

# **Evidence from the SEIA of COVID-19 in the Pacific : The contribution of ICH in human-centered development**

Ellen Lekka

Cultural Officer, UNESCO Apia Office

## **Special Presentation**

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) have recorded a small number of cases. Nonetheless they have declared a state of public health emergency in most countries, introducing lockdowns, curfews, and social distancing to prevent coronavirus transmission. This has caused much broader socio-economic impact, which reaches beyond implications linked to the health sector and has serious repercussions on the social fabric of communities, their ability to interact as they were used to and follow their traditional practices, as well as their capacity to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This warranted an immediate response in containing the spread of COVID-19 and stabilizing economies, in both country and regional levels, in a resilient and sustainable manner.

The Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of COVID-19 in the Pacific, conceived out of a joint effort between United Nations (UN) agencies and other development partners, that sought to present evidence of the impact of COVID-19 on lives and livelihoods in PICTs with a view to inform interventions by UN agencies, governments, and development partners. The Impact Assessment was guided by the 5-Pillar UN framework for an immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19. In terms of its objective, it aimed to inform resource mobilization of resources and, in particular, efforts to ensure no one is left behind, considering that the pandemic has had a grave impact on groups that even before the crisis were already facing form of marginalization and discrimination.

UNESCO, as member of the formed Task Force leading the Socio-Economic Impact Assessment, carried out field surveys under Pillar 5: Social Cohesion and Community Resilience. In this framework, the main focus was on the diagnosis of the impact of COVID-19 on wellbeing, cohesion, and social equity in the PICTs. The assessment applied a culture lens and also took into account the impact on access to cultural spaces, and the ability to practice cultural traditions connected to intangible cultural heritage (ICH). In addition, the assessment looked at the disruption caused to the cultural and creative industries, the impact of the crisis for their survival, and how it translates into economic fractures in relevant livelihoods. The assessment presented the opportunity to Build Back Better by identifying the post-pandemic recovery needs, the ways to ensure social inclusion through cultural participation, and how to further strengthen the efforts to safeguard ICH.

The qualitative and quantitative data on the impact of COVID-19 were gathered through an indicator suite and specially developed questionnaire. For the purpose of identifying how social cohesion and community resilience had been affected the following definitions were used:

- *Social cohesion: a sense of collective identity and belonging, mutual support, social networks, safe spaces as well as local heritage, tolerance for difference and cultural diversity. Individuals, communities, and institutions play a role in fostering social cohesion.*
  
- *Community resilience: Generally refers to the ability of a community to overcome, recover from and adapt to disruptive events such as disasters, climate change, or other phenomena using their collective resources (human, cultural, political, natural, etc).*

The assessment was also aligned with the UN Declaration of Human Rights, notably the two articles referring to cultural rights (Articles 22 and 27). The process of developing the questionnaire was guided by the UNESCO 2030 Culture Indicators that help measure the contribution of culture to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

*Article 22.*

*Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social, and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.*

*Article 27.*

*(1) Everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts, and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.*

The study commissioned by UNESCO was carried out between May and September 2020 in all 15 PSIDS. Through this work the central role of social capital expressed through Living Heritage and the diverse forms of living heritage became evident. Already before the pandemic,

communities in the Pacific have benefited from their strong social ties and a tightly knit social fabric with extended networks of relationships across communities which traditionally have strengthened their societies and cared for those left behind or left alone. During the pandemic, social cohesion and community resilience have become even more important factors that are determining the ability of communities in the Pacific to cope with the pandemic and its social and economic ramifications which are threatening entire livelihoods. The assessment showed clearly that in the Pacific context social and cultural participation and inclusion (belonging) are underpinned by maintenance of relationships within families and communities activated through life cycle events; ability to share and participate in life cycle events; a sense of place and access to places of cultural importance; access to gardens, land, and sea (intimate and embodied relationship with the environment); communal decision making; ability and access to worshipping; and ability to pass on cultural knowledge especially to young people. Many of these elements sit at the heart of cohesion and act as safety nets.

