

DRAFT FOR DISCUSSION
NOT A POSITION PAPER OR RECOMMENDATION

Travel Bubbles - An information paper

Background

As the international aviation industry starts to reopen, there is much focus on the concept of Travel Bubbles. As this concept does not yet have a formal definition, this paper is an attempt to qualify some of the components and requirements to assist governments and other stakeholders that may be contemplating the implementation of such Travel Bubbles.

This document is meant to be an Information Paper and does not in any way represent an IATA position or standard or guideline.

Definitions

For the purposes of this document, the following definitions can be assumed:

- Travel Bubble – A State level agreement that enables international air travel between 2 countries by reducing the restrictions or conditions compared to those that apply to travel from/to other non-travel bubble countries.
- Restrictions – Any testing, medical certificate, quarantine, self-isolation, insurance, contact tracing or health declaration requirements required from air travelers as a result of COVID-19
- Country COVID Transmission Level – The classification of a country in terms of the risk of an incoming or outbound traveler being infected with and/or the vector for additional infections.

Restrictions and the need for Travel Bubbles

A number of countries have implemented restrictions that can limit travel due to cost, inconvenience or interference with travel objective – both business and leisure. Specifically:

- Mandatory Quarantine – generally for 2 weeks at a designated facility and is seen as the key impediment to travel.
- Self-isolation – similar in length to quarantine but acceptance is limited to some residents returning home
- COVID testing (or medical certificate) – pre-departure and/or post-arrival testing can be time consuming and cost prohibitive

On the other hand, there are some measures such as contact tracing and health declarations that do not interfere with the passenger's journey or lead to significant facilitation issues for the airlines or airports. The air travel experience needs to be as close as possible to pre-COVID for passengers and airlines. For air travel to recover, Travel Bubbles need to minimize the cost, inconvenience and interference with the passenger's journey and the airline/airport facilitation processes while at the same time ensuring that incoming passengers do not negatively impact the COVID situation in the destination country.

The fundamental requirement of a Travel bubble is the elimination of the need for quarantine or self-isolation. Also, depending on the situation, there may not be a need for COVID testing on departure or arrival and certainly not both (duplication of testing).

COVID Transmission Levels and travel conditions

There is no universally accepted classification of a country's COVID transmission level (CTL) or health situation. But there are a number of indicators or principles that can be analyzed to develop a CTL profile for a country and one can envisage the development of such a methodology that countries can then use to reach agreement on their mutual CTL on a bilateral basis. Development of a commonly accepted methodology for classifying CTL levels will greatly assist in bilateral and eventually multi-lateral or regional discussions. The actual classification of a state will be left to the states themselves given the sensitivities of any classification by a 3rd party.

Even in the absence of such a common methodology, countries could make their own judgements on the CTL levels of other countries as compared to their own – enabling them to enter into bilateral discussions with other countries on the change in CTL due to movement of air travelers from and the needed mitigation measures. But these discussions could be protracted and contentious if there is a difference in metrics or indicators used by the 2 parties.

Travel Bubble scenarios

Based on CTL, countries can be classified as (based on mutual agreement) as:

- No transmission or Minimal transmission
- Medium transmission
- High transmission

Logically, the following principles should be adopted:

- There is little justification for implementation of any extraordinary restrictions such as quarantine, self-isolation or testing for travel between 2 countries with equivalent CTLs. Or from a lower CTL to higher CTL country
- It is practical to implement some restrictions for passengers from a higher CTL country travelling to a lower CTL country
- Countries deemed to be high CTL would inevitably result in the implementation of quarantine or self-isolation measures which would automatically make them ineligible to be considered for travel bubbles.

Based on the above, there are basically 2 types of travel bubbles:

- The Basic Travel Bubble (BTB) with minimal or no restrictions
- The Limited Travel Bubble (LTB) with some restrictions

Country COVID transmission level (CTL)

From ↓	To→	No/Minimal	Medium	High
No/Minimal		Minimal or no restrictions needed – BTB	Minimal or no restrictions needed – BTB	Not suitable for travel bubble
Medium		Some restrictions needed - LTB	Minimal or no restrictions needed - BTB	Not suitable for travel bubble
High		Not suitable for travel bubble	Not suitable for travel bubble	Not suitable for travel bubble

The following should be noted:

- The above should be looked as a broad guideline but countries may choose to implement restrictions that are either more stringent (LTB instead of BTB) or lenient (BTB instead of LTB). E.g. a country with no CTL may choose to implement testing for travel from a country with minimal CTL.

- Given the rapidly changing nature of the situation in many countries, it is highly likely that the CTL of a country may change for the better or worse requiring the Travel Bubble agreement to be revised from BTB to LTB or vice-versa. Or if a country's CTL changes to High, the countries may mutually decide that the Travel Bubble is no longer viable.
- While a country with High CTL may not be suitable for a travel bubble, it may choose to open its borders to inbound travel – especially from No/Minimal/Medium CTL countries. Unilateral border openings to inbound travel are not considered as Travel Bubbles even if it results in 2-way traffic between 2 such countries.

