

Covid-19: Trinidad and Tobago's Disaster Management in A Pandemic

Introduction

As long as the human civilization has existed, infectious diseases and humanity have always been at war. Overtime, plagues, epidemics and pandemics have wrecked havoc of immense proportions on human beings and have, in most instances, altered the course of history and fostered a 'new normal' for future generations.

According to health experts, the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV-2).¹ The virus first originated in Wuhan, China and presented itself to health practitioners in December 2019. Since then it has swept across the globe to 213 countries and territories with a reported 6,317,715 cases of which 375,036 resulted in deaths.²

Besides the obvious health-related concerns associated with the virus, COVID-19 over the past few months has left most, if not all, developing countries in crisis. Reports state that income losses are expected to exceed \$220 billion in developing countries leaving an estimated 55 per cent of

the global population void of social protection,³ and, ultimately leading to social and economic challenges. The ripple effects of these socio-economic setbacks have implications both in the short-term and long-term for vulnerable sectors of society. The lower and middle class sectors are likely to be disproportionately disadvantaged in the areas of education, human rights, and access to basic food security and nutrition,⁴ putting at risk the attainment of several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for these countries.

Trinidad and Tobago versus COVID-19

With a population of approximately 1.4 million people,⁵ Trinidad and Tobago's fight against the COVID-19 has been nothing short of spectacular. As on June 1, 2020, as stated in "Trinidad and Tobago COVID-19 (Novel Coronavirus) Update #248", the number of samples, which have tested positive, is equal to 117; the number of deaths stand at 8, and the number of persons discharged is 108. The update also states that the number of samples submitted to the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) and the University of the

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West Indies (UWI) site for testing for COVID-19 is 3169.⁶

The islands of Trinidad and Tobago can count itself lucky, having literally ‘dodged a bullet’ from the virus in February when the country hosted its annual Carnival festivities with thousands of international visitors coming to its shores. However, luck alone didn’t keep the COVID-19 figures seemingly at bay. The country recorded its first case on 12 March 2020⁷ with the case documented as ‘imported’. Since then the government’s proactive response to curbing the spread of the virus was guided by their number one priority: to protect their most precious commodity, the life of each Trinbagonian national. Figure 1.1 is a visual representation of the timeline of confirmed COVID-19 cases from March 2020 to June 2020 reported to the Ministry of Health, Trinidad and Tobago.

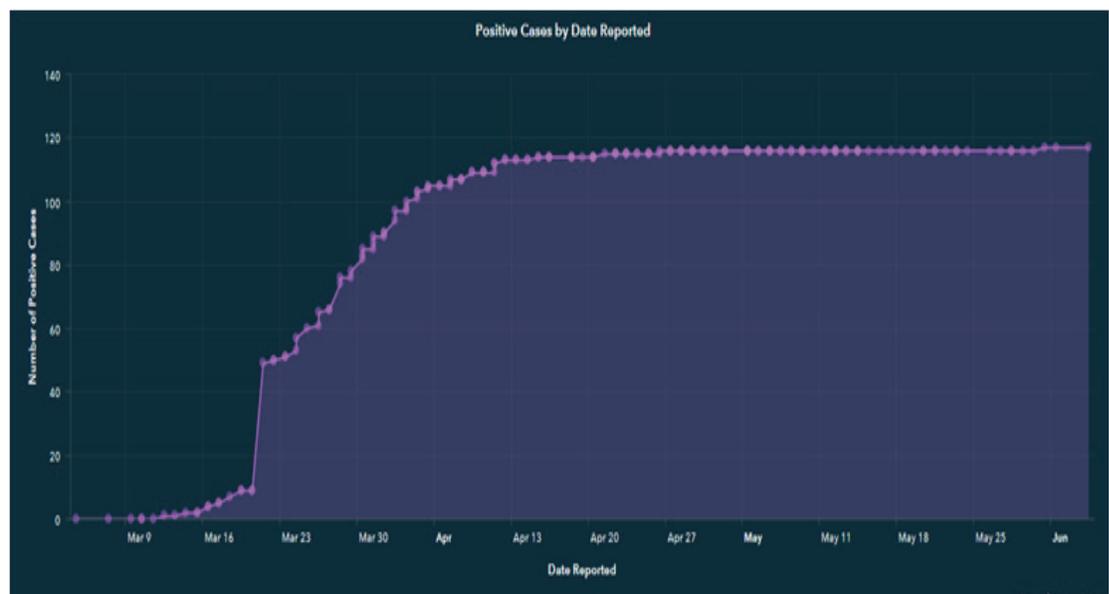
Figure 1.2 shows the graphical mapping of samples sent for testing to Caribbean Public Health Agency

