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INTRODUCTION

The global COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect Fiji beyond public health, in profound ways. The indirect effects of the pandemic in Fiji coalesce primarily around social, economic, and political issues, presenting individuals, organizations, and communities with livelihood challenges for years to come. With the closure of state borders and ships ceasing to sail, Fiji's supply chains have been disrupted, and food insecurity has increased. Displaced individuals and households are becoming refugees of the COVID-19 crisis. Some businesses (specifically Medium, Small and Micro Enterprises) are closing, while others are suffering losses, with workers being laid off. Fijian households, including both indigenous families and those of Indian descent, face uncertainties and the already vulnerable are turning into extremely vulnerable community members.

To explore the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic in Fijian society, this research adopted a qualitative approach and utilized the following research instruments: (a) virtual ethnography, *i.e.* keeping track of activities and updates on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as the COVID-19 situation evolved in Fiji, (b) participant observation, and (c) people shadowing, to gain a deeper understanding of how different segments of the Fijian society behaved and responded to the situation as it advanced, and (d) informal interviews with ten individuals who were randomly selected from households along the Suva-Nausori corridor. Six females and four males participated in the informal interview component of this research. The youngest participant was a 28-year-old female of iTaukei origin while the eldest was a 54-year-old female, also of iTaukei origin.¹

In the present research, my identity was somewhat ambiguous, as both an 'insider' and an 'outsider' of the research community. As a Fijian citizen, and faced with the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic as much as my fellow country folks, I was to a large extent, positioned in this research as an 'insider'. On the other hand, I was also an 'outsider', approaching the community as a professional international civil servant working as Head of Community Research and Ethnographic Solutions Mapping with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Accelerator Lab, Pacific.²

I present the material according to the four phases that have been widely noted for the COVID-19 pandemic: (i) identification and acknowledgement of the virus in mainland China by the World Health Organization (WHO), (ii) virus imports to Fiji, (iii) community transmission, and (iv) containment.³

MAINLAND CHINA, COVID-19, AND NATIONAL SECURITY

As mainland China started to battle the virus, authorities around the globe and in Fiji also started stepping up their 'game', making tough decisions in real time to protect their

citizens' wellbeing. In early January 2020, Fiji tightened its border security. As cases spiked in mainland China, borders were immediately closed off to foreign nationals who had been in mainland China within 14 days of their intended travel to Fiji.

By late January, Fiji had extended its travel ban to travellers from Italy, Iran, and the cities of Daegu and Cheongdo in South Korea, where COVID-19 cases had spiked. Furthermore, cruise ships entering Fiji were required to make first berths at the ports of Suva and Lautoka and passengers were required to undergo travel history and medical screening. By mid-March 2020, no cruise ships could enter Fiji waters and all international events in the country, as well as overseas travel for government officials, had been cancelled. While this worked in favour of Fiji's security, it also caused heartache and chaos for the international community living and working in Fiji. At the time of writing, three expatriates who have not been able to reunite with their families or get back to Fiji as borders were closed off relayed their stories and experiences to me. I present summaries thereof.

Moris informs me that he has not seen his family since December 2019. His spouse, who is of Chinese descent, has gone to China to celebrate the Chinese New Year with their two daughters, but has not yet been able to return to Fiji. Moris has tried all possible ways to get them back into the country, but all strategies have failed.

A mother who left her two-year old behind in Fiji and returned to the West Indies to get the daughter's passport made so that she could take her daughter with her to West Indies has since not been able to return to Fiji. The two-year-old has since been living with her nanny here in Fiji. The only way that she can communicate with her daughter is via Zoom or other online media applications.

Shabilo is on a working visa in Fiji. Because her work requires travel across the Pacific, she had traveled to the Solomons. She was stuck in the Solomons for over three months. They would not let her board the flight to Fiji as borders have closed. She had no money. She had given up on her accommodation and her sim card before she left for the airport. She was begging staff at the airport in Honiara to board the flight, but they did not allow her to do so. She was basically left stranded. In these three months she faced so many difficulties. To add to the difficulties, her mother has been hospitalized back in India. She had also run out of her special medications in the Solomons. On top of that she is a vegan and a female - both of which presented additional difficulties. As a female, she was worried for her safety and security, and as a vegan she faced lots of difficulties obtaining nutritious and fresh leafy vegetables for her meals. The vegetables are expensive in Solomons.....She felt that decisions were just made overnight and lacked proper instructions. Now, as she is trying to return to India via a repatriation flight, she was told that her COVID-19 test which she did some days ago is invalid.

