

Pacific Heads of Nursing & Midwifery Meeting

Réunion des directeurs des soins infirmiers et obstétricaux du Pacifique

**COVID-19 VACCINE CERTIFICATE FOR CROSS BORDER
TRAVEL: 'OCEANIA VACCINATION VOYAGER'**

1. BACKGROUND

Since the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a ‘pandemic’ in March 2020, Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) undertook unprecedented measures to protect themselves including border closures, travel restrictions and quarantine measures for returning nationals. While some of our PICTs health system remained largely unscathed initially due to the decisive actions taken by Governments, the unintended socio-economic impact of the pandemic has been felt across all countries. As countries re-open borders, the region continues to experience COVID-19 community transmission in addition to declaration outbreak of monkeypox as a public health emergency of international concern. A socio-economic impact assessment endorsed by Forum Economic Ministers in 2021 highlighted PICTs with developed tourism sector and who have high dependence on tourism for employment, public and private sector revenue have lost between 30% – 40% of national income while export revenues from key sectors, including fisheries, minerals, logging, and agricultural primary commodities, have dropped significantly. Additionally, the pandemic has exposed the region’s existing vulnerabilities and exacerbated inequalities for marginalised groups - women, persons with disabilities, children, and older persons.

In recognition of the unintended socio-economic impact of the pandemic a COVID-19 Economic Recovery Taskforce in 2020 to identify the region’s economic recovery priorities and oversee its implementation.

Key to the region’s recovery is the importance of COVID-19 vaccination roll-out, including the resumption of regional travel and the significance of leveraging emerging opportunities to support our regional recovery efforts, in particular, the growing prominence and utility of digitalisation. In recognition of this, Forum Leaders endorsed the notion of streamlining the collective responses to COVID-19, and to focus on utilising existing mechanisms such as the Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19 (PHP-C) to support efforts for comprehensive vaccine coverage, and to continue discussions on harmonised approaches for regional vaccination certification and travel bubbles as and when conditions allow.

At the Fifty-First Pacific Islands Forum held on 6th August 2021, attended by Heads of State, the Australian Prime Minister the Hon. Mr. Scott Morrison offered support to establish robust and practical processes for vaccine certification, including digital vaccination certificates. The provision of these models of providing COVID-19 Certificates will enable the promotion of travel and tourism within the Pacific region and globally.

In ascertaining how best the Leaders directive can be implemented SPC collaborated with WHO and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) to draft a proposal on the Regional COVID-19 Vaccination Certificate for Cross-Border Travel recognizing that (1) this work is linked to Strategic Focus Area 2 of the Boe Declaration Action Plan on Human Security and Humanitarian Assistance and (2) this would be a complex undertaking given multiple national stakeholders (e.g., health, border services, police, economic development, trade, tourism, etc.) involved. Following the PHP-C Regional Taskforce on COVID-19 and Pacific Heads of Health endorsement, a Technical Working Group (TWG) has been established, Chaired by SPC, to progress this work.

2. PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

2.1 Mutual Recognition for a Phased Approach

SPC, WHO and PIFS recognized the limited in-house expertise across the 3 organisations outside of health information systems, public health, and economic policy across a TOR for a Firm to support the TWG with Phase 1 of this project was developed. Funding for Phase 1 was provided through the PHP-C Reserve Fund.

- Phase 1: Building Consensus and Reaching Regional Agreement - Preparatory and Standards Setting Work for the Introduction of COVID-19 Certificates for Cross Border Travel
- Phase 2: Solutioning, Build and Implementation - Country Assessment and Strengthening Readiness for the Introduction of COVID-19 Certificates for Cross Border Travel
- Phase 3: Supporting Countries with Readiness and Integration - Implementation of COVID-19 Certificates for Cross Border Travel

SPC engaged a world-leading digital health team from Accenture to undertake this work.

2.2. Phase 1 Deliverables

The project has benefitted from excellent coordination from CROP¹ agencies and Partners². Significant work has been undertaken with Accenture in delivering key milestones thus far:

- i. the conduct of a **Landscape Analysis** ([see Annex 1](#)) which proposed that the region subscribe to the EU Digital Covid-19 Certificate, and notes that the tenets of a regional mechanism for

¹ CROP Agencies refers to PIFS, SPC, Pacific Aviation Safety Office (PASO), South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO), Pacific Immigration Development Community (PIDC) Oceania Customs Organisation (OCO).

² Partners includes Association of South Pacific Airlines (ASPA), WHO, UNICEF, DFAT and MFAT

cross-border travel, if implemented, would position members to conform to the widely accepted EU DCC system.

- ii. the development of a **Protocol Agreement** ([see Annex 2](#)) which outline the business case (i.e., in the form of high-level functions) and technical requirements and provide an overview of the proposed COVID-19 travel document solution that can be used to promote safe cross-border travel in the PICT; and
- iii. the development of a **Technical Conditions Report** ([see Annex 3](#)) which provides an overview of the technical conditions necessary to implement the solution defined in the Protocol Agreement.
- iv. The **Pacific Safe Border Reopening and Vaccination Certificate Deployment Readiness Survey** ([see Annex 4](#)) deployed on 10 June, assessed each PICT's public health, logistical and technical infrastructure in order to understand the country's current infrastructural resources. Through this assessment, the TWG was able to gauge country readiness to transition a non-digital (paper based), digital or hybrid solution in issuing and verifying vaccine certificates.

