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A Notice to Navigators



*Scientific Congresses
Guidelines for Navigating the New
Global Health Landscape*

Advisory to Navigators

Those who are now called upon to lead an association or a medical-scientific society find themselves navigating waters profoundly different from those of just a few years ago. Not because the founding values of research, education and scientific exchange have diminished, but because the context in which those values are expressed has changed with a speed that has caught many unprepared.

In this new scenario, the scientific congress – long experienced as a ritual, cyclical and in some ways predictable appointment – must be understood as a complex infrastructure. Not because its original purposes have changed, but because the overall balance that makes it possible and determines its effectiveness has shifted.

Engaging participants in person has become more difficult. Available time has diminished, digital alternatives have reshaped habits and expectations, and economic resources – starting with sponsorship and funding – no longer offer the stability and availability they once did. At the same time, increasingly stringent regulatory and ethical

constraints impose choices that must be ever more careful and responsible.

In this context, decisions that in the past could be taken with relative linearity now require a different approach. The choice of destination, the event format, its duration, the scientific and social programme, the use of technologies, and economic and contractual management are no longer secondary variables. They are factors that directly affect the success of the congress, the sustainability of the organising body, and its credibility over time.

This booklet was conceived with the aim of offering criteria for orientation. It does not propose models to be applied indiscriminately, nor ready-made solutions. Rather, it seeks to help presidents, delegates and governing bodies read the current context, recognise critical issues and make informed decisions in a scenario that no longer allows for improvisation, so that the congress may continue to fulfil its scientific and institutional role, contributing in concrete terms to the advancement of Global Health.

Chapter I

The Congress Is No Longer Just an Event

For a long time, within associations and medical-scientific societies, the congress was primarily regarded as a recurring institutional appointment. A central moment for updating and exchange, certainly relevant, yet framed within a largely stable and predictable context.

This interpretation was not incorrect. It was simply appropriate to a context that allowed for a more linear organisation: in-person participation largely taken for granted, relatively stable economic resources, a consolidated sponsorship system, and a less stringent regulatory framework. In that context, a congress could function even without particularly sophisticated planning, because the system as a whole absorbed many of the critical issues.

Today, that balance no longer exists.

The congress remains a central moment in the scientific life of an organisation, but it has also become a tool that affects multiple dimensions at once: the association's reputation, its economic sustainability, its ability to attract and retain an active scientific community, its relationships with sponsors and institutions, and its overall credibility in the medium to long term.

In other words, the congress is no longer merely an event to be organised, but a strategic decision to be governed.

This transformation is not linked to a single factor, but to the convergence of multiple dynamics. In-person participation is no longer automatic and must be actively motivated. Congress participants' time has become more fragmented and selective. Economic resources are harder to secure and more constrained. Digital technologies offer alternatives that, if not properly governed, can weaken the event rather than strengthen it. Ethical codes and regulatory frameworks require greater attention and responsibility.

In this scenario, the congress becomes a point of synthesis: a place where scientific, organisational, economic and institutional choices intersect, producing effects that extend well beyond the days of the event itself.

Added to this is an often underestimated element. Today, interconnection between different scientific fields is far more intense than in the past. Research communities engage in more continuous dialogue, expertise increasingly overlaps, and disciplinary boundaries—while still necessary—have become less impermeable.

In this context, even highly specialised congresses generate echoes and repercussions that extend beyond the perimeter of the event and the organising association. The choices made, the topics addressed, and the very way in which the congress is designed and managed influence, directly or indirectly, a broader scientific community, eventually reflecting into the global debate.

Continuing to regard the congress as a simple calendar appointment means underestimating its real impact. Recognising its nature as a strategic tool, on the other hand, enables governing bodies to make

more informed choices, prevent critical issues, and fully enhance the role the congress can play—not only for the individual association, but for the entire scientific ecosystem to which it belongs.

It is from this awareness that it becomes possible to address more maturely the themes that follow: the role of governance, the balance between presence and distance, the use of technologies, economic sustainability, decision-making responsibility and, more broadly, the contribution that congresses can offer to the development of Global Health.

Chapter II

Understanding Change Before Governing It

One of the most frequent mistakes, when faced with the transformations affecting the world of scientific congresses, is to seek immediate solutions without first fully understanding the nature of the change itself. New formats, new technologies and new modes of participation are often adopted as operational responses to perceived problems, but not always to problems that have been properly analysed.

Understanding change, instead, means recognising that it is not a simple technical or organisational evolution, but a broader transformation involving behaviours, expectations and priorities within scientific communities. Congress participants are not attending less because they are less interested in content, but because the way they evaluate the relationship between time, costs, benefits and opportunities has profoundly changed.

In recent years, a more selective logic has emerged. In-person participation is no longer automatic, but the result of a considered choice. Professionals assess scientific value with care, certainly, but also the overall usefulness of the experience: opportunities for real exchange, the quality of relationships, the context in which the congress takes place, and the possibility of integrating professional, institutional and personal activities.

At the same time, the supply of scientific content has expanded dramatically. Webinars, digital platforms, online courses and virtual communities have broadened access to information, reducing the congress's exclusive role as the primary moment of professional updating. This does not diminish its importance, but it changes its function: the congress is no longer merely the place where content is “delivered”, but the space in which content is discussed, contextualised and brought into relation.

Within this framework, technologies must also be interpreted with greater care. They are neither a solution in themselves nor a threat. They can expand participation, promote inclusion and strengthen international dialogue, but they can also—if adopted without clear governance—contribute to weakening

in-person participation and fragmenting the scientific community.

Understanding change therefore means recognising that simple answers no longer exist. Every organisational choice produces cascading effects: on participation, on costs, on economic sustainability, on the organisation's reputation and on the quality of scientific exchange. Governing a congress today first and foremost requires this awareness, because only what is truly understood can be effectively guided.

It is on this basis that it becomes possible, in the following chapters, to address the theme of governance—not as a formal exercise, but as the concrete ability to orient complex decisions within a system that is increasingly interconnected and less predictable.

