

COVID-19 IMPACTS ON FISHING AND COASTAL COMMUNITIES



Update #8: Western Province, Solomon Islands 15 October 2020

Summary

Seventy-one key informants from five districts in Western Province, Solomon Islands, were interviewed between May and September 2020 to investigate the impacts that factors associated with the coronavirus pandemic may be having on coastal and island communities. Results from the surveys have indicated:

- Government restrictions related to COVID-19 have affected over half of those surveyed.
- Net migration in to villages was an average of 16% per community.
- Community events were canceled or postponed due to the State of Public Emergency.
- Food availability was a concern during this time for 40% of respondents.
- Agricultural activities were noticed to have increased by all respondents.
- Increased numbers of people fishing were reported by only a third of the respondents.
- It was not possible to determine whether compliance with current management efforts had been affected as these questions were typically not answered. Generally, low levels of awareness were reported for national and local rules.
- Ongoing resource management efforts were reported in four villages in four districts and include: seasonal species bans, temporary area closures, and raising awareness amongst community members. These communities' resource management initiatives are supported by the Wildlife Conservation Society's (WCS) Solomon Islands Program.
- Financial stress, family stress and food availability were the most common concerns listed by respondents.
- Potential government assistance included agricultural and fishing support, livelihoods assistance and direct financial assistance.

Introduction

The direct and indirect impacts of the coronavirus pandemic have had varying effects in the Pacific. In the Solomon Islands (pop.



691,954¹), a nationwide State of Public Emergency (SOPE) was imposed on March 25 and has been extended until March 2021². The SOPE maintained closed international borders, controlled people's movements, banned the informal food and betel nut markets outside of Honiara, and imposed social distancing requirements, to name a few.

Earlier surveys from Solomon Islands³ described outward migration from Honiara caused by the closing of schools, the shutting down of the informal market sector, and the government encouraging residents to return to their home villages away from the capital city. Recent repatriation flights have brought in 17 cases of the coronavirus⁴, but these are border contained and not out in the general population.

What did we do?

A rapid response survey questionnaire was designed to investigate the impacts of national responses to the coronavirus pandemic on coastal and island communities. The survey was conducted in Western Province (pop. 98,820⁵) by staff from the WCS Solomon Islands Program who conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with adult and youth key informants.

Seventy-one surveys from eleven villages in five districts were carried out from 18 May – 4 September 2020, including from: Peava Village, Gatokae Island (n = 5); Gatere (n = 10), Hunda (n = 10), Kuzi (n = 10) and Vavanga (n = 10) villages, Kolombangara Island; Chubikopi Village (n = 6), Marovo Lagoon; Dunde (n = 5), Kekehe (n = 5), Kindu (n = 4), and Nusa Roviana villages (n = 1) from Roviana Lagoon; and Rarumana

Village (n = 5), Parara Island. Both females (n = 38) and males (n = 33) were interviewed.

Our Findings

Major Events

Seventy percent of females and half of the male respondents (63% in total) thought COVID-19 was the major national incident of the year.

Event	Female (F)	Male (M)	Total
COVID-19	27	18	45
Other	4	3	7
None	7	12	19
Total	38	33	71

A third (37%) did not report any major or notable events affecting their lives. Of these, four respondents (6%) had heard of the pandemic but it had not impacted their daily lives, and three respondents from the same village (4%) mentioned the nearby logging company was preparing to leave the area, which would have consequences for the local villagers who relied on the presence of the company for income.

Respondents reported that due to the SOPE, community events had been negatively affected (e.g., a women's rally and a youth rally had been canceled, crowning of the village chief had been delayed, community fundraising activities and Church activities had also been canceled, Church programs were modified, as well as the postponing of regularly scheduled sports leagues and the closing of schools).

The majority (85%) reported increased village populations; ten respondents (14%) reported no change in village populations. The net migration overall was an average of 16% increase per community.

“At the early stages of COVID-19, people were panicked. People were eager to know what is the latest with COVID-19. Many people flooded into our community from Honiara city.”

Food Security

Half of the informants reported that there was enough food currently available in their communities, whilst about 40% thought that there was either not enough food or that food availability was a big problem. There were no notable differences in responses by gender.

¹ <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/solomon-islands-population/>

² <https://www.solomontimes.com/news/governor-general-extends-state-of-public-emergency/10450>

³ *Wale, J. and LMMA Network. 2020. COVID19 Update#2: Russell Islands, Solomon Islands. 30 May 2020. LMMA Network and Eriksson H, Ride A, Boso D, Sukulu M, Batalofo M, Siota F and Gomeze C. 2020. Changes and adaptations in village food systems in Solomon Islands: A rapid appraisal during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Penang, Malaysia: WorldFish. Program Report: 2020-22.*

⁴ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/solomon-islands/> (Accessed Dec 14)

⁵ <https://www.statistics.gov.sb/statistics/social-statistics/population>

“Because I did not hear or see anyone go hungry and die due to not enough food. People are struggling for their survival everyday and we have our natural resources that we depend on for our livelihood.”