1. The Basic Travel Bubble

The Basic Travel Bubble (BTB) should have the following features:

- No quarantine or self-isolation requirements on arrival
- No specific testing requirements on arrival or departure
- Basic screening on departure and arrival (during the active phase on this pandemic)
- Contact tracing and health declarations in line with ICAO standards
- Aircraft and crew operations in line with ICAO CART guidelines

It is only logical that the BTB model would initially be implemented for countries with no or minimal CTL classification as it is expected that these economies will be well on their path to recovery and there will be a pent up demand for travel. Also, national restrictions in such locations are expected to be minimal – thus allowing for free movement within the country.

2. The Limited Travel Bubble

The Limited Travel Bubble (LTB) should have the following features:

- No quarantine or self-isolation requirements on arrival
- Testing (or medical certificate) requirements prior to departure
- Basic screening on departure and arrival (during the active phase on this pandemic)
- Contact tracing and health declarations in line with ICAO standards
- Aircraft and crew operations in line with ICAO CART guidelines

The key additional restriction in the LTB model is the need for testing (prior to departure) to mitigate the risk of transmission from a passenger from a higher CTL country (relative to the destination country). Note that testing on arrival may not be conducive to a travel bubble given the potential of infection at the departure airport and on arrival. In addition, the waiting time for test results can interfere with travel plans and thus lead to travel avoidance – thus defeating the purpose of a travel bubble. Nevertheless, some states may choose to implement additional testing on arrival as an additional layer of protection.

Additional Considerations

Passenger scope

While countries may choose to initially limit travel bubbles to a particular segment of travellers (e.g business or citizens) there is no health reason to differentiate between business and leisure travellers, or nationality. Limiting the eligibility in the initial stages of the bubble can help in the identification of any operational issues while allowing for passenger confidence to build over time.

Transit Traffic

Assuming a country has opened its borders to more than 1 country, there will be a need to accommodate transit traffic from a 3rd country in traffic for both BTB and LTB models and thus the following measures should be considered:

- Segregating transit and O/D traffic throughout the journey is not a sustainable proposition
- Transit traffic from a 3rd country with similar or lower CTL profile can be considered “clean” and thus should be treated no different or segregated from O/D passengers.
- Transit traffic from a 3rd country with higher CTL profile should be subject to testing (or other equivalent measures) to ensure they are “clean” and then should be treated no different or segregated from O/D passengers. Ideally this testing is done before departure from the 3rd country else testing on landing at transit airport can be considered.
- Testing and physical segregation facilities for such passengers prior to their clearance need to be arranged at the transit airport.
- Once tested and cleared, transit passengers can mix with Origin passengers in the airside area of the airport (similar to normal hub operations).
- Thus all passengers on any flight in the travel bubble are “clean” – either because of the CTL status of their country or because they have been tested and cleared.

Example: Country AA (low CTL) has a BTB arrangement with BB (low CTL) and a LTB with CC (medium or high CTL). A passenger should be able to transit AA and do BB-AA-CC without any testing while CC-AA-BB will also be possible with the passenger tested/cleared before departure at CC (or on landing at AA). But for direct travel between BB and CC, a new travel bubble agreement will be needed.

Multilateral Travel agreements

Though the default model for travel bubbles is bilateral, they can cater to multilateral or groups of countries that meet the CTL criteria. Special consideration should be given to existing multi-national institutions (e.g. ASEAN) that can provide the forum and facilitate discussions on the formation of such multilateral bubbles. Also, bilateral bubbles can be merged or expanded to multi-lateral travel bubbles. For cases, where the country or country pairs have different CTLs, measures similar to Transit traffic can be implemented to ensure that the CTL of a country is not negatively impacted by inbound passengers from a higher CTL country.

Sub-national agreements

A large country may have different CTLs and health measures in different parts of the country with border-like travel restrictions between the different parts (e.g. states or provinces). In such cases, travel bubbles of different types (BTB or LTB) or with different counterparties could be established. But there will be a need to ensure that the CTLs of the different states are reviewed regularly and adjustments made to the travel bubbles as needed.

Duration and reviews

All Travel Bubble arrangements should be subject to periodic review and adjustments to cater to changes in health environment, country CTL, testing methods, and any other factors that can impact the travel bubble. Such review arrangements should be agreed upon by the parties before the implementation of such travel bubbles.

Recommended Process for Governments

- Inter-ministry/agency involvement (Transport, Health, Foreign Affairs, Security, Immigration)
- Stakeholder engagement with airlines and airports
- Determination of travel demand – inbound and outbound
- Bilateral discussions with potential country partners
- Mutual agreement on respective CTLs
- Mutual agreement on any Health restrictions including contact tracing, health declarations
- Lead time for airport and health facilities preparations
- Lead time for airline scheduling and marketing
- Public awareness and education