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Chapter III

Governing Does Not Mean Delegating

In the common language of associations and medical-scientific societies, the term “governance” is often used in a generic way. Sometimes as a synonym for organisation, sometimes as a reassuring formula to suggest that someone will “take care of it”. In reality, in the current context, governing a congress means assuming a responsibility that cannot simply be delegated.

This does not imply that presidents, boards or scientific committees must deal directly with operational aspects. It means, rather, recognising that strategic decisions – those that affect the success, sustainability and consequences of the event – remain the responsibility of the organisation and its institutional representatives.

For a long time, an implicit distinction existed: on the one hand, scientific content, overseen by the association’s governing bodies; on the other,

organisation, entrusted to external parties. This model worked as long as the context allowed it. Today, however, organisational choices produce effects that go far beyond logistics and can no longer be considered neutral.

The choice of venue, the congress format, the number of days, the programme structure, the economic model, the relationship with sponsors and partners, the use of technology: all these decisions have a direct impact on the identity of the organisation, external perception, participation and, in some cases, the legal responsibility of those who take them. Delegating execution is necessary; delegating strategic decision-making is not.

In this sense, governing means first and foremost exercising a function of direction. Defining clear objectives, setting priorities, identifying the boundaries within which to operate. It means asking not only “how” to organise a congress, but “why”, “for whom” and “with what consequences”.

One of the most widespread misconceptions is the belief that relying on a PCO, an agency or a structured supplier automatically reduces risk. In reality, delegation does not eliminate responsibility: it shifts

it, but does not cancel it. Decisions remain attributable to the organising body and, in the case of committees or collegial boards, to the individuals involved in decision-making processes.

This aspect becomes particularly relevant when a congress grows in size, acquires an international dimension or involves a large number of stakeholders. The greater the complexity, the more necessary it is for those governing the organisation to maintain an overall vision and not simply ratify decisions taken elsewhere.

Governing does not mean controlling every detail, but knowing where the critical points lie. It means understanding the economic implications of an apparently technical choice, assessing the reputational impact of an organisational decision, anticipating the effects that a given format may have on participation and on the scientific positioning of the association.

In this framework, governance is not a formal exercise, but a competence to be developed. It requires time, awareness and, at times, the ability to question established practices. Above all, it requires a

willingness to assume responsibility for decisions, even when they are implemented by external parties.

From this perspective it becomes possible to address the issues that follow: the relationship between innovation and participation, the balance between presence and distance, economic sustainability, civil liability and forms of protection. All areas in which the quality of governance makes the difference between a congress that works and one that, although well organised, produces unintended effects.

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Chapter IV

Innovation, Participation and the Value of Presence

In recent years, the theme of innovation has entered forcefully into the debate on scientific congresses. New technologies, new formats and new modes of participation are often presented as necessary responses to a changing context. In many cases, they are. In others, they risk becoming solutions adopted by reaction rather than by choice.

The issue is not whether innovation is appropriate or not. Today, it almost always is. The issue is how it is introduced and within what overall design. Because innovation, if not governed, can produce effects opposite to those intended.

One area in which this ambivalence emerges most clearly is participation. Technologies enabling remote connection have opened possibilities that were previously unthinkable: expanding access, engaging distant scientific communities, overcoming geographical, economic or logistical barriers. In many

cases, these solutions represent a real value, particularly from the perspective of inclusion and international dialogue.

At the same time, however, the possibility of participating remotely significantly alters the behaviour of congress participants. If a congress is not carefully designed, the remote option may become the rational choice for a growing number of attendees: lower costs, less time away from professional activity, greater flexibility. From an individual perspective, a reasonable decision. From a systemic perspective, a concrete risk.

A congress that progressively loses in-person participation becomes impoverished. The quality of interaction declines, the relational dimension weakens and the sense of belonging to the scientific community fades. The economic sustainability of the event is also immediately put under pressure, as many financial balance models rely directly on the physical presence of participants.

It is here that the role of governance becomes clear. Technology should neither be passively accepted nor idealised. It must be integrated into a project whose objective is not only the dissemination of content, but

the enhancement of presence. An in-person congress cannot compete with digital solutions in terms of convenience; it must offer something different: quality of experience, intensity of exchange, opportunities for relationships, context.

Designing a congress today therefore means working on multiple levels. Scientific value remains central, but is no longer sufficient on its own. It is necessary to motivate, engage and attract. Within this framework, the appeal of the destination, the quality of the overall programme and the care given to moments of interaction assume a substantial role. Elements once considered ancillary have become decisive factors in influencing the choice to participate in person.

This approach sometimes encounters resistance, particularly in contexts governed by deontological codes or restrictive regulations that tend to limit anything not strictly related to scientific activity. However, ignoring the real context in which professionals operate risks producing events that are formally impeccable but poorly attractive.

From this perspective, even solutions that would once have been considered marginal take on new significance. Facilitating forms of scientific and

professional tourism, encouraging extended stays for personal or cultural reasons, integrating the congress into a broader experience does not mean distorting its content. Rather, it means recognising that in-person participation is a choice situated within a complex balance between work, time and quality of life.

Innovation, therefore, is not an end. It is a tool. It can strengthen a congress or weaken it, depending on how it is used. Governing it means keeping the objective clear: preserving and enhancing the function of the congress as a place of real encounter, deep exchange and the building of a living, interconnected scientific community.

From this awareness it becomes possible to address, in more concrete terms, the operational and strategic choices examined in the following chapters: from internal organisation to data management, from contractual relationships to decision-making responsibility. Because without a clear vision of the value of presence, every innovation risks being no more than an illusion of modernity.

Chapter V

The Congress as a Global Health Infrastructure

When a congress is considered exclusively as an event, its impact tends to be concentrated in the days in which it takes place. When it is instead placed within a broader vision, it becomes a tool capable of exerting a lasting influence on the scientific community and on the contribution it offers to Global Health.

In this sense, the congress can be understood as an infrastructure: a stable space for relationships, dialogue and network building, in which scientific knowledge, institutions and health systems interact in a structured way. This does not represent a change in the original purposes of the congress, but rather a different awareness of the context in which it now operates.

