

POLICY REVIEW

COVID-19 and PACIFIC YOUTH



Youth selling local products to tourists in Honiara. Photo by Joey Manemaka

Purpose

The aim of this policy brief is to:

- *provide an analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on Pacific youth; and*
- *identify priority activities and policy actions needed for COVID-19 responses.*

Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak that started in the city of Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, in early December 2019, and declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020, is affecting multiple regions of the world (World Health Organisation.2020). As of 27 October 2020, more than 43,363,298 cases and 1,157,126 deaths have been reported worldwide, with a case fatality rate of 2.7%. The number of countries and regions with COVID-19 cases is at 189 (World Health Organization 2020). The United States continues to take the global position for cumulative incidence, reporting the highest number of global daily cases. The US, India, and Brazil have significantly higher rates than any other country in terms of cumulative incidence, with little indication of levelling off. While India's daily cumulative incidence remains high, their daily incidence decreased by 16% compared to the numbers as of 23 October 2020.

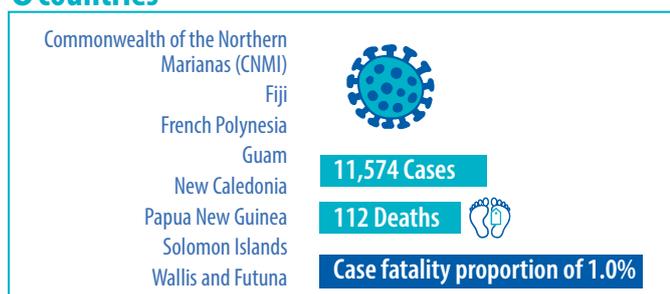
Incidence is decreasing in South America, as well as in Asia (driven principally by India), increasing moderately in North America, and increasing more sharply in Europe (nearly doubling over the past two weeks). Incidence in Oceania is increasing sharply as well, but the region has generally reported very low incidence over the course of the pandemic, so even minor absolute increases result in large relative changes. Similarly, incidence in Africa appears to be

increasing at approximately the same rate as North America, but this is a result of a much smaller absolute change due to Africa's generally low incidence, particularly on a per capita basis. Daily incidence is decreasing in most of the Eastern Mediterranean region, which includes numerous countries that previously reported among the highest per capita incidence in the world (World Health Organization. 2020).

With more than 43,363,298 million cases, COVID-19 has forced businesses to close, halted international trade and travel and tourism, crashed economies, and in some places, overwhelmed hospitals and other healthcare facilities to the edge of collapse. Furthermore, while attention is currently focused on those most immediately affected by the virus, there are many indications that the pandemic will have long-lasting and multidimensional social, cultural, economic, and political impacts on the whole of societies, including young people. According to United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres' statement on COVID-19 and youth, respect for all human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights as well as civil and political rights, is fundamental to the success of public health responses and recovery from the pandemic. To mitigate the effects of COVID-19 there is a need for governments and non-government organisations to partner safely and effectively with young people, during and after the pandemic. The Secretary-General continued, stating that recognising young people's capabilities and their potential to advance the fight against the pandemic is crucial (United Nations 2020).

FOR THE PACIFIC REGION, AS OF 27 OCTOBER 2020

8 countries



2,478 new cases between 20 October and 27 October 2020



 **Sixteen of the other PICTs remain COVID-19-free** (WHO 2020), however it does not render them immune to the far-reaching effects of the pandemic.

Issues

Youth unemployment

Many young people are employed in work that makes them more vulnerable to income and job loss during the current crisis. For example, across much of the Pacific region, tourism and agriculture are not only some of the key drivers of economic growth, but a major source of livelihood and employment for young people (Balakrishnan 2020). Prior to COVID-19, youth unemployment in the Pacific stood at 23%. Young people who are working are often employed in informal jobs without benefits and protections, and they are over five times less likely to secure jobs compared to older workers (PYDF, 2015). Young women face additional insecurities and barriers due to the significant gender wage gap as well as occupational segregation. Further, young women spend considerably more time doing unpaid care and household work than young men (Azzopardi and Clarke 2019).

The majority of the Pacific may still be COVID-19-free, however extensive and ongoing lockdown restrictions across the globe are proving detrimental to the region. The COVID-19 labour market aftershocks are evident in the quality and quantity of jobs currently available for young people, both in the formal and informal sectors, including zero-hour contracts. Some observers believe it could take at least two years for the tourism industry to get back on its feet. Others remain uncertain given that recovery will largely depend on people's appetite and confidence to travel. According to the Asian Development Bank and the International Labour Organization (ADB and ILO), countries such as Cook Islands, Fiji, Palau, Samoa and Vanuatu will experience negative economic growth this year as a result of a decline in tourism numbers (ADB and ILO 2020). The ILO estimates that thousands of tourism workers in the region are facing poverty as a

result of losses from low visitor arrivals. For instance, in Fiji, nearly 300 hotels and resorts have shut down or been converted to quarantine sites, with over 40,000 tourism workers either laid off or on leave without pay (News, 2020). The chief executive officer of the Fiji Hotel and Tourism Association, Fantasha Lockington, has described the situation as “extremely devastating”. In Samoa, more than 4,000 tourism workers have lost their jobs after the country closed its borders to foreign nationals on 20 March (News 2020). The impact of COVID-19 on

youth unemployment will further exacerbate the social challenges the region is currently facing.

There is a large number of youth from the Pacific region engaged in labour mobility schemes with New Zealand and Australia. As a result of the pandemic, the two receiving countries have had to prioritise their own citizens. The uncertainty surrounding the future of these initiatives will certainly worsen the region’s youth unemployment crisis.

