

Navigating COVID-19 Challenges in Malaysian Haulage Industry

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ABSTRACT

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The COVID-19 pandemic's global effects significantly disrupted supply chains, with the critical Malaysian haulage industry bearing the consequence of the impact. This study delves deeper, exploring the unique challenges faced by these companies beyond the initial disruptions. By leveraging secondary data from government reports and scholarly articles, the research identifies key issues impacting operational efficiency, economic viability, market dynamics, and workforce availability. The study has two main objectives. First, it comprehensively assesses the distinct challenges posed by COVID-19 on the Malaysian haulage sector. This goes beyond initial disruptions and explores the long-term ramifications. Second, the research evaluates the coping mechanisms adopted by haulage companies during the pandemic, assessing their effectiveness and identifying areas for improvement. This research's significance lies in its contribution to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by the Malaysian haulage industry. By informing policymakers, industry stakeholders, and scholars, the findings can facilitate the development of adaptive strategies to build resilience and ensure continued growth in the face of uncertainty.

1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has affected over 200 countries worldwide, consequently, impacting global trade and the economy [1, 2]. The effects have been especially felt by low-income countries, with weak health systems, which have stopped all but essential activities are required for long term strategies. The transportation industry is facing extreme challenges and struggling with the disruptions during pandemic outbreaks of COVID-19. It involves road, rail, sea, and air transportation [3]. The haulage industry was one of the sectors most impacted by restrictions and facilitation measures. In particular the government responses to the emergency are rapidly changing the day-to-day realities and haulage industry with specific regulations for their movement. The haulage industry is the biggest transportation fleets holding in Malaysia with tight restrictions which include low demand, stringent movement rules concerning less assignment, and the closure of factories and seaports [4].

The interrelations of worldwide supply chains reveal weaknesses that affect the industry's crucial function in global trade networks as emphasized [5, 6]. Another study conducted by study [7] emphasizes the economic consequences, making the industry vulnerable to changes in trade dynamics and economic downturns. The operational obstacles faced during health crises, as explained by study [8], offer valuable insights on the capabilities of the sector to withstand and adjust to unforeseen shocks. In order to maintain operational continuity, it is crucial to priorities addressing staff reduction and human

resource difficulties [9]. In addition, the study conducted by on policy reactions during pandemics influences the strategies adopted by the industry to enhance resilience [10]. Together, these factors contribute to the unique characteristics and importance of the difficulties encountered by the Malaysian haulage industry during the current global health crisis.

Prior to COVID-19, the Malaysian freight (haulage) and logistics market were expected with a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 11% in the forecasted period [11]. At the same time the economy was projected to grow between 5% and 6%, driving the growth of the logistics and transport sector are expected to be 8-12 % in the future [11]. This will enable the logistics sector to handle greater volumes of freight and speed up the time taken to deliver goods across the supply chains with lower the costs of delivery. Unfortunately, the disruption made through an appearance on the outbreaks of COVID-19 which enforced the policy on Movement Control Order (MCO) [12]. During the initial phase of the MCO, haulage operations were abruptly disrupted as port workers were restricted to their homes. No containers were allowed to be transported in and out of the seaports. The impact of COVID-19 outbreaks on the global economy could be more severe than the impacts of the other major outbreaks in recent history e.g. SARS (2002-2003), MERS-CoV (2012), A/H1N1 (2009-2010) or Ebola (2013-2016) [13]. Hence, the widely reported effects on daily operations in the haulage industry depend on the delivery of goods in containers. These businesses have experienced a decrease in demand, which has repercussions for their entire fleet movements. This trend is

approximately 500,000 to 700,000 jobs in the latter [34]. While in China from late January to early April 2020 of one year the impact of lockdown on annual labour supply reduced about 30% [39]. In Thailand, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a substantial decrease in international tourist arrivals. In 2020, the number fell to 6.7 million and further dropped to 427,869 in 2021. Nevertheless, by the latter half of 2022, the figure rebounded significantly, reaching a total of 11 million visitors. This decline in tourism had a severe impact on the approximately 3.9 million individuals employed in the industry. According to data from the Labor Ministry, prior to the pandemic's inception, the tourism sector employed around 7.7 million people [40]. In Malaysia, major challenges in the supply chain for large and listed companies revolve around delays in receiving supplies. On the other hand, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) face challenges related to delays in fulfillment and delivery. A majority of large and listed companies are seeking exemptions from cross-border and service taxes. They are also requesting additional credit facilities from banks. Moreover, there is an emphasis on maintaining open communication with suppliers through dialogue sessions to address issues within the supply chain.

