

## The COVID-19 pandemic and Pacific resilience

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On the 21<sup>st</sup> November 2020, the number of COVID19 cases recorded worldwide is about to reach 59 million with close to 1.4 million deaths.<sup>1</sup> Countries such as New Zealand with the promptness in strict border controls, screening, tracking and isolation policies and procedures have the least rate of infection and deaths, compared to countries such as the United States of America (USA) who lacked a prompt coordinated response, leadership and population willingness to prevent infection spread.

Most Pacific Island countries responded promptly and appropriately to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic reaching their shores by curtailing all air travel even to its returning citizens. The exception is French Polynesia which has 12,978 cases in a population of 280,908 (4.6% COVID-19 infection rate (CIR)) and 63 deaths (0.49% CDR). Lower number of cases and CIRs have been recorded in the Northern Marianas (104, 0.18%), Papua New Guinea (604,0.01%), Marshall Islands (4,0.01%), New Caledonia (32,0.01%), Fiji (35,0.00%), Solomon Islands (16,0.00%), Samoa and Vanuatu have now recorded a case each whereas eight of the following countries have had none: Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Cook Islands and Kiribati.<sup>2</sup> The prompt Pacific response demonstrates informed national leadership which would have been assisted by media coverage and expert advice from the World Health Organization (WHO). In Samoa's case, the immediate response was on the back of lessons learnt from the measles outbreak a few months earlier, in late 2019, which resulted in 83 deaths.

Besides being vulnerable to the high frequency of natural disasters, the Pacific Islands have been deemed equally vulnerable to pandemics over the years. Although the Pacific Islands were spared from the devastation of the Zika virus, H1N1 Swine Flu, Human Immunodeficiency Virus, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, Ebola virus, Polio, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome; Samoa has remembered the carelessness in quarantine procedures that led to a fifth of its

population decimated by the Spanish Flu in 1918 and the poor vaccination rates that led to 83 deaths from the measles epidemic in 2019.

Although the number of cases is low and may remain so until a vaccine is available in the middle of 2021, the health and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, since international travel and trade was curtailed from March 2020, is yet to be measured or understood. The impact on the economy, however, is keenly felt with a surge in unemployment and postponement of infrastructure projects as most economies of Pacific Island countries are highly reliant on tourism. Tourism has ground to a halt in all countries and yet the sector contributes to more than 30% of the gross domestic product (GDP) of Samoa, Fiji, Vanuatu, Niue, French Polynesia and the Cook Islands.<sup>3</sup> The tourism and hospitality sectors employ an estimated 150,000<sup>3,4</sup> workers directly and indirectly employ thousands more of the informal workforce affecting livelihoods of those in the farming and agricultural sectors. The severe reduction in the demand for primary produce and services from the affected tourism sector have impacted the informal economy and the many vulnerable family's dependent on it. Samoa for example, reduced trading and market hours and banned young street vendors. To make matters worse, Pacific families in New Zealand, Australia and the USA have also experienced high levels unemployment and with reduced incomes, the remittances to the Islands have also fallen.<sup>5</sup> A reduction in disposable incomes affect the affordability and desire for healthcare further resulting in vulnerable groups getting sicker.<sup>6</sup>

Due to the worldwide destruction of the aviation industry's capacity and associated services linking tourist destinations to the Pacific Island countries and the decline in local tourism capacity as businesses close operations as the pandemic continues in to the second year, the length of recovery is uncertain and may take six to eleven years to return to pre-pandemic conditions but it also "may not happen before the middle of the decade".<sup>7</sup> Stimulus financial packages and government interventions will

soften the impact of financial hardships, but these measures may not be sustainable, even with assistance from donor partners, if the pandemic continues to the end of 2021; which may be likely. More borrowing and loan repayment defaulting may occur in those countries with high debt levels such as Samoa and Tonga.<sup>5</sup>

The high frequency of natural disasters in the Pacific Island countries have not only affected lives and livelihoods but they have also resulted in infrastructure damage worth in the billions of dollars. The tsunami that hit Samoa in 2009 cost US\$120million or 22% of the GDP over three to four years.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, for every damage to 1% GDP, there is a reduction in growth by 0.7% in the year of the disaster.<sup>9</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic is not classified as a natural disaster and have not reached many Pacific Island shores; yet, the pandemic has caused significant economic and social impact that is more severe given it is affecting all Pacific Island countries and economies of donor partners. The impact may be difficult to quantify as it is associated with a prolonged shutdown of travel and trade across the region affecting not only economic but health and educational programmes.

The Pacific Islands economic, social and community resilience is being tested. The delivery of quality population health programmes is and will be affected. Macroeconomic resilience will depend on how long the pandemic will last and whether COVID-19 cases start spreading in Island communities placing financial stress on overstretched resources. Building community resilience by promoting health and hygiene programmes to avoid infection transmission has occurred through community consultations, women's groups and health messaging in school programmes and multimedia advertising. Pacific governments and international agencies have launched initiatives to increase local food production<sup>5</sup> and there is evidence in Samoa that agricultural production has increased, prices have fallen and food imports reduced. The other benefits could be that intellectual exchange and some educational programmes have transferred to online platforms saving limited funds and lessening environmental decline.

The Pacific Islands have survived multiple natural disasters and with the assistance of development partners and families in Pacific-rim countries, the Islands will pull through again, albeit severely bruised, with social cohesion and resilience underpinned by cultural, spiritual and family values. Social cohesion may be challenged

in vulnerable groups should economic hardship continue to the end of 2021 and without any relief or vaccine in sight.

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