COVID-19 REACHES FIJI

When Fiji identified its initial clusters of COVID-19 patients (imported cases) in the cities of Lautoka, and later in Suva (on Viti Levu) and in parts of Labasa such as Soasoa (on Vanua Levu), these regions were immediately declared as 'active hotspots' and were required to transition into mandatory lockdowns.⁴ All non-essential businesses were also requested to halt their operations at these hotspots, but banks, supermarkets, pharmacies, and essential businesses could remain open (Kate 2020; Vula 2020).

A shop owner in Suva city informed me that his business has been heavily impacted by the pandemic, not because he is not able to make sales, but because he used to import products from mainland China to be sold in Fiji. As border restrictions become tighter, his importations have been affected.

At the time of writing, the Government had also made one of its toughest decisions—to close all schools around the country and to require that all Fijians observe national curfew orders, which start at 10 pm and end at 5 am daily. By March 21 2020, cases of community transmission started to emerge.

COMMUNITY TRANSMISSION AND VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

In light of the risk of community transmission and restricted travel freedoms, anthropologists like me could only engage in virtual ethnography. Virtual ethnography was the only means to get a sense of what was happening around the country during this period. A few days into lockdown, however, I realized that the virtual ethnography aspects of the research did not portray the full picture. Therefore, I decided to deploy participant observation and people shadowing as additional research tools to gain a deeper understanding of the effects of the pandemic on different segments of Fijian society and on their livelihoods (Figs. 1–3).

The participant observation and people shadowing component of the research often entailed making spontaneous car rides to towns, supermarkets, hospitals, and other places such as bus stations to observe people's behaviour during the lockdown period. I could not, however, move out of the city or beyond the town borders. I recorded my observations as diary entries and took photographs that were later used for evidence and reflection purposes.

Some of the behaviours and attitudes exhibited by citizens did not bode well for creating and sustaining an engaged COVID-19 society. It was observed that the majority of people continued to stockpile essential items during panic buying for themselves, disregarded the safety guidelines set by the government, and had placed their own needs ahead of other community members. For example, (i) some shop owners engaged in devious activities such as cheating consumers through price gouging face masks, hand sanitizers, and food items, (ii) some citizens recklessly displayed inconsiderate behaviours such as breaking curfew orders individually and as groups⁵ and (iii) many others engaged in non-compliant activities such as ignoring new instructions set by the Government relating to community gathering.⁶

The rapidly transformed 'new normal' resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak has left some citizens with a bitter taste in their mouth (Figs. 4-5). Instances such as breach of quarantine measures by individuals arriving into the country has also caused concern and unease in the community. For instance, the public became outraged at a 62-year woman from Santa Rosa, California who arrived into Fiji on 23 March 2020 on a Los Angeles flight and defied self-quarantine orders by going to the Registrar of Marriage in Suva and requesting an urgent procedure of marriage on 27 March 2020 (Talei 2020).

As the spread of the virus in the community was controlled and restrictions on movements scaled back, I started to employ informal interviews to elicit the views, feelings, thoughts, and opinions of individuals along the Suva-Nausori corridor on the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on households and livelihoods. This was only possible because I could now sit with individuals at a distance and carry out the interviews. The insights collected through informal interviews were then triangulated with the data obtained *via* virtual ethnography, participant observation, and people shadowing.



Figure 1: Billboards erected around the country for awareness purposes.



Figure 2: Safe hand washing posters at the back of a bus.

