

# Surviving the pandemic: COVID-19 in the Pacific and health security

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Pacific Island Countries and territories account for eight of the world's ten remaining nations with no recorded cases of COVID-19. Drawing on the Australia Pacific Security College's weekly *Trendlines – COVID-19: The Pacific Response* series, this paper investigates the policy responses employed by Pacific governments to this global pandemic.

The decisive responses taken by Pacific governments in the early days of the pandemic, including the response to snap close borders to international travel, has proven crucial in avoiding widespread catastrophe in many countries. While keeping the virus out of the region has been vindicated from a health perspective, border closures have had striking economic, social and political impacts, highlighting the nature of policymaking in a crisis. Management of the economic and social fallout continues as the cost of border closures continues to compound. The hurdle ahead is how Pacific governments can safely reopen their economies.

## Splendid isolation

If one were to design a geographical region to succeed in controlling a global pandemic, it might look something like the widely dispersed Pacific Islands Countries (PICs). Recognising the inherent geographic benefits of their Blue Pacific continent, governments capitalised upon their natural isolation, sealing their borders to international arrivals, including returning citizens, to safeguard against the introduction of COVID-19 into vulnerable communities.

With the memory not only of the deadly 2019 Samoan measles outbreak, as well as the 1918 Spanish Flu that claimed the lives of almost one-third of Samoa's population, policymakers conceded that the region's public health infrastructure was too underdeveloped to respond to an outbreak of a communicable respiratory illness. With health infrastructure painfully lacking, the decision was made that prevention was better than cure, and leaders made the most of the vast moat that is the Pacific Ocean.

The first country to seal their border was the Marshall Islands. Tonga, Kiribati, Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, Tuvalu and Nauru all followed suit. While the rest of the world has been ravaged by COVID-19, these island nations have remained largely virus free throughout 2020, something that, by October, Nauru's President said was a 'commendable' achievement (RNZ 2020a).

It must be noted that closed borders did not keep cases out of all countries. Owing to its role as a regional transportation hub, Fiji recorded a number of cases but the country's tracking, isolating, and testing mechanisms managed to keep the virus from spreading extensively within communities, helped by state of emergency restrictions. Most cases were confined to border quarantine centres. Similarly, the only cases in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have been in border quarantine. Border closures kept these countries virus-free for the majority of 2020, providing time to

develop border management systems, which have proven effective at keeping the virus out of the community at large.

In a Pacific Wayfinder podcast (2020), Dr Paulala Vivili, Director of the Public Health Division of the Pacific Community has said that the public health response has been strong across the region, protecting the clinical services response, where there are greater challenges.

## The uncomfortable truth

Throughout the pandemic, the most infected Pacific communities have consistently been the territories ruled by metropolitan powers, including the US territories of Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands and the French territories of New Caledonia and French Polynesia.

In the early stages of the pandemic, high case numbers in Guam, French Polynesia and New Caledonia were attributed to the rotation of officials from metropolitan countries. Through the early months, protests at airports in New Caledonia were frequent as French officials continued to arrive in Noumea and bypass customs and health checkpoints, despite mandatory 21-day quarantine arrangements. Pro-independence party president Daniel Goa responded, stating that France had failed to respect the Noumea Accord due to the continued rotation of officials and ordered the French High Commissioner to leave the country.

In the second half of the year, the exponential increase in cases witnessed in Guam and French Polynesia highlighted uncomfortable truths about policy autonomy for local administrations.

Despite strong opposition from indigenous Tahitians, French Polynesia's borders were re-opened to tourism in the second half of the year. Around 7500 tourists arrived in Tahiti from mid-July to mid-August, with 90 per cent travelling from the US and France. Despite mounting case numbers, French authorities dug their heels in to rule out any return to lockdown or the declaration of a second state of emergency. This decision came despite multiple French Polynesian unions threatening to strike unless COVID-19 measures were strengthened. While authorities did reintroduce the requirement to wear masks while travelling on public transport, many of the calls for other restrictions and protections were unanswered. As a result of the border reopening in July, the number of cases rose to 56 by the end of 2020.

It is not clear where these tensions will end. Despite being ultimately unsuccessful, New Caledonia's second independence referendum in as many years saw both an increased turnout and an increased pro-independence vote (Sartre and Doherty 2020).

In counterpoint, Guam's government responded swiftly to its second wave with lockdowns, presumably with the agreement of the US Government which manages the territories' border policies (RNZ 2020b).

## Coming home

Pacific Islanders are travellers by nature, and the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how many Pasifika people are overseas at any given point in time – for study, seasonal worker programs or family commitments. As months have passed, governments across the region have been reluctant to reopen their borders to international arrivals, including citizens stranded abroad.

