



LIVED EXPERIENCES OF COVID-19  
IMPACTS ON AN ATOLL  
ISLAND COMMUNITY,  
PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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2020

REPORT

# LIVED EXPERIENCES OF COVID-19: IMPACTS ON AN ATOLL ISLAND COMMUNITY, PAPUA NEW GUINEA.

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## PHOTO CREDITS

Dean Miller 2018





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This report details the findings from in-depth interviews with community members in an atoll island community in Manus Province, about their experiences during and after the PNG state of emergency. The interviews were conducted by mobile phone in late July 2020 and early August 2020. When the state of emergency began, leaders closed the weekly island markets to stop large gatherings of people. This closure quickly started to cause food shortages, and people stopped following the rules and returned to the markets. This disrupted food access so severely, that markets were quickly reopened.

The community's ability to access mainland markets was greatly disrupted by social distancing rules that halved the number of people able to travel by boat to the mainland. Customer numbers in markets and demand for fish declined dramatically. These changes impacted islander's income and ability to access store-bought goods and foods. Transport disruptions and social distancing rules likewise caused difficulties accessing financial services (e.g. ATMs) and purchasing petrol necessary for both transport and fishing livelihoods. On the island itself, weekly markets were closed at the beginning of the state of emergency. Due to a lack of cash circulating in the community, markets increasingly reverted to traditional barter systems. These findings suggest that unintended flow-on effects of social distancing rules and their implementation severely impacted livelihoods and food and nutrition security on the island.

Based on these findings, we highlight key leverage points for supporting island communities through further and continuing disruptions from the Covid-19 pandemic: recognise distinct challenges that islands face if they become isolated, ensure that support reaches islands in a timely manner, ensure clear communication about future rules, and acknowledge trade-offs between social distancing with livelihoods, food and nutrition security and wellbeing.

A person wearing a red cap, a blue t-shirt, and blue shorts is walking away on a sandy path. They are carrying a colorful woven bag on their back and holding two white plastic bags in their hands. The background shows lush green trees and a clear sky.

## Executive SUMMARY

# INTRODUCTION

The spread of COVID-19, and policies across the world to contain it, continue to have wide-reaching impacts on small-scale fishing communities; from the 'triple economic shock' (Triggs & Kharas, 2020) of changed demand, supply, and finances, to extensive environmental, geopolitical, societal and technological consequences (World Economic Forum, 2020). Covid-19 has been 'a harbinger of massive and life altering changes... in small-scale fisheries and coastal fishing communities around the world' (Bennet et al., 2020).

Within the Pacific region, most countries, including Papua New Guinea, successfully implemented policies in the early stages of the pandemic which minimised transmission and prevented a direct health crisis in the region. However, the deliberate isolation required to prevent disease spread has had severe secondary consequences for small-island states which are highly dependent on international tourism, food imports and remittances (Farrell et al., 2020; Hickey & Unwin, 2020). This has resulted in income loss and reduced affordability and accessibility of food in communities already under the threat of food and nutrition insecurity due to pre-existing social-ecological vulnerabilities (Connell & Lowitt, 2020).

As of October 4, 2020, Papua New Guinea has had 540 cases of Covid-19 (PNG National Department of Health and World Health Organisation, 2020). Between March 2020 and June 2020, PNG was in a state of emergency that restricted movement between provinces, closed schools and required non-essential workers to stay home. Since then, despite increasing rise in cases, there has been a move to a new normal - niupela nomol - with relaxed restrictions but continuing emphasis on social distancing and other methods to stop the spread of the pandemic.



As this new normal unfolds, the Covid-19 pandemic will continue to reverberate across aspects livelihoods, food and nutrition security, and ultimately human wellbeing, likely in unforeseen ways.

Rapid assessment surveys about the impact of Covid-19 on fishing and coastal communities in New Ireland and Central Province in Papua New Guinea (LMMA Network, PNGCLMA and WCS-PNG 2020) highlighted issues of food availability where Covid-19 coincided with the dry season in New Ireland, difficulty in accessing markets, and the need for external support for basic foods and services in Central Province.

This report adds to these findings by providing an in-depth, and open-ended examination of individual and household's lived experience of Covid-19 impacts, in an island context in Manus Province. Ahus Island, off the north coast of Manus Island, is highly dependent on fisheries, has little arable land, and is between a 30-minute and 2-hour boat ride from the closest major town and market in Lorengau. As such, these findings are pertinent to small, atoll island coastal communities, who may have fewer food safety nets, and more issues of access (Connell & Lowitt, 2020). The findings are based on a series of in-depth interviews with women and men of various ages as well as community leadership (see Appendix A for details of study and Appendix B for interview questions).



