

Headquarters

BUILDING BRIDGES IN THE MEETINGS INDUSTRY

JULY 2026 #125

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through Meetings



THE ASSOCIATION
MAGAZINE



GLOBAL VIEWS 2026

THE NEW GEOGRAPHY OF INFLUENCE

Editor's Notes



Global Meetings, Local Identity

Author: Jesús Guerrero Chacón, HQ Deputy Editor

Much of the meetings industry still speaks a common language: access, capacity, infrastructure, sustainability, legacy and impact. The words are familiar because the requirements are real. Yet in conversations held by the HQ team across different regions during the first half of 2026, the most useful exchanges did not start with what destinations had in common. They started with what made them unique.

A city with a medical research base gives an association one kind of value. A capital connected to public policy gives another. Climate priorities, local industries, cultural knowledge and regional cooperation influence programmes, partnerships and legacy in different ways. Strong destination propositions make clear which associations, sectors and communities they can serve, and why meeting there changes what the event can achieve.

Released during **IMEX Frankfurt 2026**, ICCA's *GlobeWatch Business Analytics Report* analysed more than 12,400 international association meetings across 162 countries and 1,603 cities. Europe hosted 53% of meetings recorded during the year, while 47% took place across Asia-Pacific, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, North America and other regions. The rankings placed the United States, Italy, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and Japan among the leading countries, while Lisbon, Paris, Barcelona, Vienna and Singapore led the city rankings.

Spain and Portugal placed 79 destinations in the latest ICCA rankings. Lisbon, Barcelona and Madrid continue attracting international congresses, while Porto, Coimbra, Valencia, Bilbao and many other destinations broaden the range of expertise, institutions and delegate experiences available across Iberia. Rankings record performance, but they do not show how destinations define their own identity in an increasingly diverse global market. The same debate is taking place beyond the meetings industry.

Led by advocacy groups including **Africa No Filter** and **Speak Up Africa**, and endorsed by the **African Union**, the **Correct the Map** campaign supports the use of equal-area world maps that show Africa and much of the Global South at their true scale. Advocates argue that maps influence perception, shaping how regions are understood politically, economically and culturally. Although Africa is the world's second-largest continent, capable of fitting the United States, China, India, Japan and much of Europe within its borders, it is often perceived as far smaller. The discussion is about more than geography. It is about accurate representation. At IMEX, the **Africa in Motion** session brought together representatives from Rwanda, Ethiopia, Angola, South Africa and Zambia, each presenting a different business events proposition. Panellists challenged the idea of presenting Africa as a single destination, pointing instead to 54 countries with different key industries, policy priorities, research communities, event capabilities and identities. Rwanda offered one case study, with its growth in ICCA rankings and its successful bid for the **ICCA Congress 2027**. Angola presented a fast-moving positioning strategy through its new convention bureau, new airport, convention centre pipeline and new MICE district in Luanda. Ethiopia brought climate diplomacy into the discussion, with Addis Ababa set to host the **United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP32)** in November 2027, and an agenda focused on climate finance, adaptation, resilience and African-led solutions, including the **Green Legacy Initiative**. The shared message was not that Africa lacks capacity, but that international perceptions still need to catch up with the infrastructure, sector expertise and business events systems across the continent.

Australia's business events strategy, discussed with HQ at **AIME** in Melbourne and later at IMEX, is tied closely to national priorities. Health, education, technology, agribusiness, defence, space and sustainability sit within



the country's proposition because they reflect areas where Australia already holds expertise. The **Green Is Our Gold** initiative brings environmental responsibility, wildlife protection, First Nations engagement and industry participation into a shared national framework.

Melbourne recently hosted **Women Deliver 2026**, one of the world's largest conferences on gender equality and the rights of women and girls. The event introduced the Oceanic Pacific framework, recognising the diversity of peoples, cultures and priorities across the region while giving greater visibility to self-definition and regional voices. In Geelong, **Nyaal Banyul Convention and Event Centre** opens in July 2026, adding another layer to Victoria's meetings proposition. Developed with the Wadawurrung Traditional Owners from its earliest stages, the project places First Nations participation within venue identity, planning and decision-making.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, *HQ's* reporting moved from the long-awaited opening of the **New Zealand International Convention Centre (NZICC)** in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland to Rotorua, with both destinations showing Māori participation as part of business events strategy. Auckland hosted the **World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education (WIPCE) 2025**, while Rotorua brought Māori organisations into conversations on leadership, governance and destination development. Stewardship, wellbeing and cultural knowledge sat alongside infrastructure, investment and international growth, giving New Zealand's meetings proposition a stronger institutional and community base.

FIEXPO in Costa Rica placed Latin America and the Caribbean within a public policy discussion. **ICCA Chief Executive Officer Dr Senthil Gopinath** argued for a stronger role for business events in national development strategies, linking meetings to innovation, entrepreneurship, professional development and knowledge exchange alongside economic impact. **Arnaldo Nardone, Director of FIEXPO** and **Past ICCA President**, opened the **13th Latin American Political Forum** by framing business events as a regional development tool, with government representatives from Latin America and the Caribbean joined by organisations including **ICCA, PCMA, IAPCO** and **UN Tourism**. He highlighted the industry's scale with US\$3.1 trillion (approx. €2.7 trillion) in global economic impact, 24.2 million direct jobs and 1.65 billion participants travelling to meetings and events during 2025.

Professional standards continue to mature across the meetings sector. Associations expect reliable service, sustainability frameworks, risk management and operational clarity wherever they meet. Consistency in delivery does not require uniformity in identity. Associations also look for the institutions, local partners and areas of expertise that can strengthen a programme and extend legacy after delegates return home. This edition of *HQ* follows how different regions and markets are defining their success stories.

Destinations are refining their own propositions, building on local expertise, community partnerships and areas of recognised strength. The global meetings industry benefits from that diversity. Every destination brings a different perspective, and together these viewpoints expand the possibilities of what business events can achieve.



The **Map** Is Being Redrawn Where Models End and Perspectives Begin

Author: Manuel Fernandes, HQ Magazine Manager

As I write these lines, I bring to a close a season spent, on behalf of *Headquarters*, attending many of the conferences that have shaped the agenda for the leading voices, suppliers and stakeholders of our industry. From the **International Association of Professional Congress Organisers (IAPCO) Annual Meeting** in Athens, I travelled to the **City Destinations Alliance (CityDNA) Conference** in Helsinki, bringing together Europe's destination management organisations, before continuing to the **GDS-Forum** in Szczecin and, finally, concluding the journey in Bilbao for the annual gathering of the convention centres hosted by the **International Association of Convention Centres (AIPC)**. Collectively, these events sketched an expanded map of our industry, revealing new centres of innovation, fresh perspectives and emerging players that are steadily reshaping the global meetings landscape.

For much of the modern history of the meetings industry, that map appeared remarkably stable. It showed us where ideas originated, which experiences evolved into best practice, which institutions set the benchmark for excellence and whose voices shaped the conversations that others would eventually follow. Leadership was synonymous with established destinations, mature markets and long-standing associations. Innovation travelled along familiar routes: some regions developed the frameworks; others embraced them. That assumption rarely invited scrutiny. Today, it deserves precisely that.

The most profound transformation unfolding across the global meetings industry has little to do with infrastructure, technology or geography. It concerns the way knowledge itself is created, shared and legitimised. Influence is becoming more widely distributed. Expertise is emerging from places once regarded primarily as recipients of established practice. Leadership is acquiring new dimensions and new voices. That evolution was unmistakably reflected in the innovation initiatives, impact awards and emerging leaders recognised throughout the events I attended over the past few months. For that reason, I believe the defining story of the years ahead will be the continued expansion of this 'map of influence'. The meetings industry continues to export models, but it is now beginning to import perspectives. The conversations featured in this issue of *Headquarters* offer compelling evidence of that foreshadowing.

Across Africa, associations are no longer asking how to replicate European or North American structures. As **John Molepo, President** of the **African Society of Association Executives (AfSAE)**, explains in our interview, the focus has shifted towards building governance models, professional development pathways and institutional resilience that respond to African realities while contributing to global practice. Across the Asia-Pacific region, a new generation of association leaders is moving beyond adaptation towards authorship, developing leadership frameworks, knowledge ecosystems and collaborative models shaped by one of the world's most diverse regions. As **Prasant Saha, President** of the **Asia-Pacific Society of Association Executives (APSAE)**, reflects in the following pages, the ambition is no longer to follow established models but to help define them. Neither conversation is framed around 'catching up to the rest.' Both are driven by a determination to contribute, while designing approaches that are deeply rooted in the realities of their own regions.

For decades, globalisation was widely understood as a process of convergence. The more interconnected our industry became, the more it was assumed that its challenges (and the solutions to address them) would gradually converge as well. Yet the opposite has proved true. Greater connectivity has revealed the extraordinary value of context. Cities have come to recognise that competitive advantage cannot be reduced to a convention centre or a destination marketing campaign. Associations have realised that annual conferences alone are not enough to sustain vibrant, engaged communities. Event organisers have learned that success cannot be measured solely through delegate numbers or economic impact. Even sustainability has evolved, shifting from a collection of isolated initiatives into a shared language capable of embracing diverse realities without demanding identical solutions.

The **Sustainable Event Goals**, presented in this issue through the valuable contribution of our colleagues at **Kenes Group**, embody that evolution. They do not prescribe a universal formula; they provide a framework through which destinations, organisers, suppliers and associations can pursue common ambitions while responding to their own local circumstances. That subtle distinction may prove far more influential than yet another certification or benchmarking exercise. The same principle extends well beyond sustainability. For many years, our industry competed for market share. The next chapter will be won through mind share. Several of the feature stories in this edition demonstrate that the future of association meetings will be shaped by knowledge, trust and intellectual leadership. Institutional credibility, human capital and the ability to convene expertise are becoming strategic assets every bit as valuable as air connectivity, hotel capacity or exhibition space. Physical infrastructure (particularly for organisations serving global memberships) remains indispensable; yet it no longer defines leadership on its own.

Collectively, and despite the extraordinary advances in digital technology and artificial intelligence, one truth continues to assert itself with remarkable clarity across the live events sector. As **Jim Russell, Global Head of Business Event Solutions at Maritz**, tells us, people continue to place their greatest trust in one another. In an age capable of generating infinite content, authenticity has become one of the rarest commodities of all. Physical presence conveys a level of credibility that no algorithm can replicate. The enduring value of live events lies in that uniquely human capacity to build trust, strengthen relationships and transform knowledge into shared experience. The future of meetings, therefore, extends far beyond the language of algorithms. This edition brings together voices from Africa, Asia-Pacific and other regions, alongside destinations seeking stronger engagement with new markets and new partners.

At its heart, this is a conversation about communities, institutions, ideas and leadership. It calls for the confidence to recognise that meaningful innovation is no longer concentrated within a handful of established centres of excellence. It is emerging wherever organisations choose to invest in knowledge, wherever destinations understand themselves as living ecosystems, and wherever collaboration displaces imitation as the driving force behind progress. The future of our industry will not be determined by those with the largest convention centres or the most ambitious destination marketing campaigns. It will belong to those capable of connecting global ambition with local intelligence.



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A New **Voice** for **Asia-Pacific** Associations

From Fast Followers to Global Standard-Setters!

As associations worldwide adapt to new expectations around membership, governance and engagement, the launch of the **Asia Pacific Society of Association Executives (APSAE)** signals an important development for one of the world's most dynamic and diverse regions. Officially debuting at the inaugural **APSAE Summit** in Singapore this July, the organisation aims to provide a dedicated platform for association leaders across Asia-Pacific while fostering leadership development, knowledge exchange and regional collaboration.

For many observers, APSAE represents more than a new professional body: it reflects the growing confidence of a region increasingly shaping global conversations on innovation, community building and organisational leadership. In this interview, **APSAE President, Prasant Saha**, shares his perspective on the opportunities, challenges and global significance of association leadership in Asia-Pacific.



What inspired the creation of APSAE, and what role do you believe it can play in strengthening the association sector across Asia-Pacific?

APSAE was created at a pivotal moment for the global association community, where traditional models of membership, governance, and engagement are being fundamentally redefined. Across regions, associations are rethinking their purpose, not only how they generate revenue, but also how they create meaningful value for their members.

At the heart of APSAE's inspiration is a simple but often overlooked principle: associations exist to advance missions, but also to actively enable the growth journeys of individual members. In many cases, that second dimension has been underdeveloped. APSAE seeks to bridge this gap by placing mission and value creation at the centre of the conversation, ensuring that associations are not only relevant at an organisational level, but also transformative at a personal level.

In Asia-Pacific, where diversity of scale, maturity, and resources is significant, APSAE's role is to act as a catalyst, facilitating knowledge exchange, strengthening leadership capacity, and helping associations better align purpose with sustainable growth.

What are the common challenges and opportunities that unite association leaders across the Asia-Pacific?

Despite its extraordinary diversity, the Asia-Pacific association landscape is united by remarkably similar challenges. Across markets, associations are deeply mission-driven, yet often constrained by limited resources to fully execute and communicate that mission effectively.

Three common challenges stand out: engaging younger generations, navigating linguistic and cultural complexity, and ensuring that value propositions remain clear and compelling across highly fragmented audiences. These factors can create barriers to communication and engagement, even when intent and ambition are strong.

At the same time, the opportunity is equally significant. Asia-Pacific represents more than half of the world's population, much of it still under-engaged from an association perspective. The scale of untapped potential is immense. Equally important is the region's strong sense of community and collaboration, which is deeply embedded in many cultures.

In today's geopolitical context, there is also a growing recognition that collaboration within Asia-Pacific is not only about economic opportunity, but about resilience, sharing knowledge, strengthening best practices, and enabling collective growth in an increasingly interconnected world.

How important is it for Asia-Pacific to develop its own leadership models, research and best practices, and what role can APSAE play in that process?

Asia-Pacific is a region defined by both curiosity and complexity. While there is a natural openness to global learning, there is also a growing need to develop frameworks that reflect local realities rather than importing models that may not fully translate.

APSAE believes that learning content, leadership development, and best practices must be rooted in the context of the Asia-Pacific region. This means integrating local intelligence, cultural understanding, and practical realities into every layer of knowledge creation.

Through its programmes and initiatives, APSAE will focus on delivering content in diverse formats that reflect how association leaders in the region learn, engage, and implement change. The goal is not only to share knowledge, but to co-create it with the community.

How do you see the relationship between associations and the meetings industry evolving across Asia-Pacific?

That relationship is undergoing a fundamental transformation, from a transactional supplier-client model to a strategic partnership built on shared outcomes. In Asia-Pacific, this evolution is particularly visible across four key dimensions.

First, there is a clear shift from logistics to legacy. Associations are no longer evaluating success solely on event execution, but on long-term impact, whether that is advancing policy, building local capacity, or contributing to sustainability goals. The industry is now expected to co-create that legacy.

Second, localisation has become essential. The diversity of Asia-Pacific requires far more than operational delivery; it demands cultural intelligence, regulatory awareness, and contextual understanding. Third, data agility is increasingly critical. Associations now expect real-time insights, hybrid readiness, and robust contingency planning in an environment shaped by uncertainty and rapid change.

Finally, purpose is now central. Transparency, ethical engagement, and alignment with mission-driven outcomes are really expected. Trust has become the defining currency of success in the region. This is precisely where APSAE plays a role: bringing associations and destinations together as co-creators of impact, not just as parties to a transaction.

Where do you see the greatest opportunities for collaboration between Asia-Pacific associations and their counterparts in Europe, Africa and the Americas?

The most promising opportunity lies in what I call reciprocal innovation. For too long, knowledge exchange has largely flowed in one direction. Today, that is changing. Asia-Pacific offers significant leadership in areas such as digital engagement, mobile-first ecosystems, and AI-enabled personalisation. In turn, collaboration with Europe, Africa, and the Americas opens opportunities in areas such as governance frameworks, policy development, and scalable inclusion models.

