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Island Tourism and COVID-19 in Vanuatu and Samoa: An Unfolding Crisis

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Abstract: Most Pacific islands and island states have sought expanded international tourism development. Tourism generates employment, partly through a considerable informal sector, yet local economic linkages are hard to generate on islands. COVID-19 has brought the demise of island tourism, with border closures and the loss of cruise ship tourism, despite its being absent from most islands. The impact of this collapse in the Pacific island states of Vanuatu and Samoa, both with economies heavily dependent on tourism, has involved hotel and resort closures, selective losses of employment and incomes, with women, markets, car hire, taxis and the urban informal sector particularly disadvantaged, despite attempts to generate domestic tourism. That raises complex questions over the duration of the crisis, and over self-reliance, diversification, sustainability, the future of tourism, the potential for a 'new normal' and therefore of development in small island states.

Keywords: cruise ships, coronavirus, employment, incomes, informal sector, islands, markets, policy, Samoa, small states, tourism, Vanuatu

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Introduction

> We'll keep it beautiful for you (Vanuatu Tourism Office, May 2020).

Contemporary Pacific interest in the blue economy, loosely regarded as the sustainable use of marine resources for economic growth, has improved livelihoods, and created employment. But it has also raised new questions about the role of tourism in this economy and in small island states more generally. This paper, firstly, briefly reviews recent trends in tourism in the Pacific islands and, secondly, examines the impact of COVID-19 on the industry and what this means for national and regional development.

Most Pacific island countries (PICs), where alternative economic development opportunities are scarce, value tourism highly, as a key source of income that also offers a positive national image. The growing focus on tourism since the global economic boom of the 1970s, but particularly in this century, reflects a wider transition in many Small Island Developing States (SIDS) from the productive to the service sector. However, a period of steady growth in many PICs came to a dramatic stop – the ultimate external shock – early in

2020 following the global spread of COVID-19. Ironically, the spread was both partly facilitated by the tourism industry and the reason for its collapse. This paper focuses on the current context of tourism in Pacific islands, with particular reference to Vanuatu and Samoa, which exemplify both the opportunities and unprecedented challenges for tourism development.

Numerous studies have focused on the impacts of crises on tourism. Few have explicitly investigated health-related crises; those that refer to such crises have focused on the impact on epidemics in the destinations, notably relating to SARS in China and Singapore and Ebola in Gambia (Zeng et al., 2005; Henderson and Ng, 2004; Novelli et al., 2018). Various studies have focused on the impact of distant crises on islands, such as Penang (Ghaderi et al., 2012), but none have yet done so in recent times for the Pacific islands. This paper thus offers an initial analysis of a unique external shock: a health crisis originating entirely beyond the islands but with massive local implications.

The Pacific includes some of the most recent islands to have embraced tourism because of costs, distance from markets and intervening opportunities: a combination of well-known structural and scalar disadvantages (Connell, 2013; 2018). Cheaper air transport, cruise ships, higher incomes, paid and longer vacations, and consequent growing global tourist numbers have involved once distant and isolated islands, which usually have comparative advantages in terms of clean beaches, unpolluted seas, warm weather and water and distinct cultures. Most tourists are from Australia and New Zealand but the coronavirus crash came just as several PICs, including Samoa and Vanuatu, were incorporating a new Chinese market. Few recent detailed studies provide insights into the role and impacts of tourism. Hence, this paper provides an inevitably partial overview of recent tourism in Pacific islands, and an equally partial and primarily qualitative examination of the unique and dramatic challenges that they now face following COVID-19. It seeks to focus on the nature and significance of the impacts of COVID-19 on the tourist industry, by drawing on a range of local and regional sources, and by pointing to the implications of these for small Pacific island states.

On the edge of the industry?

Tourism only belatedly became significant in the PICs. In this century, in Vanuatu, Samoa, Fiji and Palau, tourism has become the largest contributor to the GDP, substantially in excess of the value of any exports. In 2018, the tourism sector contributed 35% of Vanuatu's GDP and in 2019 was 23% of Samoa's GDP. In both countries, it also provided a third of all jobs (World Bank, 2020a). Within the PICs, once remote islands have benefited from increased cruise tourism. However many Pacific islands remain on the periphery, distant from conventional tourist circuits, without distinctive cultural or natural attractions, or perceived as unsafe or expensive. Few visitors reach island states such as Tuvalu and Kiribati, while within archipelagic states tourists are less likely to visit outer islands, knowing little about them, preferring to stay put, or without enough time or money (Baldacchino, 2015; Connell & Rugendyke, 2008; Cassidy & Brown, 2010). Some PICs and many islands have failed to attract significant tourist numbers because of intervening opportunities, inadequate airline connections (and thus costs) and ineffective marketing. Several PICs, and many islands and their residents, are simply bypassed by tourism.

Success is therefore highly valued. And yet, incomes can be concentrated in the hands of relatively few households and amongst already relatively well-off households and social groups. Significant parts of the tourist economy are owned by foreign capital, where 'resorts' and cruises dominate. The impacts of tourism are more complex than any simple model can address, and the relationships between the agency of tourists and local people, and of governments and distant entrepreneurs, play crucial roles in outcomes. Incomes from employment are the principal widespread gain from tourism. The most exclusive resorts in the world are on some of the most isolated islands, such as Turtle Island and Wakaya in Fiji. All obvious needs are satisfied within the resort, almost all payments are made outside the country, and local people gain only from some lease payments and employment: Pacific versions of 'zero-dollar tourism' that minimise local expenditure. However, several resorts, including Turtle Island and The Havannah (Vanuatu), have a high ratio of employees to guests and hence make substantial contributions to employment. They also sponsor local schools and education, while seeking to operate through environmental conservation principles.

