



COVID-19: Note 2 18 May 2020

COVID-19: KEY LESSONS FOR THE ROAD AND TRANSPORT COMMUNITY FROM THE LATEST PIARC WEBINARS



(Photo provided by Mark Rubarenzya, Uganda National Roads Authority, 22 April, 2020 Presentation)

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Summary

Following the success of the first four webinars that PIARC organized in response to the issues faced by road and transport administrations during the COVID-19 pandemic, the decision was made to extend the webinar program, not only in English, but also in French and Spanish with an additional program of topics specific to those languages. This Note is the second Bulletin and summarizes the findings from the six webinars held from April 15 to April 30, 2020 with three in English, two in French, and one in Spanish, with the latter focused on South and Central America. The webinars have continued to provide a useful global platform to share relevant information and practices from around the world on pandemic impacts and responses for the road and transport community, and to assist practitioners in identifying appropriate approaches for their respective situations.

Videos and copies of all presentation slides in three languages from the Webinars can be found on PIARC's website.

Introduction

The first PIARC COVID-19 Response Note, published on April 21, 2020, presented some early conclusions about the COVID-19 pandemic and how it is impacting road and transport administrations in multiple ways. These conclusions included:

- The demand for travel and the use of roads, as well as mass transit, both public and shared, has fallen dramatically in response to restrictions on personal mobility, business activity and public anxiety.
- Road transport has proven to be an essential service for the movement of workers, goods and supplies, with the implication that key infrastructure, facilities and services must be kept operational.
- Much of the initial response from road and transport administrations has been focused on ensuring the health and safety of staff, including protecting frontline employees through revised operational procedures and equipment, regulating direct contact with users and making home working effective.
- There has also been a need to examine relationships between road and transport agencies and their private sector supply chain, amend contractual arrangements where necessary, but also to protect the integrity of suppliers and jobs in anticipation of the recovery period.
- The impact of COVID-19 will have medium to long term consequences for the road sector, some of which will present positive opportunities as well as challenges.

The subsequent webinars reported here continue to confirm these conclusions, adding further specific evidence as to their validity.

The PIARC COVID-19 Webinars

The six Webinars summarized here were held between April 15th and April 30th, with three in English, two in French, and one in Spanish, with the latter focused on South and Central America. Notably the Webinars in French and Spanish had a separate program of presentations.

The findings from the webinars, building on the previous findings, are presented below. They are very relevant for both high- and low-income countries as the Webinars included a diverse portfolio of presentations from countries throughout the world, such as Andorra, Belgium, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ecuador, France, Italy, Ivory Coast, Japan, Mexico, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, Tunisia, Uganda, United Kingdom, and the United States of America. The Webinars also include the perspective from the Contractors Professional Associations' (CICA) and of the International Association of Transport Regulators (IATR). The presentations also touched on a number of different areas such as various operational measures taken by road and transport administrations, business continuity, the role of road network operations and ITS, financial consequences for toll road and public transport operators, issues faced by mass transit, and perspectives of mobility, freight, and resilience among others. The Question and Answer sessions were also dynamic, with 280 participants to the six Webinars coming from 49 countries, showcasing PIARC's global outreach and contributing to the exchange of ideas between experts.

Summary of Key Emerging Issues

Based on the six webinars, the following key issues and commonalities have been identified across the topics, countries and organizations presented. As noted, the issues validate, and further expand, the evidence base on the COVID-19 pandemic gathered from the first four webinars. The full recordings and PDF copies of these presentations can be accessed from on a dedicated PIARC page, <https://www.piarc.org/en/News-Agenda-PIARC/Coronavirus-PIARC-and-Covid-19>.

The issues can be split into the following four categories:

- General impacts and approaches.
- Road network operation, freight and logistics.
- Construction work.
- Economic impacts and future resilience planning.

