

# Study looks at impacts of COVID-19 and Cyclone Harold on fishers in Fiji

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A new study published in the journal *Environmental Science and Policy* addresses the impacts of COVID-19 and Cyclone Harold on Indo-Fijians engaged in small scale fisheries.

The paper says that countries, including Fiji, need to address ethical and social justice considerations and the politics of recovery efforts by

putting vulnerable and marginalized groups front and center in the aftermath of pandemics and natural disasters.

What countries cannot afford is for economic recovery efforts to put additional burdens and risk on those invested in the SSF sector, and cause further widening of inequities, and increase food and economic insecurity.

While the attention of the global community is focused on the immediate health crisis, cyclones Harold, Yasa (Category 5, made landfall on 17 December 2020) and Ana (Category 2, made landfall on 31 January 2021), were stark reminders for the Pacific that the existential threat of climate change has not gone away. The COVID-19 pandemic may simply be the 'first wave', especially if global climate change, biodiversity, and sustainable development goals and targets, and addressing inequities through an intersectional lens, are not seen as integral to economic recovery.

The paper's lead author, Dr. Sangeeta Mangubhai, Director for the Wildlife Conservation Society's program in Fiji explains, "In addition to dealing with the global COVID-19 health crisis, countries like Fiji are trying to understand and respond to the knock on economic impacts, while responding to other disasters. Our study specifically looked at how Indo-Fijians (that is, Fijians of Indian descent) in the small-scale fisheries sector were affected by COVID-19 and a Category 4 cyclone, with a focus on livelihoods, income and food security. This type of research is critical as governments and partners mobilize resources and respond to multiple and compounding crises, to ensure assistance is given to people who are most vulnerable do not widen inequities between different people and groups."

Co-author Chinnamma Reddy, a project officer at IUCN said: "Through our interviews with fishers, boat owners, boat crew and seafood traders

we found the reduction in seafood sales resulting from a reduction in local consumption and loss of tourism markets had the greatest impact on these groups. The price of seafood dropped by an average of 36.5%, making fisheries less profitable. What was concerning was that a fifth of the people we interviewed did not have enough food for their families, because their ability to feed themselves depended on the state of the local economy."

Co-author Yashika Nand, Science Coordinator who has been leading WCS's work with Indo-Fijian fishers and traders explained: "Our study provided insights into how vulnerable different Indo-Fijian groups were within the fisheries sector. For example, since the borders closes in Fiji, these groups are earning very little (enough for daily needs) and do not have any social security or safety nets they can fall back on. Because they have limited access to land and other resources, they cannot easily shift livelihoods to compensate for how less profitable small-scale fisheries are right now, or to earn additional income to repairs boats and gear damaged by Cyclone Harold."

Co-author Dr. Arundhati Jagadish, a social scientist at Conservation International with expertise in community-based conservation and development highlighted "we specifically looked at vulnerability through an intersectional lens. In other words people's vulnerability to COVID-19 and disasters are influenced by a number of social factors, such as gender, ethnicity, culture, education, economic status, and access to resources. We are working in unchartered territory and bottom up processes aimed at understanding the ways people are affected and responding to these crises are necessary."

**More information:** Sangeeta Mangubhai et al, Politics of vulnerability: Impacts of COVID-19 and Cyclone Harold on Indo-Fijians engaged in small-scale fisheries, *Environmental Science & Policy* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.envsci.2021.03.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2021.03.003)

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