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EUROPEAN SOCIETY OF ASSOCIATION EXECUTIVES

Bettina Reventlow-Mourier, Deputy Director, Copenhagen Convention Bureau (CCVB)



International association congresses are important platforms for exchanging knowledge, building new relations and contributing to solving some of the world's most pressing challenges.

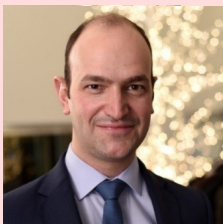
Delivering successfully on these events and ensuring their long-term value require close collaboration and strong, trusting partnerships between the association that own the events and the destinations that host them.

In today's increasingly unstable environment, marked by geopolitical disruptions, climate changes, and other significant risk factors, the importance of resilient partnerships has never been greater. We have all experienced great—and not so great—partnerships. But rarely do we take the time to reflect on their mechanics or discuss the externalities affecting them despite their importance. Nor do we necessarily have systems or frameworks in place to ensure consistency in our mutual collaborative approaches.

We therefore set out to explore the elements that an optimal partnership consists of, how they are perceived and prioritised and what they require, to set the foundation for a stronger, shared understanding. The findings here are intended to serve as an inspiration and awareness of the nature of true partnerships and it is an invitation to our respective communities to share more perspectives and best practices.

We hope you enjoy the report.

Ioannis Pallas, Managing Director, European Society of Association Executives (ESAE)



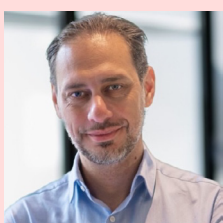
Associations find themselves in a transitory phase, as the COVID pandemic changed the habits of our delegates and the ways we work with our staff and stakeholders. Business plans and revenue streams are reassessed to ensure our organisations are fit-for-purpose. At the same time, cataclysmic geopolitical developments force us to be more agile and adaptive to change.

Not only are the criteria for choosing a Destination bound to change on behalf of Associations, but also the reasoning behind holding big or smaller conferences altogether. Both the Association, and its partners need to be able to prove the value they are bringing, and in this transition, Destinations have a critical role to play.

By bringing Communities together and making the right connections with local stakeholders like policymakers, academia, businesses and regional not-for-profits, Destinations can be a precious ally for aligning the mission and vision of an Association, with the goals and priorities of the Communities living in a city or region; thus creating long-term impact that can lead to sustainable growth, and the improvement of living standards.

Working together, Associations and Destinations can be more impactful, achieving a Legacy for

Stylianos Filopoulos, Managing Director, Association By Design SRL



If we aspire to change, we must break our habitual ways of thinking and doing things. CCVB and ESAE are spear-heading change within their domains and communities. We are delighted to support their efforts to re-design association-destination partnerships with a thinking, communication, and problem-solving method, like LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®, that fosters inclusivity, creativity, and shared understanding.

A tall tower constructed from various colored LEGO bricks (white, green, red, blue) stands against a dark background with blue and red lighting. The tower has a semi-circular opening in the middle section.

Workshop Identity

Title: "Re-designing Association – Destination Partnerships"

Date/Time/Venue: Wednesday 15th January 2025, ACE Events, Brussels

Organisers: CCVB and ESAE

Participants: 19 Association Executives, 3 Destination Executives and 3 facilitators

Challenge: Define the characteristics of aspirational partnerships between Associations and Destinations to deliver successful, sustainable, and impactful congresses and identify the practical steps needed to make them happen amid geopolitical, environmental and socioeconomic challenges.

Method: LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® Workshop Designed, Facilitated, Reported by Association By Design SRL.



1'

Read

- **Partnerships are a journey, not a transaction** - start before bidding and keep collaborating long after the last delegate leaves.
- **Six Step Action Framework** - early alignment, building trust, co-design, engaging stakeholders, impact-driven delivery, reflecting, and sharing - turn good congresses into great ones.
- **Transparency and honest, respectful talk are fundamental** - prioritise the time to clear the path and solve any “elephants in the room” (budgets, sponsorship, risk, deliveries, past experiences).
- **Long-term legacy goals are vital** - and when Destinations and Associations co-define meaningful, long-term impact, engagement and investment follow.



A top-down view of a white table where several people are using colorful LEGO bricks to build structures. Some people's hands and arms are visible at the edges of the frame. There are several printed sheets with diagrams of LEGO builds and small plastic bags containing specific pieces. A red banner with the title 'Executive Summary' is positioned in the upper left area of the image.

