



International **Photography** Assoc. Festivals

Practical Guide for Sustainable Photography Festivals (2026)¹

This document is presented as an open draft intended to encourage collective reflection on how sustainability (understood in environmental, social, cultural, and organisational terms) should guide the contemporary management of photography festivals. At the International Photography Festivals Association (IPFA), we believe that the professionalisation of the sector depends today not only on artistic excellence and organisational capacity, but also on our ability to act responsibly in response to environmental and social realities.

This guide is not conceived as a closed or mandatory set of rules; it establishes shared principles and progressive orientations that each festival can adapt according to its own scale, geography, and resources. We recognise that every organisation operates under different conditions. Diversity is one of the strengths of our network. What we propose is not uniformity, but coherence between our values and our actions. Throughout this guide, sustainability is understood as a broad framework that includes ecological responsibility, social inclusion, cultural coherence, and long-term organisational resilience.

This guide also recognises that the material, institutional, and territorial conditions in which festivals operate are deeply unequal. In many Global South contexts, and in other territories marked by structural fragility, institutional

¹ This document builds upon discussions and materials developed within the European Photo Festival Network (EPFN), including the *Photography Festival Sustainability Handbook* (F/262 – Festival de Fotografia Analógica & F/SOS – Stories of Solidarity, Portugal), authored by João Carlos with contributing editor Filipa Banza, as well as reflections shared by f/stop – Festival für Fotografie Leipzig (Constanze Müller and Sandra Plessing) and other European network members engaged in ongoing sustainability dialogues.

discontinuity, and limited resources, sustainability depends not only on reducing environmental impacts, but also on sustaining cultural projects in close relation to communities, territories, and local realities.

This guide should also progressively align with the United Nations 2030 Agenda by identifying the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) most directly connected to each section. Referencing these goals can help festivals situate their practices within a broader international framework and communicate their commitments more clearly, both within their organisations and on public platforms such as their websites.

Photography festivals frequently engage with themes of climate, justice, community, global exchange, and memory. It is therefore consistent and necessary that our production models reflect a conscious understanding of impact, responsibility, and long-term sustainability. Sustainability is not a limitation of ambition; it is a refinement of intention.

We invite all IPFA members to read, discuss, question, and enrich this document. Sustainability is not a destination, but a continuous process of reflection, adjustment, and collective learning.

1. Sustainability as an Organisational Principle

Sustainability should not function as a separate project or as an occasional requirement linked to funding calls. Gradually, it should become integrated into the festival's decision-making culture. When this approach is understood as structural rather than decorative, it influences programming, partnerships, mobility, production, and communication. Caring for people (through stable teams, fair working conditions, and long-term collaboration) is often more responsible and sustainable than prioritising constant growth in production. Sustainable management also implies financial responsibility, ensuring that environmental commitments are aligned with realistic and resilient economic planning. Integrating this perspective into internal processes strengthens external credibility. Audiences, artists, and funders increasingly expect coherence between discourse and action. This does not require immediate transformation, but rather clarity of intention and progressive improvement. In many festivals, especially in contexts with less institutional or financial stability, this principle also involves recognising the real limits of the organisation, avoiding team overload, and building forms of continuity that do not depend on the permanent exhaustion of those involved. Continuous internal learning and training are essential so that environmental, social, and organisational commitments can translate into informed decisions.

→ **Sustainability becomes meaningful when it informs daily decisions rather than exceptional gestures.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

1. Include sustainability as a standing agenda item in team meetings.
2. Draft a 1–2 page sustainability mission aligned with festival values.
3. Appoint a sustainability contact person within the team.
4. Include sustainability objectives in annual planning documents.
5. Review key decisions (travel, materials, catering) through a sustainability lens.
6. Integrate sustainability questions into staff training.
7. Conduct a brief internal sustainability review after each edition.

2. Inclusion, Diversity, and Accessibility

Sustainability extends beyond environmental concerns and must also include the social and cultural conditions through which festivals are conceived, produced, and experienced. Questions of access, representation, diversity, and belonging are not secondary issues, but essential dimensions of long-term cultural responsibility. A festival's impact is measured not only by how it reduces emissions or manages resources, but also by who feels welcomed, who is visible, whose voices are heard, and whose perspectives are included. This requires attention to structural economic, physical, geographic, linguistic, and cultural barriers that may limit participation or recognition. It also involves an active commitment to diversity in programming, curatorial approaches, and institutional narratives, including sensitivity to different identities, contexts, and lived experiences. In many Global South contexts, this dimension also includes recognising situated forms of knowledge, diverse languages, Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and historically marginalised communities, as well as memories, narratives, and forms of representation that have often remained outside dominant cultural frameworks. Ensuring accessibility and inclusion strengthens institutional legitimacy and reinforces the ethical foundations of the festival. Environmental awareness and social responsibility are interconnected; when addressed together, they contribute to a more open, equitable, and resilient cultural ecosystem.

