



UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE
CENTRE FOR
ENVIRONMENTAL LAW
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UNIVERSITY
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ISLAND



COVID-19 Island Insights Series

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Azores

Carlos Eduardo Pacheco Amaral

The COVID-19 Island Insights Series is an initiative spearheaded by the Strathclyde Centre for Environmental Law & Governance (SCELG) and the Institute of Island Studies (IIS) at the University of Prince Edward Island in collaboration with Island Innovation. The initiative brings together critical assessments of how specific islands around the world have performed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the extent to which their recovery plans can promote resilience and sustainability in the long term.

For more information on SCELG see
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The **Azores** is an archipelago located in the middle of the North Atlantic and has been an autonomous region of Portugal since 1975.

Population 242,823

Land Size: 2,321 km² / Maritime
Size: 984.300 Km²

Carlos Eduardo Pacheco Amaral

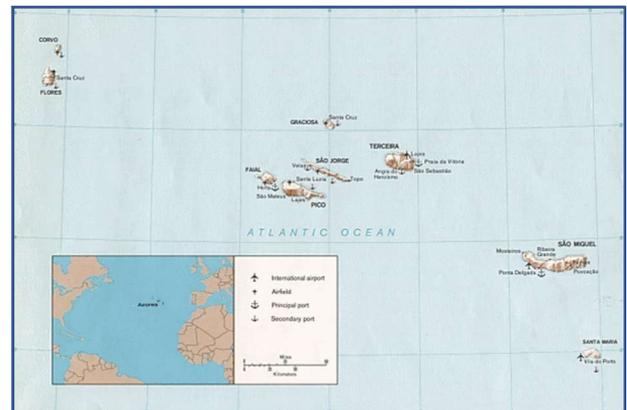
Associate Professor at the Social and Human Sciences Faculty of the University of the Azores. He holds the Jean Monnet Chair in the Azorean academy.

COVID-19 data and timeline (as of April 13, 2021)

Number of cases: 4,498 (1.85% of the population)

Number of fatalities: 30 (0.012% of the population)

Schools closed on March 16th 2020; reopened on September 15th, closed again on January 8th 2021, and reopened in a staged return on January 29th.



Azores¹

¹ Source <https://www.magical-azores-islands.com/azores-map.html>

COVID-19 on the Azores

Although there had not yet been any confirmed cases, on March 13th, 2020, the Regional Government of the Azores declared a contingency situation (similar to a state of emergency, which put all sectors of civil protection on standby) and drew up a range of measures to ensure that if new cases were detected on the islands, there wouldn't be a fast spread of the virus. These measures resulted in mandatory quarantine upon arrival in the region², and the presentation of a request to the national Portuguese Government to suspend all flights to the archipelago, as well as the adoption of extraordinary measures aimed at providing social protection for workers and their families.

The first case of Covid-19 was registered in the region on March 15th on the island of Terceira. Following the appearance of other new cases, the Regional Government closed the public administration services, having its employees work from home³, closed all educational establishments⁴ and day-care facilities⁵, limited all air and sea connections between the islands, closed all gardens, natural monuments, environmental and interpretation centres and public

visitation spaces⁶, closed bars and clubs, cinemas, gymnasiums, and banned access to public swimming pools⁷. In parallel, the government implemented a series of measures aimed at providing economic support to those most affected by the pandemic.

Since November 2020, there has been a different approach to slow the pandemic in the Azores. The Regional Government has used the method of identifying each municipality according to the risk it represents, taking into account the active cases in each area. Thus, the degrees of risk are very low, low, medium, medium high and high. Currently, the municipalities of Nordeste and Vila Franca do Campo are at High Risk and the remaining municipalities on São Miguel Island are at Medium Risk.

Socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 in the Azores

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected the economy of the Azores, an Outermost Region of the European Union, restricting economic activity and the mobility of people and leading to important challenges that are made worse by geography and distance, both between the islands (a range of 630 km. separates

2 *Resolução do Conselho do Governo n.º 65/2020 de 19 de março de 2020 (azores.gov.pt)*

3 *Resolução do Conselho do Governo n.º 64/2020 de 19 de março de 2020 (azores.gov.pt)*

4 *Resolução do Conselho do Governo n.º 62/2020 de 16 de março de 2020 (azores.gov.pt)*

5 *Resolução do Conselho do Governo n.º 62/2020 de 16 de março de 2020 (azores.gov.pt)*

6 *<https://jo.azores.gov.pt/#/ato/b5e2c4c3-0da5-4fde-9eaa-fc8cb314f81e>*

7 *<https://jo.azores.gov.pt/#/ato/b5e2c4c3-0da5-4fde-9eaa-fc8cb314f81e>*

the most distant islands) and between the islands and the neighbouring continents (i.e., 760 km from Europe and 3,900 from North America)⁸.