What we are witnessing is not the end of globalisation, but its evolution into globalisation. Global challenges such as climate change, AI ethics, and geopolitical uncertainty are inherently

borderless. However, the way solutions are implemented must be deeply local. The future belongs to organisations that are globally connected but locally intelligent, capable of adapting to context while maintaining a shared global purpose.

Looking ahead, what contribution do you believe Asia-Pacific associations can make to shaping the future of the global association community?

Asia-Pacific associations are moving from being fast followers to becoming global standard-setters. The region's complexity across languages, cultures, economies, and governance models has created a unique strength: the ability to manage diversity at scale. This positions APAC associations as natural leaders in building inclusive, adaptive, and resilient organisational models.

We are already seeing innovation in membership structures, with a growing emphasis toward flexible, modular, and on-demand engagement models, as well as experimentation with micro-credentials and lifelong learning pathways. There is also a distinct agility in the region, often born out of necessity, which enables rapid adaptation to technological, economic, and geopolitical shifts. This 'bamboo effect', flexible yet resilient, offers an important lesson for the global community.

Ultimately, APSAE is founded on the belief that the next chapter of association excellence will be shaped significantly by this region. Asia-Pacific is actively redefining global models, demonstrating that associations can be both deeply rooted in local communities and globally connected in impact.



The inaugural APSAE Summit heads to Singapore in July 2026



From Fragmentation to Unity

Africa's Association Landscape in Transition

Africa's association and meetings landscape is playing an increasingly important role in strengthening professional development, knowledge exchange and institutional capacity across the continent, amid rapid demographic and economic change. Following a previous encounter at the **IBTM Association Forum 2025**, our **Manuel Fernandes** spoke with **John Ntshaupe Molepo**, **Executive Director of the South African Association for Public Administration and Management (SAAPAM)** and **President of the African Society of Association Executives (AfSAE)**. A leading voice in African association leadership, he has been closely involved in advancing the professionalisation of association management across the continent. The conversation explores a sector under pressure to evolve, from fragmented systems and funding dependence to the need for stronger governance, diversified value chains and year-round engagement.



How are you adapting SAAPAM's conference model to ensure financial sustainability and long-term member value amid rising funding pressures and changing expectations?

Organising a conference today requires balancing significant financial pressures with increasingly complex expectations from delegates and partners. Sustainability depends first on diversification: associations can no longer rely on a single sponsor or narrow income base. A combination of registration fees, institutional support, grants, partnerships and alternative revenue streams is essential.

Equally important is long-term planning. Financial resilience is not only about revenue generation but about building reserve capacity and operational systems that allow organisations to withstand uncertainty. Some associations demonstrate this stability more clearly than others; the key lesson is that sustainability comes from systems, not events.

Governance also plays a decisive role. A conference cannot depend on one individual or one network of relationships. Permanent committees, structured fundraising mechanisms and clear governance frameworks ensure continuity beyond leadership cycles, allowing institutional knowledge and partnerships to be transferred rather than personalised.

How important is continuous, relationship-driven engagement in ensuring the long-term sustainability of associations beyond conference cycles?

Sustainability is not only financial but relational. Associations must fully understand and activate the value chains within their own networks. Too often, functions are outsourced that could

be managed internally, increasing costs unnecessarily. When internal expertise exists, it should be leveraged strategically to improve efficiency and reinforce ownership.

More importantly, engagement cannot be limited to conference periods. Associations should not only communicate when they need registrations for the next event. Engagement must be continuous and structured throughout the year. That is why we maintain alumni databases and actively track participation trends. When key participants stop attending, we follow up to understand why.

This requires deliberate relationship management. In some cases, we make direct contact or assign dedicated teams to reconnect with former attendees. Sustainable conferences are ultimately built on sustained communities, not episodic participation.

How is SAAPAM ensuring its conferences remain relevant and responsive to real geopolitical, governance and public administration challenges across Africa?

Geopolitical instability, technological disruption, climate change and governance failures are reshaping public administration across the continent. In South Africa specifically, these pressures are visible in service delivery protests, infrastructure collapse, unemployment and institutional capacity constraints.

SAAPAM positions itself as both a knowledge producer and a strategic partner, bridging the gap between academic theory and practical governance. Our conferences bring together academics and practitioners to ensure direct engagement between research and real-world implementation.

We design themes around current policy tensions and ensure participation from actors directly involved in governance challenges. This keeps discussions grounded in lived realities rather than abstract debate.

Beyond conferences, we provide policy dialogues, executive training, and research partnerships that support decision-making in the public sector. We are also increasingly focused on digital governance, artificial intelligence and ethical leadership, recognising that accountability and professionalisation remain central to rebuilding public trust.

How is SAAPAM approaching legacy and knowledge transfer to ensure its conferences deliver measurable impact beyond attendance figures?

We have deliberately moved away from conferences as purely discursive spaces. The expectation today is clear: events must produce tangible outcomes. Each SAAPAM conference now generates structured outputs such as reports, declarations and policy recommendations. These are not symbolic; they are integrated into our annual planning and budgeting cycles to ensure continuity of implementation.

We also prioritise institutional memory. Conference outputs and materials are documented and preserved so that knowledge is not lost during leadership transitions. This ensures continuity and allows future leadership teams to build on existing work rather than starting from zero. The value of the conference lies in its ability to generate actionable insights. Delegates should leave not only with ideas, but with strategies they can implement within their institutions and communities.

How is the African association landscape evolving, and what structural barriers continue to limit its professionalisation and growth?

The African association landscape is gradually shifting from administrative, event-driven models toward more strategic and knowledge-based institutions. However, fragmentation remains a major constraint. Many associations continue to operate in isolation, often duplicating mandates and activities without coordination. This limits efficiency and weakens collective impact.

Financial sustainability is another structural challenge. Overdependence on conferences and external funding leaves many organisations vulnerable to economic and geopolitical shocks. In response, there is a growing push toward professionalisation through training, leadership development and certification-based programmes. The aim



is to build stronger governance systems and a more coherent ecosystem aligned with international standards, while still reflecting African realities.

What is needed for Africa to better integrate into the global association ecosystem and strengthen its position in international knowledge and events networks?

The starting point is collaboration. Africa must first strengthen its own institutional ecosystems and better understand its internal challenges and opportunities before fully engaging globally. This requires more strategic, institutional leadership. Associations can no longer focus solely on events and membership fees. They must ask how they contribute to global knowledge production, policy influence and sector development.

Professionalisation is central to this transition. Associations need to evolve into knowledge-producing institutions that generate research, data and policy insights on a continuous basis. At present, only a limited number in Africa operate at this level. There is also a need to embrace more modern operating models. The future of associations is hybrid, data-driven and increasingly shaped by digital tools and artificial intelligence.

Financial sustainability remains critical. New models must reduce dependency on conferences and external funding while building long-term institutional resilience. Equally important is leadership development, particularly addressing generational renewal so that younger professionals can take active roles in shaping the future of associations across the continent.

Frank Cuypers & the VivaCITY

Cities as Living Systems, Not Products to Be Marketed

At the **CityDNA Conference 2026**, amid an increasingly self-reflective debate on the limits of destination branding, urban strategist and academic **Frank Cuypers** returned to a question that sits at the heart of his work: what happens when cities are treated as systems rather than products?



Founder of **Place Generation** and a central figure behind the **VivaCITY programme** – CityDNA’s long-term mentoring and advisory framework for destination organisations – Cuypers has been working with cities such as Helsinki and Torino to test a different logic of destination development. One that moves away from replication and towards situated understanding.

His position is deliberately uncompromising: “Cities are not products to be marketed, but living systems that require coherence between what they are, what they project, and what they ultimately deliver.” That notion of coherence is not theoretical. It becomes tangible in the way he reads cities: not as brands to be engineered, but as evolving organisms shaped by culture, governance, behaviour and perception.

VivaCITY as a Laboratory of Difference

The VIVACITY programme was originally conceived as a counterpoint to what Cuypers sees as an over-standardised consultancy culture in destination strategy. Rather than applying a universal model, it works with destinations over time to reveal their specific ‘territorial DNA’. For Cuypers, this is precisely where most conventional approaches fail. “The ‘one-size-fits-all’ model of assistance and consultancy is strongly outdated.”

Instead, he argues for a methodology grounded in difference: understanding how each city operates on its own internal logic, and how that logic is either expressed or suppressed in its external projection. This is where Helsinki and Torino become particularly instructive.

Helsinki: A City that Under-Communicates Itself

In Helsinki, Cuypers saw a destination with a rare depth of cultural, creative and intellectual capital, but one that struggles not with substance, but with articulation. The paradox, in his reading, is not absence of identity, but restraint in its communication. “There is a very strong foundation: sustainability thinking, a kind of ‘new world’ mindset, deeply rooted in cultural values around social diversity, equity, and inclusion.”

And yet, he suggests, much of this remains under-expressed in the city’s external narrative. Helsinki, in his analysis, is a city where identity is often assumed rather than actively projected. This creates a structural communication gap: what the city is, and what the outside world perceives it to be, do not fully align. He frames this not as weakness, but as cultural disposition; a form of modesty that limits visibility. “There is a cultural tendency not to talk about it too loudly, because in a Finnish context, self-promotion can be perceived as showing off.”

The consequence is that Helsinki risks being interpreted through a generic northern European lens, rather than through its own distinct cultural and creative ecosystem. Cuypers is particularly struck by the extent to which key cultural assets remain under-integrated into the city narrative, from its contemporary music scene to its historical and intellectual output. In his view, the challenge is not reinvention, but expression: how to make visible what already exists.

Torino: The Underestimated Complexity of Identity

If Helsinki represents under-communication, Torino stands for something more complex: under-recognition of its own depth. Cuypers resists the simplified framing of Italian cities that often dominates international perception. Torino, in particular, he argues, does not conform to the stereotypical image of Italy as expressive, loud and visually saturated.

Instead, it carries a distinct cultural tone: restrained, industrial, alpine-influenced, and historically layered. “Culturally, there is a certain restraint, a sense of elegance and understatement.” Yet the paradox is that this very distinctiveness is often hidden beneath an internalised narrative of secondary status within Italy.

Torino, he suggests, frequently positions itself as “not Florence, not Rome, not Venice”, rather than as a city with its own autonomous identity. This self-positioning obscures a far richer reality. “If you look objectively at the assets they have... it is remarkable.” He points to the density of cultural,

industrial and intellectual heritage: from major museums and architectural collections to the broader ecosystem of industrial innovation and design. Yet much of this is fragmented in perception, rather than consolidated into a coherent identity narrative.

The issue is not lack of material, but lack of confidence in its articulation. Cuypers goes further, suggesting that Torino's surrounding ecosystem – from Barolo wine regions to industrial legacies like Olivetti or Lavazza – forms part of a wider territorial identity that is not yet fully integrated into how the city understands itself. "Almost like the city is the spider on this vast web."

Reframing Who Cities Are for

Beyond the specific destination cases, Cuypers' broader argument returns consistently to a more fundamental redefinition of what cities actually are in strategic terms. For him, the starting point is not branding, but ownership, and more precisely, the question of who a city ultimately belongs to. "Fundamentally, who owns the name and identity of a city? It is the people who live there." This perspective shifts the entire logic of placemaking away from institutional authorship and towards lived legitimacy. Cities, in this reading, cannot be externally authored without internal consent. Any attempt to bypass that process risks creating narratives that are visually coherent but socially fragile.

From this perspective, placemaking becomes less about image construction and more about alignment between

governance, lived experience and communication. Cuypers is explicit that this alignment is often missing, particularly in systems where tourism, urban policy and political decision-making operate in parallel rather than in integration. "What is still needed is a clearer understanding that the value of tourism is no longer just about attracting visitors through promotion. It is about managing a place, and that must be done together with the city as a whole."

Towards Better Placemaking Strategies

This shift also reframes the role of data, measurement and evidence. Rather than treating cities as systems to be optimised through indicators alone, Cuypers warns against reducing place value to quantifiable outputs detached from lived reality. The increasing influence of algorithmic perception, he suggests, "risks reshaping how cities are understood externally in ways that are not always grounded in first-hand experience."

At the same time, he emphasises that strategy must remain attuned to the temporal reality of political cycles, institutional constraints and moments of opportunity that are often short-lived. In this context, destination strategy becomes less about long-term abstraction and more about navigating complexity in real time, while still preserving coherence of intent. Ultimately, Cuypers returns to a simple but demanding proposition: "Cities only function as meaningful constructs when identity, governance and communication operate in alignment rather than in isolation. The strongest city brand is ultimately its residents."



Maritz and the New Incentive Economy

Why Live Experiences Still Define Value!

Incentive travel is quietly reasserting itself as one of the most powerful tools of engagement in a rapidly fragmenting world. A recent SITE-Maritz study points to a renewed appetite for live experiences, particularly among younger generations entering the workforce, where trust and authenticity are shaped by direct, in-person interaction. At a time when information is abundant but credibility is harder to secure, physical presence is regaining strategic value. The industry itself is also refining its language, fluctuating from face-to-face meetings to in-person experiences, an evolution that reflects deeper behavioural and cultural change.

As these forces converge, **Maritz** continues to explore how behavioural science, technology and global uncertainty are reshaping the design and purpose of business events. At **IMEX Frankfurt 2026**, **Jim Russell, Global Head of Business Events Solutions**, told us how incentive strategy, destination choice and live engagement are being redefined under pressure from economic constraints and geopolitical volatility.



A conversation with the HQ Magazine Manager, Manuel Fernandes

The SITE-Maritz research highlights renewed demand for incentive travel, particularly among younger generations. What is driving this resurgence in live, in-person experiences?

There was a widespread assumption that younger, digitally native generations would naturally prefer virtual interaction over live experiences. However, the research points in a different direction. What we are hearing is that trust is strengthened when information comes directly from another person. In a world shaped by AI-generated content, digital manipulation and constant information overload, authenticity has become critical. People want first-hand interaction and real-world engagement, where credibility is established through presence instead of mediation, and where relationships are formed in a more tangible and human way.

This is also reflected in broader industry research. In a study developed by the **U.S. Travel Association**, we have seen a subtle but important shift in language from face-to-face meetings to in-person experiences. Technology allows us to replicate face-to-face interaction virtually, but it is not the same as physical presence. That distinction reinforces the value of live events as a foundation for trust, engagement and meaningful relationships that endure beyond the moment itself.

How are these behavioural traits influencing the design of business events and incentive programmes?

Many of the qualities younger generations are asking for – trust, authenticity, flexibility and connection – are not generationally exclusive. They reflect what most people value, regardless of age, particularly in a complex and fragmented communication environment. Participants now expect greater autonomy: the ability to navigate experiences on one's own terms, build one-to-one relationships, and engage in ways that feel more personal and relevant, rather than being directed through a rigid or overly prescriptive programme structure that limits interaction.

At the same time, experiential learning remains critical to effective design. People retain significantly more when they actively participate. Whether interacting with a product, solving a challenge, or building something collaboratively, the most effective experiences combine learning with participation. This is what creates deeper engagement, stronger relationships and memory that extends well beyond the event itself, turning attendance into something far more significant and lasting. Importantly, this shift is not about replacing traditional formats, but about evolving them and ensuring that live experiences are intentionally designed with behavioural outcomes in mind, not just content delivery or logistics.

Is geopolitical instability changing the value or structure of business events?

Geopolitical developments are not reducing demand for meetings and incentives; they are primarily moving from where they take place and how global flows are redistributed. We are seeing temporary relocations of programmes; for example, from parts of the Middle East to Western Europe, while regions such as Australia are also benefiting from redistributed activity as organisations reassess destinations based on evolving risk perceptions and operational feasibility.

However, these transformations remain largely cyclical. Once conditions stabilise, programmes tend to return to their original destinations over time. The result, therefore, is not a decline in business events, but a short-term rebalancing of geography in response to external uncertainty. The underlying demand for meetings, incentives and congresses remains fundamentally intact, and demonstrates resilience across markets.

In destination marketing, what currently moves the needle in how clients choose destinations?

