



COVID-19 Impact on iTaukei Fijians in the commercial coastal fisheries sector: FIJI

18th September 2020

©Simon Harding / USP

Introduction

The COVID-19 (or coronavirus) pandemic is having a major effect on human society around the world. Overall, the Pacific Island countries and territories have been less affected by the virus than other regions. Some nations have managed viral infections by closely screening people entering the country while others have stopped the entry of the virus by closing borders completely. The social and economic impacts of the pandemic on sectors of society are still being quantified. National responses have potential implications for the coastal fisheries sector. These need to be better understood to ensure responses are tailored to meet the particular circumstances at the local, provincial or national level. Fiji recorded its first COVID-19 case on March 19 2020 and to date has a total of 32 cases and two deaths. Although lockdowns have been lifted, a nation-wide curfew remains in place, with no active cases outside of quarantine.

What did we do?

The Institute of Marine Resources (IMR) at the University of the South Pacific (USP) conducted a survey, in collaboration with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) to gain insights into the impact of COVID-19 on iTaukei Fijians working in the commercial coastal fisheries sector. This work complements a parallel study by WCS that assessed Indo-Fijian commercial fishers and traders¹. A short survey was administered by phone or face-to-face interviews. It asked for feedback on the main stresses or stressors faced by actors in the commercial coastal fisheries sector, particularly concerning COVID-19; and the impacts on sales and income. This work is intended as an initial step to inform economic recovery responses or more extensive assessments.

The survey team, comprised of IMR and WCS staff, interviewed 46 individuals of iTaukei descent between June and August 2020 who were classified as independent fishers (n=16), fisher-owners (i.e. fishers operating boats with crew, n=6), crew members (n=13) and traders (n=11) from Rewa, Macuata and Kadavu provinces. Within the iTaukei Fijian community, commercial fishing for fin-fish is predominantly practised by men, although the number of women operating in the sector is increasing. In this study 40 of those interviewed were male and 6 were female.

Our Findings

Events

COVID-19 and Tropical Cyclone (TC) Harold both had a substantial impact on commercial iTaukei Fijian fishers and traders during 2020. The location of those interviewed influenced the degree of effect from these two main events. A drop in fish sales (54%) and difficulty in selling fish (15%) was reported by just under 70% of interviewees. This was attributed to a lack of customers caused by COVID-19 related restrictions including the Suva lockdown and the halting of inter-island shipping services from March 29 to April 25 2020. A further 22% of those interviewed specifically mentioned fish supply or access issues attributed to the lockdown and other restrictions. On average fish sales decreased by 80% for those that provided these details with a range of 44–100%. A decrease in fish price was also reported for the Suva market. Conversely, an increase in price was reported by a few fishers in Macuata and Kadavu provinces. Other effects mentioned were the curfew reducing fishing time and fuel supply issues

TC Harold was mentioned as a significant event by just over half (52%) of those interviewed, with the vast majority (90%) of these from Kadavu Province,

¹ WCS 2020. COVID19 Update #4: COVID-19 Impact on Indo-Fijians in the coastal fisheries sector: FIJI. Wildlife Conservation Society, Suva

where the effects were most severe. The most reported effects of TC Harold were damage to plantations and houses and subsequent food supply issues. Damage to fishing grounds / coral reefs and a drop in fish catch were also mentioned.

Stress

Stress responses varied according to location and role within the coastal fishery sector. Almost a quarter of respondents (24%) stated that they were not stressed, with most of these residing in rural areas. The most reported stress responses were financial (63%), food availability (30%) and family-related (17%). A few respondents mentioned feeling some mental stress or related to their livelihood. Other aspects mentioned were linked to financial stress and the family, including paying rent, school fees and for food. Respondents in Kadavu Province were more stressed about the effect of TC Harold than COVID-19. Low levels of stress were generally reported from Macuata Province.

Livelihood dependency

For all respondents, 38% of interviewees were solely relying on the coastal fisheries for their livelihood, with the majority having a secondary source of income for the household (62%). However, reliance on the fishery varied according to location. Almost two-thirds (63%) of respondents from Suva completely depend on fishing or selling fish for their income. Conversely, 95% of those interviewed in Kadavu had a secondary source of income, mainly from farming *yaqona* (77% of respondents). Other secondary sources of income were farming (food crops), salaried positions, small family businesses (canteens, shops) and contract work (agricultural).

Comparison between roles shows that 70% of traders solely rely on the fishery for their income while this proportion is much lower for all three fisher categories: fisher-owner (33%), independent fisher (25%) and crew members (31%).

In terms of food, 17% of respondents stated that they did not have enough food in their household. Of these, most were from Kadavu Province (75%) and were linked to the impact of TC Harold.

Assistance

Those interviewed were asked “if you had to ask for any assistance or support from the government right now, what would it be?” The five most popular requests were: boat or engine purchase (12 responses), direct financial support (11), fishing gear purchase (7), housing (4) and ice and storage (3) including solar freezers and a more reliable ice supply. Other requests included setting up a fish market (on Kadavu Island), boat maintenance and supplies such as fuel, access to the export market, better boat transportation for children to school and food support.

Conclusion

COVID-19 and TC Harold both had an impact on the livelihoods of many iTaukei Fijians engaged in the commercial coastal fisheries sector in Fiji. The main effects of the COVID-19 measures were a drop in the sales and price of local fish as supply exceeded demand, especially during lockdown. The effect of COVID-19 measures was not only felt in Suva but also in Kadavu Province. The main factor that affected many commercial fishers in Kadavu was the halting of the inter-island shipping service during lockdown in March and April. This service provides regular access to the Suva market for fish sales and also supplies other commodities such as boat fuel. A combination of fewer customers and a lack of fuel led to some fishers stopping commercial fishing completely until shipping services resumed. The impact of TC Harold was also substantial in Kadavu Province where many plantations and houses were damaged, leading to shortages of some foods such as root crops and a loss of income from *yaqona*.

However, the impacts of these two events did not affect all those interviewed with some respondents stating that they did not feel stressed by either event. As most people interviewed have access to land and farming, it is likely that iTaukei commercial fishers were less reliant on fishing for their livelihoods than Indo-Fijian commercial fishers (see COVID19 Update #4, WCS 2020).

Overall, within the iTaukei commercial fishing sector there were some large differences between fishers and traders and also between actors in different locations. Such differences are critical when planning recovery programmes in order to reach the most vulnerable parts of society.

Acknowledgements: This work was funded by the University of the South Pacific and the USP Pacific European Union Marine Partnership (PEUMP) Programme through IMR (Contact: simon.harding@usp.ac.fj). The survey is complementary to a regional initiative led by the LMMA Network (Contact: teri@lmmanetwork.org) supported by the European Union and the Government of Sweden under the PEUMP Programme. **To be cited as:** USP and WCS 2020. COVID-19 Impact on iTaukei Fijians in the coastal fisheries sector: FIJI. The University of the South Pacific and Wildlife Conservation Society.

