

Restarting International Aviation through 'Travel Bubbles'

Introduction

The purpose of 'Travel Bubble' arrangements is to facilitate the reopening of as many bilateral travel markets as possible, based on equalization of infection risk between origin and destination countries

'Travel Bubbles' offer a flexible solution with public health risk mitigation measures adapted to suit the specific circumstances of the bilateral country pair or regional grouping. As a result of this adaptability, IATA believes that a travel bubble arrangement can be developed for the majority of bilateral markets based on current infection rates. Nothing in the travel bubble concept is intended to favor any State over another State based on any factor other than the evolution of the pandemic.

The only basic and universal condition for an effective travel bubble is the elimination of the need for quarantine or self-isolation, given the clear evidence that quarantine requirements are inconsistent with a resumption of international air travel.

Definitions

For the purposes of this document, the following definitions are used:

- 'Travel Bubble' – A State level agreement that enables international air travel between 2 (or more) countries based on a mutually agreed set of public health mitigation measures. In some markets, reference is made to 'travel corridors' or 'airbridges'. For the purposes of this paper, these terms are seen as synonymous
- Public health mitigation measures – Any requirement such as testing, medical certificate, quarantine, self-isolation, insurance, contact tracing or health declarations required of air travelers as a result of COVID-19
- Country COVID Transmission Level – The status of a country in terms of the risk of an incoming or outbound traveler being infected with and/or the vector for additional infections.

Travel Bubbles and Risk Equalization

One of the benefits of the travel bubble model is that the measures applied in a given bubble can be tailored so as to effectively equalize infection risk between origin and destination countries. In order for this to be possible, an appropriate risk assessment framework is required. While there is currently no harmonized methodology for risk measurement, the following elements should be taken into account:

- Current infection rates, relative to population size;
- Trend in infection rates (decreasing, stable, increasing) compared to a previous time period;
- Effectiveness of overall public health response to COVID-19 in each country.

For bilateral travel between countries with similar levels of epidemiological risk, a stable or declining trend in new infections and an effective public health response the basic mitigation measures should be sufficient. Where a significant risk differential exists between origin and destination markets and/or if infection rates are increasing then additional measures (specifically testing) can help equalize risk levels and enable the markets to reopen.

Biosafety measures and COVID testing

The airline industry is committed to the health and safety of both passengers and airline employees. The measures contained within the ICAO 'Take-Off' guidance provide multiple layers of protection to mitigate the risk of transmission during air travel and the importation of COVID-19 through air travel. These measures, along with



effective contact tracing and the introduction of public health mitigation measures in both the origin and destination country, are assumed as a basic requirement for all travel bubble variants.

At the same time, creating an air travel experience that is as close as possible to pre-COVID for passengers and airlines is important for passenger confidence and the recovery of travel demand. Travel Bubbles should aim to minimize the cost, inconvenience and interference with the passenger's journey and the airline/airport facilitation processes while at the same time ensuring that incoming passengers do not negatively impact the COVID situation in the destination country.

Where the rate of new infections in the origin country is significantly higher than in the destination country and/or where the rate of new infections in at least one of the countries has not peaked, testing can be an effective risk equalization tool.

Therefore, 3 main types of travel bubbles can be envisaged:

- The **Basic Travel Bubble (BTB)** with the standard set of public health risk mitigation measures;
- The **Limited Travel Bubble (LTB)** with an additional requirement for a test within 24-48 hours of departure;
- The **Extended Travel Bubble (ETB)** with a requirement for a test within 24-48 hours of departure and a second test within 24-48 hours of arrival.

Emerging evidence suggests that a test prior to departure could reduce the risk of importation by up to 90%. A second test after arrival for the highest risk markets could reduce importation risk by as much as 99% enabling air travel to resume between the vast majority of countries without a quarantine requirement.

Where testing is required, it should be a PCR test (preferably saliva-based) carried out in the 24-48 hours immediately prior to or subsequent to travel and thus not at the airport. Data transmission relating to the sharing of results with the State of arrival should be between passengers and governments.

Additional Considerations

- **Mutual Recognition of measures**
Mutual recognition is a basic requirement for an effective travel bubble solution
- **Multilateral Travel agreements**
Although the default model for travel bubbles is bilateral, States are encouraged to consider forming multilateral bubbles. Special consideration should be given to existing multi-national institutions (e.g. EU, ASEAN) that can provide the forum and facilitate discussions on the formation of such multilateral bubbles. Also, bilateral bubbles can be merged or expanded to multi-lateral travel bubbles.
- **Transit Traffic**
Assuming a country has opened its borders to more than one other country, there may be a need to accommodate transit traffic from countries where more than one bubble level is in operation. Applying differentiated measures during the travel process will be very complex and potentially disruptive. Therefore, testing or other measures to ensure passengers are of equivalent risk should be applied prior to departure where possible and/or following arrival where additional testing is required.
- **Duration and reviews**
All Travel Bubble arrangements should be subject to periodic review and adjustments to cater to changes in the health environment, testing methods, and any other factors that can impact the travel bubble. Such review arrangements should be agreed upon by the parties before the implementation of such travel bubbles.