Destinations now have a much more sophisticated understanding of client objectives. There is a deeper recognition that programmes serve different strategic purposes, whether incentive, reward, or broader business performance and cultural objectives. What matters is not only the destination itself, but how effectively it aligns with those objectives in practice. The most successful destinations are those that can translate their unique identity, culture and infrastructure into relevant outcomes for specific client needs, rather than relying solely on physical assets or geographic appeal.

Our role sits within that ecosystem as an interpreter and connector. We translate what destinations offer into what clients actually need, working closely with destination marketing organisations and stakeholders on both sides of the equation to ensure alignment of intent and experience. Ultimately, destination selection is driven less by geography or facilities alone, and more by the ability to align intent, experience and business purpose in a coherent and compelling way.

What are the biggest challenges in balancing client expectations with rising costs?

Clients are currently operating under flat or reduced budgets, while travel, accommodation and destination costs keep rising across global markets. This creates a structural imbalance between expectation and economic reality that is increasingly difficult to ignore. As a result, organisations are responding pragmatically by, shifting from five-star to four-star environments, or reducing programme duration from three days to two, while maintaining integrity, emotional impact and overall quality. This is not being driven by reduced appetite. Demand for meetings, incentives and live events remains strong and consistent, but organisations are reconfiguring how they achieve outcomes within tighter financial parameters and more complex approval environments.

For Maritz, the priority is to ensure that value and strategic intent are preserved, even when format, destination or duration changes. Looking ahead, there is cautious optimism that conditions will stabilise and that budgets will gradually recover from 2026 onwards, leading to a more balanced and predictable operating environment. A key dimension of this evolving landscape is internal advocacy. Meeting planners are increasingly required to justify investment internally and demonstrate clear return on experience and return on investment in order to secure support at senior leadership and board level.

What is the biggest threat to the continued growth of the industry?

The most significant challenge facing the industry is internal: the ability to clearly, consistently and convincingly articulate its value. If the sector fails to communicate its impact effectively, it limits its own potential for growth, recognition and investment. This is also reflected in wider policy environments, from visa accessibility and mobility frameworks to levels of institutional support for business travel and international exchange.

External shocks such as pandemics or geopolitical crises will always exist, but they sit outside the normal operating conditions of the industry and affect global systems far beyond meetings and events alone. The more immediate and controllable risk lies in under-communicating the economic, strategic and behavioural value already created by meetings, incentives and live experiences. The industry's future strength depends not only on what it delivers operationally, but on how effectively it is able to demonstrate its relevance to business performance, human behaviour and global economic activity at large.





Sustainable Event Goals

Turning Global Ambition into Practical Action for Business Events

The global business events industry has no shortage of ambition when it comes to sustainability. Organisations across the sector are committing to reducing environmental impact and creating positive social and economic value.

What the industry has needed is a shared way to translate sustainability goals into practical decisions across the event lifecycle. That is where the **Sustainable Event Goals (SEGs)** come in. Launched at **IMEX Frankfurt 2026**, the SEGs provide a practical, industry-aligned framework designed to help organisers, suppliers, destinations and partners embed sustainability into everyday event decisions.

Article kindly provided by Kenes Group

A Practical Framework for Action

The SEGs are 13 interlinked goals designed to minimise negative environmental and social impacts while promoting positive economic outcomes. They translate the UN Sustainable Development Goals into clear, event-specific guidance for the business events ecosystem.

They are not a certification or a replacement for existing frameworks. Instead, they act as a shared language and practical tool that complements existing standards and can be integrated into current sustainability strategies without duplication.

For an industry operating across diverse markets and stakeholder expectations, this common structure provides clarity and direction where it is most needed.

Why the SEGs Matter Now

The framework responds to a clear challenge across the industry. While sustainability commitments are growing, alignment and execution remain inconsistent.

Sustainability is still often treated as an additional consideration rather than a core part of planning. The SEGs aim to change that by supporting decisions where impact is defined, including travel and logistics, venue selection, food and beverage, supplier engagement and community impact.

By embedding sustainability into these decisions, the SEGs help organisations move from intention to consistent, credible action.

A Balanced Approach to Sustainability

The SEGs are structured around three interdependent pillars: Environmental, Social, and Economic Governance.

The Environmental pillar focuses on reducing the ecological footprint of events through areas such as energy use, travel, food and resource management. The Social pillar addresses inclusivity, wellbeing, collaboration and community engagement. The Economic Governance pillar emphasises local impact, transparency, partnerships and innovation.

Together, these pillars reflect a holistic understanding of sustainability, where environmental, social and economic considerations are interconnected.

From Global Goals to Event Decisions

One of the key strengths of the SEGs is their ability to connect global sustainability priorities with practical event actions.

Every decision, from choosing a destination to selecting suppliers or designing participant experiences, becomes part of a broader, shared framework. This ensures that sustainability is considered early and consistently throughout the planning process, rather than addressed at the end.

A Collective Industry Effort

The SEGs were developed following **Destination Canada's Business Events Sustainability Roundtable** in Montréal in April 2025, where industry leaders identified the need for greater alignment and practical implementation.

They are the result of a global, volunteer-led, cross-sector collaboration and are endorsed by organisations including **Destination Canada, PCMA, Convene 4 Climate, the Events Industry Council (EIC), Kenes Group** and **Amex GBT Meetings & Events**.

Importantly, the SEGs are designed as a neutral and widely adoptable framework that supports the industry as a whole.

Kenex Group Supporting Practical Implementation

For Kenes Group, supporting the SEGs reflects a broader commitment to advancing practical sustainability in events. As **Ori Lahav, CEO of Kenes Group**, noted: "Sustainability only delivers real impact when it is embedded into everyday decisions. The Sustainable Event Goals respond to a clear

need within our industry for greater alignment and practical direction, helping organisations move from ambition to action in a consistent and credible way."

This perspective aligns with the core purpose of the SEGs: making sustainability actionable and relevant at every stage of event planning.

From Ambition to Action

With the Sustainable Event Goals now established through this global, cross-sector collaboration, the focus shifts from framework development to implementation. The Events Industry Council is now advancing the next phase of this work, as part of the **EIC Centre for Sustainability and Social Impact**, translating the SEGs into practical tools, resources and pathways that help organisations embed sustainability into everyday decision-making.

Working alongside industry partners and the founding partners, EIC will develop implementation guidance and align the SEGs with existing initiatives, including the **EIC Sustainable Event Standards**, ensuring they serve as a practical catalyst for action across the full event lifecycle. This next phase is designed to help organisations of every size and sector move from aspiration to measurable, scalable impact through the creation of pathways.

"The introduction of the Sustainable Event Goals represents an important step forward for our industry," said **Amy Calvert, EIC President and CEO**. "For many years, organisations have been navigating a complex landscape of frameworks and expectations. The SEGs provide a shared foundation, one that helps translate global sustainability priorities into practical, everyday decisions, while aligning with established standards and practices."



CityDNA Summer School

Developing the Next Generation of Place Leaders

As the CityDNA Summer School prepares to celebrate its **40th edition** in **Dijon**, **Bénédicte Lack**, **Communication & PR Manager** at **City Destinations Alliance**, reflects on one of the most pressing challenges facing destinations today: developing the next generation of leaders. In this article, she explores why future place leaders will need more than technical expertise, highlighting the importance of collaboration, systems thinking and cross-sector understanding in a destination ecosystem where challenges, stakeholders and priorities are more interconnected than ever.

When we talk about destination development, discussions often focus on strategy, governance, sustainability, investment or innovation. Yet one critical question receives far less attention: how do we prepare the people who will be responsible for delivering these ambitions?

The challenges facing destinations today are becoming increasingly interconnected. Sustainability can no longer be separated from economic development. Visitor experience cannot be considered independently from resident wellbeing. Technological innovation, talent attraction, accessibility and place reputation all influence one another.

As a result, destination leadership is changing. The next generation of leaders will not succeed because they are experts in a single discipline. They will succeed because they understand how different parts of the destination ecosystem interact and how to bring diverse stakeholders together around shared objectives.

This shift is particularly visible within the business events sector. Convention bureaux, destination management organisations, venues, hotels, PCOs, associations and local authorities all play a role in shaping the visitor economy. Yet these stakeholders often operate within their own professional environments, developing expertise within their specific field while having limited exposure to the challenges faced by others.

The consequence is a familiar one: collaboration becomes more difficult precisely when it is needed most. Developing future leaders therefore requires more than technical training. It requires creating opportunities for professionals

to understand different perspectives, challenge assumptions and develop a broader understanding of how destinations function as interconnected systems.

This is one reason why initiatives such as the **CityDNA Summer School** have remained relevant for nearly four decades.

The programme, which will celebrate its **40th edition** in **Dijon** on August 24-28, 2026, brings together newcomers from convention bureaux, destination organisations, congress centres, hotels, airlines, DMCs, PCOs and meeting planning organisations. Rather than focusing on a single area of expertise, participants are exposed to the full spectrum of stakeholders that shape the business events ecosystem. Through discussions on sustainability, stakeholder management, legacy, inclusivity, technology, association congresses and corporate events, they are encouraged to think beyond their immediate role and understand the wider context in which destinations operate.

This approach reflects a broader reality facing cities across Europe. The ability to attract events, visitors, talent and investment increasingly depends on collaboration between multiple actors. No single organisation can deliver destination success alone.

Perhaps this is the most valuable lesson of all. The future of destination development will not be determined solely by infrastructure, funding or technology. It will depend on people: their ability to build relationships, connect perspectives and lead across organisational boundaries.

In that sense, developing future place leaders may be one of the most important investments a destination can make.



The **Future** Has Four Versions

A Practical Guide to Scenario Planning

Predicting the future is always an art. In uncertain times, it is even harder. Next to the 'classics' (SWOT, SMART business goals, etc.), scenario planning may be needed. It is simpler than it seems and a useful way to become more future-ready.



Author: **Sven Bossu, CEO, AIPC**

It is a statement you read in the **International Monetary Fund** reports, Foreign Affairs and even the weekend edition of my local newspaper: “we are living in a new reality and are not sure where it is going.” The level of unpredictability is much higher than ten years ago. But this is nothing new. In 1977, Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith published *The Age of Uncertainty*. What is different is the speed of change and the number of societal areas affected.

That makes planning more difficult. Imagine you are the CEO of a convention centre. Like many CEOs, you are confronted with inflation, rising interest rates, disrupted supply chains, difficulties finding the right talent (and defining what the ‘right’ talent would look like), changing customer behaviour, etc. There seems to be a new surprise every day, most of it outside the CEO’s control. So, how do you plan?

This is where scenario planning comes in. It recognises that there are several possible futures, some of which depend on things outside our control. The **World Economic Forum** published a useful report in February 2025 on why scenario planning helps us move from prediction to foresight. How do you apply it as a convention centre CEO? First, arrange a one-day meeting with your senior management team. Ask them to put their mobile phones on the table. The first person to remove theirs buys dinner, including drinks. Then, take the team through eight steps.

First, define the focus question. What will drive demand for our convention centre in the next three to seven years? How should we adapt our product? What type of business should we be aiming for? For example, **HUNGEXPO** in Budapest has a thriving movie business alongside its traditional event business. Secondly, once the focus question is defined, identify the key drivers. Put differently: what can change? That could be anything from new competition to technology and the other challenges mentioned above.

The third step is to pick two critical uncertainties: factors with both high impact and high uncertainty. For a convention centre, those could be demand (high vs low) and event type (traditional vs experience-driven and multi-use). This is critical because it provides the axes for a 2x2 matrix.

Next, build four scenarios using the matrix. One could be high demand plus traditional events, where the focus is on scale, logistics and capacity. Another could be high demand plus experience-first, with clients looking for a ‘wow’ moment and investment focused on flexible space, staging and premium food services.

Once the scenarios are built, define the key actions for each one. With a little luck, you will identify ‘no-regret moves’, actions needed in every scenario. Increased space flexibility could be one. Improving sales intelligence could be another.

Step seven is to create traffic lights. None of the four scenarios will become 100% reality, but you need indicators to move right, left or straight ahead. Average lead time, corporate travel policies and travel costs could all serve as traffic lights. Finally, create a decision roadmap, if the lights point one way, action needs to follow.

Is this easy? Of course not. But these steps can be covered in one day if everyone is engaged and focused. That will enable your organisation to shift from forecasting to strategic vision.

AIPC

Global Perspectives Start with Local Stories

From association leadership to destination strategy, *HQ* examines how organisations, cities and regions contribute to the development of the meetings industry.

This edition brings together perspectives from Africa, Asia, Latin America, Oceanic Pacific and Europe.

Looking for further destination insights?

We recently took a closer look at Singapore, Australia and Sabah, examining the knowledge networks, research strengths and partnerships that support their appeal for international meetings.



Download the reports and subscribe to receive future destination insights from HQ.





Kigali Convention Centre © Rwanda Convention Bureau

Kigali Joins BestCities as Africa's Meetings Profile Rises

Kigali, Rwanda, has joined **BestCities Global Alliance** as its 14th member and the alliance's second African destination. The new membership reflects the growing visibility of Rwanda and other African destinations in the international association meetings sector, supported by stronger rankings, major congress wins and recognition from global industry organisations.

Located in East-Central Africa, Kigali has strengthened its position within the international association meetings sector over the past decade. The city ranks second in Africa for international association meetings in the **ICCA** rankings and has held that position for six consecutive years. Rwanda also ranked third among African countries in the latest **ICCA GlobeWatch** results, reflecting the country's growing role in the continental meetings market.

The city's rise has been supported by continued investment in infrastructure and accessibility. **Kigali Convention Centre** can accommodate up to 5,000 delegates, while **BK Arena** hosts events for more than 10,000 attendees. The city offers more than 10,000 hotel rooms and benefits from international air connections through Kigali International Airport, located close to its main conference venues. Rwanda's visa-on-arrival policy for all nationalities has further supported its attractiveness for international events.

Kigali's international profile received a further boost with its successful bid to host the **66th ICCA Congress** in October 2027. The event will return to Africa for the first time in more than two decades, bringing one of the meetings industry's most influential congresses to the continent. Kigali's selection reflects its convention infrastructure, operational capacity and growing experience in hosting international association events.

"We are pleased to join BestCities Global Alliance, a membership that reflects Kigali's commitment to strengthening its position

within the global meetings industry," said **Janet Karemera, Chief Executive Officer of Rwanda Convention Bureau**. "Kigali has built strong capacity to host international meetings and events, supported by its modern infrastructure and experience in delivering major conferences. Through the alliance, we aim to exchange expertise and strengthen Kigali's international profile."

Kigali has proven experience in hosting large-scale events. In 2023, the city welcomed the **Women Deliver** Conference, the first edition of the event ever held in Africa. More than 6,300 participants attended in person, while over 200,000 joined online through the conference's virtual platforms. The conference brought African perspectives into global discussions on gender equality and development while reinforcing Kigali's position as a host destination.

Kigali's membership of BestCities Global Alliance consolidates the network's presence in Africa and adds a destination with a growing international congress profile. Widely recognised as one of Africa's cleanest and safest cities, Kigali also benefits from a compact layout that allows delegates to move easily between hotels, venues and the city centre. **Nyandungu Eco Park**, local coffee experiences and the capital's culinary scene can be incorporated into the congress programme, while **Volcanoes National Park** and Lake Kivu offer options for pre- and post-congress travel linked to Rwanda's landscapes, conservation work and local communities.



Connected by Purpose

How Cape Town Is Designing the Future of Meetings in Africa

When the **BestCities Global Forum** arrives in Cape Town in 2027, it will mark more than a change of host city. Following Guadalajara and preceding the Forum's future journey to Dubai, the event represents another chapter in an ongoing global conversation about how meetings can create meaningful and lasting impact.

Held under the theme **Connected by Purpose: Global Perspectives, Shared Values**, the Global Forum 2027 speaks directly to one of the defining questions facing the meetings industry today: how can events create impact that extends beyond the conference hall and contributes to wider economic, social and community outcomes?

