# COVID-19 Island Insights Series

## Mauritius

Verena Tandrayen Ragoobur

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
**https://www.strath.ac.uk/scelg**

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Mauritius is an island nation in the Indian Ocean about 2,000 kilometres off the southeast coast of the African continent.

The outlying islands of Rodrigues, Agaléga and St. Brandon also belong to the Republic of Mauritius.
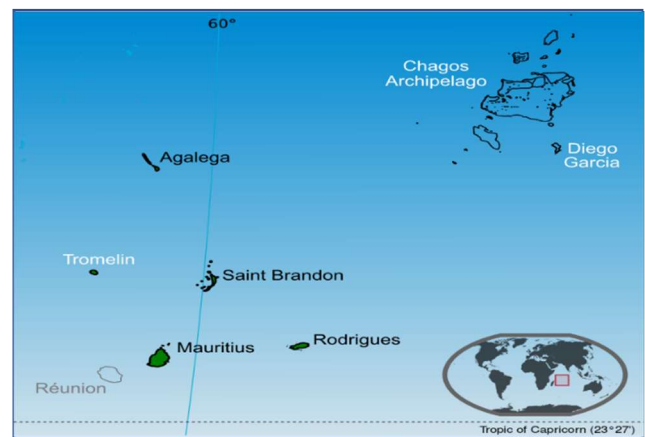
Population 1,265,475[1]

Size 2,040 km²(of which Mauritius is 1,864 km² and Rodrigues is 104 km²)[2]

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**COVID-19 data and timeline**
(as of 31st January 2021)

- Number of cases 569 [0.045% of the population]

- Number of fatalities 10 [0.000008%]

- Schools closed on 20 March 2020 and reopened in 01 July 2020.

- Travel restrictions enacted on 20 March 2020 are still present



**Mauritius[3]**

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[1] Data obtained from "Population and Vital Statistics - Year 2019". *Statistics Mauritius. March 2020*.

[2] *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mauritius*
[3] *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mauritius*

## COVID-19 on Mauritius

In Mauritius, precautionary measures against COVID-19 were taken early on. Starting on 22 January 2020, health authorities screened passengers on arrival from a growing number of countries. On 24 January, all passengers irrespective of their nationality, travelling from Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China or who had visited Wuhan during the previous 14 days, were immediately quarantined for at least 14 days; and those who were showing signs and symptoms of the infection upon arrival at the airport were immediately admitted to the isolation ward of the New Souillac Hospital. Tourists who were suspected of being infected were sent to quarantine in early February with results from tests sent to Germany and South Africa for confirmation. As of 23 February, passengers on arrival from infected regions were denied entry, culminating with entry denied for foreigners from Réunion, the EU, the UK, Norway and Switzerland starting on 16 March. These early precautionary measures have contributed to a relatively small pool of cases when the first three cases were announced on 18 March.

Two days later, on 20 March 2020, the island was under "sanitary" lockdown for two weeks. During the lockdown, only essential services (e.g., police, hospitals, dispensaries, private clinics, firefighters) and specific economic activities (e.g., shops, banks, supermarkets, bakeries, pharmacies) and minimum public transport service was operational. From 24 to 31 March, the country went under complete lockdown with only essential services being open. No other activities were opened during the curfew period, including supermarkets, shops and bakeries. Health officials and members of the Government reported the number of COVID-19 cases on a daily basis through the media. The Government also announced severe penalties for breaking the confinement measures and for issuing fake news related to the pandemic. Fake news was spread on the number of COVID-19 cases through social media and these were seen to be likely to create a climate of fear and put pressure on health services. For example,

a man was arrested by the Central Criminal Investigation Department for publishing on social media that a supermarket and a police station were under attack during the lockdown. The Cybercrime Unit of the Police Force stated that those found guilty of having disseminated false news on the COVID-19 virus risk a maximum prison sentence of 10 years and a fine of up to Rs 1 million for each false news broadcast.

This lockdown was extended until 15 April, then again until 4 May and finally a third time to 1 June, with a gradual reopening of certain economic sectors starting from 15 May. The lockdown was lifted entirely on 15 June. Consequently, beaches, markets, gyms, parks, village halls, community centres, cinema and other public places became accessible to the public but the wearing of masks and social distancing were still compulsory. Schools resumed on 1 July 2020. As of 27 August, the number of PCR tests carried out stood at 67,094 while the number of Rapid Antigen Tests was 160,315, totalling 227,409 COVID-19 tests, representing around 18% of the population being tested.