Employment and incomes, accommodation and land

Tourism employment usually requires no high education levels, and is labour intensive, creating many jobs. However few jobs are well paid and come with limited promotion prospects, hence many are taken by women, where alternative wage labour may be scarce. Tourism also generates activity in other sectors of the economy (especially in services such as construction, retail and transport). Trends towards resort development have increased labour-intensive elements (Shakeela et al., 2011). Much employment is in the informal sector, as tourism is characterised by both ease of entry and intense competition. Tourism work is precarious at the best of times (Robinson et al., 2019), but formal employment opportunities for women enable some empowerment even where that employment is routine and menial. In Samoa, 80 percent of workers in the formal tourist industry are women, and the proportion of women in the informal sector is probably even higher. Transport is almost always a male arena and a rare component of the industry where men outnumber women. Tourism offers women new opportunities for social mobility and greater control over household incomes and, in some contexts, a break from patriarchal society.

The local benefits from tourism have been positive and relatively equitable in several contexts, as in the Yasawa islands (Fiji) where population was declining into the twenty-first century until tourism grew rapidly with superior access and marketing. In islands with few income generating opportunities, small-scale but regular tourism and incomes have reversed migration flows by supporting economic needs and diversifying limited existing livelihoods (Connell, 2015). Samoa provides a rare example where development of large hotels and resorts has often been thwarted by landowners who refuse to relinquish control of communally held resources. Local families have been able to build low-cost accommodation, consisting of thatched, open-sided beach huts (*fale*) in prime coastal locations. Although, beach *fale* tourism attracts backpackers and some domestic tourists rather than high-spending tourists, economic benefits are retained through high levels of local ownership and participation (Scheyvens, 2006; 2008). Tourism has hastened modernity in various guises, and the economic benefits from regular employment have been used in much the same way as remittances: on improved consumption, housing, education and technology (Connell & Rugendyke, 2008; Scheyvens & Russell, 2012; Movono et al., 2015). Social costs have sometimes ensued, with uneven development and conflicts over land and incomes, but alongside recognition that the most cherished values, centred on kinship relations, were usually resilient while tourism enabled superior lifestyles and positive means of self-representation.

Linkages

The extent of local involvement in management and the kind of tourists account for varying degrees of economic leakage and of social and environmental change. Tourism stimulates development in other economic sectors, notably transport, agriculture, fisheries and handicrafts, but multiplier effects are least in small islands, where goods are more likely to be imported, and where tourism exists in enclaves. Local transport services have flourished in PICs, and small-scale industry, such as the manufacture of bread, soft drinks, water and beer (e.g. Connell 2006, Baldacchino, 2010), small stores and restaurants have all grown in response.

A significant proportion of incomes generated from tourism is leaks from small islands or never reaches them. Holidays are booked with overseas travel agents; airlines, cruise ships, hire cars and hotels are usually owned (or franchised) by transnational corporations, while construction material, fuel and labour may be imported. Payments made locally may be repatriated when food and especially drinks are imported, alongside such 'tourism artefacts' as swimming wear, surfboards, snorkels and scuba gear. Where tourism markets are small, consistent linkages with agriculture and especially fisheries have proved difficult to develop, and neither has grown substantially in the PICs in response to tourism. Large resorts are least likely to be linked to local producers (Scheyvens & Russell, 2012). Foreign owned hotels, and fast food restaurants, usually have reliable global food and drink supply chains independent of local producers. Hotels seek a regularity and high quality that small-scale local suppliers are unable to meet, although resorts have usually sought to stimulate local production, to encourage good relations with local people. Nonetheless, an estimated 50% of all fresh produce consumed in Vanuatu hotels and restaurants is imported, especially meat, seafood and dairy produce (Vanuatu Department of Tourism, 2020). Even 'island nights', with 'authentic' local foods, rarely tempt tourists to try them (Scheyvens & Laeis, 2019). Integration of agriculture with the tourist industry has been disappointing, usually because of low volumes, uncertain supplies and inaccessibility, but is widely seen, notably in Vanuatu, as a particularly valuable means of enabling both agricultural development and poverty reduction (Connell & Cruz, 2019). The attractions of fresh fish have enabled the fishing industry to be rather better integrated with the tourist industry.

Between 40 and 85 percent of tourist expenditure leaves the islands, with the lowest proportions retained in the smallest islands (Connell, 2013). So great has that leakage been, especially because of foreign ownership, that even in Fiji, the most significant PIC tourism destination in terms of numbers, some early on questioned the value of tourism, with its social costs, as a worthwhile development strategy (Rao, 2002). That concern has grown where public infrastructure provision has favoured tourist regions, and where all-inclusive resorts owned by international chains – classic enclaves – have made almost everything available within the resort. Low-density resorts are more likely to alienate land (and sometimes sea) from local uses, may intensify erosion, and contribute to a 'coastal squeeze' and net welfare losses.

Tourism has had multiple environmental impacts. Change is inevitable where facilities must be constructed, but is less visually intrusive and damaging to the environment than many forms of development. In some cases this has resulted in a subsequently improved environment, where governments, hotels, NGOs and villages undertake various forms of conservation and land and marine management. Several island hotels have pioneered environmental conservation ahead of governments, when it became evident that this was valuable for the tourist industry. Tourism has however placed considerable pressure on reefs and coasts, through reconstruction (e.g. seawall and marina development), reclamation, and recreational uses. Exceptionally, the correlation between tourism growth and environmental degradation is strong, especially with coastal squeeze, as on the Mulinuu peninsula (Samoa) or at Erakor lagoon (Vanuatu) (e.g. Komugabe-Dixson et al., 2019). Climate change also poses problems for island tourism, mainly because of rising temperatures, bleaching of coral reefs and coastal erosion, while more intense cyclones may damage tourism infrastructure and cause closure of facilities. Although tropical Pacific islands are the most likely places to be negatively affected by climate change, future tourism is more likely to be affected by socio-economic influences of various kinds.

