Event sustainable development in Thailand: A qualitative investigation

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ABSTRACT

This study is a research project that aims to gain a deeper understanding of perspectives, barriers and difficulties that might have an influence on the sustainable event development in Thailand. Primary research data were collected through in-depth interviews with stakeholders involved in Thailand's sustainable event development. The results reveal that, at present, although both government sectors and the private organization are involved in promoting sustainability in the event industry in Thailand, there is still an essential necessity for more widespread environmental education and course curriculum. By increasing knowledge and understanding, obstacles identified by interviewees may be eliminated.

1. Introduction

The meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions (MICE) industry accounts for a significant segment of the tourist industry market and has experienced generous growth and development in the past decade (Astroff & Abbey, 2006; Kim, Chon, & Chung, 2003; UNWTO, 2006). In Thailand, the MICE industry is among the fastest-growing industries and is a major contributor to the tourism industry. Thailand's MICE industry has been experiencing steady growth since 2010, with total MICE-related visitors rising from 679,585 to 1,013,502 between 2010 and 2013; this shows a 49.14% increase. MICE revenue also increased by 65.35%, from THB 50.515 billion to THB 88.845 billion over the same period (TCEB, 2015a). This has been coupled with an expansion in the development of supporting facilities and infrastructures within Thailand designed to call for this remunerative sector of the tourism market (Dwyer & Forsyth, 1996).

According to Mihalic (2000), the term "green" is used to represent "environmentally friendly". It is also understood to mean "sustainable" when discussing tourism destination practices or "clean and efficient" when describing pollution and energy consumption (Tsaur & Wang, 2007). The formalized definition of the "green event" concept is still in debate (TCEB, 2012).

However, it is important to note that events, by their very nature, create waste. Any gathering of a large number of people can have a "potential negative impact on the air, soil, water, resources, and people" (Dickson & Arcodia, 2010, p. 236). This includes not only the location where the event takes place but also areas far beyond, as participants may consume natural resources (such as materials, energy, and water), generate waste, create local air and water pollution, and contribute to climate change through greenhouse gas emissions (Han, Hsu, Lee, & Sheu, 2011; Lee, Barber, & Tyrrell, 2013). By taking sustainability planning into consideration, event organizers have the opportunity not only to minimize potential negative impacts but also, given the large number of stakeholders involved, concretely influence change by leaving a positive legacy and possibly inspiring those involved to live more

sustainably (Boo & Park, 2013; TCEB, 2015b).

Current trends indicate that there is strong interest among planners in creating sustainable meetings. According to the "2009 State of the Sustainable Meeting Industry" report issued by Meeting Strategies Worldwide, approximately half of all professional planners (51% of independent planners, 47% of corporate planners, and 44% percent of association and government planners) are focused on sustainability. When looking at factors pushing the trend, "corporate belt-tightening" was singled out. A study conducted in 2010 by the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) found that 69% of those surveyed adopted eco-friendly practices at their meetings, and an additional 11% had plans to incorporate them within a year. These numbers represent a 20% increase from 2007 results (Kornegay, 2011, pp. 13–14).

In an effort to appropriate a more nuanced understanding of the obstacles or challenges that could pose problems for the overall sustainable development of Thailand's events industries, this study conducted comprehensive qualitative interviews with known MICE industry stake holders to gather relevant information. The hope is that the information gathered will help fill in some of the gaps that currently exist in this field of research—while also providing some guidance to partners in Thailand's event industry in utilizing a dynamic scheme for sustainable event operations—as well as uncover insights for curriculum design in educating future workforce.

2. Literature review

2.1. International and Thai MICE and event industry

In 2013, the global travel industry had healthy growth, with outbound travel increasing by 4%; meanwhile, travel spending grew by 6%. During this time, international travel among people from emerging economies around the world was the predominant factor pushing the trend. Asia, the Middle East and Latin America saw robust growth, and there were projections of even higher growth in outbound travel for the following year, although growth in inbound travel was expected to see relative decline (TCEB, 2014).

