificate could be a motivator and guideline for sustainable event development. The certification's focus has to be on the event organiser's management. However, event organisers need to certify their own organisations, either including all future events or only some specific events. This would give the organisations and the event industry a positive image and recognised role in a sustainable world.

**Key words:** *Sustainability, events; sustainability certification; Corporate Social Responsibility; event process.*

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. Problem discussion and purpose of article

Currently, there is a lack of knowledge available to event organizations on how to handle the sustainability issue and to obtain some sort of sustainability certificate. However, there is a growing interest in sustainable development among Swedish tourist companies and organizations (Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, 2009), and especially event-oriented ones.

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In Sweden, a massive discussion has also started, specifically in the event industry, on how to be more aware of society and the environment. For example, the event industry association "Eventakademin" has started a project with its member organizations about future sustainability, in which I have been involved. Despite their awareness of the importance of sustainability, organization managements are uncertain about how to work internally with sustainability criteria in order to improve their own business (Schwartz, Tapper & Font, 2008). Furthermore, many sustainability questions have been raised by the general public about not only the overall development of our society but also about such specific event-related issues as the proper management of waste (Wong, Wan & Qi, 2014). This will force the event industry to be more engaged in sustainable development in general.

Getz (2008) proposes that there are several categories of planned events, such as those for public celebration, competition, fun, entertainment, business and socializing. This article is focused on event tourism, where the event is seen as a product for destination developers and a market for event managers. In order to include both commercial and non-commercial event organizers, the term "event organization" instead of "Event Company" has been used in this article.

Events, big and small, all over the world have an important effect on sustainability (Swedish Standards Institute, 2014). For well-known international-level events, such as the 2012 Olympics in London, sustainable development has become an important factor (London Organizing Committee, 2010). However, even small-scale events, such as local sporting events, can be a sustainable form of tourism development for communities (Gibson, Kaplanid & Jin Kang, 2012).

In order to plan the events, one cornerstone is to plan and understand a value-creating service process based on customer needs, where the event organization must work as a whole unit (Hasty, 2004). However, one can ask how sustainability criteria, activities and effects can be integrated in this service process and yet also be seen as a distinct sustainability process. The process approach is especially useful when studying events. This is due to the inherent sequences of activities in the process planned by the event organization's management and conducted by the organization's front and back office.

Several sustainability event standards have been developed in recent decades. The latest is ISO 20121, which is an event management system standard that has been designed to help organizations in the event industry. The problem is that organizations in the event industry are uncertain about which standard and certification will be most suitable, and how it can be used. Some standards make it

possible for event organizations to be certified, and that certification can then be used as a marketing and business tool, and as a statement of the organization's commitment to the idea of sustainability (Sjöholm, 2013). On the other hand, some event industry representatives mention sustainability obstacles, such as the costs of certification.

The sustainability questions, especially the climate change problem, are also on the agenda of politicians at the highest level (UNFCCC, 2014). Nevertheless, there are no easy solutions concerning sustainable development in general and for events in particular. This was stressed by Pachauri (2014) at the 2014 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) conference. Even though the outcomes of the sustainability talks are still very uncertain, the consequences for the industry will be significant. Therefore the sustainability work has to be continued by us all (Kjellén, 2011; Ekman, 2010). In order to obtain clearer sustainability results, the EU has suggested concrete actions that will influence all industries, including the event industry (Hedegaard, 2014). This leads to questions about how the event industry can cope with the pressure from politicians in the future and deal with external sustainability criteria such as the environmental dimension.

Global systems thinking views the planet as one harmonious system, as set out by systems thinkers in the 20th century (Ackoff, 1999; Bertalanffy, 1952; Wiener, 1948). An understanding of the difference between analysis (analytical thinking) and synthesis (systems thinking) is crucial to an introduction to systems theory (Lazanski, 2009b). One starting point can be to use a systems approach when analyzing sustainability events with respect to stakeholders in a societal context.

The purpose of this article is to investigate and analyze how event companies and organizations can develop a sustainability process in their own organization within a societal system context, and the need of sustainability certification for their events. The term "event organization" in this article includes both commercial and non-commercial event organizers.

## **1.2. Theoretical background of green events, sustainability and certification**

A green event can be defined from different perspectives. Laing and Frost (2010) define it as an event that focuses their definition on an event that has a sustainability policy or incorporates sustainable practices into its management and operations. Wolfe and Shanklin (2001) state that "green" is based on actions that reduce the environmental impact of an event. Wong, Wan and Qi (2014) stress the importance of attendees' "green" involvement in event settings.

Some criticism has been raised against the sustainability concept. For example, Hardy, Beeton and Pearson (2002) proposed some years ago that sustainability is a reactionary concept in response to current paradigmatic approaches and it is difficult to define. On the other hand, new concepts have been developed in the event industry, such as the concept of the “green event”, in order to focus on relevant sustainability issues.

There is great uncertainty about what sustainability really is and how it can be managed. The context for the sustainability issue in events can be studied from the classic Brundtland Commission report (1987), to the UN Summit “Agenda 21” (UNCED, 1993), and further on to the World Tourism Organization and its conceptual definition of sustainable tourism (WTO, 2004). WTO’s definition can be used as a framework for different tourism sectors, such as sustainable tourism events: “1) To make optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity; 2) Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance; 3) Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation.” On a concrete level for events, the major areas of concern from a sustainability standpoint are energy, transport, waste management, waste reduction and resource recovery and materials purchasing and procurement (Jones, 2010).