For Cape Town, the opportunity arrives at a particularly significant moment. "Hosting the 2027 BestCities Global Forum represents a significant milestone in Cape Town's international evolution," says **Adriaan Fourie, Head of Cape Town & Western Cape Convention Bureau**. "It provides an opportunity to showcase not only our destination, but also the role that business events can play in advancing knowledge, collaboration and meaningful impact."

The timing could hardly be more fitting. Having retained its position as Africa's leading convention destination in the **ICCA 2025 rankings**, Cape Town is being recognised for the intellectual capital that underpins its meetings industry, from world-class universities and research institutions to the expertise driving some of the continent's most dynamic sectors.

Beyond Tourism

For decades, Cape Town's global reputation has been shaped by its extraordinary landscapes, rich cultural diversity and world-renowned visitor experiences. Yet increasingly, the city is positioning itself around another defining strength: knowledge. "The goal is not to replace our tourism appeal, but to build upon it," says Fourie. "The city's unique ability to combine exceptional visitor experiences with academic excellence, innovation and industry expertise is what sets it apart."

Cape Town is home to internationally respected universities and research institutions, including the **University of Cape Town**, **Stellenbosch University**, the **University of the Western Cape** and the **Cape Peninsula University of Technology**. Together, they contribute to globally relevant research and innovation across disciplines ranging from healthcare and life sciences to engineering, sustainability and social development.

Beyond academia, the city has developed expertise across a number of high-growth sectors, including technology and digital innovation, financial services, renewable energy, advanced manufacturing, healthcare and the ocean economy. These sectors are not only driving economic growth but are also harnessing sources of expertise and thought leadership on issues of global importance for communities at large.

Business events have become a powerful mechanism for connecting these local strengths with international networks, serving as platforms for collaboration, investment, research partnerships and knowledge exchange. As Fourie puts it, "This is how the city continues to evolve from a place people visit to a place where people come to learn, connect, and shape the future."

Turning Legacy into Action

If the BestCities Global Forum has a defining ambition, it is to demonstrate that legacy is something that must be intentionally designed into it from the beginning. "The true success of an event lies in the lasting benefits it creates for people, communities and sectors long after delegates have returned home," says Fourie. "Association events have mostly created value beyond the meeting itself; the difference today is that this impact is increasingly being measured, tracked and intentionally embedded into event strategies."

That philosophy sits at the heart of Cape Town's plans for the Forum, whose legacy programme is being built around four interconnected pillars: Knowledge Exchange, Sustainability, Education and Culture. Knowledge Exchange focuses on creating opportunities for local professionals, researchers, entrepreneurs and emerging leaders to engage with international expertise. The objective is not simply to host conversations, but to ensure knowledge remains within the destination and contributes to future growth and innovation. A dedicated post-Forum **Community Impact Workshop** is expected to identify opportunities for ongoing collaboration and long-term value creation.





Sustainability extends beyond environmental responsibility to encompass broader social outcomes. One example is the **Waste to Wonder** initiative, which seeks to repurpose materials used during events into practical community assets, transforming temporary event infrastructure into resources with lasting local benefit. The Education pillar is perhaps best illustrated through support for the **Goalso Early Childhood Development Centre** in Heideveld. Rather than viewing education as a broad aspiration, the initiative focuses on tangible interventions that support learning opportunities and community development at grassroots level.

Culture, meanwhile, occupies a particularly important place within the legacy framework. Rather than being treated as a destination showcase, it is being positioned as a tool for connection, understanding and dialogue. The programme will draw on African traditions of storytelling, collective problem-solving and community engagement, creating opportunities for delegates to engage more deeply with the people, perspectives and lived experiences that shape the destination.

Some of the Forum's cultural and community initiatives will be delivered in partnership with organisations such as **Uthando South Africa**, whose work connects visitors with locally led social and development projects across the city. Together, these initiatives reflect a wider ambition. "Destinations, associations and event organisers are now placing greater emphasis on identifying, measuring and maximising outcomes to ensure that benefits are broader, more inclusive and longer lasting," says Fourie.

Africa's Moment

Cape Town's continued success within the ICCA rankings also tells a larger story about Africa's evolving role within

the global meetings landscape. "This reflects the growing recognition of Africa as a credible, competitive and influential player within the global meetings industry," says Fourie. "In many ways, Cape Town's success is also Africa's success."

For many years, international perceptions of Africa were shaped by limited exposure and outdated assumptions. Yet today, the continent is rising as a source of innovation, expertise, entrepreneurship and research leadership. Africa is home to some of the world's fastest-growing economies, rapidly expanding urban centres, dynamic entrepreneurial ecosystems and a generation of young innovators helping shape solutions to global challenges. These developments are creating new opportunities for international associations seeking fresh perspectives, new partnerships and emerging centres of expertise.

"International associations are increasingly looking to the continent not only as a host region, but as a source of knowledge, innovation, expertise and solutions," says Fourie. For destinations such as Cape Town, this creates both an opportunity and a responsibility. Hosting international meetings is no longer just about bringing delegates to Africa, but to ensure African voices, experiences and expertise contribute meaningfully to global conversations.

Few destinations are better positioned to facilitate those exchanges. Through conferences focused on healthcare, sustainability, astronomy, climate action and scientific research, Cape Town has become a meeting point between local expertise and global dialogue. Fourie believes the continent's role in shaping future agendas will only continue to grow. "Africa is not waiting for a seat at the table," he says. "It is helping to set the agenda on issues that matter to the future of our world."



Business Events Take on a New Role in Angola's Economic Development Plans

The launch of the **Angola Convention Bureau (ACB)** in May 2026 introduced a new player to Africa's meetings industry. Officially inaugurated in Luanda and presented to international stakeholders during **IMEX Frankfurt** weeks later, the bureau reflects a growing focus on business events within the country's development plans. New convention infrastructure, expanded international air connectivity and a calendar of sector-focused forums are creating the foundations for a more coordinated meetings industry.

Angola Vision 2050 and the **National Development Plan 2023-2027** provide the framework behind that shift. Economic diversification is a central objective of both programmes, with tourism, infrastructure, logistics, agriculture and industry identified as priority sectors for future growth. Angola's development plans place particular emphasis on expanding sectors beyond the oil economy, positioning tourism as a long-term driver of investment, employment and international engagement. Business events support those ambitions by creating opportunities for investment, knowledge exchange and connections between international and local stakeholders across multiple sectors.

International business travel already plays an important role in Angola's visitor economy. More than 223,000 international visitors travelled to the country in 2025, including almost 60,000 business travellers. Business arrivals exceeded leisure arrivals during the same period, reflecting Angola's position as a destination for investment, commerce, government relations and sector-specific activity.

The **Angola-EU Lobito Corridor Business Forum** illustrates how those connections are developing. The 2026 edition focused on agriculture, agro-industry, transport and logistics projects linked to the Lobito Corridor, a strategic route connecting Angola's Atlantic coast with Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Government institutions, investors, development organisations and private-sector stakeholders participated in discussions aimed at accelerating projects and mobilising financing across the corridor.

The Lobito Corridor has become a focal point for discussions around regional integration, critical minerals, agricultural production and supply chains connecting Southern Africa with international markets. Growing investment activity is also creating demand for forums, business meetings and sector-specific events involving policymakers, financiers, logistics operators and industry experts.

Several of Angola's priority sectors already provide a foundation for future congresses and industry events.

Mining occupies a prominent position through the **Angolan International Mining Conference**, which has developed into a platform for discussions around critical minerals, investment and supply chains linked to the global energy transition. Energy remains a major contributor to the economy while renewable generation, transmission infrastructure and energy security attract growing attention from investors and policymakers.

Agriculture and agro-industry feature prominently within diversification plans, creating opportunities for technical meetings focused on food production, processing, agritech and regional value chains. Infrastructure and logistics continue generating international interest through port developments, transport corridors and urban development projects. Tourism investment has emerged as another area of focus, highlighted by the **Global Tourism Forum Angola Investment Summit** held in Luanda in June 2026.

The creation of ACB provides an institutional framework for connecting those sectors with congresses, corporate meetings and international events. Established through a national MICE strategy approved by presidential decree, the bureau coordinates destination promotion, bid development and industry collaboration across government agencies, convention facilities, hotels, airlines and event suppliers.

The structure reflects a broader effort to align business events with national development priorities. Government





View of the Luanda Convention Palace
© AI-generated image

institutions provide policy direction and infrastructure investment, while industry partners contribute destination representation, market development and event expertise. **Kleber Group**, which established operations in Luanda in 2025, manages the bureau's international representation and day-to-day activities.

One of the most significant developments supporting that ambition is the **Lundo Project** on the Chicala peninsula. At the heart of the development, the **Luanda Convention Palace** is expected to open towards the end of 2026 with capacity for approximately 3,000 delegates. Plans include exhibition facilities, seminar rooms and dedicated spaces for executive, corporate and diplomatic meetings. The **Executive Oval Room** has been designed to accommodate up to 375 participants and will feature multilingual support and advanced conference technology.

The project is transforming part of Luanda's waterfront through new hospitality, residential and commercial developments. At its centre, the convention palace will anchor a district designed to support

international conferences, exhibitions and investment events, complemented by accommodation, cultural attractions, entertainment options and services for delegates and organisers.

"Angola's rapid infrastructure development is laying the groundwork to compete in the global MICE market. Its status as an emerging destination allows it to offer innovative and uncrowded proposals, increasingly sought after by organisers and companies. Angola is not simply investing in venues; we are creating an ecosystem that connects business events with investment, knowledge exchange and economic development. The Angola Convention Bureau provides the platform to bring those opportunities together," says **Julia Kleber**, CEO at **Kleber Group**.

Beyond destination promotion, the bureau's role is to support conference attraction, bid development and long-term industry growth across Angola's wider business events ecosystem. Accessibility has also expanded through the **Dr. António Agostinho Neto International Airport**. Designed for up to 15 million passengers annually, the facility has become Angola's principal international gateway. Lufthansa, Emirates, Qatar Airways and Ethiopian Airlines are among the carriers strengthening connections between Luanda, Europe, the Middle East and other African markets.

The airport also anchors plans for an Airport City incorporating hotels, offices and logistics facilities aimed at corporate travellers, investors and international business activity. Together with Luanda's growing meetings infrastructure, it reinforces the city's role as a meeting point for organisations operating across Southern Africa and the Atlantic region.

Current meetings activity remains centred around facilities such as the **Talatona Convention Centre**, which regularly hosts regional conferences, government gatherings and business forums. Additional capacity from the Luanda Convention Palace will expand the destination's ability to accommodate larger congresses, exhibitions and international events while creating opportunities to attract new sectors and meeting formats.

ACB's long-term role includes conference attraction, sector partnerships and the development of recurring event programmes. Convention infrastructure, international air connectivity, investment forums and sector expertise are already in place. The bureau's creation marks a coordinated approach to developing Angola's meetings industry around those existing strengths.



Curoca Hills. © Ministry of Tourism of Angola,
Kleber Group Credit: Robert Haidinger



The **IMPACT** Effect

Building a Destination Ecosystem in Bangkok

Bangkok's position as a regional MICE hub has long rested on scale, connectivity and hospitality infrastructure. Yet, within Muang Thong Thani, one of Thailand's leading event districts, the **IMPACT Arena, Exhibition and Convention Center** is advancing a more structural argument: that large-scale venues are no longer only hosts of economic activity, but active players shaping how cities operate, consume resources and engage communities.

At the heart of IMPACT's strategy is a redefinition of sustainability. Instead of treating it as a parallel programme, IMPACT embeds it directly into its daily operations, from procurement and food systems to waste management and supplier coordination. "Sustainability at IMPACT is not implemented as a standalone programme; it is embedded into our daily operations and decision-making processes," says the **Chief Executive Officer of IMPACT Exhibition Management Co., Ltd., Paul Kanjanapas**. "For a venue that hosts millions of visitors annually and hundreds of events of varying scales, even small operational changes can create significant cumulative impact."

This operational framing extends across the venue's food and beverage strategy. Local sourcing has become a procurement principle, not merely an aspiration, while plant-based menus are increasingly integrated into event catering. Organic waste is processed and converted into fertiliser used within the precinct itself, closing loops that traditionally fall outside the venue boundary. "Sustainability requires continuous monitoring, measurement, and improvement," Kanjanapas adds. "Rather than adding complexity, it has helped us create a more efficient, resilient and responsible business model."

Moving from isolated initiatives to integrated systems is central to IMPACT's positioning. It also reflects a broader redefinition of what 'sustainability' means in the context of high-volume event infrastructure, where scale amplifies both impact and opportunity. A key challenge, however, lies in organisational culture. Embedding sustainability requires alignment across departments that were historically optimised for cost, speed and delivery, with environmental performance playing a secondary role. "The greatest challenge is cultural transformation," Kanjanapas says. "Sustainability cannot be driven solely by a dedicated

ESG team; it must become part of the mindset of every department, from procurement and engineering to catering and event operations."

He notes that this shift requires procurement frameworks that take more than cost into account. Environmental impact, sourcing practices and long-term efficiency are now part of decision-making criteria. Event planning, similarly, must integrate waste and resource considerations from the outset, avoiding costly adjustments later in the process. "Operational discipline means treating sustainability with the same rigor as safety, quality and financial performance," he adds. "For large venues like ours, the opportunity is to become platforms that connect these stakeholders and create sustainable ecosystems that extend far beyond the boundaries of the venue itself."

The same principles guide not only venue operations, but also relationships with suppliers, producers and local communities. IMPACT increasingly frames sustainability not as a collection of initiatives but as a connected network spanning food production, logistics, energy, landscaping and community engagement. "We view sustainability as an ecosystem rather than a checklist," Kanjanapas explains. "Food sourcing, catering operations, waste management, landscaping, energy efficiency and community engagement are interconnected components of a larger system."

Within this logic, localisation becomes both environmental and economic strategy. By working with nearby suppliers and institutions, IMPACT reduces transport emissions while strengthening regional supply chains and community value creation. "The future of sustainable venues will depend increasingly on their ability to collaborate with local suppliers, communities, educational institutions and

technology partners,” he says. “Localisation not only reduces environmental impact but also strengthens economic resilience and social value creation.”

The Next Layer of IMPACT in Muang Thong Thani

A small number of institutional partnerships reinforce this direction. IMPACT has secured multiple certifications under **Thailand’s MICE Venue Standards (TMVS and TMVS Plus)**, **ASEAN MICE Venue Standards (AMVS)**, and **Thailand Sustainable Event Management Standard (TSEMS)**, thereby aligning its operations within formalised regional frameworks for performance and accountability. It has also been ranked among the top five ASEAN venues under AMVS recognition, reinforcing its market proposition.

Alongside its operational efforts, IMPACT is also reshaping the spatial logic of its district. The transformation of the former Eastin Lakeside Hotel into **The Lake Club** signals the emergence of mixed-use, continuously active environments within Muang Thong Thani. “The Lake Club represents our vision of transforming Muang Thong Thani into a vibrant destination that extends beyond exhibitions and conventions,” says Kanjanapas. “We wanted to create a space that remains relevant and engaging every day of the year for residents, visitors, businesses and the wider community.”

Combining hospitality, culture, retail and workspaces, the project is designed to remain active year-round, not just during events. As infrastructure connectivity in the area improves, its role is expected to deepen as a node within a broader urban structure. The Lake Club is also envisioned as a ‘business laboratory,’ providing a real-world setting to test new formats before rolling them out more broadly. This includes culinary concepts, cultural programming and experiential formats developed in real operational conditions. “This approach reflects a wider trend in the events and entertainment industry,” Kanjanapas notes. “Consumer expectations are evolving rapidly, and successful organisations must become more agile, innovative and data-driven.”

He emphasises that this model allows for iterative development, reducing the distance between idea and implementation. It also positions the venue as an experimental layer within a larger framework system. Convention infrastructure itself is also being redefined. Where venues were once activated primarily during events, IMPACT increasingly sees them as components of a continuous urban fabric. “Convention centres can no longer operate as isolated facilities that activate only during events,” Kanjanapas says. “The most successful destinations of the future will be those that integrate business, lifestyle, entertainment, culture and community engagement into a cohesive ecosystem.”

