When Dubai won the bid to host World Expo 2020 in 2013, we asked our experts to weigh in on what it would mean for business in the Emirate. Despite setbacks, Expo 2020 Dubai was finally inaugurated in 2021 with huge pomp and to much acclaim. Postponed due to the pandemic, the world fair showcases all that humanity has achieved so far, and offers hope for a creative future. On the occasion, we once again turn to our experts to weigh in on what impact the Expo may have in a post-Covid world and what, if anything, has changed.
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**Damian Regan, Middle East Assurance Leader for Sustainability**

What Expo 2020 Dubai has demonstrated is the ability to weather this particular Covid storm through continued effort, goodwill and adaptation. It has put in place its own sustainable story of low emissions, recyclable and reusable construction, and sustainable tourism. The country pavilions and their exhibitions highlighted many innovations that will help the world move forward in terms of sustainability. In many ways, Expo 2020 Dubai has more impact and has shown us all what we must do in an ever-changing world that leads with sustainability at its core.

Of the many things that Covid-19 has taught us, one is that not only are companies highly vulnerable to the effects of nature, where supply chains are disrupted, demand dries up, physical assets are unable to be used, and workers stay at home, but also that those companies that are able to quickly adapt to disruption and respond are those that remerge quickly and thrive. These companies are often deemed sustainable in the sense that they have evaluated and responded effectively to both risks and opportunities. In many ways, climate change presents a similar force of nature, outside the control of companies, but over a longer time-frame. Companies need to factor in climate change and other environmental and societal changes, in order to position themselves strongly for what the future may hold.

**Emmanuel Durou, Partner, Consulting, Technology, Media and Telecommunications Leader**

The learnings and impact of Expo 2020 Dubai could not be more relevant for a Covid world, where technology and digital have taken center stage in shaping our ways of living. For Dubai and the UAE, two core aspects of Expo are profoundly impacting the technology landscape of the Emirate and will form an integral part of the Expo legacy in the country and for Dubai: the build-up of a vibrant tech start-up ecosystem, enabling its ambition to become the smartest city on earth.

Firstly, Expo 2020 Dubai has brought about profound changes in the UAE tech SME and start-up ecosystem. In the ramp-up to the Expo, over 16,700 contracts were awarded, and more than half of these to SMEs, including a significant proportion in the technology sector. Local start-ups across supply chain, logistics and events have benefited from ancillary services delivered to the most significant global gathering since the start of the pandemic, while local emerging tech (e.g. agtech, cleantech, etc.) have greatly benefited from the cross-pollination of ideas from international start-ups with platforms such as the Good Place Pavilion, home of the Expo Live impact and innovation program, and other networking and collaborating events across Expo. As important, the legacy strategy of Expo with District 2020 and the Scale2Dubai initiative are bound to provide fertile ground to further build the UAE start-up ecosystem. Given the scale and ambition of District 2020, we see its unique central infrastructure, mixing corporate, SMEs and start-ups combined with the latest smart city technology to bring to scale similar existing concepts in the Emirate including Area 71.

The second impact relates to the position of Dubai and the UAE on the smart city agenda. In many ways, Smart City is the Eiffel Tower of Expo 2020 Dubai. Expo 2020 Dubai has been a unique demonstration of how diverse yet universal the concept of Smart City can be-from the Smart Pavilion replica of Finland to Germany’s Future City Lab or India’s Smart City Mission. Expo 2020 Dubai has been a unique demonstration of how diverse yet universal the concept of Smart City can be-from the Smart Pavilion replica of Finland to Germany’s Future City Lab or India’s Smart City Mission.
Dubai has set the stage to demonstrate how to attract much needed global investment for all participants and has been a key enabler to reopen for business and to stimulate economic growth.
Dubai has “gotten off to an excellent start and hotel occupancy is up from 54 per cent in 2020 to 62 per cent in Q3 2021.”

One of the measures of the success of an Expo is measured in number of visits achieved, and Expo 2020 Dubai had been targeting 25 million visits during the six-month event. More than 10 million visits have been recorded in the period up to 18 January 2022 - and though this may be lower than what was initially expected pre-pandemic, it is still significant and should be considered a fantastic success of Expo given the current circumstances.

What has changed is the proportion of local vs. international visitors, with initially over 70 percent of visitors expected to be living outside the UAE, and 30 percent to be from within the UAE. Figures for the first three months showed that almost one third of all visitors came from abroad, with the split most likely changing over the coming months through increased tourism and other parts of the world travel restrictions. The biggest impact Expo 2020 Dubai has had to date however in our opinion has been the strengthening trade and business with global counterparts. A perfect illustration of this was the recent visit of Emmanuel Macron, French President, to Expo 2020 Dubai where he was received by His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces. The two leaders discussed the friendly relations, cooperation and development opportunities in various fields under the strategic partnership that brings the two countries together, especially in the investment and economic aspects, advanced technology, energy and food security. In addition to the cultural, educational and other fields to achieve their mutual interests. President Macron’s visit to the UAE also provided the right platform to sign over ten important agreements and deals on the sidelines, with one of the most significant being the ordering of 80 Rafale fighter jets and 12 military helicopters through an arms contract worth US$19.20 billion.

We anticipate Expo 2020 Dubai to build on its successes to date during the event, which will create a fantastic platform for its legacy. Looking beyond the Expo, District 2020 will become a hub for technology and innovation and a place for businesses to connect, exchange ideas and solutions and create an ecosystem to foster sustainable economic development to support the growth of key industries such as travel, tourism, education, real estate and construction.

Wayne Thomas, CEO, Financial Advisory

I think there are a few reasons why Expo 2020 Dubai can have a greater and more significant impact for Dubai, the UAE and the GCC in a post-Covid and, crucially, a post-COP26 world.

Innovation

The Expo showcases innovation in thinking and technology, and supports collaboration to build a better future. Although totally relevant themes in 2013 and in 2019, it feels like the new world with Covid, and the watershed change in perceptions of the global impacts of climate change demonstrated at COP26, really bring these themes to the forefront of global thinking. The UAE’s agenda to diversify away from oil, particularly towards greener technology, has never seemed more important (both for the economy and for wider perceptions) and the Emirates can play a leading role in the development of sustainable sources going forward. The infrastructure landscape is also being shaped by the change to the ways that people will work after Covid, with less office space and more demand for green space. The need for residential, commercial and wider infrastructure to support the sustainability agenda is also clear, and Dubai in particular has a clear role here.

Better government

Another key theme that resonates across the region is the desire/agenda to make government more effective, efficient and better at delivering for its citizens. Expo should be a catalyst for driving further change, particularly given recent global and regional events. The impact of Covid, both directly (in terms of changing working conditions, changes to the way we are allowed to travel, etc) and indirectly (the relationship between government and its citizens through restrictions and new laws) has magnified the importance of effective governance and regulations. The competition to challenge Dubai’s status as the regional leader for foreign talent and business will only intensify over the coming years, increasing the importance of being able to demonstrate the ability to create, refine and adapt public policy and delivery to offer the best results for those they serve. Dubai is well placed to do this.