In terms of business travel, since 2009, MICE industry-related travel has had much better numbers than that of traditional business travel. In the first 8 months of 2013, MICE travel increased by 6%, while traditional business travel declined by 10%. Currently, the MICE segment accounts for 54% of the total business travel market. Specific segments under the MICE umbrella, including incentives, conventions, and conferences, have experienced respective increases of 61%, 44%, and 27% since 2009. Meanwhile, traditional company travel has dropped by 10% (TCEB, 2014).

Table 1 shows the number of international meetings per country based on a survey by the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA). In 2016, the USA was ranked first with 934 meetings. Thailand ranked 24th out of 113 ranks (held by 115 countries), with a total of 174 meetings (ICCA, 2017).

Among individual cities holding international meetings, Table 2 shows that in 2016, Paris ranked first, with a total of 196 meetings. In this comparison, Thailand's capital, Bangkok, ranked 12th out of 392 ranks (held by 407 cities), with a total of 121 meetings (ICCA, 2017).

Statistics from 2014 indicate a drop from 2013 levels for MICE arrivals and industry revenue in Thailand, with 919,164 visitors and THB 80.8 billion in revenue. This is a decline of 9.3% and 8.69%, respectively. Problems of political instability were the clear culprit, as many prospective patrons were discouraged from putting on MICE events in Thailand that year. Despite this decrease, Q1 2015 gave the industry reason for optimism, with indications that the trend had rebounded. At that time, there was a 3% uptick in arrivals and a 3.3% boost to MICE industry revenue when compared to the same period in the previous year (TCEB, 2015a) (see Table 3).

Table 4 shows the number of visitors and total revenue associated with MICE activity in 2014. The MICE travellers and revenue can be broken down into the following categories: meetings, incentive travel, conventions and exhibitions. The ratio of visitors per category was 31.32% for conventions, 26.17% for incentives travel, 25.32% for meetings and 17.19% for exhibitions. The revenue

Table 1
Number of international meetings per country, 2016.

Rank	Country	Number of Meetings
1	U.S.A.	934
2	Germany	689
3	United Kingdom	582
4	France	454
5	Spain	533
6	Italy	468
7	China-P.R.	410
	Japan	410
9	Netherlands	368
10	Canada	287
	Portugal	287
..	..	..
24	Thailand	174

Source: International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), 2017

Table 2
Number of international meetings per city, 2016.

Rank	Country	Number of Meetings
1	Paris	196
2	Vienna	186
3	Barcelona	181
4	Berlin	176
5	London	153
6	Singapore	151
7	Amsterdam	144
	Madrid	144
9	Lisbon	138
10	Seoul	137
..	..	..
12	Bangkok	121

Source: International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), 2017

Table 3
The number of MICE visitors and amount of industry revenue in Thailand, 2009–2013.

Year	Number of Event Visitors (People)	Amount of Event Revenue (Million Baht)
2009	679,585	53,515
2010	840,054	70,625
2011	895,224	79,770
2012	1,013,502	88,485
2013	919,164	80,800

Source: Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB), 2015a,b

Table 4
The number of visitors and revenue by event category in 2014.

Event Category	Number of Visitors	Revenue (Million Baht)	Average Revenue Per Head (Baht)
Meetings	232,736	25,173	108,161
Incentive travels	240,546	27,415	63,497
Conventions	287,886	26,737	92,874
Exhibitions	157,996	61,613	86,179
M + I + C + E	919,164	80,800	87,906

Source: Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB), 2015a,b

ratio according to category was 33.09% for conventions, 31.15% for meetings, 18.90% for incentives travel, and 16.85% for exhibitions. When looking at per capita revenue, the averages, from highest to lowest were meetings, conventions, exhibitions, and incentives travel (TCEB, 2015a). On average, revenue generated from MICE visitors reached THB $87,906 (equal to USD$ 2,747) per person. The MICE industry brings strong benefits to the increase of the national GDP.

