

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SIERRA LEONE'S AVIATION INDUSTRY

The Coronavirus pandemic visited unannounced and swept the world off-guard, leaving the aviation industry extremely vulnerable. Being the worst hit industry, never has global aviation experienced a downturn so steep as COVID-19. With its seismic shock and unprecedented catastrophe, it is estimated that a whopping \$300 billion in revenue could be lost and 25 million jobs are at risk due to plummeting demands as the demand for air travel goes down to 80% on last year.



Departing Lounge

As COVID-19 heightened, especially in February 2020, a number of factors exacerbated the situation: flight cancellations, aircraft grounding, travel bans and border closures which led to traffic decline were the myriad of challenges that contributed to this great revenue loss. However, these measures instituted by different governments from around the world were mainly done to prevent the spread of the virus.

In Sierra Leone, the government, through the Civil Aviation Authority, suspended all scheduled commercial flights to and from the country for 90 days. It came into effect on the **22nd March 2020**. The suspension of winter operation permit for schedule airlines is one of the key preventive measures in the fight against. Today, the airport, which was so full of economic activities, has become a ghost town.

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Before the advent of Coronavirus, that is, before the suspension of all commercial schedule flights to and from Sierra Leone, the aviation industry was sailing on a calm ocean, and that was

mirrored on the number of activities that the industry had undertaken on resounding theme: **“Building a safe, secure and economically viable Civil Aviation System in Sierra Leone”**. The aviation industry had begun experiencing an upward acceleration, transforming different sectors within the industry that initially seemed an uphill task to achieve.

Capacity building has been the epifocal of the industry’s quest to build an economically viable aviation system; this has resulted to improved workforce coupled with a competitive service delivery. During the smooth sail, the State recorded 71% of the 2019 Universal Security Audit Program (USAP) conducted by ICAO and was in the pursuit to certify the Freetown International Airport (FNA) which is one of the goals of the New Direction government. The certification would have provided a window of opportunities for Sierra Leone, as it would have attracted more global carriers and make Sierra Leone a hub for aviation.

THE WRECKAGE

The impact caused by the pandemic is wide-ranging, as such never experienced before. In Sierra Leone, aviation contributes greatly to revenue generation which is used to steer the affairs of the State, and it also contributes to the economic livelihood of those working in different sectors in the industry. The flight ban instituted by the Government of Sierra Leone led to less aeronautical charges which badly affected airport revenue generation. As a result of the huge revenue loss, many unskilled workers whose daily-living depend on the day-to-day running of the airport were redundant and others were also given pay-cut.



Boats docked at sea due to COVID-19

Another sector that has been hugely affected is the travel agencies. Most of those agencies operate through daily commission realized by the sale of air tickets. The advent of COVID-19 put a halt to their activities, thereby relieving Sierra Leoneans of their duty.

The economic impact caused by COVID-19 can be categorised in two: direct and indirect impact. For direct impact, an estimated loss of twenty billion Leones in the form of Foreign Travel Tax to the Government of Sierra Leone; an operational loss of about nine billion eight hundred million Leones to the Sierra Leone Airports Authority and a fifty million dollar loss to the respective airlines during the period of March to June 2020. For indirect impact, a total number of seven hundred jobs were lost from travel agencies, sea transportation and other service providing agencies at the Freetown International Airport (FNA).

The Government of Sierra Leone bears the brunt of the economic challenge because part of its daily activities is dictated by revenue. However, the move to suspend flights was a bold move by the Government of Sierra Leone to ensure public safety by preventing the spread of Coronavirus in Sierra Leone.



Airside of Freetown International Airport

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