# OBJECTIVES

This report documents the lived experiences of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in an atoll island community in Papua New Guinea. More specifically, it outlines how Covid-19 and rules to combat it impacted food and nutrition security, livelihoods, and wellbeing and coping strategies. From these findings, we outline implications of the continuing pandemic on island communities.



# MARKETS & LIVELIHOODS

Local markets are normally held three times per week. Mainlanders bring fresh garden produce and sago to sell, or islanders travel to sell fish in two mainland communities. In line with the directives of the state of emergency, local leaders closed the local island markets to avoid large gatherings of people. While markets were closed, those able (usually stronger young men) paddled to the mainland with fish to barter with relatives. Those without relations on the mainland, or those not strong enough, were unable to barter while the markets were closed.

**“...they said, there will be no market, it will stop. Because that activity gathers too many people. Too many people go and too many people hang around there. But... that’s the one way for people to get food. So how can I not go to the market?” ~ Man, age 32**

The closure of local markets and reduced trading hours in markets and stores in town immediately started to cause food shortages, particularly for those more vulnerable, including the elderly. Quickly, people stopped obeying the rules and the markets began again, but with social distancing rules in place. Since reopening, community leaders have worked with leaders on the mainland to institute more local markets; and traditional bartering systems, rather than cash sales, have increased.



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## RESULTS



The state of emergency also severely impacted the town market and local mainland markets – the main fish market for many fishing families from the island. Trading hours for stores and market days were reduced. Social distancing and fear of the virus meant that far fewer people attended the markets on the days they were open, resulting in fewer sales and less income for islanders who sell fish there. Decreased sales have severely impacted cash flow into the community.

**“There weren't a lot of people coming to buy our produce or our fish... because of the virus, I think everyone was afraid, so not many people came to the market... Produce and food, and that sort of thing, it all moves with the people.” ~ Man, age 47**



# ISOLATION

Aside from an Aid-post and numerous canteens, many key services, such as banks, fuel stations, stores, and the hospital are on the mainland. When social distancing rules were in place, boat transfers to town became very difficult. Rather than 12-15 or so passengers, only 6-7 could travel on each boat, increasing the per-person transport costs. Boats ran less often, and some used smaller motors to save money, meaning that the trip took over 2 hours, compared to around 45 minutes. These changes meant it was hard for the community to access town markets to sell fish, and obtain key services, like petrol needed for trolling.

“**...if you're in a city, in a town or an urban area, you're ok compared to us on islands and in villages. And the mainland is alright as well because they have gardens...For us on this island, it is hard... We travel by sea. We go by boat. Now if only limited people can get on a boat, then that affects us... It's 1m social distance and at 1m, when 30,000 or 40,000 men want to go wait for the ATM, you can't finish the things you need to do in one day” ~Man, age 44**



Lack of access to services also disrupted people's livelihoods in unforeseen ways. For instance, one respondent actively discouraged her sons from spear-fishing because of the added risk of getting sick and the inability to access the mainland hospital, which had closed to all but urgent patients, in turn leading to less fish in the household.

**“So I told our family, you can't go to the sea, because if you get sick then how can we go to the hospital? So during that time no one went fishing, and we didn't have money or enough food.”**  
~ Woman, age 54



# FOOD & NUTRITION SECURITY

The state of emergency immediately led to food shocks in the community. Firstly, when local markets were closed, food became hard to access. The island has little arable land, and the community predominately relies on income from fishing to purchase (or barter) food from the mainland and town. Second, lack of access to markets (described above), led to lack of cash income, which decreased people's ability to purchase store foods.

**“That’s the only income we can get...from the sea. We market the fish, we sell the fish... so we can get store food from the income. It helps us to get store food.”**  
~ Woman, age 25

These changes impacted the diversity of people's diets, and people started eating only garden foods, including sago. People also started limiting meal sizes, and eating fewer meals.

**“There was limited food ... we had to... look after it well so it could last a long time, for many days more. If we’d gotten food as normal, as if the virus hadn’t come, then our food would have run out quickly. So, we reduced food... We’d usually boil four cups of rice, and we reduced it so it went down to two cups of rice. So we’d serve, little, little for each child and each adult. It doesn’t matter if you’re full up or only just full, that was your share [ration].”** ~ Man, age 44

**“Before, we’d all eat rice often. Not now. I’ve cooked sago over and over, and everyone complains... but there’s nothing else.”** ~ Woman, age 32



# IMPLICATIONS

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These findings suggest the need to recognize distinct challenges that islands face if they become isolated. In particular, small island communities will be highly impacted by rules affecting the ease and accessibility of boat transport, especially if they have a high dependence on fisheries and fish markets for income, and outside markets for food. Rules should be coupled with measures (e.g. food support) to support communities during times when extreme measures are necessary.