All informants from Chubikopi Village (9% in total) and a third of the informants from Kolombangara Island (18% in total) stated that there was not enough food available or that it was considered a big problem at the time of the surveys. Additional reports from Kolombangara Island indicated that during March and April, food gardens were damaged by heavy rains as well as being negatively impacted by Tropical Cyclone Harold in early April.

Food avail. In village	F	M	Tot.	%
Big problem	7	2	9	13%
Not enough	8	14	22	31%
Enough	23	16	39	55%
More than enough	0	1	1	1%
Lots	0	0	0	0%
Total	38	33	71	100%

Every individual surveyed reported observing an increase in agricultural activities occurring in their villages.

“People are busy with making gardens. People that didn't used to make gardens are now cleaning the bush to make gardens. They are afraid COVID-19 will impact their food security if Solomon Islands has any confirmed cases in the future.”

Fifty-four percent stated that there were no changes in traditional sharing practices. The rest reported that a reduction in sharing had occurred due to the COVID-19 situation, the sudden increase in village populations and the need to budget. Another six respondents (8%) mentioned that sharing had increased in order to assist relatives returning from Honiara.

“Our leaders today create groupings to feed others who have no access to garden or income. But [only during] certain times, and it was said [it] might not continue anymore.”

A majority of respondents did not observe any changes in the prices of staple foods (tinned fish (70%) or rice (79%) in their village shops, whilst about 20% noticed that the prices of rice (23%) and tinned fish (20%) had increased.

Price of rice	Resp.	Price of tinned fish	Resp.
Increased	17	Increased	14
Decreased	3	Decreased	1
No change in price	50	No change in price	56
No answer	1	No answer	0
Total	71	Total	71

Fishing Pressure

Forty-two percent of those interviewed stated that there were no noticeable changes in numbers of people fishing, whilst another third (37%) stated that there were more or a lot more people fishing during this time. On Kolombangara Island, increased fishing pressure has been attributed to the damaged food gardens as well as the increased population from Honiara-based people returning home due to the COVID-19 situation.

No. of people fishing now	F	M	Total	%
A lot less	1	0	1	1%
Less	5	8	13	19%
Same	21	9	30	42%
More	8	11	19	27%
A lot more	3	4	7	10%
No answer	0	1	1	1%
Total	38	33	71	100%

“More people go fishing because fishing is one of the only solutions to feed families [and to] generate small income.”

Resource Management

Only eleven people (15%) reported that the rule breaking of fisheries management efforts was occurring in their communities. About a quarter reported that current rules were not being broken. A majority (62%) did not answer the question.

In addition, it was reported that awareness of local rules was low, with twelve respondents (17% in total) from Kolombangara Island and nine respondents (13% in total) from the Munda area of Roviana Lagoon stating that there were no existing local fisheries management efforts in their villages. A majority (68%) reported that awareness of national rules was also very low.

“People are not aware of our national fishing rules due to maybe lack of awareness plus education on these rules in our community.”

A further eight respondents (11%) stated that elders in the villages would likely be the ones most aware of traditional, local, and national management practices.

No. of people breaking mgmt. rules	Total	%
None	16	23%
Less people than before	5	7%
Same	3	4%
More than before	3	4%
No answer	44	62%
Total	71	100%

All informants from the villages of Chubikopi, Rarumana and Kindu reported ongoing management initiatives that included: temporary area closures, seasonal species restrictions, and the raising of awareness within the communities. However, this is not due to the COVID-19 situation. The communities that were surveyed are part of the WCS’s Solomon Islands Program working with community-based fisheries management in Western Province.

Potential Support Required

Informants were asked about current stressors in their lives. Over half of those surveyed (58%) stated they had financial and food availability concerns, as well as feeling the effects of family stress. Almost a third (28%) added they felt extra physical stress and 14% further felt mental stress.

When asked about what government assistance they might need at this time, eighteen respondents (25%) mentioned agricultural and fishing support; sixteen respondents (23%) mentioned livelihoods, such as help with income

generating projects; fourteen respondents (20%) stated that direct financial assistance for school fees and living expenses would be the best way; eleven respondents (15%) listed improved sanitary conditions and medical assistance; and only four individuals (6%) responded with the need for food rations.

Conclusion

At the time of the surveys, results from Western Province have indicated:

- The COVID-19 pandemic and the knock-on effects were perceived to have affected two thirds of informants.
- Eighty-five percent of respondents reported inward migration and net migration across all villages was on average 16%.
- Food availability was reported as a moderate or a big problem by 40% of respondents; half reported that there was enough food available.
- Increased agricultural activities were observed by all those surveyed.
- Increased numbers of people fishing were observed by only a third of informants.
- Traditional sharing practices were reported by 40% of respondents to have changed due to the COVID-19 situation.
- Questions on the breaking of fisheries management rules were mostly left unanswered. However, awareness of national and local rules is considered low, as stated by a majority.
- Stressors mentioned most frequently by informants include financial worries, food availability concerns, and family stress.
- Potential government support requests included agricultural and fisheries, livelihoods, and direct financial assistance.

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