



**WORKING PAPER**

**ASSEMBLY — 41ST SESSION**  
**EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

**Agenda Item 13: Facilitation Programmes**

**PRE-TRAVEL VERIFICATION AND DIGITIZATION OF PROCESSES**

(Presented by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) and Airports Council International (ACI))

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to advancing the concept of pre-travel verification. Digital health platforms have facilitated greater interactions between passengers and border and health authorities. These platforms have proven to be one of the most efficient ways to ensure the compliance of passengers with the entry requirements of States, while supporting authorities to gain greater control of their borders.

There is a strong push towards moving away from the current predominant manual document verification process for determining the admissibility of passengers to travel and enter a country. This working paper intends to provide some reflections and avenues for the aviation sector, including authorities, to embrace the digitalization of processes and redefining the roles and responsibilities of aviation stakeholders. This working paper builds on recent Recommended Practices formulated by the ICAO Facilitation Panel and the ICAO High Level Conference on COVID-19.

**Actions:** The Assembly is invited to request that ICAO continues:

- a) developing the global interoperability framework for digital credentials in Annex 9 – *Facilitation*, with a focus on harmonizing the notification of approval to travel related to government health digital platforms and on developing recommended practices surrounding the ICAO specifications on the Digital Travel Authorization (DTA) and the Digital Travel Credential (DTC).
- b) further developing the pre-travel verification concept and related tools and systems with the objective of moving the current manual document verification process away from airports for the benefit of passengers and all aviation stakeholders.
- c) fostering a collaborative approach between the public and private sectors, notably through National Air Transport Facilitation Committee (NATFC), for modernizing passenger processes.

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| <i>Strategic Objectives:</i>   | This working paper relates to Strategic Objective <i>Security &amp; Facilitation</i>                 |
| <i>Financial implications:</i> | Non applicable   |
| <i>References:</i>             | Annex 9 – <i>Facilitation</i> ; FALP/12; HLCC; and Doc 9303 <i>Machine Readable Travel Documents</i> |

<sup>1</sup> English, Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian, Spanish and versions provided by IATA and ACI.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The pre-travel verification concept implies that passengers can demonstrate to relevant authorities their compliance with entry requirements prior to traveling. The further developments surrounding this concept have been a major success of the global COVID response. The pandemic has had devastating consequences on the aviation sector. But it has shown that it was necessary to increase the interactions between the passengers and relevant authorities and that it was possible to achieve such greater interactions. Many pre-travel solutions are available to States according to their different capabilities and resources.

1.2 By setting up government-managed health digital platforms (on-line or through a mobile application), authorities have been able to determine the admissibility to travel of each passenger in advance of traveling, in accordance with their own public health requirements. In most instances, airlines had to manually check that passengers had provided their information in advance. Greater operational efficiencies would be gained with the digitalization of the health document check process, while enhancing the preparedness of the aviation sector for future health outbreaks.

1.3 The importance of such health platforms as well as the use of contactless procedures to automate the inspection of health-related documentation are Recommended Practices contained in the Amendment 29 to Annex 9 - *Facilitation* adopted by the ICAO Council.

1.4 These developments with health status and proofs accelerate this shift towards ensuring that passengers fulfil, prior to travelling and ideally in off-airport locations, the conditions to be admissible to travel by using digital platforms. Pre-travel verification is a process that was already widely implemented prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, over 60 countries from all regions already had a platform in place for visitors to digitally apply for a visa or an electronic travel authorization.

1.5 Digital credentials are an essential enabler to pre-travel verification initiatives. As pre-verification models mature, trusted digital credentials will enable a much-needed contactless passenger processes.

1.6 Further cooperation between authorities and the aviation industry is key in achieving a digital travel journey to improve both the facilitation and security of the processes, while reducing complexities for passengers. The ICAO High-Level Conference on COVID-19 (HLCC) has formulated a recommendation in that regard: “Recommendation 8/1 - Enhancing digital data sharing to facilitate seamless and contactless processes during and beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic”.

## 2. PRE-TRAVEL VERIFICATION

2.1 Strengthening the interactions between passengers and authorities can be achieved through a digital platform. Numerous countries<sup>2</sup> across all regions have, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, developed such platforms, to various extent, for health purposes (for collecting information such as test and vaccination certificates, contact tracing, travel history, health declaration, hotel booking, etc.) Such platforms are mirroring the process for passengers to obtain a visa or other forms of travel authorizations through a website. These pre-travel verification solutions can be implemented by most States.

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<sup>2</sup> Countries and territories that have roll-out a health digital platform include, but not limited to: Aruba, Australia, Bahamas, Belgium, Bermuda, Bonaire, Brazil, British Virgin Islands, Canada, Chile, China, Croatia, Curaçao, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, India, Ireland, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Saint Lucia, Seychelles, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, St. Kitts, Spain, Switzerland, Thailand, Turk and Caicos, Türkiye, United Kingdom.

2.2 Upon submission of the required information and credentials by passengers through such platforms in off-airport locations, relevant authorities can perform an assessment to ensure that each passenger satisfactorily meets their entry requirements. By issuing a notification of approval to travel, authorities increase their control over their borders, and avoid involving airlines as intermediaries for collecting and/or checking sensitive health information. The issuance of a notification of approval to travel to passengers is also a Recommended Practice contained in the Amendment 29 to Annex 9 – *Facilitation*.

