

Operational safety an immeasurable asset

The city of Praia hosted from 17 to 18 February the 22nd Meeting of Directors General of the Operational Safety Supervision Organisation of the Banjul Group Agreement for Civil Aviation (BAGASOO). The meeting was held under the banner of sustainability of the organisation that brings together Cape Verde, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Conakry, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone.

BAGASOO was created in June 2009 with the main mission of promoting the best standards of operational safety of civil aviation of the seven member states.

Cape Verde, through the Civil Aviation Agency (AAC), assumed until December 2021 the Vice Presidency of BAGASOO, having given its support in the affirmation of the entity, one of the most active regional supervision organizations of the African continent, and actively participated in the preparation of regulations with a view to their harmonization, through our inspectors who make up the TC Regulatory (Technical Regulatory Committee). On the other hand, we have assisted the other members of the organization with the provision of guidance materials, manuals and regulations of the sector, in order to enable them to do an effective operational safety oversight activity in their territories and as a result of this, in the last audits, two of the Member States managed to raise the effective compliance with ICAO standards and recommendations, even allowing Ghana to become the country of the group with the best score among the Banjul Agreement Group (BAG) States.

The BAGASOO Directors General Meeting in Cape Verde was the motto to get to know a little more about the organization of which the Civil Aviation Agency is a member, the projects and the vision of the entity for the supervision of operational safety in the seven member countries. Tidiane Bah, the current Executive Director, began by explaining that BAGASOO is an operational safety oversight organization, with a mandate to develop joint documents, support member states in complying with all the requirements defined by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), staff training, among other aspects. BAGASOO's role is to support the seven member states in harmonising policies, regulatory aspects, norms and standards in accordance with international best practices.

The executive leader of BAGASOO believes that there are challenges in the civil aviation sector in the organisation's area of intervention at the moment. Firstly, the issue of funding is surely one of the immediate challenges. The pandemic dictated by Sars-COV-2 brought down the air transport system, with a drastic reduction in movements, hence revenues were also reduced. Indirectly, this situation also affected BAGASOO, which saw a drop in financial contributions from member states. However, given the restrictions on travel and contact, the organisation took the opportunity to work, in a virtual way, on the harmonisation of standards and recommendations that have been presented by ICAO, and which signatory countries should implement.

Regarding funding, most member states have financial contributions in arrears, so one of the decisions of the Praia meeting was the partial forgiveness of part of the debts, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the rescheduling of the payment of arrears according to a schedule and modalities approved by the Directors General.

Another challenge that member states, through BAGASOO, should continue to face is the implementation of USOAP (Universal Safety Oversight Audit Programme), which is the ICAO mechanism for overseeing the operational safety of civil aviation worldwide. BAGASOO considers this ICAO mechanism, which obliges signatories to comply with SARPs (Standard and

Recommended Practices), to be important. This means that all member states, at a global level, must implement the standards and recommended practices set by ICAO. Compliance with these standards is mandatory for member states to use, while the recommended practices are optional. However, the effective implementation of these practices, in conjunction with the standards, attests to the degree of operational safety in a given country or territory. Hence, it is important that civil aviation regulators do their best in overseeing the implementation of these ICAO standards. This is what allows achieving an acceptable level of civil aviation oversight. In this way, a country with a high degree of effective implementation of ICAO provisions conveys safety to all operators, with direct impacts on the economy.

To achieve the desideratum of implementation of SARPs it is necessary to have a coherent legislation, adequate and adapted regulations, and an independent regulatory authority with clear competences in the process of safety oversight. Added to this are human resources with appropriate profiles, and in sufficient quantity for the full exercise of operational safety oversight. Continuous training, in a very dynamic sector, is an important component if one wants to have an efficient supervision, in line with international commitments, with the law in force in the country, and with the best practices in the field of civil aviation.

BAGASOO also argues that the civil aviation authority should be proportional to the existing activities in member states, but recognizes the impossibility of having, in many cases, sufficient staff for all the tasks inherent in the process of certification and oversight of the sector. One of the solutions is the exchange and transfer of qualified personnel who could at any time assist other member states in operational safety matters.