There are several sustainability industry standards in Sweden, such as the “Swedish Welcome” concept. However, only some of these standards offer organizations an opportunity to be certified (Swedish Standards Institute, 2014). A similar situation can be found in America: Strick & Fenich (2013) argue that, while a significant number of “green” and “sustainability” certifications targeted at the event industry have developed over the past decade in America, only the good ones will survive. They propose that the problems in surveying the situation for potential certification force event planners to analyze whether the standards are transparent, science-based, objective and rigorous. The American industry’s first industry standard for the event planning process is composed of nine individual standards, such as accommodation and transportation, which shows that the event process consists of several products from the whole tourism sector (Strick & Fenich, 2013). On an international level there has been a management system standard for event

sustainability since 2012, ISO 20121. This is based on the earlier British Standard called BS 8901 Specification for a Sustainability Management System (ISO 20121).

### **1.3. Theoretical background of events and event management**

The term event can be defined both theoretically (Getz, 1997) and practically (Swedish Sponsor and Event Association, 2014), which makes it more difficult to deal with complex issues such as sustainability. Getz (1997) defines an event as a temporary occurrence that has its unique combination of time, setting, management practices and people.

Event management is the applied field of study and area of professional practice devoted to the design, production and management of planned events, encompassing festivals and other celebrations, as well as entertainment, recreation, political and state, scientific, sport and arts events (Getz, 2008). Andersson (1997) suggests that the event can be analyzed as a process, which is similar to the more general service processes, where a service organization works with humans (customers and other suppliers) and/or machines in order to carry out the tasks needed to perform the service. He writes that the service is performed through the use of repetitive activity chains in sequence or parallel, based on the organization's ambition to control the process. The crucial point for event management is to take a comprehensive approach in all pre-, during and post-event stages, and all planning, management, marketing, monitoring and evaluation fields (Soteriades & Dimou, 2011).

There are methods of integrating sustainability into the event process. Firstly, the overall integration of sustainability principles into the event tourism planning process provides some new perspectives, and sustainability theory needs to be translated into practical steps and processes. A knowledge management approach may contribute to addressing this knowledge-practice gap (Ruhanen, 2008). Secondly, the event organization can start by analyzing sustainability effects caused by the event process, using Moreno and Becken's (2009) five-step method for assessing tourism vulnerability, where event tourism is one product; the steps are 1) tourism system analysis; 2) analysis of climate change; 3) identification of key vulnerability components; 4) integration of individual vulnerability assessments; and 5) communication of results to stakeholders. Thirdly, the organization can analyze what sustainability actions can be taken and integrated into operational event management, which has been done by a global study called The Economics of Ecosystem and Biodiversity – TEEB (Kumar, 2010). In that study, it is argued that biodiversity and ecosystem services can be integrated into business, creating a

significant added value for organizations by ensuring the sustainability of supply chains, or by penetrating new markets and attracting new customers. Fourthly, the organization can develop a sustainability plan based on the event process, as was done during the 2012 Olympics in London. The plan was divided into the following phases: Preparation (the design and construction of the Olympic park and infrastructure), Event staging (all Game-time activities) and Legacy (the post-Games economic, social, health and environmental benefits). Five main sustainability themes were identified: climate change, waste, biodiversity, inclusion and healthy living (London Organising Committee, 2010).

Sustainability can also be used in the event organization's marketing. Tinnish and Mangal (2012) propose that sustainability marketing contributes by aligning with sustainability-oriented values, embedding sustainability in the planning process, and embedding sustainability in the product to drive behavioural change. Kumar (2010) also points out that there are strong market opportunities for certified products in all business sectors around the world, where the certification itself is a typical ecosystem service.

Not only can the core product be managed in a "green" way, but there is also a growing interest in "green" events resulting in a growth of environmentally themed events, which increases with the number of attendees seeking more such events (Laing & Frost, 2010). Jacobsen (2007) also stresses the focus on potential visitors. He points out that there is a need for visitor support for the kind of tourism development that does not destroy landscape qualities and is ecologically sensible. However, Wong, Wan and Qi (2014) propose that attendees who take an interest in and feel connected to environmental issues in their lives will spend significantly more. For example, festival attendees will pay 28 % more for food if they perceive that the event offers them green values.

#### **1.4. Theoretical background of event system and its stakeholders**

The central concept "system" embodies the idea of a set of elements connected together to form a whole rather than focusing on the properties of its component parts (Checkland, 2000). There is a whole concept about "system thinking", which can be used by involved stakeholders in one particular system, developed by Senge (2006) and Lazanski (2009a). Further, it brings tourism (including events) sustainability research in line with contemporary systems approaches (Calgaro, Lloyd & Dominey-Howes, 2014). During an event, the systems perspective can be used in order to understand the relationship between different sustainability

processes and stakeholders (Zifkos, 2014). A framework for strategic sustainable development, also known as “The Natural Step”, has been developed using a systems perspective (Missimer, Robèrt, Broman & Sverdrup, 2010).

