

COVID-19 Impact on Fishing and Coastal Communities: FIJI

Update #1, 26 May 2020



Introduction

The global COVID-19 (or coronavirus) pandemic is having a major impact across the globe and on all segments of the population. The effects on Pacific Island countries and territories have been extremely varied; six have had to manage viral infections while others are so far managing to keep the virus entirely from their shores. The social and economic impacts across different sectors has yet to be quantified. In all cases the national responses have many potential implications for coastal communities but these need better understanding if international and government responses are to be most effective and suit the particular circumstances of different villages and countries.

Fiji recorded its first case on 19 March 2020, and a total of 18 cases and no deaths. As of 25 May, 2020, 15 people have recovered and there are only 3 active cases. While lockdowns have been lifted, a nation-wide curfew remains in place and recommendations to maintain social distancing continues.

What did we do?

The LMMA Network and partners such as WorldFish, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and ANCORS have developed a survey tool to gain basic and rapid insights into changes occurring in villages and their fisheries. The 22-question survey is intended to be simple enough to be asked relatively quickly over the telephone or social media and provide the most important feedback quickly. This is intended as a first step to inform other more extensive surveys (once national restrictions are lifted) or emergency responses.

To date, 26 villagers have undertaken the survey in Bua (n=15, 8 districts), Cakaudrove (n=4, 2 districts), Lomaiviti (n=3, 2 districts) and Ra (n=4, 1 district) from 13–15 May, 2020. An equal number of men (n=13) and women (n=13) were interviewed to look at COVID-19 impacts through a gender lens. The number of villagers were limited to those with electricity and telephone access.

Our findings

Events

The two largest events to have impacted Fiji were COVID-19 and tropical cyclone Harold that hit Fiji on 8 April, 2020. Twenty people (77%) listed COVID-19 as the biggest event in their lives, and 6 people (23%) listed cyclone Harold. Specific ways people are being affected by COVID-19:

- a) on the general movement of people (e.g. between villages) and social gatherings (38.5% of people);
- b) access to shops in towns (11.5%);
- c) general income loss (11.5%);
- d) agricultural income loss (7.7%); and
- e) fisheries income loss (7.7%).

Just under a third of the people interviewed stated their communities had suffered damage to crops from cyclone Harold (19.2%), and one woman noted she was not able to fish for crabs due to damage to mangroves. One man suggested the cyclone had damaged the reefs and this might be affecting declines in fish catch, and another noted damage to turtle nests.

There were very few gender differences in the effect the two events had on people, except more women (26.9%) mentioned the impact of cyclone Harold on crops, farms and gardens than men (19.2%).

Fishing pressure

Just under half the people interviewed reported immigration of people back to their villages, averaging a 13% increase. Overall, a third of the people interviewed felt (at the time of the interview) there was less fishing pressure than in February this year (pre-COVID19 and cyclone Harold), while 45.8% stated it was the same, 16.7% stated it was more or a lot more. Just under a third of people suggested this reduction in fishing pressure was because of COVID-19 restrictions.

Resource management

Despite some increases to village population numbers due to migration, everyone that fishes was aware of the local and customary practices and rules around fishing, as well as national rules. However, 38.5% stated that people were breaking rules and gave examples such as catching turtles, too many passengers on boats, fishing undersized fish, fishing or selling fish without a license, and poaching in the village *tabu*. These are commonly reported issues and offenses even during normal times. Perpetrators came from both within and outside the village, with male fishers highlighted by some. Just over half (53%) stated that those in charge (such as leaders, clan heads, committees) were not taking action, while others (57.7%) mentioned leaders were reminding them of natural resource management rules. Interestingly the responses were identical between men and women

around rule breaking. The majority of villages had not changed the management rules for their fishing grounds (88.5%).

Food and livelihood impacts

The majority of people (92.3%) stated they had enough, more than enough or lots of food, available to them through their own gardens and local fishing grounds. Only two men interviewed (7.7%) stated they had less than enough food to eat because of the damage caused to their crops from cyclone Harold. There were no notable gender differences in responses.

In terms of the amount of fish being caught, just over half (57.7%) said it was same amount as before, while the rest said it was less (19.2%) or more (11.5%). In terms of sales of fish from the village the majority (65.2%) said there was no change, though some noted sales were less (21.7%) or more (13.0%). There were no notable differences in responses between men and women.

Conclusion

While most people interviewed listed COVID-19 as a major event in their lives, there is little to suggest that there have been large impacts to their food security or fisheries livelihoods. Cyclone Harold has affected crops, but for the majority, there has not been a large impact or change to their food security or livelihoods. Given the upcoming seasonal ban on groupers, there is nothing to suggest that communities we interviewed are concerned about the ban on groupers or want to lift the ban.

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