

Interview with Dr. Torben Holvad Analysis and Monitoring Unit Team Leader European Union Agency for Railways

Dr. Aránzazu Berbey Álvarez 

Universidad Tecnológica de Panamá (UTP). Vicerrectoría Académica.

aranzazu.berbey@utp.ac.pa

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Torben Holvad is Analysis Team Leader at the European Union Agency for Railways (France). He obtained Economics degrees from Copenhagen University (MSc) and the European University Institute in Florence (PhD). He has more than 30 years of experience in applied economic analysis.

His skills and expertise correspond to backgrounds like: Quantitative methods, Data Envelopment Analysis, Impact Assessment, Cost Benefit Analysis, Transport Economics, Multicriteria analysis, Economics of regulation, Data analysis, Health economics.

According your knowledge and railway expertise, what effects is having the COVID-19 in the railway transportation for the passengers? Do you consider that until an effective vaccine for Covid-19 exists, there will be a new normality in the habits of railway transport users?

Currently, COVID-19 has already had substantial effects for societies across the World, especially in those cases where comprehensive lockdown measures have been introduced. The rail sector is no exception. In many countries rail services have been operating at much reduced levels in response to reduced overall demand covering both passenger and freight. The reduced overall demand is either linked to legislative steps imposing restrictions on activities, including travel, or linked to behavioral responses due to the risk of infection or a combination. Other current (& recent) effects on rail passenger travel include: 1) Focus on essential trips (e.g. commuting for persons with jobs in critical sectors) with trips with other purposes significantly reduced (e.g. leisure trips); 2) Modal shift away from public transport towards individual transport (notably car but also cycling and walking). Further effects could concern changes regarding the time and day of rail travel in order to reduce the risk of infection during travel (e.g. shifting trips from



Figure 1. Dr. Torben Holvad.

the peak to the off-peak period). As societies are gradually opening up (e.g. in Europe, Asia and US) overall passenger transport demand would start returning towards pre-COVID levels although likely to be less pronounced for public transport than individual transport due to differences in risks of infection.

Moreover, it is likely that local and regional passenger travel may recover faster than long distance and in particular international travel influenced by border closures and travel restrictions. As such these patterns are likely also to be the case for rail passenger travel, i.e. stronger recovery for local and regional trips and more limited recovery for long distance / international trips. Obviously, there would be significant country differences regarding how rail passenger travel is evolving following the initial COVID-outbreak depending on various factors. Moreover, the recovery will be dependent on whether a second wave of new COVID-cases will happen or not.

As to the question regarding whether there will be a new normality in the habits of railway transport users until an effective vaccine for Covid-19 exists my view is that this is very likely. I would add here that in case an effective treatment is developed before any vaccine it is possible that habits of railway transport users could return sooner to something akin to a pre-COVID context. Overall, the evolution in the habits of railway transport users will be influenced by essentially two group of factors: supply and demand related factors. Firstly, supply related factors would cover elements such as measures taken by railway operators as well as authorities to facilitate passenger rail travel, e.g. making masks and hand gel available to passengers, arrangements at stations and in passenger coaches to promote social distancing as well as specific rules and support measures

from public authorities. Secondly, demand related factors would cover aspects linked to persons' activities notably work, education, shopping, visiting family and friends etc. and the extent to which these activities can be undertaken without travel. For example, for those persons where employers promote teleworking there would possibly be a reduced need for commuting to work. A similar argument could be made in the case of education where online provision of courses would permit students not to travel. For shopping and other leisure activities it is likely that at least up to a certain degree some of these could take place online without the need for travel.

Recently, agencies such as The International Union of Railways (UIC), Association of American Railroads (AAR), Asociación Latinoamericana de Ferrocarriles (ALAF), have published a management of Coronavirus (Covid-19) guidance for railway stakeholders, employees, and users. Do you think this guide is sufficient to control the epidemic and the effects on passengers and employee safety? Could you add any more warning measures for individuals, to prevent the spread of covid-19?

