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CENTRE FOR
ENVIRONMENTAL LAW
AND GOVERNANCE



UNIVERSITY
of Prince Edward
ISLAND



COVID-19 Island Insights Series

No. 22, May 2021

Canary Islands

Carmen Rubio Armendáriz

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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Suggested citation: C. Rubio Armendáriz, *Canary Island, COVID-19 Island Insight Series, no 22, May 2021*, University of Strathclyde Centre for Environmental Law and Governance, University of Prince Edward Island Institute of Island Studies and Island Innovation.

ISSN 2563-6944

The Canary Islands, also known informally as the Canaries, is a Spanish archipelago in the Atlantic Ocean. The archipelago is economically and politically European, and is part of the European Union. The Canary Islands are the southernmost region of Spain, and the largest and most populous archipelago of Macaronesia. At their closest point to the African mainland, they are 100 kilometers west of Morocco.

In 2019, the Canary Islands had a population of 2,153,389 (with a density of 287.4 inhabitants per km²), making it the eighth most populous autonomous community (region) among the 17 autonomous communities (regions) in Spain. The population is mostly concentrated in the two capital islands with 43% on the island of Tenerife and 40% on the island of Gran Canaria.

COVID-19 data and timeline

(as of April 5, 2021)¹:

Positive cases: 47,723 (2.2% of the population)

Positives cases per islands:

- 20,147 Tenerife
- 19,788 Gran Canaria
- 4,676 Lanzarote
- 2,105 Fuerteventura
- 481 La Palma
- 300 El Hierro
- 225 La Gomera

First case in the Canaries: 31 January 2020

Number of Fatalities: 682 (0.032% of population)

Number PCR Tested: 974,673 with a 5.3% positive rate

Total number of people fully vaccinated as of March 31, 2021: 105,256 (7.8% of population)

Carmen Rubio Armendáriz

Professor of Toxicology. Former Vice President of Internationalization (2015-2019).
Universidad de La Laguna. Canary Islands, Spain



Canary Islands

¹ COVID-19 Canarias. https://www.gobiernodecanarias.org/principal/coronavirus/acceso_datos.html

The geo-strategic position of the Canary Islands makes the archipelago a tri-continental region. The Canary Islands are part of the fifth largest economy in the European Union (EU) through Spain and are fully integrated into the EU. Tourism is vital for the economy of the Canary Islands, contributing approximately 40% of employment and 35% of the islands' Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The Canary Islands takes pride in their leadership in this sector, which entails great responsibility and opportunity. The Canary Islands have developed a comprehensive touristic system/structure that serves tourists from the moment they arrive on the islands until they return to their countries of origin.

COVID-19 on the Canary Islands: An overview

The virus was first confirmed to have spread to Spain on 31 January 2020, when a German tourist tested positive for SARS-CoV-2 on La Gomera island. A few weeks later, the closure of a hotel in the south of Tenerife was required to deal with the outbreak of this virus. The management of this outbreak was later portrayed as a national example of successful public health intervention and the archipelago demonstrated itself to be a safe destination capable of making the decisions necessary to prevent the spread of the virus.

Since then, multiple national and regional measures have been implemented. Noteworthy is the nationwide state of alarm (13–27 March) for 15 days, the lifting of some restrictions (13 April – 1 May), the reimposition of a second state of emergency (1 October – present) and travel restrictions that have contributed to a feeling of remoteness and isolation among the local population.

Not all islands have been equally affected. The islands with the smallest populations, such as La Gomera and El Hierro, have remained very isolated and cases have been very rare. For this reason, the Government of the Canary Islands has had to personalize and adapt the COVID

management measures for each individual island. For this reason, some islands have suffered harsher restrictions than others.

Currently, vaccinations have become the most challenging objective. As of March 31st, 2021, 105,256 Canarians had received a full two-dose vaccination, representing just over 7.8% of the target population. This percentage is considered relatively low by European standards and there is a risk that the islands may not reach the 70% immunization target set by Europe for July.

COVID-19 containment measures and socioeconomic impacts

Since the start of the pandemic, the Government of the Canary Islands has been implementing measures to reduce the rate of spread of the virus, intensively monitoring and surveilling the epidemic, and strengthening public health and welfare services.

To protect public health, maintain the low COVID-19 incidence rate in the archipelago and maintain tourist and economic activity with the highest possible level of public safety, the Government of the Canary Islands passed a Decree in October, 2020 to regulate conditions for accessing tourist establishments within the Canaries. Both the regional and national Spanish governments continue to appeal to individual responsibility to achieve collective security.