Comparing some economic activity indicators from the first three quarters of 2020 with the same period in 2019, it is apparent that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the entire Azorean society. Sectors such as tourism, as well as agriculture and fisheries, all fundamental to the Azorean economy, stand out as the most seriously affected by the pandemic.

Tourism, a sector of growing economic importance in the archipelago and responsible for almost 7% of the Gross Value Added (GVA) generated by the region, was deeply affected by the pandemic, with a decrease of 71% in the number of guests and 73% in the number of overnight stays, as well as a decrease of more than 76% in tourism revenue. The number of tourists arriving to the archipelago on cruise ships also suffered a significant drop, with 86% fewer passengers handled, with the consequent economic impact on the islands that were to receive those cruise ships.

Even though transportation is an essential component for the movement of residents and visitors, air transport saw a 63% decrease in passenger landings on all types of flights. Even maritime transport of goods suffered the effects

of the pandemic, with a 14% decrease in the volume of goods entering the region's ports and a 7% decrease in exports by sea.

Agriculture and livestock farming remains one of the main economic sectors in the Azores and, as an Outermost region of the EU, the challenges are increased by the geography and the distance between the islands and the European mainland, a situation exacerbated by the pandemic. In line with what has been proposed by the European Union (EU), particularly at the level of the Common Agricultural Policy, the Region has concentrated its efforts in diversifying, producing crops in a more environmentally friendly way, with increased concern for animal welfare, and investing in value-added markets. These goals have been called into question in a short span of time. The standard of living and consumption changed drastically in a matter of days, dramatically affecting the activity of industries and the income of producers. The impact on the Azorean dairy industries is rather significant. With the pandemic, some products such as traditional cheeses (like the well-known "São Jorge" as well as those produced by other dairies), no longer had a market, because of their dependence on sales to tourists and a decrease in exports.

Fisheries have also been affected, as revenues dropped by almost 14% and catches decreased

⁸ Regional Secretary for Finance, Planning and Public Administration.

by 5%. Regarding fresh fish exports, the volume of fish exported either by sea or by air corresponds to about 70% of the fish traded at auction between the years 2017-2019, and in 2020 this percentage decreased by about 65%. The Regional Executive is determined to move forward in all areas and fisheries is not to be left out, with the possibility of projecting during 2021 extraordinary aid and the extension of aid packages that have already been provided. Some aid may be updated and revised within the financial framework available through the regional budget and EU funds, and specifically through the Recovery and Resilience Programme.

Regarding the education sector, the 2020/2021 school year began on September 15th, and as of this day (April 13th, 2021) all schools are closed on the islands of São Miguel and students are taking online classes. As for the other islands that have a low risk of transmission, schools have remained open for face-to-face learning. Contrary to what happened at the beginning of the pandemic, when schools completely closed with only a few positive cases, the Azores education system is now faced with a multiplicity of scenarios. In some cases schools are completely closed; in other situations, where there are a few confirmed COVID-19 cases, there are online classes with teachers teaching from the school. In still other places, teachers are teaching from home while

the students are at school. Finally, there are situations where, in the same class, some students are learning at home online while others in the same class are at school. This plurality of options imposes chaos and, at the very least, a confusing array of distance learning situations for students, teachers, and the education system as a whole.

In the manufacturing sector, there was a decrease in production and energy, which was reflected in the slowdown in economic activity. Another major indicator is the 13% decrease in energy consumption by the commerce and services sector, reflecting the reduced activity of numerous establishments. The economic and employment strategy of the Azorean government has been clear and objective. First, the Government created conditions for Azorean companies to enjoy significantly more support than companies were provided elsewhere in Portugal. Second, it ensured that all regional support was complementary to national support to maximize the availability of resources to Azorean companies. Finally, it directed all regional measures to encourage and foster the maintenance of employment. To this end, the government provided financial support to all companies that have had a significant reduction in their activity to retain all their employees without any dismissals. These measures are under an Immediate Liquidity Support program, providing non-refundable grants for companies that maintained the level of employment until 31

December, 2020, where 75% of the amount was already received and could be increased by another 10% if the companies maintained the jobs until 30 June 2021. The other measure was prolonging the Supplementary Regional Allowance for lay-offs under the Labour Code, InvesteEmprego and the Turism-Form. This measure includes an extraordinary top-up in the amount of one regional minimum wage per worker covered, which will be paid in one lump sum.