Transportation, logistics cut to underweight and destroyed by COVID-19 and recovery plan of transportation & logistics sectors are varied among different segments. The projected unemployment rate for this year is estimated to reach around 629,000 individuals, showing a significant increase from the 3.3% rate observed in 2019 [25, 41]. Also predicted that between 951,000 and 2.4 million jobs would be lost: 647,000 jobs to 1.6 million jobs from the unskilled category, 303,000 jobs to 780,000 jobs from the skilled category 18.7%. The Asia Pacific region is anticipated to bear the most substantial impact of COVID-19, with an estimated job loss of around 63.4 million. In contrast, Europe is expected to be the second most affected, with a projected decline in employment of 13 million [42].

3. MITIGATION ASPECT IN THE HAULAGE INDUSTRY

The Malaysian government has introduced its initial stimulus package, allocating an additional US\$1 billion to support small and medium enterprises (SMEs). This package, valued at US\$4.8 billion, is designed to mitigate the immediate impact of the outbreak on vulnerable sectors and households. The second package, worth US\$57 billion, is primarily focused on bolstering existing financing facilities and allocating US\$2.4 billion for food security. Assistance is also directed toward the low-income group, including financial aid and payment restructuring for housing and car loans. An additional RM250 billion is allocated for the Prihatin Rakyat program. Furthermore, the government has implemented the movement control order (MCO) along with standard operating procedures (SOP) [43]. The haulage industry should be practicing on proper mitigation in logistics procurement through several mitigations by looking at the available assets, value and costs in maintain for the longer period times. Revised the loan facilities should be obtained in maintaining the asset until the economy recover. Permanent contracts in the memorandum of understanding should be put on hold for the purpose of costs restructuring [44]. This research is intended to study the impacts of COVID-19 of the haulage industry in Malaysia and suggests for the specific measure in future

pandemic outbreaks especially on the grounded vehicles. The haulage industry should be practicing theory the Adoption of business intelligence, technological, individual and supply chain efficiency in order to stay longer in market [45, 46].

Initiatives to prolong the aging assets life cycle through scheduled maintenance needs to be practiced as usual. A proper stocktaking, checklists, and be prepared for future challenges in the market recover [47]. A proper maintenance program especially on the prime movers and trailers are required to be monitored [21, 22]. The government implemented a moratorium strategy with appropriate initiatives and made the domestics economic growth. The mitigation by the government reflects on the haulage industry as a whole which impacted with the following□

(i) Digital transformation and automation

Introducing digital technologies such as route optimization software and automated tracking systems can streamline logistics processes, reduce manual intervention, and enhance overall efficiency. Automation can minimize physical contact points, improve real-time visibility of shipments, and contribute to quicker response times, ultimately aiding in a faster recovery by ensuring smoother and more resilient operations.

(ii) Supply chain diversification

Diversifying the supply chain by identifying alternative suppliers and transportation routes mitigates risks associated with disruptions in the primary supply chain. This strategy enhances resilience by reducing dependence on a single source, thereby minimizing the impact of disruptions. It ensures a more adaptable and flexible haulage network, crucial for sustained recovery during uncertainties.

(iii) Employee training and safety protocols

Providing comprehensive training on health and safety measures ensures that the workforce is well-prepared to adhere to guidelines and minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission. A healthy workforce is critical for maintaining operational continuity. Implementing stringent safety protocols not only protects employees but also fosters confidence among stakeholders, contributing to a safer and more sustainable recovery.

(iv) Collaboration and communication

Establishing effective communication channels and fostering collaboration with key stakeholders, including government agencies and suppliers, facilitates information exchange and collective problem-solving. Improved communication ensures timely responses to challenges, fosters a collaborative environment, and allows for the sharing of resources and information. This collective effort can contribute to a more coordinated and effective recovery.

(v) Green initiatives and sustainable practices

Integrating environmentally friendly practices, such as fuel-efficient technologies and eco-friendly packaging, aligns with global sustainability trends and can lead to long-term cost savings. Embracing sustainability not only enhances the industry's reputation but also attracts environmentally conscious customers. Moreover, it positions the haulage industry as a responsible player, contributing to long-term recovery and resilience.

(vi) Financial planning and risk management

Developing robust financial plans, including effective cash flow management and risk mitigation strategies, ensures financial stability during challenging times. A sound financial foundation allows businesses to weather economic uncertainties, maintain liquidity, and continue essential operations. Effective risk management provides a buffer against unforeseen challenges, contributing to a resilient recovery in the haulage industry.