Several researchers have stressed the importance of mutually beneficial relationships and sustainability collaboration between stakeholders during events (Hjalager & Johansen, 2013; Lawton, 2009). The stakeholder concept can be seen in an initiative in Copenhagen called the “Copenhagen Sustainable Meetings Protocol”. Six key stakeholders, including Visit Denmark, MCI Group and Wonderful Copenhagen, are involved. They believe that the global meetings industry, with its broad reach and expansive network, must evolve to achieve a higher standard of sustainability. This standard includes more effective and efficient business practices that integrate sustainability into both their day-to-day operations and their strategic management. Another example of the need for collaboration between stakeholders is when launching major events related to food production in national parks (Hjalager and Johansen, 2013). Vincent and Thompson (2002) point out that, with respect to the management of the event, it is important to consider the local society as a relevant interested party. They stress the importance of including communities to be actively involved in the design and development of an ecotourism project. New institutions will be needed to get governments to adopt a comprehensive policy for planned sustainable events (Getz, 2009). This would ensure that the usual claims of economic benefits are not accepted at face value, and that social, cultural and environmental values would be equally important.

Defined from an organization perspective, sustainability 1) stands as an ethical sensibility and guiding principle that refers to an organization's obligation to contribute to the long-term well-being of its environment, often termed Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and 2) implies a focus on the survivability of the organization itself (Zifkos, 2014). “Corporate Social Responsibility” has recently also been termed “Corporate Sustainability” (Dahlsrud, 2008). The increasing number of organizations with a CSR policy is an important driver in the business events context (Mair & Jago, 2010). Although there may be no legal requirements to provide green facilities, companies will find it harder to win business contracts using sustainability arguments if they don't. Businesses need to adopt systems for evaluating and certifying their commitment and responsibility (Manente et al., 2012). Some of these systems follow the “responsible tourism approach” by assessing whether the whole product can be considered a responsible tourism product, while other systems are

based on the “certification approach”, focusing on the internal processes and CSR of the organization.

Finally, there is a discussion in the event industry about how to work together to establish sustainability guidelines, a subject on which not enough has been done so far (Dickson & Arcodia, 2009). The event industry representatives also discuss the importance of their personal educational experiences related to their commitment to environmental sustainability (Boo & Park, 2013).

## **2. Material and method**

A qualitative method approach (Gummesson, 2000) with the purpose of exploratory research (Veal, 2011) was used. The research was conducted in four steps:

### *1) Investigation of Swedish organizations for sustainability standards and certification*

In order to identify the certification systems used in Sweden, an Internet search using themes such as “event certification” was carried out. After that, ten in-depth interviews were conducted, with a representative for each of the various certification systems utilizing the following themes: the certification organization itself, sustainability policies, certification system objects, sustainability criteria outside (external to) the event organization, the certification process, the number of acknowledged certified organization, competing certification systems in tourism and the future. To ensure that all certification systems were included, representatives from the Swedish Event Academy were asked about all possible systems in Sweden. Finally, an analysis was conducted of every certification system found on the Internet using the above interview themes.

### *2) In-depth interviews and focus group interviews of Swedish informants*

There are trade associations in Sweden, such as the Event Academy, which are involved in discussions among their members on how to improve routines and standards. The board of the Event Academy suggested the interview framework which was used for all the in-depth interviews. The sample of eight sustainability experts represented consultants, specialists in event organization and event industry associations. These interviews took about one hour and included the following broad discussion themes: sustainability criteria within (internal to) the event organization and its events; sustainable criteria outside (external to) the organization and its



events; sustainability certification effects within (internal to) the event organization and its events; sustainability certification effects outside (external to) the organization and its events; importance of the overall sustainability work; sustainability criteria in relation to its costs and general interest of acknowledged sustainability certification.

In order to conduct reflective and improvised interviews with several experts at the same time, three focus group interviews were arranged with the Swedish Event Academy's members. These interviews took about one and a half hours and included the following broad discussion themes: importance of the sustainability concept; current and future certification systems; sustainability criteria in different event organization situations; importance of sustainability certification; acknowledgement of the certificate as an image tool for the event organization and its events; and overall certification effects within and outside the organization and its events.

### *3) Structured interviews of Swedish event organizations*

To find informants, the search engine Retriever Business in Sweden was used. The search criteria "core business event" and "a minimum turnover the last year" were selected, which resulted in 530 Swedish event organizations. From these, 50 organizations were chosen at random. A manager from each of the 50 organizations was interviewed on the telephone. The sustainability criteria which were identified during the in-depth interviews were used in the interview guide. Every question was answered by giving the response from 1 to 5, where 5 is "totally agree". Respondents also had an opportunity to give an open answer. Questions were asked about 1) the importance of the sustainability dimension and 2) the willingness to pay for sustainability in this dimension. One special question was asked about the organization's interest in taking a certificate in sustainability. For this question an ordinal scale was used with the possible answers: Not interested, Less interested, Interested, More interested and Very interested.