Executive Summary

Association and Destination leaders are redefining how, why, and where events take place, responding to evolving delegate expectations, shifting business models, and new geopolitical realities. At a LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® (LSP) workshop organized by Copenhagen Convention Bureau and ESAE, in Brussels, Association and Destination executives explored what an aspirational collaboration looks like today and which practices must evolve.

Participants highlighted a wide variety of elements, among which trust, transparency, honesty, alignment on shared goals, proactive communication, and inclusivity are critical to successful collaborations. Effective and successful congresses furthermore depend on effective brokers who translate association strategy and destination priorities, commit to a continuous partnership, and meaningfully involve local communities.

Long-term legacy planning emerged as vital, needing to align economic, social, scientific, and environmental ambitions from the outset. Addressing the tension between destinations' practical goals and associations' mission-driven impact requires robust intermediaries to bridge perspectives effectively.

An actionable framework emerged from the discussions:

Align ► Build Trust ► Co-design ► Engage ► Deliver ► Reflect

Recommendations include proactive stakeholder engagement, embracing innovation, integrating sustainability, and managing knowledge strategically.



Features of an Aspirational Collaboration - the shared model

The participants defined the ideal collaboration as a **journey** that begins in the earliest planning discussions and continues long after the closing session.

The journey is powered by **alignment, open communication, and continuous cooperation** around a clearly shared purpose and vision. This alignment must go beyond slogans: partners openly acknowledge and map missions, objectives, human and financial resources, ecological constraints, and non-negotiables, translating global goals into the local event ecosystem while respecting cultural diversity. Along the way, partners establish a living **sharing table**, where knowledge, data, and experience circulate freely among associations, CVBs, suppliers, and the host community. Building these **strong bridges** secure long-term impact and legacy—economic, social, scientific, and environmental—for all stakeholders.

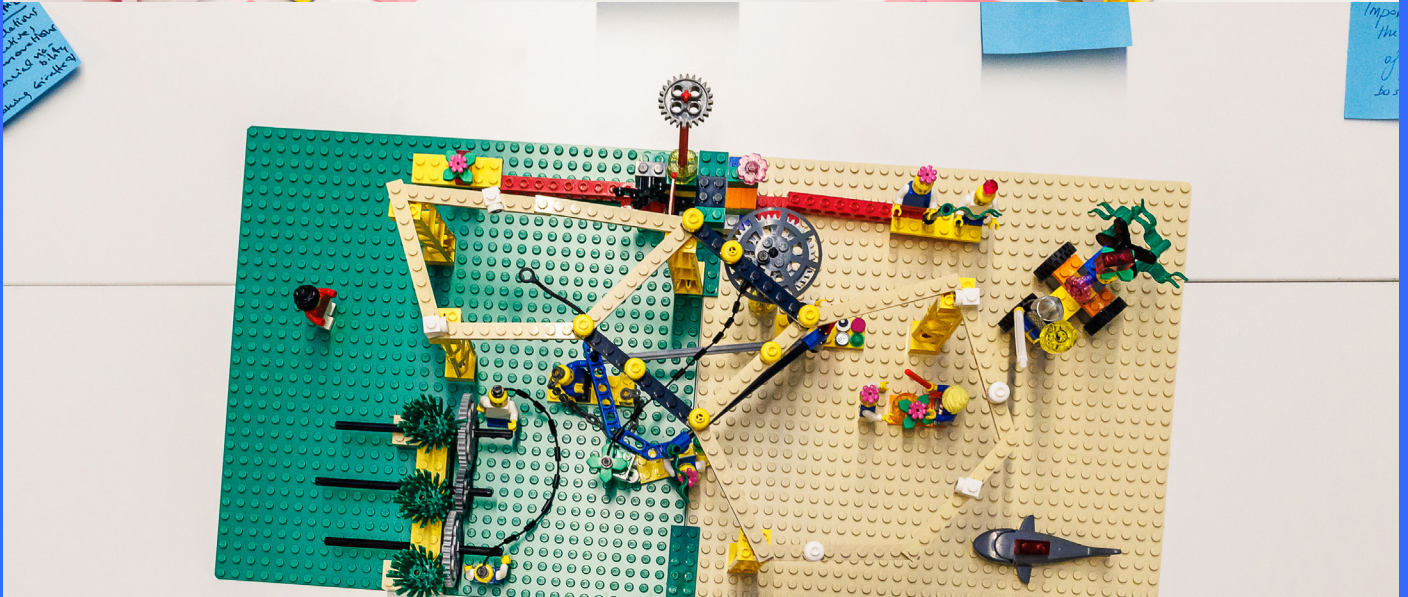
Although participants worked in three groups, certain success factors were consistent across every table: **trust, transparency, honesty, efficiency, and inclusiveness**. “Naming the elephants” early—budgets, politics, sponsorship, risk—creates the psychological safety needed to innovate. Inclusivity means engaging local citizens and culture, giving voice to those who might not bring immediate revenue, and planning jointly for **sustainability** and **legacy** in knowledge, infrastructure, and social capital. Engage robust **brokers** to translate between the association strategy and the local ecosystem.

