POLICY BRIEF

Coronavirus: A Global Island Perspective

Francesco Sindico and James Ellsmoor

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On 22 March the **Strathclyde Centre for Environmental Law and Governance** (SCELG) started a survey aiming to better understand how Covid-19 was being dealt with on islands. SCELG was soon joined by **Island Innovation** and together they reached out to their island network. The goal was not to undertake a research project, but to collate "raw" data from anybody who was inclined to respond and put such data at the disposal of policy makers and wider island related stakeholders in their ongoing activities to deal with and adapt to the Covid-19 pandemic. The response to the survey was very positive and so far responses from islands in 36 countries have been included in an **online database** where people can now find the data divided by islands and by specific survey question.

Questions included in the SCELG and Island Innovation survey:

- What actions are being taken to protect the island community from COVID-19? In particular, how are travel restrictions being put in place and enforced?

- What actions will be taken should people on the island have COVID-19?

- What actions are being taken to ensure that essential goods and services are provided to the island community?

- What actions are being taken to ensure that people working on the islands, not only in the tourism sector, are sustained financially in the short term and in the long term?

- What actions are being taken to ensure the mental well-being of people on the islands?

- If you consider it appropriate, feel free to share any data about people who have COVID-19 on your island and of people who, sadly, have passed away because of COVID-19.

- If applicable, how are lockdown measures being relaxed?[2]

- Is there anything else you would like to share?

After just over one month from its start, the survey will now expand and attempt to collate data on what can be framed as "Phase 2" of dealing with Covid-19 and that relates on when and how to relax the lockdown and the long-term economic implications such as the impact on the tourism industry. Before SCELG and Island Innovation move towards this new territory it is time to start reflecting on the responses to the survey so far.

Islands: Covid-19 safe heavens?

Islands were seen by many as safe heavens upon the initial declaration of the pandemic. While this (as we will see) presents challenges in its own right, many islands and island communities fared relatively during the first month. Take the Western Isles in Scotland, for example: of 27,000 residents, **only 6** contracted Covid-19. Other islands, such as the Azores (Portugal) have performed particularly well. Very few countries in the world are Covid-free, most of these being **small island developing countries** (SIDS). However, the picture is not all positive. There are stories where islands have become negative hotspots, such as **Sareema in Estonia**, where, according to some figures, half of its 33,000 inhabitants, would have contracted

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Covid-19 and for a long time was the worst-affect part of the country. In Venezuela, the state of **Nueva Esparta**, consisting of the islands of Margarita, Coche y Cubagua, also had the highest incidence of cases in the country.

Against this background, how different is the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic on an island? We have been told over and over that Covid-19 does not know about borders and affects everybody equally. In a way that is indeed true also for islands. In fact, Covid-19 health protocols on islands have not differed in most cases from the mainland. Social distancing measures have been adopted, special focus on essential workers and on elderly or otherwise vulnerable members of the island communities has been put in place. Furthermore, the same WHO self-isolation protocols apply also on islands and, in most cases, schools and other educational facilities have shut down.

However, it is in the implementation of some of these measures and in the results stemming from such measures that the differences between island and mainland start arising.

Contact tracing is one example of where response to Covid-19 may be more effective for some islands. On islands with a strong and close knit community it will be easier to develop robust and efficient contact tracing that will be able to follow any future spread of the disease amongst the island community. According to responses to our survey, in Antigua and Barbuda "contact tracing brigades" are being established and I am sure these will be present in more islands, especially once the lockdown will start to be relaxed. Contact tracing on islands will also benefit more generally from island mentality whereby people just get along with things. Data in the survey from the island of Föhr in Germany highlights this point and made it clear that people on the island "us[e] what is available and [do] not wait… for the capital's decisions."

Island fragility vis-à-vis a second wave

However, while island-based contact tracing may lead to positive stories, islands and their communities are in a delicate position, should a second wave of Covid-19 reach their shores.

Their geographical nature and, in some cases, their remoteness can be a double-edge sword. While it can make islands more resilient to Covid-19, especially if travel restrictions are done well in advance and kept firmly throughout the pandemic, remoteness and isolation may come back to haunt islands should Covid-19 start spreading on the island. A number of factors need careful attention.