The repatriation of seasonal workers who were on contract in Australia and New Zealand at the outbreak of the pandemic has been undeniably slow and has left families separated for an extended period. Samoan and ni-Vanuatu seasonal workers in New Zealand have been subjected to a stop-start approach to repatriation, largely due to the sheer size of the repatriation task, owing to the magnitude of their Seasonal Worker Program (SWP).

Many of the hurdles of repatriation are at the Pacific end. Governments are clearly anxious about the capacity of scarce quarantine, isolation and testing facilities to manage the large number of repatriates effectively, and have been cautious about the risk of introducing the virus into the community (Bedford 2020). Vanuatu Prime Minister Loughman halted repatriation in June due to fears that the queue of 2300 repatriates could overwhelm his country's quarantine facilities. Meanwhile, in Kiribati, President Maamau called for patience, refusing to allow citizens to return home until the government had built an isolation facility. Six months on, his citizens remain locked out (RNZ 2020c). While New Zealand has provided some assistance, repatriation of seasonal workers has placed a substantial financial burden on both Pacific countries and individuals, particularly those travelling from Australia.

Border quarantine processes have so far detected recent known positive cases entering Fiji. Despite the success of managing a consistent stream of arrivals to Fiji, there is concern that the country's acceptance of 'all stations' flights from India, stopping off in Jakarta and Port Moresby, is unduly increasing the risk level. Similarly, Prime Minister Sogavare in Solomon Islands heralded that his nation's quarantine systems had proven successful when that country's first and second cases were detected in border quarantine and were successfully isolated. Sogavare indicated that the decision to delay repatriation until facilities were ready has proven prudent. Despite this, widespread opposition was voiced over plans for a repatriation flight from China, which carried just over 80 government appointed Chinese architects to assist in works for the 2023 Pacific Games.

## Inside the bubble

In addition to border closures, Pacific governments moved quickly to declare states of emergency. Initially expected to run for 14 days, they were eventually declared for much longer periods. In Vanuatu, a state of emergency was declared until the end of 2020, despite the country having not recorded a single case of the virus. The pandemic marked the first time that state of emergency declarations were issued as a preventative measure, rather than as a reaction to crisis (Ride and Kekea 2020).

To enforce social distancing, churches, schools, markets and kava bars were forced to close their doors, changing the fabric and pulse of social Pacific lifestyles. With tightly policed curfews enacted, the vibrant streets that characterise the region quickly became deserted.

As weeks have turned into months, state of emergency enforcement has evolved into a vexed political issue. In Samoa, critics of the Prime Minister have said that his state of emergency restrictions are but a thinly-veiled excuse for him to implement his traditionalist beliefs on the country, such as that businesses should not trade on Sundays. In many parts of the region, the increased visibility of police, and the central role they have played in managing a public health crisis, has raised eyebrows (Thomson 2020). While state of emergency and lockdown restrictions curtailed the spread of the virus, the constitutionality of extended state of emergencies has been questioned in numerous parts of the region, including Vanuatu and French Polynesia (Mayron 2020).

The debate surrounding the state of emergency has perhaps been fiercest in PNG. Despite recommendations from the Parliament's Permanent Emergency Committee for the state of emergency to continue for two additional months, it was lifted in June 2020 after no new cases were recorded for 60 days. The state of emergency was replaced by the National Health Emergency Act 2020, a piece of legislation that has become the subject of criticism by anti-corruption agency Transparency International PNG (2020), for impinging on citizens' rights for an indefinite period with no parliamentary oversight. Debate has continued to be fierce, with former Prime Minister Peter O'Neill outlining that he did not support a state of emergency extension beyond 14 days, and he was backed up by the Governors of Madang, Eastern Highlands and East Sepik provinces.

Just as PNG's second wave took hold in August 2020, Prime Minister Marape declared his country must 'learn to live with the virus', allowing the 14 day second-wave lockdown period to lapse without any extension (Whiting 2020). Despite a 10:00pm–5:00am curfew remaining in place at the time, schools were re-opened and restrictions on inter-provincial travel were similarly lifted as case numbers skyrocketed.

The management of PNG's health resources is a fraught topic. Under strain, the PNG Nurses Association threatened industrial action over personal protective equipment shortages, while pressure built in August 2020 after the Rita Flynn Sports Complex, which had been the country's isolation facility, reached capacity amidst the country's second wave.

A month later, as case numbers continued to mount, Opposition Leader Belden Namah called on the government to remove all remaining COVID-19 restrictions, claiming the restrictions were crippling the nation's economy for little practical benefit. He stated that most deaths were attributable to pre-existing comorbidities.