Finally, participants stressed readiness for the unexpected: wearing a different hat, abandoning habitual formats, and injecting positive surprises. Rapid feedback loops, real-time dashboards, and a bias for action keep the partnership effective, responsive, and future-proof.

*All the different perspectives really amaze me.
There are different constructions, some similarities,
but everyone has a different way of seeing things.
Collaboration is important across any sector, any
industry, any destination, any association.*

Silke Schlinnertz,
Marketing and Communication Manager, **EPICA**

Features of an Aspirational Collaboration - the shared model



Six Step Action Framework – inspired from the workshop outcomes

1. Align on Purpose & Partnership (Early Planning)

- Prioritise an early and deep alignment: map vision, mission, KPIs and non negotiables before discussing venue specs. Discuss strategic priorities, desired long-term impact, success parameters for each stakeholder, and available resources. Openly share perceptions and expectations of each other's key drivers for the collaboration. Identify and appoint trusted “Brokers” — people fluent in both the association's mission and the destination ecosystem.
- Keep dialogue productive, ensure science and research-based decisions, and hold partners to measurable goals that connect impact with revenue potential.

Congresses of today need to have a purpose. It comes from the associations, but it is important to be discussed and decided also with the destination.

Chiara Gasparotto, Deputy CEO, ESTRO

2. Foster Proactive, Honest, and Trustful Communication

- Address the “elephants in the room”: budgets, sponsorship models, political sensitivities, earlier experiences, and perceptions. Be upfront about promises that cannot be delivered.
- Establish and maintain transparent and honest communication channels from the outset and consistently throughout the relationship; address potential or current challenges and build a foundation of mutual trust and respect.
- Commit to a continuous and genuine collaboration: Engage in ongoing cooperation and partnership throughout the entire event lifecycle, from initial planning to post-event evaluation and legacy building. This involves working together to solve problems, generate new ideas, and adapt to evolving circumstances and disruptions.

The conversation really has to be both ways and we need to be ‘in the shoes of the other person’.

Pauline Benoit, Senior Event Coordinator, Eurocities

3. Co-design the Congress (Programme & Experience)

- Run joint design sprints with local stakeholders and community representatives to ensure inclusivity and creativity.
- Embrace innovation and adapt to change. Be open to new ideas, technologies, and sustainable approaches and be willing to challenge traditional event formats and practices. This requires a flexible mindset and a willingness to learn and adapt.
- Prioritise and integrate sustainability. Collaboratively define and actively work towards shared sustainability goals to minimise the environmental impact of the event. This includes adopting environmentally responsible practices, strive for reduction and thorough reporting. Leverage the role of "Brokers". Actively identify and engage these brokers if not already done in alignment phase to facilitate connections, mutual understanding and optimal event design. Anchor programme choices in current science and research; prototype innovative formats and test them with member & community panels.
- Analyse risk scenarios jointly and agree on mitigation plans.
- Destinations to actively play a role in showcasing their unique, local culture as well as their strongholds. Activate local talent, culture and suppliers for authentic delegate experiences.

Convention bureaus are really important, because they are the people on the ground, who can really guide us and help us understand what is happening locally in their destination also when it comes to sustainability and legacy.

