IURC GLOBAL THEMATIC WORKSHOP · SESSION FACTSHEET

Deconstructing Sustainability

How the GDS-Index can help you transform your destination

About this session

Tourism moves people, money and attention on a vast scale, but can it leave a place better than it found it? That question is the starting point of this session, which introduces the Global Destination Sustainability Index (GDS-Index) and shows how cities are using it to turn sustainability ambition into measurable strategy. After an overview of the Index and its methodology, two destinations, Berlin and Adelaide, shared how benchmarking has reshaped the way they plan, collaborate and communicate. Together they illustrated what it takes to move a destination from measuring sustainability to genuinely improving it.

The GDS-Index at a glance

City Environmental Performance

- Climate & emissions
- Circularity & waste
- Water & air quality
- Transport & mobility
- Biodiversity

City Social Performance

- SDG alignment
- Personal safety
- Diversity & inclusion
- Accessibility
- Resident engagement

Supplier Performance

- Hotels
- Venues & attractions
- Agencies (PCO / DMC)
- Restaurants
- Tourism businesses

Destination Mgmt Performance

- Destination strategy
- Governance & reporting
- Policy & certification
- Climate action
- Measurement & impact

74 criteria, co-created by destinations and aligned to the UN SDGs and GSTC Destination Standard v2

What it is	A performance-improvement programme, not a certification, that measures and benchmarks the sustainability of tourism destinations. Run by the GDS-Movement; 151 destinations have taken part to date.
Methodology	74 criteria across the four pillars above, co-created by destinations and updated every year, aligned to the UN SDGs and the GSTC Destination Standard v2. 81 destinations were benchmarked in the latest cycle.
How it works	A six-stage improvement journey, collect data, submit, benchmark, results launch, performance report, action, supported by the Omni platform, webinars and 1:1 sessions.

Getting started	Three entry points: GDS Light (30 indicators, no ranking), the full Index (74 criteria) and a Regional Index, plus an optional pathway towards GSTC certification. Standard entry from €4.865 (premium ≈ €9.500).
Track record	Since 2016, a 31% rise in average performance across all destinations and a 46% rise among the Top 10, achieved even though the criteria get tougher each year. The 2025 Top 40 is published in September 2026.

The Cities' Perspective

Two destinations at very different stages of the journey, Berlin, a mature user of the Index, and Adelaide, in its third year, share what changed when they put it to work.

Case study — Berlin (visit Berlin)

From scattered projects to a citywide, evidence-based strategy

- A major city destination (29.4M overnight stays, 12.4M guests in 2025, 41% international) where the question shifted from volume to the value tourism creates for residents, business and visitors.
- Overall score rose from 66.2% (2021) to 80.5% (2025), placing Berlin 4th in the Metropolis & Mega-Cities category. The biggest gains came from supplier and environmental performance — certified hotels rose from 15% (2020) to 75% (2025).
- The Index surfaced concrete gaps and the initiatives to fill them: "Here in Berlin" (resident engagement), Tourism for All (accessibility), the Berlin Impact Programme (linking events to local projects), "Sustainable Berlin" certification, and a new Climate Roadmap for the tourism & MICE sector.
- It moved the work from isolated projects to a citywide, evidence-based effort — and the GDS-Index is now a tourism KPI in Berlin's new city sustainability strategy. Sustainability has also become a decision factor in MICE bids and tenders.

Case study — Adelaide (Business Events Adelaide)

Using collaboration and a strong sustainability record to grow globally

- In just three years on the Index, Adelaide rose from 77th (2024 debut) to Most Improved Destination 2025 and 54th today — and ranks 12th globally for environmental performance, the highest of any Australian destination.
- Client demand is the driver: 74% of travellers want destinations to demonstrate sustainability, two-thirds will pay for it, 42% won't travel unless wellbeing is considered, and 85% want to respect local cultures and leave a positive legacy.

- South Australia leads the world on annual renewable energy (targeting 100% by 2027), was the first state to ban single-use plastics, and hosts one of the world's largest lithium-ion batteries, credentials the city can now evidence and promote.
- A "Team Adelaide" committee (tourism commission, city council, convention centre, suppliers) brought separate projects under one pathway, helping turn business events into a record AU$684 M and a platform to grow internationally (80% of events are currently domestic).

Lessons learned

- **A benchmark is a catalyst, not just a scorecard.** In both cities the Index's biggest effect was organisational, it pulled fragmented efforts into a shared, coordinated strategy.
- **Clusters accelerate progress.** Cities that move together, in country or destination-type clusters (Nordics, UK, France, Canada), improve faster than those going it alone. The Index doubles as a community of practice, where big and small cities learn from each other; a natural fit for city-network programmes.
- **Evidence beats claims, and unlocks buy-in.** Verified data builds credibility with administrations, suppliers, residents and event clients. Both cities found that once mayors and ministers cite the ranking publicly, internal data and cooperation flow far more easily.
- **Sustainability is now a competitive factor.** For the business-events (MICE) market in particular, demonstrated performance increasingly decides bids and tenders.
- **Collaboration is the hard part, and the point.** Moving from "DMO-only" to citywide ownership ("Team Adelaide", Berlin's shared commitment) is what unlocked progress; the first year is the hardest, then momentum builds.
- **Improvement is a long game.** Berlin's steady multi-year climb shows that gains accumulate through sustained participation and a continuous-improvement cycle, not one-off audits.

Recommendations for destinations starting out

1. **Just start.** As both speakers put it: don't worry about what you don't know — focus on what you do, take the first step, and momentum builds. GDS Light (30 indicators) is a low-stakes way in.
2. **Appoint a lead and a small task force.** Name one dedicated person, convene a compact cross-organisation group (DMO, city, suppliers), work through the criteria together and build a reusable system you improve each year.
3. **Treat the Index as a strategic tool.** Align it with the city's wider sustainability goals and use the Performance Improvement Report to set a few prioritised, owned actions, not a one-off compliance exercise.
4. **Use the data to communicate.** Verified performance is a credible story for stakeholders, residents and, especially, event-bid audiences; public recognition from leaders accelerates internal cooperation.
5. **Consider moving as a cluster.** Joining or forming a cluster of peer cities speeds up change and shares the workload, a strong option for city networks and cooperation programmes.

Useful links & resources

- GDS-Index — overview and how to join — https://www.gds.earth/index/
- 2026 GDS-Index methodology (the 74 criteria) — https://www.gds.earth/wp-content/uploads/2026-GDS-Index-Methodology.pdf
- System-transformation white papers (with the University of Exeter) — https://www.gds.earth/white-papers/
- Technical Advisory Committee ("Changemakers") — https://www.gds.earth/changemakers/
- GDS-Forum Impact Day 2026 (Poland) — https://www.gds.earth/forum-impact-day-2026/
- Example shared in the session — Christchurch environmental SmartView portal — https://smartview.ccc.govt.nz/category/environment

Speakers: Guy Bigwood (GDS-Movement) · Nina Zantout (visit Berlin) · Tony Saulters (Business Events Adelaide). Moderated by IURC (Sandra Marin,, Ashish Verma). *Next milestone: GDS-Forum Impact Day, 16–18 June 2026, Szczecin (Poland). Index 2025 Top 40 published September 2026.*

Produced under the International Urban and Regional Cooperation (IURC) programme · Funded by the European Union.