

Assignment 4

In light of the recent rise in COVID-19 cases in countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore, China, and Thailand, discuss the following questions:

- What can governments do to prevent a new wave of COVID-19?
- How can the tourism sector help reduce the spread of the virus while keeping international travel open?
- What lessons from the earlier stages of the COVID-19 pandemic can help countries respond better now and in the future?
- Choose one country (Germany, India, Nepal, Hong Kong, or Thailand) and explain how its tourism industry reacted to earlier waves of COVID-19.
- What actions worked well?
- What actions did not work well?

Increasing COVID-19 cases in places such as Hong Kong, Singapore, China, and Thailand mean it's essential for governments and leading sectors, especially tourism, to act proactively. Just as the world learned from waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, and then revisited previous protocols, countries can also apply this learning to protect public health without completely closing borders or closing down economies. This paper will examine government obligations, role of tourism, lessons learned, and a case study of Thailand in its tourism sector response.

Strategies For Governments To Stop a New Surge

Governments are increasingly taking the reins in improving and preventing new waves of COVID-19. The following strategies may be helpful:

Vaccination: Roll out mass vaccination campaigns where vaccines and booster doses are available to susceptible populations.

Testing and Tracing: Ensure rapid testing and case management processes are efficient and timely; cases must be isolated as quickly and urgently as possible.

Travel Oversight: Require health declarations, proof of vaccinations, or negative test results for all incoming travelers.

Public Campaigning: Leverage media, community programs, and public health channels to effectively communicate the importance of hygiene, vaccination, and reporting signs early, enabling people to be aware and take action.

Health Service Capacity: Sufficient hospital staff, ample PPE, and a clear scope and number of staff are needed to cope with a surge.

The Tourism Sector's Role in Controlling the Spread

The tourism sector plays a significant role in mitigating the risk of COVID-19 in the context of international travel. I must assume that the responsibility will fall on hotels, airlines, and attractions to implement health and safety protocols appropriately. I would hope, for instance, that, within the tourism sector, we will begin to advocate for some sound controls in terms of practices such as having a habit of wearing masks in enclosed areas, frequent sanitization of high-touch regions, and ensuring adequate ventilation in high use rooms (for instance in hotels) to help reduce risk.

Digital innovation has also enabled safer travel. Many tourism experiences have moved to a contactless format, e.g., airlines implementing contactless check-in, contactless payments, and utilizing digital menus to connect customers and service staff while minimizing direct contact. Health screening, such as requiring proof of vaccination or a negative test result prior to entry, provides a layer of control. The most significant potential source of tension may arise from tourism staff being adequately trained and resourced to manage a COVID-19 incident as it unfolds, such as recognizing symptoms or supporting guests in the self-isolation protocol. Lastly, we had previously promoted flexible booking and cancellation policies as a sustainable travel practice, as this would allow guests to cancel or change a booking at no cost as the risk increases.

Lessons from the Early Pandemic Response

The early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed important learnings that continue to inform our responses today. A key consideration is the timeliness of actions taken. Countries that implemented lockdowns and travel restrictions early tended to have better outcomes in limiting the transmission of the virus. In contrast, public health responses that did not occur until late in the transmission cycle created overwhelmed healthcare systems and extended lockdowns for all.

Strong and clear communication also appeared to be critical. Where governments were honest and transparent regarding risk and about what the restrictions were and were not, the public was more compliant. Misinformation, or conflicting communication, contributed to a loss of trust, confidence, and compliance. Furthermore, international collaboration was another indispensable aspect of the pandemic, as global partnerships in sharing data, research, and vaccine supplies saved lives.

Equally necessary was the extent to which rapid adaptation to change was required. COVID-19 has demonstrated that public health strategies cannot be static and must be adaptable to new variants of the virus and emerging data. Finally, many countries have learned how vital it is to balance public health with economic and mental well-being during times of crisis. Future response planning should include systems of support for individuals and businesses to mitigate longer-term harm more effectively, going beyond the impact of the virus alone.

Case Study: Thailand's Tourism Industry Response

The tourism sector in Thailand suffered significantly during the pandemic due to its substantial importance to the economy. In response, authorities introduced several initiatives to revive the industry while managing public health risks. One of the leading interventions was the “Phuket Sandbox,” which allowed fully vaccinated tourists to visit Phuket without undergoing full quarantine, provided they stayed on the island for a reduced timeframe and passed COVID-19 tests while there. This allowed for a phased approach to safely reopening tourism, allowing international visitors to opt into the Phuket Sandbox experience.

The Thai government introduced an SHA (Safety and Health Administration) program to classify and promote businesses, assuring tourists that they adhered to minimum hygiene and sanitary standards defined and approved by government authorities. The domestic government was also deliberate about vaccinations in popular tourist regions, such as Phuket, Bangkok, and Chiang Mai, to help achieve some level of safety for international tourists. Not all aspects of the Thai response were practical and developed quickly. Early on, there was concern about the complexity of entry requirements, which could hinder travel. Tourists were required to provide up to five health documents, such as a negative test result, insurance coverage, and quarantine approval, all of which are extensive, confusing, and potentially risky. Travel policies were changing frequently. Tourists may not have been keeping up with the changing entry requirements, which created uncertainty. Local businesses found it increasingly difficult to operate under the changing requirements. The cautious apex of the national reopening strategy caused unnecessary prolonged economic hardship to small tourism operators.

Conclusion

The growth of COVID-19 cases observed in parts of Asia serves as a reminder that the pandemic is not yet over. In terms of reopening, there are positive lessons to be learned, including establishing reopening pathways based on experiences and implementing greater flexibility and coordinated plans, which present an opportunity for countries to develop safe plans to move forward toward re-establishing past norms. The example of Thailand shows us that

targeted programs, a health and safety certification program, and vaccination against diseases that are prevalent in the region allow for tourism to go ahead but manage the effects of a public health emergency. All of these actors are moving forward while streamlining processes and improving communications to ensure the recovery of tourism in a timely and inclusive manner. With caution, creativity, and collaboration, countries can develop a model in response to COVID-19.