

Pacific Heads of Health Meeting

Réunion des directeurs de la santé du Pacifique

Public health measures at Points of Entry (POE)

Under the International Health Regulations (2005), a Point of Entry (POE) is defined as “a passage for international entry or exit of travellers, baggage, cargo, containers, conveyances, goods, and postal parcels as well as agencies and areas providing services to them on entry or exit¹. POE, including airports, seaports, and ground crossings, are important settings in the management of public health emergencies. POE plays an essential role in societies and economies by enabling the international movement of people and goods.

1. BACKGROUND

World travel is now characterised by higher speed and larger volume of transportation, travel and trade. Points of entry continue to play a critical role in detecting and responding to communicable diseases such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), tuberculosis, malaria and more recently COVID-19.

Points of entry play a critical function in information provision and sharing to support coordinated border control policy implementation between countries. POE is the channel through which infectious diseases can spread, through travellers, from national to international settings and vice versa. Measures at POEs may be used to limit the spread of infectious public health threats across international borders.

2. PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

With progress made on COVID-19 vaccination coverage and to allow for economic recovery, countries are undertaking careful considerations when adapting border measures. Risk

¹ Article 1 – Definition, International Health Regulations (2005)

assessment² was conducted systematically and regularly, considering the local epidemiology in the country or area of departure and destination; travel volumes; public health and health service capacity and performance; and exit & entry screening policies of departing country. Multisectoral coordination has been strengthened to ensure effective management of travellers, specifically related to quarantine systems, logistical supports, Infection Prevention & Control (IPC), transportation, and information sharing.

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered considerable progress towards POE core capacity strengthening (e.g. capacity on testing, quarantine facilities at POE, etc.) and its integration into the overall national health emergency response plan. However, challenges, particularly around multi-sectoral coordination and cross-border collaboration remain.

3. CHALLENGES

There are rooms for improvements for multi-sectoral coordination at POE. Coordination of preparedness and response activities at POE with all relevant sectors and agencies at national and sub-national levels is crucial to effective and efficient responses to public health events. As there are many sectors involved in the transportation-related infrastructure, the coordination of interventions at POE is not only important to a country but also to the regional and global settings to minimize interruption of services, travel and trade during the pandemic.

Cross border collaboration for timely information sharing to support joint risk assessments and harmonization of POE responses needs to be further strengthened to facilitate bilateral and multisectoral discussion on adapting border policies. During response to COVID-19 pandemic, information is being shared by countries, however, this process needs to be harmonized and coordinated.

POEs are in a unique position to minimize the risk of import and export of public health threats. Therefore, the linkage of activities and information collected at POEs and surveillance (including community-based surveillance) should be strengthened. Information routinely collected for immigration or customs purposes can provide important information to be

² Considerations for implementing a risk-based approach to international travel in the context of COVID-19. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020; (<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Risk-based-international-travel-2020.1>)

utilized for surveillance activities, including contact tracing, risk assessment and to facilitate decision-making on public health and social measures. The sharing of information collected at POE with multisectoral stakeholders needs to be strengthened and closely linked with national surveillance system (e.g. immigration, customs, transportation, public health) to support response decision making.

4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A paradigm shift to move from the control of health security threats at POE to risk containment at source (based on risk assessment as part of wider national and international responses). This requires early information sharing among countries, especially on emerging of infectious diseases, which will facilitate the implementation of information provision and exit screening.

POEs need to be more flexible and dynamic, based on the actual context and epidemiological situation, to adapt responses quickly to the evolving public health threats. Capacity building at POE is needed to quickly detect risks of infectious diseases importation and linking with national surveillance systems to support response decision making.

The sharing information and cross-border collaboration need to be further promoted to harmonize travel measures to support risk assessment and decision making with regards to border policies.

4.1 Recommendations for governments:

- Establish or strengthen mechanisms for more effective multi-sectoral collaboration at POE for effective implementation of entry/exit controls.
- Establish mechanisms to effectively link surveillance at POE with national systems and strengthen information provision at POEs
- Strengthen risk communication and community engagement to ensure public health messages are effectively delivered to travellers to promote observance of preventive measures and where to seek help when sick.

- Promotion of information sharing through regional POE networks and conduct of periodical joint exercises with other countries to increase collaboration, information exchange.

4.2 Recommendations for development partners:

- To work closely with WHO and other relevant agencies to build capacities for IHR national focal points and authorities at POE for effective management of travellers.
- To work closely with WHO and other relevant agencies to promote risk containment at source and enhance capacities to implement entry/exit controls when required.
- To support and facilitate the sharing of information between countries and partners for international contact tracing and risk assessment.