

Who Organises Expos?

Archive

HE DIMITRI K: Opening Ceremony speech at Expo 2020 Dubai.

Podcast Transcript

NOON SALEH: If this voice sounds familiar, it might be because you tuned in for the opening ceremony of Expo 2020 Dubai, or you listened to the first episode of this podcast. So, who is this? Here's a hint: he's a person who played a key role in bringing the World Expo to the Arab region for the first time - in the middle of a pandemic, no less.

HE DIMITRI K: That evening itself was, I think for me, one of the most emotional moments in my life. To see the culmination of all these years of work - not, not the pandemic, but all the preparation from candidature to preparation, to bringing countries in, to getting them ready and all the pavilions set up - then to be crushed by this pandemic and to have all our hopes hanging by a thread...and to manage to pull it off in such, such a glorious fashion, you know, the, the opening ceremony and it was not just the ceremony. It was the excitement that I knew existed. And it was, for me, it was more than the Expo. It was the reopening of the world.

NOON SALEH: This is His Excellency Dimitri Kerkentzes, Secretary-General of the BIE - the International Bureau for Expositions. A lot of people make the mistake of thinking that Expos are one-off events that host nations decide to throw at random every 5 years or so. But there's a logic to World Expos - and the source of that logic is the BIE.

On today's episode, we speak with His Excellency to better understand the role the BIE plays in organizing World Expos. How does this intergovernmental organization help each Expo achieve its goals? What is it like to work with Dubai's leadership to connect minds and create the future?

I'm Noon Salih, and this is Inside Expo, an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai, where history is being made.

[INTRO STING]

NOON SALEH: When your job involves helping a nation host an Expo that makes history every 5 years, can you pick only *one* favorite moment or experience?

HE DIMITRI K: You know, a lot of people ask me this question, and it's very difficult to pinpoint one particular thing, because I think that the most important thing that the general public has to understand about expos is that each one is truly unique. And that's because when, whether it is the UAE or any other country that comes to bid for these events, we don't have a rule book. You come and tell us what you think the next Expo should be. And I think that's why these events are so popular because they are so different. Each single edition is completely different from the last one. It's not just seeing a repeat and repeat and repeat.

NOON SALEH: That sense of uniqueness and surprise is the reason why His Excellency - and why millions around the world - love Expos. But he admits that that wasn't the case when he joined the BIE in 2003.

HE DIMITRI K: I was still very skeptical about these events. I had visited one as a child, but I never quite understood why they were still existing. And, you know, the usual things that you hear about, well, with the internet and modern travel capacity, why do we kind of still need these events? And when I joined, I questioned it myself as well. Until 2005, when I landed in my first Expo, in Expo 2005 Aichi.

Archive of Aichi 2005

HE DIMITRI K: It was that discovery for me of what was going on in Japan. You know, all these countries brought together to discuss these themes and the way that they were really putting forward their cultural diversity on one site, you know, in one place on the planet at one single time. I mean, I was hooked. You know, from that day on, I decided, I, I don't think I need to try and do anything else with my life.

NOON SALEH: His Excellency witnessed 2 other World Expos after Aichi 2005: Shanghai 2010, "Better City Better Life."

Archive of Shanghai 2010

NOON SALEH: And Milan 2015, "Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life."

Archive of Milan 2015

NOON SALEH: Then, in January 2020, a few months before the next Expo was supposed to open, His Excellency took on the role of Secretary-General of the BIE. This makes Expo 2020 Dubai the first under his leadership.

Now, we all know what happens shortly after that. Here's another hint: a pandemic. But before that, we asked His Excellency to give us a crash course on the BIE.

HE DIMITRI K: For those who might not know, the first expo was in 1851 in London. And at that time, the BIE did not exist. There was no structure that controlled the hosting of these events. They were set up by big leading industrial nations to try and invite the world to show off their latest inventions, their latest discoveries.

But by the 1920s, I think there was a feeling that these events. They were, they were losing control. There was too many happening, you know, there was no real regulation around them.

And so a group of countries decided it was time to form an organization to regulate them. And so they wrote an international treaty, which was signed in Paris and brought us in 1928 with the creation and the office starting its work in 1931. And it has always been there as an organization to guide and regulate these events.