(CARPHA) versus the number of confirmed positive cases. From the figures provided through the official website of the Ministry of Health of Trinidad and Tobago, it can be determined that 4.18 per cent of tests sent to CARPHA returned positive. In addition, approximately only 0.20 per cent of the population of Trinidad and Tobago tested for the Novel Coronavirus. Notably, these calculations exclude repeated tests.

Figure 1.3 is a geographical representation of the islands of Trinidad and Tobago depicting where COVID-19 positive patients reside. Notably, the Ministry of Health reports that the majority of these confirmed COVID-19 cases were imported and not locally transmitted through community spread. From the diagram, it can also be seen that the northern parts of Tobago, as well as, the majority of the South-Eastern parts of Trinidad were relatively COVID-free.

However, in light of the growing number of COVID-19 cases on the global front, the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago

Figure 1.1: Positive Cases by Date Reported⁸



Source: Ministry of Health, Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago COVID-19 T&T GIS Map.

¹ World Health Organization https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1

² “COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC” Worldometers.info/coronavirus/?utm_campaign=homeADUOA?Si June 01, 2020-06-02.

³ United Nations Development Programme. 2020. “COVID-19: Looming crisis in developing countries threatens to devastate economies and ramp up inequality”. Undp.org/content/undp/en/home/news-centre/news/2020/COVID19_Crisis_in_developing_countries_threatens_devastate_economies.html March 30.

⁴ WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM. “COVID-19: What are the biggest concerns for the developing world?” Weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/developing-world-covid19/

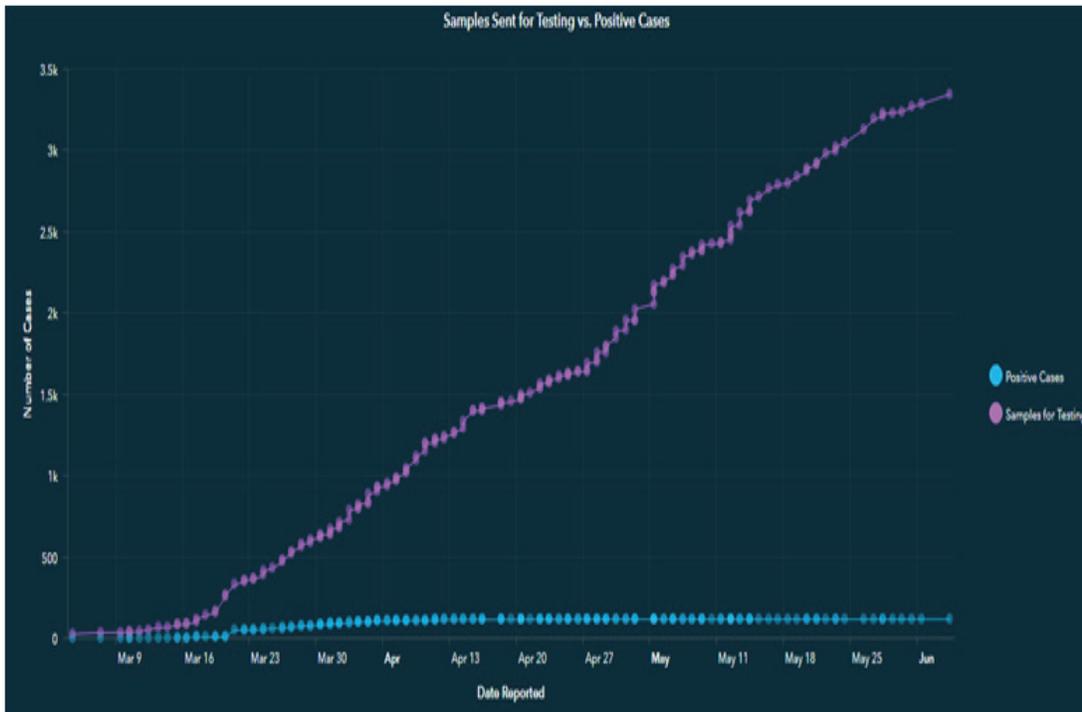
⁵ Central Statistical Office. Cso.gov.tt/news/tt-population-reaches-1-4-million/

⁶ Ministry of Health. 2020. Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Corporate Communications Unit. T Media Release health.gov.tt June 1.

