

# Introduction

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When the possible themes for this year's Annual Report on Global Islands were being discussed with stakeholders, it was only natural for the outcome of the discussion to reflect the principal concern facing islands, as well as all other jurisdictions, at the time — the COVID-19 pandemic. After all, it had just forced the postponement of the 2020 Islands Economic Cooperation Forum and was adversely affecting the public health of so many islanders and the economies of so many islands. However, this volume is not just about this specific pandemic and islands. Although several chapters speak directly to the way islands have experienced and overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, this fifth volume in the series of Annual Reports takes a broader, more holistic interpretation of public health as it relates to small islands. It suggests that, sooner or later, most island states and subnational jurisdictions will enter a post-pandemic reality. That reality may create even greater economic challenges for some islands, especially for those that depend on international tourism. There are already signs that some islands are taking a path of least resistance, opting to rebuild the same economies and the same structures that existed pre-pandemic. However, for others the pandemic points to a “call to action” as reflected in slogans such as “building back better”, a “new normal”, and a “greening of the economy”. In some cases, the aspiration to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a global initiative that preceded the COVID-19 pandemic, has taken on greater significance.

There are two other themes that emerge from this collection of research. One is best reflected by the word “islandness”; a term that Island Studies scholars often use to describe and explain the unique contributions that this interdisciplinary field brings to the conceptual and applied debates on island issues. Are there characteristics of islands and islanders that set them apart from mainlands? Does relative isolation in space and the boundedness of islands bestow on islands and their inhabitants an innate advantage — a resilience — to meet and overcome this external public health threat in much the same way they have overcome external economic, cultural, and natural threats in the past? Evidence is already emerging that, despite economic devastation to their economies, island governments may have been more successful than many mainland jurisdictions in fending off the worst public health outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite relatively poorer health care systems and less access to equipment and health care providers. One indicator of this success is the current ranking of states on how they have fared during the pandemic, as determined by the Lowy Institute, an

Australian-based think tank. According to this organization, of the top twenty countries deemed to have been successful in dealing with the public health outcomes of the pandemic, seven are islands (Lowy Institute, 2021). Of these seven islands, New Zealand is said to have been the best nation in the world in combatting COVID-19.

In most jurisdictions, governments alone cannot guarantee public health success. It requires a collective effort to act in the best interest of the common good, even if those actions curtail personal freedoms. It could be that the collective actions of islanders are being influenced to a degree by their islandness. After all, on small islands social networks are often strong, there is a sense of physical and social separation from the rest of the world, and it is not uncommon to find an “us versus them” or “islander versus outsider” mentality. All of these islandness characteristics may be providing some islands with relative advantages in responding to COVID-19.

The other theme that connects the topics in this volume is cooperation and collaboration. Although islands may have developed a degree of protection by shielding themselves from external threats, there are many examples in the literature and on these pages where “building back better” occurs by forging partnerships with other islands. In some cases, these might be simple bilateral relationships. In other cases, networks of island jurisdictions have come together to exchange ideas, people, capital, and best practices. If conducted respectfully, cooperation in economic investments can lead to greater resilience in achieving public health goals.

## **SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS**

The first chapter, by Randall and Chapman, continues the tradition in this series of tracking the economic and social changes taking place on a group of 48 island states and 13 subnational island jurisdictions (SNIJs). Although the coverage of island states in this section consists of almost all independent island nations, the small number of SNIJs barely scratches the surface of the total number of these semi-autonomous islands. However, the availability, reliability, and comparability of data for this latter group continues to make these comparisons challenging.

Drawn from various government and supra-government sources, by bringing together island-specific data in one place, it allows the reader to better understand the state of islands and the changes, albeit sometimes small, taking place from year-to-year. As in previous years, certain variables make their appearance to reflect the themes of each volume. This year we have added a greater number of variables that are linked directly to public health on islands, including government spending in the health sector, the number of hospital beds per 1,000 people, the levels of adult and child obesity, and the prevalence of diabetes, this latter being one of the unfortunate consequences of obesity. Perhaps as evidence of its usefulness, several of the chapters in this volume reference the data from previous Annual Reports in their analyses.