HOW COVID-19 IS SHAPING FIJIAN HOUSEHOLDS AND FAMILIES

The global COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect Fiji in profound ways because of the nature of the pandemic and the specific circumstances surrounding Fiji, a small-island developing state. Some of the effects of this global pandemic on Fiji observed by the UNDP Accelerator Lab in the Pacific are as follow:

- (1) At microlevels, the impact passes through the household levels resulting in reduced household incomes, lower wages and employment, limited access to credit if any,



Figure 3: Signage inside a shop.

reduced real income, and decreased access to public services. These impacts are reflected by the sentiments shared by individuals:

We have lost our jobs. Our household income is affected. We are now taking out from our savings, whatever little we have. Our major worries are that of groceries and paying for the rent. I am frightened that he (landlord) will tell us to go. We also have our sickly elderly parents residing with us (Female, iTaukei, 29 yrs).

My husband and I juggle with where and how to spend our money.....health, medicine, construction.....on top of that.....you know our culture.....we also have to look and provide for our extended family members living with us (Female, Indian descent, 36 yrs).

Without a job at hand, no bank wants to give us loans, the only option is to access funds through our superannuation.....even that is not enough.....you know (Male, Indian descent, 30 yrs).



Figure 4: Members of the public stand in a queue outside a bakery but fail to observe the 2 m distance rule set by the government.

- (2) Because Fiji is generally a net importer of food, the country is facing increased food prices. High food prices in turn have diminished households' purchasing power, pushing marginalized and poor households further into poverty.

We are now skipping meals. We cannot afford much food since COVID-19.....we cannot put much items in the shopping list. Before we used to go and do shopping every Saturday but it's now like once or twice a month at most (Female, iTaukei, 33 yrs).

Yes, at times we do get visited by NGOs that distribute food rations but they do have their own dramas.....they come and check our kitchens, move around our house, try to speak to outsiders if we are receiving food from elsewhere.....maybe that's the way they work (Male, Indian descent, 28 yrs).

We are now cooking less and consuming smaller amounts of food (Female, Indian descent, 36 yrs).

- (3) The global economic slowdown provoked by the pandemic has caused a worldwide contraction of the GDP (International Monetary Fund 2020; The World Bank 2020). This hugely affects Fiji because of its status as a 'structurally weak economy', 'fairly resource poor' and 'small island developing state'. As an island nation relying heavily on global trade, tourism, commodity exports including cash crops such as kava, and external financing, Fiji is facing a looming economic crisis.

Before when the tourist ships used to come to Suva, my husband could make somewhere \$200-300 per day.....he used to do tour guiding.....now no more ships (Female, iTaukei, 54 yrs).



Figure 5: Members of the public fail to observe 2 m distancing rule at the Suva Bus Station. None of them had adopted the extra precautionary measure of wearing face masks.

The price of Kava has gone down because people are not earning, and it is no longer in demand. Our client number and sales have decreased considerably (Male, iTaukei, 35 yrs).

- (4) Coping mechanisms deployed by both rural and urban households have been observed to marginalize children, and especially young girls. This is of crucial importance, given household coping mechanisms' potential to limit child development and thus lock future generations into poverty.

I will now have to search for some other work. The little money I make here is not enough. Life here in the urban area was already difficult but with COVID-19.....I don't know what the future holds for me and my daughters. If I go back to the village, I will need to take my two daughters (aged 9 and 13) with me. I will need to change their schools also if we return. I can't say much about what our status or the future will look like in the village as there are also no good health care facilities, and our house lacks basic utilities. I am worried about my daughters (Female, iTaukei, 28 yrs).

- (5) Domestic violence, divorce cases, and cases of psycho-social stress have all increased.⁷ In May 2020, for instance, the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre stated that

there was a spike in domestic violence-related calls during the enforced COVID-19 lockdown and curfew in the country (Radio New Zealand 2020).⁸ The Centre said it received more than 400 calls between 1 and 17 April 2020. The Government also revealed that it had received over 500 calls related to domestic violence on its national domestic violence helpline. Similarly, Empower Pacific, a Civil Society Organization based in Lautoka, stated that they received over 100 calls per day on the new helpline that was launched in partnership with UNDP through the European Union funded Fiji Access to Justice Project to provide counselling services during lockdown period in Lautoka.⁹

I have seen my husband's behaviour change. He spends most of the time at home with us now because of his reduced hours of work. He picks on everyone very quickly almost every day.....to the point that me and my children have become victims of his short temperament. My kids get scared of his sudden change in behaviour (Female, Indian descent, 37 yrs).