Cruise Ships

The rapid growth of cruise ship tourism, a twenty-first century phenomenon in the Pacific, has put increased pressure on PICs and islands that are relatively accessible to major western tourism markets and extended the reach of tourism to once largely isolated islands. The economies of scale of increasingly larger ships led to reductions in the cost of cruises, in turn opening up new markets. Growth in a cruise tourism market has been particularly rapid in Australia in this century with direct implications for PICs. The Pacific island states and territories closest to Australia – notably Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji – have been the major beneficiaries. Some outlying islands within those states, such as 'Mystery Island' in Vanuatu, have gone from having virtually no tourists in the twentieth century to intermittently experiencing overtourism. Since cruise liners bring their own accommodation, the 'capacity' of the islands has increased substantially but the economic benefits have been disproportionately less substantial.

The newest cruise ships offer an ever-increasing range of on-board attractions and services, with all-inclusive costs (including all meals), so that the cruises are the primary attractions and destinations, enabling cruise companies to increase on-board revenues, reducing local income generation. Cruise companies have also sought to buy or lease particular islands, often uninhabited, to concentrate all land activities (and expenditure) in their own facilities. Begun in the Caribbean, the practice has spread to the Pacific. In 2019, the Royal Caribbean line was seeking to develop what they described as the 'world's first carbon neutral cruise destination' on the private island of Lelepa (Vanuatu), officially in partnership with the local people, and to be called Perfect Day at Lelepa. Wider economic benefits were likely to be small; local landowners had concerns and COVID-19 brought at least a temporary halt to the proposal.

While cruise ship visits do not generate the full-time employment of land-based tourism, they offer various short-term economic opportunities, for the local provision of goods (particularly café food and handicrafts) and services (especially transport and tours). Ship-based tourism incurs fewer costs and lower financial risks, and creates fewer visible environmental pressures, than land-based hotel tourism. The costs of marketing, accommodation, electricity, water and waste disposal are largely external. However, ships place pressure on water supplies, and generate waste streams, including sewage.

By the end of the 2010s, the cruise ship industry was increasingly being viewed negatively as both environmentally more hazardous and economically less beneficial to destinations than previously assumed. Since most cruise ships operate under flags of convenience - two thirds being registered in just three countries: Bahamas, Panama and Bermuda - hence without 'genuine' homes, they are poorly regulated for workplace health and safety, and environmental management (Mahoney & Collins, 2020). Despite such concerns, cruise ship tourism was growing faster than any other form of tourism until 2020. The advent of COVID-19 overturned that perception and resulted in cruise ships increasingly being perceived as floating 'petri dishes' and implicated as one of the main causes of the global spread of the virus (Chinazzi et al., 2020; Ito et al., 2020). Early in 2020, almost all cruise ships quickly became ghost ships, empty floating hotels without a clientele; or, even worse, quarantine stations and prisons for passengers trapped onboard (e.g. Xu et al., 2020). Employment in ports and in a range of services, from cleaning and markets to restaurants and taxis, in their main Pacific destinations, most notably in Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, immediately disappeared.

Coronavirus

While various facets of globalisation have influenced tourism in recent decades, nothing has had a more dramatic and devastating impact on tourism in the PICs and elsewhere, as the spread of COVID-19 early in 2020. Its preliminary global impact on tourism was the subject of several papers, none of which however bear on PICs and small islands, and have tended to be speculative rather than based on empirical evidence (e.g. Baum & Hai, 2020; Gossling et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2020; Jamal & Budke, 2020). Islandness has had some distinctions and advantages; the PICs themselves were much less directly affected than their continental neighbours and outer islands were unaffected. By mid-May, when many countries had reported tens of thousands of deaths, the Pacific PICs reported just 288 detected cases (and seven deaths, five from a US navy vessel moored off Guam). Six states, including Vanuatu, Samoa, Tonga and Solomon Islands, reported no cases. By the end of 2020, the same six states had reported just three cases, all from repatriations, and no local spread. However COVID-19 had become significant in French Polynesia which, by then, had 126 deaths and 17,000 reported cases, the outcome of opening up too soon in order to attract tourists from the United States and France (Heinzlef & Serre, 2021). Were the virus to have spread as quickly in the PICs as in continental states, it would have posed serious problems for small states with less immunity to outside diseases, urban populations and large extended families living at high densities with poor sanitation, significant co-morbidity, minimal access to personal protective equipment and laboratory testing, and underfunded and inadequately managed health services.

However, the global impact of COVID-19 was inescapable and, in the PICs, immediate and crippling. By February 2020, many island ports were closing to cruise ships, beginning with the Loyalty Islands (since New Caledonia was one of the first island states to detect COVID-19 cases) soon followed by Tonga, Samoa and the Cook Islands. The Cook Islands first banned ships from visiting outer islands (*pa enua*), beyond Rarotonga, recognising the particular challenges of meeting possible health crises on small, remote islands. Fiji and Vanuatu selectively received some ships; but, by the end of March, all ports (and borders) had closed and cruise ship tourism was over. Land-based tourism ended almost as quickly and by April many hotels and resorts were closing down alongside related activities such as restaurants, dive shops, local travel agents and car hire companies. That process continued through the year.

Vanuatu and Samoa

The early impact of coronavirus on tourism in two Pacific SIDS, Vanuatu and Samoa, both of which have significant tourism industries generating valuable foreign exchange, can now be examined. Data were derived from local newspapers, social media and interviews, mainly by the second author, but are only exceptionally quantitative (because of commercial in confidence concerns), and by Skype, Zoom and telephone conversations. This has limitations; but dubious or incorrect information has been excluded. Both countries have small open economies that experience limited growth and are at risk to external shocks. Samoa has an older population with a high incidence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) but a more effective health system than Vanuatu which has a larger population widely scattered over a considerable archipelago.