New applications were also accepted for the React-Emprego program, providing the regional minimum wage monthly to unemployed persons who were not receiving benefits, and to unemployed persons with benefits who will receive a monthly amount of EUR 190. Finally, there was the Support Programme to Restaurants and Hotels for the Purchase of Azorean Products bearing the Azores Brand seal. This measure reinforces the co-participation rates provided for in this support programme, increasing from 20% to 25%, for the purchase of Azorean products with the Marca Açores seal. The maximum annual financial support per establishment was also increased from €5,000 to €7,500.

Post Covid-19 recovery in the Azores

On the one hand The Agenda for the Social and Economic Recovery of the Azores aims to revive the economy of the Azores and, on the

other hand, to build a more resilient region. The instruments made available to member states and European regions to overcome this crisis, namely the Recovery and Resilience Instrument, will guide the strategic choices made over the next four years. The attempt to create a more resilient, cohesive and sustainable Azores is based on the following principles:

- Reinforcement of the investment in education and upgrading of qualifications of the people, namely in initial and advanced digital skills, as well as in better financial, digital and health literacy, contributing to a more equitable, inclusive and participatory Azorean society and economy, thus reinforcing democracy and autonomy;
- Adding value to Azorean products and services, either through research and development, innovation and experimentation in the traditional economic sectors, or through the creation of new locally-based products and services. These would occur as a result of investment in the green, blue and circular economies, and would be based on a culture of collaboration and co-production, linking empirical and scientific knowledge to the Azorean business fabric and contributing to a greater social, economic and environmental sustainability of the Region;

- Promotion of the Azores as a "living laboratory", making the most of regional endogenous resources (e.g., renewable/clean energy), combined with promoting new and emerging technologies. The objective is to foster the incubation of national, European and international innovative projects, attracting highly qualified young people, investors and entrepreneurs to the region;
- Continued Investment on the Regional Health Service, combined with the preservation and enhancement of the Azores as a Sustainable Tourism Destination with the objective of re-launching an Azorean tourism sector. This is intended to attract new segments of the tourism market, including those seeking safe destinations, accessibility to health care, contact with nature, and experiences of environmental citizenship.

Although the Azorean government has not explicitly addressed the Sustainable Development Goals in their planning documents, based on these principles they have done so in spirit and intent. For example, The Azores Destination⁹ is strongly associated with practices of sustainable development, the result of an ongoing strategy that has been carrying out effective environmental, social and economic policies and

practices, so that the identity, ecosystems and quality of Azorean life can be preserved.

Within the scope of this process, a coordinating entity titled Destiny Azores was developed, with a statement on the sustainable vision of the Region, and an exhaustive survey of data requested by EarthCheck, which allowed it to carry out a comparative assessment of the sustainability performance across environmental, cultural, social and economic dimensions. Projects "towards sustainability" have also been developed through environmental education actions, for energy efficiency, for reducing waste, for recycling, but also a recognition of the ongoing importance of tourism in the economic development of the Region, as well as the creation of a Primer for Sustainability and Green Teams in all the islands.

Useful Sources

- <https://portal.azores.gov.pt/en/>
- <https://destinoseguro.azores.gov.pt/>
- https://srea.azores.gov.pt/default.aspx?lang_id=2
- <https://www.visitazores.com/en/time-toazores>

⁹ https://sustainable.azores.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/EC08_00PlanoAcao2019_2027.pdf

Published COVID-19 Island Insights Papers

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| #1. Malta. November 2020 | #12. Hawai'i. February 2021 |
| #2. Egadi Islands. November 2020 | #13. Barbados. March 2021 |
| #3. Grenada. November 2020 | #14. Jamaica. March 2021 |
| #4. Trinidad and Tobago. November 2020 | #15. Newfoundland and Labrador. March 2021 |
| #5. Shetland Islands. November 2020 | #16. Prince Edward Island. March 2021 |
| #6. Åland Islands. November 2020 | #17. Iceland. March 2021 |
| #7. Guam. December 2020 | #18. Lesvos. April 2021 |
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