General Impacts and Approaches

- There is wide-spread application of Government approaches of “Avoid the 3 Cs” – Closed Spaces, Crowded Places, and Close Contact Settings. Against this general message, a parallel principle is to guarantee mobility for those people (such as health workers or truck drivers) who need it for essential or critical activities and services.
- Traffic volumes have continued to see a significant decrease due to COVID-19, in some cases by 50 – 70%, and even more so in some countries, during the phase in which they have applied the most restrictive measures on mobility and the closure of non-essential activities, reaching decreases of more than 90%. Freight although has fallen by less than general traffic, in the range of 15 – 30% to sometimes more than 50% when non-essential activities have been closed.
 - In UK, traffic levels have fallen to levels last seen in 1955. Similar falls are seen in other European countries. Additionally, in Switzerland, it has been observed that there has been a more dramatic reduction in activity space – people are travelling more locally over shorter distances. Such reduced trip length is partially a reflection of working from home. There has been an 80% reduction in opportunities to meet people in some countries. Peaks in travel have become less pronounced since people are currently not commuting at fixed times. The promotion of staggered timetables to avoid congestion in collective transport has further contributed to this.
 - Changes in demand vary by mode. Mass transit has collapsed in many places as services have been suspended, travel restrictions are in place, or people feel nervous in crowded trains and buses. Additionally, in the USA, Transportation Network Companies (TNCs) such as Uber and Lyft have banned people from sharing rides, whilst demand has likewise contracted due to passenger anxiety around shared transport. Some countries have indicated that they are hesitant to allow a return to high-occupancy transit, and have implemented social distancing measures (e.g. blocking off seats) at least in the short-term.
 - It should be indicated here, that the treatment of taxis and ride-hailing has been different according to countries and cities, varying from the closure of the service, to advise not to use it, or not to adopt any measure except the limitation of the maximum number of occupants
 - The flight from mass transit has led, in some cases, to people reverting to active modes of transportation, and their consequent advantages, but in others to own cars. If this trend is not reversed, or if measures are not adopted, problems of congestion, pollution, noise, lack of space, etc., could be exacerbated.
 - By contrast, cycling has increased, sometimes massively, up 180% in one instance in Switzerland, but also evidenced in other countries. Walking initially fell, but has now recovered and may be increasing above pre-pandemic levels. In the short-term, some cities and countries are planning for temporary infrastructure and re-allocation of road-space to allow for high levels of walking and cycling in a socially distanced manner and as an alternative to motorized public transport.
 - The results can feed into dynamic mode choice modelling, stated-preference surveys and the tracking of on-going behavioral changes; the question is whether the changes being seen are stable or not, and will remain, at least in part, after the pandemic ends.
- Along with consistent evidence in an improvement in air quality and traffic noise, road accidents appear to have reduced; however, there is evidence that some countries are experiencing an increase in the

severity of accidents, including fatalities, as a result of higher speeds. Stronger enforcement is required to tackle this.

- COVID-19 has caused temporary re-introduction of border controls between nations. Border restrictions, including new requirements for people to have their temperature checked or complete health questionnaires, have resulted in major queues on approach roads and delays in crossing. Passengers have also been increasingly subjected to 14 days domestic quarantine and self-isolation arrangements. However, a range of mitigating actions have been put in place for essential goods and services; for example, some countries have opened additional traffic lanes at the border, some exempt truck drivers from restrictions on movement or quarantine, or have placed fast-track measures for processing through truck drivers;
- Working at home has increased and may lead to new forms of organizational management after the pandemic. In the short-term, there are operational and human resource issues around making home-working effective. There are also issues of cyber-security of personal computers and networks which are being addressed through urgent advances in Information and Communications Technology (ICT).
- Towards the end of April there has begun to be a shift in planning within road and transport agencies towards restarting of economic and social activity, although this shift varies between country and their ability to manage COVID-19 transmission. This suggests the need for PIARC and others to start thinking about the COVID-19 pandemic in different phases rather than a single event, with different responses needed in each phase and that there is a need to begin planning for the post-crisis phase.