First, most islands lack testing capacity and samples will need to be sent to the mainland. Dangerous delays may occur, up to one week in very remote islands such as the Falklands. Where testing is instead present on the islands, such as in the **Faroe Islands**, the island community will be better protected. Second, if the response to Covid-19 is heavily biased towards technology, this may be a challenge on some islands. In fact, some have limited digital connectivity and a large (elderly) part of the population may not use smartphones. Third, on some islands ferry workers are amongst the most essential workers. What will happen if they suddenly fall ill and need to go in self-isolation? Concerns from Sherkin Island in Ireland present in the survey point to this challenge.

Moving beyond lockdown: rebooting island's societies

Moving forward, we are now at a point where some islands are **on their way** to relaxing the lockdown. Difficult questions on when to start easing restrictions and on how to do so are currently on policymakers' tables. The survey has, hence, added a further question aiming at gathering data on how islands around the world are starting to move into Phase 2 of the Covid-19 emergency and we look forward to sharing such data with as many island policy makers and stakeholders as possible.

Looking farther ahead there is, of course, life after Covid-19. However, everybody needs to interrogate themselves as to when we can, or when we should go, back to business as usual. We deliberately say that we need to reboot "society", and not just the "economy". If we were to focus only on the economic/monetary side of things, important as they may be, we would be

missing an important opportunity. In the context of islands, the post Covid-19 recovery needs to be a process whereby island communities are at the heart of any discussion. Two practical suggestions could be instrumental to kick start the recovery process. First, islands need to take a long, hard look at what has worked well during the Covid-19 crisis, but also at those areas where they have suffered the most. While some of the latter may be well endemic to a specific island, Covid-19 may have highlighted a specific fragility of an island.

Food security, tourism and relationship with "the mainland" come to mind. While well stocked, some islands appear to have only 2-months' worth of supply (Bahamas) or 3 months (Pitcairn). How should food security be conceived in a post Covid-19 world? Tourism is a large part of the economy for many islands, especially but not only in the Caribbean. In the Cayman Islands, Covid-19 has reopened up a debate between the benefits of increasing cruise capacity vis-à-vis the protection of coral reefs around the islands. In the Balearic Islands, tourism is expected to fall 95% this summer, with similar numbers being predicted for Hawai'i.

What kind of tourism can and should be present on islands in a post Covid-19 world? Another island related challenge that has come up in the survey and that should be considered going ahead is the difficult relationship between mainland and islands. This is an issue mainly for islands linked geographically and politically to the mainland (Scotland, Croatia, France, Japan, and Sweden, for example). Many people from the mainland sought "refuge" on the islands at the beginning of the pandemic. Meanwhile, British media showed resentment to the export of health equipment to the overseas territory of Saint Helena. Others may consider roaming the islands once lockdown is relaxed, especially if overseas travel will not be possible for some time. The relationships between people coming from the mainland and people living on islands could be strained and there needs to be careful thinking and attention from island related policy makers and stakeholders. A difficult balance between much needed income from tourism and public health concerns is on the table.

Food security, tourism, relationship with the mainland are just some of the questions that island policy makers and island stakeholders need to consider when rebooting island society. SCELG and Island Innovation look forward to being part of this conversation and we are excited to move on to a second phase of our work on Islands and Covid-19. While continuing our survey and actively promoting and sharing its data, we will now start to critically assess the data with the goal of distilling good practices that can be considered by island related policy makers both in relaxing the lockdown measures and, even more importantly, in planning ahead for a post Covid-19 world.

*To fill out the island response survey **click here** and to see the data collected **click here**.*

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F Sindico, Transboundary Aquifers at the 2019 UN General Assembly 6th Committee: The Invisibility Cape is Still On (at least for another five years…), SCELG Policy Brief 13/2019

F Sindico, The Ocotepeque – Citalá Statement of Intent: A First Step towards Transboundary Aquifer Cooperation in Central America?, SCELG Policy Brief 12/2019

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