From my perspective preparing and publishing guides for railway stakeholders, employees and users is a necessary step in order to, as far as possible, control the epidemic and minimize the risk of spread. However, I am not sure that guides in this case would be sufficient. In fact, the key issue here would be how railway stakeholders, employees and users respond to the guides, i.e. is the guidance followed accordingly. For example, for railway stakeholders is the advice regarding cleaning of stations and passenger coaches followed and for users is the social distancing recommendations adhered to

. This raises the issue of whether regulatory measures (e.g. enforcement of social distancing) may be needed as well in order to contribute to prevent the spread of covid-19. Furthermore, it may be useful also to promote exchange of best-practice among railway stakeholders and authorities in order to move towards consistent use of measures that appear to be successful as regards to preventing the spread of covid-19. The European Union Agency for Railways has recently created a COVID-19 information platform to support the European rail sector in its efforts to restore transport services and connectivity, while optimally safeguarding the health and safety of passengers, transport workers and staff, and to re-establish trust in rail services.

The institutional web page of the European Union Agency for Railways (ERA), it hosts several databases, studies, ERA recommendations, technical opinions, and many railways research documents. In addition, ERA sets mandatory requirements for European railways and

manufacturers in the form of Technical Specifications for Interoperability. Have ERA cooperation plans with countries out of the EU? Do you consider, that could exist a joint interest to develop activities, programs, instruments of scientific and technological cooperation between ERA and Latin American organizations and, in our case, with Panamanian universities, like ours?

Apart from European cooperation ERA have a number of other areas of cooperation beyond this context. In particular, the following are of relevance:

- Cooperation with OSJD
- Cooperation with OTIF
- Cooperation with UNECE
- Cooperation with peer regulatory agencies
- Cooperation with EUMedRail
- Cooperation with Western Balkans and Turkey

Further information about the content of these areas of cooperation are available from the Agency's website. Of particular relevance to the first question raised would be the Agency's cooperation with peer regulatory agencies. Currently, the Agency cooperates with regulatory agencies in four non-EU countries (United States of America, Australia, Brazil and Japan) as well as with the Gulf Cooperation Council. Activities are focused on exchanging information, best practice and scientific/technical knowledge.

For the second question raised regarding scientific and technological cooperation between the Agency and Latin-American organizations incl. universities it is of relevance to mention that recently the ERA Academy was established focused on supporting the implementation of the EU railways regulatory framework through dissemination and training. Although the focus of the ERA Academy is on dissemination and training within a European context it could be relevant to explore further whether cooperation with additional Latin-American organizations could be established beyond the already existing cooperation with Brazil.

Could you share some experiences that have been especially memorable in your scientific or professional career?

My scientific and professional career has to date taken place in four European countries (Denmark, Italy, United Kingdom and France) and therefore with a clear European and international dimension. This has been a very enriching experience permitting the cooperation on common issues and sharing practices in an international contexts. In particular, my current position with the European Union Agency for Railways involves cooperating with railway stakeholders from across Europe and beyond in order to strengthen the position of railways and to promote the Single European Railway Area in order to achieve a more sustainable transport system. This connects well with my doctoral studies back in the early 90s at the European University Institute in

Florence (Italy) again a place where persons from across Europe and further afield met, discussed and cooperated on research projects within social sciences. Apart from the international dimension of my career another constant has been working with persons from different disciplines. My background is in economics but specializing in transport related analyses benefit from interdisciplinary approaches in order to ensure consideration to different perspectives incl. transport planning and politics, sociology, psychology, engineering, statistics etc.

Throughout my career I have had the opportunity to work on topics requiring theoretical insight and applied to empirical / policy contexts. Indeed, this corresponds well to the two interrelated phases of my professional career starting in an academic / research environment and then since 2006 working in a European Commission Agency with more focus on policy related analyses while retaining academic links.