NOON SALEH: A common misconception about Expos is that there is only one kind of Expo - the World Expo every 5 years. But the BIE's calendar is much busier than that.

HE DIMITRI K: So you have World Expos now that take place once every five years. So from 2020 in Dubai, Before that we had Milan in 2015, and we will have Osaka in 2025 and in between the World Expos, which are these big six months events, we have the smaller specialized Expos, and these only last three months, and they're much more limited in size, but they're supposed to have a very specific theme. So it allows countries an opportunity with a smaller investment of dealing with something very specific. And they're very popular and they take place right in between two World Expos. And this I think has become one of the keys for the organization - to make sure that we don't have an uncontrollable calendar of Expos.

NOON SALEH: Keeping a calendar of Expos is helpful for sure, but the BIE's mission is much larger. It also wants to answer the age-old question: why? Why do we need Expos in the first place? That's where the values of the BIE come in - education, innovation, and cooperation.

HE DIMITRI K: Article I of our convention clearly states that Expos are meant for the education of the public. And I think this is something that has held true from the day the BIE was created right up to today and will continue.

Of course, after the Second World War Expos took a new turn. You know, people always mention Brussels 1958, its main icon, which still remains today in Brussels is the Atomium, all about the atom and nuclear power. What happened in world war II and the advent of nuclear power and nuclear weapons. And you see that Expos have this humanistic approach. What does this mean for the future of the people of the planet?

This is why you hear a lot here in Dubai about the sustainable development goals. Before Dubai Expo, we heard a lot of Expos were linking themselves to the millennium development goals. It's pushing forward these ideas, these values that we have of education and innovation, and really getting them forward through this cooperation.

NOON SALEH: So... what's the process for a country like the UAE to host a World Expo?

HE DIMITRI K: So it's, it's a long cycle, you know, it's, uh, it takes it's. I, I always say it's more of a marathon, you know, it's not a sprint, it's a marathon to get to the end of one of these. I think you have to think that first of all, what you want it's, and it's something that is key for me as secretary general of the BIE we don't go looking for candidates. They need to come to us. You know, I don't think you should ever try and force a country or a city to host one of these events because the implications are huge. And you want it to make sense to the country and to its citizens. Otherwise, why are we doing this? You know, so point one, it's, let the country and the city come to you. When they come to you, then you have, uh, let's say a year and a half, two years of a candidacy.

So, this is what they need to put forward apart from all the technical aspects on the financing and the site of the Expo and, uh, you know, travel, accommodation and so on, because you want people to be able to reach every expo. You have the thematic importance. Put across why you think your theme is so important in 2020 for us to be here in Dubai, rather than Yekaterinburg who was their competitor or in Thailand or in Brazil or in Turkey at that time? It's a tough job. You know, it's two years of difficult work. Traveling the world may sound very luxurious and fun, but trust me, they do not have fun. You know, it's nonstop lobbying trying to convince their partner governments and all the governments around the world - this would be the best place until we get to the vote. At the vote we saw Dubai did extremely well.

Archive of Dubai winning at the bid.

HE DIMITRI K: It was clear. The world, I think gave a very clear answer where they wanted to go in 2020.

And from that day on, it becomes a race, a race to really get the site ready, get countries committed to participate. You know, it's not enough to put a flag of your country and the picture to say that I was present. You really need to say something, you know, give us the best, put your best foot forward. It's always what I've said about why Expos are important. It gives all these 192 countries here this unique opportunity in 2021 to put forward your best foot on why you think this is what your country's doing. These are the projects that are important for the future of humanity.

So, you have all this preparation period, something I'm always very keen to remind members of the press and everyone who doesn't work in Expos that an Expo cannot be done by their host. It needs to be a joint project because look at what countries have built. This was not just built by the UAE. This was built by 192 countries coming here and building 7,000 square meter pavilions. So the logistics in being able to have 192 construction companies basically working on one site. It's, I mean, it's a tremendous feat to, to manage this.

Um, and once you have all of that ready and all the technical side under to make sure that visitors are comfortable, everything, the logistics of traveling onsite, offsite, it's a very big site, it's hot in Dubai, you know, you need to make sure people are comfortable, and you have the whole six month period of running this expo. And then you will have a brief dismantling period where the countries basically pack up their things, thank their host government and go home.