In fiscal year 2016, Thailand attracted 1,273,465 international MICE visitors and generated THB102,936 million. Of that, meetings attracted 258,483 visitors and THB23,445 million; incentives brought in 263,556 visitors and THB16,217 million; conventions drew 298,564 visitors and THB25,789 million; exhibitions interested 180,480 visitors and THB15,686 million; and events attracted 272,382 visitors and THB21,799 million (TCEB, 2017) (show in Table 5). These facts show developing trends in and the

Table 5
International MICE performance overview 2016.

Industry	Number of MICE visitors			Revenue (THB million)		
	FY 2015	FY 2016	Growth	FY 2015	FY 2016	Growth
Meetings	262,538	258,483	−1.54%	28,397	23,445	−17.44%
Incentives	254,125	263,556	3.71%	16,136	16,217	0.50%
Conventions	294,371	298,564	1.42%	27,339	25,789	−5.67%
Exhibition	174,652	180,480	3.34%	15,214	15,686	3.10%
Events	110,309	272,382	146.93%	8,789	21,799	148.03%
MICE	985,686	1,001,083	1.56%	87,086	81,137	−6.83%
MICE + Events	1,095,995	1,273,465	16.19%	95,875	102,936	7.36%

Source: TCEB Annual report, 2016

growing importance of the Thailand MICE industry.

2.2. Strategies of promoting event sustainability in Thailand

To help imbue the event industry with a "green" set of principles, the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB) formulated and implemented the innovative "Green Meetings Guidelines: Advancing the Future of MICE" in 2008. With a determined effort to set its event industry on an eco-friendly path, Thailand adopted a dynamic blueprint, which it has used to spread its message for developing event sustainability throughout Asia.

The guidelines, which were developed in relation to the country's prime model scheme, embrace the development of strategies for MICE operations and activities while concentrating on making use of eco-friendly resources. The initiative involved outlining a promotional strategy for Thai entrepreneurs, which would help them recognize the importance of MICE sustainability in Thailand and provide them with goals to work towards (TCEB, 2015a,b).

Developing Thailand's MICE industry and event sustainability in all regions has been the most important mission of the TCEB in recent years. Aiming to establish the MICE industry as an engine of growth (TCEB, 2013, 2014, 2017), the TCEB has cooperated with public and private partners to devise new strategic plans that are also in line with the government's 20-year national strategy and the Thailand 4.0 economic model. The TCEB's key strategies include winning more bids for Thailand to host events, promoting Thailand as a MICE destination, and developing MICE industry standards (TCEB, 2017, 2018).

In an effort to upgrade the sustainability of Thailand's MICE industry since 2012, the TCEB has promoted a new sustainability strategy for the Thai MICE industry, based on the self-sufficiency philosophy of His Majesty the King (TCEB, 2015b). The formulation and framework of a 5-year scheme focusing on MICE sustainability management in Thailand (2016–2020) encompasses 3 key strategies, including (1) the determination of vision, mission, strategies, promotion and supervision; (2) the participation of all segments from entrepreneurs and alliances to the general public in Thailand; and (3) the establishment of sustainable management systems within the TCEB that use integrated forms of activities to create awareness among organizations (TCEB, 2015a).

Organizing MICE sustainability involves distributing international knowledge to MICE operators and interested parties, which is a standard for entrepreneurs in organizing quality events (Rittichainuwat & Mair, 2012; TCEB, 2017). In addition to the introduction of sustainable events guidelines and standards, the TCEB has published books and broadcast media for the purpose of teaching and spreading learning related to meetings and exhibitions. There are 89 educational institutes that have joined with the TCEB, and the education network extends to Hong Kong Polytechnic University (TCEB, 2017).

2.3. The definition and implication of environmental sustainability within the event industry

The definition of "sustainability" is the study of how natural systems function, keep on diverse and produce everything it needs for the ecology to remain in balance. The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987, p. 45) defined sustainability as "development that meets the needs of the present without comprising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". The WCED also acknowledges that human civilization consumes resources to sustain our modern way of life (EPA, 2018; TCEB, 2012, 2015b).

