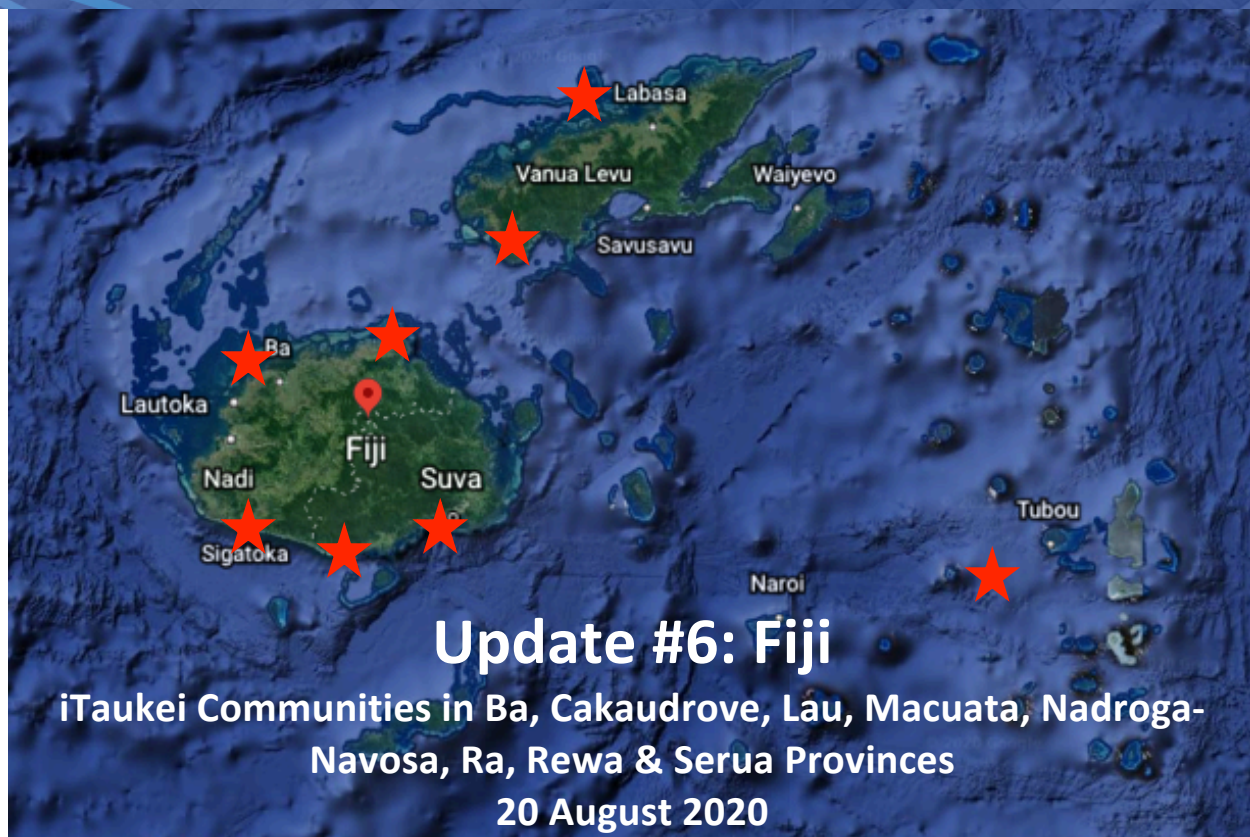


# COVID-19 IMPACTS ON FISHING AND COASTAL COMMUNITIES



## Summary

Fifty respondents from thirty-seven villages in eight provinces around Fiji were interviewed between May and July to determine the related impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic on island and coastal communities. Results from the surveys have suggested that:

- Both COVID-19 restrictions and Tropical Cyclone Harold have affected iTaukei communities,
- An average net migration of thirteen percent into villages is reported by half the respondents. Forty percent reported no migration,
- Food availability is reported as enough or more than enough by the majority of those surveyed.
- Cultural practices, e.g. the sharing of food and *solesolevaki*, are normal everyday communal activities of village life,
- Government assistance in the form of food rations after TC Harold has been received by some respondents in Lau and Nadroga-Navosa provinces,
- An increase in fishing and farming activities was reported by more than half the respondents,
- Prices of staple foods have not noticeably changed in village shops,
- Fishing pressure was noted to have increased by half of the respondents, and stayed the same or decreased as reported by about half of the respondents,
- Fisheries management efforts are ongoing in most communities through the form of *tabus* and restrictions of fishing methods and equipment, or species and sizes,
- Concerns over financial stress, livelihood loss and food availability dominated responses, as well as requests for agricultural, farming and food assistance in areas hit by TC Harold.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic continues globally and is having varying effects on Pacific Island nations. Fiji, (population 897,492<sup>1</sup>) has recorded 29 cases of the virus, 2 deaths, and 23 recovered patients<sup>2</sup>. Since the first survey results from Fiji in May,<sup>3</sup> international borders remain closed, government has maintained its nationwide curfew, but schools have resumed, some areas are adapting to the loss of employment due to the pandemic, and other communities are still recovering from the impacts of Tropical Cyclone Harold.