A separate partnership with **Bangkok University** reinforces this trajectory, creating pathways for education, training and workforce development aligned with evolving industry needs. In parallel, collaboration with **Nakhon Pak Kret Municipality** on smart city development reflects a broader public-private alignment around urban planning, data integration and quality of life improvements within Muang Thong Thani. These initiatives point towards a model where MICE infrastructure is not only economic but also civic, contributing to long-term urban development and governance structures.

Looking ahead, Kanjanapas sees Asia’s MICE sector moving towards convergence across sustainability, technology and experiential design. “Future leadership will not be determined solely by venue size or infrastructure,” he says. “Success will increasingly depend on the ability to create integrated destination experiences, demonstrate sustainability leadership, embrace technological innovation, and build strong international networks.” Thailand’s competitive advantage, he argues, lies in its ability to combine infrastructure readiness with cultural and experiential depth. IMPACT’s strategy is to position itself within that trajectory, not as a standalone venue, but as a destination system. As he concludes: “The winners will be those that successfully combine global competitiveness with local relevance.”





Connecting the World

Hong Kong as a Super-Connector for International Associations

Association leaders looking towards Asia are increasingly pursuing the same objectives: membership growth, stronger sponsorship opportunities, and deeper engagement with regional industries. Chinese professional communities are advancing a parallel ambition, seeking greater visibility beyond their domestic market and stronger links with international peers. Hong Kong's approach focuses on fostering connections in both directions. During **IMEX Frankfurt**, **Marilyn Tham**, the **Hong Kong Tourism Board's (HKTB) General Manager of Mega Events, MICE and Cruise**, explained how the destination links international associations with Chinese Mainland, while also helping Chinese organisations to expand their international reach.



The Greater Bay Area plays a central role in how Hong Kong engages with international associations. Bringing together Hong Kong, Macao and nine cities in Guangdong Province, the region connects organisers with a population of over 88 million, alongside universities, research institutions, Fortune 500 companies, multinational corporations and some of China's largest technology companies.

"We position Hong Kong as a super connector," said Tham. "On one hand, we invite international conventions to Hong Kong and help them connect with the Chinese Mainland. On the other hand, we help Chinese Mainland congresses expand to the global stage."

"Most convention organisers define success through record-breaking attendance," she added. "The Greater Bay Area gives access to a large population. It also makes sponsorship acquisition easier because many leading corporations are headquartered there. Attendance and sponsorship are both critical in making a successful convention."

Hong Kong welcomed 2.5 million MICE visitors in 2025, a 7% increase on the previous year. Meetings and incentives represented 62% of the total, while convention arrivals grew by more than 30%. About half of all MICE visitors came from the Chinese Mainland and half from short and long-haul markets. MICE visitors spent HK\$7,467 per person (approx. €840), 36% more than leisure travellers.

Hong Kong's proximity to Shenzhen and Guangzhou places organisers within reach of manufacturing centres, technology ecosystems and professional communities spanning medical, finance, engineering and innovation.

"Many Chinese Mainland associations have developed to a world-class level," noted Tham. "Usually, they organise rotation conventions within the Chinese Mainland. Now they have an opportunity to showcase themselves to the world. Hong Kong

can be the first stop when they go outside and connect with the international market."

The **15th China Chest Pain Centers Congress** brought that ambition into focus. Held in Hong Kong in April 2026, the event marked the first time the congress had taken place outside the Chinese Mainland. As the nation's largest conference on chest pain centres, the conference converged about 3,000 healthcare leaders, clinicians and researchers at the **Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre** with a concurrent venue in Shenzhen.

"When they moved the congress to Hong Kong, we helped promote it internationally and invite participants from around the world," said Tham. "This case demonstrates how we help Chinese Mainland congresses expand to the global stage."

Medical sciences remain one of Hong Kong's strongest convention sectors, accounting for close to one-third of convention activity secured by the destination. Government priorities have also shaped acquisition efforts. Financial services, trade, aviation and shipping, innovation and technology, intellectual property, legal services, cultural exchange, education and medical sciences feature prominently in bid development and convention attraction strategies.

Support for those efforts comes from the **Hong Kong Convention Ambassador Programme**. More than 170 ambassadors currently participate in the initiative, representing professional bodies, universities, industry associations, public institutions and chambers of commerce. 40 ambassadors are based in the Chinese Mainland, working alongside HKTB teams in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Chengdu.

"We have a very passionate group of ambassadors supporting Hong Kong," added Tham. "They help us connect with organisers and identify opportunities within their industries and professional networks."





Consensus Hong Kong has established itself as the Asian edition of the US-originated Web3 conference. **LEAP East** will bring one of the Middle East's largest technology event brands into Asia for the first time. "Many organisers are creating Asia-Pacific versions of their global conferences," she explained. "Travel costs and changing market conditions mean they are looking at regional events as a way to maintain engagement and grow their communities."

Infrastructure also supports a broader shift in event design. **Kai Tak Sports Park** has added a 50,000-seat stadium, a 10,000-seat arena and outdoor space for sports, entertainment and large-scale gatherings. **AsiaWorld-Expo** is expanding flexible exhibition capacity, while **West Kowloon Cultural District** gives organisers access to **M+**, the **Hong Kong Palace Museum**, and new performing arts facilities. **SKYTOPIA**, the **Airport City** development by Airport Authority Hong Kong, will add hospitality, retail, popular culture, art trading, entertainment and event infrastructure around the city's international gateway. Cruises are being folded into the same logic. Tham's portfolio brings Mega Events, MICE and Cruise under one remit, allowing HKTb to build programmes that combine meetings, incentives and regional travel. Cruise products are now being promoted for corporate groups through sea-and-land itineraries, where meetings and incentive activities can begin in Hong Kong and continue on board.

"For MICE, we see opportunities in cruise, especially for the meetings and incentives segment," explained Tham. "On board, they have food and beverage, entertainment and meeting rooms. They can have a sea experience for one night, then another one or two nights on land."

To showcase the city's distinctive travel experiences and deepen Hong Kong's tourism appeal, HKTb launches a brand-new promotional campaign **Only in Hong Kong**

globally. The campaign highlights the city's variety, vibrancy and world-class offerings, as well as unique facets across culture, mega events, natural scenery and many more, attracting worldwide travellers to come and explore Hong Kong from brand-new perspectives and inspiring them to visit, thereby elevating Hong Kong's position as 'Asia's World City'.

HKTb is positioning the city's cultural calendar, mega events and neighbourhood experiences as part of the business events offer, connecting delegates with **Art Basel Hong Kong**, **Hong Kong Sevens**, **LIV Golf**, the **Wine and Dine Festival**, **Dragon Boat Festival** and major concerts when timings align with congresses or incentive programmes.

"People now prioritise immersive and unique experiences," she noted. "We have a full spectrum, from world-class attractions to nature-based activities, cultural moments and urban adventures. We bundle these experiences together with MICE."

The campaign connects meetings with Hong Kong's broader calendar of cultural, sporting and entertainment events, giving organisers additional options for incentives, hospitality and delegate engagement.

"We want delegates to experience something different every time they come to Hong Kong," explained Tham. "There should always be another reason to stay longer or return."

As Asian associations expand their international reach and global organisations look for stronger engagement across Asia, Hong Kong is positioning itself between both conversations. For Tham, the opportunity is not only to attract events, but to help organisations build relationships, grow communities and connect expertise across borders.



Washington, DC Is Redefining Engagement with a Capital

Washington, DC is entering a defining period in its destination story. As the United States marks a period of global visibility shaped by America's 250th anniversary celebrations, the **FIFA World Cup** and the road to the **Los Angeles 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games**, the nation's capital is leveraging its unique mix of political influence, intellectual capital and cultural assets to elevate its profile in the global events market.

Author: Manuel A. Fernandes, HQ Magazine Manager

The timing is significant. Destination DC recently announced record tourism performance, with 27.2 million visitors generating US\$11.9 (€10.3) billion in visitor spending. Yet beneath those headline figures lies a more complex reality. International visitation declined by 4% year-on-year, reflecting broader challenges facing the US travel market. Even so, Washington, DC outperformed the national average decline of 5.5%.

For **Melissa Riley, Senior Vice President of Convention Sales and Services at Destination DC**, these figures reinforce the importance of long-term thinking. "We are really making sure that we are investing in the right markets at the right time with the right financial support," she says. "At the end of the day, this is a long game." That perspective is particularly relevant as Destination DC navigates reduced funding these days; still, Riley remains confident that sustained destination marketing investment continues to deliver value. "The investments we have made over the past several years will continue generating momentum well into the future," she says. "Destination marketing is, by its nature, a long-term investment strategy."

The City Behind the Headlines

For many international audiences, Washington, DC remains defined by politics. Riley argues that this perception overlooks much of what makes the destination distinctive. "Washington is really a tale of two cities," she says. "There is the city associated with Capitol Hill and policymaking. Then there is the other where people live, work and build communities." That distinction sits at the heart of Destination DC's **There's**

Only One DC campaign, which aims to showcase the city's neighbourhoods, culinary scene, cultural diversity and quality of life alongside its institutional relevance.

"People come with a preconceived notion of Washington, and then discover an entirely different city," Riley says. "The reaction is almost always: 'I had no idea.'" For meeting planners, that transformation is increasingly valuable. In addition to convention centres and hotels, delegates gain access to world-class museums, cultural institutions and neighbourhood offerings that enrich the overall event journey. "A great leisure destination makes a great meeting destination," Riley notes.

From Destination Marketing to Knowledge Hub

While infrastructure remains critical, Riley believes the role of destination organisations is evolving rapidly. "The role of the DMO today is no longer limited to promoting hotels, convention centres or meeting space," she says. "Increasingly, we are becoming subject-matter experts, connectors and knowledge hubs for our destinations."

This philosophy underpins Destination DC's **Meetings Capitalized** strategy, unveiled at **IMEX Frankfurt**. The initiative places greater emphasis on the city's intellectual and institutional assets, from universities and associations to think-tanks, embassies and policymakers. "We have been positioning that intellectual capital for the past 10 to 15 years," Riley explains. "But now we are looking beyond traditional sector-based framing and focusing more on experiences and outcomes."



Washington, DC's status as the US capital also creates unique opportunities for advocacy, diplomacy and knowledge exchange. "There is no other place in the United States where organisations can engage with policymakers in the same way," she says. "Throughout history, people have gathered in Washington and changed the course of history through dialogue and exchange." Rather than distancing itself from its political identity, the city is learning how to leverage it as a competitive advantage for business events.

Accessibility as a Path to Inclusion

Another area shaping DC's meetings strategy is inclusion. For Riley, inclusion is no longer simply a matter of accessibility compliance. Instead, it must be embedded throughout the delegate journey. "Inclusion is only going to become more significant in the years ahead," she says. "We want to be proactive in designing experiences where every delegate feels welcomed, valued and supported." That includes creating environments that accommodate neuro-divergent attendees, offering quiet spaces and lasting impressions that recognise a wider range of participant needs.

The approach is already influencing how events are delivered. The **International Society on Thrombosis and Haemostasis** became the first congress in Washington where Destination DC helped facilitate a dedicated childcare centre. Meanwhile, the **American Speech-Language-Hearing Association** partnered with **Planet Word** museum to create an exhibition focused on speech disorders, turning the destination itself into part of the learning process. "It gave attendees a sense of belonging and recognition," Riley says. "It showed how the city could authentically support a highly specialised professional community."

The focus on social impact is not confined to individual events. Through the **NextDC**, their official nonprofit partner, Destination DC supports hospitality education, internships and scholarships designed to strengthen the future workforce. "When the industry invests in the next generation of talent, it creates a long-term cycle of shared success," Riley says.

America 250 and a New Era of Experiences

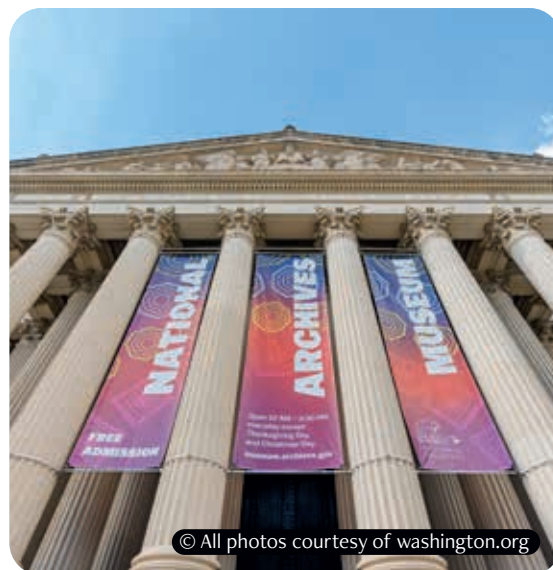
The **America 250** celebrations provided another major boost for the destination. Destination DC is helping planners integrate anniversary-related activities into meetings and conventions, while museums and cultural institutions across the city are developing new exhibitions and programmes. "The 250th anniversary of the United States is a tremendous opportunity for Washington, DC," Riley says.

One recent example saw delegates attending an event at the **National Archives**, dining in the presence of some of the nation's founding documents, including the Declaration of Independence. "There is only one place where attendees can network while being immersed in the institutions and stories that have shaped the United States," she says. For Riley, these settings demonstrate how destinations can move beyond infrastructure and make the city itself part of the meeting.

Stronger Together

That same philosophy of collaboration also informs Destination DC's participation in the **BestCities Global Alliance**. "What makes BestCities particularly important is that it brings together cities that share common values and long-term ambitions," Riley says. While business development still carries weight, she believes the alliance's greatest value lies in knowledge sharing. "As an industry, we can only continue to evolve if we are willing to share not only our successes, but also the lessons learned from initiatives that did not work as expected."

In many ways, that sentiment captures Washington's current approach. At a time when destinations face growing competition and changing expectations, the city is looking beyond traditional measures of success. Economic impact remains a benchmark, but increasingly it is being complemented by intellectual capital, inclusion, legacy and meaningful human connection. Perhaps that is why so many visitors leave the city with a different impression than the one they arrived with. "People come with a preconceived notion of Washington," Riley reflects. "And then they discover an entirely different city."



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FIEXPO 2026 Places Latin America and the Caribbean at the Centre of the Meetings Agenda

FIEXPO returned to Costa Rica from 8 to 11 June for the second year of its three-year cycle, placing San José at the centre of a Latin American and Caribbean reading of the global meetings industry. Under the theme **Connect to Evolve**, the event brought business generation into the same frame as public policy, education, artificial intelligence, inclusion and sustainability.

The event gathered participants from more than 80 destinations and 700 exhibitors, generating 12,625 business meetings and more than US\$655 million (approx. €605 million) in projected opportunities. Around that commercial platform, FIEXPO 2026 treated meetings as tools for governance, professional development, accessibility, sustainable operations and long-term destination strategy.

Business events now sit closer to global policy because they bring research, sector agendas, investment conversations and institutional networks into host destinations. FIEXPO used that argument to place Latin America and the Caribbean inside the global meetings debate, with regional priorities shaped by governance, infrastructure, sustainability and professional capacity.

Dr Senthil Gopinath, Chief Executive Officer of the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), gave the opening academic programme a clear institutional context. He referred to ICCA's engagement with the **United Nations, UN Tourism, the European Union, the World Economic Forum and the International Organization for Standardization**. UN Tourism's estimate that business events account for 25% of global tourism gave FIEXPO a policy argument with weight. The case becomes stronger when destinations connect congresses to local priorities, from health and mobility to education, energy and technology.

Arnaldo Nardone, Chairman and Director of FIEXPO Exhibitions Group and Past President of ICCA, moderated an opening panel that tested how destinations can move from promotion to strategy. The discussion brought together **Diana Rodríguez**, representing the **Cartagena Convention Centre by Grupo Heroica**, **Christoph Tessmar, Director of the Barcelona Convention Bureau**, **Dennis Speet, Managing Director of the Amsterdam Convention Bureau**, and **Michael Blackman, Managing Director of Integrated Systems Events**. Risk management, legacy, agentic artificial intelligence and technology adoption were treated as destination strategy, not separate operational concerns. A competitive destination needs buyer research that reaches beyond hotel capacity, with clear knowledge



of local clusters, academic institutions, ambassadors and projects that can strengthen a bid.