As Chirieleison and Scrucca (2017) noted, sustainability should aim to balance three aspects: economic, socio-cultural and environmental dimensions. Environmental sustainability describes situations where the valued natural characteristics and or resources of a given physical environment are not adversely affected and can be maintained over time. This is the simplest and most fundamental way to express the concept. However, people using the term environmental sustainability can specify or elaborate the term further to add extra meaning or to apply the concept to more specialized contexts (Sutton, 2004; TCEB, 2018).

In the tourism literature, a green destination has been interpreted as a sustainable destination or an eco-tourism destination (Holleran, 2008). Being green means making choices that are healthier, safer, less wasteful and less damaging to the environment and the community. That is, being green means striving to have a positive impact instead of a negative one. Furthermore, being green is sometimes called sustainability, which is a way of doing things that takes the present and the future into account (TCEB, 2013). Environmental sustainability is not a new consideration for those involved in the meetings and events industry. Currently, sustainable strategies aim at the triple bottom line (TBL) of social, economic, and environmental sustainability (Font & Harris, 2004), and researchers suggest employing a measurement framework for assessing the impact of greening an event from such a perspective (Fredline, Deery, & Jago, 2005; Sherwood, Jago, & Deery, 2004). For example, Fredline et al. (2005) cited managerial implications for a TBL measurement framework that would provide a standardized approach for measuring green meetings and events.

Regarding the importance of including an eco-friendly element in events and meetings, Getz (2009) states that sustainable events satisfy crucial economic, social, cultural, and environmental roles that are of personal value to people; they also have an influencing effect on local communities. It has been noted that the environmental impacts of events should be evaluated from an ecological sustainability perspective (Laing & Frost, 2010). In the present context, the term "green" can be a general indicator of innovative and future-oriented meetings and events management or can serve as a reference to an essential set of conditions under which hosting meetings and events can bring better economic benefits to the community.

Implementation of practices that are sustainable can reduce both the economic costs and environmental impacts related to convention centre activities (Chidsey, 2012). Currently, conferences and conventions are experiencing a major push in the direction of sustainability (Russell, 2008). However, despite this influx of momentum, relevant literature has also pointed out that there are limitations with respect to how big of a part sustainability plays in the MICE industry. This becomes more of a surprise when considering that it has been shown that consumer decisions are influenced by environmental concerns (Diamantopoulos,

Table 6

Interview respondent profiles.

Category	Informants	Affiliation	Gender
Executives (government and associations)	E1	Manager	Female
	E2	Project Manager	Female
	E3	President of Association	Female
	E4	Chairperson	Female
Scholars	S1	Dean of the University	Male
	S2	Assoc. Director/University	Female
Practitioner	P1	Senior Director	Male
	P2	Senior Vice President	Female
	P3	Manager	Female

Schlegelmilch, Sinkovics, & Bohlen, 2003). This, perhaps, could be explained in part by the fact that until recently there were low levels of understanding and awareness of the type of action that would be required to accomplish the desired transition.

Thus, well-designed guidelines for the MICE industry should serve as an effective strategy for setting the movement on a clear path for sustainable event development. However, prior to the validation of effective guidelines for the Thai MICE industry, it is worth further exploring the perspectives of industrial, governmental and academic stakeholders.

3. Methodology

It is suggested that qualitative research would benefit from undertaking research to gain a flourishing understanding in the event industry (Rittichainuwat & Mair, 2012). For this study, it was deemed appropriate to adopt a qualitative approach. The primary data were solicited from the informants through interviews designed to gain insight on perceptions of core problems. Interviewees were asked to identify perceived barriers or challenges originating from governmental, academic or business sectors which could potentially impact the sustainable development of Thailand's events industries. They were then asked to make recommendations on how such problems could be ameliorated.