### *4) Analysis*

The analysis technique of triangulation was used to combine different methods and sources of information in this study. This includes the literature study and investigation of organizations for sustainability, in-depth interviews, focus group interviews and structured interviews. In order to analyze the event organizations and other event stakeholders in the event industry and society, a systems analysis

approach was used. The systems approach is described in the Theoretical Background section.

### **3. Empirical results**

#### **3.1. Investigation of Swedish organizations for sustainability and certification**

In general, Sweden was listed as number one with respect to Environmental Sustainability in the World Economic Forum's 2008 Travel & Tourism Report. Special organizations are dealing with the sustainability concepts for tourism companies and for organizations outside the event industry which have indirectly influenced event sustainability standards:

\* "The Natural Step": Certification is only possible for persons (Natural Step, 2014).

\* "International Organization of Standardization ISO 14000, Environmental Management": 4677 organizations, interested in sustainability in general, from different industry sectors were certified in Sweden (Certification.nu, 2014).

\* "The Nordic Ecolabel Licence, The Swan": About 141 hotels were certified in Sweden (Nordic Ecolabel, 2014).

\* "The EU flower" by the EU commission: about 17 000 products and services had received the award in Europe by 2011; in Sweden, about 2% of the total have it; on average in Europe, tourist accommodation organizations represent 2% of all awards (EU Environment, 2014).

\* "Keep Sweden Tidy Foundation": The Green Key certificate was used by about 109 accommodation and conference organizations in 2014 (Keep Sweden Tidy, 2014).

Furthermore, there are special organizations dealing with sustainability concepts for organizations inside the event industry:

\* "Swedish Welcome": "Swedish Welcome" was launched to develop a sustainable tourism industry supported by the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (2012). About 100 tourism organizations, especially experience, event and accommodation companies in rural areas, were certified in 2012-2014 (managing director, SW, 2014).

\* "KRAV": 800 restaurants, cafeterias and institutional kitchens have the KRAV label on organic products in Sweden, which can be used at food events (KRAV, 2014).

\* "Nature's Best": About 83 Swedish organizers used the quality certificate "Nature's Best" for their ecotourism products and services in 2014 (Nature's Best, 2014).

\* “Keep Sweden Tidy Foundation”: 55 events, often big cultural and sporting events, got the Eco-labelled Event Award in 2014 (Keep Sweden Tidy, 2014).

\* “International Organization of Standardization ISO 20121, Event sustainability management systems”: This is a standard for all events, but it is not yet possible to be certified by a Swedish certification organization (ISO, 2012).

The Eco-labelled Event Award mentioned above is the only one which is more focused on the event itself than the event organization.

Sustainability compensation methods have been discussed; for example, SAS offers it to all customers (SAS, 2014). Sustainability compensation can be an effective method for organizations and individuals who want to reduce their own negative impact on the climate (Climate Institute, 2014), but there are also warnings from the event industry that these compensations are just (too small) efforts to defend unjustified unsustainable actions. However, the analysis of sustainability organizations found that economic sustainability compensation to visitors or event organizers has not been used frequently.

Sustainability aspects outside the event organization and its events were called external sustainability criteria. These criteria were identified during the investigation of the above- mentioned certification systems and then categorized in a sustainability classification scheme with the following 5 major criteria and 16 sub-criteria:

\*The environmental dimensions: resource consumption, waste disposal, transport solutions, biodiversity, climate change and nature protection.

\*The economic dimension: strength of the local economy, local labour and services and produced goods.

\*The social dimension: local decision makers and event’s openness to participants.

\*The cultural dimension: local culture communication and heritage preservation.

\*The sustainability work dimension: the event's own sustainability organisation, sustainability expertise support and participant’s experienced quality.

### **3.2. In-depth interviews in Sweden about sustainability criteria, effects and obstacles**

The external sustainability criteria identified during the investigation of the Swedish sustainability organizations were discussed during the in-depth interviews with Swedish informants. The 5 major criteria (and their 16 sub-criteria) listed above were accepted as relevant by the informants.

During the interviews the informants also mentioned that there have to be internal sustainability criteria within the event organization and its events: business

concept development, event process planning, event financial control, sustainability responsible person and sustainability plan. These internal criteria will be managed with sustainability activities within the organization's and its events' own processes and functions, and will have direct internal effects. However, the activities will also have indirect external effects in the wider perspective, such as support from the local society. This empirical result of internal sustainability criteria is somehow in conflict with what was found during the investigation of the Swedish sustainability organizations. These organizations have stressed external sustainability criteria more than internal. However, during the in-depth interviews it was proposed that sustainability organizations often have the objective of protecting the environment, but the event organizations have as objectives both to deal with the environment and to handle their own activities in a sustainable way.

The informants also pointed out some external organization (including its events) effects using acknowledged sustainability certification, including general societal image, positive market image, customer quality experience, and support from the local society, well-preserved nature and usable cultural objects. Furthermore, the informants pointed out some internal organization (including its events) effects, including sound business concept, efficient event process, positive economic result, satisfied employees and sales support.

However, these informants also pointed out that there are some negative effects, or certification obstacles, in using sustainability certification, such as shifting the focus too much from business to sustainability criteria.

