

**Reflections on leadership and cooperation in commercial civil aviation with the purpose of overcoming the crisis derived from the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Presented by LACAC

## **Introduction**

The global and multidimensional crisis that the COVID-19 pandemic produced requires global and multifunctional solutions. However, these solutions have been fragmented and applied at the level of each sovereign State. The result is that the crisis has lasted longer than anticipated, with a major impact on the commercial aviation industry. Consequently, this sector of the economy, probably the one most hit by the crisis, is experiencing the worst times in its entire history.

The level of uncertainty regarding the end of the pandemic is constant despite the encouraging news of the development of several vaccines that could produce herd immunity in the long term. However, the speed of the production of vaccines and of people effectively getting it is, so far, less than the speed with which the virus spreads and continues its mutation process.

Reflecting on the leadership needed to overcome this crisis, it is clear that the recovery of the harmonization of the applicable regulations in international air transport and the management of various interests is an unavoidable task in this period.

In December 2020, a LACAC-CAAS High Level Roundtable was held, in which directors and representatives of the senior management of the aeronautical authorities of Latin America and the Caribbean, with the support of the Aeronautical Authority of Singapore, reflected on restarting civil aviation and building resilience. The reflections and conclusions of that meeting serve as the basis for this document.

It should be noted that this document tries to portray a common position, however, in the times of uncertainty that currently exist, it serves more as a contribution to the reflections already in progress. In other words, it illuminates a part of a still unfinished discussion, regarding the role that leaders play, the way in which greater cooperation can be achieved, and what we must do to improve the response to future crises.

## **Shared objectives of international civil aviation and harmonization of interests**

The history of commercial aviation shows that, from the beginning, there has been an effort to achieve goals common to all actors in the “air transport ecosystem,” a broader term than “commercial airline industry.” The essential place of cooperation, where coordination decisions have been made among States by gathering opinions from all sectors (public and private), has been the International Civil Aviation Organization - ICAO and its main organs, the Assembly and the Council.

Regional organizations, such as LACAC, have served as a coordination forum for States to prepare and refine their presentations to ICAO. A similar process has been developed in other organizations and observers, so that, with the active participation of various actors in ICAO bodies, decisions can be harmonized resulting in the establishment of common objectives in our sector.

It is feasible to affirm, then, that ICAO's strategic objectives are also shared objectives in the aviation industry at a global level, which are to enhance global civil aviation safety, increase the capacity and improve the efficiency of the global civil aviation system, enhance global civil aviation security and facilitation, foster the development of a sound and economically viable civil aviation system, and minimize the adverse environmental effects of civil aviation activities.

The COVID 19 crisis prompted the right and valuable action of the ICAO Council to establish the Council Aviation Recovery Taskforce CART, where all actors have agreed on objectives, principles, and procedures to overcome this crisis. These measures are related to aviation, public health, security and facilitation, and economic and financial measures, among others. A common goal was quickly agreed between the actors: the need to build a more resilient air transport system. The awareness that in the future we will have similar crises again motivates us and also forces us to design resilient institutions as a common goal. In this sense, it should be added that it is crucial that, in the future, civil aviation does not lose the harmonization of the measures that make international air travel possible and feasible.

In general terms, the correct implementation of the aforementioned objectives benefits all the actors of the international civil aviation ecosystem and prevents one actor having an advantage over others. However, it is pertinent to continually review the plans and global or regional programs that seek to achieve these objectives, because through them, even when there is a good intention, some actor could be in disadvantage due to a specific measure.

The aforementioned happens because it is normal for there to be conflicting interests between the parties, especially in a system as complex as international civil aviation. In addition, economic and environmental issues always arouse a great debate, and the attempt to harmonize interests can cause contradictions in the short term.

The best way to avoid or reduce situations that generate disadvantage due to some measures is to maintain a frank and open dialogue, where the various stakeholders can express their apprehensions with transparent procedures, with access to the relevant information of each process.

The continuous review of the measures adopted to achieve the shared objectives is a task that must be addressed with due periodicity in each of the instances that coordinate common actions in the civil aviation system or in the industry, and then take them to the bodies of ICAO.

### **Leadership and decision making**

ICAO's leadership on making recommendations for the implementation of public policies for commercial aviation is undisputed. In addition, it should be mentioned that crises put leaderships to the test and that these are renewed and validated as they overcome obstacles. In a crisis, you tend to look for leaders who show a way forward. ICAO has been successful in using inclusive leadership in creating CART and making this information available to all stakeholders.

Although a sample of the success described are the documents prepared by CART, part of the pending challenges is that we have not been able to regain harmonization in the sector. Indeed, the implementation of CART recommendations is a complex task that has not been able to be put into practice globally. The States, based on the principle of sovereignty, maintain dissimilar measures that are not adequately coordinated with others. Without mentioning an exhaustive list, the explanations of the above can be summarized as follows:

1. Decision-making came from the aeronautical sphere, and they are at the mercy of the health policies adopted by the States.