Angela Guillemet, Executive Director, INCON

4. Actively Engage and Value Local Stakeholders

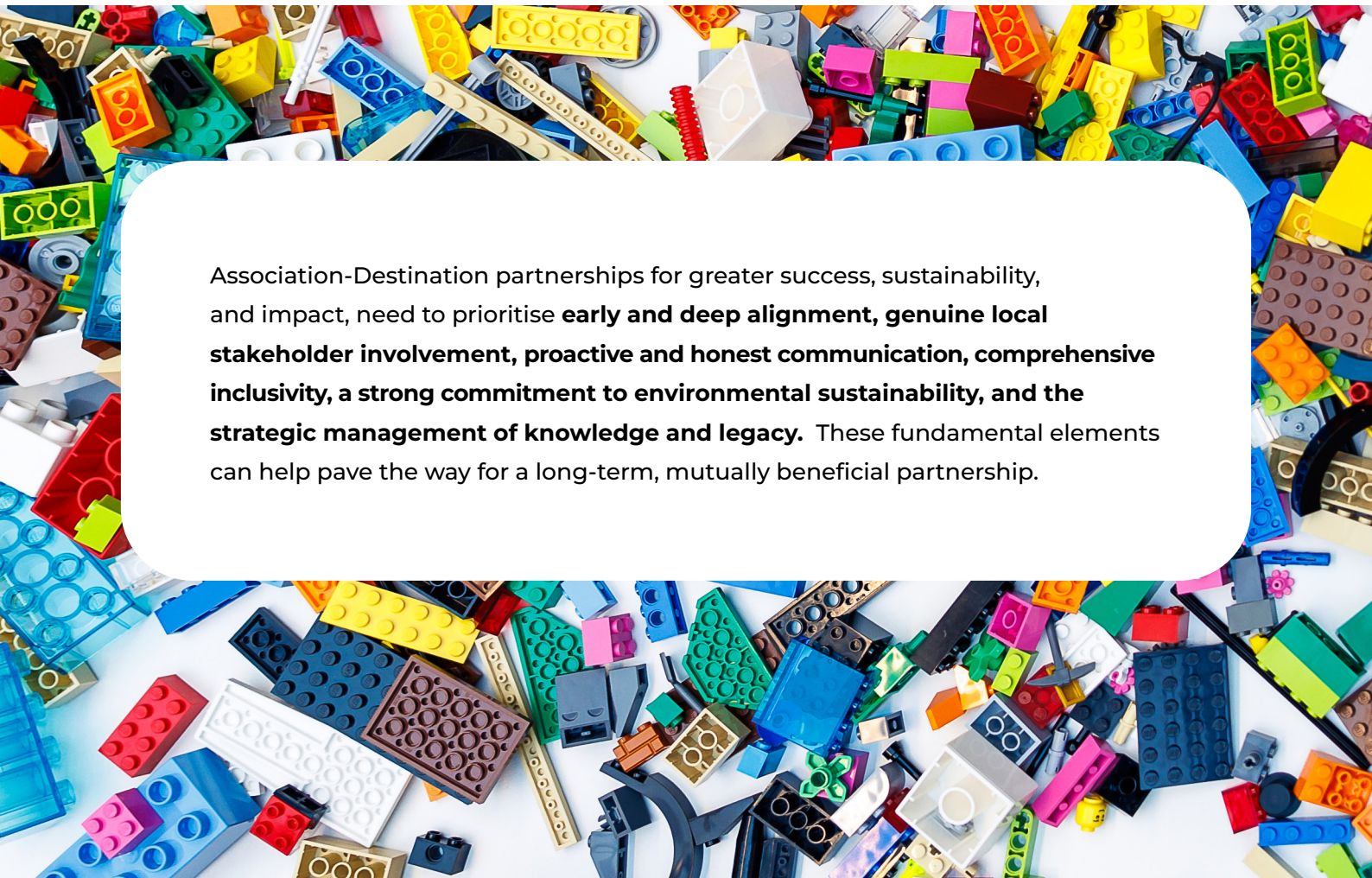
- Recognize the crucial role of local communities, academia, businesses, and organisations. Involve them in the planning, execution and promotion of the event as well as in a potential legacy programme. This engagement can unlock substantial synergies, tap into valuable resources and create broader impact.
- Have a close collaboration between event organisers and convention bureau, to ensure support for useful suggestions/alternatives/solutions amongst both local suppliers and stakeholders.

5. Deliver with Impact (On Site Execution)

- Deliver as promised.
- Solve challenges, if and when they occur, in a respectful and constructive manner.
- Show genuine interest and engagement in the event and the people involved.
- Provide real-time “Sharing Table” dashboards for finance, engagement and sustainability metrics.

