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COVID-19 Island Insights Series

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Seychelles

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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.

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The Republic of Seychelles comprises an archipelago of 115 islands located in the Indian Ocean.

The population is 98,462¹

The size of the country is 458.4 km²

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COVID-19 data and timeline

The first imported case was detected on 14 March 2020.

Number of confirmed cases until 23 January, 2021 is 972 (0.0098 per capita).

Number of fatalities until 23 January, 2021 is 3 (0.00003 per capita).

Schools closed on 19 March 2020 and re-opened on 11 May 2020.

Travel restrictions were enacted in April 2020. The International Airport re-opened to commercial flights on 01 August 2020.



¹ NBS, Population and Vital Statistics: 31 August 2020 <https://www.nbs.gov.sc/downloads/mid-2020-population-bulletin/viewdocument>.

² Map downloaded from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seychelles#/media/File:Se-map.gif>.

COVID-19 on the Seychelles

The COVID-19 pandemic reached the shores of the Seychelles islands in March 2020.³ By 06 April, the total number of confirmed cases had climbed to 11, and the government announced a 21-day lockdown on travel and movement two days later.⁴

During the lockdown, a number of measures restricting the movement of the residents were implemented.⁵ Non-essential businesses were ordered to shut down and only employees of essential services were allowed outdoor movement. All shops except those that sold food items, pharmaceutical products and groceries were to remain closed. Travel services between the islands were restricted to carrying out and the transportation of staff associated with essential services. The measures extended into other spheres as well. Cruise ships were banned from calling at Port Victoria until 2022. All flights operating at the Seychelles International Airport were halted. Child-minding and educational institutions were closed and a night-time curfew was also imposed. The restrictions were supplemented with increased public health communication promotions and campaigns which aimed to sensitise the population around COVID-19. Social distancing, frequent hand washing and face mask wearing were encouraged by the authorities.

Following no new cases being recorded during the lockdown period, the country announced a gradual lifting of containment measures on 04 May.⁶ Notably, all restrictions on the movement of residents were removed. Religious services

– previously banned – were able to resume under the guidance of the Department of Health. All shops were allowed to extend their opening hours until 8:00 pm. Lastly, the majority of services and businesses were also allowed to reopen. Child-minding and day-care services and the post-secondary institutions re-opened from 11 May. As no new cases were recorded in the period immediately following the removal of restrictions, the government declared the islands COVID-free in May 2020.⁷ However, the re-opening of Seychelles' airport and fishing waters saw a spike in imported cases in June, emanating mainly from seafarers on Spanish fishing vessels. Eventually, 183 cases were confirmed as of December 2020.⁸ The country also saw its first case of community transmission on 30 December, and subsequently implemented a series of measures aimed at curbing the spread. This included keeping all schools closed, restricting public gatherings and once again closing spas, stand-alone restaurants, cinemas, casinos and gyms.⁹ The first COVID-related death in Seychelles was also recorded on January 03, 2021. In light of the recent spike in cases and two more deaths since, the government has re-imposed some of the measures enacted in April 2020, but has not called for a total lockdown yet.¹⁰

Key economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak in Seychelles

The Seychelles economy consists mainly of two key sectors; tourism and fisheries. The country's gross domestic product (GDP) was poised to grow by 3.3 per cent in 2020 prior to the

³ Information retrieved on 08th December from the Travel Daily News website, <https://www.traveldailynews.com/post/paradise-seychelles-is-covid-19-free>

⁴ Information retrieved on 08th December from the Medical Xpress website, <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-05-cases-seychelles-confinement.html>

⁵ Information retrieved on 08th December from the Seychelles Legal Institute website, SEYLII, <https://seylilii.org/content/covid-19-government-special-measures-and-legislation>

⁶ Information retrieved on 08th December from Statehouse website, <http://www.statehouse.gov.sc/news/4826/address-by-president-danny-faure-on-the-easing-of-restrictions-related-to-the-covid-19-situation>

⁷ Information retrieved on 08th December from the National News website, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/life-style/travel/the-seychelles-has-reopened-to-tourists-but-only-to-those-travelling-by-private-jet-1.1028188>

⁸ Information retrieved on 08th December from the Ministry of Health website <http://www.health.gov.sc/>

⁹ Information retrieved on 1st Jan from the Seychelles Nation, <http://www.nation.sc/articles/7390/covid-19-first-cases-of-community-transmission-confirmed>

¹⁰ Information retrieved on 23 January from the Ministry of Health website, <http://www.health.gov.sc/index.php/2021/01/04/new-measures-effected-as-covid-19-cases-rise/>

COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹ Much of this growth was anticipated from increased activity in the information and telecommunication sector, with tourism remaining the principal contributor to GDP at a growth rate of 5 per cent.¹² Additionally, the country had been following a prudent monetary policy stance that was successfully reigning in inflation, and the government was on target to reduce its debt to GDP ratio by 50 per cent in 2021 through added fiscal discipline¹³. At the end of 2019, Seychelles recorded the highest GDP in Africa of nearly USD17 billion.¹⁴

However, the island nation's overt reliance on these narrow economic bases has exposed its extreme vulnerability to external shocks such as this global pandemic.¹⁵ The tourism sector is the mainstay of the economy, contributing over 80 per cent to GDP and employing over 25 per cent of the country's working population.¹⁶ In 2019, visitor arrivals to the Seychelles totalled 384,204, surpassing the 4 per cent target set by the Seychelles Tourism Board.¹⁷ This represented more than three times the islands' population. The fisheries sector is also crucial, employing 17 per cent of the population, thereby making important contributions to the economy and the export market, income and livelihoods.¹⁸

The pandemic significantly affected these two sectors, which led to a ripple effect throughout the entire economy. A dearth of tourists left hoteliers running at a loss with significant overheads, staff layoffs and empty beds.¹⁹ The country recorded only 75,000 visitor arrivals in the first three quarters of 2020, translating into a drop of almost 83 per cent from 2019.²⁰ Government figures also revealed 1,100 people had lost their jobs since the start of the year, mostly in the tourism sector.²¹

As the tourism sector contracted, fisheries and other supporting industries suffered in tandem. Redundancies emanated from industries related to food services activities, accommodation as well as in administrative and support services such as car rental and taxi service businesses.²² In the third quarter of 2020, the national unemployment rate was recorded at 4 per cent. A new category called 'not employed' was subsequently added to the labour force status categories, to classify those whose work has stopped, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government estimates the unemployment rate would have stood at 6.5 per cent if those affected by the COVID-19 situation had started seeking alternative employment, rather than waiting for the lessened (work-related) impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.²³ The country

¹¹ Information retrieved on 08th December from the African Development Bank website, AfDB,

<https://www.afdb.org/en/countries/east-africa-seychelles/seychelles-economic-outlook>

¹² Information retrieved on 08th December from the Ministry of Finance website, http://www.finance.gov.sc/uploads/national_budget/BUDGET_AMENDMENT_2020_PART_1.pdf

¹³ Information retrieved on 08th December from the African Development Bank website, AfDB,

<https://www.afdb.org/en/countries/east-africa-seychelles/seychelles-economic-outlook>

¹⁴ Information retrieved on 08th December from the World Bank, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/seychelles/overview>

¹⁵ Senaratne, M. 2020. The Blue Economy: charting a new development path in Seychelles. Retrieved at

<https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-blue-economy-charting-a-new-development-path-in-the-seychelles/>

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Information retrieved on 08th December from the FTN News website, FTN, <https://ftnnews.com/tours/38612-seychelles-tourist-arrivals-increased-in-2019#:~:text=Accord>

<https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-blue-economy-charting-a-new-development-path-in-the-seychelles/>

¹⁸ Senaratne, M. 2020. The Blue Economy: charting a new development path in Seychelles. Retrieved at

<https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-blue-economy-charting-a-new-development-path-in-the-seychelles/>

¹⁹ Information retrieved on 08th December from the Bangkok Post, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/2007123/spared-by-covid-19-seychelles-suffers-dearth-of-tourists>

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Information retrieved on 08th December from the Seychelles News Agency website, SNA, <http://www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/13704/Job+losses+in+Seychelles+this+year+reach+nearly+%2C%2C+most+in+tourism+sector>

<http://www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/13704/Job+losses+in+Seychelles+this+year+reach+nearly+%2C%2C+most+in+tourism+sector>

²² Information retrieved on 08th December from the Seychelles News Agency website, SNA <http://www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/13704/Job+losses+in+Seychelles+this+year+reach+nearly+%2C%2C+most+in+tourism+sector>

<http://www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/13704/Job+losses+in+Seychelles+this+year+reach+nearly+%2C%2C+most+in+tourism+sector>

²³ Ibid

has since experienced foreign exchange fluctuations, rising cost of imported goods that support industries and has relied on a number of international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank for emergency financial assistance to deal with the crisis.

