



HIGH-LEVEL CONFERENCE ON COVID-19 (HLCC 2021)

SAFETY STREAM

Montréal, Canada, 12 to 22 October 2021

Agenda Item 3: Standardization

3.3: Ground Handling

GROUND HANDLING AS A KEY COMPONENT OF THE LONG-TERM RESILIENCE AND SUSTAINABILITY OF THE AVIATION SYSTEM

(Presented by Airports Council International (ACI) and Air Services Association (ASA))

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper presents and highlights the importance of Ground Handling Service Providers (GHSPs) as part of the longer-term economic and social sustainability of the aviation ecosystem as well as the importance of ensuring that the overall levels of safety are sustained through adequate safety management processes applied by GHSPs and States. It proposes the adoption of a balanced regulatory framework addressing the safety risks related to ground handling activities.

Action: The Conference is invited to agree to action 3.3/X – Ground Handling Safety and Sustainability

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Ground handling forms a significant and critical part of the aviation system, supporting safe and efficient operations. It is important that the safety, reliability, and consistency of flight operations continue during ground operations. These operations, provided either by air operators or by independent third parties, are carried out on apron areas, which are often the most congested and busiest areas of an airport, with aircraft turnarounds being carried out under significant space and time constraints.

1.2 The evolving operational requirements as well as the social and economic challenges arising out of the COVID-19 pandemic have compounded the already significant pressures applied to this sector of the aviation industry. The high number of personnel that have been put on temporary or long-term furlough programmes, or simply made redundant, across the industry has generated an overall reduction in years of experience available within many organizations and in the capacity to offer services according to defined performance levels. These factors in turn may introduce potential negative impacts on the safety performance of ground handling activities as well as the capacity to deliver agreed services to aircraft operators at airports.

1.3 Ground Handling Service Providers (GHSPs) play an integral role in ensuring the safety and regularity of flight operations. When unable to perform their duties and deliver agreed services, the overall impact to the air transport system and the end user – the flying public – can be significant. At a time when the industry is striving to recover from the pandemic, sustain higher levels of flight operations, and regain the traveling public’s confidence, any delays, cancelations, or low levels of service should be avoided.

1.4 Prior to the pandemic, several industry stakeholders and States were advocating for the mandatory implementation of Safety Management Systems (SMS) for GHSPs. Discussions have been underway on this specific topic for a number of years and progress has been made, notably through the publication of the ICAO Manual on Ground Handling (Doc 10121) towards the end of 2019.

1.5 The work of the ICAO Ground handling Task Force, which brings together States and Industry around the key issues in the domain of Ground Handling, has been pursued throughout the pandemic. Industry applauds and strongly supports the ongoing work of this task force, particularly in regards to the proposed amendments to multiple Annexes¹ and the PANS-Aerodromes (Doc 9981).

1.6 This paper highlights the importance of GHSPs in the longer-term economic and social sustainability of the aviation ecosystem as well as in ensuring that the overall levels of safety are sustained through adequate safety management processes applied by GHSPs and States.

2. DISCUSSION

2.1 Ground Handling Services Providers as Part of the Aviation Ecosystem

2.1.1 Ground handling services, both for commercial air transport and general aviation, whether performed by the air operator, airport operator or a GHSP, aims to maintain the safety, regularity, and efficiency of flight and aerodrome operations. The numerous GHSPs established on airports globally, provide essential services to the air transport industry. These organizations should be considered as being fully integrated into the aviation ecosystem. If they are unable to deliver the services required of them, air transport activities will in most cases have to be suspended.

2.1.2 On many airports, where GHSPs provide under-wing or over-wing services, alternatives to the provision of these services are not generally available should the GHSP be unable to deliver. During the pandemic, the low levels of air traffic necessitated significant cost reduction measures across the industry. Tens of thousands of aviation employees were made redundant as organizations struggled to meet the economic downturn. Governments provided economic relief packages to various segments of the aviation industry, yet very little of this relief trickled down to GHSPs.

2.1.3 Minimum ground handling services, being critical to ensuring the continuity of the air transport system, need to be guaranteed at airports on a global level. The provision of these services will not only ensure that critical flight operations (e.g., medivac, humanitarian, state, etc.) can be sustained, but equally that commercial activities are maintained. As such, ensuring the ongoing economic and social sustainability of GHSPs is integral to ensuring the longer-term sustainability of the air transport system.