In general, the informants were interested in acknowledged sustainability certification. However, in many cases they had not made any economic calculations associated with the sustainability certificate. It is more a qualitative assessment in that the certificate is important for getting a positive image in the marketplace and for being considered by customers as a serious alternative. There is a belief among organization managers that the sustainability concept will be even more important in the future. Every serious organization has to deal with it in a constructive way.

### **3.3. Focus group interviews reflecting sustainability and certification**

The empirical results (about the sustainability concept, certificate criteria, effect and image) from the investigation of Swedish organizations for sustainability and the in-depth interviews were used as a starting point. However, the focus group interviews were used for a more reflective deep discussion in seeing the events as a part of a whole societal system.

Here are the overall results from the three focus group interviews in Sweden: The sustainability standards and certifications will be even more important in the future. This, it is argued, is because of the pressure from the opinion of several stakeholders in society and because organization managers feel an increasing responsibility for the event's place in society. Sustainability can be considered both externally and internally from the event organization's perspective. For example, the organization management has to develop a long-term profitable business concept combined with activities preserving the natural environment. Even though sustainability certification criteria focused on external effects is important, for example, activities for minimizing any negative impact on local culture, the organization managers stress that the sustainability work must also be focused within the organization and its events, for example, integrating sustainability within the event planning process.

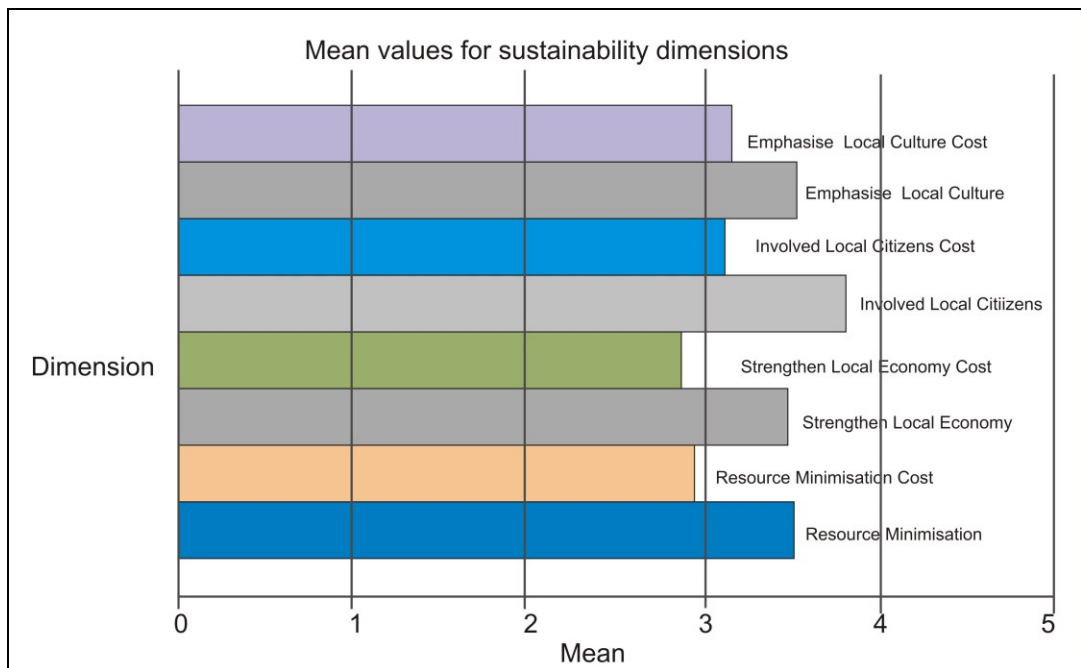
Sustainability certification is considered important for event organizations, depending on important effects both outside and inside the organizations and their events. However, there is uncertainty about whether or not the organizations can afford the costs for the certification activities, especially for small events. When using an acknowledged sustainability certificate, image marketing will improve the external and internal effects in the organizations and their events. This is because stakeholders such as customers and politicians will take favorable decisions concerning the event organization and its event products. Therefore organizations argue that certification must be shown clearly in different places, for example, certification logos should be displayed on websites. There has to be an openness and thoughtfulness in judging certification effects resulting from organization certification activities and image marketing, because it is a complex matter and the surrounding world is dynamic. However, the positive effects are considered to be definitely stronger than the negative effects.

#### **3.4. Structured interviews about sustainability certification, criteria and related costs**

The results from the 50 structured interviews in Sweden are as follows. Empirical results about sustainability criteria and certification were used as input to the structured interviews investigation. The structured interviews verified the earlier findings about sustainability certification and criteria, but also gave more precise answers related to costs.