⁷ LoopTT. Looptt.com/content/watch-one-month-later-look-back-timeline-covid-19-tt April 13, 2020.

⁸ Ministry of Health, Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago COVID-19 T&T GIS Map <http://www.health.gov.tt/sitepages/default.aspx?id=292>

Figure 1.2: Samples Sent for Testing vs. Positive Cases⁸



Source: Ministry of Health, Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago COVID-19 T&T GIS Map.

implemented its first travel restriction on persons coming into the country from China.⁹ This was possibly instrumental in protecting the country’s borders from an outbreak of this highly infectious virus. By mid-to-late-March, the government of TT escalated its border closures, sought to limit public gatherings to ten persons, closed all places of learning and non-essential businesses, banned leisure activities at beaches and rivers, and passed legislation in order to enforce the government’s stay-at-home-measures.⁷

Amidst these lockdown measures arose many other socio-economic challenges for the islands of Trinidad and Tobago. These included productivity losses via labour and capital, financial market instability, increased joblessness, an increase in socially displaced persons, and access to basic food security and nutrition by vulnerable groups throughout the country.

Through the Ministry of Finance, the Government’s timely response to these anticipated COVID-19 short-term challenges resulted in the development and implementation of financial and economic support strategies. These measures were aimed at alleviating the socio-economic impacts of the virus on individuals and businesses affected by COVID-19.¹⁰ The projected costs of these social relief programmes implemented by the Government of TT to minimise the socio-economic effects COVID-19 is estimated at US\$6 billion.¹¹

Public Health Challenges and Solutions

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged many Governments across the globe to maximise limited and scarce resources in the healthcare system. For Trinidad and Tobago, this was no exception.

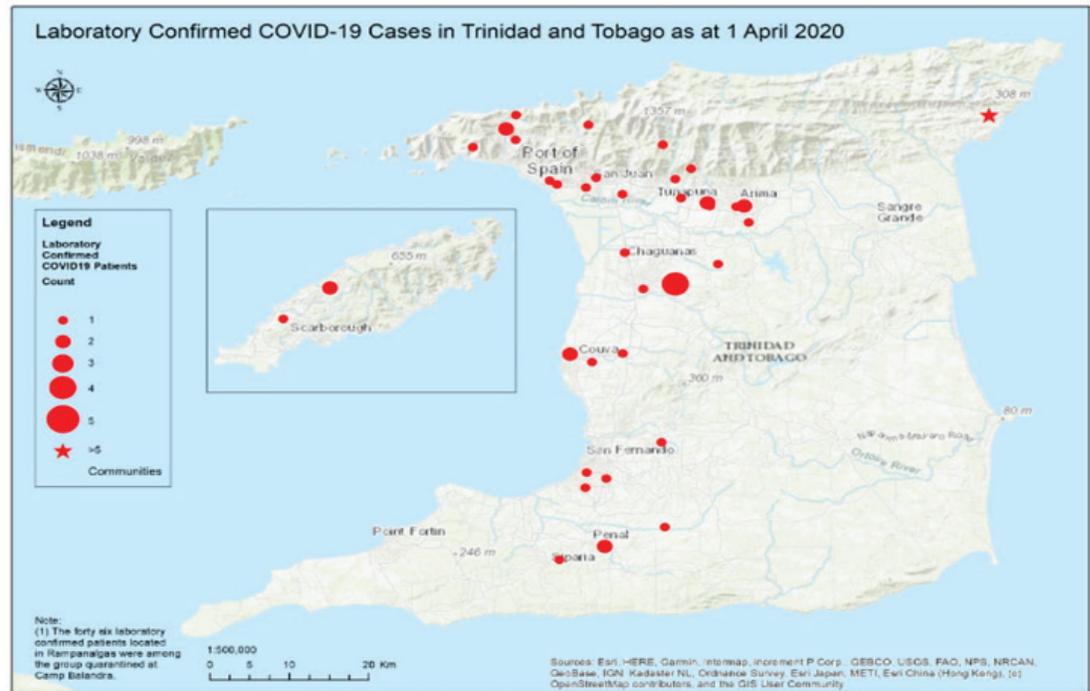
However, the traditional health system could not accommodate the

⁹ Office of the Prime Minister.2020. “Trinidad and Tobago Expands Travel Restrictions to Five Additional Countries” <https://www.opm.gov.tt/trinidad-and-tobago-expands-travel-restrictions-to-five-additional-countries/> February 27.