A function that goes beyond the event

A congress generates real value when it is not isolated, but embedded within a broader pathway. Its effectiveness also depends on what precedes it and on what follows it.

Preparatory activities, working groups and research projects, as well as subsequent initiatives for in-depth analysis, training or collaboration, help transform the congress into a node within a wider process rather than a self-referential moment. From this perspective, the congress does not represent the conclusion of a process, but one of its central stages.

Connections that generate scientific value

Within the Global Health context, the value of a congress no longer derives solely from the quality of individual contributions, but from its ability to connect forms of knowledge, experiences and perspectives that would otherwise remain separate. Dialogue between different disciplines, professional generations and national contexts enriches scientific debate and broadens its impact, turning the congress into a place of synthesis rather than mere presentation.

This connective function is neither automatic nor proportional to the size of the event. It is the result of precise choices in programme design, topic selection and the planning of spaces for exchange.

Access and inclusion as quality factors

Expanding access and promoting inclusion do not respond to a compensatory or merely formal logic. They directly affect the quality of scientific exchange. When a congress succeeds in engaging communities that differ in origin, experience and operational context, the debate becomes more closely aligned with the real complexity of health challenges, avoiding partial or self-referential interpretations.

Within this framework, tools and models that facilitate participation should not be seen as concessions, but as design levers that, if properly integrated, strengthen the overall scientific value of the event.

Relationships that consolidate over time

Global Health requires continuity, not isolated episodes. From this perspective, the congress can play a central role in strengthening existing scientific

networks and in fostering the emergence of new collaborations.

When the dialogue initiated during the event continues over time through shared projects, structured exchanges or joint initiatives, the congress ceases to be an occasional moment and becomes part of a broader process of cooperation and development.

A positioning built over time

Every congress implicitly communicates the role that the scientific body intends to play within the scientific and health system. This positioning does not depend on the size of the event, but on the coherence of the choices that define it.

A congress that is recognisable, readable over time and consistent with the organisation's mission strengthens institutional authority and clarifies the contribution offered to international scientific dialogue. Conversely, a pursuit of visibility lacking a clear vision risks dispersing value and weakening the message.

A responsibility that extends beyond the event

Pensare il congresso come infrastruttura significa assumersi una responsabilità che va oltre la gestione dell'evento in sé. Significa interrogarsi sull'impatto che le scelte compiute avranno nel tempo: sulla comunità scientifica, sulle reti costruite, sul contributo concreto allo sviluppo del Global Health.

Quando questa responsabilità viene esercitata con lucidità, il congresso diventa uno strumento capace di generare valore reale e duraturo, non solo un appuntamento da organizzare.

Chapter VI

Innovation and Governance: an Institutional, Not a Technical Choice

When technological innovation in scientific congresses is discussed, the most frequent risk is not the adoption of inadequate tools, but the underestimation of the consequences of the decisions that introduce them.

In the new scenario, technological choices are no longer neutral or purely operational. They affect the form of the congress, its economic balance, the quality of participation and, above all, the role that the scientific body decides to play. For this reason, innovation cannot be delegated or treated as a technical matter: it is a governance choice.

When decisions remain implicit

Many technological decisions are taken by inertia, imitation or in response to external pressure. In such

cases, innovation does not stem from a vision, but from the accumulation of incremental adjustments.

The problem is not the tool adopted, but the fact that:

- no one has clarified what should be preserved
- no one has defined what can be transformed
- no one has assessed the systemic effects of the choice

When decisions remain implicit, technology ends up reshaping the congress without the organisation truly assuming responsibility for it.

Governance means choosing what to strengthen

Governing innovation does not mean deciding whether to use technology, but for what purpose to use it.

Every technological tool strengthens certain dimensions of the congress and weakens others. Governance consists in making these consequences explicit and consciously deciding which balance to pursue.

The key question is not:

“Which technology should we adopt?”

but rather:

“Which form of congress do we want to protect and develop?”

Innovation and institutional responsibility

When a scientific body introduces a new mode of participation, access or interaction, it assumes a responsibility that goes beyond the specific event.

These choices:

- influence future editions
- shape participants' expectations
- affect economic sustainability
- redefine the relationship between presence and distance

For this reason, innovation is not a neutral act of modernisation, but an institutional decision that contributes to defining the future identity of the congress.

From ‘it works’ to ‘it holds’

Many technological solutions work in the short term. The decisive question is whether they hold over time.

Poorly governed innovation can

- simplify today
- complicate tomorrow
- reduce immediate costs
- undermine the structural balance of the event

Governing innovation means shifting attention from immediate results to the long-term resilience of the congress as a scientific and institutional instrument.

Chapter VII

The Risk of Congress Desertification

The risk of desertification in a scientific congress does not appear suddenly. It is not the result of a single wrong decision, but the outcome of a series of choices which, accumulated over time, progressively empty the event of its original function.

By “desertification” we do not mean simply a numerical decline in attendance, but a structural impoverishment: less real presence, lower density of debate, weaker relationships, and a reduced capacity of the congress to generate scientific and institutional value.

When participation becomes optional

One of the clearest signs of this process is the transformation of in-person participation from a central choice into an optional one. When a congress no longer offers clear reasons to be experienced physically, the decision not to attend becomes

rational, especially in a context where time and resources are increasingly limited.

The issue is not remote participation in itself, but the fact that it is introduced without redefining the value of presence. In the absence of a clear distinction between what can be accessed remotely and what only makes sense through direct interaction, physical presence progressively loses weight.

Cumulative effects, not immediately reversible

Desertification does not only produce immediate effects; it triggers cumulative dynamics that are difficult to reverse. A congress with reduced presence:

- reduces opportunities for real interaction
- weakens professional networks
- makes the event less attractive to sponsors and partners
- forces programme and investment downsizing

Each weakened edition becomes the premise for further reduction in the next one. The congress thus enters a downward spiral of adjustment, often disguised as rationalisation or modernisation.

From congress as a meeting place to congress as a container

As the process advances, the congress risks shifting from being a place of encounter to becoming a mere container of content. Relationships become marginal, dialogue flattens, and the overall experience loses depth.

