

## **POLICY REPORT FROM THE PRESIDENT**

My policy report this year covers not only the end of last year, but all that has happened this year up to our General Assembly which takes place much later than usual: as you might expect Covid 19 has disrupted our lives too. This is also a “virtual” General Assembly which has unfortunately for us meant that we have missed an opportunity of meeting you our members to discuss with you the impact the issues you are facing, as well as your ideas for the future. We also had to cancel our keynote speaker of the day, Alain Hutchinson, Brussels Commissioner for Europe and International Organisations. This is a pity, but we are sure that we will have the opportunity of meeting him in the future.

Indeed, this year has seen all of us having to adapt the way we work and the way we organise our association lives. Covid-19 has upset the way we run our organisations at nearly every level: we have had to cancel or reschedule long-planned physical meetings, often replacing them with virtual ones; we have had to change the way we work internally, with most staff homeworking, ... I suppose that one benefit of this is that we are becoming Zoom, Teams, etc., experts. In the short run, such virtual meetings may have proven to be a blessing since it allowed our colleagues and us to mostly work from home, but in the longer run this is not ideal: a major part of the attraction of the meetings we organise lies in enabling our members, who are very often also competitors, to meet on neutral ground. We are therefore hopeful that there will be a quick solution to the problems arising from the pandemic to ensure the long-term vigour of our associations.

Of course this pandemic is affecting Brussels as a whole: after a record year in 2019 at the level of congresses and visitor nights, the drop in B2B visits since March has taken its toll to the extent that the city is now offering incentives to those who organise congresses with more than two hundred participants. A 2.000.000-euro budget has been made available, with a maximum of 50.000 euros per event.

If the incentives provided by Visit.Brussels are attractive, at a practical level, the restrictions introduced by the authorities on gatherings and on travel have both been a brake on the normal meetings our members hold, and on the formal meetings required by law: it is for this reason that in March we wrote to Mr. Geens, the Belgian Federal Minister of Justice calling upon the government to allow associations to postpone their General Assemblies and the filing of their annual accounts and to allow the holding of “virtual” or written General Assembly meetings whether, even if these are not foreseen in their statutes. This was particularly important for international associations due to the travel restrictions imposed by different countries which has impacted the ability of their members from different countries to meet up. We were successful in obtaining these requests. Now, however, it will be time for us to ask that this measure which comes to an end in September be extended: travel is still difficult and many associations have not yet adopted new statutes which enshrine the possibility to hold virtual General Assembly or Board meetings. We will therefore be publishing a position calling upon the federal government to take account of the impact that this prolonged pandemic is continuing to have on our members in their day-to-day management of their association in Belgium.

Besides this, we have been thinking in greater depth on what our programme should be for the coming year: we see no reason to believe Covid19 will go away soon, This means FAIB will need to adapt its work programme, our lunch debates and more widely to seek new ways to work with you our members.

As members are still often reluctant or forbidden to come to any but essential meetings, we will be organising a series of webinars in the coming months on issues such as how to keep our members committed to the association, budgetary and staff issues, as well as other subjects which you might suggest to us and where you might be prepared to participate in discussions on the issue.

We are also continuing to enrich our information offering on our web site in areas which we are sure are helpful to our members: first of all we have updated our model statutes with our experts so as to ensure they respect the new Company and Associations Code. This will greatly facilitate the work of members adapting their statutes which they must do soon. This model is available to members only. We continue to enrich the “FAQ” part of our website to provide you with up-to-date information, as and when we can make it available.

In the follow up to our work on the CAC, with our experts we are drafting a lengthy article on the practical implications for associations of the new Company and Association Code “one year on”. The article covers a large variety of issues which have come up for our members, ranging from the impact on association statutes and on day-to-day management, liability issues, to the tax implications and more. It will be published in November in the “Revue Pratique des Sociétés”, a publication for legal experts and then of course be made available to members and regulators.

Finally, on the subject our working programme and methods. We all know it is not enough for an association to work well and to do the right thing: it is essential for members to know this and to see the results of the association’s work: communication is therefore central to any modern association’s work; we are pleased, therefore, to let you know that a new member of staff, Teresa Iglesias, has joined our team. She will be working on freshening up our FAIB News and other channels of communication with you. We hope you will like the results.

To conclude my report then, I want to highlight the fact that we can only offer the level of service we do because of the efforts of the many volunteers who work with us. I would like to warmly thank you our members, our sponsors and associates who support us either by the work you provide on our Board, or through the expertise you bring to the issues we follow and on which report. This support is invaluable, as is that of our Secretary General Danièle Vranken and her Deputy Stella Sauvan and my other colleagues on the FAIB staff, some of whom are volunteers. Thank you all for your support.

A final word from my side to you our members: we count on your support which is even more important to us at this time. This will encourage all of us to continue offering you the regular updates and support on Belgian issues which is our core strength.

**Adrian Harris, FAIB President**