¹ The current package of amendments proposed by the GHTF covers Annexes 6 Parts I, II and III *Aircraft Operations*, Annex 8 – *Airworthiness*, Annex 9 – *Facilitation*, Annex 14, Volume I – *Aerodromes* and Annex 19 – *Safety Management*.

2.2 The Social and Economic Sustainability of Ground Handling

2.2.1 As the industry emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, much focus has been put on system-wide long-term sustainability and resilience. This is of great importance to ensuring the future of the air transport system as whole, yet little focus has been put on the ground handling domain that has been particularly negatively affected by the global reduction in air and passenger traffic.

2.2.2 As providers of essential flight safety and operational services, it is vital that the long-term sustainability and resilience of GHSPs be equally considered in order to maintain the capability for air operators to provide continued access to reliable, safe, and affordable air travel, as well as to support economic recovery through a robust air transport system. The economic pressures that traditionally affect this segment of the industry have negatively affected the regularity, operational performance, and in some cases, the safety of flight operations. The arduous working conditions in which staff have to operate accompanied by the often high rates of staff turnover do not create particularly attractive employment opportunities. However, ground handling remains a labour-intensive activity that still very much relies on large volumes of manual labour, even though automation is starting to make its appearance in some operations.

2.2.3 Creating an economic and socially sustainable environment for organizations providing ground handling services will be critical to ensuring the longer-term recovery and resilience of the aviation industry. This will equally benefit the safety of ground handling operations by creating a more attractive and favourable operating environment.

2.3 Safety Management in Ground Handling

2.3.1 Throughout the pandemic, and into the recovery phase, safety has remained a core component of the aviation industry. For several years, air operators, aerodrome operators, and GHSPs together with a number of States, have been concerned with the level and extent of damage to aircraft during ground handling and the rate of safety occurrences affecting aircraft, passengers, and airport workers. This concern has to a certain extent been amplified during the pandemic.

2.3.2 While accidents-in-flight continue to become less frequent, accidents-on-the-ground remain problematic with the cost of ground incidents at airports increasing annually, both in terms of injuries to those providing services and to the ongoing safety of flight operations. The increasing complexity of aircraft design and technology is also a contributing factor to more costly grounding incidents.

2.3.3 In many cases, a single GHSP provides services to multiple air operators and is required to use different operating procedures to service the same type of aircraft. The lack of harmonization of ground handling procedures among air operators and across the industry adds another unnecessary layer of complexity for GHSPs resulting in higher training costs for an already unstable workforce and increased risk of incidents and accidents.

2.3.4 There is currently no global mandate, other than certain industry initiatives or voluntary decisions by States, for GHSPs to implement Safety Management Systems. Furthermore, only few States have included a continuous monitoring of risks generated by ground handling activities in their State Safety Programmes. However, all other important sectors of the aviation industry have a requirement to implement Safety Management Systems. This situation imbalances the overall concept of ensuring a high level of safety across the aviation system promoted by industry, States, and regulatory organizations.

3. CONCLUSION

3.1 The air transport system will benefit from the support and services provided by a safe, resilient, and sustainable ground handling community. This can be achieved through the establishment of a regulatory framework aiding the industry to further develop the level of safety, as well as the efficiency and performance of ground handling operations. It will equally be necessary to ensure the ongoing sustainability of the overall air transport industry through a balanced approach to the regulatory framework, introducing mechanisms such as the use of industry codes of practice or other alternative means of compliance to fulfil regulatory requirements in ground handling.

3.2 Considering the above, the Conference is invited to agree to the following recommendation:

Recommendation 3.3/x – Ground Handling Safety and Sustainability

That States:

- a) recognize the importance of Ground Handling Service Providers as key participants of the aviation ecosystem, including the significance of ensuring their longer-term social and economic sustainability, so as to ensure the future safety, efficiency, resilience, and development of the air transport system on a national and global level.

That ICAO:

- b) develop a balanced regulatory framework for ground handling with a focus on the implementation of Safety Management Systems by Ground Handling Service Providers and the continuous safety monitoring of ground handling risks by States through their State Safety Programmes. The framework should be implemented by 2024.

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