



**Asia-Pacific  
Economic Cooperation**

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**2021/SOM3/007**  
Session 2.2

## **APEC Cross-Border Travel: Roundtable on Safe Passage, 7 May 2021 - Report to Senior Officials**

Purpose: Information  
Submitted by: New Zealand



**Third Senior Officials' Meeting  
2-3 September 2021**



APEC CROSS-BORDER TRAVEL:  
ROUNDTABLE ON SAFE PASSAGE  
7 May 2021

Report to Senior Officials

On 7 May 2021, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Thailand convened the Roundtable on Safe Passage to discuss the resumption of cross-border travel in the APEC region.

2 A stimulating panel discussion on developments in multilateral organisations was held with representatives from the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), and the International Air Transport Association (IATA). The discussion covered: these organisations' initiatives regarding cross-border travel; how governments and the private sector could collaborate on the issue of travel; the potential benefits of travel bubbles; and where APEC can best contribute to global efforts.

3 Representatives of APEC committees and fora engaged in cross-border travel presented their Groups' perspectives on the policy or technical contribution that APEC could make to support Asia-Pacific economies as they consider resuming cross-border travel, and the next steps that they would recommend APEC take.

4 Representatives discussed a broad range of approaches that APEC could take to build on its work to date on cross-border travel, with key themes focusing on: collaboration with stakeholders; increasing coordination across APEC fora; sharing information on efforts and increasing transparency; drawing on existing APEC initiatives or past experiences; developing common principles/parameters, or common definitions/criteria; implementing existing international guidance for air crews; and supporting existing international common standards for vaccine certificates.

5 Subsequent discussion among members focused on the same issues of the policy or technical contribution that APEC could make regarding the resumption of cross-border travel and any recommended next steps, in many cases responding to the preceding interventions by the Committees and fora representatives.

6 Overall, the Roundtable demonstrated the following:

- (i) A strong sense among APEC economies that border restrictions, while necessary to protect populations from COVID-19, are having a significant economic impact;
- (ii) While not wishing to duplicate the work of other multilateral fora, a shared view that differential rules could produce a "spaghetti bowl effect", complicating the resumption of cross-border movement;
- (iii) A view that APEC's strengths on cross-border travel include the ability to collaborate across different sectors (e.g., business mobility, health, transportation) and with multiple stakeholders;
- (iv) A request from sub-fora to be given a sense of direction from Senior Officials so they know where to focus effort within the mandate of their sub-fora and in what timeframe;

- (v) A shared perspective that there would be things that APEC might be able to make progress in some softer areas in the short term (e.g. information-sharing on efforts; low-hanging fruit), with moves towards greater harmonisation only likely to be possible in a longer timeframe;
- (vi) An appetite in the short-term to work on information-sharing around lessons learned on border arrangements (e.g. quarantine, green lanes, travel bubbles) with a view to identifying best practice;
- (vii) Interest in providing direction on specific low-hanging fruit that might be looked into to facilitate movement, with the Transportation Working Group's work on common arrangements for air crew identified as an area of potential urgency;
- (viii) Interest in further discussing APEC members' challenges regarding the movement of "essential workers", potentially within the Business Mobility Group, and what each APEC economy considers "essential workers" (however these are defined);
- (ix) Malaysia's proposal for common principles was discussed with interest in concluding some commonly applicable principles, but further feedback to align with initiatives and recommendations of other international organisations was also provided;
- (x) Economies noted the benefit of agreed standards and protocols (or at least mutual recognition) of operational arrangements to facilitate cross-border movement, but also a sense that policy and practice in this area was still evolving and will need careful consideration.

7 We recommend that Senior Officials consider the following short-term actions:

- Establish/Support information-sharing initiative/s on border arrangements, including existing multilateral ones and through relevant APEC mechanisms, such as the APEC COVID-19 Live website, and utilising existing networks with stakeholders and relevant International Organisations;
- Task the Transportation Working Group to work with the Health Working Group and the Business Mobility Group on working on arrangements for air (and potentially maritime) crews;
- Encourage interested economies, via the appropriate sub-fora, to identify and consider APEC members' challenges regarding the movement of "essential workers" and what each APEC economy considers "essential workers" to be;
- Ask Malaysia, should it wish, to continue to discuss with economies its proposed common principles, while recognising this may take some time;
- Convene a further Roundtable meeting, which would report back to Senior Officials.

