

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK ON THE TRANSPORT SECTOR IN THE GAMBIA

INTRODUCTION

The transport sector is critical for the efficient functioning of the national economy as it provides vital and essential links between areas of production and markets and facilitates access to social and economic facilities. For the private sector, transport infrastructure is critical for competitiveness and is equally an opportunity for participation through public-private partnerships. The transport and storage sub-sector directly contributed 3.6 percent to GDP in 2018.¹

STATUS OF THE TRANSPORT SECTOR IN THE GAMBIA

The Gambia's transport system falls under three modes; (i) road transport system (consisting of a primary network, inter-urban trunk roads; gravel surfaced secondary roads; urban roads confined mainly to the Greater Banjul area; and gravel/earth surface rural feeder roads); (ii) Air Transport System provided by the Banjul International Airport at Yundum and (iii) Maritime and River Transport consisting of the Banjul Port and the Gambia River transport.

Subsequent briefs will explore the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the various modes of the transport system. For the purposes of this brief, the impact of COVID-19 on the public transportation system will be explored.

Rapid urbanization is creating a transport crisis in the Greater Banjul Area (GBA). Currently, there is confusion with respect to institutional responsibilities for the hierarchy of the urban roads network and regulation of urban transport services on the arterial, collector and local roads. The Government of The Gambia is taking measures to address these issues by constructing alternative routes and bypasses to ease traffic on the link, although these measures will be slowed down by the outbreak of COVID-19.

GLOBAL DEVELOPMENTS IN TRANSPORT RESULTING FROM COVID-19

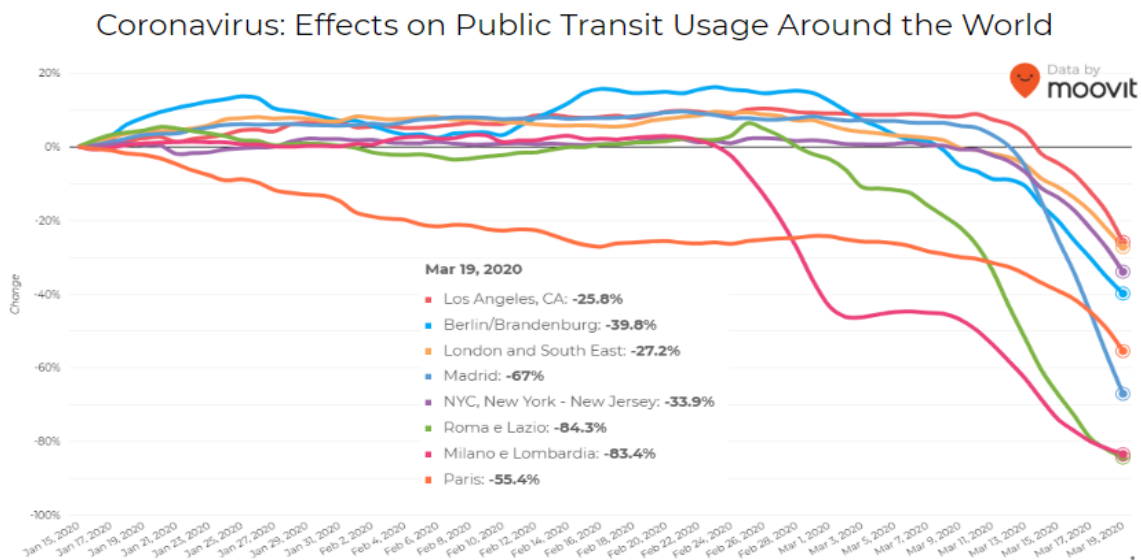
The COVID-19 outbreak has shown that effective public transport is essential to keeping cities running in line with Sustainable Development Goal 11 on Sustainable Cities and Communities.

¹ Gambia Bureau of Statistics.

One of the targets of SDG 11 states ‘by 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons.’ The public transportation system serves essential workers in healthcare, emergency services, food sectors and other sectors that have become so vital in limiting the spread of the virus and protecting the lives of the most vulnerable.

Measures being taken to curb the spread of COVID-19 worldwide are putting an incredible strain on public transport systems globally. This had led to major implications for mobility and connectivity, as well as cumulative impacts on basic infrastructure systems that keep regions, markets and supply chains going. The negative impact on public transport has multiplier negative effects on health services, education, employment and economic growth as the movement of people and goods are severely limited. With transit ridership estimated to be down by 50-90% around the world, and a long-term decline expected, the future of public transportation is in jeopardy. Figure 1 looks at the decline of public transit usage in major cities worldwide affected by COVID-19 with data from Moovit demonstrating the universal decline by various levels:

Figure 1: Impact of COVID-19 on Public Transit Usage in Select Major Cities



Source: Moovit



Emergency interventions will be necessary to keep the transport system afloat in the short-term, however governments should also be thinking about measures to take in the long-term. Investing in public transport can create jobs quickly while reducing carbon emissions, make roads safer and better maintained and improve people’s access to jobs and other opportunities.

