

Pandemic impact cancels ITA WTC in 2021

17 Sep 2020

Shani Wallis, *TunnelTalk*

Convened as a virtual gathering for 2020, the representatives of the 78 Member Nations of the General Assembly of the International Tunnelling and Underground Space Association (ITA) took vital decisions on behalf of the membership.

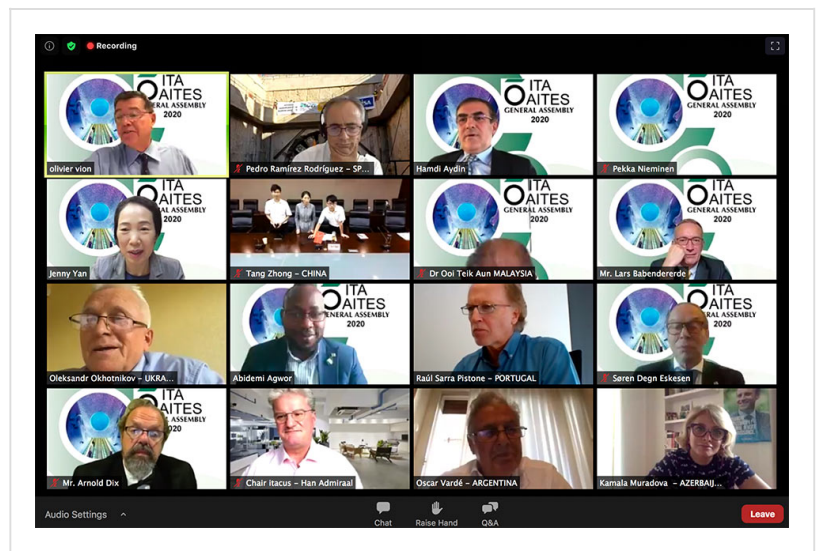
Most decisive of these was a vote to cancel the WTC of 2021 in Copenhagen – physical or virtual – and to move it. In his presentation to the Assembly Søren Degn Eskesen, as Chairman of the organising committee for Denmark, explained that the uncertainty and travel restrictions due to the global pandemic situation was likely to have a risk impact that required an early decision for cancellation rather than advancing further into a physical event commitment that might have to be cancelled at a later stage.

The financial and social consequences of having to cancel a physical WTC at the last minute was clearly explained in a presentation by ITA Executive Council Vice President Arnold

Dix, Australia, who represented ITA in cancellation negotiations with Malaysia for 2020, and by Dr Ooi Teik Aun, Chairman of the WTC2020 organising committee for the IEM, Institution of Engineers Malaysia.

Dix explained how the ITA agreed to forego the financial revenues that the annual WTC event accrues for the ITA and its operations in efforts to secure for delegates, exhibitors and sponsors a 70% refund from IEM. The refund was for the cancellation of the physical events in May and in September and transfer to its virtual alternative. Both explained the unprecedented nature of the task and the financial losses for both organisations. For ITA the WTC2020 loss is a lump sum of €50,000 plus a percentage of the event revenues. For IEM, Dr Ooi explained that, after paying the 70% refunds, which are promised by the end of September 2020, the loss in unrecoverable expenses for the event will be 1.2 million MYR, about €250,000.

Dix explained that the ITA is not a party to any of the commercial or financial arrangements of a WTC, that these are entirely under the auspices of the event organisers and the jurisdictions of the host countries. Several Member Nations asked if the financial report by IEM had been audited and why it was not a 100% for the refunds. ITA President Jenny Yan, China, said that everyone had suffered under the necessary cancellation circumstances, that lessons had to be learned from the crisis, and asked the IEM to share the financial numbers with the Member Nations.

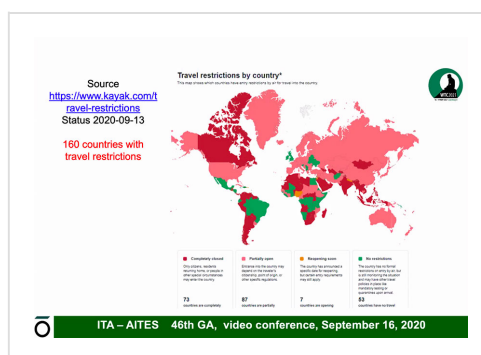


Virtual General Assembly for the ITA in 2020

Covid-19 pandemic situation

- Covid-19 known since Dec 2019/Jan 2020 i.e. for 8-9 months
- Covid-19 is still developing in many countries
- We are 8 months ahead of WTC2021
- Travel restrictions will apply until a vaccine is effectively in place
- Airline industry has announced they do not expect travelling to be back to pre-Corona level for 2-3 years
- WHO has announced that they expect a vaccine may become available by mid-2021, then a program of vaccination can start
- Covid-19 is expected to develop further during the winter season on the northern globe