After two decades of steady growth, the increase in tourism numbers in most Pacific SIDS was slowing at the end of the 2010s; Samoa with 146,000 arrivals in 2017 was slowly growing but Vanuatu, after a record 358,000 arrivals in 2017, had experienced a pronounced slowdown, attributed to a weaker Australian economy. Any growth ended abruptly in 2020 with obvious repercussions for the national economies. By April 2020, the ILO had concluded that "Pacific island countries like Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu, where the tourism sector revenues accrue to more than 50 per cent of total exports are expected to face especially severe economic contractions this year" (ILO, 2020, p. 3).

Prior to the collapse of the industry in April, after borders were closed, both countries had already confronted problems. Samoa experienced a major measles outbreak late in 2019 that affected 5,700 people and killed 83 (out of a national population of about 198,000). Travel to Samoa from New Zealand (the source of the outbreak, and the main link to the outside world) was banned and in the last quarter of 2019 tourism fell by 25%. The measles outbreak, attributed to decreased vaccination rates, offered warnings about contagion. A state of emergency was declared in November, but lifted early in 2020. Cyclone Harold passed through Vanuatu early in April 2020 with flooding across northern Vanuatu, and more than half the buildings in the second city of Luganville were damaged. Preoccupation with COVID-19 in Australia and New Zealand posed problems for aid delivery, and overseas aid was quarantined for 14 days, affecting the immediacy of response. An increase in dengue fever and malaria followed. Agriculture was hit hard, with more than half the agricultural systems of the northern islands, which provided both income and nutrition, severely damaged.

Both countries were still experiencing the impacts of previous cyclones: Cyclones Evan and Gita in Samoa in 2012 and 2018, and Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu in 2015. Each had caused substantial damage to infrastructure which had contributed to the slowdown in tourism in both SIDS following 'reputational damage'. By 2019, reconstruction from Cyclone Pam was only 'near completion' and tourism numbers had not yet reached pre-2015 levels. By 2020, while the measles outbreak in Samoa had ended, Vanuatu was also experiencing widespread volcanic ash damage on the island of Tanna. Neither country was well placed to cope with another disaster, especially one that was unprecedented, unique in its global incidence, all-encompassing and with no end yet in sight.

Cruise ship visits to Samoa (that had previously visited about once a week, a quarter of the frequency in Vanuatu) had already ended during the measles crisis. Within a month of the border being closed on March 20th some 70 hotels, resorts and other businesses closed, leaving 1,000 people without employment, where there was little job security and no social security net. The Return to Paradise, one of the few Samoan-owned resort hotels, gave 100 of its 130 staff extended leave, with potentially more to follow. It retained a skeleton staff of 30 but with reduced roles and hours. Other hotels lost similar proportions of staff. The Saletoga Sands Resort laid off 120 of its 150 workers. Sheraton Aggie Grey's, the largest employer after the government, with two resorts, reduced work hours to 24 hours per week and laid off four-fifths of its 600 staff. The more basic beach *fales* also lost workers; Taufua Beach Fales, on the south coast of Upolu, laid off 50 workers. By the end of 2020, even some large resorts that had sought to remain open had eventually closed. The Sinalei Reef Resort on the south coast of Upolu had hung on; but, by the time it closed at the end of the year, it had been reduced to the last 16 of a former staff of 106 (Radio New Zealand, 8 January 2021).

Skeleton crews usually remained, which meant the retention of maintenance staff (such as gardeners and handypersons) and the loss of housekeeping staff (almost all of whom were women) and most wait staff (again mostly women). Most hotels also sought to retain skilled chefs and office workers. The Saletoga retained its housekeeper, a critical position for her role in training new staff. It also retained a small number of skilled Fijians, as did Sheraton Aggie Grey's for Filipinos, who would otherwise have had visa problems, had no local support structures and whose skills would have subsequently been more difficult to replace. Some men, unemployed elsewhere, whose wives worked at the Saletoga, were taken on as security staff at token rates. Some of the key people retained were alternated and rotated during subsequent weeks to enable a broader access to employment. Maintenance work could, at least, be undertaken.

Many displaced workers could return to a more agricultural lifestyle. However, since agriculture could not immediately be productive and goods marketable, and most had utility bills and no alternative incomes, the transition was difficult. There was a distinct increase in the extent of sharing goods and food between households within local social networks. A second immediate outcome was the proliferation of small roadside stalls throughout the country, with households anxious to make some income from agricultural produce (cocoa, coconuts, taro, vegetables, and also fish), but correspondingly fewer households bought such produce and prices were low. Households had reduced incomes, broadly sold the same goods and undercut each other. As cash became less evident, bartering grew in significance (Boodoosingh, 2020). Two months later, roadside stalls had also spread through the capital, Apia. The Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development, whose significance increased during the measles epidemic as village women's committees were revived to support village hygiene, played an expanded role in encouraging food security by undertaking more home gardening. Such changes increased self-reliance but added to the domestic labour burden of women.

The Return to Paradise reported on its website that it delivered weekly food parcels for the families of all those who had been put on temporary leave. The resort 'matriarch' Ramona Su'a Pale stated,

> At this stage, there is no confirmed assistance for our industry here in Samoa and most of our staff are the sole breadwinners for their families, so we will continue to try to feed all our staff families for as long as we can.

Two months later, the parcels had been reduced to being fortnightly, and contained little more than sugar and tea bags. The resort also allowed any existing bookings to be postponed for up to two years without penalty. Overheads for most hotels, and for bars and restaurants, barely changed and loans had to be repaid, hence some hotels sold off physical assets. The Saletoga sold off three vehicles and other equipment.

While the Return to Paradise was willing to subsequently support its own employees, it could not support those who depended on them, and whose livelihoods also collapsed, such as taxi drivers. Taxis, commonly used for transport in rural Samoa, experienced a massive decline in custom (tourists had gone, while local people were less mobile and able to pay and so found their own alternative means of transport).