The economic impact of COVID in the Canary Islands is associated with an extraordinary reduction in economic activity and employment, with a special impact on the tourism sector. The coronavirus crisis has exposed the vulnerability of our economy to a dominant industry. So far, the COVID crisis has led to the bankruptcy of 11% of Canary Islands companies, compared

to 2% of companies across Spain (Observatorio del Emprendimiento de España, 2020)².

Although it has recovered somewhat in early 2021, Canarian GDP fell by 20-24% during the last trimester 2020, compared to a decline in the Spanish GDP of 9.1% over the same period³. The greatest impacts have been observed on exports and imports of goods and services, due in both cases to the decrease in tourism and its effects on domestic demand. From a supply perspective, all economic sectors have been affected. In relative terms, the greatest impacts fall on services, followed by construction, manufacturing, and the primary sector.

The health crisis caused by COVID-19 has led to a radical and unexpected alteration in the entire Canarian productive system, with a special impact on the tourism sector. Restrictions on the movement of people, the closure of tourist establishments and uncertainties about the recovery of tourist demand have made the tourism sector experience the greatest intensity of economic devastation (Simancas et al., 2020).

The impact of the COVID crisis in the Canary Islands can be measured with different socio-economic indicators. While in March 2020 the unemployment rate was estimated to be 8.7%, in December 2020 it reached 29.4%, in January 2021 it was 32% and in February it climbed to 36.4%. The number of businesses operating decreased almost 35% between January 2020 and January 2021. Air traffic decreased 90% in one year (February 2020-February 2021) and the number of tourists arriving on the islands decreased 90% between January 2020 and January 2021. The number of foreign tourists to the Canary Islands plummeted from 16.8 million in 2019 to 4.8 million last year, a 71% drop. In the first six months of 2020, the number of British visitors to the archipelago fell 88% - from 2.5

million in 2019 to just under 309,000. Even though the “zero tourism” experience has been an unprecedented situation, the sector is showing its capacity for resilience. Finally, the number of new registered cars decreased 36.4% between February 2020 and February 2021⁴.

There were also many social impacts brought about by the pandemic, including on health services for the elderly and education. During the first few months, the Canarian population was passionate in their support for their health professionals, often applauding them from their balconies every night at 8:00 p.m. The lack of personal protection equipment (PPE) and the lack of masks in the early stages made health care work dangerous for these professionals. Although these supplies are now more available, access to COVID vaccines remains uncertain.

Education has also been impacted. Students engaged in virtual learning from March 2020 to the end of the 2019-2020 academic year. Educators suspect that the pandemic will have a long-lasting academic impact among the youngest, although the impact on the skills and abilities obtained will have to be evaluated, monitored and compared to those expected. However, since September some degree of normality has returned to the classrooms of primary and secondary schools, reducing the pressure on families and working parents.

University education has also returned to normal on the two largest islands, Tenerife and Gran Canarias, and in their two public universities and private higher education centers. Online learning within the university system has been effective and the teaching objectives were reached, although there has been an impact on the interactions between the universities and in-

² Rosa M. Batista-Canino, Alicia Bolívar-Cruz, Alicia Correa Rodríguez, Desiderio J. García-Almeida, Pino Medina-Brito, Juan L. Navarro-Mesa; Lidia Santana-Hernández, Silvia Sosa-Cabrera, Domingo Verano-Tacoronte. 2020. Situación del emprendimiento en Canarias ante la crisis del COVID-19. Análisis y recomendaciones. <https://empleo.ulpgc.es/wp-content/uploads/documentos/Emprendimiento-en-Canarias-y-Covid19.pdf>

³ <http://www.gobiernodecanarias.org/istac/.content/noticias/contabilidad-trimestral-canarias-noticia.html>

⁴ COVID-19 Canarias. https://www.gobiernodecanarias.org/principal/coronavirus/acceso_datos.html Cuadro de mando de indicadores de impacto de la COVID-19 en la coyuntura socioeconómica de Canarias. <http://www.gobiernodecanarias.org/istac/impacto-covid-19/cuadro-de-mando.html#data>

dustry, especially in professional academic programs. Due to the restrictions, some students have not been able to develop their internships in companies to the same extent as they did prior to the pandemic.

Post Covid-19 recovery: Resilience and sustainability

In October 2019, the Regional Parliament defined the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that needed to be achieved in the archipelago, and identified the actors, methods and means necessary to implement them⁵. The regional government then developed a series of concrete actions to be taken. Presented as a new model of governance, the Agenda 2030 of the Canary Islands is, according to its promoters, a real “social, co-operative and sustainable” regional development strategy. The pandemic presents both an enormous challenge and tremendous opportunity for reaching the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs are a roadmap for humanity and the challenges to be faced cannot be dealt with in isolation.