The Banjul Group's Operational Safety Oversight Organization for Civil Aviation also allows for economies of scale by promoting joint specialized training for the operational safety inspectors of all member states. As important as following the international standards set by ICAO, regarding the certification of air carriers, aeronautical personnel, airport structures and others, is the ability of the regulatory body of civil aviation to make continuous supervision, thus ensuring that the regulated companies continue to meet the purposes that guided their certification or authorization. The public interest of all those who use air transport as a safe, efficient and fast means depends on this.

ICAO regularly audits operational safety oversight systems and member states are classified according to the level of effective implementation of SARPs. At the level of BAGASOO, Cape Verde and Ghana have the best level of effective implementation of ICAO regulations, and the intention is to raise and harmonize the level of effective implementation of SARPs in all seven member states that make up the sub-regional organization.

One of the aspects taken into account in its civil aviation safety oversight capacity is the degree of independence of the regulatory bodies. In the past, the regulation was made by the ministries responsible for transport, but with the implementation of standards and recommended practices, this task passed to independent authorities that began to make a more effective and autonomous regulation, avoiding the conflicts of interest that previously existed. BAGASOO considers, therefore, that the independence of the operational safety oversight authorities evolves much more efficiently when they are not under the chains of government administrations, and in this context, they are in better conditions to ensure the effective supervision of the system. This independence of the civil aviation regulatory entities and the implementation of the international norms established by ICAO concur to a safe operational environment, in which passengers feel total confidence in the sector.

Cape Verde as a member of ICAO, and also of BAGASOO, has undergone positive transformations, with the Civil Aviation Agency (CAA) evolving to an increasingly autonomous system, in line with ICAO recommendations. The approval of the Cape Verde Civil Aviation Regulations (CV CAR's) introduced important aspects of regulation of the sector, and of operational safety, in particular, with visible gains in the degree of effective implementation of SARPs (See Box).

The Executive Director of BAGASOO considers that the steps that Cape Verde has taken in the implementation of USOAP are positive, and proof of this is the ranking that the country holds. The mechanism that audits operational safety oversight consists of eight critical elements, and Cape Verde has been consistently establishing and implementing the critical elements identified by ICAO. Thus, the legislation, regulations, the organization of the regulatory authority, the qualified human resources required for effective oversight, the technical procedures to ensure operational safety, issuance of authorizations, certificates and approvals, continuous oversight, resolution of operational safety issues are determinant aspects to assess the degree of implementation of ICAO standards and recommended practices regarding operational safety.

In going through the ICAO process, Cape Verde has achieved good results that are reflected in the level of confidence of operators and the general population in terms of operational safety. In the view of the Executive Director of BAGASOO, Cape Verde despite having an excellent system, needs, like other member states, constant monitoring and improvements in order to further increase its level of confidence.

The country faces the challenge of maintaining and raising implementation levels in an ongoing task that cannot be cut short. Due to its transversality and critical characteristics, operational safety is a constant challenge, which the regulatory entities, such as AAC, and in the regional scope, BAGASOO, should have as a priority. It is commonly said in aviation that operational safety is the main asset, and its degradation always brings immeasurable costs.

A good rating in the USOAP-CMA audit signals to air carriers that the destination is safe, that the regulatory framework is consistent with the best international practices, and therefore the country's competitiveness index also increases. The opposite implies the subjection to blacklists, impediments and also negative impacts on the country's competitiveness.

The most recent audit action to which Cape Verde was subjected by ICAO, took place in 2018, through an ICAO Coordinated Validation Mission (ICVM). However, the Civil Aviation Agency eagerly awaits the next audit that will show the path, which is wanted positive, since the last assessment. The recommendations made at the time of the ICVM are being consistently corrected, and the country wants to remain well above the world average in the effective implementation of the SARPs. To this end, a strong focus on staff training, combined with a constant review of regulations and procedures there where necessary, has been the path undertaken in this effort to strengthen the country's position when it comes to continuous supervision of operational safety.