## Annex: Summary of Discussion from the Roundtable on Safe Passage

### **Overview**

An APEC Roundtable on Safe Passage, jointly organised by Malaysia, New Zealand and Thailand, was held virtually on 7 May 2021. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Roundtable served to facilitate an exchange of views between international organisations, APEC fora Chairs and Convenors, and representatives from APEC member economies on how APEC could contribute to the pressing issue of the resumption of cross-border travel.

The Chair of the Roundtable, Mr Mark Talbot, New Zealand's Senior Official, highlighted the magnitude of the challenges faced in restarting international travel. Beyond the unprecedented impact on the tourism sector, cross-border travel restrictions had created social dislocation and affected trade in goods and services, investment and innovation. International efforts to establish some form of framework to enable cross-border travel to resume in a safe manner were ongoing. The Chair noted this Roundtable was an opportunity to identify areas in which APEC could specifically contribute to these global efforts and for these ideas to be taken to Senior Officials.

The Roundtable was divided into two sessions. In the first session, international organisations were invited to outline their initiatives relating to the resumption of cross-border travel and identify gaps and recommend potential contributions by APEC. In the second session, Chairs and Convenors of various APEC fora, the APEC Policy Support Unit (PSU) and the APEC Business Advisory Council (ABAC) were provided an opportunity to share ideas on how APEC could support Asia-Pacific economies as they consider resuming cross-border travel, followed by an interactive discussion with member economies.

### **Session 1: State of Play**

#### *Initiatives by international organisations*

The moderator, Ms Yong Ee Chin, Deputy Undersecretary, Tourism Policy and International Affairs Division at the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture of Malaysia, invited Dr Babatunde Olowokure (World Health Organization (WHO)), Mr Ross Lockie (International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)), and Mr Vinoop Goel (International Air Transport Association (IATA)) to outline the initiatives undertaken by each organisation to facilitate the resumption of cross-border travel.

ICAO highlighted that the pandemic was the largest crisis the aviation industry had faced. In response, ICAO had established a Council Aviation Recovery Taskforce (CART) to examine the impacts of the pandemic and what ICAO members and industry partners could do to assist recovery in the aviation sector. The CART identified 20 priority recommendations covering

safety, public health, facilitation and security. ICAO issued guidance materials, offered training webinars and participated in seminars to assist with implementation of the recommendations. ICAO also launched an online platform for members to update information on what is being done, for example with respect to vaccine certificates and quarantine requirements, to help harmonise and standardise procedures and requirements and support airline industry recovery.

IATA has focused on working with ICAO, government agencies and airlines to ensure aviation continues to be safe. IATA identified the range of different entry requirements implemented in response to COVID-19 as a key challenge. The IATA Travel Pass was a major initiative to address this challenge. The Travel Pass ensures that testing or vaccination requirements can be processed in a digital and verifiable format and in a way that protects the privacy of the passenger. The Travel Pass has provided confidence to passengers and governments that travellers were entering in accordance with requirements. IATA urged governments to adopt or support global implementation of the IATA Travel Pass.

The WHO acknowledged that the closure of borders has had a significant economic impact. The WHO temporary recommendations at this time do not endorse requiring proof of COVID-19 vaccination or immunity as a condition of entry. This was due to critical unknowns and challenges, including the efficacy of vaccinations in preventing transmission of COVID-19 and the inequitable global distribution and use of vaccines due to the current limited global vaccine supply. The WHO noted these recommendations were interim and recommendations would evolve as vaccine supply expanded and as evidence regarding transmission became available. A WHO Emergency Committee convenes at least every three months to review WHO recommendations on international travel. While the WHO does not currently recommend the use of COVID-19 vaccination certificates as a condition of entry for international travel, or a form of immunity passports for travel within economies in the context of COVID-19, key considerations would include compatibility, technology, ethical and scientific issues, privacy and security.

#### *Identification of gaps in international frameworks and how APEC could contribute*

ICAO, IATA and WHO were also invited to share perspectives on what gaps existed in terms of re-opening borders to travel, potential areas for collaboration, and how APEC specifically could contribute.