## What did we do?

A rapid response survey questionnaire was designed to investigate the associated impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic on coastal and island communities. Staff from Conservation International (CI), the Fiji Locally Managed Marine Areas (FLMMA) Network, Reef Explorer, and Women in Fisheries Network-Fiji (WIFN) conducted phone surveys and face-to-face interviews with male, female and youth key informants from nine provinces around Fiji.

Fifty surveys were conducted in thirty-seven villages from May 14 to July 13, 2020: Ba Province (n=1, 1 island), Cakaudrove (n=4, 2 districts), Lau (n=15, 8 islands), Macuata (n=2, 2 districts), Nadroga-Navosa (n=11, 3 districts, 2 islands), Ra (n=11, 3 districts), Rewa (n=1, 1 district), Serua (n=2, 1 island), and Tailevu (n=3, 2 districts, 1 island). Both male (n=31) and female (n=19) informants were interviewed.

## Our Findings

### Major Events

Half the respondents (52%) mentioned COVID-19 and its related impacts as the major event of this year; and a quarter of the respondents (28%) mentioned both COVID-19 restrictions and TC Harold. The majority of respondents that mentioned TC Harold were mainly located in the

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/fiji-population/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/fiji/>  
accessed 2 September 2020

<sup>3</sup> WCS Fiji and LMMA Network. 2020. Covid19 Update #1: Fiji. 26 May 2020. LMMA Network

Lau Group and Nadroga-Navosa Province, areas hit by the cyclone. Only fifteen percent felt that there were no major events. There were no notable differences in responses between men and women.

Event	Female (F)	Male (M)	Total
COVID-19	12	14	26
TC Harold	1	1	2
Both	5	9	14
None	1	7	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>50</b>

*"TC Harold brought a lot of devastation to our crops. Foods were destroyed... As for the COVID-19, we had restricted movements in our villages including social gatherings. Since the pandemic until now, we haven't had a village meeting."*

Just under half of the respondents reported an increase in village population corresponding to an overall average immigration rate of thirteen percent there. Additionally, twenty out of twenty-four villages reported immigration, including those areas affected by the loss of tourism, e.g. Malolo Island and villages in Nadroga-Navosa Province along the Coral Coast. Forty percent of respondents reported no migration, while the rest reported outward migration (8%) or did not answer the question (2%).

### Food Security

A majority of informants (77%) felt that there was enough, more than enough, or lots of food available for villagers. Only a quarter (23%) expressed not having enough food available.

Food avail. In village	F	M	Total	%
Big problem	0	0	0	0%
Not enough	6	6	12	23%
Enough	8	17	25	50%
More than enough	3	5	8	16%
Lots	2	3	5	10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

Of the twelve informants who felt there was not enough food available, four of these were from outer islands in the Lau Group, three from Ra, two from Nadroga-Navosa, and one each from Ba, Rewa and Serua provinces on the mainland of Viti Levu. These areas were also affected by TC Harold and some received government assistance.

More than half the informants (62%) stated they were engaging in more farming and fishing activities.

*“Hotel workers who were laid off didn't have farms and just started planting. Their cassava crops are not mature to eat yet. People don't have money to buy food from shops like before.”*

A quarter (29%) of informants mention *solesolevaki*, a form of cultural, social capital comprising of communal activities, like gardening and fishing, and this had even increased in a few cases. Six informants (12%) from the Lau Group and from Nadroga-Navosa mention food rations provided by government after TC Harold.

