

COVID-19 and the new paradigm in the transport sector in Benin



The Government of Benin is committed to fundamental reforms in its Action Program (PAG) called "Benin Revealed", which was launched in 2016. One of the priority areas of the PAG is the transport and infrastructure sector, which accounts for nearly 25% of the overall investment for the implementation of major projects including the construction of the new international airport at Glo-Djigbé, the modernization and expansion of the Port of Cotonou, and the construction of 1,362 kilometers of new roads across the country. A profound paradigm shift has been observed in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic.

The transport sector in Benin has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with both direct and indirect effects stemming from the unprecedented challenges posed by the global health crisis, and the implementation of stringent response measures. As a result, there have been noticeable changes in the patterns of transport utilization and adjustments in planned investments within the sector. These effects, which are both conjectural and structural in nature, have led to a reassessment of the sector's dynamics and future development.

This blog explores the remarkable changes witnessed in Benin's transport sector following the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the emergence of new transformative actions and behaviors that have reshaped the country's transportation landscape.

The reorientation of transport investments following COVID-19

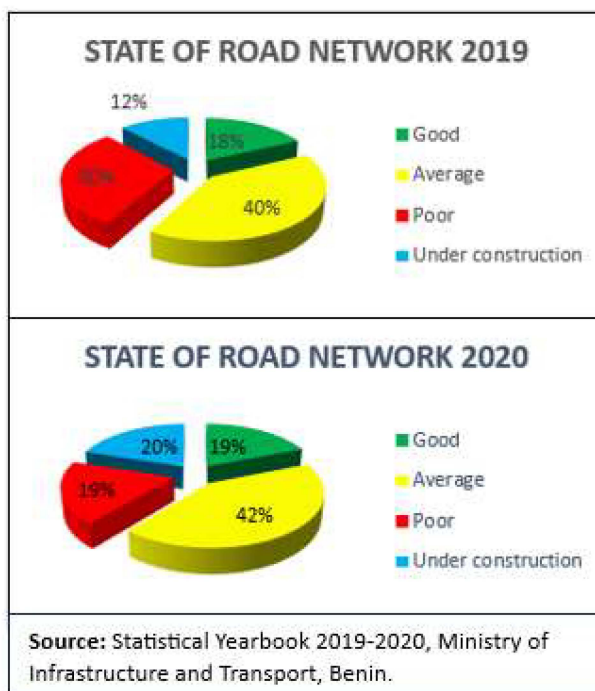
The crisis has prompted a shift towards resilient response measures and strategic redirection of resources within Benin's transport sector.

For aviation transport, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a sharp decline in airport activity and the slowdown of major projects in the sub-sector. According to data, the passenger traffic at Cotonou's Cardinal Bernardin GANTIN International Airport decreased from 256,006

in 2019 to 109,050 in 2020¹. Consequently, the government made the decision to postpone the construction of the new Glo-Djigbé International Airport and instead prioritize the modernization of the existing Cotonou International Airport. This choice was made due to the severe impact and challenges posed by travel restrictions, lockdown measures, and reduced passenger demand that made it difficult to justify significant investments in the new airport project. The renovation of Cotonou Airport involved the redesign and reorganization of surrounding areas to provide a safer environment consistent with anti-COVID-19 security regulations. Intelligent thermometric disinfection channels were installed, more appealing interiors were created to improve ventilation and enhance customer experience, and a larger parking space was set up to accommodate the needs of passengers.

In the maritime sub-sector, there was a decline in cargo traffic at the port (the volume of goods decreased from 10,563,136 tons to 10,277,050 tons between 2019 and 2020) due to disruptions in global supply chains, reduced economic activity, and restrictions on international trade. However, the management of the Port Autonome de Cotonou (PAC) has implemented a range of measures including enhanced health and safety protocols, and adjustments to operational procedures to ensure the continuity of port activities. Furthermore, during the pandemic period, the PAC has undergone significant improvements, including modernizing its infrastructure and developing the surrounding road network. These enhancements aimed to facilitate the smooth and optimal operations of the port, and improve the overall performance and quality of services, all while prioritizing the well-being and safety of staff and users.

Despite the ongoing pandemic, the government has demonstrated its commitment to enhancing connectivity and accessibility by actively continuing its investments in the improvement of the country's **road network**. Notably, the number of kilometers of paved roads increased from 3,130,422 km in 2019 to 3,285,927 km in 2020. This significant expansion has contributed to an improvement in the road quality index, which rose from 58% in 2019 to 61% in 2020. These developments underscore the importance of both upgrading and expanding public transportation systems across the country, but particularly in the poorest and most isolated areas. Roads facilitate smoother movement of people and goods, access to markets, reduce travel times and transportation costs as well as connect previously underserved areas. Research by Wantchekon and Stanig (2015) has revealed that



¹ Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport - Benin, 2022. STATISTICAL YEARBOOK 2019 - 2020.

areas with good soil are likely to be isolated districts with worse roads, and this is a main factor of poverty in Africa. Therefore, improved accessibility not only supports economic growth but also enhances social inclusivity, ensuring that citizens from all regions can benefit from reliable and efficient transportation services.

