

Resilience: the name of the game

(Presented by ALTA)

“I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become”, Carl Jung

Aviation is, because of its nature, a resilient industry. The dream of flying challenged physical laws known at the beginning of the XX century and, despite the obstacles, risks, and fears, the first engineers, aviators and enthusiasts managed to continue moving forward and writing a history that changed human life.

These dreams and the non-stop work made it possible to connect different cultures, places and people like never before and, to a large extent, made many of the modern era developments possible.

Just in Latin America and the Caribbean, over 300 million people flew in 2019 through over 470 country pairs operated by 172 airlines. By that time, our region reached connectivity with every continent and this represented a major milestone to improve the life of people in a region that do not count with safe and efficient alternatives to transport.

Beyond accomplishing an essential mission of carrying people and goods, aviation activates an extensive value chain that includes other industries such as tourism, services, commerce, food industry, construction, and a big etcetera. Until 2019, aviation directly generated nearly 8 million jobs in the region and each of those generated 4 additional jobs. Connectivity made it possible for people in remote places, as the Amazon and Andes, to access opportunities.

After sixteen years of sustained growth, the pandemic ground not only airplanes and people, but dreams, families and opportunities. We are facing a challenge like never seen before. But, as resilient our industry is, aviation has shown over the past year a new level of coordination, dynamism and creativity to challenge adversity.

As the mobility restrictions hit global aviation, industry stakeholders rapidly came together under the leadership of ICAO to study, discuss, and implement new protocols to ensure safe operations for users and employees.

ICAO's Council Aviation Recovery Taskforce (CART) produced an impressive report, result of communication, coordination and strong crisis response capacity. This document has served as guidance for the industry itself and for governments to implement protocols to ensure what we value the most: safety.

As industry, and first of all humans, we share and support the worldwide mission of protecting lives, prioritizing health and safety over everything. For this reason, several studies have been conducted to evaluate the risks of air transport activity and how to mitigate them.

These studies have demonstrated that is “virtually impossible” to catch the COVID-19 virus in an airplane due to the air flow in the cabin, the barrier offered by the chairs and the HEPA filters that eliminate 99.99% of airborne particles including viruses and bacteria. Furthermore, air in cabin is renewed every 2 to 3 minutes, more frequent than other places like hospitals, grocery stores or offices, which people visit more often. As an impressive reference, it is more likely to be struck by lightning than to catch the virus on a plane when protocols are followed.

Industry organizations have raised their voices to send one message to governments and users: flying is safe when protocols are in place.

In Latin America & the Caribbean in particular, flying is not only an option for leisure, but an essential service to connect large distances and islands safely and efficiently. Restoring air transport is critical and we have an opportunity to do it in a harmonized and sustainable manner.

We can assure that, once the health crisis is contained, travels will recover fast. Therefore, we urgently need to achieve alignment between government -not only civil aviation authorities, but also health authorities and economies responsables- and industry representatives in order to plan a harmonized restart.

What does it mean? It means taking advantage of this times of reduced operations to review regulations and measures in order to define a regional standardized plan with smart and harmonized regulations for passengers and operators to comply when resuming flights.

Beyond having a direct positive impact in growth possibilities for the industry, harmonization has a huge effect in passenger confidence, as he can be sure that everywhere he visits will find the same standards and requirements.

In this line, as industry, we have the mission of re-building confidence for travelers. Massive communications campaigns, together with governments putting in place efficient mechanisms to contain the spread of the virus, can help people regain confidence again.

Each of the professionals that make part of the industry embodies nowadays a leadership role. Being creative, committed and dynamic are powerful characteristics to face the challenges. However, it is not an easy task.

The International Monetary Fund estimated that the economy in Latin America decreased 7% in 2020. We can dimension the situation for airlines when, just in February 2021, international traffic decreased 10 times what the economy did. Although airlines have sought to reduce their costs and maintain their liquidity, it is important to consider that around 50% of their costs are fixed and semi-fixed. While passenger international traffic falls over 70%, it is difficult for costs to reduce in the same proportion.

Within this context, government alignment and joint work is critical. This work can be delivered in form of workforce meetings to draft, execute and evaluate a restart plan and 1:1 periodical meeting between industry representatives and health authorities. Aviation should be a priority as air transport restart and furthermore recovery will turn into jobs creation and socioeconomic wellbeing.

An example of States-industry collaboration is the Memorandum of Understanding signed late in 2020 between Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, and Uruguay, all of them members of the Latin American Civil Aviation Commission (LACAC), aiming at allowing the temporary and reciprocal granting of seventh freedom traffic rights for air cargo services, under no geographical or capacity restrictions. This multilateral agreement greatly facilitates the transport of essential cargoes and, especially, the transport of the COVID-19 vaccine, among the group member States.

The industry is ready with CART's guidance and recommendations to help States manage multilayer risk strategies with short- and medium-term actions to safely restart and enable aviation's role as economic catalyst.

We started this paper with Jung's quote "*I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become*". The reason is that, even though we largely use the words "industry" and "governments", the fact is that we are people that share the same mission. We are people that have not stop and everyday choose to overcome challenges and generate solutions. We are together in this battle and we should though align and collaborate.

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