At this stage, even scientific quality may suffer. Not because contributions decline, but because space for dialogue, cross-fertilisation of perspectives and trust-building among peers is reduced.

The congress continues to exist, but progressively ceases to make an impact.

A frequently underestimated risk

Desertification is often underestimated because it does not produce dramatic signals. There is no precise moment when the congress “fails”. Instead, one observes a gradual normalisation of downsizing: fewer participants, fewer days, fewer interactions, less ambition.

This makes the phenomenon particularly insidious. The choices that fuel it appear, taken individually,

reasonable and justified. Only when viewed together do they reveal a structural shift.

The responsibility of governance

The risk of desertification is not inevitable. It is the consequence of decisions – or non-decisions – that fall within the governance of the scientific body.

To govern means recognising these signals in time and questioning the direction taken:

- are we simplifying or impoverishing?
- are we expanding or diluting?
- are we protecting the value of the congress or making it interchangeable?

Without this level of awareness, the congress may formally survive while progressively losing its function.

Preventing, not correcting

Once initiated, the process of desertification is difficult to correct. It requires investment, unpopular choices and a strong recovery of identity. For this reason, prevention is the only truly effective strategy.

Prevention means:

- designing the congress starting from the value of presence
- using technology selectively and coherently
- keeping the function of the event clear over time

This is not about defending past models, but about preventing continuous adaptation from producing an event emptied of meaning.

A congress that remains central

A congress that preserves its centrality is not one that resists change, but one that governs it. One that knows how to evolve without losing density, open up without dispersing, include without emptying itself.

Avoiding desertification is not a tactical objective. It is a strategic choice that defines the future of the congress and, with it, the role of the scientific body within the Global Health context.

Chapter VIII

Principle-Based Solutions for Governing the Congress in the New Scenario

After analysing the risks and dynamics that today affect the sustainability and role of scientific congresses, it becomes necessary to identify a set of guiding principles capable of orienting the choices of scientific bodies.

These are not rigid models nor universally valid solutions. The aim is to provide reference points that support conscious decision-making, avoiding both improvisation and the uncritical adoption of apparently established practices.

1. Designing the congress starting from presence

The first principle concerns the centrality of physical presence. If in-person participation is considered strategic, it must be designed as such.

This requires asking:

- which moments of the congress make sense only if experienced physically
- which experiences cannot be replicated remotely
- which forms of real interaction make presence desirable

Technology may expand access to content, but design must clarify what makes the congress an experience worth the travel, the time and the personal investment.

2. Distinguishing between access to content and the congress experience

A common mistake is to treat content and experience as a single block. In reality, they can and should be managed differently.

A useful principle is to separate:

- what can also be accessed remotely (informational content, recorded sessions, updates)

- what constitutes the core of the congress experience (debate, networking, relationship-building, decision-making moments)

This distinction allows access to be expanded without weakening the congress's function as a meeting place.

3. Using technology selectively

Not all technologies are always necessary. Not all innovations generate value in every context.

Governing innovation means:

- assessing the impact of each tool on the overall balance
- avoiding the accumulation of non-integrated solutions
- prioritising tools that strengthen experience and active participation

The key question is not “Is it available?”, but “What effect does it have on the congress we want to build?”.

4. Monitoring the event in real time

One of the most significant changes concerns the ability to continuously monitor the progress of a

Congress: registrations, confirmations, participation and flows.

Having up-to-date data makes it possible to:

- adjust certain choices in a timely manner
- reduce financial exposure
- adapt services and investments to the real evolution of the event

Governance can no longer rely solely on initial estimates and historical habits. It must be able to read what is happening as it happens.

5. Managing contractual risk progressively

Congress planning often takes place well in advance, when many variables are still undefined. Contractual exposure based on rigid forecasts can generate significant difficulties.

A prudent principle involves:

- prioritising flexible agreements
- providing for progressive confirmation thresholds

- avoiding commitments disproportionate to the real data available

This approach does not eliminate risk, but makes it manageable and coherent with the event's evolution.

6. Enhancing the role of destination and programme

Destination appeal and programme quality are not secondary elements. They directly influence the decision to attend in person.

Integrating the congress with:

- the territorial context
- cultural opportunities
- the possibility of extending the stay

does not undermine scientific value, but strengthens attractiveness. In a context of limited resources, these factors become decisive levers.

7. Consciously choosing what to manage internally and what to outsource

There is no single model suitable for all congresses. Internal management of the organisational secretariat may be advantageous in some cases, while in others outsourcing remains the most appropriate choice.

The criterion is not ideological, but functional:

- event size
- organisational complexity
- frequency with which the body organises congresses
- available competencies

Conscious decisions avoid both internal inefficiencies and excessive delegation that reduces control.

8. Reading the congress as part of a strategy

Every congress should be embedded in a broader vision: scientific, institutional and relational.

When the event is read as part of a strategy:

- choices become more coherent

- resources are allocated more lucidly
- the congress gains continuity and recognisability

This approach does not simplify the work, but increases its effectiveness over time.

A guide, not a manual

These principles do not replace experience nor automatically resolve organisational complexity. They provide a framework that helps orientation in a context that no longer allows improvisation.

Governing a congress today means knowing how to choose, renounce, adapt and correct, while keeping clear what one intends to preserve.

Chapter IX

Decision-Making Checklist for Presidents and Boards

This checklist is not meant to control the organisation of a congress.

It is meant to govern it.

It can be used:

- before launching the design phase
- during key decision-making stages
- afterwards, to assess the coherence of the choices made

If some questions remain unanswered, the issue is not operational: it is decisional.

1. Identity and function of the congress

Is it clear why this congress needs to exist today?

- What is its primary function: updating, discussion, positioning, network-building?

- How does it differ from similar events in the scientific landscape?
- What role does it play within the organisation's overall strategy?

2. Centrality of presence

- Which elements of the congress only make sense if experienced in person?
- Is it clear what makes physical participation desirable?
- Is presence designed, or simply assumed?
- Does the programme offer moments that cannot be replicated remotely?