Strong bids require buyer research beyond hotel capacity, clear knowledge of local clusters, academic institutions and ambassadors, and a shared line between government, industry and meeting professionals. Technology adds discipline: teams need to test artificial intelligence tools, use data well and apply both to event design.

The **Latin American Destinations Forum** turned destination strategy into a regional exercise. Moderated by **Juan José García, Chief Sales and Marketing Officer at BCO Congressos**, and developed with **Santiago González, Chief Executive Officer of MICE Consulting**, the session brought together **Martin Boyle, Chief Executive Officer of the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers (IAPCO)**, **Eduardo Chaillo, Global General Manager for Latin America at Maritz**, **Annette Gregg, Chief Executive Officer of the Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (SITE)**, **Tessmar and Speet**. Governance, competitiveness, market intelligence, data and sustainability were treated as shared regional priorities. The **San José**



Declaration gives the forum a concrete editorial outcome: a reference point for Latin American and Caribbean destinations working to strengthen their bids with evidence, policy continuity and clearer sector priorities.

Certification and learning sessions from ICCA, IAPCO, SITE, the **Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA)**, and **Meeting Professionals International (MPI)** brought international standards, sector-specific tools and peer learning closer to Latin American and Caribbean professionals. The FIEXPO and IAPCO **Emerging Leaders Programme for Latin America and the Caribbean**, together with the **Jorge Castex Scholarship**, will support up to 15 emerging professionals from professional congress organisers and destination management companies through education, mentoring and international exposure, creating a clearer route from participation to responsibility.

FIEXPO Connecting Minds, led by **Borja Castelar**, former Director for LinkedIn Latin America and now an international B2B sales and leadership expert, brought that skills agenda into the artificial intelligence debate. New tools can support data analysis, audience engagement, personalisation and event design. Their value depends on professionals able to ask better questions, interpret context and make decisions with judgement.

The first **Inclusive Legacy Lab**, developed with **PCMA**, **Let's Meet Panama** and **Costa Rica's Accessible Tourism Network**, placed accessibility inside event design, staff training and emergency planning. The **Women's Forum**, moderated by **Carolina Adano**, Director and Co-founder of FIEXPO, addressed visibility, confidence and leadership with Ana Delisante from Uruguay. A later panel with **Silvana Gomes**, Strategic Alliances and Incentives Coordinator at **Embratur**, **Bianka Expósito**, Deputy Director General of the **Guatemalan Tourism Institute**, **Denisse Mac Cubbin**, Executive Director of the **Lima Convention Bureau**, and **Juliana López**, President and Chief Executive Officer of **Grupo Heroica**, connected women's presence in the sector with access to senior roles and strategic influence.

By linking environmental responsibility with accessibility, community participation and legacy, FIEXPO 2026 gave the Latin American and Caribbean agenda a practical test in San José. Technology also entered the delegate experience through interactive projection mapping during the welcome cocktail and a drone show during the gala dinner, developed in partnership with **RLA Event Technologies**. The next edition will be a chance to see how meeting planners, destinations and venues have applied this year's learnings, from stronger bids and more intentional operations to clearer criteria for choosing regional partners.

Costa Rica as Host Destination: Sustainability, Community and Event Design

Costa Rica's second FIEXPO year connected national sustainability policy with event practice. During a hosted-buyer lunch sponsored by **Grupo Heroica**, **Álvaro Rojas**, General Manager of the **Costa Rica Convention Center**, presented a technical guide on 10 trends for sustainable and responsible corporate events in 2026. The framework covered waste traceability, menu design, wellbeing gastronomy, mobility, supplier alignment, visible social impact and post-event reporting. Its value sits in the discipline behind those choices: measuring impact, reducing waste, aligning suppliers and reporting results.

The **MICE Forest initiative**, led by the **Costa Rican Tourism Board**, gives organisers a route to connect meetings with ecosystem restoration and carbon reduction. Local artisans brought the social side of legacy into the event itself. Through **Artesanías con Identidad** and the **Tico Treasures** e-commerce platform, certified crafts from 17 artisan collectives and around 300 micro, small and medium-sized enterprises can reach visitors, buyers and event designers during and after their time in Costa Rica. Their presence at FIEXPO turned the trade floor into a point of contact between local makers and the companies designing Costa Rican tourism and event experiences.



Fundación Centinela Panamá

Let's Meet Panama Transforms Events through Inclusion, Accessibility and Legacy



Accessibility is becoming part of how the meetings industry defines event quality, destination competitiveness and long-term value. The discussion now reaches beyond ramps or adapted spaces into environmental, social and governance (ESG) criteria, inclusive communication, universal design, employability, accessible tourism and the legacy events leave in host communities. Developed by **Meetings®Panama**, **Let's Meet Panama** brings that conversation into the Latin American meetings sector. Its **Chief Executive Officer and Founder, Patricia Puentes Colorado** (pictured on the right), connects public institutions, private companies, associations, academia, foundations, entrepreneurs, artists, people with disabilities and industry leaders around one premise: events can generate social capacity as well as economic activity. In 2025, Puentes was recognised by *Forbes Centroamérica* as one of the **50 Powerful Women of Central America**, reinforcing the visibility of a project now supported by regional and global meetings organisations.

Accessible Event Design

Let's Meet Panama starts from a practical definition of accessibility. An inclusive event is not only a venue with ramps, signage or adapted spaces. It also depends on how participants arrive at and move through the venue, register, understand information, take part in conversations, access services and experience the programme.

Across its first editions, the event has combined conferences, panels, workshops, business meetings, networking spaces, inclusive activations, sign language interpretation, participation from entrepreneurs and artists with disabilities, and practical content for the meetings industry, tourism, hospitality, education, companies and public institutions.

The platform has helped move inclusion from a specialised topic into the wider business events agenda. In Latin America, where many people still face barriers to participation in social,

educational, tourism and economic life, every congress, trade show or convention can become a point of intervention.

Lucio Vaquero, Regional Director of PCMA Latin America, frames the issue as an industry responsibility. "At PCMA, we believe the meetings industry has a responsibility that goes beyond convening people: the responsibility to include. Initiatives such as Let's Meet Panama show that universal accessibility and social inclusion are not an add-on, but the heart of a well-designed event," he said.

Panama's Social Innovation Role

Panama already holds a strategic position in the Latin American meetings market through its air connectivity, hotel infrastructure, convention centres and logistics capacity. Let's Meet Panama adds another layer to that positioning by using events as vehicles for knowledge, inclusion, awareness and legacy.

The platform's training and awareness work is beginning to appear in Panama's event pipeline. One example is the **Panama 2028 Parapan American Open Championships**, scheduled from 10 to 13 February 2028 and included in the official **World Para Powerlifting** calendar. The event gives visibility to adaptive sport, strengthens local capacity and connects accessible tourism with Panama's international positioning. Three further bids are also in development with associations including **Latin American Network of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities and their Families (RIADIS)** and the **Tourism Promotion Fund (PROMTUR Panama)**.

For Puentes, these outcomes show how an inclusion agenda can translate into destination development. "More than 3,000 professionals have been trained and sensitised in inclusion, accessibility, ESG and good practices, and today we see how that effort is beginning to translate into concrete results: the Panama 2028 Parapan American Open Championships, new international bids and an industry increasingly aware that change is now," she said.

She also sees the model as regional in scope. "Panama has an opportunity to become a regional hub for social innovation, with a model that can support destinations across Latin America. The partnerships we have built show that this approach can be replicated elsewhere and that events can leave much more than memories: they can leave capacities, opportunities and transformation."

Partnerships and Regional Recognition

Let's Meet Panama's growth has been supported by partnerships with organisations that place the platform in a wider regional conversation. PCMA LATAM has reinforced the educational component, while **FIEXPO Exhibition Group** connects the project with the debate on event legacy. The **Central America Tourism Promotion Agency (CATA)** brings a destination and tourism development perspective.

Santiago González, Project Director at **FIEXPO**, said the initiative has helped raise standards across the region. "Their work has helped position accessibility and inclusion as an essential part of the legacy that events should leave. Today, this space has the potential to expand to the rest of the region, inspiring destinations, organisers, venues and institutions to raise their standards and build an industry that is more human, competitive and aware of its impact."

CATA's support links inclusion with competitiveness. **Boris Iraheta, Secretary General** of **CATA**, said accessible tourism and meetings spaces generate more opportunities for people, communities and the industry itself. "Inclusion does not only expand access. It expands opportunities to attract

more conscious travellers and present ourselves as a more competitive region in international markets," he said.

Let's Meet Panama received the **Excellence in Education Award 2024** from **Learn Tourism** and took second place at **FITUR4ALL 2025** in the **Inclusive Company** category. The project also maintains a Framework Cooperation Agreement with the **Panama Tourism Authority**, with a five-year vision to strengthen the country's positioning as a more accessible, inclusive and competitive destination for meetings, events, tourism and experiences.

Legacy In Action

The fourth edition of Let's Meet Panama will take place on 7 and 8 September 2026 at the convention centre of Ciudad del Saber (City of Knowledge) in Panama City, under the theme **Social Innovation And Accessibility For All: Legacy In Action**.

The programme will bring together companies, institutions, international organisations, universities, destinations, trade bodies, chambers of commerce, foundations, entrepreneurs and meetings industry leaders. Topics will include the silver economy, which examines the needs and economic participation of ageing populations, alongside accessible tourism, business sustainability, inclusive culture, employability, adaptive sport, artificial intelligence, education, universal accessibility and design for all.

A key component will be **Inclusion In Motion**, an experience integrating adaptive sport demonstrations with Panama's national Paralympic ecosystem. The activity gives companies, universities, destinations and civil society a practical encounter with sport as a tool for participation, leadership and social change.

For Panama's Paralympic movement, the platform creates visibility for adaptive sport inside an industry that shapes how people gather. **Iveth Valdés Romero, President** of the **Paralympic Committee of Panama**, said the initiative helps "position adaptive sport as a powerful tool for inclusion", while strengthening awareness, empathy and respect.

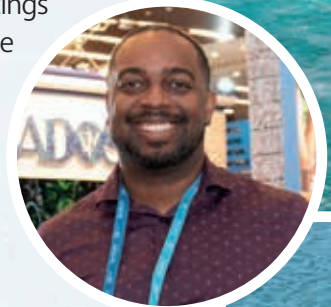
Let's Meet Panama's message is direct: accessibility needs to be considered from the first stages of event planning. When inclusion is treated as strategy, events can leave trained professionals, stronger partnerships, new bids, more prepared destinations and communities with greater capacity to participate. For a region seeking a stronger voice in the global meetings industry, Panama is using this platform to show that legacy depends on whether people can access, shape and benefit from the event.

For more information, visit www.letsmeetpanama.com



Barbados Puts Forward a Compact Meetings Proposition in the Caribbean

FIEXPO Latin America 2026 in Costa Rica gave Barbados a platform to present its meetings strategy to international meeting planners and hosted buyers from Latin America, the Caribbean, North America and Europe. Located on the eastern edge of the Caribbean, the island combines direct air access from key international markets with a compact geography that keeps transfers short and programmes concentrated. For **Russell Banfield, Senior Business Development Officer at Barbados Tourism Marketing Inc. (BTMI)**, the destination's next opportunity is to complement its established leisure profile with a stronger business events proposition, built around mid-sized meetings, incentive groups and local experiences that carry a clear programme function.



A Compact Destination with Meeting Logic

Barbados' meetings proposition starts with the way groups move across the island. Hotels, restaurants, coastal venues and off-site experiences sit close enough for organisers to build fully-fledged programmes without losing time between locations. For business events, this gives organisers more control over scheduling and delegate flow.

"Barbados is a compact destination, which means delegates spend less time travelling between venues and more time experiencing the island. That is something that can be integrated very easily into conferences, conventions and incentive programmes," says Banfield, who sees the strongest fit in groups that need professional infrastructure while still allowing the destination to shape the programme. "Barbados is particularly well suited to events of between 150 and 300 delegates, where organisers can combine professional meetings with meaningful destination experiences."

Banfield's figure points to the format where Barbados' scale is most easily used as an advantage, but the island's infrastructure is not limited to that range. The **Lloyd Erskine Sandiford Centre** remains Barbados' flagship purpose-built convention venue, with 11 meeting rooms, substantial exhibition space and capacity for around 1,200 delegates seated theatre-style in its largest room, or about 1,400 for standing and reception formats.

Wyndham Grand Barbados Sam Lord's Castle All-Inclusive Resort has added a larger resort-based meetings option to the market. The property, on the island's south-east coast, combines 422 rooms with a convention centre, ballroom space, breakouts and outdoor areas.

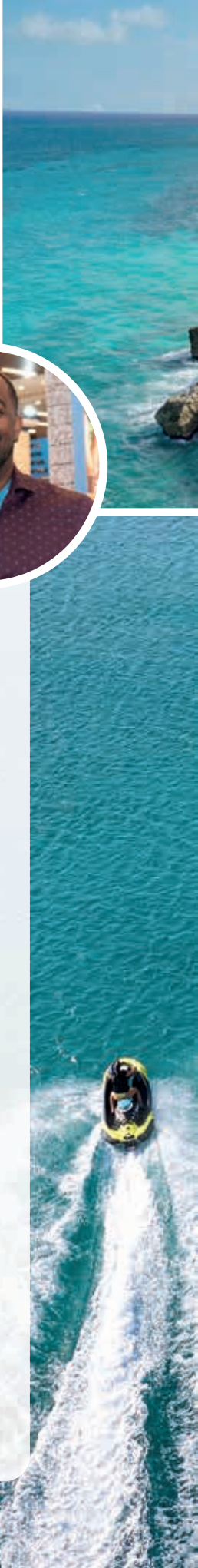
"The opening of the Wyndham Grand Barbados Sam Lord's Castle All-Inclusive Resort has significantly strengthened our meetings offering," said Banfield. "With 422 rooms and a convention centre that can accommodate up to 800 delegates, including Barbados' largest ballroom."

Grantley Adams International Airport gives the proposition a wider regional and international reach. "Accessibility is one of Barbados' strengths," Banfield said. "We have strong connections across North America and Europe, including services from key cities such as London, Toronto, New York and Miami, and our links with Latin America continue to grow through Panama City. For international organisers, that makes the destination easy to reach from multiple markets."

Sector Events and Regional Reach

Barbados' business events strategy is gaining definition through sectors where the island already has economic, policy and professional relevance. The island has a long-standing profile in international financial services and insurance, with growing visibility in fintech, sustainability, climate resilience and regional governance.

Fintech Islands brings finance, technology, regulation and entrepreneurship audiences to Barbados, connecting the island with policy and business discussion across the Caribbean fintech ecosystem. **IDB Invest Sustainability Week 2026** will bring a major sustainability and development finance forum to Barbados for the first time in the Caribbean. The **48th CARICOM Heads of Government Meeting**, held in Barbados in 2025, also showed the island's capacity for protocol-heavy regional diplomacy.





Luxury incentives add a different proof point. **Motivation Luxury Summer Barbados** gave the island a platform to present its high-end incentive capacity to buyers from Latin America and the Caribbean, with Wyndham Grand Barbados Sam Lord's Castle used as the host property.

"Hosting Motivation Luxury Summer Barbados demonstrated not only our ability to welcome a major international event, but also our capacity to deliver for predominantly Spanish-speaking audiences," said Banfield.

Latin America is a priority for BTMI, but the strategy is wider. Barbados' presence at FIEXP0 and other international tradeshows signals a broader push to build relationships with meeting planners, hosted buyers, agencies and operators across multiple markets. Its English-speaking environment, legal stability and service culture provide a clear business framework for this expansion.