4. DISCUSSION

This study has formulated several strategies and directions for further discussion. The findings of this study revealed and concluded as following;

- (i) The foreseen scarcity of labor at vital stages in the supply chain is expected to reduce the capacity for distributing and handling containers, cargoes, and stock throughputs. Prolonged waiting times for cargo are anticipated at ports and storage facilities, leading to increased volumes as stocks await their subsequent destinations. This could result in a diminished demand for haulage transport. Future research could explore innovative strategies to address workforce shortages, including automation, skill development initiatives, and adaptive workforce management practices, aimed at enhancing operational efficiency and responsiveness in the face of labor challenges.
- (ii) The restrictions of standard vessel hatch covers are raised at vessel discharge areas to prevent delays in cargo movement, ensuring smooth trade and transit. Storage delays may become inevitable as a result. It's important to note that many cargo and stock throughput policies do not cover losses or damages caused solely by delays. Vessels must also be free of infectious diseases. These factors may contribute to a reduced demand for haulage transport.
- (iii) Incurring extra expenses, such as delays or the need to redirect goods to an alternative destination due to government restrictions, will result in additional charges. While these costs are typically subject to sub-limits, the additional forwarding costs clause, or a similar provision, offers additional financial assistance in case you encounter supplementary expenditures beyond the regular expenses.
- (iv) Vulnerable goods and perishable items, such as pharmaceutical products and food produce, follow a strict and closely monitored schedule. Standard marine insurance coverage does not align with the specific needs of these cargoes. Exclusions related to inherent vice and delays come into effect, especially when ports are congested, and cargo clearance is hindered during the ongoing pandemic outbreak.
- (v) The haulage sector might encounter legal conflicts requiring thorough scrutiny of contractual arrangements, force majeure provisions, and the distribution of responsibilities amid disruptions caused by pandemics. These disagreements highlight the significance of well-defined and inclusive legal structures within the haulage industry to navigate unexpected challenges and establish principles for just and impartial resolutions. Future research could delve into identifying optimal practices in contractual frameworks and mechanisms for resolving

disputes to strengthen the industry's ability to withstand crises effectively.

- (vi) Owners of goods renting vessels for cargo loading or discharge must designate a "safe port," which refers to a port where the vessel can safely perform cargo operations and depart securely. In instances where the initially intended port is closed, the cargo owner or charterer is obligated to propose an alternative port. However, this proves challenging, as there may not be a viable alternative destination for cargo discharge.
- (vii) The goods' owner, who charters vessels for loading or unloading cargo, must specify a 'safe port' – one where the vessel can safely dock, perform cargo operations, and depart without issues. When the initially intended port is inaccessible, the cargo owner or charterer is compelled to propose an alternative port. However, this can be problematic because there may be no viable alternative destination for unloading the cargo.
- (viii) During a national lockdown, non-essential cargo cannot be transported to the ports. This situation may lead to a scenario where a vessel arrives at the port but finds no cargo to be shipped, resulting in costly demurrage charges.
- (ix) The consequences of the pandemic may be addressed in some contracts through “Force Majeure Clauses” in contract law), but these clauses are not standardized and may not always be applicable. The disruptions caused by the pandemic will lead to losses, and the main issue at hand is determining who will bear or share these losses.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In navigating the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in the Malaysian haulage industry, it becomes evident that a multifaceted and adaptive approach is essential for recovery. The industry has faced operational disruptions in supply chains, workforce safety concerns, and operational uncertainties. However, the strategies discussed, including digital transformation, supply chain diversification, employee training, collaboration, sustainability, and financial planning, offer a roadmap towards resilience and sustained recovery, along with the following recommendation:

- (i) Active supply chain techniques enable quick adaptations to changing conditions and resilient responsiveness to disturbances.
- (ii) To improve efficiency and responsiveness, invest in digitization, including advanced tracking systems, automated procedures, and data analytics.
- (iii) Diversify supply chains to reduce risks and improve industry resilience.
- (iv) Maintain strong safety protocols, regular training, and mental health assistance to help employees overcome future issues.
- (v) Increase collaboration with stakeholders, industry peers, and government agencies to share ideas, resources, and resilience activities.
- (vi) Sustainable haulage operations should include eco-friendly technologies, fuel-efficient tactics, and waste reduction for long-term resilience.
- (vii) Make sure the industry is ready for interruptions by creating and updating contingency plans for diverse scenarios.

(viii) Develop stronger government partnerships to enable industry-specific support, timely information exchange, and coordinated crisis response

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