¹⁰ Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, Ministry of Finance; “Financial and Economic Support Measures to be Put in Place in Response to COVID-19 Pandemic”. 2020. <https://www.finance.gov.tt/2020/03/18/financial-and-economic-support-measures-to-be-put-in-place-by-the-ministry-of-finance-in-response-to-covid-19-pandemic/> March 18.

¹¹ Trinidad Express Newspapers. 2020. “T&T’s \$6 billion COVID bill” https://trinidadexpress.com/newsextra/t-ts-6-billion-covid-bill/article_43236ec2-9460-11ea-b55b-3f3cc90cd1f6.html May 12.

Figure 1.3 Laboratory Confirmed COVID-19 Cases in Trinidad and Tobago as on 1 April, 2020⁸



Source: Ministry of Health, Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago COVID-19 T&T GIS Map.

COVID-19 patients. Thus, Government and the Ministry of Health of Trinidad and Tobago created a parallel health system on both islands and equipped it with additional medical personnel brought in from Cuba, medical equipment, COVID testing kits and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Additionally, hospitals and medical facilities for COVID patients were upgraded and commissioned. Furthermore, step-down convalescing facilities were put into place. These step-down facilities had a maximum capacity of 924 beds.¹²

One mechanism implored by the Ministry of Health Trinidad and Tobago, that may have been instrumental in curbing the spread of the virus at a community level, is the immediate quarantining of all suspected COVID-19 cases, as well as, all confirmed cases.

Moreover, all returning nationals that were granted exemptions to enter the country were taken immediately into 14-day quarantine at these marked facilities. No individual suspected or confirmed of acquiring COVID-19 was allowed to recuperate outside of these mandatory facilities. These procedures were in keeping with the WHO guidelines.

Financing the COVID-19 demands

Trinidad and Tobago is classified as a high-income developing (calculated using the Atlas method) country by World Bank.^{13, 14} Despite the country having the largest economy in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Government, in order to address the burgeoning financial challenges associated with COVID-19, required international financial assistance.

The Finance Minister of Trinidad and Tobago reported that the Government

¹² Donstan Bonn; The Trinidad Express Newspapers; "T&T's Parallel Healthcare System to Continue Until..." <https://trinidadexpress.com/newsextra/t-ts-parallel-health-care-system-to-continue-until/> article_dea2602e-88c6-11ea-9eb5-737682b85179. html April 27, 2020

¹³ World Bank. <https://data.worldbank.org/country/trinidad-and-tobago?view=chart>

¹⁴ World Trade Organisation. Trinidad and Tobago; Trade Policy Review; page 7 https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/tpr_e/s260_sum_e.pdf

was sourcing US\$ 300 M (TT \$2 B) from multilateral agencies, US\$ 20 M from the World Bank, US\$ 130 M from the IADB, and US\$ 150 M from the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF). Additionally, another US\$ 500 M was being sourced for budgetary support from external sources. However, the country raised TT\$ 500 M locally through governmental efforts. These funds were used for the purchase of goods and services of the Regional Health Authorities and to settle other outstanding trade payables in the health sector.¹⁵

COVID-19 and Its Effects on Oil and Gas Economies Pre-COVID

The main driver of Trinidad and Tobago's economy is energy production and downstream industry¹⁴ which accounts for approximately 40 per cent of its revenues. In addition to increased expenditures as a result of COVID-19, the country had to deal with the sudden plunge in crude oil prices during this pandemic. According to energy data outlined by the International Energy Agency (IEA), natural gas declined by almost 35 per cent since September 2019.^{12, 14, 15} Among the reasons cited for the abhorrent shock in prices were: the weak international demand, restarting of nuclear power plants in Japan, sudden increase in the availability of LNG from non-traditional exporters,¹⁶ in addition to an ongoing supply glut in relation to global demand.¹⁶ Incorporated into this unprecedented economic crisis for oil and gas driven economies was the ongoing price war between energy giants Russia and Saudi Arabia which further exacerbated the steep decline in oil prices from US\$ 60 per barrel in early January to US\$ 30 per barrel in March.¹⁶