3. Remote participation

- Why is remote participation being offered?
- Who is it genuinely intended for?
- Has a clear distinction been defined between access to content and the congress experience?
- Does remote participation strengthen or weaken in-person attendance?

4. Economic sustainability

- On which elements is the economic balance of the congress based?
- What is the immediate impact of a reduction in physical attendance?
- Are there critical thresholds below which the event becomes unsustainable?
- Are costs aligned with real data, or with outdated historical estimates?

5. Governance and responsibility

- Who makes the strategic decisions regarding the congress?
- Are technological choices treated as institutional decisions?
- Is it clear who is accountable for the consequences of those decisions?
- Is the board involved in key choices, or only informed afterwards?

6. Technology and innovation

- Which technologies are genuinely necessary?

- Is each adopted tool consistent with the desired form of congress?
- Is innovation driven by objectives, or by the availability of solutions?
- Is there a risk that technology reshapes the congress more than intended?

7. Programme and quality of discussion

- Does the programme foster dialogue, or only the presentation of content?
- Are there real spaces for peer-to-peer exchange?
- Is the session format coherent with the scientific objectives?
- Is there a balance between scientific density and usability?

8. Attractiveness and context

- Does the destination influence the decision to attend?
- Does the programme enhance the context in which the congress takes place?

- Are there opportunities that encourage an extended stay?
- Is attractiveness seen as a value, or as something to be constrained?

9. Organisational management

- Which activities are appropriate to manage internally?
- Which are more effective to outsource?
- Are internal competencies adequate for the scale of the event?
- Is the organisational structure proportionate to the real complexity of the congress?

10. Monitoring and adaptation

- Is it possible to monitor registrations and confirmations in real time?
- Are there margins to adjust certain choices during the process?
- Do contracts allow for progressive risk management?
- Are decisions updated based on data?

11. Continuity and perspective

- Is the congress conceived as a one-off event or as part of a broader path?
- Is there continuity between one edition and the next?
- Are the relationships built during the congress cultivated over time?
- Does the congress contribute to the organisation's positioning within the scientific landscape?

A checklist that allows no automatisms.

This checklist does not produce automatic answers.

It forces choices, trade-offs and clear positioning.

If the congress is a central instrument for the scientific organisation, then it deserves explicit decisions, not implicit solutions.

Chapter X

Civil Liability, Safeguards and Decision-Making Risks

In discussions about the organisation of scientific congresses, the issue of civil liability is often marginal, if not entirely overlooked. Yet it is one of the aspects that most directly involves those who lead an association or a medico-scientific society.

This silence does not stem from a lack of relevance, but from a combination of factors: habit, operational delegation, implicit trust in suppliers, and a widespread underestimation of the legal consequences of the decisions taken.

In the current scenario, this omission is no longer sustainable.

When liability is not limited to the organisation

In many scientific organisations, the congress is organised through committees, boards or associative structures operating on a collegiate basis. While this approach is entirely legitimate from a scientific and

institutional perspective, it does not eliminate the liability of the individuals involved in decision-making processes.

In particular:

- the president
- members of the board
- members of organising committees

may be held personally accountable for the choices made, especially when these affect economic, contractual or safety-related aspects.

Liability does not arise from the practical execution of activities, but from the role exercised in decision-making.

Delegation does not mean transfer of liability

One of the most common misunderstandings is the belief that entrusting the organisation to a PCO, an agency or an external supplier automatically transfers responsibility.

In reality, operational delegation does not remove the decision-making responsibility of the promoting organisation and its governing bodies.

Strategic choices — venue, format, contracts, budget, participation models — remain with those who approve them.

When governance is unclear, the risk is twofold:

- on the one hand, decisions taken without full awareness of their consequences
- on the other, difficulty in reconstructing roles and responsibilities in the event of a dispute

Main areas of risk

Without entering into specific cases, there are certain areas where exposure to risk is more frequent:

- Contractual matters: rigid financial commitments made well in advance, unbalanced clauses, disproportionate penalties.
- Financial management: significant deviations from budget, lack of monitoring, assumption of risks not formally approved.
- Participant safety and liability: health, logistical and insurance-related aspects.
- Technological choices: data management, privacy, platforms, access, system reliability.

- Role of committees: ambiguity between scientific functions and decision-making authority.

In many cases, the issue is not the mistake itself, but the absence of a formalised decision-making framework.

The importance of preventive safeguards

Addressing liability does not mean adopting a defensive attitude, but building a system of safeguards consistent with the complexity of the event.

Among the most relevant tools:

- specific insurance coverage for events and governing roles
- clear contracts with suppliers, PCOs and partners
- explicit definition of decision-making responsibilities
- formal recording of strategic decisions

Effective protection is built before the event, not when a problem arises.

Clarity of roles and decision-making processes

One of the most underestimated elements is role clarity. In many associative structures, the boundaries between scientific function, organisational function and decision-making authority are blurred.

This ambiguity may appear functional in the short term, but becomes critical when difficulties arise. Defining who decides what, and within which limits, is a form of protection both for the organisation and for the individuals representing it.

Governance is not meant to rigidify processes, but to make them clear, traceable and defensible.

Responsibility and awareness

In the new scenario of scientific congresses, responsibility is not an ancillary issue, but a structural component of leadership.

Being aware of risks does not mean renouncing ambition or innovation. On the contrary, it creates the conditions to exercise one's role with greater freedom, knowing that decisions are taken within a clear and protected framework.

Responsibility as a source of institutional strength

An organisation that addresses responsibility in a mature way:

- strengthens its credibility
- protects those who represent it
- improves the quality of decisions
- reduces improvisation

In this sense, responsibility is not a constraint, but a lever of institutional solidity.

Chapter XI

Organisational and Digital Tools for Internal Control and Management

In recent years, one of the most significant changes for scientific organisations has been the possibility of managing an increasing part of congress organisation internally. Not to replace external professionals, but to strengthen control, transparency and decision-making capacity.