Finally, to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, **the government provides support and financial relief** to businesses and workers in the transportation sector such as travel agencies and transport companies impacted by the mobility restrictions and economic challenges. These companies have been reimbursed up to 70% of their salaries, including related social security and tax charges, for a three-month period spanning from mid-March to mid-June 2020. They also benefited from full coverage of their water and electricity bills during the same period. Travel agencies received rent reimbursements for this three-month period. Transportation companies were exempted from motor vehicle taxes for the year 2020, while those who had already paid the tax received a tax credit for 2021.² In addition, part of the COVID-19 spending has been allocated to direct transfers targeting vulnerable households. The government conducted a census of individuals working in small trades such as taxi-bus drivers, and cross-border cab drivers, who were impacted by the COVID-19 response measures in Benin. Registered individuals received a monthly subsidy for three months, with the amount varying based on their business status. The amount was 45,000 FCFA for formal businesses, 30,000 FCFA for identified informal businesses, and 20,000 FCFA for unidentified informal businesses.

The conjunctural effects of COVID-19 on transport in Benin

Following the outbreak of the virus, Beninese authorities swiftly implemented rigorous health and safety protocols such as mandatory mask-wearing, and physical distancing that have been enforced across various modes of transportation, including public buses, taxis, airports, and even personal transport. Additional measures introduced include (i) the



establishment of the cordon sanitaire around 15 cities with high exposure to the contamination; (ii) the limitation of the movement across land borders; (ii) visa restrictions; (iii) the systematic and mandatory quarantine for all individuals arriving by plane; (iv) the suspension of large-scale public gatherings; (v) the ban on public transportation. These measures were aimed at mitigating the risk of transmission and prioritizing the safety of passengers and workers within the transportation sector.

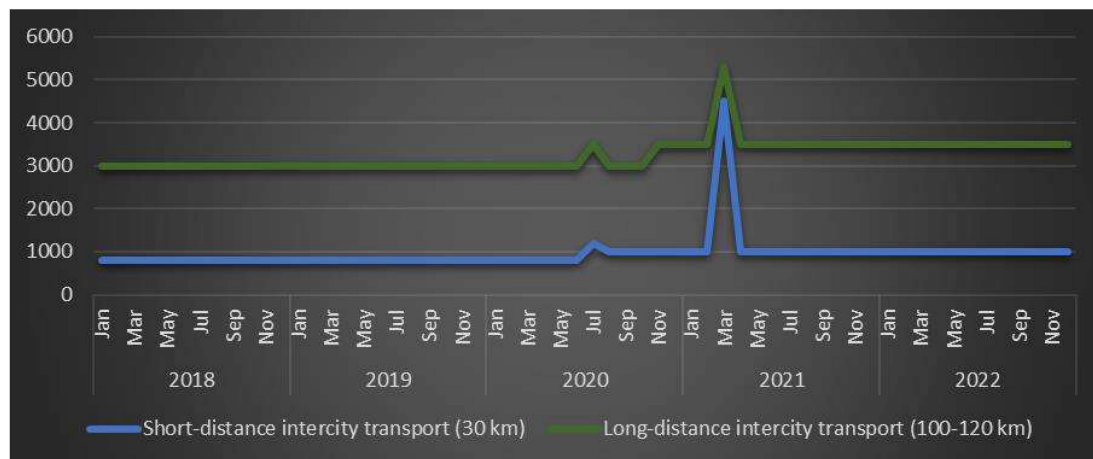
² <https://www.francophonie.org/benin-covid19>

Structural transformations in the Benin transport sector following the Covid-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and lasting impact on the economy and lifestyles in Benin. Several anti-covid measures have led to structural changes within the transportation sector in Benin, including the increase of transportation prices, the emergence of best practices from the pandemic to be preserved, and changes in transportation habits.

1) Increase in transportation prices

During the crisis, public transport drivers faced a temporary halt in operations, but services gradually resumed with limitations on passenger capacity to enforce social distancing measures. As a result, transportation prices increased, nearly doubling for cabs, minibus drivers, and bus companies, as one person now occupied the space that previously accommodated two. The resumption of circulation for public transport vehicles became operational again in June 2020. From this period onwards, as shown in the graph, intercity transportation fares (both short and long distances) rose significantly. However, prices later began to fall, but with several upward fluctuations between August 2020 and March 2021. Then, from April 2021 onwards, prices decreased and eventually stabilized at slightly higher levels than before the pandemic.



Source: INSTAD/ Benin³

It is important to note that in addition to COVID-19, there were other economic shocks contributing to the maintenance of prices at these high levels. On the graph, the sharp price shock in March 2021 cannot be attributed specifically to COVID-19 but rather to fuel supply difficulties in Nigeria during the April 2021 election period in Benin⁴. Furthermore, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine that began in February 2022 had global economic repercussions, leading to inflationary pressures and increased global prices of commodities and hydrocarbons⁵. There is a direct correlation between road transport tariffs and fuel prices. Ultimately, though the persistent rise in transportation prices cannot be solely attributed to COVID-19, this

³ Data derived from price collection for calculation of the Harmonized Index of Consumer Prices (HICP).

