

CIHT Dubai Evening Seminar (Online) – Bulletin

COVID-19: Impacts, Issues and Challenges for Transport in the United Arab Emirates

About the Speakers

The Seminar consisted of four short-presentations, followed by questions and discussion as follows.



Jonathan Spear Director, Transport Policy and Planning, Atkins Acuity - Global Perspectives on Impacts and Responses to COVID-19 from the Highways and Transport Sector



Huda Shaka, Associate Director Urban Planning, Arup - Lessons for City Resilience from COVID-19



Nada Jasim, Director, Safety and Risk, Regulation and Planning, RTA - The RTA's COVID-19 Response – Challenges and Way Forward



Edward Forrester, Future Mobility Lead, Mott MacDonald - Beyond COVID-19: Transitioning to Where?

Presentation Overview

Following its emergence at the end of 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Coronavirus (COVID-19) an international health emergency on 30th January & global pandemic on 11th March.

With the first local case of COVID-19 recorded on 29th January, the human cost of the pandemic on the UAE and the GCC is real and tangible. Over time, lockdown measures, and associated restrictions on business and personal mobility, have given way to a phased and regulated re-starting of economic and social activity.



The transport sector has had to remain operational throughout the crisis, having a vital role in keeping essential goods and workers moving across the UAE, maintaining the integrity of the supply chain and supporting the wider Government response; it also has a vital role in supporting long-term sustainable economic recovery as Dubai and other Emirates re-open.

As well as challenges, the crisis presents some opportunities. We should not lose sight of what could be done better or differently and how our post-COVID-19 World might benefit as a result. As people, business and communities recover, we are unlikely to go back to the previous “normal” – there will be medium- and long-term implications, in such areas as public transport management, traffic control, working from home, design of the public realm and decarbonisation; and, whilst there are pressing immediate needs, we should start thinking about those now. There is also a need to be better prepared for future pandemics or other crises that may materialise.

This seminar focused on the issues and challenges raised by COVID-19 globally, in the UAE and Dubai. Through four focused presentations from the public and private sectors, different dimensions of the crisis, impacts and responses were explored with time for discussion at the end.

Presentation 1: Jonathan Spear – Global Perspectives and Responses on COVID-19

“Do what you can, with what you have, where you are”, (Theodore Roosevelt). Jonathan started with this advice for the current times as the world faces firstly a public health crisis and then an economic and social crisis as a result of COVID-19.

Jonathan mapped out the incidence of COVID-19 globally, in the GCC and in Dubai, and how the world is both tracking and dealing with the pandemic. In the GCC, including UAE, the situation has been exacerbated by record low oil prices impacting business revenues and government budgets. In the UAE there are huge logistical challenges arising and the transport sector is responding in a variety of ways, adopting new thinking and practices and doing things differently. One thing is clear: that we are unlikely to go back to how things were. In the meantime, the policy focus has shifted from public health and preventing infections to countering the economic and social impact and looking at long-term recovery.

Whilst re-opening society and the economy is a priority for all governments, Jonathan argued we are not likely to return to anything like ‘normal’ until a vaccine is developed, tested, and manufactured on an industrial scale. This could be the first half of 2021.

Although the GCC is above the global average for COVID-19 cases, deaths are well below with a mortality rate of 0.7%. The UAE has done a good job in containing cases. In terms of transport, the statistics are stark. In March there was a 70-80% fall in mobility for most location types. Trips are now increasing, but remain 20 – 30% down on pre-pandemic levels. Private vehicle use has returned more strongly, but public transport usage is still depressed.

Many organisations have undertaken research work to explore the impacts and responses in the highway and transport sector. The PIARC COVID-19 Response Team has held more than 22 webinars in English, French, and Spanish, delivered over a short time to share knowledge and good practices, and consider solutions. Ten key issues have been identified globally, including protecting frontline workers, working from home, restoring confidence in public transport, promoting active travel, future mobility technology, financial sustainability and employment.

The long-term implications of the pandemic will potentially be transformational. A framework called Reopen-Recover-Reimagine was presented, with eight building blocks for shaping the future of transport.

Presentation 2: Nada Jasim - The RTA’s COVID-19 Response – Challenges and Way Forward

Nada started her presentation by stating that Dubai has been one of the safest cities in the world during COVID-19. Her presentation touched on the key objectives set by the RTA in managing the pandemic, the challenges faced, the approach followed and some of the innovative ideas introduced.

The RTA’s priorities have been to safeguard its employees, passengers, and the public; the continuation of the transport network during the crisis as an essential service; and to support other Government agencies in Dubai in dealing with the pandemic. Maintaining the trust of customers and responding to the dynamic situation has also been a big part of the RTA’s strategy as well as maintaining social distancing, sanitisation, hygiene & other regulations.

Nada presented the RTA’s multi-layered approach to establishing a biohazard protection shield, which is rigorous, flexible, timely, and based on strong leadership in meeting the COVID-19 challenge. Some of the key initiatives being implemented include transport mode capacity studies, dynamic scenario planning, establishing social distancing requirements, contactless fare payment initiatives, assets monetization and the development of a transport response tracker. Nada declared that 100% of the RTA’s office-based workers were now back in the office and that this has sent a clear signal that the Authority is open for business and operating in a safe environment. 500 actions have been completed and 80 recommendations made to management.