Mauritius has been COVID-19 free with no local cases since 26 April 2020. The island had only one local case in November 2020 but since then there have been no new local cases. In a health curfew for more than two months, Mauritius had a contamination rate below the WHO forecasts. The WHO predicted more than 20,000 cases and 1,139 deaths in the over 60 age group. At the end of May 2020, the island had recorded 332 coronavirus confirmed cases, all recovered, and 10 deaths. With less than 3% of the infected population, Mauritius is one of the few jurisdictions in the Indian Ocean which has been able to control the progress of the pandemic. Rodrigues Island recorded no cases and the public health confinement there only lasted 14 days. With no local cases for the past months, the government stated that Mauritius is now a COVID-19 safe destination. As at 31 August 2020, Mauritius had 356 cases; the additional cases (24 in all) were essentially imported cases from the repatriation of Mauritians from different parts of the world. As of that date, there are 1,211 repatriated Mauritians in quarantine. The Mauritian government received the help of

several hotels around the island, with at least 1,700 hotel rooms being provided to place people under quarantine.

## Key socioeconomic pressures in Mauritius during COVID-19

On 18 March 2020, once the lockdown was announced, all in-bound passengers, including Mauritians and foreigners, were prohibited from entering Mauritian territory. Many locals were stranded in different airports around the world. This created much frustration and anxiety amongst locals whose relatives were stuck in several airports. Mauritian authorities managed to repatriate around 1,000 Mauritians at the beginning of April. Once these repatriates entered the Mauritian territory, they were required to spend 14 days in quarantine. The repatriation process continued until the end of September 2020.

Amid the lockdown and curfew order in force and the decision to close all supermarkets, shops and bakeries until 31 March 2020, the population of Mauritius was under pressure and strained by the possible lack of food supplies. The Government reassured the population that there was no need to panic as there was no shortage in the supply of commodities such as flour, rice, fuel and cooking gas on the market and exhorted each Mauritian to demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility during the curfew period. There were also efforts from a number of companies to provide services for online buying and home delivery. Many companies, however, did not have the proper logistics and could not deliver in time to meet the growing demand of the Mauritian population. In many instances, prices of basic commodities escalated, making people, and especially low-income people, more vulnerable in this challenging time.

In addition, many people in Mauritius operate in the informal sector or are self-employed with low wages on a daily or weekly basis. These

low-income earners have been most vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic and were the most affected during the lockdown, owing to their inability to work and feed their families. Hence, a total of 35,000 households enlisted on the Social Register of Mauritius[4], including persons with disabilities, those receiving the Carers' Allowance and residents of homes received food packs. There was also an appeal to distributors, supermarkets and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), amongst others, to join in the efforts of the government to provide vulnerable families with the basic necessities. On 2 April, Mauritians could enter supermarkets as per alphabetical order of their names during specific days. It was compulsory to bring their National Identity cards and wear masks, and basic essential products were limited to three units per person. This eased the tension considerably but there were still long queues and panic-buying in many instances.

In terms of medical supplies, Mauritius received a donation by the founder of Alibaba Group, Jack Ma, at the end of March 2020. His donation consisted of 20,000 COVID-19 screening kits, 100,000 masks and 1,000 protective suits for medical personnel. The African Union ensured that these supplies were delivered to the 54 African countries who benefited from this aid. India also sent 13 tonnes of medication and 500,000 Hydroxychloroquine tablets to Mauritius. Mauritius was among the first countries to receive supplies of this medicine after a special exemption was granted by India. In addition, 231 tonnes of equipment, including masks, overalls and other protective accessories for healthcare staff from Guangzhou and Beijing reached Mauritius at the start of April[5].The Mauritius Export Association (MEXA) reported that its members had already produced 300,000 protective masks against COVID-19. A mobile application named "beSafeMoris" was launched by the Ministry of Information Technology, Communication and Innovation and the Ministry of Health and Wellness. The app provides the latest news along

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[4] SRM is a computer-based application to register and identify the poor and vulnerable people. It uses a Proxy Means Test (PMT) to determine eligibility below a given threshold.

[5] *http://www.govmu.org/English/News/Pages/Mauritius-receives-second-shipment-of-medicine-supplies-from-India.aspx*

with measures to prevent the proliferation of the virus. The government also set up the COVID-19 Solidarity Fund, which will help people affected by the pandemic. The European Union contributed MUR 11.3 million (USD 282,000) to the Solidarity Fund.

The Government implemented major social policies during the COVID-19 pandemic. These included the Wage Assistance Scheme (WAS) and the Self-Employment Assistance Scheme (SEAS). The former targets businesses in the private sector and their employees drawing a monthly basic wage of up to Rs 50,000 (USD 1,250). The SEAS in turn assists self-employed persons who have suffered a loss in revenue because of the lockdown. The purpose of the two schemes is to cushion the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 by providing financial support to employees who have become unemployed on a temporary basis, as well as those who are employed in informal sectors or self-employed. From mid-March to the end of June, the Government paid out MUR 8.2 billion of WAS to more than 268,000 workers in 14,700 companies. Further, more than 197,000 self-employed Mauritians received MUR 2.4 billion over the same period. A total of 10.6 billion rupees (265 million USD) had been disbursed under the two employment assistance programs to companies and self-employed people. The Government has decided to maintain both schemes for workers in the tourism industry as long as the borders are closed.