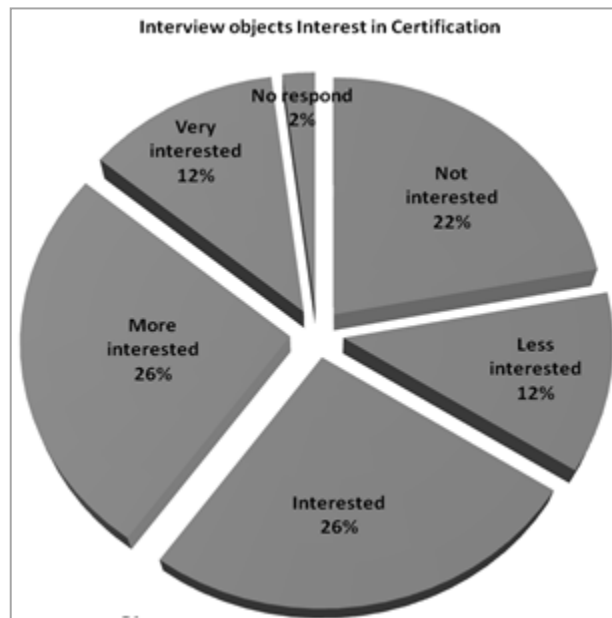
Figure 1 shows that the four sustainability dimensions (criteria areas) are supported rather well by the informants based on a ratio scale. The dimension to

involve local people received 3.8 out of a maximum of 5 (5 is best), and the rest were around 3.5. When asked the same question about whether it would cost more money, the informants' answers were not so positive (about 0.4–0.7 lower), but they were in the middle between totally agree and not all agree, with a mean value of  $3 \pm 0.2$ . From this it may be concluded that the participants consider cost to be important when working with sustainability. However, many event organizations are very interested in working with sustainability even if it costs money.



**Figure 1.** Assessment of sustainability criteria and costs – mean value by informants.

The participants showed interest in sustainable events certification, as can be seen in figure 2 using an ordinal scale. With 36 % answering very interested or more interested, it can be interpreted that the event organizations are seriously interested in trying to be certified within the near future. 26 % answered interested which can be interpreted as the companies are interested to at least seriously discuss with a certification organization.



**Figure 2.** Declared interest in sustainable events certification–share of informants.

#### 4. Discussion

##### 4.1. The sustainability event system

There is a growing interest in sustainability, both in our society in general (Hedegaard, 2014; UNFCCC, 2014) and in the event industry specifically (Andersson, 2009; Laing & Frost, 2010; Wong, Wan & Qi, 2014). This was confirmed during the interviews. The importance of seeing the events' sustainability context and underlying deep values in the society has been recognized (Hjalager & Johansen, 2013; Lawton, 2009; Zifkos, 2014). By using the systematic approach, society is a system, and event tourism in general has to fit into that system using the system thinking methods developed by Senge (2006) and Lazanski (2009a).

Sustainable development is on the agenda for the world community and all its participants, as can be seen in the World Tourism Organization's conceptual definition of sustainable tourism (WTO, 2004). Sustainability knowledge from the tourism sector has been used when planning sustainability standards for events (Strick & Fenich, 2013). During the interviews it was found that the event industry would obtain advantages by using sustainability knowledge from the whole tourism sector. This is because the event business concept is very closely linked to sub-

industries in the tourism sector and there is already documented experience concerning sustainability in tourism in general.

The event companies, in this article called event organizations, could be considered as the main players in a sustainability event stakeholder system (Mair & Jago, 2010). In the event industry it is considered important for event companies to have a CSR policy (Zifkos, 2014). During the interviews, organization managers mentioned that they need a member of the staff to be in charge of sustainability and interact with the surrounding society. It was discussed during the focus group interviews that if the event industry and its organizations do not show genuine interest in and responsibility for sustainability, they will risk society deciding strongly on legislation. However, on a national and international level there can still be legislation on special issues such as emission allowances, as recommended in the UN's Kyoto Protocol.

Between the participating stakeholder groups there are relationships which are used in the events (Hjalager & Johansen, 2013). This implies that politicians and other authorities will be supporting the sustainability system at an overall societal level and creating a demand for concrete sustainability results from the event industry. Moreover, within the event market the different customer groups can be important both for demanding a sustainability-oriented product and for contributing to the sustainability result.

Further on, the organization's business must be sound and profitable when starting external sustainability activities (Mair & Jago, 2010), which was confirmed during the interviews by the event organizations' management. This can be concluded as: the business and societal integrated sustainable event, which starts with a sound core business within the organization, where the sustainability event is controlled by the organization and the event is integrated in a responsible way with the whole societal system in general.

The event industry's organizations have not been fully successful in establishing industry sustainability guidelines (Dickson & Arcodia, 2009). The results from the focus group interviews indicated that event managers need support from the event association organizations concerning the development and use of sustainability standards and certification systems.

#### **4.2. Sustainability standards and event certification**

There are several sustainability industry standards in Sweden (Swedish Standards Institute, 2014) and outside Sweden (Strick & Fenich, 2013), and a significant



number of “green” and “sustainability” certifications targeted to the event industry have been developed (Wong, Wan & Qi, 2014). The empirical study found a number of special organizations dealing with the sustainability standards for organizations inside the event industry in Sweden, such as Swedish Welcome, KRAV, Nature’s Best, the Keep Sweden Tidy Foundation and ISO 20121. It is possible for the event organization to use these as sustainability standards for the management of events, but also to obtain a sustainability certificate. It is not yet possible to obtain ISO 20121 certification in Sweden.