The TWG agreed that the most suitable system for members to subscribe to is the EU Digital Covid-19 Certificate, and notes that the tenets of a regional mechanism for cross-border travel, if implemented, would position members to conform to the widely accepted EU DCC system.

This is relevant to existing efforts at the national level whereby New Caledonia and French Polynesia are already utilizing the EU DCC system, New Zealand and its realm countries Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau will join shortly. Fiji has also progressed its efforts to join EU DCC bilaterally.

2.3. The 6th Common Protocol

At the Special Forum Officials Committee (FOC) on 5th July 2022, a draft **6th Common Protocol for the PHP-C on Vaccination Certificate for Cross Border Travel** ([see Annex 5](#)) was presented to Members for consideration for presentation to the Forum Foreign Ministers meeting. This was developed based on the minimum requirements from the technical documents highlighted above and provides the overarching regional commitment to the Regional COVID-19 Vaccination Certificate for Cross Border Travel system. It was agreed at this meeting that the 6th Common Protocol for the PHP-C on Vaccination Certificates for Cross Border Travel (Protocol) be considered for endorsement by the Ministerial Action Group (MAG) of the PHP-C to allow Members further opportunity to review the Protocol.

3. CHALLENGES

3.1 Legal issues relating to privacy and trust requiring member consideration prior to implementation of proposed solution

The draft 6th Common Protocol outlines minimum data required to be included on vaccination certificates. In some member countries, there may be legislation that guides if, or how, the private health data of individual citizens or residents is used (published, stored, etc.). In countries that do have such legal guidance that may lead to a situation where citizens' rights are potentially impinged upon, a suggested option for the implementation of the proposed solution is to provide an opportunity to 'opt-in' to use the system, and additionally develop and provide intending travellers with a 'Traveller's Bill of Rights' to ensure the traveller is fully aware of the effects of the undertaking they would be making.

Further to this issue of personal health data privacy, some countries might find value in developing new or amending existing national law, which would invoke national parliamentary processes and procedures for law making. This option ensures the maximum protection of privacy and data, but also would take the most time to implement.

Finally, to deepen the trust a member country has in receiving and verifying vaccination certificates from a country who is outside of the EU DCC framework, the TWG recommends countries consider amending passenger arrival/declaration cards to include questions regarding the incoming passenger's COVID-19 vaccination status. The TWG understands that in many (but not all) member countries, to amend a passenger arrival card would require regulatory (rather than legislative) changes, making this a viable option for enhancing the trust in the validity of incoming passenger's vaccination status (and in following, the ability to prosecute passengers found to be making a false declaration).

PICTs need to consider how each of these 'options' would affect implementation in their own legal context, and work with the proposed implementation support team to develop an adequate solution.

3.2. Leaving No One Behind – Regional or Bilateral Consensus

Recognizing each country's sovereign decision, policy options and evaluation of policy choice ([see Annex 6](#)) were presented in taking this work forward once the 6th Common Protocol is formally endorsed through PIFS process mechanisms.

- **Option 1:** Member countries agree to implement regional solution approved as the 6th Common Protocol of the PHP-C.
- **Option 2:** Member countries agree that the 6th Common Protocol converted to a technical ‘minimum standards guidance note. Thus, the Landscape Analysis, Technical Requirements and Protocol Agreement shared as technical guidance notes to strengthen national solution and guide transition to digital solution; or
- **Option 3:** Continue with National Solutions rely on current status quo.

Samoa and Vanuatu had expressed their support to the ongoing work and given the varying levels of digital health maturity support was offered to Vanuatu, Republic of Marshall Island, Samoa, and Tonga to conduct a costed implementation roadmap.

4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

4.1 Recommendations for Governments (Directors of Clinical Services):

1. Note that the 6th Common Protocol proposed regional solution provides the opportunity to address challenges and gaps within each individual countries health information systems and digital health particularly for vaccination systems registries. Those who are not immediately able to adopt the technology required to support issuance of digital certificates, by also including an outline of non-digital (wholly paper-based) certificates that comply with the WHO’s Digital Documentation of COVID-19 Certificate Vaccination Status Technical Standards (WHO DDCC: VSTS) can be supported through this work.
2. Note that countries within the region New Zealand, Cook Islands, Niue, New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Fiji are already aligning their development efforts based on the EU DCC model used by nearly 50 countries and territories.
3. To confirm and verify initial country survey results and findings on Protocol Agreement Readiness Assessment Determinations – Issuance, Verification and Pre-Arrival Travel Portal and Information Travel Portal.
4. To formally request for relevant technical support and capacity building needed in pursuit of harmonized regional solution to allow SPC to progress with costed implementation of solution.
 - a. Develop implementation Roadmap per country.
 - b. Identify Minimum Infrastructure Components and Quantities per country.

4.2 Recommendations for development partners:

1. Technical and Financial support for the Pacific region is essential to implement vaccination certificate and development of this solution beyond COVID-19 through strengthening of health systems broadly
 - a. Develop and Support Electronic Medical Records
 - b. Strengthening in country capacities in ICT legislations regarding data privacy, protection, and confidentiality
2. Support Digital Literacy assessments for all health users to ensure capabilities and skill sets are available in responding and preparing for future public health threats as PICTs continue to monitor and manage border reopening safely even with the rise of other communicable diseases like the Monkey Pox and measles.
3. Identify cross cutting investments in health systems strengthening particularly in vaccination systems development to ensure collaboration, effective partnership, and clarity in leading and support roles, as necessary.