Experiences as Programme Design

Barbados' leisure reputation becomes useful for meetings when experiences serve a clear programme function. Rum heritage, culinary culture, coastline, caves, gardens and local markets give organisers settings for networking, incentives, leadership retreats and sponsor-hosted events.

"Because Barbados is a coral island, we can offer experiences that go well beyond beaches, from cave venues and rum tastings to gardens and outdoor event spaces," said Banfield.

The **Mount Gay Rum Visitor Centre** offers a direct link to Barbados' rum history through tastings, mixology sessions and food pairings. Harrison's Cave gives groups a geological setting away from conventional venues, while catamaran charters, coastal dinners and culinary programming can be adapted for smaller executive audiences. Oistins, Haymans Market and

community-led dining experiences add local suppliers and informal cultural exchange to business programmes.

Culinary identity is especially relevant for incentive organisers. Barbados has more than 400 restaurants and food establishments, with high-end dining, seafood, rum experiences and the **Barbados Food and Rum Festival** supporting its positioning as the **Culinary Capital of the Caribbean**. For planners, the value lies in variety over a short stay: different settings across the west and south coasts, limited transfer times and a strong base of local destination management companies able to manage premium groups.

Barbados' climate exposure, marine environment and policy focus on resilience give sustainability-led events a clear connection to place. **Dive Fest Barbados**, coral restoration, coastal clean-ups and marine conservation activities show how environmental action can enter visitor programming, while conferences on sustainability and climate add a stronger content layer to the island's meetings calendar.

"Climate resilience has become an increasingly important focus for Barbados, and we see growing opportunities to host events linked to sustainability and climate-related themes," said Banfield.

Community value is becoming part of the island's meetings offer. BTMI already works with local partners, suppliers and community tourism initiatives. The next step for business events is to make those connections easier for organisers to identify, include and measure.

"Sustainability is not only about the environment," Banfield said. "It is also about supporting local communities and ensuring that events create a positive economic impact for the destination."

Barbados is not competing on volume. Its opportunity lies in fit: selecting the meetings it can serve well, using its scale with purpose and connecting business events to local culture, communities and climate realities. For a Caribbean destination entering more international meetings conversations, that clarity gives its proposition weight.





Women Deliver 2026

Oceanic Pacific Leadership On A Global Stage

Women Deliver 2026 (WD2026) placed the Oceanic Pacific region at the centre of one of the world's largest conferences focused on gender equality and the rights of women and girls. The conference adopted an Oceanic Pacific host model developed through collaboration with organisations and advocates across the region, bringing perspectives from Pacific Island nations, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand into a global discussion on gender equality. Hosted in Narm (Melbourne), the name used by the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Melbourne area, the event brought together more than 6,000 delegates from 189 countries.

Advancing the Global Agenda for Women and Girls

WD2026 took place against a backdrop of growing challenges to women's rights and gender equality initiatives in many parts of the world. The conference brought together political leaders, advocates, researchers, funders and community organisations to examine how policy, investment and collective action can support women and girls.

Across 12 plenaries, 12 pre-conferences, more than 120 concurrent sessions and over 80 side events, discussions addressed sexual and reproductive health and rights, economic empowerment, climate justice, violence prevention and political participation. Other sessions explored the implications of artificial intelligence, the role of inclusive data in policymaking, and approaches to supporting girls' leadership.

Many discussions focused on practical tools, accountability and decision-making. Topics ranged from feminist funding models and Pacific-led climate action to advocacy strategies, investment priorities and the role of institutions in advancing gender equality.

Several major outcomes accompanied the conference. New and renewed commitments announced during WD2026 totalled USD 190 million (approx. €165 million) in support of women and girls around the world.

The conference also marked the launch of the **Melbourne Declaration for Gender Equality**. Developed through consultations involving 650 participants globally, the declaration calls for stronger protection of human rights and increased investment in the organisations, institutions and networks working to advance gender equality.

Defining the Oceanic Pacific

The term Oceanic Pacific emerged ahead of Women Deliver through discussions between the Victorian Government and Pacific feminist civil society organisations. While Oceania



remained the established geographic description, Pacific organisations sought language that recognised both the diversity of the region and the shared connections between its communities.

Meetings in Suva, Fiji, and Melbourne in 2023 helped shape the concept further. Today, the Oceanic Pacific encompasses 22 Pacific Island countries and territories alongside Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. It also acknowledges Indigenous peoples of Papua, Timor-Leste and New Caledonia, alongside Māori, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other First Nations communities across the Pacific.

Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia each bring distinct political, environmental and social contexts. Climate resilience, cultural preservation, Indigenous sovereignty, health equity and gender justice have shaped public debate and advocacy across the region, informing many of the priorities that appeared throughout the conference programme.

WD2026 adopted the Oceanic Pacific model as the foundation for its 2026 edition, incorporating regional organisations into planning and programme development. The approach was reflected in the conference's leadership, which brought together figures from across politics, civil society and international institutions. Opening proceedings featured **The Right Hon. Feleti Penitala Teo OBE, Prime Minister of**



Tuvalu, alongside United Nations Deputy Secretary-General **Amina J. Mohammed** and **Women Deliver President** and **Chief Executive Officer Dr Maliha Khan**.

Women Deliver Board Member and former **Prime Minister Helen Clark** joined other former **Prime Ministers** including **Jacinda Ardern** of New Zealand, **Julia Gillard** of Australia and **Justin Trudeau** of Canada, alongside government representatives, advocates and business leaders from around the world.

Hosted on the lands of the Eastern Kulin Nation, the alliance of First Nations Peoples whose traditional lands include Melbourne, the conference incorporated First Nations leadership throughout the programme, reflecting the role Indigenous communities play across the broader Oceanic Pacific. Discussions throughout the week drew on Indigenous perspectives relating to governance, culture, community wellbeing and stewardship of land and sea.

Inclusive Programme Design and Delegate Experience

Alongside sessions at **Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre**, delegates attended a Cultural Night at Melbourne's **Royal Exhibition Building** and **Melbourne Museum**. More than 2,200 delegates took part in the evening, which brought together First Nations and Pasifika performers, artists and businesses from across the Oceanic Pacific.

The programme opened with the Yuloo Aboriginal Dance Group before performances from Maidens of Polynesia and Te Mana. More than 20 Indigenous-owned businesses participated in a marketplace featuring art, food, fashion, design and cultural products, creating opportunities for delegates to engage directly with business owners, artists and community representatives.



International Sign Language interpretation was available during all plenary sessions, while delegates had access to multilingual conference information, onsite mental health support, accessible and gender-inclusive bathrooms, and dedicated quiet spaces.

Environmental considerations were incorporated throughout the conference. Delegates were encouraged to use Melbourne's tram network when travelling between activities, programme materials were delivered digitally, and exhibitors were encouraged to adopt zero-waste practices. Exhibition infrastructure included reusable displays, LED lighting and furniture produced from recycled, recyclable or sustainably sourced materials.

For **Melbourne Convention Bureau** and **Business Events Australia**, WD2026 highlighted the role business events can play in connecting destinations with international conversations on issues that affect communities worldwide. Bringing together expertise from government, research, civil society and advocacy, the conference reinforced Melbourne's position as a host city for meetings that contribute to the wider social and policy discussions on gender equality, health and human rights which continue to influence policy, research and advocacy around the world.



Sydney Leadership Circle: Europe Edition

Open Dialogue on Associations' Future Priorities

In May, ahead of **IMEX Frankfurt**, association executives, congress organisers and industry leaders gathered in Brussels for the **Sydney Leadership Circle: Europe Edition**, an invitation-only workshop hosted by **Business Events Sydney (BESydney)** and the **International Convention Centre Sydney (ICC Sydney)**. *HQ* joined discussions on technological change, membership expectations, organisational governance, event risk, long-term impact and financial sustainability.

Association leaders from medical, scientific, education, cultural, technology and professional bodies across Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom joined the workshop. Bringing organisations with different missions and membership models into the same room created an opportunity to examine challenges increasingly shared across the association sector.

The programme opened with **AI and the Future of Associations: From Experimentation to Strategic Capability**, led by **Avinash Chandarana, Chief Learning Officer at MCI Group**. **Patrick Delaney, Co-Founder of SoolNua**, moderated the exchange with Chandarana and later facilitated the workshop groups on artificial intelligence, member engagement, legacy and impact, and organisational resilience.

AI and the Future of Associations

Chandarana's keynote focused on a challenge many organisations are currently confronting: moving beyond experimentation and determining where AI can create practical value.

"The reality is that most associations are still experimenting with AI rather than embedding it strategically," said Chandarana. "Many people are using it for content, emails or marketing, but that is only the starting point. The bigger question is how AI can support the organisation's future direction, improve member value and reduce internal friction."

Investment decisions, governance frameworks and organisational readiness featured prominently in the discussion. Participants also pointed to data quality, technology procurement and the pace of board decision-making as barriers to implementation.

Chandarana encouraged associations to avoid viewing AI as an isolated initiative. "Associations should not start with the idea of AI transformation," he said. "They should start by asking how their organisation needs to transform for the future, and then decide where AI can support that journey. AI should serve the strategy, not become the strategy."

AI could also support learning, personalisation and knowledge sharing. One recurring theme concerned the vast amount of content generated at conferences that often remains underused after delegates return home.

"A great deal of knowledge is shared in sessions, but much of it is lost once people leave the room," Chandarana noted. "AI can help associations capture, summarise and repurpose that knowledge, extending the value of an event well beyond the day itself."

Membership Relevance and Knowledge Value

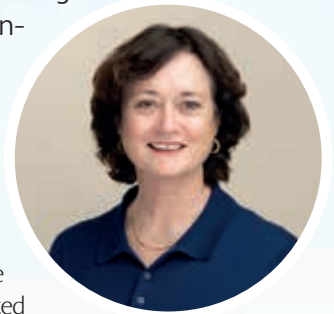
Changing consumption habits, personalised digital experiences and growing competition for attention are forcing associations to reassess how they create value for members. Access to information alone is no longer a differentiator when digital tools can provide answers in seconds.

"Associations cannot compete with large language models on content alone," said Chandarana. "The differentiator for associations is context, trust, professional relevance and the ability to turn knowledge into meaningful value for members."

Workshop discussions examined how organisations can maintain engagement between annual meetings, create stronger learning pathways and involve members more actively in decision-making. Several participants highlighted the challenge of attracting younger professionals while maintaining value for long-standing members.

Membership discussions frequently centred on retention, participation and revenue, including how associations communicate value, demonstrate impact and maintain engagement over time.

Amanda Lampe, Chief Executive Officer (pictured above) of BESydney, identified member engagement as one of the most significant organisational challenges associations currently face.





Attracting the next generation while continuing to deliver value for existing members requires calls for open, strategic conversations.

Legacy, Impact and Destination Partnerships

Associations examined how impact can be measured, what destinations contribute beyond event delivery and how congresses can generate outcomes that continue after delegates return home.

For many organisations, legacy encompasses policy change, research collaboration, professional development, community engagement and long-term sector advancement. However, measuring those outcomes remains a challenge for many organisations.

Lampe believes destinations have an important role to play in helping associations define and achieve those objectives.

“When it comes to events, leaders are also looking closely at destinations,” she said. “They are asking whether a destination is attractive to delegates, whether it aligns with the purpose of the association, and what kind of ecosystem it can create around the event.”

Universities, research institutions, government stakeholders and professional communities were identified as important partners in delivering legacy objectives. Conversations focused on how those connections can support outcomes that extend beyond the event itself.

“The question is not only where the event takes place, but what it can achieve,” Lampe said. “That includes the legacy for the association itself and the legacy it can leave in the host city or country.”

Drawing on Sydney’s experience, Lampe pointed to the **76th International Astronautical Congress (IAC Sydney) 2026** as an example of how legacy programmes can be integrated into education, community engagement and research activities when planning begins early enough. The event welcomed more than 7,500 delegates from 99 countries and attracted more than 19,500 registrations for its public **Space Day** programme.

Organisational Resilience and Event Risk

Rising costs, travel disruption and changing participation patterns continue to affect event performance and organisational finances. For associations that rely heavily on congress revenue, fluctuations in attendance and sponsorship can have significant consequences.

Diversifying income streams and strengthening organisational resilience featured prominently in the discussions. Convention bureaux were frequently cited as important partners in managing disruption, alongside venues, hotels and local stakeholders. Early communication and a shared understanding of risk emerged as recurring priorities.

For BESydney and ICC Sydney, creating space for those conversations reflects a shared commitment to engaging with the association sector beyond the traditional bid process.

“We want Sydney to be recognised as a place where ideas, leadership, research and academia come together naturally,” said Lampe.

Discussions continued during the networking session, where participants compared experiences and exchanged practical examples from their own organisations, reinforcing the value many attendees placed on exchanging perspectives with peers facing similar challenges across different sectors and markets.

For more information, visit www.besydney.com.au.





The **Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland Experience** Beyond **NZICC**

The opening of the **New Zealand International Convention Centre (NZICC)** in February 2026 marked a major moment for Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland and Aotearoa New Zealand's international meetings sector. During *HQ's* participation in the opening celebrations, the **Auckland Convention Bureau** led a fam trip for international media hosted by **Ken Pereira, Head of Business Events**, and **Kathryn Heard, Marketing Manager**. The bureau forms part of **Tātaki Auckland Unlimited**, the city's cultural, events and destination agency operating on behalf of Auckland Council.

The programme explored the business events sector, focusing on the close links between infrastructure, Māori cultural perspectives, creativity, sustainability, and the scenic harbour setting of the city.

Author: Jesús Guerrero Chacón, HQ Deputy Editor

A Connected Convention Environment

The NZICC provides Aotearoa New Zealand and its largest city with new capacity for international congresses, placing delegates directly in the heart of Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. The convention centre is connected to the **Horizon Hotel** and wider SkyCity precinct through a compact urban environment where accommodation, dining, entertainment and event spaces remain within walking distance.

Experiences including **Wētā Workshop Unleashed** and the **All Blacks Experience** sit opposite NZICC, reinforcing the proximity shaping delegate movement through the city centre.

Hotels visited during the programme reflected the wider range of experiences supporting Auckland's meetings strategy. **Sudima Auckland City Hotel** approaches hospitality through sustainability, wellbeing-focused design and plant-based dining at **East** restaurant, while **Park Hyatt Auckland** places executive groups and incentive delegates directly on the waterfront at Wynyard Quarter, with **Onemata** restaurant focusing on regional produce and local seafood. **Sofitel Auckland Viaduct Harbour** connects meeting spaces with marina views and the surrounding Viaduct district, while **The Hotel Britomart** integrates hospitality with the regenerated Britomart waterfront precinct, alongside kingi restaurant's focus on regional ingredients and North Island seafood.

Water shapes much of daily movement through central Auckland. A short journey aboard **Fullers360's** electric hydrofoil offered views across Waitematā Harbour while introducing marine technology developed with Auckland company **Vessev**. Using hydrofoiling technology, the vessel lifts above the water while operating in electric mode, combining harbour transport with low-emission mobility.

SailGP racing across Waitematā Harbour during our visit placed Auckland's waterfront at the centre of a major international sporting event, serving as both a competition venue and a public gathering space.

Auckland Museum demonstrated another dimension of the city's event infrastructure. Located inside the Auckland Domain, the museum combines heritage architecture with flexible event spaces, including the **Under the Dome** meeting space overlooking the skyline and harbour. Galleries and public areas can also be adapted for private functions, receptions and dinners linked to international congresses.

Creativity, Identity and Delegate Experience

Wētā Workshop Unleashed explores practical filmmaking through immersive fantasy, horror and science-fiction environments inspired by the work of Wētā Workshop, the New Zealand-based creative company behind productions including *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit* and *Avatar*. Delegates move through spaces focused on prosthetics, animatronics, costume design, make-up effects and world-building techniques developed for film, television and interactive entertainment. Alongside public tours, the venue hosts private functions, workshops and business events linked with creativity and storytelling.

