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ISLAND



COVID-19 Island Insights Series

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Trinidad and Tobago

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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.

For more information on SCELG see
<https://www.strath.ac.uk/scelg>

For more information about the IIS see
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<https://www.islandinnovation.co/>

Population 1,328,019 (of which about 60,874 is in Tobago)¹

Size 5,131 km² (of which 300 km² is Tobago)²

This twin-island republic is the southernmost country in the Caribbean Sea. Tobago, the smaller of the two islands, can be described as a subnational island jurisdiction and has been a ward of Trinidad since 1899.

The main economic activities are oil and gas (Trinidad) and tourism (Tobago).

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COVID-19 data and timeline

(as of 3rd September 2020)

Number of cases 1,920 [0.14% of the population]

Number of deaths 28 [0.002% of the population]

Schools closed on 16 March 2020; will reopen virtually in September (universities continued teaching online)

Travel restrictions have been enacted. 16 March border closed to everyone except Trinidad and Tobago nationals and health workers. 22 March borders closed to everyone, including nationals.



TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO³

¹ Data obtained from the Central Statistical Office, Trinidad and Tobago.

² Data obtained from the Central Statistical Office, Trinidad and Tobago.

³ Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinidad_and_Tobago#/media/File:Trinidad_and_Tobago_-_Location_Map_\(2013\)_-_TTO_-_UNOCHA.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinidad_and_Tobago#/media/File:Trinidad_and_Tobago_-_Location_Map_(2013)_-_TTO_-_UNOCHA.svg)

COVID-19 on Trinidad and Tobago

On 12 March 2020 Trinidad and Tobago had its first COVID-19 case, a returning resident from abroad. This situation eventually led to local transmission of the virus as there were primary and secondary contact cases. Up to 16 July, there were 133 positive cases and 8 deaths attributed mainly to imported cases and local transmission. However, more recently the country has been experiencing community spread through primary, secondary and tertiary contacts, and as of 3 September the country has recorded over 1, 920 cases and over 28 deaths.⁴

Restrictions in Trinidad and Tobago were imposed nationally. Travel restrictions to and from specific countries (initially China and later on South Korea, Singapore, Japan, Italy, Germany, France and Spain) were implemented starting January 2020, and the subsequent closure of Trinidad and Tobago's borders occurred on 16 March to everyone except Trinidad and Tobago nationals and health workers, and on 22 March the borders were closed to everyone including nationals. Nationals wishing to return home must apply for a state exemption, and, if granted, upon their return must be tested for COVID-19 and placed into quarantine for 14 days. On 12 March the cruise ship season was brought to a premature halt.⁵

Closure of all early childcare and educational institutions including primary and secondary schools and vocational institutes took place on 16 March. The University of the West Indies went into an emergency virtual mode and was allowed to continue operations.

Trinidad and Tobago's most restrictive phase occurred between 29 March and 15 April with a national lockdown and stay-at-home orders for non-essential workers, along with the closure of

beaches, rivers, hotels, restaurants, bars, manufacturing operations and cinemas. A cessation was also placed on mass gatherings.

A parallel healthcare system dedicated specifically for COVID treatment and quarantine was established to avoid overburdening the existing health system. The government, led by the Ministry of Health, also embarked on near-daily information press briefings to update the population in terms of the number of infections and deaths as well as new measures taken to counteract the spread of the virus. Geo-spatial maps were also updated regularly showing locations of new infections. To enforce the public health restrictions the police increased patrols at all times.

Collectively, the above measures contributed to Trinidad and Tobago being ranked first in the world in May 2020 by the University of Oxford Government Response Tracker (OxGRT) in terms of readiness to reopen.⁶ However, a phased reopening of the economy, accompanied by an intensive national election campaign in early August, has led to an exponential increase in new COVID-19 infections, particularly due to community spread. This has forced the government to rethink its approach to control the spread of the virus, and a new round of Stay in Place Orders (SIPOs) have been initiated.

Key socioeconomic pressures in Trinidad and Tobago during COVID-19

The measures employed to fight COVID-19 have brought about significant economic and social challenges in a country heavily dependent on the energy sector. Even before the crisis, T&T was experiencing an economic downturn primarily as a result of low international oil and gas prices (see Figure 1). The lockdown measures have placed a further strain on local economic activity as persons have lost their jobs or experienced reduced incomes, while supply chains have been disrupted, and there

⁴ <http://www.health.gov.tt/sitepages/default.aspx?id=293>

⁵ <https://www.looptt.com/content/government-suspends-cruise-ship-season-due-covid-19>

⁶ <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/coronavirus-government-response-tracker>

has been reduced demand for goods and services (IDB 2020). The closure of the borders has led to several hotels and tourist services temporarily closing down. This is particularly devastating for Tobago since the island is heavily dependent on tourism. A special Tourism Accommodation Grant was given to these operators to support them during the crisis. The local entertainment sector, construction sector and most of the manufacturing sector are considered non-essential and were closed temporarily. Finally, depressed international energy prices, together with falling local production, are expected to reduce economic activity and investment in the local energy sector, along with exports and government revenue.