## Economic fallout

In August 2020, the Asian Development Bank released its 2020 Pacific Economic Monitor (PEM) that showed a region-

wide economic contraction of 4.3 per cent. The PEM predicted that tourism-dependent economies, including Palau, the Cook Islands and Fiji would record the greatest contractions, with GDP in Fiji expected to shrink by 15 per cent. Looking to the future, the PEM forecast growth of 1.6 per cent in 2021 contingent upon the resumption of international travel.

If border closures were the chosen protection from failing health systems, then expansive stimulus payments were the buffer to the pandemic's economic fallout with governments across the region moving quickly to increase welfare payments to support a growing list of unemployed workers. While payments are helpful, they are far from enough.

The Fijian Government predicted the single largest economic contraction in Fijian history of 21.7 per cent, with remittances falling by 15 per cent and foreign direct investment reducing by 40 per cent. Faced with this grim economic outlook, the government presented a US\$390m (A\$554.8m) stimulus package early in the pandemic. The sizeable budget deficit pushed the debt to GDP ratio to 83.4 per cent, in part due to tax reductions of US\$232m (A\$330.6m), legislated to support businesses and stimulate consumer spending. With one third of the workforce having lost either their jobs or faced reduced hours, the Minister for the Economy outlined that 86,000 Fijians accessed relief payments from their pension fund in phase one, with 26,000 accessing support during phase two. If figures like these are replicated across the region, such unprecedented demand has the potential to overwhelm countries' embryonic welfare systems.

In response to Fiji's package, the University of the South Pacific economist Dr Naleesh Gounder said the government should have done more to diversify the country's economy (RNZ 2020d). Dr Gounder outlined that the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the risks inherent to Fiji's narrow economic base, arguing now is an opportune time to develop alternate industries. Similarly, non-government organisations including the Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises Development (FRIEND) and the Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS) made clear their disappointment with the Budget (Rex 2020). FRIEND said that those engaged in the informal economy were largely ignored by the government's stimulus package. The FCOSS argued that the government focused disproportionately on supporting businesses, failing to appropriately assist families to make ends meet. Often, individuals must have superannuation accounts to register for welfare, disproportionately neglecting the many informal workers who are most vulnerable to economic hardship. Clan and kastom continue to be the safety net for the majority.

In PNG, the COVID-19 Economic Stimulus Package was developed. Several months after it was announced, Treasurer Ling-Stuckey outlined its content:

- US\$79m (A\$112.3m) investment in health and security;
- water sanitation and hygiene received US\$17m (A\$24.1m);
- frontline provincial health received US\$10m (A\$14.2m);
- US\$8.5m (A\$12.9m) for personal protective equipment;
- US\$1.4m (A\$1.99m) to churches for food provision;

- US\$21m (A\$29.87m) for constructing new border posts with Papua; and
- the government approved a US\$56m (A\$79.6m) relief package to boost small and medium enterprises in response to appeals from business for tax relief. In theory, the money will be allocated to commercial banks and the National Development Bank for low interest loans.

Delays in the release of funds have been reported. The PNG Micro-Small and Medium Enterprise Council has reported that US\$60.27m (A\$81.1m) in funding promised for Small and Medium Enterprises has not been received. Similarly, Prime Minister Marape apologised to church-run health facilities that were forced to close their doors due to a four-month delay in payments of salaries and operational funds. Such debates have had substantial implications on the political economy and day-to-day politics.

Elsewhere in the region, the French Polynesian Assembly approved an updated Budget to account for the territory's revenue shortfall of US\$150m (A\$213.4m). In Tonga, the 2020–21 Budget passed the parliament unanimously, in what marked the Kingdom's largest Budget deficit on record, totalling US\$26.4m (A\$37.6m). With remittances down, national revenue was reduced and the need for social support was greater. Niue, a country that has traditionally returned a balanced budget forecast a substantial deficit as a result of the altered economic climate during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rising debts are inevitable. At risk of economic instability, Pacific leaders are continuing to engage with diverse development partners for donor assistance and debt relief.

## Social affairs

As border closures have lingered, and much of the region has remained out of work, the impact on households has compounded throughout 2020.

Reflective of the higher unemployment rate exhibited, incidences of domestic and family violence have sharply increased. Fiji's Minister for Women has repeatedly outlined that the country's domestic violence hotline has received increased calls during the pandemic. Eighty-seven calls were placed with the nation's hotline in February 2020, a figure that rose to 527 by April of that year.

Further, just as the COVID-19 pandemic has been labelled the 'pink recession' in Western countries, women-led businesses in the Pacific are in heightened need of support. According to the head of the Pacific Trade and Investment Commission, Caleb Jarvis, women's reliance on the services and tourism industries has led to disproportionate impact. A survey revealed that 92 per cent of women entrepreneurs have suffered a drop in revenue. More pain is likely to come.