Primary data were collected by applying the snowball sampling technique and conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews on four government policy makers (industry executives), two scholars, and three business practitioners involved in sustainable events development in Thailand (see Table 6). Each interview lasted 60–90 min and was recorded and later transcribed. As the communications took place in the Thai language, the transcripts were later translated into English. When following a qualitative approach (e.g., by using in-depth interviews), it is not uncommon for interviewees with differing interests to present things from different angles. With this in mind, secondary data were collected from related websites, journal publications, reports and other reliable sources to help iron out potential discrepancies. Once the information had been gathered, it was organized and the contents were discussed with MICE industry scholars who assisted shed further light on the points most relevant and important to the industry.

In the social sciences, a method that is widely regarded for its useful application in consumer research is the content analysis approach (Kassarjian, 1977). Deemed to be a suitable technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts on the contexts of their use (Maxwell, 1996), this approach was applied in the present study to establish a context for the interplaying themes and categories. In order to identify the applicable themes and concepts, tables were constructed.

Creswell (1998) developed a "data analysis spiral" for conceptualizing the procedures of qualitative data analysis. There are five loops within his data analysis approach: data collection; data management; reading and taking memos; describing, classifying and interpreting; and representing and visualizing. In order to perform the content analysis, different elements of the data were placed into categories which could help the researcher make sense of the trends (Kassarjian, 1977; Krippendorff, 2004). Precise rules and rigorous procedures must be established and followed throughout the processes of the research. Since the researcher must rely on his/her own judgement when analysing the data, the strictly established rules are set in place to mitigate against subjective dispositions. A detailed summery of the results also depends on quantified judgements, which will be referred to when making interpretations and assumptions. Any findings must be generalized and be congruent with theoretic frameworks.

4. Findings and results

The empirical findings gathered were based on a past, present, and future flow with reference to sustainable event development in Thailand. Following a thematic analysis, each emerging issue is illustrated (see Table 7 for details). Furthermore, this section presents not only the emergent issues that are identified by this study but also postulates the linkages between the empirical findings and the relevant literature discussed previously.

4.1. The perceptions and importance of sustainable event development in Thailand

Much of the information gathered from the interviewees is similar. Most informants do not regard sustainable development as a mere trend, but recognize it as a response to a pressing need and a model expected by international standards. Furthermore, the widespread acceptance of the TCEB's green guidelines by the Thai MICE industry has attracted more business to Thailand, as

Table 7
Category and themes abstracted from empirical data.

Category	Themes and Key issues
1. Perceptions and importance	● It is essential develop event sustainability. ● Event participants put more priority on selecting sustainable packages than they did in the past. ● Venue operators have recognized the importance of sustainable development.
2. Development barriers	● Government leaders pay less attention to the development of sustainable events. ● Government policies are barriers to solving problems that occur in the development of event sustainability. ● Green concepts are new to the event industry.
3. Development strategies and fixes	● Equip staff with green-related knowledge; understanding is essential. ● The government sector should make policies that initiate sustainable event operations.

organizers have begun to appreciate the importance of holding business events at green destinations. As the respondents commented:

"Avoiding causing damage to nature is the trend of the event industry. This idea is widely accepted both at national and international events." (S1)

"The event industry, especially meetings, has high requirements for corporate social responsibility (CSR). When they choose their suppliers, they will think about sustainability or sustainable policies. Right now, it's not just a trend, but it will be a 'must' in the future." (E4)

Furthermore, sustainable development is understood by venue operators to be an important path for the MICE industry to follow which is why they are beginning to adopt policies to standardize training for their agents and employees. Several respondents commented on this:

"We are training our staff by learning and observing from successful companies. In the past 2 years, we did a mock-up green meeting package, and we also improved our infrastructure to make it green and enacted a green policy for the administration." (P3)

"We always train our employees, every year, on the topic of sustainability in MICE. It is an ISO20121 policy, and we are still running a standard system for energy management according to ISO5001." (P1)