ICAO, IATA and WHO each emphasised the importance of collaboration between international organisations, with governments and with the private sector. Collaboration was important including in areas such as digitalisation; electronic certification; developing and implementing guidelines; and ensuring passengers were aware of, and followed, said guidelines and restrictions. The WHO highlighted the importance of communication with stakeholders to ensure they remained updated as WHO temporary recommendations and Smart Vaccination

Certificate Working Group guidelines evolved. IATA suggested other potential areas for further collaboration including requirements for flight crews, which were on the front line in ensuring critical supplies and passengers were transported safely, and on sustainable and efficient implementation of travel bubbles.

The WHO encouraged economies to take risk-based approaches to resuming travel and implementation of risk mitigation measures. ICAO also emphasised the principle of non-discrimination and ensuring regulations were evidence- and risk-based. The WHO suggested regional organisations such as APEC could advocate for openness and connectivity to reduce border restrictions to enable travel and trade throughout the region. ICAO also encouraged APEC to move to standardisation and harmonisation of internationally negotiated requirements and regulations, including through standardised risk assessments. Future planning was also important to ensure contingency measures remained in place. APEC economies were encouraged to regularly update the ICAO database with information on how CART recommendations were being implemented. IATA suggested that APEC could increase the levels of knowledge-sharing and capacity-building to increase harmonisation across the APEC community.

## **Session 2: Next Steps**

The Chair introduced the next session as an opportunity to share ideas on how APEC could support Asia-Pacific economies in resuming cross-border travel and to discuss what next steps could be recommended to Senior Officials.

### *Representatives from APEC fora, ABAC and APEC PSU*

Chairs, Convenors and representatives of various APEC fora, as well as the APEC PSU and ABAC, were invited first to outline the policy or technical contributions that APEC could make to support Asia-Pacific economies as they consider resuming cross-border travel and next steps. The presenters were Ms Krasna Bobenrieth, Chair of the Committee on Trade and Investment (CTI); Mr Emmanuel San Andres, APEC PSU; Ms Kimberlee Stamatias, Convenor of the Business Mobility Group (BMG); Ms Melanie-Ann Way, Representative of the Health Working Group (HWG); Mr Jason Hill, Chair of the Transport Working Group (TPTWG); Mr Demyan Smilevets, Lead Shepherd of the Tourism Working Group (TWG); and Mr Lam Yi Young, ABAC Singapore and Convenor of ABAC's Taskforce on Reopening Borders for Safe and Seamless Travel.

Presenters outlined the significant impact of the pandemic on travel and tourism industries, as well as the broader economic and social effects of border closures. According to the UN World Tourism Organization, international arrivals fell by approximately 74 per cent globally in 2020, with the Asia-Pacific the most affected region. Cross-border restrictions alone led to around \$1.2 trillion in lost economic output in the APEC region. The wide variation in

approaches taken by economies to travel restrictions had increased costs and created significant uncertainty.

Presenters also highlighted that APEC was well positioned to take advantage of its strengths as a premier regional and multi-sectoral forum and as an incubator of ideas to help resume cross-border travel in a safe way. APEC needed to act with a sense of urgency to reflect the state of the global emergency. Existing initiatives were also highlighted, including the study on Cross-Border Mobility in the APEC Region commissioned by Korea; Malaysia's proposal on 'APEC Common Principles on Managing Travellers' Arrival in the Era of COVID-19'; and ABAC's Public-Private Dialogue on Reopening Borders for Safe and Seamless Travel held on 3 May. A broad spectrum of suggestions for how APEC could build on its contribution were made. Some of these suggestions included:

#### Collaborating with stakeholders

APEC should continue to collaborate closely with other relevant international organisations and complement existing efforts, including with respect to international standards and guidelines. APEC could also leverage its strong linkages with industry as well as with other stakeholders such as policy and research institutions.

#### Increasing coordination across APEC fora

The various APEC fora undertaking work on cross-border travel could coordinate and share information to improve cross-fora visibility and take advantage of APEC's multi-sectoral expertise. An information sharing platform or sessions could be established to facilitate communication across relevant groups and Committees could play a coordination role.