Like almost every hotel in Samoa, the Return sought local bookings for weddings and other celebrations, reopening for the Mother's Day and Independence Day weekends. Most hotels in Samoa organised special events for those weekends, centred on bargain accommodation and meals. Several reported their only successful days for several months but not enough to sustain a business. The Saletoga was fully booked for the Independence Day weekend (30 May-1 June) at 70% of normal rates. Other hotels had similar experiences, with an estimated 80 percent of patrons being of Samoan ethnicity. During the week, several hotels offered lunches and dinners at similar 'bargain' prices: the most prestigious hotel in the country offered lunches from $6 (and over an eight-hour period) to try and keep business ticking over. There was considerable competition. Urban hotels sought to retain and promote their regular special dining nights, at 'discounted prices'. Remaining open for 'walk-ins' was not feasible outside Apia; hence rural resorts had less incentive to retain kitchen staff. However, the Samoa government permitted Ministry of Natural Resources personnel working remotely to stay in hotels (at reduced rates). In various ways, government sought to support continuation of business. From late in May, when repatriation flights started, several hotels became quarantine sites, enabling at least 14 days of continuous business, but that was not sustained over the year.

Absence of tourists had direct multiplier effects. Hotels and all restaurants needed less food hence they patronised local markets less and regularly turned down unsolicited offers of food and fish from local producers. That proved difficult where producers had customarily sold particular goods such as organic produce to the hotels. Near the Saletoga Resort, three small local stores, partly dependent on sales to tourists at the resort, shut down. That pattern was replicated elsewhere. Both hotel stores and market stall-holders had to turn down local people anxious to sell goods and earn some cash income. Urban markets were particularly affected by what became an over-supply of local products, especially of handicraft goods. The usual earnings for some handicraft stall owners at the Savalalo Flea Market in Apia fell from about 4,000 tala ($2,000) a month to barely 1,000 tala a month ($500). Some were unable to pay relatives or others who produced earrings, carvings and bracelets. Quite quickly, local craft production had ground to a halt (*Samoa Observer*, 20 May 2020).

Almost all distinctive tourist sites, including beaches, in Samoa and to a lesser extent in Vanuatu, are owned by local people (either villages or simply households) and visitors pay a fee to visit them. The village owners of such Samoan sites as the To Sua Trench and Alofaaga Blowholes lost the roughly US$5-10 per capita entry fee which could amount to several hundred dollars a day, and was particularly valuable in remote areas.

Many of the small businesses that had closed had some link to the tourism sector, notably local package tour operators. A preliminary count of a sample of hotels indicated that they had laid off 1,177 workers, given 229 leave without pay and retained 999 on reduced hours. That loss represented about 12 percent of all formal sector employment in Samoa. Lost work spilled over into the informal sector (Tahana, 2020), including markets, and into transport services, bars and restaurants. That was estimated to have affected a further 1,500 working in the informal sector, in the handicraft sector and in small industries, including musicians and carpenters, who effectively lost their employment (*Samoa Observer,* 2020a). Those totals excluded bars, restaurants, car hire businesses and taxis. Restaurants, in competition with hotels, were particularly affected and doubly disadvantaged since a preventative lockdown against the possibility of COVID-19 being present first closed them down for four weeks and then required them to reduce the number of patrons and/or provide takeaway service (that not all were able to do). Restaurants lost wait staff first, while seeking to retain chefs, and reduced the prices of meals, but many closed relatively early on (*Samoa Observer*, 2020b).

The multiplier effect of so many businesses closing, or their returns dwindling, and of remittances falling at the same time (see below), meant that most households had less income to spend, were concerned about their future economic situation and less likely to dine out at restaurants, as discretionary incomes declined. Anecdotal data indicated that more households were consuming cheaper local food, especially fish, so that urban markets were doing relatively well in overall turnover. And yet, the volumes of goods increased, as the market was flooded and prices therefore fell: so that, for example, the price of a heap of roasted cocoa beans was effectively half the 'normal' price. Demand for flowers also fell, as funerals were now much smaller, with restrictions on attendance in place. Not all urban workers could afford even the reduced prices, especially in the 'market economy' of urban Apia where some residents sought help from Samoa Victim Support for food and other necessary goods.

The overall outcome across the country was a considerable reduction in formal and informal employment that was most serious around Apia, where much of the tourism sector was concentrated and where there was greater dependence on cash incomes, more utilities bills (notably water and electricity) and less ability to achieve some subsistence support. Poverty thus increased especially amongst those in the already disadvantaged informal sector, and particularly women.

In Vanuatu, the outcome was broadly similar. Formal analysis demonstrated the stark impact as 70% of all tourism jobs were lost in just six weeks. A survey undertaken across the tourism sector in mid-April recorded, from a limited sample, a reduction of 2,077 full-time employees and 214 part-time employees: a 70% fall in full time employment, and a 33% fall in part-time employment. Some 1,633 workers were placed on unpaid leave, 462 given paid leave and 300 jobs terminated (Department of Tourism and Vanuatu Tourism Office, 2020). The online survey effectively excluded the informal sector, including cultural villages, market vendors and taxis. It also directly excluded the impacts of the complete disappearance of cruise ship tourism, of great significance in Vanuatu (involving bars, restaurants, stores and markets patronised by cruise ship tourists) which provided income earning opportunities for people in the informal sector and in low socio-economic groups. These include taxi and bus drivers, souvenir sellers, hair braiders and the participants in 'cultural villages' on the fringes of Port Vila who displayed dance, explained traditional food and medicinal practices and sold artefacts.

Typically, some of those displaced from the formal sector never found formal employment again in 2020. Some adapted in Vila, such as the former chef at an elite resort who worked seven days a week selling doughnuts (*kato*) from a roadside stall (Graue, 2020). Others who had been self-employed in micro-businesses in the tourism-oriented informal sector, had to adopt similar strategies. Roadside stalls proliferated in and around Vila, selling homemade doughnuts and garden produce, but handicraft stalls closed. Some traded from their homes where there were small markets, notably selling plants and home cooked food, but had to adjust by living on reduced incomes. As in Apia, the overall impact was greatest on the urban informal sector in and around Port Vila: their urban residents were more likely to experience poverty. The livelihoods of those in the informal sector, many of whom were in the poorest socio-economic groups, had almost entirely disappeared.