Among three segments of stakeholders in the event industry, it was suggested that sustainable development is not simply a trend but a needed reorientation that should have its bearings set by international standards. This suggestion was also argued in Lee et al. (2013). The findings also indicated that current demand among customers for sustainable packages has increased. Thus, development should be given more attention. This is consistent with research by Tinnish and Mangal (2012) who noticed that in consumer markets being sensitive to the need for sustainable products did not necessary mean changing one's purchasing behaviour. Thus, more work must be done by marketers to get the message across through various forms of media that concrete changes in behaviour need to materialize. By taking action and hosting events that are sustainable planners can change behaviours, and with new habits that are oriented towards sustainable practices, customers will become even more likely to seek green packages in the future (Chidsey, 2012; Diamantopoulos et al., 2003; Tinnish & Mangal, 2012).

The motivations behind Thailand's desire to push its MICE industries in a greener direction are twofold: environmental and economic (Rittichainuwat & Mair, 2012). Practices promoted through the TCEB's green guidelines can mean improved business for events companies in Thailand, as organizers have indicated that they prefer to hold events at green destinations.

4.2. Barriers to developing event sustainability in Thailand

Business operators, while pursuing sustainable development, are looking for increased levels of participation from the government sector. Business operators recognize the importance of broader coordination between those who are in a position to influence the overall outcome, and they stress the importance of having a proper understanding of the principles that must be applied and the problems that may be encountered. This was illustrated by several respondents:

"Government leaders never pay attention to the MICE industry; so, leaders must take on responsibility for the meeting sustainability when they are concerned about the strategy of the country." (E4)

"Keynote speakers from the successful companies should be invited to share 'awareness' and 'knowledge'. They can also be asked to offer consulting because they understand more than the government sectors do." (E1)

Communication and understanding are continually emphasized. However, respondents also noted that government policy can act as a barrier to solving problems:

"On the part of the government, political issues are one of the barriers. We must push things democratically; and when they think about economics, they will focus on economic strategy, but education is a secondary priority." (E4)

"The policy of the country may be the key factor obstructing the growth of sustainable event development." (S2)

However, businesses must calculate the cost and return. If investment is very high, it causes large increases in the cost of the product. Therefore, some informants showed concern in this respect:

"The government of Thailand does not give enough support, but the private sector has more power to do it. So, government has to establish a policy and support a budget for this issue; then it will improve the level of sustainability for the country of Thailand." (E4)

Green concepts are still new, and it is therefore important to develop personnel who can work on relevant issues. This involves training and building practical awareness:

"For those who came to the meeting, they just came to follow the work objectives but were not really educated on the main ideas of green events." (S1)

The current government strategy focuses on MICE standards. Through a cooperative relationship with the Management System Certification Institute (Thailand), the government will encourage the adoption of standards. The broader agenda will be pursued by employing six key strategies:1) Bring the Thailand MICE Venue Standards (TMVS) in-line with international standards; 2) Train human resources on TMVS; 3) Update IT systems 4) Execute TMVS public relation campaigns and marketing activities 5) Promote ASEAN MICE Venue Standards (AMVS); and 6) Push the MICE Venue Standards towards sustainability. Referring to these, respondents expressed the current shortcomings:

"The strategy is not clear right now. They do try to insert it into the training courses, but it depends on instructors and learners." (S2)

For the event business and organizations in Thailand, it remains difficult to understand the principles and good practices of event sustainability declared by government, and there is a lack of appropriate awareness and basic motivation for getting involved in the sustainable development initiative.

According to respondents, at the present time, the national policy lacks clarity and can consequently be a barrier to solving problems. Thus, effective communication is a must. In order for stakeholders to reap the greatest gains from their marketing efforts, members of both the government and industry sectors need to keep the processes free of unnecessary obstacles. Different groups with stakes in the game should also be actively engaged in conductive interaction with one another (Hjalager & Johansen, 2013). In the same respect, action must be taken by politicians and those in charge to help raise awareness and foster demand for sustainability at community levels. Throughout the processes, the government should endeavour to maintain clear communications with the concerned parties and community members to help avoid causing unnecessary frustration or fomenting distrust.