The impact of COVID-19 in the transport sector will be felt globally more in countries whose value chains are closely linked to epicenters of the pandemic, as disruptions in transport supply chains will affect production nodes and cause cascading shortages of products – further worsened by hoarding. This is a situation being observed in an import dependent country like The Gambia where hoarding of goods has been taking place. It is estimated that COVID-19 wiped out US\$50 billion off global exports in February alone.²

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE TRANSPORT SECTOR FROM COVID-19 OUTBREAK IN THE GAMBIA

One of the measures under the Proclamation signed by the President of the Republic declaring a state of emergency stated that all public transport shall carry **half** of the total number of passengers they are allowed to transport by law amongst measures limiting the mobility of people and provision of non-essential services.

The transport sector can be divided into two, the transport of people and the transport of goods. The transport sector was one of the earliest sectors of the economy to be adversely affected by COVID-19. At the moment, the national state of emergency has affected drivers engaged in the transportation of people. The measures have caused some drivers to park their vehicles and thus caused a shortage of vehicles amidst high public demand.

On April 30, 2020, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, in line with the Government’s policy of mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on lives and livelihoods, made the biggest ever reduction of the domestic retail prices of fuel in The Gambia. The retail prices of fuel throughout The Gambia were reduced as follows: Petrol - D40 per liter from 49.36 per liter (a reduction of D9.36); Diesel - D43 per liter from D50.04 per liter (a reduction of D7.04) and Kerosene - D30 per liter from D41.35 per liter (a reduction of D11.35).

The measure was taken to help ameliorate the cost of fuel on transport operators in light of the presidential proclamation to limit the passenger capacity of commercial vehicles. Since February 2020, the government has made a cumulative reduction of D12.62 (25%), D11.94 (23%), and D19.23 (44%) on the price of petrol, diesel, and kerosene, respectively.

² World Bank



Despite the cumulative reduction of fuel prices during the outbreak, it is still difficult to quantify whether the reduction in fuel price makes up for the halving of the maximum number of passengers that can now board a commercial vehicle.

George Lwanda, Strategist and Team Leader of the UN-RCO in The Gambia, conducted modelling research on the effect of COVID-19 on public transport prices in The Gambia.³ The research illustrates that the measures prescribed by the state have led to price rises in public transport. The modelling results show that both public transport operators and commuters are negatively affected. The situation is a difficult one and the results indicate that even with a 100 percent increase in public transport fares and a zero compliance by the public to staying home, operators would still experience an estimated D802 decrease in daily earnings. This is a significant decrease and increases the vulnerability of individuals working in the public transport sector.

Strikes by drivers operating at the Brikama car park and those plying the Westfield-Brikama highway is a sign that the drop-in fuel prices might not be sufficient to make up for the loss in passenger numbers per trip.

The Gambia Transport Service Company (GTSC) in partnership with the Government recently rolled out new buses in addition to its normal fleet to address the daily nightmare faced by commuters as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak and measures taken to mitigate the spread. The buses were deployed at busy and urban areas especially during peak hours with a move to address the daily plight of commuters in both the formal and informal sectors. The new buses also cater for persons with disabilities which is a welcomed development in the spirit of leaving no one behind.

The transport of goods should also be affected. Cross border transport of goods, driven by re-export trade, should fall with border closures. There is anecdotal evidence that transportation of goods within the country has also fallen as a result of the lockdown. The scale as with most macroeconomic effects cannot be quantified right now. As stated above, the lack of data on this sector and projections by those in the industry makes it hard to quantify the effects on those in this sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several policy responses and recommendations can be enacted to mitigate the negative effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the public transport sector and for the recovery beyond:

³ <https://public.tableau.com/profile/george.lwanda#!/vizhome/Theeffectofcovid-19onpublictransportpricesinTheGambia/Story3?publish=yes>

- ✓ Government should rationalize institutional responsibilities for the regulation of urban transport services and strengthen institutions to improve the efficiency and accountability of the urban transport system;
- ✓ Further reductions in fuel prices to reflect falling global prices will aid transport operators and commuters alike by reducing the revenue gap and increasing the availability of vehicles for essential workers;
- ✓ Government should invest in more sustainable public transport options and promote good health and well-being by creating cycle lanes and walking routes as part of the transport system;
- ✓ Training should be provided to public transport operators to ensure that vehicles, garages and depots are properly and effectively cleaned, disinfected and maintained in the interest of safety;
- ✓ Development partners such as the World Food Programme (WFP) with the requisite experience can support the Government in capacity building for road transport users in areas such as logistics/transport supply chains, periodic maintenance, truck-loading, road safety measures, etc.;
- ✓ Relief packages should be provided by the Government to those most adversely affected by the measures undertaken to limit public transport operations;
- ✓ Promotion of green mobility initiatives for environmental sustainability such as increased telecommuting and e-commerce;
- ✓ Using ICT to improve management of the sector and improve data collection;
- ✓ Expedite the modernization and electrification of the bus fleet to make them cheaper and more environmentally friendly.