2. Public opinion, in general, better understands the measures that protect people's health than those that promote economic activity, however, the need for everyone is to keep economic activity alive.

3. With few exceptions, the multidimensional crisis of COVID 19 has resulted in a loss of trust in public and private institutions. This lack of trust translates into political crises that are added to the health and economic crises.

The way to break the non-virtuous circle that this generates is to maintain a single voice in the sector. The leadership to achieve an adequate balance between health measures, and at the same time, to progressively aid the economies of the countries, where the recovery of aviation plays a substantive role, requires the generosity of all the actors of the aeronautical system in order to achieve cooperation and coordination.

Additionally, there are several signs of fatigue in the population that show that the strictest quarantine measures have been losing effectiveness. This gives way to begin to develop the idea of the adaptation of people to new conditions, generating new habits- an opportunity opens up to achieve new balances.

The role of global, regional, and local leaderships requires a great pedagogical exercise to explain, especially to the authorities that are not from the aeronautical world, the consensual measures in CART and the need to apply them. They must reinforce the idea that unilateral measures that close borders or impose quarantine conditions, which do not allow commercial air traffic, should be avoided. The above, however, requires an adequate risk assessment in order to maintain the strategy that will finally lead us to the end of the pandemic through the herd immunity generated by the ongoing vaccination processes in several countries.

### **Cooperate to achieve the progressive reactivation of commercial aviation**

The response to a global and multifunctional crisis varies between countries in this region and the world at large. It has not been an easy answer, and there are only a few cases of success. In general, progress has been made in trial-and-error processes. Leaders have opted for the solutions that are available: quarantines or border closures.

The best way to move forward in these types of difficult-to-answer situations is to simply deliver as much information as possible to the community. Without underestimating the importance of maintaining health measures that protect the population, it is also necessary to progressively adopt measures so that the economy can be reactivated, and for this the air transport system has to be operative.

In different forums on aviation, the common idea is that the best way out of the crisis is through cooperation. It seems to be quite obvious that, in this time of crisis, the multilateral response is the correct one to efficiently face the threat of the pandemic. However, it is also evident, after a simple observation, that exactly the opposite occurs. The response has been and continues to be primarily one-sided. Therefore, cooperation is subject to only some shared policies. The dominant strategy is non-cooperation, and this leads to a loss of global welfare that in the medium and long term will make us pay a much more expensive price than if we were able to cooperate.

Unfortunately, cooperation, given the current scenario, is difficult to achieve. It takes enormous effort to go back, then go forward, and go back again to go forward one more time and eventually repeat this sequence. In countries where the aviation industry has managed to get financial support, the situation has been somewhat simplified, but when this does not happen, only effective opening through shared measures would improve the situation of this ailing sector.

To illustrate the point above, imagine a theater on fire. Everyone runs to the exit door, but the doors can only open inwardly. If everyone keeps pushing, the doors will stay closed. It takes a tremendous cooperative effort to get everyone to stop pushing and back off so that the door can be opened. It is extremely difficult for people to collaborate in such circumstances. Then, if non-cooperation predominates, because each party pursues its own interest, what could be done to change the situation? It requires opening the door of the burning theater from the outside, so that it would be possible for everyone to go out. For this, a leadership with enough strength is required to break through that door.

Cooperating and maintaining transparency in the delivery of information allows for the adaptation of institutions and people to new conditions. Thus, it is possible to regain confidence in the aeronautical system. This is not an automatic process, but it can take place quite quickly in the coming months as the flexibility of the interposed measures increases and thus facilitates commercial aviation operations.

### **Preliminary conclusions**

- 1.- ICAO's response to the crisis, through inclusive leadership by establishing CART and its recommendations has been a successful initiative. The concern is to effectively implement these recommendations so that an institutional structure is generated that aids the recovery of the air sector.
- 2.- The continuous review of the measures adopted to achieve the shared objectives in the industry is a periodic task and must be developed in all the available instances, including CART, to coordinate actions in the civil aviation system or in the industry that prevent the collision of interests.
- 3.- It is necessary to activate the leaderships of the aeronautical sector to develop a pedagogical explanation regarding the need to adopt CART recommendations based on harmonized measures. It is especially important to direct these explanations to the authorities that are currently making the most relevant decisions, which are not in the aeronautical sector.
- 4.- The structure of interests, even beyond the commercial aviation sector, facilitates the adoption of unilateral policies instead of multilateral ones, which delays the recovery of both health and the global economy, and therefore the commercial aviation sector is especially affected. It is pertinent to use all available leadership and direct the initiatives at the highest possible level for each country in order to achieve cooperative solutions.
5. Leaders must maintain a single voice in the sector, in other words, a common discourse, which progressively helps the recovery of air transport for the benefit of the social and economic development of the countries.