The owner of the luxury Havannah Resort queried how long the resort and its more than 80 staff could survive with what was initially anticipated to be 3-9 months of no income. Staff reductions and halted expenditure followed. By October, the majority of the staff had been laid off as the severity as the duration of the crisis became more apparent. Many came from families in four nearby villages and, where possible, one family member was retained (Pechan, 2020). The procedures used by The Havannah in laying off staff were illustrative of the challenges faced by both employers and employees in the crisis, and the efforts to achieve continuity. Employees were phased out. Half the staff left in March but in July it was decided to terminate most remaining staff since it was not viable to keep them on even with existing reduced hours. Those first displaced had worked for less than three years and had lower termination payments so were the least costly to lay off. Staff who were displaced were offered the possibility of returning to the resort on given days for training and learning new digital and communications skills. None of those in nearby villages returned to full-time agriculture since the returns to agriculture had fallen as market prices fell. Some fished or provided boat transport to earn extra money, but fishing also earned little money because demand from restaurants had ended and cold storage was not an option. Some men were eventually re-hired for maintenance particularly of the grounds. Most of the workers who came from Vila returned there but few found fulltime employment. Many of those displaced were biding time and waiting for tourism to resume. The Havannah also effectively ended most community engagement activities, including sourcing supplies from local markets, handcraft producers, tour operators, taxi services and local village 'businesses' who provided security, conservation, handyman, gardening and cleaning services (Naupa et al. 2021). Such restructuring had parallels elsewhere, with complex impacts on national and international supply chains.

As in Samoa, efforts were made to develop domestic tourism. The Vanuatu Tourism Office sought to stimulate demand by highlighting that tourism was not just for international visitors. The "*Sapotem lokol turisim"* ('Support local tourism' in the Bislama lingua franca) campaign was designed to stimulate new consumer behaviour, foster a more sustainable sector, and assist businesses with marketing and packaging products for a domestic audience. The strategies employed by businesses included offering group discounts, package deals, discounts, and targeting new market segments. Various promotions, mainly for discount accommodation and restaurants, had some success; but, as in Samoa, the potential market was small (especially as incomes were falling), some indigenous consumers felt that tourism was not for '*man ples'* (local people), being for international tourists only, but there was some limited success in Vila.

Tourism in both these PICs was not as spatially concentrated as in Fiji. Hence, unemployment too was less concentrated and the unemployed perhaps better absorbed into the communities. In Fiji, loss of employment was marked by a rise in domestic violence (Connell, 2021) but that was not reported in either Vanuatu or Samoa. Nonetheless, in Vanuatu at least problems of land tenure occurred and theft of kava plants, sandalwood trees and root crops was reported (Davila & Wilkes, 2020). Re-establishing agricultural livelihoods was not easy at a time of crisis. Agricultural and fisheries systems could not immediately compensate for the loss of incomes that enabled purchases to support local food production. Both in Vanuatu and Samoa, governments introduced programmes to train local youth in agricultural techniques and distributed seeds and planting material. Samoa, for example, introduced a scheme to employ 200 displaced hotel workers from the island of Savaii to earn wages and rehabilitate the coconut and cocoa industries of the island.

Aftermaths and islands

The variety of tourist experiences and outcomes is enormous across the Pacific region, yet responses to the impact of COVID-19 have been very similar in two dissimilar PICs, and beyond. Past tourism development, even where it has been most successful, has been disappointing despite international agency enthusiasm over its prospects (Cheer et al., 2018; Asian Development Bank, 2018). PICs are not however homogeneous and the uneven development that has often followed tourism has tended to build on existing inequalities where these relate to power, land tenure and access to resources, with local people often constrained by a lack of economic and social capital and basic understanding of the increasingly global dimensions of the industry, which prevent effective engagement with tourists and their intermediaries (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004; Cheer et al., 2017). However, many places, including several villages on Tanna (Vanuatu) and the south coast of Upolu (Samoa), have benefited significantly from the rise of tourism. Beyond such hitherto fortunate places, where tourism has transformed livelihoods in largely positive ways, achieving equitable and sustainable development through tourism has proved difficult. Markets are invariably distant and domestic tourism is unusual; hence, it could not play a leading role in regenerating tourism, as occurred in larger, more wealthy countries (Baum & Hai, 2020; Ghaderi, 2012). That is particularly ironic since most PICs were virus free at the start of 2021. The devastating impact of COVID-19, almost entirely absent in all Pacific island tourist destinations, provides the ultimate example of the costs of absolute dependence on international tourism.

Tourism abruptly ground to a halt in all its forms as borders closed early in 2020. Overall, outcomes were unsurprising and reflected the industry's desperation to stay open as long as feasible since temporary closure might become permanent and skilled workers especially might not be replaced. The loss of a third of national GDP from the tourist sector alone provided a shock of unique magnitude, difficult to manage for small economies (Coke-Hamilton, 2020; Kampel, 2020), while emphasising how fast the tourist sector loses employment (Robinson et al., 2019) and how it has multiplier effects and repercussions are felt throughout the economy and society. Unlike the impacts of other external shocks, the continued uncertainty over duration worsened the situation. While both countries introduced various forms of fiscal stimulus packages, welfare provisions and social cash transfers, these did not extend far, and rarely extended into the informal sector. Both had to borrow internationally to support even limited welfare packages, a process that was difficult to sustain over time.

No economic sector is more sensitive to external shocks than tourism. And no shock has been more devastating than COVID-19, because of the abrupt ending of the entirety of international tourism and because 'conventional' shocks (such as coups, bombs or cyclones) tend to be instantaneous, rather than of indeterminate length. Particularly disadvantaged people have been those close to rural resorts such The Havannah and Saletoga where no alternative wage employment exists: but, many of these could at least partially be absorbed into the rural economy.