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ITA First Vice President Lars Babendererde, Germany, explained the impact of the cancellation of the WTC 2021 event in Denmark on the sequence of future WTCs and on the vote, scheduled for this General Assembly, to select the host of the 2023 WTC between Turkey and Greece. This overlapped with a report

by Executive Council task force that has been convened to review the rules for presenting proposals to host WTCs and

the criteria for managing the events.

ITA Vice President Randy Essex, USA, as leader of the task force, presented a report for the proposed changes for bidding for and hosting WTCs and explained that the coronavirus pandemic, and on the WTC2020 in Kuala Lumpur, brought to light further considerations for the review. These were to be incorporated and presented at the next General Assembly, which the Member Nations agreed would be an extraordinary virtual assembly in January 2021.

Rearrangement of the Copenhagen WTC in Denmark to April 2022 was made possible by the agreement of Member Nation Mexico which had been selected at the WTC2019 General Assembly in Naples, Italy, to host the Congress in Cancun in 2022. Mexico explained that it did not forego its selection to host a WTC but that it would need to see the new rules to be applied before making a full commitment. For Member Nations Turkey and Greece, who had prepared and submitted proposals to host WTC in 2023, there was concern that the rules were being changed in mid-process, with Greece suggesting that the vote for 2023 go ahead as planned in the 2020 General Assembly and under existing rules. The Assembly voted to delay the vote and review the 2023 selection process at the extraordinary January 2021 General Assembly.

Having voted to cancel a WTC in 2021, it was announced that the ITA with its four Committees – ITACUS, ITACET, ITAtech and ITACOSUF – would prepare and stage virtual seminars and congresses during the year. In the financial report, the impact on the financial welfare of the Association was explained. Forecast budgets, with no contribution from a physical WTC in 2021, showed that savings in expenditure centres for the Association would be required to adjust for reduced revenues. WTCs are the greatest contributor of operating revenues to the Association with WTC2019 in Naples, Italy, reported as contributing the most, in financial terms, of any previous WTC. The budget forecasts, with expenditure reductions, illustrated that the Association could maintain a positive balance, albeit with a reduced revenue of by as much as 40-50%, from approximately €800,000 to about €500,000.

While the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic dominated proceedings of the General Assembly, other items of business were carried forward from the 2019 General Assembly in Naples for vote and report.

Two changes to the bylaws of the Association were voted on and passed.

- First, that all Member Nations must prepare and submit a report on activity of the Member Nation representative society or organisation and a report on the tunnelling and underground infrastructure planning and construction activity in the country; and
- Secondly, that only Member Nations who have paid its Member Nation subscription to the Association by January of each year will have the right to vote at the year's General Assembly.

There were reports also from the Governance task force convened in 2019 to review the operation of the Association as a one-off investment, and a report setting out the strategy for the development of the Association for the coming three years.

To miss another physical WTC in 2021 is a loss to the industry, as the report from Denmark for the planning of a physical WTC in Copenhagen in May promised much. The Belle exhibition centre was presented as a fine venue for a congress of a forecast 2,000 participants (as did the KLCC Convention Centre in the iconic Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia), and a programme to be established from 625 paper abstracts from 45 countries. But all that planning and effort by Denmark is not forfeit as it carries forward to what we all hope will be a WTC in Copenhagen in reality in April in 2021.

9. Presentation of the Strategy 2020 - 2023

- GOAL 1** Encourage MN to actively develop and share technology, promote underground space and be active as a MN in ITA
- GOAL 2** Optimize the contribution of Working Groups and Committees through facilitating interaction with MNs & Sponsors, encouraging synergies and deploying modern communication practices
- GOAL 3** Encourage further knowledge sharing through education and training
- GOAL 4** Enhance tunnelling and underground space awareness
- GOAL 5** Improve communication with Member Nations, industry and the general public.



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ITA strategy for the coming three years

ITA strategy for the coming three years

