
Sustainability in practice: Tools for a greener performing arts sector

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This session introduces three practical tools designed to support the performing arts on their sustainability journey: the STAGES Doughnut Protocol (a framework aligning theatre and companies' work with social and ecological boundaries), the ETC Theatre Green Book (an international reference handbook with step-by-step standards for sustainable productions, buildings and operations), and the Sustainable Culture Toolkit (a pragmatic guide offering strategies on sustainability, with each thematic section illustrated by concrete good practices).

Context and Overall Framework

The central objective of the session was to move beyond abstract commitments to sustainability and present concrete, operational tools that theatres can use to transform their practices. The speakers emphasized that sustainability in the performing arts must address both environmental responsibility and social well-being. Ecological transition cannot be separated from issues such as accessibility, diversity, working conditions, governance, and community engagement.

Across the three presentations, several shared principles emerged:

- Sustainability requires structured methodologies rather than isolated actions.
- Change must be collaborative and inclusive, involving all departments.
- Leadership support is essential, but grassroots engagement is equally critical.
- Tools must be adaptable to different scales—from small companies to national theatres.
- Transition takes time, training, and cultural change within organizations.

The exchange highlighted three complementary tools:

1. The Stages Donut Protocol

2. The Theatre Green Book
3. The Sustainable Cultural Toolkit

Each offers a different entry point into sustainable transformation, but all are freely accessible and designed for practical use.

The Stages Donut Protocol

Emmanuelle Lejeune introduced the Stages Donut Protocol, developed through the European STAGES project (Sustainable Theatre Alliance for a Green Environmental Shift). This four-year EU-supported collaboration involved twelve theatres and academic partners working to accelerate ecological transition in the performing arts sector.

The protocol is inspired by “donut economics,” which seeks to position human activity within planetary boundaries while ensuring social foundations. Applied to theatre, this means balancing environmental impacts (energy, materials, mobility, supply chains) with social minima (equity, accessibility, well-being, governance, community inclusion).

The methodology unfolds in three main steps:

1. Self-assessment
Institutions analyze their current environmental and social practices across departments. Working groups include staff, management, artists, audiences, and sometimes scientists. The goal is to create a detailed “snapshot” of the theatre’s current state.
2. Visioning the future
Teams imagine two scenarios: one in which nothing changes, and one in which the theatre defines a desirable sustainable future (often projected toward 2030). This phase builds a shared institutional vision.
3. Action planning
Concrete objectives—both qualitative and quantitative—are defined. Institutions establish measurable targets and monitoring processes.

The protocol typically requires around twenty hours across workshops and benefits from having a coordinator. It is designed as a horizontal process, fostering dialogue across departments and increasing collective ownership.

Emmanuelle Lejeune shared key lessons from partner theatres:

- Training is crucial. Staff must understand both the reasons for and the methods of change (e.g., technical training for LED lighting transitions).
- Time is essential; sustainability is a long-term journey.
- Budget matters, but many actions are organizational rather than financial.
- Existing tools, contracts, and policies can be leveraged.

Examples of implemented actions included:

- LED transition plans (VD Lausanne)
- Material-sharing networks (Maribor)
- Vegetarian menu promotion (MC93)
- Accessibility plans (Liège)
- Burnout prevention strategies (Antigone)
- Green governance structures with autonomous green teams (Dona Maria)

A key insight was that addressing social well-being alongside environmental action increases acceptance of ecological transformation.

The Theatre Green Book

Raquel Castells presented the Theatre Green Book, a widely adopted practical guide for achieving environmentally sustainable theatre. Developed collaboratively by theatre professionals and sustainability experts, it provides a structured pathway toward net zero.

The Theatre Green Book focuses on three pillars:

1. Productions

2. Operations

3. Buildings

Operations apply to all organizations, while productions and buildings depend on institutional structure.

The system is organized into three levels:

- Basic
- Intermediate
- Advanced

Institutions ideally progress across all applicable pillars.