The impacts and responses to COVID-19 in Samoa and Vanuatu were broadly similar to those elsewhere in the Pacific, especially in such popular destinations as Fiji, Palau and the Cook Islands. Hotels and related activities closed, many lingering on hopefully for months; the informal sector collapsed, and incomes fell. Through complex supply chains, the impact was felt through the national economies, as economic growth ended and unemployment grew. Women were most affected, losing jobs and market sales and acquiring greater domestic burdens. Agriculture and fishing became of greater significance, but urban residents were sometimes most affected where such possibilities were absent. Many businesses had debts that suddenly became crucial as creditors themselves were often indebted. Barter economies emerged, notably in Fiji where as many as 165,000 people were reportedly part of a 'Barter for Better Fiji' Facebook page (ABC News, 1 June 2020). Only in Fiji and New Caledonia was there any prospect of significant domestic tourism; creative efforts had enabled some segments of the industry to survive a little longer. Remaining employment was rotated and shared through families, where feasible: a particular Pacific response that favoured equity. Changes quickly validated the prediction that the coronavirus crisis would 'disproportionally influence the lives and wellbeing of the poorest and the most vulnerable, including workers in the informal sector' (ESCAP, 2020, p. 1). Despite social welfare provisions from governments, supported by aid and international organisations, domestic financial support on the scale required to give adequate and lengthy support to the tourism industry was not feasible, despite the significance of the sector for domestic employment and foreign exchange.

In both small states, tourism has been the backbone of the economy, providing more than 50% of national GDP (exclusive of remittances). The critical economic impact of cyclone damage and the disappearance of tourism was expected to be compounded by the loss of remittances; but that, mercifully, did not happen. While there is widespread evidence, including from Samoa (Le Dé et al., 2015), that remittances rise in response to hazards, that cannot easily occur when shocks also occur in source countries. Australia and New Zealand are the sources of more than half of remittances, from seasonal workers in both countries and from more permanent residents, especially in New Zealand. In both countries, earnings of PIC migrants declined, but remittances help as the overseas diaspora, assisted by cuts in transfer rates by the banks, sustained remittance levels at some personal cost (Le Dé & Jackson-Becerra, 2021). In the second half of 2020, remittances to Samoa actually increased by 13% when compared to corresponding period in 2019. This is a remarkable outcome since overseas Samoans – and especially guestworkers – were experiencing higher levels of unemployment (Radio New Zealand, 15 February 2021). Expatriate islanders cushioned the blow at home.

The collapse of tourism drew attention to the limited diversity of PIC economies, and the need for regional development and diversification, especially into local production and the achievement of food security. Together, tourism and construction activity were the two main sources of economic growth in Vanuatu and Samoa over the last decade; but growth has been uneven with development centred in and around Port Vila and, to a lesser extent, Apia, with almost all the medium and larger tourist businesses, mainly foreign-owned, concentrated there (Dornan & Newton-Cain, 2015). However, alternatives to tourism can be 'high risk' activities. Small-scale industrialisation has failed. Agricultural exports are constrained by quarantine policies in Australia and New Zealand, but kava has been recently successful, and offers hope of growth. As recent cyclones demonstrated, agriculture is however as prone to cyclone-related damage as the tourism industry. Moreover, despite government efforts, agriculture has too often been disdained as a source of livelihoods; optimism reigned that tourism would regenerate and inertia discouraged innovation at a difficult time.

Over time, the likelihood of significant changes enabling the restart of tourism in any PIC receded, marked by the permanent closure of some restaurants, resorts, dive stores and other activities, and at least the partial closure of airlines, travel agencies and tour companies. In Fiji the national airline, Fiji Airways, terminated half its workforce, while the remainder experienced reduced hours and pay. In May, Air Vanuatu similarly cancelled all international passenger flights, and also cancelled the purchase of a new Airbus plane. Samoa Airways, relaunched in 2017, had already faced various setbacks, including the grounding of its brand-new Boeing 737-Max, suggesting that it was unlikely to exist at all in 2020, leaving all international operations to Air New Zealand. Ironically, all three airlines had recently extended their fleets and routes to meet growing tourist demand (Pryke, 2020). Reopening would now depend on overseas airlines.

The future of Pacific tourism is particularly uncertain since the end of the COVID-19 crisis is unpredictable and, while it remains, the infrastructure of the industry – airlines (particularly small national airlines), resorts, travel agents, hire cars and cruise ships – has gradually folded as debts mount. Collapse of airlines may render some destinations inaccessible. Future fare structures are unpredictable, although packages will be in place. Market access will be valuable, against the threat of being stranded far from home. Marketing will be challenging since local tourism is already being encouraged in key markets such as Australia and New Zealand (where both have recently lost valuable Chinese tourism and Australian tourism was further lost to bushfires). Hitherto unpopular destinations, such as Timor Leste, may emerge but market proximity may be offset by uncertainties over medical care. PICs will need to develop adequate COVID-19 testing and provide additional resources to strengthen public health and build consumer confidence so that they can demonstrate being virus free (Pechan, 2020), which may be difficult in contexts of vaccine nationalism. Moreover the virus mutates and the arrival and utility of vaccines in uncertain.