The availability of advanced digital tools has made possible what was previously complex or economically unsustainable: monitoring the progress of a congress in real time and intervening promptly when needed.

Internal management is not an ideological choice

It is important to clarify a preliminary point: internal management of the organisational secretariat is not

an ideological choice and is not suitable for every situation.

For congresses that are:

- large in scale
- highly complex from a logistical perspective
- strongly international in scope

full or partial outsourcing often remains an appropriate solution.

The issue is not to follow a single model, but to decide consciously which approach to adopt, based on:

- the size of the event
- available internal skills
- the organisation's objectives
- the frequency with which congresses are organised

An association accustomed to managing events of a certain scale may develop a stable internal structure. Conversely, when facing a non-routine event — for example, an international congress organised only occasionally — outsourcing becomes a balanced and protective choice.

The value of direct control

When part of the management is kept in-house, the main advantage is not only economic, but informational.

Direct management of:

- registrations
- confirmations
- participation flows
- invoicing
- basic accounting

allows the organisation to have an immediate and continuous view of the congress's performance.

This direct control makes it possible to:

- identify significant deviations early
- adjust services and investments
- reduce financial exposure
- support strategic decisions with real data

In the current scenario, making decisions without up-to-date data is equivalent to deciding in the dark.

Data as a decision-making tool, not just an administrative one

The data generated by the organisational secretariat are not merely administrative. They are a decision-making tool.

Knowing in real time:

- who is registering
- where participants come from
- which participation model they choose
- with what timing

makes it possible to read the congress while it is being built, not only afterwards.

Even when presidents and boards recognise the importance of data, these are often fragmented, dispersed among different providers, or available only as final reports. This severely limits the ability to intervene.

Integration with suppliers and PCOs

Internal management does not exclude the involvement of PCOs, agencies or specialised

suppliers. On the contrary, it works best when integrated with them.

An effective model includes:

- a clear distinction between control and operations
- shared information flows
- direct access by the organisation to key data

In this way, the organisation retains overall governance, while external partners operate within a clear and monitorable framework.

Impact on risk management

Real-time control directly affects risk management. When registration or confirmation trends diverge from forecasts, it becomes possible to:

- revise hotel room blocks
- adjust logistical services
- contain variable costs
- renegotiate certain commitments

This is particularly relevant in a context where many decisions are made well in advance and on the basis of forecasts.

When control strengthens governance

Having internal tools does not mean centralising every decision, but strengthening governance. Boards with access to clear and up-to-date information can:

- deliberate with greater awareness
- reduce internal conflicts
- assume responsibility more calmly

Informational transparency does not complicate decision-making processes; it makes them more robust.

A choice to be calibrated over time

Internal management is not a definitive decision. It can be adjusted, expanded or reduced over time, depending on the evolution of the organisation and its events.

What matters is avoiding two extremes:

- delegating everything and losing control

- internalising everything without adequate skills

Organisational maturity lies in the ability to find a dynamic balance.

Tools in support of decision-making

In the new scenario of scientific congresses, digital tools are not an end in themselves, but a means. They serve to support more informed decisions, reduce improvisation and make growing complexity governable.

When used thoughtfully, they help strengthen the organisation's autonomy and the overall quality of the congress.

Chapter XII

Legal Choices, Organisational Structures and Registered Office: An Underestimated Strategic Lever

In the governance of an association or a medical-scientific society, legal choices are often considered a formal matter, to be addressed once and then set aside. In reality, legal structure and registered office have a significant impact on operational capacity, economic sustainability and international positioning.

In the new scenario of scientific congresses, these choices can no longer be treated as neutral or purely administrative elements.

Legal form as a tool, not a label

The legal form of an organisation determines:

- the scope of liability

- the ability to enter into contracts
- the management of financial flows
- relationships with sponsors, partners and institutions
- the applicable tax regime

Choosing one legal structure over another is not a matter of identity, but of function. Each model has advantages and limitations that must be assessed in relation to the activities carried out, the frequency of events and the level of economic exposure.

A frequent mistake is maintaining a legal structure designed for limited activity while continuing to operate as if the organisation had a broader and more complex role.

When international activity changes the rules

For medical–scientific associations and societies operating internationally, the issue becomes even more complex. Organising congresses in different countries, managing international participants, contracting foreign suppliers and receiving cross-border sponsorships expose the organisation to multiple legal and tax regimes.

In this context, the choice of registered office is not irrelevant. Some European countries have developed regulatory frameworks that are more favourable to scientific and associative organisations, offering:

- greater regulatory clarity
- more predictable tax regimes
- simplified administrative procedures
- explicit recognition of scientific and non-profit activities

Assessing these opportunities does not mean avoiding obligations, but equipping the organisation with a structure consistent with its real operational profile.

Registered office and effective governance

Another often overlooked aspect is the relationship between registered office and effective governance. Having a formal registered office in one country while operating in practice in another can generate ambiguity, especially in the event of disputes, audits or tax inspections.

Consistency between:

- where decisions are made

- where financial flows are managed
- where core activities are carried out

is a protective factor both for the organisation and for its representatives.

Impact on congress organisation

Legal and organisational choices directly affect the organisation of congresses, even when this is not immediately apparent. They influence, for example:

- registration invoicing methods
- VAT and indirect tax management
- contractual relationships with PCOs and suppliers
- insurance coverage
- international payment management

An inadequate structure can unnecessarily complicate processes that, with a proper framework, would be more straightforward and less exposed to risk.

No universal solution

As with other areas discussed, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. The appropriate choice depends on:

- the size of the organisation
- the frequency and type of congresses
- the geographic scope of activity
- the level of administrative complexity
- risk tolerance

What matters is avoiding inertia. Continuing to operate with an outdated structure out of habit or fear of change is often riskier than undertaking a conscious review.

An issue to be addressed in advance

Revising legal form or registered office once a congress is already underway, or during a critical phase, exposes the organisation to tension and difficulty. Addressing the issue in advance, instead, makes it possible to:

- plan calmly
- evaluate alternatives

- involve qualified advisors
- align structure and strategy

This is a decision that requires care, but delivers tangible benefits in the medium and long term.