4.3. Sustainable event development practices and fixes

Although a desirable policy on sustainable events operations has been adopted for promotion by the government, work must also be done to transform the trend into a set of formatted practices in which every part can be acknowledged and understood with a degree of similarity:

"We published the Sustainable Event Guidelines to introduce how to meet the requirement and make proper acknowledgements to improve the abilities of entrepreneurs in Thailand for the future." (E1)

Both government and private sectors can work to propel event sustainability arrangements in order to improve the overall image of the country.

"In the private sector, there is cooperation between 3 organizations: TICA, TEA and EMA. They all like to be the distributors of information and to coordinate with entrepreneurs in Thailand. We plan and hold the meetings for conducting training and coordinating activities with one another." (E1)

"Education institutes have signed MOUs with TCEB already, but still have not begun development due to a lack of human resources." (S1)

Some venue operators have specific departments to handle issues related to the environment, energy management, and system waste management. Some emphasize saving water and energy, while others focus on green materials:

"We use ISO 50001 as a guideline for purchasing procedures because all materials must be green and are guaranteed by certificates, such as LED lighting systems and chemical products." (P2)

"We created the TIS 22300 MICE Security Management System (MSMS) as part of the safety of meeting locations, and, in the future, we will apply for ISO 14001 to put more focus on the process. And right now we are preparing to improve the lighting and water systems." (P3)

Another area of focus has also been on materials that can be reused, reduced or replaced with materials that are greener.

"We have used this system for more than 20 years. We conduct garbage management and use a water recycling system for EM products (fermented fruit recycle process). Another thing that we have done for more than 2 years is to recycle dry coffee dregs that we get from partners or business owners who rent our locations." (P1)

"Our green activities include the EM process. We also do a garbage screening process so we can reuse, recycle and sell items. Money collected can be used for company maintenance." (P3)

A real impact can be made by reducing waste and saving natural resources, and venues have been promoting this type of activity—coordinating with all participants, including employees, executives, exhibitors and organizers. This was illustrated by the respondent:

"We offer sustainable packages and green MICE packages as options for customers. If they chose any packages from those selections, we will give them a certificate to thank them for their support. At the same time, we also ask for cooperation on reducing paper usage and managing garbage and recycling to cut costs." (P1)

During the interview, venue managers explained that certain staff members on their teams are responsible for addressing sustainability issues and ensuring that good relations are maintained with the neighbouring community. This is consistent with the research of Sangpikul & Kim, 2009. In order for Thailand to successfully transform its events industry into a sustainable enterprise, the community must have a clear understanding of what is to be expected and a positive attitude towards the industry – this will depend on good public relations and the visible adoption of sustainable practices.

For success in this area, however, there is a common belief that strategies will depend heavily on government policymakers. As one venue operator suggested:

"… if Thailand wants success in its green policy, it must start with a general government policy to set up a green system. It's really important for the customers' expectations and safety and for saving the environment." (P1)

In this respect, sustainability should be promoted not only as a marketing strategy that can attract business to the country but also as a contribution to the development and pursuit of overall sustainability objectives. The information also echoes the research of Rittichainuwat and Mair (2012).

In summary, according to the empirical findings, event industry stakeholders are currently giving priority to sustainable development. The importance of event sustainability has been both recognized and emphasized. However, there is a lack of mutual understanding of the concerns if different parties and the difficulties they face, and implementing sustainable event development makes this development get entangled. Event venue operators consider some Thai environmental policies to be barriers and obstructions to the sustainable development of events. For some event practitioners, a lack of human resources with accurate and proper knowledge and competence in developing event sustainability has made the implementation more challenging. In exploring the current situation of the sustainable event industry in Thailand, this study has revealed that if Thailand is going to excel in this area, increased coordination between multiple stakeholders must take place.

5. Recommendations and suggestions

Through qualitative interviews, this study asked industry stakeholders to identify the obstacles and challenges that they understand to be impeding the sustainable development of Thailand's events industry. Based on the empirical results, the recommendations below are made in hopes of improving sustainable event development in the country by providing guidance for to those who are working to see the industry unleash its full potential and move towards a position of greater prominence in the MICE arena.