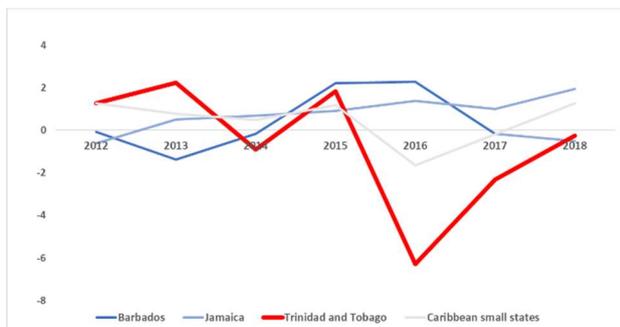


Figure 1: Gross Domestic Product Growth, Caribbean countries (in % annual change)

The closure of the borders has led to an influx of approximately 19,000 nationals, with many still left stranded overseas.⁷ The majority of persons stranded outside are students and workers in particular cruise ship workers and oil and gas workers, but also includes persons who left the country for medical treatment and for leisure travel. Further, there are concerns about children being away from school over an extended period, and the ability of schools to re-open in a virtual format, expected for September. In the nation, there is a significant digital divide, and it is expected that 60,000 students do not have

⁷ <https://www.diplomacy.edu/blog/first-month-covid-trinidad-and-tobago>

⁸ <https://www.guardian.co.tt/news/60000-students-suffering-6.2.1109261.6ee28d9d13>

⁹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1055521/internet-penetration-trinidad-tobago/#:~:text=Internet%20penetration%20has%20seen%20a,from%2048.5%20percent%20in%202010.>

the resources to access online learning,⁸ while internet penetration rates stand at just 77%.⁹ Additionally, stay-at-home restrictions and fear of contagion have raised concerns regarding mental health, domestic violence and unequal distribution of childcare responsibilities (ECLAC 2020).

Post Covid-19 recovery on Trinidad and Tobago: A different approach

The combination of the pandemic and low energy prices has generated over TT\$4 billion in losses to the local economy from January to March 2020.¹⁰ The country has taken a multi-dimensional approach in its COVID-19 response, inclusive of the following policy objectives:

1. Macroeconomic measures—additional liquidity into the commercial banking system, a moratorium on mortgage loans and installment loan payments, and reduced interest rates and late fees on credit cards.
2. Fiscal measures—payment of outstanding VAT and income tax refunds and overdue payables owed by the government, provision of a Liquidity Support Loan Programme to credit unions to facilitate the provision of loans to individuals and small businesses; special grant for hoteliers in Tobago to upgrade their facilities.
3. Monetary measures—reduction of the reserve requirement for commercial banks and the Repo rate, or rate at which the Central Bank lends money to commercial banks.

¹⁰ http://planning.gov.tt/sites/default/files/Report%20of%20the%20Roadmap%20to%20Recovery%20Committee_1st_.pdf

On 16 April the Prime Minister appointed a High-Level Multi-Sectoral Committee comprised of representatives from government, private sector, civil society, labour and academia with the mandate to develop a plan for the reopening of society and the road to economic recovery for the post-pandemic period. The “Roadmap” is intended to guide the government’s actions in the immediate short-term to cope with the fallout from the pandemic, as well as the transformation of the economy and the accelerated and sustained development of the society over the medium- to long-term.¹¹ To achieve these objectives the government intends to:

1. Expand social protection and deepen the involvement of civil society organizations
2. Increase agriculture production to reduce dependence on imports
3. Strengthen the food value chain
4. Stimulate activity in the construction sector and infrastructure projects
5. Providing relief to businesses and consumers
6. Provide financial relief through banking, insurance, and credit unions
7. Sustain economic activity in the energy sector
8. Support a resurgence of Tobago business
9. Expand local tourism
10. Build a digital economy by increasing e-government solutions and services

The government has had to draw down on savings from the Heritage and Stabilization Fund as well as borrow from multilateral institutions to fund recovery efforts, further increasing long-term public debt.

¹¹ Roadmap available at http://planning.gov.tt/sites/default/files/Report%20of%20the%20Roadmap%20to%20Recovery%20Committee_1st_.pdf

Post Covid-19 recovery and the Sustainable Development Goals

The government intends to adopt the call by the United Nations to “Leave No One Behind” in response to the challenges of COVID-19 and the ensuing economic instability (Ministry of Planning 2020). The government has responded through social measures to ensure the safety and security of citizens including food support to low-income households and children on the school feeding program; income support to beneficiaries on public assistance and disability grants; rental assistance; support to NGOs to assist socially displaced persons; and salary relief grants. These challenges have deepened the resolve of the government to sustain its commitment to achieving the SDGs through the implementation of Vision 2030, the country’s national development strategy.

Useful Sources

- ECLAC. 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the care crisis in Latin America and the Caribbean. https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/45352/1/S2000260_en.pdf
- IDB. 2020. The Impact of COVID-19 on the Economies of the Region. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18235/0002282>
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- #1. Malta. November 2020
- #2. Egadi Islands. November 2020
- #3. Grenada. November 2020
- #4. Trinidad and Tobago. November 2020



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