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COVID-19 Island Insights Series

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Tierra de Fuego. Argentina

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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.

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Argentine Tierra del Fuego is an archipelago located in the extreme south of the South American continent. It forms part of the nation's youngest provinces, called Tierra del Fuego, Antártida e Islas del Atlántico Sur, constituted in 1990.

Estimated population: 173,432¹

Land size: 21,571km²

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COVID-19 data and timeline

(as of April 20, 2021)

Number of cases: 25,410 (14.7%
of the population)

Number of fatalities: 388 (0.22%
of the population)

Number of vaccines: received
30.601; applied 27.811, of which
21.153 first doses and 6659 sec-
ond doses.



Tierra de Fuego²

¹ Retrieved on April 21 from <https://ipiec.tier-radelfuego.gov.ar/>

² Source https://www.ushuaia-patagonia.com.ar/Mapas/pages/tierrafuego_jpg.htm

COVID-19 en la Isla Grande de Tierra de Fuego, Argentina

The Great Island of Tierra del Fuego (total land surface 47.992 km²) is divided into two jurisdictions along the meridian of 68° 34' West. The western portion of the island (29,485 km² or 61.43% of the island land mass) belongs to the Chilean Province of Tierra del Fuego, the eastern section (18,507 km² or 38.57%) being part of The Republic of Argentina³.

Despite being an insular community located 3,000 km south of the capital city of Buenos Aires, the first COVID-19 case was confirmed within its boundaries on March 10th, only seven days after the first case at the national level.

On the 17th of March, the governor of Tierra del Fuego announced severe measures in the light of latest COVID-19 related developments. At that time, cruise tourism was still active, producing many entrances for international tourists into the urban area of Ushuaia, the Province's capital city. With just a few confirmed cases within its jurisdiction, this issue, along with the relatively low capacity in terms of medical assistance, forced the Provincial government to implement severe measurements before the national government did so on March the 19th⁴.

All industrial, commercial, sport and leisure activities were suspended, including all tourist related events. All public establishments were closed, including all educational institutions⁵. The local population was commanded to stay at home, and tourists were asked to return to their places of origin⁶. Specific regulations allowed only one family member to be in the public space, for essential services such as food acquisition and medical assistance. All access to and from the island was closed, excepting repatriating movements from and to the island which were carried out only by air. This "preventive and obligatory social isolation" (or ASPO in

Spanish) was sustained for 80 days until the more flexible measure - "preventive and obligatory social distancing"- (or DISPO in Spanish) was announced on the 6th of June.

Cases were significantly reduced during this first period of ASPO, although with different curves in the two mayor cities. In Río Grande, the largest city on the island, the number of cases was stabilized rather quickly. However, during July, when measures had been eased for several weeks, cases increased steeply, resulting in a second period of ASPO at the local scale from July 21th to August 16th⁷. In Ushuaia, positive cases climbed to 124 at the beginning of May, and dropped rapidly reaching a 39 day stretch without any positive case until the 4th of July. With the exception of a short eight-day period of ASPO from the 27th of September in Ushuaia, both localities maintained a policy of DISPO during the spring and summer months⁸.

Just recently, from the beginning of March 2021, positive cases started to increase significantly again, reflecting national trends. Argentina has entered into a "second wave" and although a lock down has been implemented only in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, in Tierra del Fuego DISPO restrictions were announced. Social gatherings in private spaces were prohibited, while outside gatherings were allowed for up to twenty persons. Also, a curfew was implemented from midnight to 6:00am.

Socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 in Tierra de Fuego

Apart from a steep decline in most commercial activities produced by ASPO and DISPO restrictions, the city of Ushuaia was particularly affected due to the suspension of tourist activities. During the winter season of 2020 businesses survived on local demand only (which is

³ Van Aert P. (2013) Tierra del Fuego. In: Baldacchino G. (eds) *The Political Economy of Divided Islands*. International Political Economy. Palgrave Macmillan, London.
https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137023131_11

⁴ Source: Ontivero, J. y Rodríguez M.S., 2020. Coronavirus en Tierra del Fuego. Una mirada cuantitativa. Actualizado el

30 de diciembre 2020. Retrieved on April 15 from http://untdf.edu.ar/coronavirus/covid19_en_tdf.

⁵ See Decreto Provincial 468/2020, available [here](#).

⁶ Recorded [here](#) from Gobernador Melella.

⁷ Ontivero, J. y Rodríguez M.S., Op.cit.