The Canary Islands Government, in this particularly fragile pandemic context, is under unparalleled pressure to deliver digital services and social protection, deal with immigration from West Africa, and function in ways that advance social cohesion. The Canaries people, health care professionals, and government leaders face the challenge of rethinking multiple aspects of our lives. The health crisis caused by COVID-19 has shone a magnifying glass on the economy and society, highlighting its deficiencies and weaknesses. People are tired and exhausted. The airlines have closed many of their routes and the number of flights offered has decreased. The Canary Islands population feels

less connected, both within the archipelago and with the mainland.

There is a high degree of uncertainty about the future, including the employment prospects of our young people. The recovery has been very slow and new and innovative ways of thinking are required. Long-term care services and facilities for elders must be rethought. Increased levels of teleworking are likely here to stay, turning houses into offices. Companies located on the mainland that previously shipped their products to the Canaries are thinking of opening branch plants on the islands and Canarians are increasingly able to access previously unavailable products online. E-commerce now constitutes 6% of the GDP after growing 25% in 2020. Canarian companies are betting on the internationalization of their products (ICEX, 2020)⁶.

Health security measures are going to become an important aspect of tourist protocols, making destinations that comply with them more attractive. The Canary Islands government has drawn up a roadmap to guarantee maximum health security for visitors, tourist sector workers, and the rest of the residents, conditions. The "Canarias Fortaleza Plan" and the "Laboratory of Tourism Protocols" have been launched by the Canary Islands Government to guarantee health security at each of the steps of the tourism value chain (Canarias FORTALEZA, 2020)⁷. The government is committed to marketing the Canary Islands as a “safe destination”. For their part, tourism entrepreneurs are highlighting the resilience of tourism on the archipelagic territory and have been studying opportunities for sustainable tourism development.

Tourism currently provides one out of every eleven jobs in the world. In the Canary Islands, it represents over one-third of the Gross Domestic Product. In addition, in Tenerife, the hospitality and service sectors contribute more than

⁵ Guía para la localización de los ODS. La perspectiva del Parlamento de Canarias. <https://www.local2030.org/library/659/Gua-de-localizacin-de-los-ODS-Parlamento-de-Canarias-PNUD.pdf>

⁶ Reference ICEX, 2020. <https://www.canarias7.es/economia/facturacion-comercio-electronico-20210307023253-ntvo.html>

⁷ Canarias Fortaleza, 2020 https://turismodeislascanarias.com/sites/default/files/canarias_fortaleza_dmt_2020.pdf

60% of the GDP to the island's economy. Being part of the Smart Tourist Destination Network means being a well-established innovative destination with cutting-edge technological infrastructure that ensures the sustainable development of the tourist region is accessible to all, facilitates visitors' interactions and integration with the surroundings, and enhances the quality of both visitors' experiences and the lives of local residents. This is intended to turn the Canary Islands Smart Islands into an innovative tourist destination based on an ICT infrastructure that ensures the quality of life of its citizens and makes the area accommodating, habitable, accessible, and sustainable.

Rural tourism is playing an increasing role. The COVID-19 crisis that has paralyzed traditional mass tourism to the Canary Islands will, paradoxically, favour the growth of a new business segment consisting of traveling professionals or what has been referred to as "digital nomads", which the Government expects to grow by twice the number previously predicted. Canarias is being redesigned and reinvented as a destination for some mobile workers who can come here to work remotely all year round. Thanks to a marketing strategy aimed at promoting itself as "the office with the best climate in the world", the archipelago aspires to attract 30,000 remote workers and digital nomads within a one-year period. With an initial budget of 500,000 euros, this project will seek to position the Canary Islands internationally among the main centers of activity of these remote professionals in the world, from London or Budapest to California (USA), using targeted promotional campaigns and publicizing their progress. Ads and reports in traditional media, paid and free, publications on social networks and organization or sponsorship of events that attract the attention of this type of tourist, who does not usually respond to the stimuli of the campaigns used in travel agencies and other common supports, are part of the marketing strategy⁸.

⁸ <https://workintenerife.intechtenerife.es/blog-en/smart-island-innovation-that-ensures-sustainable-development/>.

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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 |
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| #9. Mauritius. February 2021 | #20. Saint Helena. May 2021 |
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With thanks to the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF), creators of the **COVID-19 Rural Insights Series**, for kindly giving us permission to use "Insights Series" as part of our series name