⁴ Harmonized Index of Consumer Prices, Benin - April 2021

⁵ <https://fraternitebj.info/societe/article/nouvelles-tarifications-des-produits-petroliers-une-legere-hausse-du-prix>

pandemic was the precursor phenomenon that accustomed people to paying high prices for their transportation needs.

2) Best practices emerging from the pandemic to be preserved

The limitation of the number of passengers in public transportation

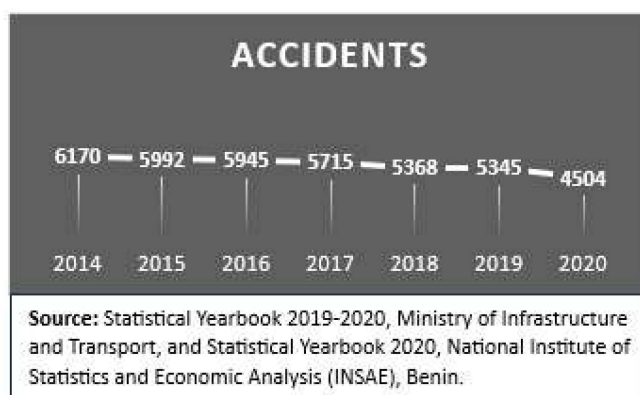
Overcrowding in public transport, and to a lesser extent, in motorcycle taxis (known as Zémidjans in Benin) has always been a prevalent problem in Benin, with negative consequences in various aspects including health risks, passenger comfort, quality of service, safety, and impact on road infrastructure. The limitation of the number of passengers implemented during the pandemic, along with the requirement of wearing masks, not only protects individuals from the risks of infectious diseases such as COVID-19 and pollution, but also creates more comfortable travel conditions, reduces travel times, minimizes the extent of damages or losses in case of accidents, and prevents premature wear and deterioration of roads and infrastructure quality.

Admittedly, this practice can have economic consequences for transport operators, as experienced during this pandemic, but weighing up the aforementioned advantages, it can be considered a good practice worth preserving.



Increased control of traffic and loading standards

Non-compliance with loading standards, whether for people or goods, is a prevalent issue among drivers of vehicles with four or more wheels in Benin. Unbearable overloads are a common occurrence, posing risks to the physical integrity/safety of both passengers and the transported goods. When transporting oversized loads, the weight per axle is unbalanced, which causes serious accidents, damages the road infrastructures, and endangers the lives of those



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involved. During the pandemic, stricter controls were implemented, with extra emphasis on overloading. Encouragingly, data reveals a decline in the number of road accidents in Benin between 2019 (5,345 accidents) and 2020 (4,504 accidents). This underscores the importance of adhering to loading standards and the need for ongoing efforts to strengthen control and enforce measures that contribute to a safer transport environment, more sustainable infrastructure, and reduce economic losses.



3) Changes in transportation habits

Containment measures, travel restrictions, and health concerns have contributed to significant changes in transport habits in Benin. Among these changes, the substitution effect has played a key role, driving individuals to explore new transportation alternatives. Here are some emerging trends from the crisis that could have lasting implications for the future of transport in Benin:

- Limitations on mobility, restrictions on non-essential travel (including international travel), and the increasing openness to remote working could become part of people's habits and have an impact on transport demand.
- Increased adoption of digital technologies, such as online booking services, electronic payments, and carpooling applications (Gozem, Uber, and Benin-taxi) help individuals better organize their travels in a more convenient and secure way.
- The crisis has highlighted the importance of individual modes of transportation. The high cost of public transport, coupled with time wasted on public transport such as taxi-buses (Tokpa-tokpa), along with the fear of contamination, would have led some users to prefer individual modes of transportation, that offer greater convenience and reduce physical contact.
- Closed borders have led to the popularity of river transport as a bypass alternative, particularly for the informal transport of people and goods to neighboring countries such as Niger, Nigeria, and Togo.⁶

⁶ <https://levenementniger.com/covid-19-frontiere-niger-benin-fermee-le-fleuve-comme-voie-de-contournement/>
<https://vert-togo.tg/contre-la-propagation-du-covid-19-le-long/>

- There are persistent travel difficulties linked to the health pass controls still required at certain borders, even after the lifting of restrictions, as well as high toll fees at certain checkpoints, and high airfares, likely to favor other airports in the sub-region (e.g. Togo).

In conclusion, the coronavirus pandemic has acted as a catalyst for a profound paradigm shift in Benin's transport and infrastructure sector. The government has prioritized resilient response measures and strategic adaptations, redirecting resources to address immediate needs and long-term sustainability. As Benin progresses, the transformative changes witnessed during this time reflect a recognition of the evolving dynamics and needs within the transport sector, which will continue to shape the future of the transport and infrastructure sector.

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The analyses in this blog are part of the study on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on African economies, social cohesion, and governance: Evidence from Benin, Burkina Faso, and South Africa. This work is carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada.

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