A NEW OR THE SAME NORMALITY IN FAIRS AND CONGRESSES?

Barcelona, October 15, 2020 – By Anwar Zibaoui, General Coordinator at ASCAME –

Since the announcement of the cancellation of the MWC last February in Barcelona, the pandemic has caused a storm in the Fairs and Congresses sector with the cancellation or postponement of numerous events. After a few first days of astonishment after the ban of meetings and the abrupt cessation of all activity, the vast majority of operators in the events’ industry have shown resistance and have turned towards online platforms to avoid mass congregations and try to smooth the hit on the sector.

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a dramatic impact on geopolitics, technology and society, in the same way that other events, such as September 11, led us to drastic changes on issues, such as security or privacy. For the events’ industry, technology has proven to be critical for recovery, but organisations must better prepare for the upcoming biosecurity threats and seek to strengthen their agility and resilience.

The phenomenon of events and their impact on the economy should be well understood. Numerous congresses and fairs are organised around the world, covering a wide variety of topics and sectors, involving from world leaders, businessmen or entrepreneurs, to thousands of people who seek to know first-hand the news and interact with the actors who are relevant to their industries. It is an unparalleled platform for networking and meetings at the service of the diplomacy and the economy.

However, the fairs and markets are as old as humanity. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, leaders could easily meet in less rigid formats, and congresses and fairs became a great opportunity to discuss issues of great importance, therefore improving international relations and trade.

In the era of online technology and screens, the face-to-face meeting and being able to shake hands are still important. In-person interaction remains very powerful and is unlikely to be fully replaced by virtual events.
In-person events are attractive for business and networking purposes. They are an exceptional platform for development, creativity and innovation. They cause numerous economic impacts, promoting the economy of each city or region, generating projects, and in turn facilitating commercial relations. In addition, they allow to identify investment or business opportunities, form alliances or joint ventures, understand the latest trends, and exchange ideas with the most interesting actors. And all this in just 2 or 3 days, something that implies a huge time saving.

It has been easy to underestimate the contribution of this industry for years. Nevertheless, now governments and cities have begun to appreciate its valuable role. There are recognised direct benefits, such as business tourism or the promotion of local projects, which become facilitators of urban development with new companies, jobs and sales, and stimulators of other sectors, providing identity, visibility and reputation to any city in the world.

Without forgetting that these international meetings are a thermometer of both the political and economic situation in the world, the fact that we meet face to face makes the impact and responsibility of our actions more real.

Although the global contribution of the trade fair and congress industry has not yet been quantified, some studies estimate its global size at 750.000 million euros and they project a growth of up to 50% by 2025. Only global trade fair activity gathers each year to 4.5 million exhibiting companies, attracts 303 million visitors and creates 3.2 million jobs.

The return of the events and fairs will help the recovery of the tourism sector. The organisation of events of all kinds contributes from 30% to 50% of the activity of tourism professionals (travel agencies, hotels, carriers, etc.), depending on the city and region.

Many events have turned to virtual or hybrid formats in the short term. The virtual strategy enables exhibitors and speakers to use cost-effective means to reach a wider audience without the need for participants to travel. Online connected events from multiple locations are growing to form a larger global event. An attractive solution in the current phase, as attendees lack the confidence to travel and attend large meetings.

As in other sectors, COVID-19 will accelerate digital trends in the sector. Consumer shows will adopt virtual event formats more easily than trade shows. In the future, companies will distinguish between essential and non-essential travel. Some meetings, especially internal ones, will not fully return to pre-COVID-19 levels. They will include in-person, hybrid or virtual options, with improved technology infrastructure and flexible rooms. Virtual visits to places will be the norm. Virtual meeting and event software will improve rapidly.
What is most needed today is a workable vision and the adoption of a comprehensive approach to recovery, which in turn redefines and reimagines the industry. Yesterday's solutions will not solve today's problems. It is imperative to go beyond the crisis and continue to support systemic change in the industry to improve its resilience to future crises and their positive socio-economic impact. The road to recovery will pass through evolving demand, rebuilding customer trust, health and hygiene, innovation and digitisation, and sustainability.

There will be significant changes in the MICE industry in the post COVID-19 era. Some will be structural and permanent and others will be temporary, because once the threat to health diminishes, its advantages and its stimulating effect on the economy cannot be ignored.