Meetings such as the upcoming Senior Officials' Meetings or the Ministers Responsible for Trade meeting could be leveraged to gather information and support deliverables on cross-border travel.

#### Sharing information and increasing transparency

APEC economies could share information, best practices and lessons learned on steps taken to resume international travel, including on: digital solutions for tracking cases and registering vaccinated individuals; plans to develop vaccination proof mechanisms; requirements for crew and passengers; experiences with travel bubbles; quarantine requirements; parameters considered when developing measures that restrict the movement of people; as well as other key considerations such as non-discrimination, vaccine access, risk mitigation measures, security and privacy.

#### Drawing on APEC initiatives



APEC could draw on existing initiatives and past experiences such as single window implementation or pathfinder initiatives to allow economies to participate voluntarily and at their own pace.

Initiatives such as the APEC Business Travel Card could also be leveraged, for example by including information on relevant testing requirements. The BMG Chair noted the Travel Card was now available in a digital format and there had been rich discussions in the BMG on extending the Travel Card to essential workers. Though there was scope for more information to be associated with the Travel Card, and while the BMG was open to considering ideas, suggestions would require careful consideration and consensus, sufficient resources, and high-level guidance.

APEC could also build on the work of the TWG in exploring opportunities related to smart technologies and digital tools to boost safe and seamless travel.

#### Developing common principles or parameters

APEC could focus as a starting point on supporting internationally developed common principles or parameters as a first step toward harmonisation of approaches to increase certainty. Such principles could include non-discrimination; transparency; alignment with international standards; recognition of vaccines with WHO Emergency Use Listing or Stringent Regulatory Authority authorization; protection of personal data; avoidance of duplication and overburdening travellers with expenses and formalities.

#### Developing guidance for air crews

APEC (TPTWG) could commit to implement existing guidance on how to address the special needs of air crews, including exemptions from quarantine, layovers and mandatory rest periods. This guidance could help address existing inefficiencies and inconsistencies which have resulted in delays for cargo and passengers and added significant costs, and threaten to inhibit the safe reopening of the air transport sector within the APEC region.

#### Developing common definitions or criteria

In order to increase certainty, APEC could consider exploring common definitions or criteria for essential travel and essential workers; as well as potential criteria for when borders are opened or closed. ABAC also suggested APEC could develop a list of essential business activities.

#### Developing common standards and mutual recognition of vaccine certificates

ABAC suggested APEC could play a role by adopting common standards for testing, vaccinations, and consistent quarantine protocols across economies. This would require mutual recognition of vaccinations or test results through a digital health passport or similar mechanism. ABAC suggested APEC could prioritise developing a digital vaccination certificate

system that is interoperable and consistent with international standards. APEC could also consider establishing 'green lanes' with more relaxed requirements for vaccinated passengers.

The HWG representative reiterated a point made earlier by Dr Olowokure of the WHO that it is currently unknown whether vaccinated individuals could transmit COVID-19, and noted that any decision to differentiate public health measures for fully vaccinated individuals would need to take this into consideration and also evolve in line with scientific evidence. Presenters also highlighted that initiatives such as common vaccine certificates would likely only be implemented in a phased approach over several years, noting the differences in terms of vaccination roll-out. Any common frameworks would also need to account for different realities in the modes of travel; differences between essential and discretionary travel; APEC versus non-APEC travellers; and different domestic contexts within APEC economies. Technological, legal, privacy and security matters would also need to be considered.

#### *Questions and comments from APEC economy representatives*

Economies acknowledged the necessity of discussing a Safe Passage arrangement, noting the fact that COVID-19 has imposed unprecedented challenges to regional economic growth, one of which is the disruption of connectivity, particularly people-to-people connectivity.

Economies responded to the presentations and exchanged views on what APEC could do to help re-establish safe cross-border travel. A number of economies highlighted the need for APEC to take urgent action given the widespread implications of travel restrictions for the region. Some economies suggested taking a step-by-step approach or developing a roadmap with short, medium and long-term actions. Economies also highlighted the need for APEC to avoid duplicating initiatives already underway, and to focus on areas in which APEC could add value.

