

5 Lessons learned during times of uncertainty: Cultural festivals in Mexico

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Introduction

Festivals are an activity that bring social, cultural, and economic benefits to communities and attendees. However, when faced with unforeseen situations, festival organisers must make decisions in the face of uncertainty.

In early 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic affected many industries in the world. The cultural industry was no exception, mainly because among the health restrictions applied internationally, it was widely recommended to stay at home, postpone travelling and maintain social distancing (UNWTO, 2020), and those who worked in cultural industries were forced to take their work to the virtual world. Whilst some sectors had already dedicated themselves to producing works specifically designed for digital platforms, many professionals had to rapidly convert to digital in order to try to save their income and/or their contact with the public. This context forced festival organisers into making decisions that might affect not only their current events, but also events in the years to come.

According to the scope of these events, the time it takes to plan varies between a few weeks, months or even years in advance (Sánchez-Aguirre & Van Winkle, 2022) and, when a crisis arises, quick and assertive decision-making should take place to modify, adapt or even start again. From every crisis and therefore from the decisions made in that context, a learning process is generated. Festival organiser decisions made in crisis must ensure that festival attendees are provided with a safe and secure environment, i.e., free from harm and free from danger (Smith & Kline, 2010).

In Mexico, national statistical indicators show that the budget for operating expenses and promotion of culture activities fell by 9% in 2020 (INEGI, 2023), as another consequence of the health crisis, and the subsidy for cultural activities, such as fairs and festivals, was reduced by 44% (Volpi et al., 2020). Despite this