During the in-depth interviews, the informants mentioned that there are advantages to certifying a specific event on the one hand, such as non-repetitive events in the non-profit sector where the organizer is financially weak. On the other hand, they mentioned that there are advantages to certifying the whole event organization which can be used for several events, such as repetitive events in the commercial sector. In Sweden, the Eco-labelled Event Award is the only certification which is more focused on the event itself (Keep Sweden Tidy, 2014). The other certifications, such as Swedish Welcome, are more focused on the event organization. However, the management of events and their sustainability is planned and controlled by the event organizer. Therefore, the focus of certification has to be on the organizer's management of events in the future. Depending on the sort of event and organizer, there is a need for event organizers to certify their own organizations, either including all future events or only some specific events.

The fact that sustainability certification has been developed by several organizations in Sweden inside and outside the event industry implies that there may be even more certification alternatives in the future. This will make the organizations even more uncertain about how to choose one sustainability certification. However, the image aspect might lead event organizations to choose among a few well-known systems.

According to the conclusion in this study, the acknowledged sustainability certificate is an important tool for developing a sustainable system that includes the event organization and its events and the surrounding environment. The Swedish interviews support the idea that many event organizations believe that it is important to have this acknowledged sustainability certificate. For example, 52% of respondents in the structured interviews expressed different degrees of interest in certification. More and more big events and event organizations are already using a sustainability-oriented certificate. Some event organizations add that an organization’s positive attitude towards sustainability is more important than a

formal certificate. However, Swedish event organizations' managers indicated that they felt that certification would give a significant positive image on the market. This image can be used by the event organizations in general and for specific events.

#### **4.3. Sustainability and certification process**

The event can be analyzed as a process (Andersson, 1997) with crucial points in the process for the event management (Hasty, 2004; Soteriades & Dimou, 2011). Sustainability activities can be incorporated in the business event process (Laing & Frost, 2010; Wolfe & Schanklin, 2001).

The processes involve some components, such as sustainability criteria (WTO, 2004), which also were found in the empirical studies. The sustainability criteria are a sustainability knowledge guideline for concrete sustainability activities carried out by the event organization. Sustainability activities have in some contexts been called "ecosystem services", which weaken or improve the ecological ecosystem (Kumar, 2010). In the structured interviews in Sweden, the social dimension received a score of 3.8 on a 5-grade scale, and the cultural, economic and ecological dimensions were around 3.5. A conclusion from the structured interviews is that the majority of the event organizations are interested in working with these external sustainability criteria, even if they must finance the costs themselves. Organization management is uncertain about how to work internally with sustainability criteria in order to improve their own business (Schwartz, Tapper & Font, 2008). The in-depth interviews have shown that internal sustainability criteria can be chosen in the areas of business concept, event planning, financial control, sustainability responsibility and the sustainability plan.

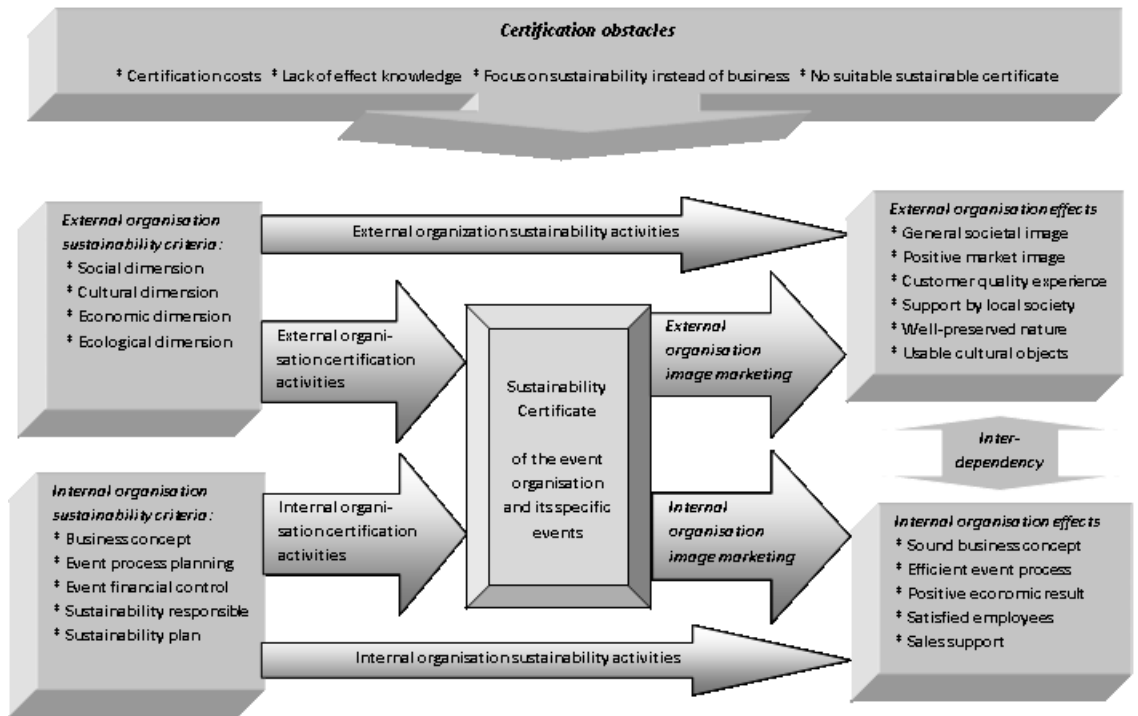
Several sustainability certification criteria will have to be managed by the event organization. This must be done in order to obtain an acknowledged sustainability certification depending on the certification organization's rules and the event organization's own priorities. It was found during the interviews that the certification activities will not only result in certification, but will also have a direct impact inside the event organization and its event process. For example, certification may result in greater employee satisfaction, as employees work within the certification plan. On the other hand, there are some sustainability activities which give no certification advantages but still result in positive organization effects, such as positive economic results when working with the event's financial controls. Sustainability certification can also be used in the event organization's marketing process (Tinnish & Mangal, 2012). This was also mentioned by the event organizations' managers during the

interviews, including the use of sustainability logos on websites and the demand for certification information in business agreements.