Structure and vision must align

In the new scenario of scientific congresses, legal structure and strategic vision must move together. An organisation that aspires to play an authoritative role in the Global Health context cannot afford a structure that is inconsistent with its ambitions and the complexity of its activities.

Addressing this issue with clarity is not a formal exercise, but an act of institutional responsibility.

Chapter XIII

Enabling Technologies and AI-Based Simultaneous Interpretation: New Opportunities for Dialogue

Among the innovations that have had the most significant impact on the organisation of scientific congresses in recent years, AI-based multilingual simultaneous interpretation systems represent a genuine paradigm shift.

This is not simply a more efficient technological solution, but a tool that introduces a clear discontinuity compared to traditional simultaneous interpretation models. A discontinuity that affects, directly and immediately, the economic sustainability of a congress—even before influencing the quality of scientific exchange and the accessibility of content.

Beyond (and before) the cost issue

For many scientific organisations, the first impact of AI-based interpretation systems is economic. Even interpretation into a single language, under traditional models, involves very high costs—often high enough to significantly affect the overall event budget or to limit its international ambition.

AI-based solutions radically change this scenario by enabling:

- a substantial reduction in interpretation costs
- far greater budget predictability
- the removal of access thresholds that previously made interpretation a selective or residual choice

This change is not marginal. It directly affects the very possibility of offering interpretation services, transforming them from a critical cost item into a genuinely sustainable tool.

However, reading these technologies merely as a cost-saving measure would be reductive. It is precisely this new economic sustainability that enables a broader qualitative leap, opening the door to

forms of scientific dialogue that were previously difficult to achieve.

Opening up previously unthinkable exchanges

The ability to offer simultaneous interpretation in multiple languages, with reduced cost and complexity, allows many congresses to open up to scientific communities that were previously marginalised.

This makes it possible to:

- involve scientific communities from under-represented countries
- promote more balanced international participation
- broaden the range of contributions and perspectives

In the Global Health context, this openness is not an ancillary value, but a structural factor of quality.

Language as a determinant of debate quality

One of the most underestimated aspects of scientific congresses is the impact of language on the quality of

interaction. Expressing oneself in a non-native language often leads to:

- simplification of thought
- reduced spontaneity
- lower effectiveness in debate

The possibility of intervening in one's mother tongue, with the assurance of being understood, fundamentally changes the dynamics of discussion. Interaction becomes more fluid, deeper and more authentic.

This not only improves the scientific quality of the exchange, but also fosters more active and equitable participation.

Technology serving inclusion, not replacement

Like any innovation, AI-based interpretation systems must be governed. Their value emerges when they are used to expand dialogue, not to replace presence or flatten the congress experience.

When integrated coherently, they:

- strengthen in-person sessions

- facilitate interaction between audience and speakers
- reduce linguistic barriers without reducing the density of the event

When used improperly, they risk becoming merely a tool for passive content consumption.

Impact on programme design

The availability of multilingual simultaneous interpretation also affects the design of the scientific programme. It enables, for example:

- genuinely international sessions, not only formally so
- panels with speakers from diverse contexts
- a better balance between local and international contributions

This expands the possibility of building programmes that are truly aligned with a Global Health perspective, without forcing all participants into a single vehicular language.

A choice that requires awareness

Adopting AI-based interpretation systems is not a purely technical decision. It affects the shape of the congress, participation patterns and the expectations of attendees.

For this reason, it must be embedded in a clear strategy:

- defining where and how it is used
- clarifying its relationship with in-person participation
- assessing its impact on the overall experience

When governed with clarity, this technology becomes a powerful lever for strengthening the role of the congress as a space for real and inclusive dialogue.

A technology aligned with the new scenario

In the new landscape of scientific congresses, tools such as AI-based simultaneous interpretation respond to a concrete need: to facilitate dialogue without impoverishing it, to broaden access without emptying the event of meaning.

They are not a universal solution, but an opportunity that—when used thoughtfully—can contribute significantly to the development of congresses that are more open, more effective and more consistent with the challenges of Global Health.

Chapter XIV

Hotels, Allotments and Contractual Risk: Governing Uncertainty

In the traditional model of scientific congress organisation, the relationship with hotel properties has always been one of the most delicate elements. In recent years, this aspect has become even more critical, mainly due to the evolution of contractual policies adopted by many hotel chains.

Today, hotels increasingly tend to bind organisers contractually to allotments defined well in advance, requiring:

- rigid quantitative commitments
- early release deadlines
- in some cases, significant deposits

If not carefully governed, this approach can transform accommodation from an essential service into a structural risk factor.

The nature of the problem: unavoidable estimates, not certainties

When a congress is confirmed—often years in advance—the organiser can only rely on:

- historical data from the event
- previous editions
- participant behaviour in comparable destinations

These are reasoned estimates, but they remain estimates.

In the meantime, numerous factors may intervene and affect actual attendance patterns:

- changes in the economic context
- shifts in participation models
- greater incidence of remote participation
- changes in participant profiles
- geopolitical or health-related factors
- evolution of the scientific programme

Expecting a forecast made years earlier to translate into a rigid commitment is, in practice, unrealistic.

When risk is shifted onto the organiser

The critical issue is that, through some contractual models now widely adopted, risk is transferred almost entirely onto the organiser.

If initial estimates are not confirmed:

- penalties may be substantial
- deposits may become non-recoverable
- the congress budget may suffer immediate and significant impacts

This is particularly dangerous for:

- associations
- scientific societies
- organising committees

which do not have the financial structure of a hotel operator and cannot easily absorb such risks.

Alternative models exist (but are not always proposed)

It is important to clarify that alternative, more balanced contractual models do exist and can protect

both parties. The issue is that they are not always proposed by hotels, especially in contexts of high demand.

These solutions include:

- global options on inventory
- progressive allotment contingents
- staggered release windows
- downsizing mechanisms linked to actual booking trends

Such models make it possible to:

- define a potential capacity
- confirm numbers progressively
- adapt commitments to the evolution of the event

Progressivity as a principle of balance

The key principle is progressivity.