During this global pandemic, most attention has rightly focused on the immediate need to limit adverse health outcomes and support those who have lost their livelihoods. However, it is not too early to start uncovering patterns and trying to decipher how those patterns might help jurisdictions as they emerge from the pandemic. Based on an analysis of a comprehensive data set contributed by islanders around the world, the chapter by Sindico starts to build those patterns. Interestingly, Sindico goes beyond the obvious impacts on the tourist sector to discuss food security. Even though many islands have the capacity to be almost self-sustaining in meeting their own food needs, globalization has led to an evolution of food production on many islands, such that producing for the tourist sector and emphasizing export-oriented, monoculture production has made these islands vulnerable to food insecurity during the pandemic. Sindico calls for a more robust policy-relevant research agenda that recognizes traditional policies that may have contributed to island vulnerability. A recognition that governance and government is at the heart of many of the current vulnerabilities is the first step in making islands more resilient to the next pandemic.

In Chapter 3, Huish uses the examples of historic and current pandemic experiences faced by islands to better understand their failures and successes. The subtitle of the chapter, “Neither gift, nor luck”, suggests that pandemic outcomes have not occurred by either fate or chance. Rather, good governance practices and coordination within and across islands have contributed to the positive outcomes. As an example of external cooperation, Huish outlines in some detail the medical internationalism role taken by Cuba preceding and during the COVID-19 pandemic. For a small island state that is beset by economic and social challenges not entirely of its own making (e.g., American trade restrictions and blockades), they have made a conscious effort to assist the public health efforts in other jurisdictions.

Kelman (Chapter 4) uses the concept of islandness, raised earlier in this Introduction, to better understand the pandemic outcomes on small islands. Kelman’s interpretation of islandness takes two forms; the physical connectedness and barriers implemented to prevent the spread of the virus, and the virtual connectedness experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, Kelman concludes that islandness can be both beneficial and detrimental to islands facing crises. The key to a more resilient post-pandemic world is to recognize these elements and be nimble enough to react quickly when circumstances change.

In the midst of this global pandemic, we tend to forget the longer-term issues facing humanity. In Chapter 5, Telesford reminds us that all nations are still supposed to be working toward meeting their obligations under the United Nations-approved 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Given the theme of this volume and current public health challenges, Telesford focuses on SDG3 — good health and well-being — and how this is integrated with all the other SDGs. He does this by analyzing the progress reviews conducted by ten island states and two island territories. The COVID-19

pandemic will negatively affect progress in achieving the SDGs. What is not clear is how many jurisdictions have even begun to articulate the magnitude of this impact.

Lin and Deng (Chapter 6) describe examples of the many types of island networks that currently exist but ultimately conclude that there is still a considerable amount of fragmentation among islands and island organizations. They make the case that there is still significant opportunity to build more cohesive island-centric networks around the broad concepts of the marine economy and the Blue Economy. They call for the collaborative establishment of Blue Economy demonstration areas and global central island cities to truly achieve the goals of sustainable development.

In Chapter 7, Wong reminds readers of the main theoretical frameworks underpinning state-to-state cooperation and conflict, and then applies these to a series of case studies involving islands, including their relationships with other islands and with mainland jurisdictions. He suggests that islands have been underrepresented in the literature on conflict and cooperation. By using these cases, Wong presents a preliminary unified framework of island-to-island and island-to-mainland cooperation and conflict.

The final chapter in this volume, by Huang and Wang, is a “call to action” regarding the role that Hainan can play in a rapidly changing network of islands. It documents the advances Hainan has made and intends to make soon as a global island. It also contends that Hainan is well-positioned to serve as a living laboratory for both China and the region to engage in some innovative economic development practices. Interestingly, many of the suggestions given in the chapter, including Hainan expanding its role in modern producer services, high-technology and/or digital sectors, and building the island’s intellectual capacity, are drawn from the research presented by Island Studies scholars in earlier iterations of these Annual Reports. This serves as evidence that the knowledge gained from these events is making a difference to local policy and practice.

Finally, on this fifth anniversary of the Island Economic Cooperation Forums, I want to thank our colleagues in Hainan for allowing this scholarship to flourish. A body of work is now being built that represents an important contribution to island economic development. This would not have been possible without the ongoing commitment by the Foreign Affairs Office of Hainan Province.