My parents add fuel to the fire. They know very well that we are facing financial difficulties, yet they continue to invite people to come over for get together and dinners. At times we get financially and mentally drowned. And it's difficult to say no considering our cultural and religious values. In our culture, we cannot object to the decisions of our elderly and religion wise, every visitor is considered equal to God (Male, Indian descent, 35 yrs).

I feel for my children. They see those kids out there who are not affected from the effects of COVID-19 because their parents have jobs, and they ask for similar stuff.....food.....clothes.....luxuries of life. But at this time, we just cannot afford all this (Male, Indian descent, 30 yrs).

Loss of job has caused some other problems for us. My husband has nothing to do.....he goes with his friends and returns either intoxicated with alcohol or kava.....this has created the rift between us.....I have been tortured twice by my husband.....I cannot take it anymore.....I am planning for a divorce (Female, Indian descent, 36 yrs).

We have already had a big fight regarding who to allow into our house. My parents live with us and they think it is ok to let my other siblings and their families come to our house at any point in time, whenever they desire. I guess it's just the parental instincts (Male, Indian descent, 30 yrs).

COVID-19 AND FOOD SECURITY

The International Labour Organization estimates that 115,000 Fijian workers have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Krishant 2020). Considering that these 115,000 workers support on average a family of three individuals each, Fiji is set to face serious consequences, especially with regards to food security. While most of the world's nations have favourable food production and manufacturing systems, small island developing states like Fiji lack them. Therefore, Fiji requires care packages, accommodation, food, clothing (including school uniforms), and supplies to cater for these extraordinary circumstances.

The absence of widespread local production and manufacturing additionally pose food security challenges, specifically in terms of growing crops and vegetables. There is the additional challenge of developing transnational relationships in the region, as other nations are already dealing with their own difficulties. Initially, Fiji faced an immediate risk of

inadequate supply of processed food items which it imports from overseas and heavily relies on as a food source for its people. All these bundled together may lead to food scarcity on the island. Nonetheless, as of 26 August 2020, it has been 129 days since Fiji recorded a new case of COVID-19 in the community, and the Government aims to maintain this unbroken streak (Deo 2020).

RECOMMENDATIONS

While some argue that Fiji may become a case study for the rest of the globe, this comes with some caveats (Personal Communication 2020). The key elements of a successful containment of the virus involve (i) strictly following guidelines as set out by the WHO, (ii) open and transparent communication, (iii) continuous updates *via* radios, and more importantly social media, and (iv) partnerships and engagement. These key touchpoints help strengthen national culture and responses to the pandemic, creating a more COVID-19 informed society in the country.

Given Fiji's weak structural economy, 'resource poor' status, unequal household income distribution, and dependence on processed and imported food items, foreign food aid, and remittance, agriculture-based interventions and solutions will need to be part of the immediate response to the threat of COVID-19. The breakdown of support required by the 'Fijian Government National COVID-19 Response Budget Estimate 2019-2020' features food security as the major priority.¹⁰

In order to rapidly strengthen Fiji's capacity to increase its own local food supply, it is recommended that concerned parties deploy tools and methodologies that will help identify, innovate, and test agricultural approaches that have the potential to be adapted and scaled up by the local subsistence farming community in a relatively short timeframe. Innovation in food security is something that is also supported by the UNDP Pacific Office's Accelerator Lab.

If agriculture is the way forward for a country like Fiji, this will require working with local lead users to identify and test local solutions for sustainable resilient agriculture *via* rapid experimentation and training.¹¹ This may include a mixture of solutions such as hydroponic farming, high-raised bed farming systems, diversified farming systems, and urban and backyard gardening using lead users of such interventions that have already been identified in past engagements.

Such interventions require relatively little financial or technological inputs and could be implemented in a way that strengthens the capacity of the local farming community immediately and in the long-term. It is envisaged that the uptake of these solutions will improve the food security of the people of Fiji, in anticipation and response to the current concatenation of socio-economic shocks that the country faces.