→ **Sustainability is fully realised only when environmental responsibility is accompanied by inclusion, accessibility, and meaningful cultural representation.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

1. Ensure physical accessibility.
2. Promote gender balance.
3. Provide digital participation options.
4. Offer scholarships or fee waivers.

5. Collaborate with marginalised communities.
6. Include multilingual communication when possible.
7. Consider different cultural, gender, and identity perspectives in programming.

3. Local Production and Community Integration

A festival's connection to its local context directly influences its long-term stability. When production, partnerships, and programming are rooted in the local environment, the festival becomes more structurally resilient and less dependent on external infrastructures. Collaborating with local institutions, suppliers, schools, and cultural organisations reduces transport needs while strengthening regional networks. Beyond environmental benefits, local production supports knowledge exchange, shared responsibility, and continuity beyond the event's duration. In many Global South contexts, this dimension also implies a deeper territorial rootedness: working from the realities of the place, strengthening ties with specific communities, and recognising that a festival does not simply take place in a territory, but can also actively help sustain it culturally. When local audiences and artists feel involved, the event develops a stronger social foundation that supports both sustainability and international ambition. In many cases, this local involvement is also connected to the preservation of collective memories, community archives, and territorial narratives that festivals can help make visible, activate, and transmit.

→ **A festival rooted locally builds long-term structural resilience.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

1. Partner with local print labs.
2. Collaborate with universities and art schools.
3. Offer workshops for neighbourhood communities.
4. Include local artists in each edition.
5. Develop community outreach programmes.
6. Offer discounted tickets for residents.
7. Create year-round community engagement initiatives.

4. Environmentally Conscious Curating and Exhibition Design

Curating is not only an intellectual or aesthetic practice; it is also a material one. Every exhibition involves decisions about printing, mounting, construction, lighting, transport, and dismantling that translate ideas into physical form. These decisions are not neutral: they reflect institutional priorities and the degree of coherence between discourse and practice. The choice of materials, display systems, and production scale affects not only the immediate footprint of the exhibition but also its long-term environmental

impact. When exhibition design is approached strategically, it can reduce waste, optimise resources, and create infrastructures usable across multiple editions. In this sense, curatorial strength should be measured by coherence and depth rather than by the volume of production. In many Global South festivals, this coherence is also expressed through practices of reuse, repair, adaptation, and material inventiveness developed under limited-resource conditions, which should not be understood as shortcomings, but as valuable forms of situated knowledge. Considering durability, modularity, reuse, and local production as integral parts of the curatorial process allows festivals to innovate responsibly and build more resilient exhibition models.

→ **Curatorial coherence includes material responsibility embedded in exhibition design and production.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

1. Design modular and reusable exhibition systems.
2. Avoid PVC and polystyrene.
3. Print without dates for reuse.
4. Store frames and plinths for future editions.
5. Commission local fabrication.
6. Reduce excessive exhibition builds.
7. Share exhibition infrastructure with partner festivals.

5. Materials, Printing, and Communication Design

Festivals are temporary events, yet the materials they produce can have a lasting impact. Decisions related to printing, signage, display supports, and promotional items directly influence the environmental footprint of the project and the volume of waste generated after the event. Planning from the outset which materials can be reused, which can be avoided, and which can be adapted for future editions helps reduce unnecessary production and optimise resources. Effective communication does not depend on the quantity of materials produced, but on the clarity and coherence of the message. Integrating criteria of reduction, reuse and durability makes design an active tool within the festival's environmental and ecological strategy.

→ **Designing with foresight is a concrete way to reduce future impact.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

1. Print only essential materials.
2. Use recycled or FSC-certified paper.
3. Replace vinyl banners with reusable fabric.
4. Use QR codes instead of large posters.
5. Develop reusable signage.