## Regional rescue

When Tropical Cyclone Harold made landfall in April 2020, the category five system drastically altered the nature of the COVID-19 response. In parts of the region, including Vanuatu's Sanma province, where 90 per cent of homes

were impacted, COVID-19 concerns took a backseat to the pressing humanitarian response as leaders had the melancholy duty of responding to the twin-emergencies of cyclone and pandemic and declared dual states of emergency.

With the usual humanitarian assistance support workers not able to access the region due to border closures, financial aid absorption capacity was limited. With both COVID-19 and Cyclone Harold aid flows entering the region simultaneously, and without the traditional rush of external humanitarian assistance, coordination was vital. The need for regional cooperation became clear. For the third time in its history, the Biketawa Declaration was invoked in April, as Pacific Island Forum foreign ministers met virtually and agreed to establish a Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19 (PHP-C) to coordinate and prioritise assistance flows, as well as manage the increasingly complex political relationships with the ever-increasing list of donor partners. In the months since, PHP-C has been widely viewed as a win for the region – serving as a corridor to accelerate and coordinate humanitarian assistance in the aftermath of Cyclone Harold and also for the distribution of medical supplies such as testing kits and personal protective equipment for the COVID-19 response.

In August, the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat with the UN World Food Programme (2020) welcomed the launch of the Humanitarian Air Service that would assist with the aftermath of Cyclone Harold and also the distribution of medical supplies. The service made its maiden flight from Nadi to Port Moresby to deliver 44 cubic metres of essential medical supplies. The Air Service forms part of the PHP-C. Meanwhile, regional collaboration for border processes was discussed at a virtual roundtable convened by the United Nations and the Asian Development Bank. Representatives from Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Fiji attended and discussed border security quarantine processes hoping to streamline approaches, and accelerate the return of tourists.

## Playing the long game?

As leaders turn one eye to the future, the Pacific is a region in two parts. About 80 per cent of Pacific Islanders live rurally, many of whom have limited access to health services, and even sanitation. It is these communities that are most vulnerable to infectious diseases, and have the most to risk and the least to gain through the resumption of international travel and tourism. Frequently tested by natural disasters, Pacific Islanders have long returned to their gardens as the ultimate safety net, learning to live in subsistence affluence and relying on the social safety net provided by the *kastom* economy. In this pandemic, many have returned to villages to harvest their gardens and engage in subsistence agriculture and fishing. In some parts of the region, a return to traditional ways has also included the resumption of bartering and traditional money systems (Fainu 2020).

On the other side of the equation is the urbanised parts of the region, which are reliant on access to global markets. Many would like to revive the tourism industry, but the hopes for a region-wide travel bubble are looking dim, Fiji

Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama floated the idea of a ‘Bula Bubble’ to see tourists return to his country from Australia, New Zealand and other Pacific countries. Vanuatu’s Prime Minister announced a similar ‘Tam Tam Bubble’. Both proposals were dashed after their announcement. A ‘Realm Bubble’ between New Zealand, the Cook Islands and Niue has been raised periodically, but it too seems a way off.

In a novel approach, Fiji welcomed its first arrivals through the ‘Blue Lane’ strategy, which saw two visitors from New Zealand arrive on a boat after spending a fortnight quarantining at sea. While some have taken advantage of the pathway, it is a niche and expensive solution. It will take some time before tourism earnings will return to pre-COVID times.

Other industries have also been affected by the pandemic. Export-focused, resource-based economies including PNG and Solomon Islands have suffered reduced employment and reduced government revenue streams due to a drop in demand for natural resources, including timber and commodities.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted almost every aspect of policymaking in the Pacific. Pacific governments’ decisive response to close borders has protected much of the region from a significant outbreak of the virus. For a region that continues to battle a non-communicable diseases epidemic and serious co-morbidities, the risk COVID-19 presents is significant.

The effective shutdown of much of the economic life of the region has highlighted many of the underlying policy challenges of the Pacific region. In 2021, the challenges of the region’s vulnerability to natural disasters, tensions of external governance in the region’s territories, persistent social issues including gender inequality, matters of political and economic management and the exposure of the region’s narrow economic base are each in sharp focus.

Leaders now face a range of policy challenges, as they seek to restimulate the economy in a way which boosts prosperity while continues to safeguard the health of the region. Despite the Australian Government making overtures to procure and provide vaccines to the region, leaders will struggle to find ways to balance the diverse security challenges facing the Pacific that the pandemic, and its response, have brought to the surface.

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