A congress is not built at a single moment; it evolves over time. Similarly, hotel commitments should:

- grow as registrations consolidate

- be reviewed at regular intervals
- allow downsizing without disproportionate penalties

This approach:

- protects the organiser
- reduces financial exposure
- makes risk more sustainable
- improves planning quality

The decisive role of monitoring

Here, the link with a digital organisational secretariat becomes direct.

The ability to monitor in real time:

- registrations
- participant categories
- registration timelines

makes it possible to:

- negotiate more effectively
- justify progressive adjustments

- make decisions based on real data rather than assumptions

An effective monitoring system aligns hotel decisions with the actual evolution of the congress, reducing exposure and strengthening negotiating capacity.

Not conflict, but informed negotiation

Addressing this issue does not mean positioning oneself in opposition to hotel properties. On the contrary, it means negotiating on more realistic grounds, avoiding disproportionate exposure for either party.

A sustainable congress is also one that:

- does not put the organising entity at risk
- does not compromise the continuity of the event
- does not generate avoidable tensions in the final phase

Codes of ethics and historical context: when protection becomes a constraint

Alongside contractual issues, there is another factor that has a profound—and often underestimated—impact on the sustainability and attractiveness of medical–scientific congresses: the restrictions imposed by ethical codes of pharmaceutical industry federations.

These rules, originally introduced with the legitimate aim of curbing abuses in the sponsorship of medical events during the 1980s and 1990s, have progressively “criminalised” any component related to leisure, making it effectively impracticable for many organisers.

In that historical context, setting limits was necessary. Sponsorships were often used indiscriminately and with limited transparency, risking the credibility of scientific events themselves. Today, however, the framework is radically different.

Rules designed for a world that no longer exists

The conditions under which medical–scientific congresses operate today bear little resemblance to those of thirty years ago:

- sponsorship resources have diminished
- controls are more stringent
- transparency has become a structural requirement
- scientific value is subject to rigorous evaluation

Yet many restrictions continue to reflect a punitive rather than regulatory logic, ultimately targeting not abuses—now largely residual—but legitimate opportunities to make a congress sustainable and competitive.

Any reference to participants' personal time, the destination, or the overall quality of the experience is often treated as suspicious, if not outright prohibited.

Undeclared side effects

This approach produces tangible consequences:

- it reduces the ability to incentivise in-person participation
- weakens the international competitiveness of events
- penalises destinations and countries that could benefit from congress tourism
- compresses congress formats, making them shorter and less attractive

The paradox is that rules designed to safeguard ethics end up impoverishing the system, without real benefits for scientific quality.

Ethics and development are not contradictory

Recognising the value of participants' time and transparently integrating the bleisure dimension does not mean returning to past practices. It means acknowledging that congresses now compete in a profoundly changed environment.

Ethics and development are not opposing concepts. They become so only when rules fail to evolve with the context.

A more mature approach should clearly distinguish between:

- improper incentives
- opaque practices
- legitimate, transparent and declared management of attractiveness

Confusing these levels means renouncing a fundamental strategic lever, without any real advantage.

A decision-making responsibility that can no longer be postponed

Accepting rigid contractual models or obsolete ethical constraints without question is not a necessity, but a choice. And like all choices, it produces consequences.

For presidents and committees, governing these aspects means:

- asking the right questions
- requesting more balanced solutions
- linking decisions to real data
- avoiding unnecessary exposure

Governing uncertainty does not mean eliminating it, but making it sustainable.

And today, this is one of the most significant responsibilities of those who lead a medical-scientific congress.

Conclusions

A Notice to Navigators

This book was not written to provide operational solutions or to propose models to be replicated. It was written to help those who are called to decide to find their bearings in a context that no longer allows improvisation.

Scientific congresses remain one of the most powerful tools available to associations and medical-scientific societies. However, their effectiveness is no longer guaranteed by tradition, regularity or the quality of content alone. Today, it depends on the capacity to govern.

Governing a congress means assuming responsibility for choices:

- the role the organisation intends to play
- the balance between in-person participation and distance
- the conscious use of technology
- attractiveness as a legitimate strategic lever
- the management of risks, data and structures

- positioning within the Global Health context

Not deciding is already a decision. And it is often the most risky one.

Many of the issues addressed in these pages would, only a few years ago, have been considered marginal or inappropriate. Today they are not. Not because they have become acceptable, but because the context has made them unavoidable.

Technology is neither the problem nor the solution. It is a tool.

Remote participation is not a threat, but a variable to be governed.

Attractiveness is not a concession, but a strategic lever.

What makes the difference is not the tools themselves, but the vision with which they are used.

In the new scenario, presence can no longer be imposed. It must be made meaningful, desirable and coherent. This requires institutional courage: recognising that people's time, the context and the overall experience matter. Not as accessory elements, but as integral parts of the scientific project.

If Global Health is the horizon, then the congress cannot be reduced to a moment of content delivery. It must return to being a space for real, inclusive and multilateral exchange, capable of generating relationships and shared visions.

This book does not offer recipes, because none exist.

What it offers is a course.

A course made of the right questions, explicit choices and assumed responsibilities. A course that allows presidents, boards and committees to exercise their role with greater awareness and confidence.

The sea has changed.

The maps of the past are no longer enough.

But the tools to navigate still exist.

It is up to those who decide

to choose whether to drift with inertia

or to consciously chart their own course.

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Scientific congresses are no longer what they once were.

Not because they have lost their value, but because the context in which they operate has changed profoundly: new modes of participation, more limited resources, and technologies that expand possibilities while increasing the complexity of decision-making.

Today, a congress can no longer be seen as a simple recurring appointment. It has become a strategic instrument that shapes the role of the organisation, its long-term sustainability, and its concrete contribution to Global Health.

This book is addressed to those who are called upon to decide. It does not offer operational solutions or models to be replicated, but provides criteria for orientation—tools to govern choices that have become increasingly complex.

A Notice to Navigators is an invitation to exercise decision-making responsibility with greater awareness, in a context that no longer allows for improvisation.