6. Provide digital press kits instead of printed versions.
7. Archive design materials for reuse.

6. Responsible Catering and Hospitality

Catering and hospitality management involves environmental, economic, and social implications that directly affect the impact of the event. At the same time, decisions related to hospitality influence how the festival's environmental and social commitments are perceived and experienced. Responsible catering does not require radical transformation, but consistent and thoughtful adjustments. Small improvements can significantly reduce impact while maintaining quality and guest experience. When aligned with broader sustainability goals, hospitality becomes a coherent extension of the festival's values rather than a separate operational concern.

→ **Responsible hospitality reinforces institutional coherence by aligning guest experience with sustainability values.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

1. Increase the proportion of gluten-free, vegetarian and plant-based options in menus.
2. Eliminate bottled water and provide clearly accessible refill stations.
3. Use reusable or deposit-based serveware systems instead of single-use items.
4. Partner with local and seasonal food suppliers to reduce transport impact.
5. Plan catering quantities carefully to minimise food waste.
6. Establish agreements to donate surplus food when feasible.
7. Communicate environmental and waste reduction criteria to catering suppliers in advance.

7. Digital Formats as Strategic Extensions of the Festival

Digital formats cannot replace the communal, tactile, and relational dimensions that define photography festivals. Physical encounters with artworks, artists, and audiences remain essential. However, digital tools can significantly complement in-person programming when used strategically. Their use should form part of a coherent cultural and environmental strategy that develops hybrid models capable of preserving the quality of the encounter, expanding access, and responsibly reducing the environmental impact of cultural activity. Talks, screenings, portfolio reviews, or small digital editions can be organised with relatively modest infrastructure and cost. Growing familiarity with digital platforms has reduced technical barriers to participation. These formats make it possible to reach regions and communities that might otherwise remain excluded due to travel costs or logistical limitations. At the same time, it is

important to recognise that access to digital infrastructure, stable connectivity, and technical equipment remains highly unequal across territories, so hybrid strategies must be adapted to each context rather than assuming homogeneous conditions. They also extend the lifespan of festival content beyond its physical dates. Developing accessible digital archives can reinforce the festival's role as a platform of long-term cultural memory. In this sense, online initiatives not only help reduce mobility-related impact, but also constitute a powerful tool for audience development and international visibility.

→ **Digital formats should complement physical festivals, expanding reach and reducing impact while preserving the depth of in-person encounters.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

1. Livestream and record conferences, debates, and workshops.
2. Archive lectures and panels online.
3. Offer digital portfolio reviews.
4. Develop hybrid network meetings.
5. Provide online access for remote audiences.
6. Use digital catalogues instead of large print runs.
7. Evaluate the cost-impact ratio before investing in advanced technologies.

8. Conscious Internationalisation

In today's world, international exchange is fundamental to photography festivals. However, internationalisation must be intentional, not automatic. The cultural value of each invitation must be weighed against its environmental and structural impact. International visibility should be defined as a qualitative objective rather than a quantitative one. This reflection also requires recognising that international circulation is shaped by strong inequalities between centres and peripheries, and that not all festivals, artists, or territories have equal access to circuits of visibility, funding, and global legitimacy. Transnational exchange is essential, but it must be approached consciously. An international presence can be maintained through combinations of physical and digital participation, longer residencies, or shared collaborations between festivals. Structuring circulation through travelling exhibition models, rather than repeated individual transport, can reinforce international exchange while reducing unnecessary mobility. A conscious internationalization allows one to maintain global dialogue by acting with environmental and cultural responsibility. In this sense, a situated perspective also invites us to think of internationalisation not as adaptation to external models, but as a construction based on more horizontal exchanges and on the

recognition of voices, forms of knowledge, and contexts that have historically been underrepresented.

→ **International presence should generate meaningful cultural value in proportion to its impact.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

1. Invite some artists to participate digitally when physical presence is not essential.
2. Encourage guests to combine multiple activities in one trip.
3. Coordinate invitations with nearby festivals to share travel.
4. Develop travelling exhibitions instead of repeated individual transport.
5. Prioritise underrepresented regions in international invitations.
6. Offer online masterclasses with international contributors.
7. Evaluate the balance between local and international participants annually.

9. Travel and Mobility Awareness

Mobility is one of the most significant sources of environmental impact in photography festivals. Although its elimination is neither realistic nor desirable, it is possible to plan it more consciously and strategically. Addressing travel does not mean renouncing international exchange or limiting cultural dialogue, but rather reflecting more carefully on how, when, and for what purpose mobility takes place. Acting with greater awareness in this area allows festivals to reduce impact without compromising programme quality or international ambition. However, it is also important to recognise that low-impact mobility alternatives are not equally available in all territories, and that in large regions or places with limited infrastructure, decisions must be assessed in relation to context rather than through uniform standards.