First, since education is an effective instrument in building understanding and awareness and promoting participation in environmental practices (Boo & Park, 2013; Goralnik & Nelson, 2011), it will be necessary to provide the planners with the opportunity to take part in educational courses on the environment. Educational program design should be engaging for those who are making the decisions and planning the events, and efforts should be made to ensure that stakeholders and meeting participants are all on the same page (Boo & Park, 2013). Essentially, this will mean that industry practitioners must receive institutional support with respect to the administration of educational activities, and that the educational contents provide good instruction on what it looks like to organize a sustainable event.

At the same time, it will take more than simply creating the educational opportunities. Thought must be invested into the program design to ensure that the educational subject matter covers the most essential elements and does so in a manner that accessible, informative and motivating for the industry professionals who may be considering updating their practices. (TCEB, 2015b).

A separate hurdle that must be overcome if Thailand is to work its way towards becoming a top destination for international conventions is its shortfall in professional management-level staff. Concern has been raised, that Thailand still lacks in number when it comes to veteran level staff members (e.g., executives, directors, managers) with the experience necessary to run top level conventions (Sangpikul & Kim, 2009).

The objective should be to create curriculum that can motivate planners to operate according to eco-friendly standards (Boo & Park, 2013). The most effective way to promote a greener MICE industry is to foster environmental awareness and promote communication among concerned parties and stakeholders (Boo & Park, 2013; Laing & Frost, 2010).

In examining issues related to government policy, this study brought to light certain items of discontent among representatives of the private sector on the effectiveness of such policy. Complaints were directed at the lack of clarity or poor communication that results in a situation where policy becomes a barrier to solving problems of event sustainability. Resolving this situation, of course, will come down to finding a way to motivate the government sectors to become more involved. Interviewees voiced multiple times that effective development of green MICE events must involve the government, but the government must first gain a greater appreciation for the overall value to be derived from further investment.

In consideration of the benefits that local economies could potentially reap by hosting meetings and conventions (Crouch & La Louviere, 2004; Sox, Benjamin, Carpenter, & Strick, 2013), local governments could do well by taking a serious look at sustainability as an approach to boosting their reputations and gaining the competitive edge. As it currently stands, however, the perception of those interviewed is that government leaders are not giving the sustainable development of the local events industry the attention it needs. This lack of attention, without a doubt, can be understood to indicate a lack of pressure. Such pressure might come down to the

topic of education and awareness; next time, however, it should be with a focus on the public.

As local communities gain a better understanding of the win-win situation that can result from investment in a green event industry, both in terms of economic gains and in healthier environments, the overall demand would undoubtedly increase. As the issue becomes more important to the community, it will also become more attention grabbing for leaders. Essentially, across the spectrum of participants, there appears to be a benefit that can be gained by increasing the focus on education. Green concepts are new to this industry; in this context, they are new to the venue operators, the staff and the guests. They are also new to the government and the surrounding community. However, as people become more familiar with them, they are more likely to become more involved with them. This has been seen with the increase in demand for green packages over time, as reported by the venue operators; however, it has not yet happened on a scale that is large enough to push Thailand's green event industry to the forefront of this burgeoning industry.

This research reports a thorough investigation of sustainable event development in Thailand, comprising MICE stakeholders' opinions. The results from the present study suggest that without adopting a plan to broaden the scope of environmental educational curriculum, the efforts made by government and business sectors to promote sustainable events practices in Thailand may be insufficient. Practical suggestions for developing event sustainability in a certain geographical area are noted and can serve as a reference for those countries that need to develop event sustainability. In order to piece together a fuller picture of this diverse industry, further studies will need to look into the perceptions people hold with respect to how green meeting facilities are. It is also recommended that additional studies on the topic of sustainable developments in the events industry could be carried out with special attention placed on hotels with their own convention facilities.

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