

WiLAT Chat on COVID-19 28 May 2020

Re-opening of airports and Preparation

WiLAT chat session on COVID-19 has invited two prominent speakers: Nadia Abdul Aziz, WiLAT Global Vice Chairperson, Middle East and David Ankapong Gray, Vice President Air Transport Ghana to speak on Re-opening of Airports and Preparation. Dato Radzak Malek, CILT International President, opened the session emphasising the importance of regular dialogues to upkeep knowledge among members. Other attendees are: Keith Newton, Secretary General, Dorothy Chan, WiLAT Global Chairperson, Vicky Koo WiLAT Deputy Global Chairperson, Reshma Yousuf Ghulam Chair of the session, Gayani de Alwis, Finbarr Cleary, Mohd Azam Bin Din, Marina Kuznechevskaya, Edward Lau, Dantao Li, Kelly Li, Funmilayo Loremikan, Zawiah Abdul Majid, Doreen Owusu-fianko and Dabney Shall-Holma.

The airline industry is one of the hardest industries under COVID-19. Initially, international travel was maintained despite the lock down of Wuhan city in China in January. However, with increasing number of confirmed cases and deaths, many governments have implemented travel restrictions which led to a dramatic drop in air passenger demand. IATA has estimated that around 8,500 passenger air craft has been grounded which accounts for 1/3 of the total passenger fleet around the world.

Cargo has replaced passenger traffic

The two speakers confirmed that as passenger traffic drops, many airlines have changed to carrying cargoes and business has increased by 60% comparing April last year to April to date. However, global air cargo capacity is down by 35% as only 20% of belly cargo is still flying. The fact that cargoes are also carried by passenger flights, the reduction of such flights means that air cargo has become more costly and this has imposed hardships on the already weak economy. There is a 3-fold increase in freight charges and this could add to inflation. As land transport has been drastically halted with the closing of borders, delivery by air has become more convenient.

Countries around the world have also displayed unity to facilitate the delivery of medical supplies and essential products. Even during the full closure of airports to passengers, a substantial share of airport and air side infrastructure remains open. There are some struggles to keep domestic land transport routes to and from the airport open, both to freight and staff. Medical supplies due to global sourcing will continue for the foreseeable future and ensuring smooth last-mile delivery is important. WHO has used UAE as the hub to transport health products.

Explaining why the lifting of restrictions on air travel could be a problem as air passengers may be carrying the coronavirus from their place of origin and the airport has become an important point to guard against this. Most cities are either refusing the entry of non-residents or visitors would be placed on quarantine for 14 days upon arrival. While Sri Lanka is beginning to open up, returning nationals have to be carefully screened and supplemented by quarantine measures.

Re-opening of airports



Airport throughput has decreased by over 90%. However, there are indications that with the easing of COVID-19, air travel would resume gradually, and it is believed that it would be in June. UAE has announced that airport and flights would resume normal operation after 16 June. According to the projection of IATA, global airlines could be involved in US\$35 billion on refund of unused tickets and it is advisable to develop a scheme to allow tickets to be used over a period of 1-2 years. This is a difficult decision as there are also fears that the virus would return. On the other hand, the airline industry is forecast to lose 25 million jobs globally.

On the possibility of creating bubbles to link up cities which have similar infection rate, it is likely that cities in China may open up and the industry in the Asia Pacific Region is looking to China to lead it out of crisis. On the other hand, there is no restriction on air travel between Ireland and UK. People are more pessimistic about a V-shape recovery due to recession triggered by lock down of cities and countries worldwide.

This is a difficult time and the airline industry may be faced with a change or drop in travel demand in the future as on-line communication is found to be effective for general business during COVID-19. To revitalize the airline industry, a new business model may emerge with focus on E-commerce where the delivery of goods under a trading platform may help the airlines to utilize their flight capacity.

Operation plan for re-opening

The involvement of all aviation related international organizations is important to draw up a comprehensive plan on re-opening of airports with specific rules. Some valid considerations include: flights and schedule change, the danger of freight crews to be placed in quarantine, administration of health checks and declarations etc.

Staff and travellers would have to comply with new protocols. Some airports have suspended physical check-in. Passengers and staff would need to put on protective gears and face mask is mandated on board throughout the journey. Meals are no longer served on board and no newspapers and magazines. Passengers are only allowed minimum luggage to be carried on board with them.

These measures are additional to the aircraft sanitization measures and are taken together to make flying as safe as possible. Cabin service cleaners are also engaged to clean toilets.

Some airport plans to use robotics and advanced thermal screening helmets which is a wearable intelligent helmet which helps in contactless temperature measurement. Disinfectant robots would give out concentrated UV-C light to kill most microorganisms.

Within the airport, social distancing of 1.5m is also implemented with the help of floor markings, signage and distance seating. Shops and retail business within airports have suffered, and they would need assistance to remain in being. Many cities are offering help by reducing or suspending rent.

Emirates have started conducting rapid COVID-19 test on site. The analysis is a blood test with results within 10 minutes. As most people do not have the confidence to travel, the airport and airlines must use their best efforts to restore confidence.

Remarks from Dato Radzak, CILT International President

The odds of airlines surviving COVID-19 have worsened as hope for rebound in world air travel would probably not come until 2021 and when vaccines could be developed and tested in time. Speaking from an Institute point of view, the opening of air travel involving multiple cities which are in different stages of the virus outbreak would require a profound understanding on the nature of passenger and cargo movements and professional leadership in harmonizing different practices so that passengers would not find themselves unable to complete a trip because of multi-restrictions, quarantine requirements, health declaration and new travel protocols. CILT International with its global background could help by sharing good practices and guidelines. This is a significant step towards more co-ordinated action during these challenging times.

Concluding remarks

Dorothy Chan thanked Nadia Abdul Aziz and David Aukapong Gray for sharing their insights and Dato Radzak for joining the chat session. It is clear that we need to learn lessons from what we are experiencing and to better prepare ourselves for potential crisis in the future. The next and final topic will be conducted on 4 June on Maritime and Port and how the industry react and re-shape under COVID-19.

Dorothy Chan
WiLAT Global Chairperson



Please join our next session:

WiLAT Chat on COVID19: Post CONVID-19: Maritime and port
Thu, June 4, 2020 5:00 PM - 6:30 PM (Hong Kong time)

Please join from your computer, tablet or smartphone.

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