The process begins with a “Preliminary” stage, which involves institutional commitment: forming a green committee, drafting an action plan, establishing data collection systems, and creating communication strategies.

A core strength of the Theatre Green Book is its measurable tools:

- A production calculator (Excel-based) to assess materials, reuse rates, and carbon-related factors.
- Operation trackers for areas such as paper, food, travel, waste, procurement, and digital practices.
- A building survey tool to assess insulation, energy efficiency, water use, and biodiversity support.

In productions, the emphasis is on transitioning from a linear to a circular model. At the basic level, at least 50% of stage materials must be reused or recycled, and 65% must be reused or repurposed after the production ends.

Raquel Castells described Teatro Arriaga’s first “green production,” initially targeting the basic level but achieving intermediate certification. Success helped overcome internal resistance and build momentum.

The Theatre Green Book also includes a self-certification system. Organizations can publicly recognize their level of achievement, fostering shared standards across the sector.

The tool has international reach, with translations and adaptations in many countries across Europe and Asia. It is supported by networks such as the European Theatre Convention and Opera Europa and has gained recognition from the European Commission.

The Sustainable Cultural Toolkit

Edyta Oldak presented the Sustainable Cultural Toolkit, developed through research on green practices in European institutions. The handbook addresses a broad range of institutional dimensions:

- Green teams
- Sustainable design
- Ethical work practices
- Sustainable stage (materials and equipment)
- Travel and transport
- Sustainable cuisine
- Green office practices
- Well-being
- Green narratives
- Building and neighborhood engagement
- Carbon footprint measurement

Unlike the more technical orientation of the Theatre Green Book, the Toolkit combines recommendations with case studies and visual materials such as posters to stimulate discussion within institutions.

At Novi Theatre, the toolkit served as a diagnostic instrument. The team categorized recommendations into:

- Already implemented

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- To be implemented soon
 - Not currently feasible

Edyta Ołdak emphasized the importance of green teams. In Poland, many are grassroots initiatives rather than leadership-driven. While this fosters enthusiasm, lack of managerial support can threaten sustainability efforts. The toolkit highlights well-being and institutional backing as essential for long-term success.

Community engagement was a strong focus of her presentation. Novi Theatre transformed its concrete public square by introducing flower meadows, trees, and ruderal plants to increase biodiversity. Future plans include insect habitats, bat shelters, and decomposing wood zones—creating a “micro-reserve” within the city.

A notable social project involved teenage girls (13–18), identified as underrepresented in public space design. Through workshops and consultations, they contributed ideas for redesigning the theatre’s outdoor area, including a terrace built from reclaimed materials.

Education, Hope, and Cultural Transformation

Edyta Ołdak concluded with a discussion of education and “solar punk” philosophy. Addressing climate anxiety and youth disempowerment, Novi Theatre developed educational workshops encouraging young people to imagine hopeful ecological futures.

Solar punk, contrasted with dystopian cyberpunk narratives, promotes visions of cities powered by renewable energy, community-based economies, biodiversity, and harmonious coexistence with nature. Workshops invite participants to define the future using thematic keywords related to ecology, technology, resilience, and social organization.

The aim is to replace climate despair with agency and practical empowerment. Cultural institutions, Edyta Ołdak argued, must respond to societal crises by equipping communities with resilience and adaptive skills.

Conclusions

The session demonstrated that sustainability in the performing arts is not abstract but operational. The three tools presented are complementary:

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- The Stages Donut Protocol fosters holistic reflection and institutional vision.
 - The Theatre Green Book provides measurable, production-focused environmental standards.
 - The Sustainable Cultural Toolkit integrates ecology with governance, education, and community transformation.

Common themes included collaboration, training, governance support, measurable targets, and the importance of combining environmental action with social justice.

Ultimately, the speakers emphasized that sustainable transition is both technical and cultural. It requires structural change, collective engagement, and new narratives—on stage and within institutions—that imagine viable, hopeful futures.