



POLICY BRIEF

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KEY POINTS

- Ports are essential facilitators of world trade
- Public health advice is crucial in mitigating the impact of pandemics
- Government policy and regulation is required to support port operations during pandemics

Emerging strategies for ports during the pandemic

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has had a significant impact on humankind and on global commerce. Ports and port communities have experienced major changes to normal operating environments. The strategies used by ports to remain open and continue to facilitate sustainable economic development throughout the pandemic may provide useful lessons for policymakers, particularly in relation to the protocols and innovative measures that have been employed to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the movement of imports and exports as well as ships' crew and essential port workers.

Introduction

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020. Immediately, ports moved into crisis management mode in the face of this new and invisible threat to staff, customers and the business processes that keep imports and exports moving. Modern ports are well versed in planning and preparing for various potential accidents and incidents, from security breaches to vessels running aground. The rapid spread of COVID-19 forced ports to re-examine emergency response plans and adapt them to meet the new existential threat posed by the pandemic. Ports, their customers and all State agencies active in ports, from customs to State veterinarian officers, have had to tailor operations in line with public health advice and government regulations and legislation.

Prior to the pandemic, health and safety measures at ports had focused mainly on accidents and incidents impacting the physical and environmental aspects of safety for port workers. For example, at most ports, it is mandatory for all port workers to wear high-visibility clothing, hard hats, protective footwear and, when near water, lifejackets. However, the



rapid spread and severity of COVID-19 led to a surge in worldwide demand for medical grade face masks, sanitizing fluid, dispensers, goggles, disposable overalls and other material with which to protect workers from airborne infections.

In March 2020, the World Health Organization stated that severe and mounting disruption to the global supply of personal protective equipment was putting lives at risk.¹ Ports, like many other sectors, were initially not well equipped to meet the demands for essential supplies of appropriate face masks, sanitizing fluid, disinfectants and other more specialized equipment to protect the health and safety of port workers with regard to COVID-19, nor did they have the necessary processes and procedures in place to manage the move to telecommuting as required by government legislation in many countries. Emergency procedures for ensuring social distancing among work groups to reduce the spread of infection and to isolate symptomatic staff members had to be put in place and plans needed to be drawn up to safely manage the movement of personnel at ports. This was more complicated for essential workers such as ships' crews, who had to rely on arrangements for accommodation made by shipowners and port authorities. For example, the Philippine Ports Authority launched a new quarantine facility with capacity for over 100 seafarers.² Non-symptomatic seafarers changing ship or taking shore leave have had to be given clear directions as to how they are expected to transfer in a safe and secure manner.



Photo: Philippine Ports Authority

A quarantine facility for 124 seafarers in Bataan, Philippines, is mainly used during crew change activities

In addition, the efficient movement of heavy goods vehicles and tankers with vital fuel supplies and the repositioning of empty containers had to be maintained while, at the same time priority access had to be given to transporters carrying essential goods. However, as noted in *Review of Maritime Transport 2021*, disruptions to trade resulting from lockdown measures during the pandemic, exacerbated by the week-long blockage of the Suez Canal, resulted in bottlenecks “causing shortages of inputs and delays in delivery, and generally holding up the recovery”.³

To help alleviate supply chain disruptions, port workers and transport operatives are deemed essential workers in some countries. For example, in Nigeria, dock workers and ships' crews have been designated essential workers by the Government through the Maritime Administration and Safety Agency and in the United States of America, the Department of Homeland Security includes port workers and transportation workers as part of the essential critical infrastructure workforce.⁴

Some countries have had stricter measures in place at times than others. For example, transport workers may require clearance when driving heavy goods vehicles to and from ports and, port workers, when travelling to and from work, may need to show evidence of the essential nature of their employment. Testing regimes, contact tracing and vaccination protocols have had to be introduced. In this regard, ports seeking guidance and advice have turned to the UNCTAD Train for Trade programme (TrainForTrade) for support, including for information and examples of best practices from partner ports within the Port Management Programme network.

¹ World Health Organization, 2020, [Shortage of personal protective equipment endangering health workers worldwide](#), 3 March.

² Philippine News Agency, 2020, [New seafarers' quarantine facility launched in Bataan](#), 9 October.

³ UNCTAD, 2021, *Review of Maritime Transport 2021* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.21.II.D.21, Geneva), page 9.

⁴ See <https://nimasa.gov.ng/covid-19-dockworkers-seafarers-are-essential-workers-exempted-from-travel-restrictions-says-nimasa/> and <https://www.cisa.gov/publication/guidance-essential-critical-infrastructure-workforce> (accessed 1 February 2022).

Evidence of port resilience during the pandemic

Government policy based on public health advice has aimed to control and mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on the health and welfare of people worldwide. Government strategies designed to address the pandemic have included widespread communications to inform and educate people about the actions they should take to safeguard themselves and others. Governments have backed up public health advice with regulations and legislation, where necessary, to ensure compliance among the general public and the business community.