2.3 By taking place at off-airport locations, the pre-travel verification process also contributes to relieving congestion at various touchpoints. The move to off-airport verification process is also more and more required considering the current limitations of airport terminal capacity post-pandemic and the manpower challenges. There is a need for decreasing the reliance of the air travel sector on the current manual document verification performed by airline agents and border control officers.

2.4 The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that manually checking the numerous proofs required to enter a country was not sustainable. Despite the low international traffic levels during the pandemic, the processing time at airport has more than doubled in some instances<sup>3</sup>. Assuming that an airline agent or a border control officer possesses the tools and the skills to manually verify a plethora of non-harmonized paper documents in a reasonable timeframe, is erroneous. Harmonization is however required to enable automation and digitization of document verification. ICAO and aviation stakeholders must look into standardizing the notification of approval to travel to ensure a streamlined processing for all verifiers.

2.5 As pre-travel verification models mature, there is an opportunity to extend the functionalities of these digital platforms. The setting up of a single travel platform where passengers can fill the immigration, health, security and customs requirements will improve the compliance of passengers with all entry requirements and reduce the risks for airlines to carry inadmissible passengers. In such settings, airline's role would focus on informing their customers on the requirement to provide their information and credentials to governments in advance of travel and check that travellers possess a digital approval to travel.

2.6 With the maturation of pre-travel verification models, additional work is required for adapting existing systems and processes, along with legislative arrangements. For instance, enhancements will be required when an interactive Advance Passenger information (iAPI) system is in place, for extending the message response codes to airlines beyond the current immigration and/or security passenger's status. Additionally, digital processes require backup mechanisms to be in place in case of system failures and supporting regulatory frameworks will also be essential for processing digital credentials.

### 3. **DIGITALIZATION OF CREDENTIALS AND BIOMETRIC PROCESSES**

3.1 The pre-travel verification concept relies on passenger's digital credentials and information, e.g., their identity information, information to obtain a travel authorization, health proofs, etc. A trusted digital notification of approval to travel along with passenger's trusted digital identity enables both authorities and industry stakeholders to roll out biometric-enabled touchpoints more easily. ICAO readily provides technical specifications for trusted digital credentials such as the electronic Machine Readable Travel Documents (eMRTDs), the [Digital Travel Credential \(DTC\)](#), Visible Digital Seal for [Non-Constraint environments \(VDS-NC\)](#) and [Digital Travel Authorization \(DTA\)](#). However, the technical specifications for the DTA and the DTC are not readily included in the regulatory framework provided by

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<sup>3</sup> [Digitalization Needed for Smooth Restart](#), IATA, May 2021 and [From Restart to Recovery, a Blueprint for Simplifying Air travel](#), IATA, November 2021

Annex 9, therefore reducing the visibility and uptake on these trusted digital credentials. Annex 9 must be amended to reflect these recent technical specifications.

3.2 With emerging specifications in the digital realm and the development of open standards, the interoperability of these digital credentials must be prioritized from the outset of the development of such standards.

3.3 Beyond enabling a truly contactless travel journey and enhancing border security, trusted digital credentials along with biometric recognition at touchpoints provide the opportunity to strengthen personal data privacy and security. As the aviation sector is shifting to digital and biometric processes, it is paramount to pay attention to the real need for passenger data and information of each stakeholder in the travel continuum. This need may differ greatly depending on the stakeholder. Digital credentials should enable the minimum data required to be shared for a specific transaction or process.

3.4 Under the One ID initiative, IATA works with its airline members, airport operators, other aviation industry stakeholders, and government agencies for achieving a streamlined, contactless, and passenger-centric travel experience relying on the capture, verification and processing of a passenger's digital credentials, upon informed consent of passengers. Digital identity technologies can lead to significant improvements to operational efficiency and security, including to the automation and digitization of document verification process.

#### 4. NATIONAL COORDINATION

4.1 The COVID-19 pandemic has sharpened the need for a national coordination body to effectively align a national response in case of pandemics. The ICAO CART has on the onset of the pandemic recognized the relevance of such body with its Recommendation #6 - Member States that have not done so should immediately establish a National Air Transport Facilitation Committee (NATFC) or equivalent as required by Annex 9 to increase national level cross-sectoral coordination.

4.2 Such national coordination mechanism enables a greater mutual understanding of the prerogatives, capabilities and limitations of each national agency involved with international travel. It also fosters collaboration with aviation industry stakeholders and can be a catalyst for border modernization projects.

4.3 An important issue that airlines faced during the pandemic has been the requests by different national authorities, at different levels of governance, for passenger data and health information. From an operational perspective, there are no processes in place for airlines to collect health data from passengers or to assess this information on behalf of authorities. Health information is considered sensitive and it poses important data privacy questions when its collection is imposed on airlines. A best practice is to avoid that data already collected from passengers through a government platform by one authority, such as contact tracing data, is additionally required to be collected by airlines from another agency or an airport authority. For maximising the benefits of a government health or travel platform, collaboration and coordination among government agencies, is crucial.

#### 5. ACTIONS

5.1 To consolidate the advancements made with pre-travel verification during the COVID-19 pandemic and to take into account the technological advancements that can enhance the efficiency of passenger processes and border security, the Assembly is invited to endorse the actions as set in the Summary.