6. Reflect, Share & Build Legacy (Post Event)

- Capture, share, discuss and utilise knowledge and lessons learned in a shared knowledge base to build an intellectual resource and foster continuous improvement.
- Co-author an Event Impact Report within 60 days.
- Evaluate the partnership, not just the meeting.



Association-Destination partnerships for greater success, sustainability, and impact, need to prioritise **early and deep alignment, genuine local stakeholder involvement, proactive and honest communication, comprehensive inclusivity, a strong commitment to environmental sustainability, and the strategic management of knowledge and legacy.** These fundamental elements can help pave the way for a long-term, mutually beneficial partnership.



Lego Serious Play method

The workshop followed the LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® (LSP) facilitation method, a scientifically based facilitated thinking, communication, and problem-solving technique. The workshop pursues Meet Denmark's initiative, "Pioneering the Congress of Tomorrow," to re-imagine the congresses of tomorrow. The 22 participants were organised into three groups, supported by a certified LSP facilitator per group. The workshop was centered around two main challenges each group had to address:

- The nature/ identity/ power/ features of an aspirational collaboration that creates value for both associations and destinations and leads to successful, sustainable and impactful congresses
- The action needed to make this aspirational collaboration come true.

The facilitator(s) posed the first question/challenge, and the participants had to build models with LEGO® Bricks to answer it, share the story within the group, and then further build a group model that everybody felt committed to. The second challenge included the same process, but following the storytelling phase, people had to position the model-represented

actions close to the relevant feature of the aspirational collaboration. As such, a Landscape of the Association – Destination Aspiration Partnerships was created, demonstrating both features and actions. This creative

and innovative method allowed the creation of new knowledge and narratives (Stories) and a stronger shared understanding of what an aspiration partnership looks like and how to make it happen.

The essence of the ideas/ metaphors of the shared model and of the actions were captured in this report and we were further developed to be presented in a useful and practical manner to a broader audience.

Different people have different ideas and opinions. The LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® methodology allows us to reconcile all the different positioning and understand what the model forward for everyone is, to define a positive vision for the event.

Alessandro Cortese, CEO, ESTRO

Relevant Reads

- Copenhagen Convention Bureau: Copenhagen Legacy lab, Copenhagen Risk Assessment White Paper
- Meet Denmark: Unleashing the magic of impactful events - Eight Building Block of Magic

Follow CCVB and ESAE for more aspirational partnerships

<https://www.wonderfulcopenhagen.com/convention-bureau/copenhagen-cvb>

<https://www.esae.eu>

Credits

List of Participants:

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2. Amanda Lazaroni, Senior Advisor, Communications & Events, Accountancy Europe
3. Amanda Millard, Event & Office manager IWTO
4. Andreia Costa, Community Manager, CENTR
5. Angela Guillemet, Executive Director, INCON
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12. Gökşen Caliskan, Senior B2B Advisor, Euractiv
13. Ioan Kaes, General Secretary, AEPO-ARTIS
14. Ioannis Pallas, Managing Director, ESAE
15. Irina Varlan, Board Member, ESAE
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19. Pauline Benoit, Senior Event Coordinator, Eurocities
20. Sharon Ashton, Senior Manager, Knowledge & Legacy, ICCA
21. Silke Schlinnertz, Marketing & Communications Manager, EPCA
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Facilitators:

1. Dominik Rhinnhofer (Co-facilitator)
2. Robert Rasmussen (Co-facilitator)
3. Stylianos Filopoulos (Lead facilitator)

Copenhagen Convention Bureau (CCVB):

CCVB is the official convention bureau of the greater Copenhagen area. Together with their wide spectrum of industry partners, they offer all the support you need for sourcing, planning or developing your event in Copenhagen. CCVB also works closely with academia, public authorities, and organisations and assists associations, together with the destinations in strategically and systematically creating long-term positive impact from both congresses and major events. CCVB is a partner with ESAE.



European Society of Association Executives (ESAE):

ESAE fosters the professionalisation of association management through peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and collaboration. ESAE members learn from one another, gain a thorough knowledge of the sector, overcome common challenges, and develop the skills necessary to create effective strategies for success.



Association By Design (ABD):

Association By Design (ABD) SRL is a Brussels-based consulting firm specialising in international association strategy and management. It aims to help communities reach their objectives and create a positive impact.

This report was compiled and written by:

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