CONCLUSION

This research drew upon a range of observations on how the global COVID-19 pandemic has impacted Fijian households and families, and the domestic economy. From the research, it can be concluded that Fiji (and perhaps the region) has already started to feel a developmental and inequality crisis. Notably, food accessibility is a challenge, although the effects of this on households and families are disproportionate. There are chances that the COVID-19 pandemic will increase the number of people suffering from mental traumas, social insecurity, hunger, and undernourishment in Fiji. Hence, it is important that a small island

developing state like Fiji takes the necessary decisive rules and collective actions in order to ensure equal prosperity for all.

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DISCLAIMER

This paper represents the views of the author and not that of UNDP.

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Mohseen Riaz Ud Dean is currently working with the UNDP Accelerator Lab, Pacific office based in Suva, Fiji, as Head of Community Research and Ethnographic Solutions Mapping. He holds a PhD in Anthropology from the University of Waikato in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Mohseen's cross-disciplinary PhD thesis drew upon the agronomic, ecological, and social sciences to analyze the current crisis in the Fijian sugar industry. It focused particularly on the livelihood crisis faced by smallholder sugarcane growers and explored the potential of local and traditional farming knowledge to address this crisis. Mohseen also holds a M.Sc in Environmental Sciences from Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, India, a Post Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching, and a B.Sc in Environmental Science from the University of the South Pacific. Before joining the UNDP, Mohseen worked as an academic at Fiji National University. [Correction added on 07 January 2021, after first online publication: Author biography section has been added.]

NOTES

1. iTaukei denotes original settlers and native population of Fiji.
2. The Accelerator Labs represent UNDP's new strategy and thinking in relation to development and advocating bolder innovation. The Pacific Lab based in Fiji tries to address the following questions: (a) how can the lab better tackle complex and fast-moving challenges in the region, (b) how can the lab find the most relevant solutions that work locally, and (c) how can the lab learn more quickly about what works and what does not. Essentially the Lab moves innovation from the margins to the center of UNDP's programming work (<https://www.pacific.undp.org/content/pacific/en/home/AcceleratorLabPacific.html>).
3. On 12 January 2020, the World Health Organization confirmed that a novel coronavirus was the cause of a respiratory illness in a cluster of people in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China. These individuals had initially come to the attention of the WHO on 31 December 2019 (Elsevier 2020; Nand 2020).
4. The first (index) case of the disease in Fiji was reported on 19 March 2020 in Lautoka, the case of a flight attendant of Fiji Airways who had arrived from San Francisco returning *via* Nadi on 16 March. The Prime Minister, Frank Bainimarama announced a further extension of the ban to foreign nationals who have been present in the United States, as well as all of Europe including the United Kingdom. Moreover, all travellers arriving in or returning to Fiji from outside of the country were required to self-isolate for 14 days (Singh 2020).
5. See <https://fijisun.com.fj/2020/04/05/covid-19-110-arrested-for-breaching-curfew-hours-24-for-social-gathering-restrictions/>.
6. See <https://fijisun.com.fj/2020/04/05/covid-19-110-arrested-for-breaching-curfew-hours-24-for-social-gathering-restrictions/>.
7. The Ministry for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation set up the Gender-based Violence and the COVID-19 Response Gender groups to address this issue. Together with the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, they are responsible for analysing the impact of the virus on families. Almost half of the cases reported in March

- 2020 involved restrictions of movement and the economic strains on families, with three quarters of women reporting some form of physical and violent abuse (Radio New Zealand 2020).
8. The spike in number of cases are a direct result of the male 'perpetrators' losing their jobs or having reduced working hours, and therefore spending most of their time at home.
 9. See <https://www.pacific.undp.org/content/pacific/en/home/presscenter/articles/2020/new-helpline-for-people-in-crisis.html>
 10. See <http://www.parliament.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID-19-RESPONSE-BUDGET-ESTIMATE-2019-2020.pdf>.
 11. Individuals who are at the leading edge of important market trends and they have a strong incentive to find solutions for the novel needs they encounter at the leading edge.

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