The **All Blacks Experience** connected rugby with wider conversations around identity, leadership and belonging. Guided by former All Blacks player Ian Jones, now General Manager of the All Blacks Experience, the immersive experience explored how haka, Māori culture and team values continue to shape Aotearoa New Zealand's national identity and traditions of welcome. Both experiences reflected Auckland's growing focus on participatory programming within conferences across the city.





Indigenous Knowledge in a Global Context

The **World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education (WIPCE) 2025** placed Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland at the centre of international conversations surrounding Indigenous education, language revitalisation, climate knowledge and cultural continuity.

Hosted by **Auckland University of Technology (AUT)** alongside Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei, the Māori iwi (tribe) with ancestral connections to central Auckland, WIPCE brought approximately 3,800 delegates from more than 40 countries to the city, becoming the largest academic conference held in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Discussions connected Indigenous perspectives on education, research, climate, language revitalisation and digital innovation. Māori knowledge systems sat alongside perspectives from Latin America, North America, the Pacific and other regions, creating an international exchange grounded in local context.

Pōwhiri, formal Māori welcoming ceremonies, bilingual signage, Indigenous artwork and cultural programming formed part of the delegate experience across venues. Public events connected parts of the programme with Auckland residents, while cultural visits introduced delegates to Pacific voyaging traditions and Māori storytelling. Waka hourua experiences introduced delegates to traditional double-hulled Pacific voyaging canoes used by Polynesian navigators to travel across the Pacific, while Indigenous culinary collaborations brought together chefs from several countries to explore native ingredients, food systems and cultural exchange.



Sustainability through Daily Practice

Environmental initiatives focused on practical systems connected with food, hospitality and community participation. **Kelmarna Community Farm**, a short drive from the city centre, combines regenerative agriculture, environmental education and urban food production across five acres of public land. Volunteers, schools and chefs work alongside the farm team on composting, regenerative gardening and food programmes linked with long-term behavioural change.

Food also formed an important part of the wider sustainability discussion. Menus across the city increasingly highlight regional produce, locally sourced seafood, North Island wines and plant-based options aligned with changing delegate expectations around wellbeing and environmental responsibility.

Dining experiences linked sustainability with storytelling and local identity. Conversations around sourcing, regenerative agriculture and native ingredients appeared throughout the programme. During dinner at kingi, delegates were introduced to **Velskov**, a regenerative native forest initiative centred on kākara restoration, forest foraging and native planting. As part of efforts to offset the group's visit, kākara trees were named on behalf of participants and later planted and geolocated within the wider reforestation project. The initiative also demonstrated how environmental offsetting and CSR activities can integrate into delegate programmes and event legacies.

Environmental initiatives formed part of a wider strategy linking hospitality, infrastructure and long-term destination positioning. Recent events, including **TRENZ 2026**, **MEETINGS 2026** and the inaugural **MICHELIN Guide New Zealand ceremony** at NZICC, point to growing international visibility surrounding the precinct and wider city.

Programmes such as the **Auckland Business Events Fund** continue supporting that momentum, helping attract conferences connected with infrastructure, medtech, agritech, cleantech, aerospace and creative technologies. For international planners, Auckland increasingly offers an environment where meetings connect with local knowledge, cultural continuity, creativity and the harbour landscape surrounding the city. The opening of NZICC strengthens that proposition not only for Auckland, but for Aotearoa New Zealand's wider business-events sector as the country expands its presence within the international meetings landscape.



Rotorua's Meetings Landscape through Māori Leadership

Following our visit to Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, *HQ* continued south into the geothermal landscapes of Rotorua with a programme guided by **Michele Frost, Conference and Events at Tauhara North Tourism Ltd.** Located in Aotearoa New Zealand's central North Island, the region combines volcanic landscapes, lakes, geothermal systems and growing meetings infrastructure with strong Māori cultural and economic leadership.

Much of our visit centred on conversations with Māori business owners, guides, artists and community leaders discussing how business events and responsible tourism support cultural continuity across the region. Rotorua's geothermal landscapes, lakes and waterways remain closely connected to those discussions, shaping relationships between iwi, the Māori tribal communities connected to the land, and the whenua, or ancestral territories, they continue protecting for future generations.

Author: Jesús Guerrero Chacón, HQ Deputy Editor

Water, Geothermal Landscapes and Conference Experiences

Before reaching Rotorua, the journey south through the Waikato region stopped at Te Waihou Walkway and the Blue Spring near Putāruru, where some of New Zealand's clearest water emerges through native vegetation and volcanic rock. The spring supplies a significant proportion of the country's bottled water and remains protected for its environmental and cultural importance.

At Aratiatia Dam, the controlled release of water recreates the natural flow of the Waikato River before hydroelectric development altered the landscape. The river has long functioned as a route for trade, travel and food gathering, while also carrying whakapapa, the genealogical relationships linking people, ancestors and place. Today, the releases continue under agreements recognising the importance of maintaining the river's historic pathways for local Māori communities and future generations.

Nearby, **AWA Rapids Jet** uses water released from Aratiatia Dam to navigate sections of the Waikato River that once formed its natural rapids system. Alongside the high-speed experience, guides discussed the historical importance of the river for Ngāti Tahu–Ngāti Whaoa, the Māori iwi whose traditional territory stretches between the Rotorua lakes and Lake Taupō across the geothermal areas of the central North Island.

During a guided visit to **Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Wonderland**, **Awatere Douglas, Manager**, alongside Māori guides, discussed how geothermal areas continue shaping relationships between Māori communities, tourism and environmental stewardship across the region.



The visit moved between geology and cultural history. Stops including the Champagne Pool, the bubbling hot spring known for mineral-rich green water and bright orange edges, led into discussions of geothermal cooking traditions, thermal bathing, healing practices and the significance of moko within Māori identity. Guides also covered native plants, thermal waters and geothermal cooking methods, together with conservation, environmental management and employment pathways within local communities.

The relationship between water, infrastructure and regional identity also extends into Rotorua's conference sector, hosting the **Water New Zealand Stormwater Conference & Expo** in 2025, focused on resilient infrastructure and nature-based water systems, followed by the **Water Industry Operations Group Conference** in 2026.

Set within the Volcanic Plateau and shaped by hydroelectric and geothermal development along the Waikato River, Rotorua increasingly positions itself as a meeting place for meetings surrounding water management, environmental resilience and sustainable infrastructure. The volcanic landscapes also support conference and incentive programmes connected with local identity.



Business Events and Māori Ownership

Māori-owned cultural institutions increasingly operate as meeting places where business events intersect with preservation and intergenerational education.

Te Puia combines a geothermal and cultural village with the **New Zealand Māori Arts and Crafts Institute**, the national campus for Māori carving, weaving and traditional arts education. Alongside geothermal landscapes including the Pōhutu Geyser, the site brings together Te Arawa cultural traditions, oral storytelling, cuisine, conservation and arts training within a working cultural environment hosting international delegates and business events.

Tourism revenue supports national carving, weaving and stone-carving schools where tauira, or students, train in traditional arts while learning the histories, language and tikanga, or cultural protocols, connected to their work. The site also includes Te Puia's **Kiwi Conservation Centre**, reinforcing native wildlife protection. Te Puia also hosted the **2026 National Māori Sport & Recreation Conference**, highlighting Indigenous wellbeing, recreation and community development.

Te Pā Tū approaches cultural engagement differently. Set within a forest pā, or fortified village, the experience combines pōwhiri welcomes, haka, waiata, traditional games and seasonal feasts. The programme emphasises manaakitanga, hospitality and care for guests, alongside kaitiakitanga, the long-term guardianship of land and environment.

Dinner created opportunities for direct discussion during the visit. **Chief Te Arikī Atakura** from Te Pā Tū spoke about the role younger generations continue playing in carrying Māori traditions into contemporary business, tourism and creative industries.



© Champagne Pool at
Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Wonderland

Tauhara North No.2 Trust positions tourism and business events within a wider intergenerational strategy centred on protecting land, strengthening whānau, or extended family networks, and creating long-term opportunities for future generations. Ownership remains central to that strategy, allowing Māori organisations to retain cultural authority while expanding participation across hospitality, tourism and conference experiences. The approach reflects a wider global focus on Indigenous-led development and economic participation, increasingly combining cultural continuity, environmental stewardship and long-term economic resilience within tourism and trade models.

Wai Ariki Hot Springs & Spa reflects Rotorua's growing focus on wellness, geothermal experiences and Māori-owned hospitality within the business-events sector. Located on the Rotorua lakefront overlooking Mokoia Island, the development combines geothermal bathing, spa treatments and Māori wellness concepts connected with water, restoration and healing traditions.

Sales Executive Jesse Tamm described growing interest in international conferences, incentive groups and retreats aligned with wellness, sport and healthy-lifestyle sectors. Wai Ariki increasingly positions itself for corporate groups seeking indoor meeting space and outdoor experiences connected with the geothermal and lake environments. The adjacent development of what is expected to become Rotorua's first Māori-owned hotel would further expand Indigenous ownership across the region's premium hospitality and meetings infrastructure. Planned beside Wai Ariki on the lakefront, the project reflects wider efforts by iwi organisations to retain stronger participation across accommodation, wellness and conference development.

The **Energy Events Centre** and **Sir Howard Morrison Centre** continue anchoring Rotorua's conference infrastructure, hosting medical, engineering and environmental conferences, while **RotoruaNZ**, the council-controlled destination and economic development agency responsible for conference attraction, continues working alongside iwi-owned operators when building conference programmes connecting delegates with Indigenous ownership and long-term community development. Māori organisations shape the cultural experiences, the infrastructure, hospitality and long-term direction of the visitor economy.



Poland's Mid-Sized Cities Are Writing the Next Chapter of Its Meetings Industry

Cities rarely transform overnight. More often, they evolve through deliberate decisions about mobility, education, public space and the communities they aspire to build. Business events rarely initiate those changes, but they can accelerate them, amplify them and reveal them. Few countries illustrate this relationship more convincingly than Poland, where a growing number of regional cities are using meetings to reinforce broader ambitions for economic development, sustainability and civic identity.

Author: Manuel A. Fernandes, HQ Magazine Manager

That was the underlying message of two events held in June: **Spotlight on Poland** in Poznań and the **GDS-Forum & Impact Day** in Szczecin. Different in format yet remarkably aligned in purpose, both explored how destinations can create greater value for delegates, residents and local economies alike. As **Aneta Książek, Head of the Poland Convention Bureau**, observed, “In recent years, we have seen a clear rise in the importance of what we call second- and third-tier cities in the meetings industry. Their growing presence in international rankings reflects not only their increasing appeal but also the success of our broader strategy to promote Poland as a multidimensional destination.”

Recent ICCA figures suggest that strategy is bearing fruit. Poland retained its place among the world's Top 20 destinations for international association meetings in 2024, while cities such as Poznań and Szczecin continue to strengthen their international profile. Moving away from an exclusive reliance on Warsaw and Kraków, the country's meeting landscape is becoming increasingly diversified, driven by distinctive urban identities and specialised knowledge economies.

Poznań: A Destination Built on Balance

Among Poland's regional cities, few illustrate that concept as convincingly as Poznań. Widely regarded as the cradle of the Polish state, it combines a rich historical legacy with one of the country's strongest business and academic ecosystems. Efficient public transport, thriving universities and a long-standing trade fair tradition have helped create a city where economic vitality coexists with an exceptional quality of life.

Those qualities provided an appropriate backdrop for **Spotlight on Poland**, whose programme centred on four themes: Impact, Relevance, Accessibility and Participant-centred Design. Accessibility, delegates were reminded, extends far beyond ramps and venue specifications. It

begins with the way a city functions, how easily people move through it and how naturally visitors become part of everyday urban life.

Made Raie's keynote challenged one of the industry's most entrenched assumptions: if attendance figures alone do not define a successful event, what does? Her answer shifted the conversation towards legacy, arguing that meetings should be assessed by the knowledge they generate, the communities they strengthen and the contribution they make long after delegates have departed.

Poznań offers fertile ground for that approach. Its universities, research institutions and culture of knowledge exchange provide a strong foundation for conferences whose influence extends well beyond the conference hall. Yet, business is only one part of the city's identity. During our conversation, **Jan Mazurczak, CEO of the Poznań Convention Bureau**, returned repeatedly to the importance of balance. Unlike destinations grappling with overtourism, Poznań has managed to preserve a healthy relationship between residents and visitors. “If you visit the Old Market Square or any of the city's popular restaurants and cafés, you will find tourists and residents sharing the same spaces. We have not lost our local identity, and that is something we value greatly.”

One of the best examples is **Pyrkon**, now one of Europe's largest fantasy festivals. Rather than isolating participants inside a convention centre, the event spills into the surrounding streets, restaurants and public spaces, encouraging interaction between visitors and local communities. “For us, this is about much more than aesthetics,” Mazurczak explained. “We want to create an environment where delegates can enjoy their time beyond the conference venue itself, whether before the event, between sessions or after the programme has concluded.”



That philosophy also reflects Poznań's broader market positioning. For years, Poland's competitive advantage was largely associated with affordability. Today, that narrative is evolving. "We are no longer perceived as an exceptionally low-cost destination, and that is an important shift. Today, our focus is not on competing through price alone but on delivering high-quality experiences, strong service standards and excellent value for both time and investment." It is a sentiment that mirrors Poland's own development. As Mazurczak concluded, "Our task is not to invent a story for Poznań, but to communicate the one the city already has."

Szczecin: Reinvention with Purpose

If Poznań illustrates maturity, Szczecin demonstrates reinvention. Situated close to the German border, the city emerged from the Second World War with an entirely new demographic composition. Generations of newcomers built a community defined less by inherited traditions than by adaptability, openness and shared ambition. That perspective continues to shape the city's development today. It also explains why Szczecin provided such a fitting setting for the **GDS Forum & Impact Day**, where conversations focused on stewardship, sustainability and the role meetings can play in creating positive environmental, social and economic outcomes.

Central to that vision is **Floating Garden 2050**, a long-term development strategy launched in 2008 following the success of the Tall Ships Races. More than just a tourism campaign, it laid the foundations for an urban renewal built around the city's greatest natural asset. "The decisive factor was the view of Szczecin from the sky," recalled **Leopold Korytkowski, Director of Tourism and Events at Żegluga Szczecińska Turystyka i Wydarzenia**, the city's event promotion DMO. "The aerial images revealed that almost 70% of the city consisted of water, parks and forests. This is our greatest asset."

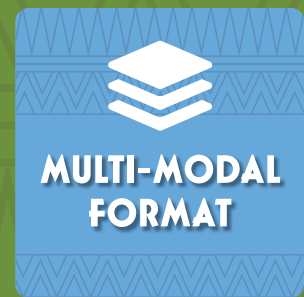
That simple observation has since influenced everything from waterfront regeneration and mobility to talent attraction and economic diversification. Offshore wind, renewable energy, maritime innovation and sustainable transport are now central to Szczecin's long-term ambitions. "We have to rethink our city strategies around talent and urban development. We want to give power to the people, power to the youth, and help them create the city they want to live in," Korytkowski said.

The meetings sector has become part of that wider transformation. "The city is not changing because of tourism. Tourism is following the changes already happening in the city." That philosophy is reflected in Szczecin's event infrastructure. Instead of relying on a single flagship convention centre, the city has embraced a network of adaptable heritage venues such as **Stara Rzeźnia**, a beautifully restored nineteenth-century slaughterhouse on Łasztownia Island that now hosts conferences, exhibitions and cultural events. It is an apt symbol of Szczecin itself: preserving its industrial past while giving it a new purpose.

The discussions held during the GDS Forum returned repeatedly to the same conclusion. Traditional indicators such as visitor numbers and economic impact remain important, but they no longer tell the whole story. Looking back, Poland's regional cities no longer appear as emerging alternatives to the country's established gateways. They have become protagonists in their own right. Poznań and Szczecin may follow different paths, yet both demonstrate how meetings can support broader ambitions for urban development, innovation and social value. If the future of the meetings industry lies in creating lasting benefits, Poland's next chapter may well be written far beyond its largest cities.



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