Rethinking Tourism and Public Health Policies in International Travel Megahubs for the Post-COVID-19 Era

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Summary

Background: This article rethinks current public health policies to transdisciplinarily reorient the countries' tourism policies as a preparation to future pandemics. This adds to the public health discourse that West Asian international travel megahubs could be susceptible spaces to high risks of transnational viral transmissions.

Method: This is a letter to the editor.

Results: The United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Qatar are the world's leading international travel megahubs, with Saudi Arabia catching up following its efforts in establishing a new national airline to increase international passenger traffic. Collectively, they are connected to more than half of the world's leading international travel destinations. While it can be noted that they were able to successfully mitigate the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) spread within their territories, these West Asian countries' shift from an oil-dependent to a tourism-oriented economy make their airports susceptible spaces to high risks of transnational viral transmissions. As such, this article rethinks current public health policies to transdisciplinarily reorient the countries' tourism policies as a preparation to future pandemics.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic preparedness, Public health, Tourism

As of this writing (November 18, 2021), the researchers see the light at the end of the tunnel for West Asian countries facing the 2019 coronavirus diseases (COVID-19) as they have reached herd immunity following the successful vaccination of most of its population a little over year the pandemic was declared. The United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, known for establishing world-class airlines, became the world's leading international travel megahubs for collectively and strategically connecting its passengers to all continents [1,2].

Due to constantly changing oil prices in the global market, increasing interest in renewable energy sources, and the criticality towards the consumption and production of fossil fuels in international environmental agenda, the region's leaders recognized the need to shift from an oil-dependent to a more sustainable tourism-oriented economy that will continue to utilize their powerhouses of national carriers. In turn, this will also make their economies diversified as new capital can be generated from various sources for the establishment of new industries.

When the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged the world, the countries' rulers were quick to implement strict public health protocols to ensure that the travel industry keeps afloat while also mitigating

further transnational viral transmission. Public health experts recognize that there will be more pandemics in the coming decades [3]. The researchers recognize that in this globally-connected world, it is inevitable for international tourism to be halted in the future most especially that the World Health Organization already provided guidelines for adjusting public health and social measures in the context of the travel industry [4]. This journal earlier published discourses pertaining to the significance of developing mitigation strategies to fight future pandemics [5] within the context of medical care globalization [6]. Moreover, a commentary piece also expressed a sense of urgency in establishing international leadership for the control of future disease outbreaks [7]. Therefore, there is a need to rethink current public health policies transdisciplinarily reorient the countries' tourism policies as a preparation to future pandemics.

It is established in tourism academic literature [8] that the people's negative reactions to emerging communicable diseases were the same as it is unfolding due to misinformation in communicating the accurate information regarding viruses, may it be the outbreaks on severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), the Middle Eastern respiratory syndrome (MERS), Ebola, and COVID-19. Moreover, Rahman et al. [9] revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic affected international travelers' "travel risk and management perceptions and its impact on risk management, service delivery, transportation patterns, distribution channels, avoidance of over-populated destinations, hygiene and safety." This creates a negative impact to tourism-oriented countries as travelers limit their travel plans to locations where they feel safe from their perceived public health risks.

To practically tackle the challenges of misinformation that affect the mitigation of imminent viruses, there is a strong need for the tourism and hospitality industries to increase the capability of their workforce to integrate fundamental public health management and communication strategies in collaboration with their respective local health authorities. It is also imperative for West Asian national carriers to take part in the global ethical and social responsibility of ensuring that logistical measures in emergency pandemic management are in place for them to be able to transport necessary supplies and aid that are essential for quick public health response to destinations with relatively fewer medical capacities.

Conflict of interest

None.

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