Quality education

The State of Pacific Youth Report 2017 (SOPY) noted significant progress made in education in the last five years, particularly regarding expanding opportunities in basic education – primary and lower secondary education. Adolescents and youth are increasing their levels of educational attainment; however, the report also identified long-term concerns



Rotuma High School students (Rotuma 2020) – Photo by Marica Risiate.

about the quality of education at all levels and the preparation it provides for adult life. Youth unemployment and lack of decent work constitute arguably the most significant problem facing young people, with young women being disproportionately impacted. PICT economies are simply not generating the quality and quantity of work opportunities required to meet the demands of young educated people.

The global COVID-19 pandemic is having an unprecedented impact on education systems all over the world, including the Pacific, with far-reaching social

consequences. According to UNESCO, 165 countries, as of 27 March 2020, have implemented nationwide and local closures of educational institutions, affecting a total of 1.52 billion children and youth (UNESCO. 2020). This number represents over 87% of all enrolled learners and is expected to increase with subsequent waves and more countries enforcing

nationwide closures (UNESCO 2020). Moreover, as the duration of school closures is highly uncertain, it disproportionately impacts disadvantaged and underprivileged children and youth who have fewer educational opportunities outside of school, lack access to the Internet and remote learning tools, rely on school for social protection and a sense of belonging and self-exploration, and who depend on free or discounted school meals for healthy nutrition. The current situation is expected to have severe consequences in terms of education quality, preparation for employment, compromised nutrition, and elevated drop-out rates.



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Health

It is known that COVID-19 can infect individuals of all ages. However, the WHO has cautioned that older persons and anyone with pre-existing medical conditions, such as asthma, diabetes, and heart disease, appear to be more vulnerable to severe illness. In addition, health experts are alerting the public to the possibility that this illness can also hit some populations with substance use disorders particularly hard. This is due to the fact that the virus attacks the lungs; therefore COVID-19 could be a serious threat to tobacco smokers.

SOPY reported a **hike in smoking activities amongst young men aged 20–24**, with notable increases in Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Kiribati.



Many governments have called on youth to help those who are most vulnerable, and to aid in spreading

public health social awareness campaigns among their communities. Although young people might be healthier individuals and have a more robust immune system than the elderly, it is critically important for the Pacific governments to take extra precautions to avoid infection and transmission amongst its youth. While they are often at the forefront of COVID-19 awareness campaigns, they need to be protected.

Lockdown restrictions, school closures and social distancing have been vital government measures in mitigating cases of COVID-19 in the Pacific. While this is a success story for the region, this level of isolation and reduced opportunities has significant implications on well-being. SOPY identified mental health and the lack of available supports a key concern for Pacific youth. The lockdown and social distancing may have lasting psychosocial effects and impacts on mental health.

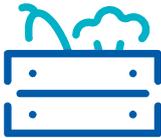
Food security and nutritious diets

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, “The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures to contain it are already having a negative and gender-differentiated impact on all dimensions of food security and nutrition, through reduced food production and distribution capacities, decreased purchasing power and diminished access to nutritious food” (20). Disruptions in supply chains that have occurred because of the restrictions on movement, road closures and other logistical channels, and limited access to markets for purchasing inputs and selling products, are resulting in unsold agricultural produce and products, poor quality produce and products arriving in markets, and high levels of food loss, all of which reduces incomes for producers and traders. These issues will likely be compounded at the peak of the crop harvest season, particularly for perishables, forcing market prices to slump. If this is not well managed soon, there will be devastating levels of food loss for young farmers and their families (FAO 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced people to go back to growing their own food, however the majority of the young people who have lost jobs live in urban areas where there is limited access to land. This leads to changed buying patterns, with consumers purchasing the cheapest but not necessarily the healthiest foods. Some consumers purchase only staple carbohydrates and non-perishables, resulting in perishable food being wasted in markets. Physical distancing measures have reduced the consumer base that would normally buy their food supplies in markets, resulting in increased food waste and reduced incomes for traders.

The negative impacts of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition in the region are further compounded by the effects of climate change and climate-related disasters. The humanitarian response to Tropical Cyclone Harold in Vanuatu and Fiji has been limited and cautious due to the COVID-19 threat. The recent measles outbreak in Samoa has left the country’s economy in a vulnerable state, which is now further threatened by COVID-19.

Suggestions for policy actions and priority activities



Immediate action should be taken to boost youth engagement in agricultural production

Priority activities/immediate actions



- Immediate action should be taken to boost youth engagement in agricultural production. This includes providing financial services to enable youth-led, small-scale farming, and small and medium enterprises to overcome cash flow crises; distributing inputs for primary agricultural production to ensure food availability in the poorest areas; and providing digital services for agriculture and education.
- Emphasis on the creation of small backyard gardens and functioning local supply chains is essential, targeting nutritious foods needed for a healthy diet.
- Consult and meaningfully engage youth of all diversities in the development of health, economic, and social interventions in response to COVID-19 and its recovery.
- Promote public health approaches and targeted delivery of accurate information so that young people can be empowered to make evidence-based decisions about their health.
- Monitor youth unemployment and underemployment; take targeted measures during the recovery to promote youth employment and decent work.
- Adapt the delivery of education through digital and non-digital methods, from early childhood education to tertiary education, to ensure the continuation of skills acquisition and learning.
- Incentivise youth innovation for the prevention and treatment of COVID-19 and the management of its corollary socioeconomic impacts.

Suggestions for policy responses

- Provide immediate health and psychosocial support for young people.
- Create decent and productive jobs for a green, inclusive and resilient recovery for youth – i.e. job creation initiatives that are low investment but high impact, and that are initiated by youth and are appealing to youth.
- Ensure that social protection systems include all young people, with special attention paid to those who are most vulnerable and marginalised, such as homeless youth, youth with disabilities, young women, etc.

Provide immediate health and psychosocial support for young people



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