⁸ Ibid.

hardly significant relatively), and during the summer season of 2020-2021 cruise tourism was completely suspended, which caused a devastating setback. At the time of the first ASPO in March 2020, Ushuaia had broken its own season record related to cruise tourism. Its port registered 443 cruise related entrances, disembarking 135,153 tourists⁹. Also the National Park of Tierra del Fuego, that borders the city of Ushuaia, registered in 2019 more incoming visitors than ever before, totalling 408,974 individual entrances, of which only 11% was from local islanders¹⁰.

The city's commercial activities lean heavily on tourism, which is why employment came under severe pressure due to the pandemic. The national government implemented a series of policies at the federal level in order to compensate for the decreased revenues in the private sector¹¹, such as the Emergency Programme of Assistance to Employment and Production (or ATP in Spanish). This consists of compensation offered to companies related to the salaries of employees. According to a survey conducted by the Provincial government in August 2020, in Tierra del Fuego, half of the state emergency assistance to tourist companies stemmed from this programme¹². Among other state funds are APTur (5.1%) – that was specifically aimed at individuals offering tourist services, such as independent tourist guides – and the Provincial fund PROG.RE.SAR (11,9%) – that received a significant number of applications from tourism-related workers in Tierra del Fuego¹³. Unfortunately, some of these funds consisted of only one disbursement, as was the case with APTur, or in the 2021 wave represented a significantly lower level of support in spite of the elevated inflation rates. For instance, PROG.RE.SAR diminished disbursements from Arg\$40.000 per person in 2020, to Arg\$30.000 in 2021, despite an annual inflation rate of 36.1% in 2020¹⁴.

Since international tourist entries are still suspended, the year 2021 presents many more uncertainties for many families in Tierra del Fuego.

However, official statistics indicate a different tendency at the provincial level¹⁵. This can be partly explained by the significant proportion of state employees in Tierra del Fuego, and, especially, by the particular employment juncture in the city of Río Grande. In this city the electronics industry employees a significant portion of the local labour force on short term contracts (mostly for periods of 90 days). After a steep fall in employment caused by the fact that many of these contracts were not extended when factories were closed down, this trend was inverted during the second quarter of 2020. This change was at least partly a result of COVID-19 hygiene protocols that resulted in a duplication of workstations. The other motive was the compensation needed in the production of the commodities that rolled of the assembly lines in Fuegian factories. After the closure during the first ASPO, production needed to be intensified in order to meet increased demand from the national market. The use of consumer goods produced in Tierra del Fuego, such as smartphones and smart TV's, was increased rather than reduced as a result of the implementation of COVID-19 measures. This clearly benefited industrial employment in Tierra del Fuego.

Besides the aforementioned financial aid offered from government at different levels, Tierra del Fuego also changed its public health infrastructure as a result of Covid-19. Due to the remote and cross-border conditions of the island community, at the initial announcements in 2020, the national government liberated funds in order to establish temporary sanitation centres in Tierra del Fuego's two main cities to

⁹ IN.FUE.TUR. Turismo de cruceros 2019/2020. August 2020.

¹⁰ Statistics obtained from the local office of the National Parks Administration, 2020.

¹¹ See <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/produccion/medidas-pymes-covid>.

¹² IN.FUE.TUR. Resultados Relevamiento COVID-19 Sector Hotelero de Tierra del Fuego, Antártida e Islas del Atlántico Sur. In Press.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ According to official publications. See https://www.indec.gob.ar/uploads/informesdeprensa/ipc_01_21CD878A2A5B.pdf.

¹⁵ For instance, see the official publication of general employment rates based on the Permanent Survey of Households (EPH in Spanish) (fourth quarter of 2020) at: <https://ipiec.tierradelfuego.gov.ar/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Tasas-4%C2%BAtrim-2020.pdf>.

increase the capacity of medical assistance. In Ushuaia, the local indoor micro-stadium was turned into a hospital ward with 63 beds equipped with respiratory technology, for low-risk yet assistance-dependent patients, and 7 intensive care units. In Río Grande, the municipal shelter was converted into a health care centre with 24 beds, four rooms with oxygen equipment and other basic medical technology. None of these centres has been fully occupied up to date, but have provided an effective “buffer zone” that prevents further spreading of the virus while recovering patients receive medical assistance without occupying hospital beds.

Additionally, the national government financed the installation of Modular Sanitary Centres (or CMS in Spanish) in ten highly tourism dependent provinces, of which Tierra del Fuego is one. On the 14th of April, 2021, Ushuaia’s CMS was inaugurated. The purpose of these centres is to add assistance, laboratory and observation facilities to tourist destinations that may suffer increasing medical demand during high season¹⁶. In his way, this CMS, located in the port area, responds to a strategy to enable economic recovery in tourism-dependent localities.

