

## **Introduction to the Volume 41, Issue 2, 2021 (Special Edition on COVID-19)**

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The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have been profound, with a lasting impact expected for years to come. The term "living in unprecedented times" resonated widely as the world grappled with the challenges brought about by the pandemic. Despite having relatively low case numbers due to their remote locations and early preventive measures, Pacific Island Countries (PICs) were disproportionately affected.

To curb the spread of the virus, many PICs implemented strict border control and quarantine measures. However, these measures had economic repercussions, particularly in the tourism sector. Tourism is a primary economic driver for many PICs, and the suspension of international travel resulted in job losses that affected a significant portion of the workforce. Additionally, disruptions in global supply chains due to border restrictions affected countries heavily reliant on food imports, raising concerns about food security.

In response to these challenges, many Pacific Island citizens working overseas and their family members provided remittances to help mitigate job losses and reduced incomes in PICs. The closure of borders was also driven by the recognition that the public healthcare systems in these countries would struggle to cope with a widespread outbreak. Limited medical facilities and resources underscored concerns about the ability of Pacific Island countries to manage potential outbreaks. To address this, some countries received assistance from international organisations to strengthen their healthcare systems.

Despite the logistical challenges posed by the remote locations and limited infrastructure of outer islands, PIC governments strongly promoted vaccination campaigns as a crucial tool to combat the virus. The pandemic highlighted these island nations' vulnerabilities and resilience, prompting a re-evaluation of their preparedness for future crises and the importance of international collaboration and support.

This special issue contains four papers, each coming from different disciplines, which is a reflection of the ubiquitous effect that COVID-19 has on communities. These disciplines include food and public health, human rights, economics, and education. The range of research topics includes COVID-19's impact on urban Fijian indigenous families' food purchasing and consumption (Buksh, Hay, & de Wit, 2021); the impact on human rights as a result of Pacific Governments' response to COVID-19 (Vaha, 2021), the economic impact

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of COVID-19 on tourism and economic growth (Makun & Jayaraman, 2021), and university students' remote learning experiences (Gibson et al., 2021).

COVID-19 lockdowns resulted in food insecurity in low-income countries. Buksh and her colleagues (2021) explore the impact of lockdowns and COVID-19 safety measures on the dietary habits, eating patterns, and food-buying practices of iTaukei (native Fijian) families residing in the Greater Suva Urban Area, which has high population density. The second wave of COVID-19 in Fiji posed significant challenges in this area. Interviews with 13 iTaukei (indigenous Fijian) mothers from various socio-economic backgrounds reveal that income losses led to food insecurity, affecting their access to nutritious meals and dietary variety. Yet, there were positive impacts too. These positive changes included reduced red and processed meat consumption, increased fruit and vegetable intake, decreased dining out, greater reliance on homemade meals, less food wastage, increased home gardening, and heightened health awareness. However, there was also a shift towards energy-dense foods, more unhealthy cooking and baking, increased snacking, and replacing dinner with tea, snacks, and sugary items. These findings raise concerns about the lasting effects of COVID-19 safety measures on health and well-being, which could exacerbate non-communicable disease-related issues. The authors recognize the need to highlight opportunities to promote healthier eating habits, resource management, and food security.

Vaha's work (2021) highlights the conundrum of trying to balance public safety (in the interest of safeguarding the right to life) with human rights when it comes to governments imposing restrictions on freedom of movement and freedom of assembly. Pacific nations, along with many other countries, implemented measures that restrict certain human rights during the COVID-19. From the outset of the global pandemic, several PICs imposed various restrictions on human rights, even in cases where their communities were not directly exposed to the coronavirus at the time. Vaha examines these restrictions in Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, and Tonga, by drawing upon the literature on limitations and derogations within international human rights law. While PICs deserve commendation for their swift responses that have saved lives during the COVID-19 crisis, Vaha contends that their governments must also undergo critical scrutiny regarding the broader human rights implications of their adopted measures.

Makun and Jayaraman (2021) empirically investigate the link between tourism and economic growth in five PICs (Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu). Utilizing a panel nonlinear autoregression distributed lag approach, they recognise that changes in per capita GDP may vary differently to positive and negative tourism shocks. Indeed, Makun and Jayaraman find a significant asymmetric relationship between tourism and per capita GDP. Specifically, a reduction in tourism earnings has a more substantial negative impact on economic growth compared to the positive effect of an equivalent increase in tourism earnings. These findings hold across various tourism indicators and sub-sample periods. Additionally, controlling for information and communication technology (ICT) and financial market factors, the authors observe a significant positive influence on economic growth. The

authors recommend decreasing tourism-related taxes, investing in liberalising the financial sector and deepening ICT-related infrastructure.

As many readers will know from first-hand experience from teaching during COVID-19, the experience of learning and teaching has forever changed due to the pandemic. Gibson et al. (2021) provide insights into students' experiences and perceptions of the shift from physical classrooms to virtual platforms. Using an online survey and conducting online focus groups and face-to-face interviews using Zoom, the research team delved into the online learning experiences of students in the Discipline of Tourism and Hospitality Management at the University of the South Pacific, following the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary objective was to comprehend how various aspects of the online learning environment affected students' experiences and perceptions. Additionally, the study investigated the coping strategies students employed to navigate self-isolation, maintain relationships, and adapt to the sudden shift from in-person to online classes prompted by COVID-19. The findings revealed that while students encountered challenges with online learning, they generally held a positive attitude towards this mode of study. They appreciated the increased opportunity for interaction with their families and friends, fostering innovative learning methods. They also adapted by finding new ways to leverage technology for their education. However, students expressed missing the social aspects of in-person classes and faced mental health issues such as anxiety, stress, and depression.

This special issue collates research undertaken in the Pacific on the impacts of COVID-19. Taken together, this research provides a clearer picture of some of the ways in which COVID-19 affected our daily lives and the pandemic's effects will be felt for many years to come—Vinaka vakalevu to the authors for making these important contributions. Our hope is that readers will be informed and stimulated through this work.

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