

Rail Transport and Coronavirus Pandemic

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While the economic development in many countries have been growing well, the coronavirus (COVID-19) suddenly shocked the world in late 2019 and severely spread all over the world like in 1900s.

The question is how we deal with this situation – between lives and incomes of the people.

Certainly, there is no one solution. Lives and incomes cannot be traded off. The pandemic has gone up to the peak and gradually slowing down depending on the medical and hospital capacity, testing in particular to make sure our people are safe. The stay-home and lockdown orders soon become making people paralyzed – that could not move outside freely.

Most of public transportation was interrupted by reducing the services both domestic and international traveling. Crowding in the urban mass transit became risk of mass infections. Some countries have issued the order to wearing the masks when using public transport. But social distancing in the crowded trains were difficult to enforce. Traveling between cities were unwelcome or strictly screened by the next city. All in all is to prevent the movement of people so as to stop the spreading.

The rail transportation faced a difficult time and was affected as well, not only in terms of revenue of rail operators and related businesses, but also the confidence of the public services.

The state of emergency declared in many countries also posted another impact to not only public services, but also businesses as well. While the number of passengers significantly reduced as a result of a very limited service schedules, airlines suspended the flights and grounded almost all aircrafts, but the cargo trains in many countries did not stop the operations. They continue their role to serve the country's logistic system. Some operators have even converted their train coaches to help transport medical equipment as well as medical workers from one hospital that may have excess capacity to those needed these resources and vice versa.

This is the case of French high-speed train, TGV. The TGV has been helping by moving medical staffs and infected patients to hospitals that have more capacity by installing the equipment for intensive-care-unit in the car body. It is just like the mobile hospital. Taking the advantage of the high speed, it can carry the patients and medical supplies within a short time. In time of the crisis, the role of rail transportation, like some of the airlines, has immediately turned to facilitate the needs of the country. This is also one of the aspects that the railway sector should consider in the future.

What will happen in the future of economic development? When will the coronavirus end? Nothing certain! But the countries have to move forward more carefully.

Almost all countries have to spend billions or trillions of US dollars to help get the economy back to normal. Priority is given to the impacted people who are unemployed, small- and medium- size businesses, and large business firms like airlines, for example.

Future of rail transport!!

The Coronavirus outbreak has heavily impacted the globalization for all free-flows, people, financial, goods and services. This will lead to all countries to reconsider the economic policies. Are we back to the future or going forward to new normal as we heard more and more? However, way of lives will change. Way of doing businesses will change too.

In the short- and medium- term, all transport services were halted in almost all modes except the logistic system. Because of the lockdown measure to prevent the movement of the people, all air services had to reduce number of flights both domestic and international traveling. The train services were no exception. The role of road freight transport was the only mode to connect the supply chain of the country. People movement was not allowed according to the curfew.

However, the traveling and transport would have to resume as soon as the pandemic is contained. But what we would see is the more strict screening for all passengers and workers. Buses, trains, and aircrafts must be cleaned up more regularly to prevent any infection. There is also no exception for the disinfection of vehicles. Some countries have already implemented the new practice to clean the train at least once a day or more frequently in a day. The timeline of these strict measures will be subject to how soon the new vaccine will be available and drugs to cure the infected patients. Perhaps at least one year from now.

In the long-run, the question is to what extent the coronavirus pandemic will have impacts to people behaviors, daily lives, and economic activities all over the world. The globalization suggests us to make people, goods and services to move freely. Whether the digital technology will have a bigger role in our lives.

One certain thing is the people still need to move around physically. Thus, the traveling and transport would maintain their roles in economic development. While medical infrastructure needs more resources to develop, the physical infrastructure needs to accelerate as well. Mobility capacity should be more efficient to help shorten traveling time so that people do not need to stay in packed trains for a long time. This is also to discourage people to ride on individual car.

The role of high-speed trains is essential. It is not only the cheaper fares than the airlines, but also the saving check-in time despite any strict measures on any communicable disease to be imposed in the future. This is because it can move people much less time for a longer distance within the country and across countries. In this regards, the high-speed train projects in Thailand are moving ahead for regional lines to connect to City of Bangkok. Likewise, it is also essential for any country to develop the urban mass transit system in capital city and major cities as the traffic congestion will remain critical issue.

However, it is very important to consider how the railway sector to cope with any pandemic in the future. There is no doubt on technology of high-speed rail. But the design of cars should be reconsidered so as to create more confidence in coping with the pandemic, for example, seating design, ventilation, medical equipment. And do not forget about the stations, particularly the central big stations where different railways meet and where big crowd of passengers are there. Thermal screening for

mass crowd, for example, would be essential to detect unusual passenger. This is the new risk that all manufacturers, operators and planners should take into account.

In conclusion, it is clear that this worldwide coronavirus pandemic is now affecting our people's lives and the economy. The railway sector development is also to be restructured. More technology would have to be developed. The concern is as to how the railway sector, particularly high-speed rail and urban transit including the station facilities, is to develop to make sure that traveling by all types of trains are safe from invisible enemy apart from safety technology in coping with natural disaster. This is going to be a new future of railways to contribute to help protect health of the public.