Much hinges on the ability to create effective 'travel bubbles', with Samoa, Vanuatu and other PICs included in an expanded Australia-New Zealand trans-Tasman 'travel bubble' (air bridge) constantly discussed to enable international travel to resume (and involve two of the main sources of tourists). Vanuatu was more cautious. Samoa, with a high proportion of Visiting Friends and Relatives tourism, would be more likely to benefit early, and was hopeful that a similar bubble might be opened with virus free American Samoa enabling an extended form of 'domestic tourism'. Its onward links to the United States long precluded that possibility. Palau sought a 'bubble' northwards to Taiwan; but it was postponed indefinitely because of Palau's concerns regarding its health system's capacity to manage potential COVID-19 cases. A South Pacific bubble would crucially also facilitate the mobility of seasonal workers to Australia and New Zealand, where workers from Samoa and Vanuatu are employed for up to seven months in a year, generating what now are even more valuable incomes and remittances (World Bank, 2020b). For smaller states, it would also enable crucial medical referrals to restart. However, even efforts to establish a continuous bubble between the low-incidence states of Australia and New Zealand proved almost impossible through 2020. Seemingly in desperation, Fiji had considered supporting a small-scale bubble of its own, where elite tourists would hire private jets and fly to private island resorts (Connell, 2021); but it never got off the ground. Much will depend on whether island airlines survive – and none were profitable even before the crisis – and being subsidised because of their value in connecting remote islands. Similar questions attend the cruise ship industry; the main Pacific players – Carnival Cruises and Royal Caribbean – are based in the Caribbean and may defer operations in the Pacific. All plans for potential travel bubbles and other similar arrangements have been stalled by health safety issues and the need to balance lives against livelihoods.

Conclusion

A multitude of future possibilities and paradoxes exist for island economies and their tourist industries, with the future shaped by psychological and emotional issues as much as epidemiological, economic and social factors. Oil and energy costs, political stability and climate change remain uncertain variables. Tourism has always been uneven and unpredictable, where islands are dependent on decisions and events elsewhere (whether by potential tourists, airlines or cruise companies … or by viruses and cyclones). That is true for both governments and tourists, evident in 2018 when Palau's tourism industry (hitherto worth 42% of GDP) collapsed after China banned tourism operators from selling package tours to Palau as long as Palau continued to recognise Taiwan. Island governments will seek new and expanded tourism markets, in any possible form, whether through cruise ship tourism, new niches (weddings, adventure tourism or bird and whale watching) or new sources (Russia, India and inevitably China). That much has not changed. Forecasting the future of island tourism, and a wider blue economy, is now particularly problematic, and a vaccine may reshape all contemporary conjectures. At least, islands are sure to remain attractive destinations.

Paradoxically, and initially, remoteness may be positive, as small islands remain virus free, and more attractive than crowded cities. Elite resorts and small elite cruises with well-off passengers are most likely to revive first; that may be a boost for conservation: a tiny silver lining in ravaged economies. Larger resorts may be seen by tourists as self-contained and secure from any possible local viruses and by local people as sites to contain visitors from countries with recent COVID-19 clusters. Early in 2020, some PICs, including Vanuatu, were considering a 'new normal' in the tourism industry with a much greater focus on local linkages and values and on sustainability. Idealistic plans sought to move away from 'business as usual', but the initiative flagged (Connell, 2021).

Grand plans for the resumption of tourism, and for the possibility of a restructured tourism industry were hindered, firstly, by the overseas ownership of significant components of the industry (including airlines, cruise ships and resorts) who made independent decisions, and, secondly, by the lack of any data on expectations of potential future tourists. These two circumstances suggested limited prospects for a 'new normal', but rather for as speedy a resumption as possible. Intense competition for an emergent market may be particularly significant, and challenge the widespread notion in tourism (and other economic and social arenas) that a 'new normal' will be necessary and will somehow emerge. Tourism workers were generally anxious to return to their previous employment as soon as possible; and were less concerned with restructuring. In Fiji, a third of Fijian tourist workers were wary about staying in the industry and at least contemplated the possibility of better jobs in the creative industries (Movono & Scheyvens, 2021); but most workers simply wanted to return to work in an industry with reasonable wages and conditions and were simply biding their time until that happened. That was particularly true of usually less skilled informal sector workers who had less choice. While small island scales preclude substantial diversity, the recent experience of COVID-19 provides a harsh lesson that some greater diversity and self-reliance are essential, within and beyond tourism.

In the main markets of Australia and New Zealand, that have remained largely virus free, tourists have been particularly concerned with the impact of border closures; and the problem of being trapped on the wrong side of a border. That will discourage tourism to destinations where health care may be problematic. It may result in the PICs seeking new markets in Asia, including China, or postponing resumption.

In these circumstances, overseas aid will be crucial to the revival of PIC economies; yet it will not necessarily be directed to the tourism sector: Australia's aid response to the COVID-19 crisis almost entirely ignored even mention of the Pacific tourism industry, while its stimulus packages focused on the formal sector and not on women (Australia, 2020). Enabling a tourist bubble with Pacific neighbours would reduce the chances of their falling into a poverty and debt trap, and so drawing more extensively on overseas aid in a region of growing geopolitical significance. Australia quietly increased its aid to the Pacific in 2020, in response to the region's growing significance to China whose 'Belt and Road Initiative' alone embraced several PICs (e.g. Rodd, 2020) and where the fracturing of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat raised additional concerns in metropolitan states over regional security and stability. Additional aid is unlikely to focus directly on the tourism industry. Ironically, seasonal workers were brought into Australia late in 2020 (and later to New Zealand) by charter flights, and to meet the needs of local farmers rather than the PICs.

Just as Anthropocene climate change was generated far from the Pacific islands, so too the genesis of COVID-19 had nothing to do with the Pacific. And yet, for both hazards, the Pacific islands are some of the most affected places. Indeed, the COVID-19 crisis has been seen as a forerunner of the potentially greater crisis of the impact of climate change. Latour (2020) has queried whether the pandemic was simply a dress rehearsal for impending climate change catastrophe, and similarities exist in the need for collective action. The Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum, Meg Taylor, stated,

> The COVID-19 public health emergency and its ensuing humanitarian and economic fallout offers us a glimpse of what the global climate emergency can become if it is left unchecked and if we do not act now (quoted in McAdam & Pryke, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic will continue to reverberate across lives and livelihoods, social, economic, political and ecological relationships, and ultimately human wellbeing, in unforeseen and unplanned ways. That implies uneasy times and frustrations for those seeking to build back better. The 'much anticipated 'new normal' may look in the end remarkably like the 'old normal', and when that might be is quite unknown.

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