The vaccination programme uses this same strategy. Its rollout started in early 2021 and is administered federally. So far, Tierra de Fuego has received 30,601 doses, mostly the Gam-COVID-Vac (Sputnik-V). All inhabitants over 60 years that voluntarily applied, as well as health personnel, have received a first dose. At the moment of writing, the Provincial government is calling all risk groups within the age range of 18 to 59, to voluntarily apply for the first dose. In Tierra de Fuego, between 800 and 1,000 persons are vaccinated daily¹⁷.

Resilience and sustainability in Tierra de Fuego

Argentina is going through the second wave, and maintains its politics of ASPO and DISPO depending on the circumstances within each municipal jurisdiction, complemented with policies of economic assistance to enforce local resistance to a global health care crisis. Public policies in Tierra del Fuego continue to aim at the immediate impacts of the pandemic, which is considered the best focus in order to leave behind the state of epidemiological emergency. Apart from initiatives such as the CMS, which springs from a future-centred vision, a sophisticated road map towards a post-pandemic reality has not yet been articulated. The main bet for health care security and economic recovery is the vaccination programme.

On the national scale, the Fuegian community has been one of the most severely impacted populations of Argentina, especially in terms of fatalities. This is why measures have often been stricter or more lasting than in other low population density regions throughout the country. Conversely, the Province is one of the most advanced in terms of vaccination, having applied the first dose at an estimated 15% of its population, and the second dose at 5%. Also, due to its relatively young population, authorities are currently vaccinating younger populations more quickly than in other districts, which implies that more protection has been reached for riskier groups and the elderly.

The local economy of Río Grande, characterized by the production of electronic devices for the national market, proved to be more resilient than that of Ushuaia, that is profoundly dependent on international tourist flows. Nevertheless, despite of the aforementioned recovery of the labour market during 2020, other sources estimated in October 2020 that 40% of the Fuegian

¹⁶ Source: <https://www.tierradelfuego.gob.ar/el-gobernador-melella-y-el-ministro-katopodis-inauguraron-el-centro-modular-sanitario-en-ushuaia/>.

¹⁷ Retrieved April 21 from: <https://www.tierradelfuego.gob.ar/la-campana-de-vacunacion-contra-el-covid-19-continua-cumpliendo-las-etapas-planificadas/>.

population was living in poverty¹⁸, which represented an annual increase of 15.3%.

The Fuegian economy is founded on an external demand (national and international) of luxury goods and services (electronics, tourism). Therefore, it is susceptible to both national and global vicissitudes. With this production matrix placed in the light of sustainability, the pandemic provides us with a profound and painful lesson. Despite the fact that the province formally adhered to the 2030 agenda for sustainable development goals on November 2016¹⁹ announcing strong commitments²⁰, no explicit articulation was made between COVID-19-related policies and the Objectives of Sustainable Development (or ODS in Spanish), or other perspectives of sustainability²¹. Rather, the pandemic demonstrated that with respect to economic and public health conditions, post-pandemic policies face great challenges in transitioning towards sustainability.

In conclusion, Fuegian islanders have been hit hard by the pandemic, while new horizons of economic recovery are still far away. At the same time, different state policies at all levels have softened the impact both for employers,

employees, and independent workers in 2020, support that so far has not been extended to the same degree in 2021. In terms of medical assistance, the local governments reacted quickly and strongly, amplifying local health care infrastructure and professional staff to attend it. However, the steep increase in the number of positive cases, both at the provincial and national levels, combined with uncertainties at local level and the abandonment, by governments, of urgent actions towards sustainability, does not bode well for the future.

Useful sources (in Spanish)

- <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/coronavirus/vacuna/aplicadas>
- <https://www.tierradelfuego.gob.ar/category/coronavirus/>
- <http://untdf.edu.ar/CORONAVIRUS>
- <https://turismoushuaia.com/contenidos/covid-19/>

¹⁸ See, for instance: https://www.eldiariodelfindelmundo.com/noticias/2020/10/01/88646-casi-el-40por_ciento-de-los-fueguinos-es-pobre.

¹⁹ See "Informe Provincial 2017", disponible en https://www.argentina.gob.ar/sites/default/files/informe_de_gestion_2017_tdf.pdf.

²⁰ For instance, by the former governor.

²¹ The ODS stem from one of many interpretations of sustainability, as we argument in BLOCK, Thomas, PAREDIS, Erik, VAN AERT, Peter (2020). Sostenibilidad en Tiempos Antropocénicos. Una propuesta didáctica para un abordaje social y político de problemas de sostenibilidad. RISUS - Journal on Innovation and Sustainability, 11 (4): 200-220. DOI:10.23925/10.23925/2179-3565.2020v11i4p200-220.

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