The pandemic has served to exacerbate notable societal vulnerabilities that already existed in the Seychelles. Despite attaining high-income country status in 2015, the small island state had recorded an alarming poverty rate of 39.3 per cent two years prior. Further, it had a Gini index of 0.47 which demonstrated a significant problem of inequality.²⁴ In 2016, a national study found the reported gender-based violence (GBV) rate in the country to be quite high, with 57.7 per cent of women and 43.1 per cent of men reporting experiencing violence.²⁵ More recently, a national study in 2020 revealed 12 per cent of the population in Seychelles was multi-dimensionally poor, thus experiencing deprivations in the spheres of employment, health, education and living standards.²⁶ While the data remains to be forthcoming, it is highly likely the pandemic will paint an even more dire portrait of the country's socio-economic landscape in 2021.

Post Covid-19 world: resilience and sustainability

Building back better around sustainability, diversification and increased resilience should signpost Seychelles' pathway in a post-COVID world. To that end, the country's national vision around a 'resilient, responsible and prosperous nation of healthy, educated and empowered Seychellois' reflects a general harmonisation with the triple-bottom outcomes embedded within the Sustainable Development Goals.²⁷

Nonetheless, the island nation has remained mindful that development needs to happen within the Seychelles context. Through the launch of its Blue Economy (BE) Strategic Policy Framework and Roadmap in 2018, Seychelles focused on developing its ocean space, opting for a model that was based on the pillars of social equity, sustainable economic growth and environmental conservation.²⁸ Some results have been notable; in 2019, the country launched the world's first sovereign blue bond, proceeds of which are used to finance the island nation's BE journey.²⁹ Additionally, the archipelago recently declared 30 per cent of its ocean territory a Marine Protected Area (MPA), meeting international targets 10 years ahead of schedule.³⁰ Moving forward, a more holistic approach to BE has been called for, with stakeholders noting an urgent need to pivot from a fisheries resource base to a more value-addition and knowledge-based economy.³¹

²⁴Information retrieved on 08th December from the Seychelles Voluntary National Review Report 2020, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26383VNR_2020_Seychelles_Report.pdf

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Information retrieved on 08th December from the Seychelles News Agency website, <http://www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/12941/+percent+of+Seychelles+is+multi-dimensionally+poor%2C+study+finds>

²⁷ Information retrieved on 08th December from the Seychelles Voluntary National Review Report 2020, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26383VNR_2020_Seychelles_Report.pdf

²⁸ Information retrieved on 08th December from the Commonwealth website, <https://thecommonwealth.org/Roadmap%20to%20boost%20Seychelles%20blue%20ocean%20economy>

²⁹ Information retrieved on 08th December from the World Bank website, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/10/29/seychelles-launches-worlds-first-sovereign-blue-bond#:~:text=On%20October%2029%2C%202018%20the,the%20protection%20of%20marine%20areas>.

³⁰ Information retrieved on 08th December from the Statehouse website,

<http://www.statehouse.gov.sc/news/4787/seychelles-designates-30-of-its-eez-as-marine-protected-area#:~:text=The%20President%20of%20the%20Republic,as%20a%20Marine%20Protected%20Area>.

³¹ Information retrieved on 08th December from the Seychelles Voluntary National Review Report 2020, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26383VNR_2020_Seychelles_Report.pdf

On the plus side, the pandemic has demonstrated the ability of most governments and international institutions to respond quickly and cohesively in the face of an overwhelming public health threat. Such a response will also be crucial in the planet's continued battle against climate change. Given Seychelles' vulnerability to climatic changes, strengthening regional and international partnerships to form binding agreements around emissions reduction targets and taking polluting nations to task will become a requirement.³²

Despite tremendous challenges, Seychelles has made considerable progress and will need to carefully balance decisions between environment, economy and equity concerns. For the newly installed government, this has come to mean protecting the health of the populace to generate wealth. To that end, the Seychelles is the first country in Africa to kick-start a nationwide vaccine program. With 13,163 vaccinations given since the campaign started, the island nation currently ranks third in the world in terms of vaccinations administered.³³ The country has also re-opened its borders for tourism to all countries with immediate effect, signalling the government's intent to focus on economic recovery as soon as possible.³⁴

Useful Sources

- <http://www.health.gov.sc/>
- <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/seychelles/>
- <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/seychelles/overview>

³² Retrieved from the Ministry of Environment, Energy and Climate Change website, <http://www.mecc.gov.sc/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/seychelles-national-climate-change-policy-may-2020.pdf>

³³ Information retrieved on 23 January from the Seychelles News Agency website, SNA <http://www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/14228/Seychelles-ranks-rd-in-world-for-percentage-of-population-vaccinated-against-COVID-2C-official-says>

³⁴ Information retrieved on 23 January from the Outlook Traveller website, <https://www.outlookindia.com/outlook-traveller/travelnews/story/71090/seychelles-reopen-for-tourists>

Published COVID-19 Island Insights Papers

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