COVID-19 and the Energy Sector

With the declaration made by the World Health Organisation (WHO) that the globe was at war with a pandemic, many countries embarked on a national shutdown. The thoroughgoing magnitude of the Coronavirus 2019 resulted in air and sea closures, manufacturing sectors to halt production, construction sectors to cease work, suspension of import and export trade, and, basically forced all non-essential work and businesses at a standstill. This global economic shutdown further depressed the demand for oil and had a massive impact on developing countries primarily reliant on oil and gas revenues for economic sustainability. The aggregated effect of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the West Texas International (WTI) oil prices into price shock with oil prices dropping as low as 1 US cent per barrel¹⁸ and below.

The Minister of Finance in Trinidad and Tobago describes this as a "multi-layered crisis" comprising of public health shocks, domestic economic disruptions, continuous crashing of external demands for oil and gas on the global front, capital flow reversals resulting in the accommodation of domestic absorption to the country's current account, and volatile commodity prices.¹⁹

Conclusion

"This country certainly stands among this stalwart assembly as one of the nations which has successfully contained the pandemic. The effectiveness of the T&T government's Covid-19 response is demonstrated by the fact that, after six weeks, the country is carefully returning to normal life."
– Song Yumin, China's Ambassador Extraordinary & Plenipotentiary to Trinidad and Tobago. 25 May, 2020.²⁰

¹⁵ Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, Ministry of Finance. 2020. "COVID-19 Updates" finance.gov.tt/2020/03/19/covid-19-updates/ March 19.

¹⁶ Parliament of Republic of Trinidad and Tobago – Hansard Reports "Statement to the House of Representatives on the Economic Effect and Financial Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic" – Presented by the Minister of Finance of Trinidad and Tobago, Honourable Colm Imbert, MP; April 27, 2020. <http://www.ttparliament.org/hansards/hh20200427.pdf>

¹⁷ International Energy Agency. <https://www.iea.org/data-and-statistics/?country=WORLD&fuel=Natural%20gas&indicator=Natural%20gas%20final%20consumption>

¹⁸ OILNOW; WTI Oil crashes 99% to 1 cent per barrel. <https://oilnow.gy/featured/wti-oil-crashes-99-to-1-cent-per-barrel/> April 20, 2020

¹⁹ Nilanjan Choudhury. 2020 "Why Are Natural Gas Prices Low and How Long Will This Last? March 30. <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/why-natural-gas-prices-low-141902624.html>

²⁰ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Trinidad And Tobago <http://tt.chineseembassy.org/eng/sxgw/t1783313.htm>

Despite the unfavourable turn of events of 2020, the country of Trinidad and Tobago and its people remain strong, resilient and united in their fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Preparing for, responding to, and recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic include the combined efforts of the people and the people in power. An efficient and effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly requires strong political leadership coupled with teamwork from Cabinet,

government ministries, health officials and healthcare workers, law enforcement officers, all other essential services, and, most importantly, concerned and law-abiding citizens.

As Trinidad and Tobago embarks on a 'new normal' along with the rest of the world, the social, economic and health lessons learnt by the Covid-19 pandemic will forever be intertwined into the policy and decision-making of future governments.

About Young Scholar's Forum: South-South Cooperation (SSC), in spite of its long history, has been scantily researched. Further, engagement of scholars from the South in developing a strong narrative that identifies SSC as a distinct effort in development cooperation has been largely insignificant. The Young Scholars' Forum aims to engage increasing number of researchers from the South in unravelling the complexities and pluralities of SSC.

RIS has been organizing a number of capacity building programmes linked to SSC, SDGs, Trade and Science Diplomacy under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme run by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. The ITEC programme forms the mainstay of India's contribution to SSC. Over the years, a large number of participants from the Southern countries have been engaged in these programmes. The Forum is an initiative to keep them engaged in issues concerned with developing countries even after the completion of their training exposures and create a strong alumni network of ITEC participants.



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