*“We are doing solesolevaki in the village. The men are planting cassava, taro, yams, and the women are collectively weaving pandanus. There are also groups of villagers who are going out fishing.”*

Forty percent stated that there were no changes in the sharing of food within the villages. The concept of sharing is also a major part of *solesolevaki* and is entwined in everyday life. The other sixty percent expressed that sharing did still occur, but that it was now limited to within family units, targeted towards those who needed assistance, e.g. widows, or only occurred when there was a surplus from the plantations. Notably, the sharing of food had also increased in some villages, and in one case, this extended to sending root crops to relatives residing in the capital city, Suva.

Only a quarter of informants thought that the prices of rice (34%) and tinned fish (30%) had increased in village shops.

Price of rice	Resp.	Price of tinned fish	Resp.
Increased	17	Increased	15
Decreased	1	Decreased	3
No change in price	27	No change in price	30
No answer	3	No answer	1
N/A	2	N/A	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>

### Fishing Pressure

Half (52%) felt that there was more or a lot more fishing pressure while forty-eight percent noted that fishing pressure had remained the same or had decreased. There were no discernable differences based on location of communities, nor between gender responses.

No. of people fishing now	F	M	Total	%
A lot less	0	2	2	4%
Less	3	0	3	6%
Same	6	13	19	38%
More	6	7	13	26%
A lot more	4	8	12	24%
No answer	0	1	1	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

*“Now it's hard to source income, so a lot more women are going to get nama (sea grapes) to earn a living. Even children are joining the elderly.”*

Respondents reported an increase in fishing pressure due to various reasons including loss of employment from nearby hotels due to the loss of tourism caused by the pandemic, damage to gardens by TC Harold, the closure of schools due to government COVID-19 restrictions, and the need to feed family members.

### Resource Management

About sixty percent of those surveyed believed that management rules were currently being broken but this was not due specifically to the Covid-19 situation.

No. of people breaking mgmt. rules	Total	%
None	19	38%
Less people than before	10	20%
Same	7	14%
More than before	6	12%
No answer	8	16%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

The most common rules believed to be ignored were catching of undersized fish or banned species (21% of respondents), fishing in *tabu* areas or other *iqoliqoli* (traditional fishing grounds for which they do not have rights of access) (20%), using illegal fishing methods, e.g. *duva* (poison) or spearfishing at night (17%), and fishing and selling without a licence (9%).

*“The leaders have a village meeting and we normally discuss about environmental conservation. We had seen when the leaders are vacant, there tends to be an increase in breaking rules and legislation.”*

Ongoing management efforts include *tabu* areas within *iqoliqoli*, village leaders reminding the community of management rules, and the



regulation of certain species and fishing methods.

### **Potential Support Required**

Nineteen respondents (38%) did not mention any extra stressors at this time. Of the rest of those surveyed, about a third mentioned financial stress (37%), food availability concerns (33%), and livelihood loss (29%), a fifth of respondents (19%) mentioned mental stress and family stress (17%), and a few mentioned stress on physical health (2%).

When asked about possible assistance from government at this point in time, only twenty-nine percent suggested farming or food assistance. Those who requested food assistance came from the Lau Group and Nadroga-Navosa Province, both impacted by TC Harold, as well as COVID-19. A few others mentioned water tanks, rebuilding of houses after the cyclone and increased awareness on resource management and financial literacy.

### **Conclusion**

At the time of this survey, the results from Fiji have indicated:

- Covid-19 and its related restrictions have affected half of the respondents, and a quarter mentioned both Covid-19 and TC Harold.
- An overall net migration rate of 13% into communities was reported by half of those surveyed, forty percent reported no changes in their village population.

- Food availability is not a major concern for the majority of informants. The quarter of informants that state otherwise are from communities also affected by TC Harold.
- A reliance on *solesolevaki*, cultural communal efforts towards village initiatives, is an important aspect of iTaukei life.
- Sharing is a common, cultural occurrence in iTaukei communities, but also an important part of the *solesolevaki* concept.
- An increase in both farming and fishing activities has been observed by most respondents.
- Government food rations after TC Harold went to some communities in the rural areas, e.g. remote islands in the Lau Group and Nadroga-Navosa Province.
- The prices of staple foods have not changed.
- Fishing pressure has increased as reported by half the respondents; one third of respondents reported no change.
- Fisheries management rules perceived as most commonly being broken include catching undersized or banned organisms, fishing in *tabu* areas, using illegal fishing methods, and fishing without a licence, though the defiance of these rules were not seen to be associated with COVID impacts.
- Financial stress, food availability concerns, and livelihood loss were informants biggest concerns with a third of respondents expressing that farming and food assistance would be beneficial at this time.

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