Further innovative ideas are being adopted by the RTA including sanitisation processes and equipment to protect surfaces, the operation of a cashless fare system, the raising of awareness, and restoring trust through visible safety measures and the introduction of thermal/facial recognition on the transport system.

The RTA’s planning & strategic thinking have helped UAE respond well to the COVID-19 crisis resulting in the country having one of the lowest mortality rates in the world.

Nada finished her presentation by pointing to the future, and the way forward for the RTA. How can we rebuild customer confidence in terms of using public transport? What are the investment opportunities? How will we all move from being online to holding face to face interactions? Fundamentally though we all need to think through the future of transportation in cities – what will cities be like in the post-pandemic world, how will they work and what will be the mobility needs?

Presentation 3: Huda Shaka - Lessons for City Resilience from COVID-19

Huda opened her presentation with the assertion that COVID-19 provides an opportunity to rethink city resilience. She then issued a challenge to consider what city resilience is, proposing that it is the capacity of cities to survive, adapt, and thrive no matter what stresses and shocks they experience.

Cities rely on a complex web of institutions, infrastructure, and information. Resilience depends on strengthening their capacities and it relies on the ability of complex city systems to function when faced with disruption.

So, how do we put in place strategies and mechanisms to withstand stresses and shocks?

Arup has undertaken research across the world's cities to evidence how they plan for, and react to, shocks and disasters. From this research, a conceptual framework (a City Resilience Index) has been developed to assess how flexible, redundant, robust, resourceful, reflective, inclusive and integrated a city's systems are.

Among the themes picked up by Huda were that infrastructure and environment are incredibly important for cities. Systems that provide critical services protect and connect urban communities and Huda referenced the fact that cities with poor air quality have seen a higher transmission rate for COVID-19. Huda also promoted the idea of informed, integrated, and inclusive decision making and how important this was in city leadership and strategic planning.

Lastly, Huda focused on the role of urban environments in adapting to the 'new normal'. There are real benefits in cities built to a human scale with the planning that includes connected environments and where communities live and work together. This may be one of the most beneficial legacies of the pandemic.

Presentation 4: Edward Forrester - Beyond COVID-19: Transitioning to Where?

Ed's presentation focused on the use of FUTURES (Future Uncertainty Toolkit for Understanding and Responding to an Evolving Society) to determine how Abu Dhabi and Dubai might transition to a potential 2025 utopian or dystopian future emerging from COVID-19, and what measures could be put in place to achieve certain outcomes – and what were the pathways to delivery.

This premise was based on evidence from Amsterdam and other cities that they can change. Amsterdam used the 1970s oil crisis as a catalyst for change, reducing reliance on the private car and taking a more sustainable path. Milan and other cities have used the COVID-19 pandemic to look at active transport solutions such as walking and cycling, reductions in speed limits, and widening pavements. These measures have all been bought in as temporary measures to mitigate transport, mobility and connectivity during the COVID-19 pandemic, but may support permanent behavioural change and policy shifts by city leaders.

Ed highlighted the statement by Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary-General, that despite the COVID-19 pandemic we must remember that we are also in a climate crisis. Transport is now the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in the UK and the transport sector is the 3rd highest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in Dubai.

FUTURES has been used to develop a template for positive outcomes for the plausible utopian scenario for transport in the UAE, and the template may also be used to avoid the plausible dystopian scenario such as cheaper car use, more parking, and lack of confidence in public transport.

The Three Horizons Method has been used to determine where we are now, where could we get to, and what obstacles/risks/opportunities do we see.

FUTURES and the scenario planning process have enabled stakeholders in UAE to identify the potential policy drivers, risks, and challenges that exist in the current situation and future pathways to development of the transport sector, and how organisations can work together to deliver better outcomes. From the workshops, ten key insights were presented on how the UAE can move forward after COVID-19.

Questions

Many companies are discouraging employees taking public transport to work. What steps is the RTA taking to regain users and respond to the increase in cars on the road?

Nada: Measures include a focus on maintaining social distance, cleaning and sanitising public transport vehicles and stations, and cleaning all surfaces to rebuild customer trust and confidence. Despite the climatic challenges in Dubai, additional cycle tracks are being planned to encourage cycling and there is also a plan to increase the use of electric vehicles, and invest in autonomous vehicle technology, in the interests of managing roads more efficiently and reducing emissions and pollution.

How resilient are the 28 cities referenced in the Arup research? Did they miss the pandemic in their scenario planning?

Huda: The framework for assessment has looked at resilience and responsiveness in its broadest sense. Did the resilience strategies developed by cities help them withstand the impacts of COVID-19? The jury is still out and further evidence is being collected all the time to determine how broader strategies have helped.

This Bulletin is issued by the CIHT Dubai Group. For further information, contact ciht.dubaigroup@gmail.com.