And for most of them, start planning 2025, you know, and, and off we go again in the circle. And while they're planning 2025, we're already working on the candidates for 2030. So, so it's non-stop.

NOON SALEH: Of course, the story of Expo 2020 Dubai would be missing an integral piece without mentioning the COVID-19 pandemic that delayed it for a year - just when it was about to cross the finish line.

HE DIMITRI K: I think humanity just tried to put it out of our minds and say, "No, this is something that can be contained the way SARS was, you know, the way MERS was and it's not going to impact us." But as time went past, and by the time we hit March in particular in Europe, um, you know, we had the true lockdowns and

it was, it was a shock, you know, to suddenly be thrust into this kind of a problematic because of the unknowns.

It was something that required to be dealt with calmly, you know, and I think this is one of the reasons why I was very, very happy to have the support of the whole UAE government here and of course, of Her Excellency as well as we move forward in this, which was a question of neither acting too late, nor jumping the gun.

NOON SALEH: The decision to postpone couldn't be made by one person or one government at the end of the day. All 170 member nations of the BIE had to vote on postponing the Expo - and the vote was, perhaps unsurprisingly, unanimous.

HE DIMITRI K: And if I take away one of the strongest points of this postponement was that the biggest fear of everyone with one year later was that countries would withdraw from the Expo.

You know, they would say, well, it's okay. We support you, but now we have other problems we need to deal with at home. We need to deal with the pandemic health systems that were crumbling under the pressure. And instead the number of countries grew. You know, and I think this is a testament to what this Expo means, not just as the first Expo in the region, but as an event for the world.

Archive of Expo 2020 Dubai new opening dates video.

NOON SALEH: That brings us back to the beginning of this episode, to the opening ceremony at which His Excellency inaugurated the first World Expo in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia region. The reopening of the world.

HE DIMITRI K: I think that Dubai for me is already pivotal in the sense that, at last, we have come to a new region of. You know, it's been a question I've been hearing in my, during my career in the BIE well, are Expos something for European countries and Asian countries, but no one else? You know, well, the Americas used to have them, maybe they'll come back, but otherwise we see it's Europe and Asia and, and it's, it's something I strongly disagree on.

The aim should be to bring these events all over the world. So for me, when you ask me, what does Dubai stand for? It also stands for the fact that for once we have come to a brand new region in terms of Expos and not, you know, the historical, cultural importance of the region goes back way before Expos even existed, but for Expos to be able to be present in the Middle East, to be able to have this important impact to put forward that a region, which has been in the

media so much with so many negative connotations for decades to be able to put forward this shining example of multilateral cooperation, multilateral inclusiveness, you know, where everyone gets a chance to come and put forward their point of views.

And I believe it will be seen in the future as a turning point for World Expos, you know, as how we need to keep moving forward and developing them, how we need to be pushing to go into new regions and bringing it to new countries, to new host countries. It's for me, something that I think I will be speaking about for many, many years to come.

NOON SALEH: At the end of our time with His Excellency, we asked him what impact he wanted Expos to have on the public, especially younger generations.

HE DIMITRI K: I'm very much looking forward to bringing my daughter. She's only nine years old and I haven't had a chance yet to bring her but I plan to do it, you know, incognito walk around the site and let her experience it because I think that it, by about the age of nine that's where a child really could feel something about what's going on here and understand what's inside the pavilions, you know?

So this is what I would tell her. I say, look at everything here, look at everything we, your ancestors, everyone has done wrong and what you need to do to fix it. Take inspiration from what little we are trying to fix now, you know, running to fix the environment and sustainability and what you could do calmly in the future and make sure that it's developed in the right way because our children, the youth, are the future. And I think people forget how much the UAE has tried to inspire and include the youth in this Expo.

You know, because this is the key. You know? So this is the moment. This is it. Look, learn, take all the good and the bad. And learn from it and make sure you don't make the same mistakes.

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NOON SALEH: Inside Expo takes you behind the scenes at Expo 2020 Dubai, sharing our stories and others across the 170-year history of this global event. Learn more by visiting [VirtualExpoDubai.com](https://virtualexpodubai.com).

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