Reopening borders through Rapid COVID Testing

Summary

- Governments should safely reopen borders without quarantine by implementing systematic, rapid testing of all international travelers before departure.
- Testing must be fast, accurate, scalable, and affordable using technology that can be easily operated.
- Governments should proactively drive the roll out of rapid tests, for example by fast-tracking the necessary regulatory approvals, and prioritize aviation when it comes to allocating available rapid tests.
- Global standards for testing should be agreed through the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) so that tests administered in one jurisdiction on departure are accepted by other jurisdictions on arrival.
- There also needs to be a much more systematic and harmonized approach to contact tracing as yet another layer of risk mitigation, complementing testing and existing bio-safety measures.

Governments must find alternatives to border closures and quarantines

Travel and border restrictions, including quarantines, are causing economic devastation and have brought the international aviation industry to a virtual standstill. There is an urgent need to learn to live with the virus and find alternative solutions to enable international travel to resume thus safeguarding the immense economic and social contribution that air travel supports. The World Health Organization (WHO) has acknowledged that travel bans cannot continue indefinitely. The challenge therefore becomes a practical one related to reopen borders safely in a way which minimizes the risk of international spread.

Rapid testing should be implemented before departure

COVID-19 testing before departure is the preferred option as it will create a "clean" environment throughout the travel process. Testing on arrival, with the potential for quarantine at destination in the event of a positive result, could impact traveler confidence.

To be suitable for use as part of the travel process, before departure, rapid tests should meet the following criteria:

- **Accuracy**: Rapid tests should demonstrate very high levels of reliability, both in terms of sensitivity (minimal number of false negatives) and specificity (minimal number of false positives). Test accuracy should be certified by reputable national or international authorities.
- **Speed**: Testing solutions should be able to deliver results quickly, ideally inside 20 minutes in order to avoid unnecessary disruption to the travel process;
- **Scalability and availability:** Support testing at sufficient scale (simultaneous processing of several hundreds of tests per hour) in order to avoid delays and passenger inconvenience. The use of saliva for taking samples would facilitate this and would also be expected to improve passenger acceptance;
- **Ease of Use:** Testing should be straightforward to carry out, both in terms of taking the sample and the use of the testing machines themselves. While it is expected that training will be necessary, testing should not need to be carried out by medical professionals;
- **Affordability:** The cost of testing should not constitute a barrier to travel. The new generation of rapid tests cost less than US$10 per test. Where testing is a mandatory requirement, the WHO's International Health Regulations (IHRs) state that neither passengers nor carriers should bear the cost of testing.

Rapid test technology, and in particular antigen testing, is evolving rapidly and is at a stage where many of these criteria can now be met enabling to be rolled out as a screening method to help accelerate the restart of international travel. Antigen tests are much quicker and cheaper than the existing standard polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests and can increasingly deliver comparable levels of accuracy. Over 100 manufacturers and research institutions are involved in the development of antigen tests and at least two manufacturers have announced that the intend large-scale production of antigen testing kits before the end of Q3 2020.

Governments should proactively drive the roll out of rapid tests, for example by fast-tracking the necessary regulatory approvals, and prioritize the travel and tourism sector when it comes to allocating available rapid tests (understanding that initially that the demand for such tests will be greater than the supply).

Passengers support testing

IATA's public opinion research revealed strong support for COVID-19 testing in the travel process. Some 65% of travelers surveyed agreed that quarantine should not be required if a person tests negative for COVID-19.

Passengers' support for testing is evident in the following survey results:
- 84% agreed that testing should be required of all travelers
- 88% agreed that they are willing to undergo testing as part of the travel process

In addition to opening borders, public opinion research also indicated that testing will help to rebuild passenger confidence in aviation. Survey respondents identified the implementation of COVID-19 screening measures for all passengers as effective in making them feel safe, second only to mask-wearing. The availability of rapid COVID-19 testing is among the top three signals that travelers will look to for reassurance that travel is safe (along with the availability of a vaccine or a treatment for COVID-19).

ICAO should develop guidance to support consistency and mutual recognition

The process for implementing testing should be based on a globally harmonized framework that ensures consistency and supports mutual recognition. Consistency will not only increase confidence in the system but will also facilitate operational implementation. IATA calls on ICAO, and specifically the Council Aviation Recovery Task Force (CART), to produce guidance on testing as a strategy for restarting international travel.

Mutual recognition of tests (both the tests themselves and the results) will be key for reciprocal and safe opening of borders. Ensuring against fraud is an important pre-condition for the acceptance by the destination country of a test carried out prior to departure in the origin country. Carrying out testing before departure, in a controlled and secure environment, will be an important step in addressing concerns about fraud.

Testing on departure is complementary to the measures contained within the ICAO 'Take-Off' guidance and which already provide multiple layers of protection to mitigate the risk of transmission during air travel. Governments should also take a more proactive and harmonized approach to contact tracing as yet another layer of risk mitigation, complementing testing and existing bio-safety measures.

Conclusion
- International air travel remains more than 90% down compared to 2019 levels as a result of travel restrictions. This is killing the aviation industry and leading to huge job losses across the global economy.
- Governments should safely reopen borders without quarantine by moving towards systematic, rapid testing of international travelers before departure.
- ICAO should lead development of harmonized guidance on COVID testing to ensure consistency of implementation and to support mutual recognition.