Secondly, there is a need to ensure that support reaches islands in a timely manner, especially during extreme shocks like the state of emergency. Several interviewees mentioned their confusion over whether there would be government support, and talked about previous food and other relief they'd received in the aftermath of natural disasters.

Finally, there is a need to ensure clear communication about future rules, and to acknowledge trade-offs between social distancing with livelihoods, food and nutrition security and wellbeing. In PNG, many government directives will be enacted through ward development councils and local forms of governance. Fear and anxiety about Covid-19 may have resulted in rules that did not account for impacts on food and nutrition security, and non-compliance with the rules may impact people's trust in the legitimacy of future directives.



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WAYS  
FORWARD

# NEW NORMAL

More recent interviews suggest that access to markets, food and services has returned to a “new normal” in the community, even as PNG is experiencing an increase in cases. As PNG’s new normal continues to unfold, the Covid-19 pandemic will reverberate across aspects livelihoods, food and nutrition security, and ultimately human wellbeing, likely in unforeseen ways. These findings will be updated in later reports from on-going interviews and surveys with the same respondents



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# APPENDICES

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## APPENDIX A INTERVIEW APPROACH & METHODS

To understand the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on livelihoods, food and nutrition security and wellbeing, we took a mixed methods approach collected over mobile phones. The methods included qualitative interviews and short quantitative surveys. The findings presented in this report are from the preliminary analysis of the first round of qualitative interviews. Follow up interviews and surveys are ongoing and planned for the next three months.

We have a long-term research partnership with the community. We interviewed three women and three men from the community, who were chosen to represent different ages, clans, and thus perspectives and lived experiences of the pandemic. We also interviewed one key informant, an active local leader. Interviews were arranged at a convenient time for participants, and conducted in Papua New Guinea Tok Pisin, over the phone in line with suggested strategies for ensuring research quality during Covid-19 (McDougall et al. 2020). Interviews were conducted by a research assistant and co-author of this report, after comprehensive training in qualitative interviewing. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to one-hour, and were recorded, transcribed, translated to English and cross-checked by the authors of this report.

Qualitative questions aimed to elicit detailed descriptions of individual and household's lived experiences across a range of themes (see Appendix A for interview questions), including livelihoods, food and nutrition security, and wellbeing. Interview transcripts were initially coded for pre-identified themes and then were openly coded for emergent themes. Interesting or unexpected findings were identified, and will be followed up in future interviews.

The initial round of interviews took place in July 2020. As such, we asked participants, specifically, to recall their experiences during PNG's state of emergency. Follow up interviews will focus specifically on changes since PNG has returned to 'new normal'.



# APPENDIX B

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

I'd like to understand the timeline of Covid-19, from March until now. Can you please tell me what happened in your community when Covid-19 started in March? For example, can you tell me how you heard about it, what rules were put in place, and who informed you about these rules and this pandemic, and also how these rules have changed since March?

### **Livelihoods**

Please tell me about how Covid-19 has impacted how you and your family have brought in food and income compared to how you normally would at this time of year.

Have you and your family made any changes to cope with these impacts? Please tell me about them.

I am interested in understanding how Covid-19 has affected how you and your family have been fishing and gleaning.

Has Covid-19 changed how much you've been catching compared to how you normally would at this time of year? How so?

Has Covid-19 changed the type of catch you've been catching compared to how you normally would at this time of year? How so?

Have you and your family made any changes to cope with these impacts? Please tell me about them.

### **Fishing and access to markets**

Please tell me about how Covid-19 has impacted how you [buy and] sell fish (including markets)?

Have you and your family made any changes to cope with these impacts? Please tell me about them.

Is it easier or harder or the same to access markets (or buyers) to buy and sell fish compared to normally at this time of year? Why?

Have you and your family made any changes to cope with these impacts? Please tell me about them.

Has the price of fish changed to buy and to sell compared to this time of year normally? How?

Have you and your family made any changes to cope with these impacts? Please tell me about them.

# APPENDIX B

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS CONT.

### **Food and nutrition security**

Please tell me about how Covid-19 has affected the types and variety of food you and your family are eating now, compared to normally at this time of year.

Are there foods you normally eat at this time of year that you are not eating at the moment? Why?

Is store-bought food easier or harder to get? Why?

Have you and your family made any changes to cope with these impacts? Please tell me about them.

### **Wellbeing**

How has covid-19 impacted other aspects of your quality of life, for example your normal routines, social interactions and level of happiness and day-to-day life compared to normal? (E.g. Church, soccer/ football).

Have your social relations with others in the community changed? How?

Have you made any changes to cope with these impacts? Please tell me about them.

### **Is there anything you'd like to add?**



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