Ports are essential facilitators of world trade, handling 80 per cent of the global trade volume.⁵ Throughout the pandemic, ports have demonstrated their ability to manage the safe and efficient handling of essential goods such as medical equipment and emergency supplies. The main strategic objective of ports during the pandemic has been to remain in business while putting in place working arrangements and protocols to protect the health and safety of essential port workers. Essential service providers not directly employed by port companies, such as terminal operators and those working for State bodies, such as customs officers, public health officials, immigration staff and civic police, have also implemented health and safety protocols.

Many ports have established dedicated task forces related to the pandemic, led by senior port officials and including representatives of key service providers, to quickly and effectively coordinate actions in response to rapidly changing rates of infection and the growth in case numbers. Government regulations and public health advice need to be followed and guidance given to all port workers. Communicating, monitoring and reporting on compliance is an important function for managers and health and safety officers at ports. For example, the COVID Coordination Committee of the Dublin Port Company has met over 115 times since March 2020 and has issued 45 communication briefings to the port community, providing important advice and regular updates.⁶

Keeping ports open during the pandemic has meant, in some cases, essential workers such as ships' pilots, without whom many vessels cannot enter or leave a port, being provided with access to hotel accommodation to reduce the potential spread of infection.⁷ Operational buildings in which personnel gather and hygiene facilities are provided have received dedicated attention; work teams have been subdivided into smaller groups and have had minimal face-to-face contact with colleagues in other groups; wherever possible, team briefings and handovers have been conducted remotely; and regular deep cleaning of common areas, shared facilities, vehicles and machinery has been carried out.⁸ In addition, lockdown measures have required non-essential staff to telecommute unless there is a clear need for them to report on site.

To help maintain productivity and a proper work-life balance, provisions have been made to ensure that staff do not feel isolated and continue to have available support from and the confidence of colleagues and managers, and additional support with regard to home office equipment and information technology solutions has been provided.

The need to establish meaningful and trustworthy communications with all stakeholders is a priority at a time of crisis. Ports have had to amend and adapt existing business continuity planning and to develop new protocols for pandemic scenarios based on advice and recommendations from public health authorities, as well as by taking on board feedback from their frontline staff.

Modern ports place a strong emphasis on security; the international ship and port facility security code provides a framework under which ships and port facilities can cooperate to detect and deter acts that pose a threat to maritime security.⁹ Therefore, the number of access points to ports was able to be rapidly reduced, as a measure to control the movement of people and vehicles. Ports have also implemented new safety procedures such as temperature checks at entrances and the verification of vaccination certificates. Some ports, in conjunction with local authorities, have introduced lateral flow testing

5 UNCTAD, 2020, [COVID-19: A 10-point action plan to strengthen international trade and transport facilitation in times of pandemic](#), Policy brief No. 79.

6 Dublin Port Company, Head of Operations, 2022, Conference call with author, January.

7 Ibid.

8 Dublin Port Company, COVID Coordination Committee, COVID-19 planning and preparedness work group: Staff memos 2020–2021.

9 See <https://www.lr.org/en/isps-code/> (accessed 1 February 2022).



and set up isolation rooms for those awaiting further test results.¹⁰ Ports with medical services on site have supported the provision of vaccinations for all staff and other port workers. Ports have also engaged outside medical services for essential workers, with testing paid for by the port company.¹¹

Finally, technological solutions have been introduced for alternative work arrangements for port staff needing to telecommute. Essential workers who must be on site had their work areas adapted so that the health and safety of workers and colleagues might be fully addressed. Ports have worked with shipowners and the International Transport Workers' Federation to ensure that crew change processes prioritize the health and welfare of seafarers.¹²

Policy recommendations

Two sessions of a TrainForTrade course on building port resilience against pandemics were held in March and in June–July 2021, with the participation of 1,246 port professionals from 105 countries. Participants at the second session suggested over 250 policy recommendations, which were ranked by priority through online voting. The following policy recommendations were collated following discussion and analysis by participants:

- Ports should use business continuity planning processes to develop action protocols for pandemic scenarios based on recommendations from national and regional authorities
- Contingency planning scenarios should be developed for the successful implementation of preventative actions and to identify appropriate responses to suspected infectious cases in a pandemic situation
- A communications strategy that is fit for purpose and aimed at all stakeholders, including employees, suppliers, customers, port users, government agencies and media, is essential
- Port managers should prioritize the education of port workers on how they can best maintain physical and mental well-being during a pandemic
- The provision of vaccination facilities, testing centres and contact tracing is a key feature and is needed to support the health and well-being of port workers
- The availability and management of appropriate technology is paramount in a pandemic situation and ports should ensure that technology, capacity and security measures are redesigned to support the high number of staff relying on telecommuting and digital communications for meetings
- Port managers should assign a high level of priority to implementing productivity tools for telecommuting staff and digitalizing processes, to enable business to continue uninterrupted while improving information technology security and resilience
- Designating transport and port workers as essential workers with the particular responsibility of maintaining services can help alleviate disruptions to supply chains, and ports should provide “green lanes” on existing road networks and allocate dedicated berths for vessels in ports for the rapid transport of emergency supplies

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