→ **Mobility is not merely a logistical matter, but a strategic decision that requires conscious planning and alignment with the festival's objectives.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

1. Promote the use of trains for medium distances.
2. Provide guests with environmentally friendly travel guides.
3. Include audience travel surveys in registration.
4. Bundle public transport passes with tickets when possible.
5. Offer hybrid participation for panels and conferences.
6. Reduce short single-purpose trips.
7. Monitor travel patterns from one edition to the next.

10. Transparency and Honest Reporting

Transparency is a fundamental component of credible sustainability practice. When festivals openly communicate their intentions, progress, and limitations, they build trust with artists, audiences, partners, and funders. Sustainability efforts gain legitimacy not through perfection, but through clarity and consistency. Reporting should not function as a promotional exercise, but as a tool for reflection and improvement. This is especially important in contexts where festivals operate with limited resources, unstable support, or changing institutional conditions, and where communicating structural difficulties can also help generate understanding, cooperation, and shared learning. Sharing measurable actions, explaining decisions, and acknowledging areas where progress is still needed fosters a culture of responsibility. Admitting challenges does not weaken institutional image; it demonstrates seriousness and commitment. Moreover, transparent communication contributes to collective learning within the sector. When festivals exchange information about successes and difficulties, the entire network benefits from accumulated experience.

→ **Sustainability becomes stronger when it is accompanied by honest communication and shared accountability.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

1. Publish a sustainability summary annually.
2. Share travel data when available.
3. Report waste reduction progress.
4. Communicate challenges openly.
5. Invite audience feedback.
6. Share supplier information with peers.
7. Make reports accessible and easy to understand.

11. Knowledge Sharing and Network Collaboration

Sector-wide sustainability depends on festivals' capacity to act in a coordinated manner. Many face similar challenges related to mobility, production, funding structures, and audience development, and addressing them in isolation often leads to repeated efforts and inefficient use of resources. Collaborative networks enable the sharing of tools, suppliers, methodologies, and practical experience, allowing improvements to be implemented more efficiently and coherently. In the long term, shared reference frameworks or common measurement criteria could strengthen comparability and collective progress across festivals. This collective approach not only optimises resources but also strengthens professional standards across the sector. When knowledge circulates openly, innovation becomes more accessible and

improvement accelerates. A connected ecosystem of festivals is better equipped to adapt to environmental, social, and economic changes.

→ **Shared knowledge and collaboration strengthen the sector's capacity for transformation and reduce individual trial and error.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

1. Share supplier directories.
2. Exchange sustainable production solutions.
3. Circulate exhibitions between festivals.
4. Share research data.
5. Coordinate international invitations.
6. Discuss sustainability in public talks.
7. Develop shared measurement tools gradually.

12. Continuous Evaluation and Long-Term Vision

Ecological, social, and organisational transformation requires a structural approach grounded in continuous evaluation and long-term planning. Due to their recurring nature, festivals are uniquely positioned to incorporate moments of review between editions. Each edition should be understood as one phase within a broader process of learning. Analysing what worked, what can be improved, and which decisions produced unintended impacts helps turn accumulated experience into structural improvement. Evaluation should not focus only on quantifiable results, but also on coherence, organisational capacity, and alignment with the project's values. Sustainability is not built through perfect gestures, but through consistent improvements over time. In certain contexts, this evaluation must also take into account factors such as discontinuity in cultural policies, economic instability, institutional changes, or territorial conflicts, all of which directly affect the capacity to sustain ecological, social, and organisational processes. In some cases, acting sustainably may require declining opportunities that exceed the festival's environmental or organisational capacity.

→ **Sustainable progress is built through constant evaluation, accumulated learning, and gradual improvement.**

Examples and practical recommendations:

1. Conduct annual environmental impact assessments, inclusion and internal organization.
2. Set 1–2 realistic improvements per edition.
3. Archive sustainability decisions.

4. Establish a basic environmental baseline (travel, energy use, waste) and compare results from one edition to the next.
5. Avoid expanding without structural capacity.
6. Evaluate international travel patterns yearly.
7. Plan multi-year sustainability objectives.