The organization's reasons for using sustainability standards and certification systems can be seen in what is called the organization sustainability effects. The effects will be the result of the organization's certification, sustainability and image marketing activities. The in-depth and focus group interview results show external effects outside the organization and its events, such as the general societal image, which is confirmed by Tinnish and Mangal (2012). Sustainability activities can also result in internal effects within the organization and its events (Sjöholm, 2013). The interviews also show the importance of internal effects, for example a sound business concept. There is also interdependency between external and internal effects for the organization and its events, which was found during the focus group interviews.

Nevertheless, why have so many event organizations not started to use formal certification in comparison with accommodation companies? There are some "certification obstacles"; for example, event organizations will find it hard to win business contracts using sustainability arguments when there are no legal requirements (Mair & Jago, 2010). During the in-depth interviews certain sustainability obstacles were stressed. The certification process costs can be considered too high compared with a total realistic event budget. In the structured interviews, the percentage of those interested in certification fell by 15 %, when the costs for certification were mentioned. During the interviews several managers expressed that they had been worried that a too-heavy focus on sustainability could lead away from the core business. Event managers were also doubtful about whether the available sustainability certification system is suitable for their own business. This indicates that the providers of certification systems have to develop systems for different needs. There was also great uncertainty among managers about what effect certification systems can have, because of the lack of internal knowledge, and there was a feeling that certification systems have to be improved in order to fit specific business situations.

A model of the event organization's sustainability and certification process has been developed, the findings of which are summarized in figure 3.



**Figure 3.** The sustainability and certification process of event companies and organizations.

## 5. Conclusions

### *The sustainability event system*

A growing discussion about sustainability in the event industry has been found in the literature review. In the event stakeholder system the event companies could be considered as the main players with relations to the participating stakeholder groups in the events. However, interview respondents indicated that the event companies would obtain advantages by using sustainability knowledge from the whole tourism sector. If the event industry and its organizations do not show genuine interest in sustainability, they will risk society deciding strongly on legislation, although, on a national and international level there can still be legislation on special issues such as emission allowances. Therefore, the author proposes the use of system philosophy in a societal context and the use of Corporate Social Responsibility CSR as cornerstones for event organizations' sustainability and certification activities. Different event customer groups have been found important both for demanding a sustainability-

oriented product and for contributing to the sustainability result. It was stressed in the focus group interviews that sustainable event starts with a sound core business, but is integrated with the whole societal system where responsible management is crucial. The author considers that the event industry associations have a responsibility to support the development and use of sustainability standards and certification systems.

#### *Sustainability standards and event certification*

The investigation of the certification organizations shows that there are several sustainability industry standards in and outside Sweden, and a significant number of “sustainability” certifications targeted to the event industry have been developed. It is possible for the event organization to use these as sustainability standards for the management of events, but also to obtain a sustainability certificate. The author argues that there may be new certification alternatives offered by potential certification organizations either focusing on pure sustainability or sustainability connected to other issues such as quality. Nevertheless, the event organizations might choose among well-known certifications, based on affordability and the potential to improve their image. There are advantages to certifying a specific event on the one hand, which few certification alternatives focus on. On the other hand, there are advantages to certifying the whole event organization, which most certifications focus on. The interviews show that the management of sustainability is controlled by the event organizer. Therefore, the focus of certification has to be on the organizer's management of events. Some event organizations add that an organization's positive attitude towards sustainability is more important than a formal certificate, but there is still an interest in the certification. The author proposes that the acknowledged sustainability certificate will be even more important in the future because of pressure from the stakeholders, the positive market image and the responsibility that the organization managers take.

#### *Sustainability and certification process*

Taking the event process as a starting point, the author suggests that the sustainability development and achievement of certification can be seen as a distinct sustainability and certification process for the event organization. In the literature review some sustainability criteria have been found, which are a sustainability knowledge guideline for concrete sustainability activities carried out by the event organization. The majority of the interviewed event managers are interested in

working with the external sustainability criteria. However, the managers are uncertain about how to work internally with sustainability criteria such as satisfied employees. Several sustainability certification criteria, found in the existing certification system, have to be managed by the event organization, which will result in certification and a direct impact on the event organization. On the other hand, the author argues that there are some sustainability activities which give no certification advantages but still result in positive organization effects. The author proposes that the organization's reasons for using sustainability standards and certification systems can be seen in what are called the organization sustainability effects. Some "certification obstacles" for not using formal certification have been identified in the interviews. A model has been developed of the event organization's sustainability and certification process (figure 3).

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