While many Pacific island countries and territories are sharing numerous cultural and societal values, for example, collective decision-making and solidarity, since the beginning of the pandemic, solidarity citizen initiatives and supporting those in need have multiplied. The spread of COVID-19 has also compelled people in the Pacific to connect, empathize, and seek a sense of awareness about the struggles of their peers. From barter Facebook groups to community groups delivering food and necessities to households, young and old have mobilized during the pandemic – and have reached people and places which institutions are not able to due to a lack of capacity and/or resources.

Culture positively impacts community resilience by building social cohesion. Research by the World Bank shows that communities with social cohesion can bounce back faster in recovery processes due to their “bonding” social capital, established linkages between social capital and policy/decision makers, as well as due to their shared sense of unity.

A key pillar of resilience for communities in the Pacific during the pandemic were their local and traditional knowledge and practices. For example the revitalisation of *solesolevaki* practices in Fiji and a simultaneous return to land, in some cases through youth-led initiatives

in villages where work is collective and divided for groups of 5 to 7 young people on a daily basis, and then rotate so all the farms are maintained together. Or the traditional *inati* system which ensures the fair distribution of fish following a collective fishing expedition in Tokelau. This has been a demonstration of the wonder of traditional knowledge in providing sources of resilience amid precarious social and economic conditions. The importance and value accorded to elders, and the recognition of their role in transmission of culture was underscored by the Ministry of Community and Cultural Affairs' in Palau when they established a weekly internet service to “meet and greet” during the height of the lockdown. In Tonga the *Tau'olunga* practices that were usually held for passing on knowledge of dances to the young people have had to be cancelled since March, but this has also forced the Culture and Heritage Division to be more creative with their programs and to use this period to collect valuable information. This led the division to launch a radio program through which the public shares traditional knowledge of food preparation and local cuisine with the purpose of encouraging the use of local resources for now and the future. Similarly, in Kiribati, this period has been used to strengthen transmission of skills and knowledge. Traditional communal events such as rethatching of village *maneaba* have continued, and elders and chiefs have been involved in decision making as is the norm. Some have asserted that through maintaining their cultural values and practices, families were able to draw feelings of security during this difficult period.

The outcomes of the assessment showed evidence of a deep rooted solidarity linked to traditional practices. The assessment also noted a large return of urban dwellers to rural areas. This return was linked to an increase of intergenerational transmission and revival of traditional practices. One of the most common practices noted was the revival of traditional food systems and, specifically, the cultivation of land to support livelihoods.

“People returning home like me have been able to rebuild and renovate traditional homes; visit pulaka pits, revive traditional fishing skills, and till the land to plant coconut trees and other traditional food crops”.

(Respondent from Tuvalu)

The outcomes of the Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of COVID-19 in the Pacific pointed out the need for strategic support, innovative investment, and ensuring communities are at the centre of recovery efforts. This approach will ensure that both the state and society will be able to transform the crisis into an opportunity. The UNESCO assessment also showed how social and cultural participation are essential to well-being in the Pacific and form the backbone of kinship relations. This is seen in the emergence of stories of families and communities building self-sufficiency through traditional food production and establishing practices of economy built on solidarity.

The transversal contribution of culture to development and the central role of living heritage in the Pacific both as a coping mechanism that ensures social cohesion during a crisis, as well as a way of contributing to the 2030 Development Agenda is undeniable. With almost all PSIDS having ratified the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, the focus is now turning towards the implementation of the Convention and more specifically on ways the Convention can contribute to sustainable development. To this end, the UNESCO Office in Apia is currently producing a policy brief that will aim to inform policy and decision makers, as well as raise awareness around the important contribution of culture and its relevant institutions in the recovery phase following COVID-19. Engaging material that convey clear messages such as infographics will complement the policy brief and be disseminated more broadly.

The outcomes of the assessment reiterated what we already knew, ICH, most significantly traditional knowledge and practices transmitted for generations and related to food systems, traditional medicine, natural resource management, and ecosystem services among others contribute to food security (SDG2), health care (SDG3), climate action (SDG13), gender equality (SDG5), and decent work (SDG8). As a key pillar of resilience of communities in the Pacific during the pandemic their strong and rich living heritage needs to be at the forefront of the recovery plans from COVID-19, which should be considered as a key component in planning for and implementing activities to address our development goals.