Road Network Operation, Freight and Logistics

- In some countries, such as Portugal, Korea or France, VMS has been used to convey travel and other public health messages. Additionally, in Norway, network information is distributed via the web, phones or social media. Such approaches are efficient, easy to implement and low-cost.
- A common theme across the Webinars was that freight movement has become even more critical in order to maintain economic activity and the integrity of the supply chain, including health supplies and food. General traffic has declined, but heavy trucks have remained broadly stable on key routes especially according to the more or less severe closure of activities.
- A key issue is information for freight operators and truck drivers on availability of road facilities and services. In France for example, information has been provided through a government site on opening of fuel stations, rest areas and overnight accommodation.
- In many countries, rest areas or other accommodations and food facilities en route have often been closed, impacting the ability of truck drivers to get sustenance on their journeys. Elsewhere rest areas have remained open, but with enhanced sanitary arrangements in place. Other initiatives include cleaning kits, and free coffee for truck drivers.

Construction Work

- Substantial effort and financial assistance have been provided to support the construction sector, preserve jobs and prepare for restarting during the recovery (e.g. deferral of taxes, furlough schemes).
- Contractors have not generally suspended works on construction sites, but are continuing in compliance with safety and sanitary regulations from Government. Some non-essential works have been postponed, in part because of shortages of materials or manpower. In some countries, there have been some workforce problems due to foreign workers going home.
- The primary concern of contractors is ensuring employees health and safety, for example in providing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Approaches vary across the World e.g. between urban and rural areas, between countries, and there are a range of issues, for example, availability of masks, appropriate

water supply (for handwashing), transport to and from site, workers accommodation and canteens – in some countries, hotels have been closed and this caused issues for contractors

- Social distancing distances also vary e.g. 1 metre in France compared to 1.5 metres in Poland, 2 metres in some other places. Other measures include requiring the wearing of face-masks, blocking seats on works buses, management of hotels and canteens.
- Administrative work has moved in many countries to remote operation e.g. avoiding physical meetings, sending letters by e-mail, waiving physically signing attendance lists etc.
- Contractual conditions have also been eased e.g. requiring a performance bond or guarantee of 3% of contract value rather than the usual 10%. “Force Majeure” has been invoked in some contracts, but this is potentially a complex area and legal definitions, and the rights and obligations of contractor and client, are not the same everywhere. This has the potential to result in lengthy and costly litigation if it is not well handled.
- Looking ahead, construction activity is amongst the first sectors to restart as lockdowns comes to an end. However, health and safety precautions and social-distancing will reduce productivity and business continuity may also be hit by a possible second or third wave of COVID-19 infections later in the year.

Economic Impacts and Future Resilience Planning

- The economic impact of COVID-19 is widespread across governments, public agencies and private sector operators across the road and transport sector.
- For example, toll road concessions and operators have been hard-hit. In Italy, there was a 60-80% decrease in light traffic. 25% decrease in heavy vehicles and a 50% decrease in car movements. This has been mirrored in toll revenue received.
- Other impacts have been observed on the banking system. Loan disbursements are projected to decline by 50% to June 2020 due to delays in project execution. Additionally, there is a risk to the private sector financing for PPP projects which could delay completion of planned projects.
- From a resilience perspective, a pandemic is an unwanted event which has a low probability, but very high consequences at the economic and social levels. COVID-19 certainly reflects this. There are cascading effects where less capacity to handle one problem increases the risk of another problem. The world is in the process of learning from experience, in order to better prepare for future unwanted threats.
- A key question asked from a planning perspective is that we need to be mindful of how long the COVID-19 pandemic will last and how long our strategies are relevant.

Final Remarks

Based on its initial activities, the PIARC COVID-19 Response Team is continuing to organize further webinars, bringing in new countries, organizations and focus areas. The findings of these events will be presented in a future note and Report.

PIARC is also engaging with partner organizations (e.g. DFID) and starting to evaluate how the Terms of Reference and other activities of its Technical Committees and Task Forces may need to adapt as a result of COVID-19.

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