



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

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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 the coastal fisheries sector, but these need better understanding if international and government responses are to be best tailored to the particular circumstances of different villages and countries. Fiji recorded its first case on 19 March 2020, and had a total of 18 cases and no deaths. As of 5 June, 2020, all cases had recovered and there have been no new cases. While lockdowns have been lifted, a nation-wide curfew remains in place.

What did we do?

The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) developed a survey to gain basic and rapid insights into the impact of COVID-19 on Indo-Fijians in the commercial coastal fisheries sector. Recognising the pandemic may be impacting ethnic groups differently, a parallel study is being conducted by the University of the South Pacific and WCS on the impact of COVID-19 on commercial *iTaukei* fishers and traders. The 10 question survey is designed to be administered over the telephone and provide key feedback quickly on: the main stresses or stressors faced by the four actors in the commercial coastal fisheries sector, particularly concerning COVID-19; and the main impacts on sales and income. This is

intended as a first step to inform emergency responses or other more extensive surveys (once national restrictions are lifted).

The team interviewed 61 individuals of Indo-Fijian descent who were classified as independent fishers (n=14), fisher-owners (i.e. fishers operating boats with crew, n=26), crew members (n=9) and traders (n=12) from Ba, Rakiraki, Tavua, Labasa and Savusavu. Amongst the Indo-Fijian community, fishing and the selling of seafood is a male-dominated activity, and therefore 57 of those interviewed were male and 4 were female.

Our findings

Events

COVID-19, Cyclone Harold and flooding (due to poor weather conditions) had the greatest impact on Indo-Fijians in the commercial coastal fisheries sector in 2020. Of those interviewed, 73.8% were affected by a decrease in fish sales which they attributed to declines in local customers and the shrinking of tourism markets. Just under 50% of respondents were affected by the reduction in the price of fish in all five markets surveyed. Based on prices provided by those interviewed, the percentage decrease in sale price ranged from 14.3–77.8% and averaged 36.5%. Just over 10% of respondents were affected by the lockdown and curfew hours that impacted their ability to fish, some were even stuck at sea due to curfew hours limiting when they could return home.

Others also reported damage to their houses, farms, fish landing sites, boats and engines from Cyclone Harold, exacerbated by insufficient money for repairs. Furthermore, poor weather conditions impacted the amount of fish caught, especially in

nearshore areas impacted by sediment run-off from land.

Stress

Level of stress varied across geographies and across fishers, fisher-owners, crew members and traders. Overall, the highest stress was financial (95.1%), followed by food availability (34.4%) and worries about the family more generally (32.8%). Financially, respondents expressed concerns about paying basic electricity and water bills, payments for hire purchase and loans, money for groceries and boat maintenance.

Mental and physical health was also mentioned by some of the fishers. Many pointed out physical stress experienced from having to spend long hours at sea fishing without any protective clothing, or traders having to stand long hours in wet markets to ensure they got some income from their fish sales. Fisher-owners felt stressed about how to support their crew members and their families. Crew members were the most vulnerable as they are solely dependent on fishing for livelihood and live on fish sales from each trip shared amongst the boat captain and all the crew.

Livelihood dependency

The majority of coastal fisheries dependent Indo-Fijians reported only one source of income (63.9%), the rest had other sources of income (36.1%). Secondary sources of income came from farming, small family businesses (rental car, carwash business, small shop), boatbuilding and carpentry, and rent from tenants on their land. Those who have no other sources of income rely on government assistance such as social welfare, if they were eligible, and support from family members and relatives.

In terms of food, 44.4% of crew members, 16.4% of fishers, 11.5% of fisheries owners, and 8.3% of

traders stated they did not have enough food in their household.

Assistance

Indo-Fijians in the commercial coastal fisheries sector 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 maintenance and supplies (17 people); direct financial assistance (9); purchase of boats and/or engines (8); purchase of fishing gear (8); and requests for freezers or improved access to ice (8). Many are struggling to cover basic needs, including food, and were not eligible for Fiji National Provident Fund assistance.

Conclusion

COVID-19, Cyclone Harold and bad weather conditions have impacted the livelihoods of Indo-Fijians engaged in the commercial coastal fisheries sector in Fiji. This is largely caused by shrinking markets and drops in the price of seafood. Cyclone Harold caused damage to their boats, fishing gear, and landing sites, which many cannot afford to fix, and this limits their ability to continue to fish for their livelihoods. It is important to note that unlike communities previously interviewed (WCS and LMMA, 2020¹), with access to land and agriculture, groups more dependent on commercial fishing without access to alternatives, such as Indo-Fijians in the coastal fisheries sector, are acutely vulnerable and report food shortages. As government develops aid and recovery plans for the country, it is critical to consider carefully how different ethnic groups are impacted to ensure government support goes to those most in need. This is vital so that efforts support the most vulnerable and do not widen inequalities in our society.

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¹ WCS and LMMA .2020. COVID19 Update #1: Impact on fishing and coastal communities: FIJI. 26 May 2020. LMMA Network.