### Post Covid-19 recovery on Mauritius: A different approach

Mauritius has been responding relatively well as compared to a number of other international islands and other jurisdictions. The various statistics (including total number of cases, death rate, closed cases, COVID tests performed, among others) tend to point out that the Mauritian "Act fast. Act now. Keep the lights on" approach has been relatively effective in limiting

the spread of the disease (De Melo, Tandrayen-Ragoobur and Seetanah, 2020)[6]. Mauritius continues to implement strict measures to avoid any further spread or second wave. Physical and social distancing measures, daily screening of body temperature, cleaning and disinfection of premises or sites, use of hand sanitizers and the wearing of masks remain in force. In June 2020, the Government set out its budget themed "*Our New Normal: The Economy of Life*", which aimed to guide the economy and population on the path to healing and growth during these times of global and local economic slowdown, rising unemployment and low morale caused by the pandemic. The objective was to build an innovative and favourable environment for local and foreign investors. The Bank of Mauritius set up the Mauritius Investment Corporation (MIC) as a special-purpose vehicle to mitigate contagion of the ongoing economic downturn to the banking sector, thus limiting macro-economic and financial risks. The MIC has taken shape following extensive consultations with major economic and systemic operators in the tourism and manufacturing sectors and is critical for rebuilding the economy. The tourism sector, however, remains the most severely impacted by the pandemic with both direct and indirect implications on those who depend on tourism for a living.

### Post Covid-19 recovery and the Sustainable Development Goals

For several decades, Mauritius has been highly dependent on the tourism sector as a major revenue generating industry and an important sector of employment creation. However, this sudden halt in the tourism sector has gravely impacted small local businesses, workers in the tourism industry, the self-employed as well as informal employees operating in that sector.

To bridge the gap between sustainable economic growth and inclusive employment, in May 2020 Mauritius Conscious Travel launched

[6] *https://voxeu.org/article/covid-19-mauritius-and-other-tourist-paradises*

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the Conscious Gift Card campaign. It features an array of immersive activities to choose from such as wild adventures, local guided tours, epic island getaways and immersive learning experiences. It is an empowering initiative that encourages travellers, both locals and global citizens, to support small Mauritian tourism businesses, to preserve the local expertise and reactivate the economy. This initiative aims at promoting sustainability while ensuring communities recover from COVID-19[7]. Strengthening the tourism pillar by building and projecting an 'environmentally friendly' image is very important. Though Mauritius has been putting forward the Wage Assistance Scheme to discourage firms from laying off workers, it is becoming increasingly unsustainable for firms to continue with their reduced activities and they may actually close down in the coming months. These schemes may not be sustainable in the long run.

In addition, like other Small Island Developing States (SIDS) Mauritius depends heavily on imported goods, and in particular fossil fuels, to power its economy. In effect, 84% of the nation's primary energy requirements are met by imported fossil fuels like oil and coal. The energy sector alone accounts for 62% of Mauritius' total greenhouse gas emissions (UNDP, 2020). The economic crisis triggered by COVID-19 speaks to the urgency for Mauritius to invest in clean energy alternatives to ensure energy security, a goal that is also vital for job creation and poverty alleviation. The post COVID-19 recovery will necessitate a long-term, reliable electricity supply to support businesses and boost the economy. Hence, as part of the low carbon economy project, Mauritius is finalising a National Grid Code, which will ensure that the electricity grid operates in a safe, reliable and economically viable way.

Mauritius has unfortunately not addressed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Measures put forward have concentrated primarily on short-term

policies to prevent the layoff of workers or closures of businesses. However, as suggested by the renewable energy and the local tourism gift card initiatives noted above, there is a recognition that there is a need for a long term strategy for sustainable development. A sustained commitment by all actors is vital to reduce the vulnerability of Mauritius on economic, social, and environmental issues.

## Useful Sources

- De Melo, J., Tandrayen-Ragoobur, V. and Seetanah B., (2020) COVID-19 in Mauritius and other tourist paradises: A progress report, *https://voxeu.org/article/covid-19-mauritius-and-other-tourist-paradises*

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[7] *http://tourism4sdgs.org/covid19_initiatives/mauritius-conscious-gift-card/*

## Published COVID-19 Island Insights Papers

#1. Malta. November 2020

#2. Egadi Islands. November 2020

#3. Grenada. November 2020

#4. Trinidad and Tobago. November 2020

#5. Shetland Islands. November 2020

#6. Åland Islands. November 2020

#7. Guam. December 2020

#8. Okinawa. December 2020

#9. Mauritius. February 2021