Economies highlighted the importance of facilitating equitable global access to safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines and other medical supplies that are vital to safeguard people's health and well-being, which were inextricably linked to the reasons for this discussion.

Economies highlighted that APEC has a strong basis for taking action and holds a comparative advantage including in key areas such as business mobility, public health and transportation. APEC was well placed to share information and best practices, for example, with respect to new private sector technologies facilitating testing and contact tracing, quarantine requirements, digital certification schemes, and travel bubbles.

Several economies noted existing APEC initiatives and infrastructure could be leveraged. For example, the APEC COVID-19 LIVE website could provide a useful platform in terms of information sharing. The study on Cross-Border Mobility in the APEC Region also provides useful insights and could be expanded to cover experiences regarding bilateral travel

corridors. APEC could draw on its existing network, including with international organisations and the private sector. Several economies noted the APEC Business Travel Card could potentially be used, and some suggested the BMG could explore this option further. The issue of managing air crew or other specific groups was highlighted as an issue that could be explored in the more immediate term.

Several economies suggested APEC economies could develop broad protocols, principles or parameters to facilitate cross-border travel as a starting point. This would send a positive signal to the region regarding APEC's commitment to facilitate travel in a safe and efficient manner. One economy highlighted that although the situation was dynamic, and uncertainty prevailed, this was not a reason for APEC not to take action.

Some economies also provided feedback on Malaysia's draft proposal on 'APEC Common Principles on Managing Travellers' Arrival in the Era of COVID-19'. Several economies expressed

in-principle support for Malaysia's proposal, and indicated a willingness to work with Malaysia to further improve the text. Some economies sought clarification and provided comments on certain elements of the proposal such as the mutual recognition of other multilateral travel passes and platforms, technical parameters, and the potential impacts of a separate protocol for non-vaccinated travellers. One economy noted that while the WHO recommendation may change in the future, considering specific conditions or common principles at this time may be premature.

Economies raised a number of considerations for APEC to take into account when considering potential actions, including non-discrimination, inclusivity and equity, the different realities faced by and risk appetites of economies in the region, and the avoidance of creating barriers that would lead to the exclusion of economies. Access to vaccines and medical supplies was also highlighted as a key issue by several economies. Some economies highlighted the current WHO recommendation not to require proof of vaccination as a condition of exit or entry. Other factors that were raised included which passengers should be prioritised; which vaccinations should be recognised; how quarantine requirements should be addressed; how air crew should be treated; how to take advantage of innovation and digitalisation; how to avoid duplication with other initiatives; and how data privacy, security, affordability, flexibility and public interest concerns should be addressed. Another economy also suggested consideration of a separate protocol for non-vaccinated travellers.

### **Concluding remarks**

The Chair thanked the organisers and the presenters and participants for a rich exchange.

The Chair noted a clear message to emerge was the need for APEC to work to avoid a 'spaghetti-bowl' of rules and requirements preventing cross-border travel across the region.

While APEC could not be expected to resolve all issues relating to cross-border travel, it was important to seek guidance from Ministers on how APEC should contribute, noting Ministers Responsible for Trade were due to meet on 5 June.

There was also a clear sense that APEC had many strengths that it could bring to the table, including by virtue of its multi-sectoral nature. There was a spectrum of actions that APEC could take, from the immediate to the long term. At the easier end of the spectrum were steps that could be taken in the shorter term – such as information sharing on issues such as quarantine regimes, lessons learnt from the development of travel bubbles or transit procedures, to identify best practices; and improving APEC cross-fora collaboration. The next level was considering common principles or parameters, noting feedback received on Malaysia’s proposal and issues raised for further discussion. Further down the spectrum was working toward harmonisation or common protocols, among which the lowest-hanging fruit could be around the treatment of air crews or definitions such as of essential workers. At the more ambitious end of the scale, and therefore likely to take longer, was mutual recognition or regional interoperability of tools such as vaccination certificates or health passes.

On the way forward, New Zealand will work with Thailand, Malaysia and the APEC Secretariat to prepare a draft written report on the Roundtable, which will be circulated ahead of SOM2 for comment. This report will be considered at SOM2 and could provide a sense of direction to APEC committees and sub-fora.