

How can improving inclusive water, sanitation and hygiene enhance Suva and the Coral Coast, Viti Levu, as tourism destinations?

Practice Note - February 2021

Tourism is a key and growing industry in Viti Levu, Fiji, as a destination attractive to domestic and international tourists. In early 2020, tourism contributed to an estimated 38% of Fiji's gross domestic product and provided direct and indirect employment to an estimated 118,000 people¹. Tourism has been the source of national and familial income due to its capacity to provide skilled employment; it supports, on average, one-third of Fiji's total labour force.

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated travel restrictions have had immediate and deep negative impacts on tourism. This practice note considers the importance and challenges of ensuring inclusive water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services are in place to support the tourism sector through challenging times and for future growth from the perspective of government, tourism operators and the community.

Findings presented here were gathered as part of formative research with stakeholders in Suva and the Coral Coast between January and September 2020. These included the communities Naivikinikini, Korotogo, Suvavou and Yadua villages, and hotels Novotel Lami, Peninsula Hotel, Grand Pacific Hotel, Crusoe's Retreat, Outrigger Beach Resort, Uprising Resort, Naviti Fiji Resort, Warwick Fiji Resort, Yadua Bay, The Beachouse, Mango Bay, Studio 6 and Suva Motor Inn.

Water security and supply issues

The abundance of freshwater in Fiji provides water security to urban and peri-urban populations, except for peak summer periods and times of drought, when water shortages and cuts are experienced. The city of Suva obtains its supply directly from surrounding streams, relying on small reservoirs to meet its demand. Aging infrastructure, limited maintenance,

inadequate training and capacity of staff, and extended dry periods, result in water disruptions. Impacts on water supply on the Eastern side of Viti Levu are associated with failure in the supply system rather than insufficient water resources

Rapid urbanisation is stressing water resources due to rising demand and tourism may add additional pressure. Outside the capital Suva and large towns like Sigatoka, which are serviced by the Water Authority Fiji (WAF), the Coral Coast is considered rural. Each community has decentralised water infrastructure, provided and supported by the Department of Water and Sewerage (DWS). Due to the diversity of system technologies in use and village remoteness, the water supply and sanitation systems are often under-maintained. Some resorts fund and sometimes maintain water systems in their host communities in the Coral Coast, which may have beneficial impacts on water management. This may also improve relations and increase tourism's social license to operate and / or to fulfil land leasing agreements. Some communities reported however, that connection to hotel water reserves led to low water pressure and suggested infrastructure needed better maintenance.

Natural disasters and heavy storms impact water quality. Hotels use filtered water and provide bottled water to guests as back-up drinking water. Communities either use filtered water or boil water when quality declines. Overall, water access was considered secure.



Sanitation

The formative research noted that whilst sanitation access is good for guests and staff of hotels, this is not

¹ IFC (2020). Fiji COVID-19 Business Survey: Tourism Focus.

always the case in surrounding communities. Hotels offer guests private toilets as part of rooms and public toilets in common areas. Toilets are considered clean, safe and comfortable but some staff toilets are too far from the workstations. Toilets in the community vary in type and standard: Homes in the suburbs of Suva close to hotels tend to have one or two flush toilets inside. Some people living in villages and rural communities have their toilets outside the house and not all toilets are flush toilets. Alternative toilets include water-seal toilets and pit toilets. There are communal toilets located in the community hall or church, separated by gender.

In villages and peri-urban districts surrounding Suva, the sewerage treatment schemes are operating close to capacity and increasing population is placing pressure on sanitation systems. The need to improve infrastructure is of critical concern to Fiji's improvement of WASH. Many residential houses have septic tanks for toilets where wastewater from the kitchen, laundry and shower is directed into drains, soak pits filled with coral. Some towns are connected to the main sewer. In some local villages on the Coral Coast, there are cases of discharge of untreated wastewater, which can negatively impact water quality and coastal estuaries.

Hotels are either connected to the municipal sewage system or have their own sewage treatment plants, or septic tanks, which are emptied regularly by external waste companies. Wastewater is then transported to WAF's wastewater treatment plants. In larger hotels, wastewater is treated with effective treatment systems, with designated personnel to maintain the system's operation as well as a clear auditing system.

Despite the drawbacks of natural beauty, there are examples of pollution of water resources. In Suva, the ocean wasn't perceived to be clean by all stakeholders with one source of pollution being tourist boats (e.g. through oil leaks). While knowledge on sanitation and the importance of the ocean as a source of fish is in place, this example highlights that pollution can still occur.

Hand and personal hygiene

Good hand hygiene practices have gained importance as an infection prevention and control measure for COVID-19 disease. Good personal hygiene by hotel staff is also viewed as critical to guest satisfaction and handwashing with soap at critical times and taking showers is reported as standard operating procedure, with sufficient facilities provided to do so in hotels. Critical times mentioned included:

- After using the toilet;
- Before food preparation;
- When starting and finishing work.

However, staff reported that explicit hygiene training is not usually provided beyond food hygiene for kitchen or Food and Beverage staff.

Communities are aware of the good conditions provided for handwashing and hygiene in hotels, and many reported that family members working in hotels take home practices learnt at work. In the community, handwashing is reported as practised for some (but not all) critical times, but not consistently, and not always with soap.

COVID-19 pandemic impacts

Stakeholders recognise positive and negative implications of COVID-19 and associated travel restrictions, hygiene requirements and economic consequences. Positive impacts include:

- Health and safety have become a priority;
- There is increased use of good hygiene practices in the community, especially hand washing with soap;
- Many hotels are using the downtime to take stock, rethink the type of tourism and experiences they would like to deliver and are planning to enhance sustainability.

Negative impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic include:

- Hotel occupancy has reduced significantly;
- Some hotels have closed or reduced staff significantly;
- Businesses are responding to multiple disasters.

The flow-on loss or reduced work for employees is leading to financial difficulties with further impacts on the families of employees and wider community.

All stakeholder groups, including hotel management, staff and communities, felt unprepared for when borders are to reopen. Especially in the communities, people have little knowledge of what COVID-19 is, what to do to prepare themselves to deal with it, and how their behaviour would need to change, including social and cultural practices. Despite the value of a vaccine, WASH training leading to positive behaviour change within the communities would be beneficial.



Gender equity, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) need increased recognition and consideration

Many GEDSI issues were identified as key influences on hotel operations in Suva and the Coral Coast’s tourism sector. GEDSI is integral to the complex network of social, environmental, political and economic issues that shape tourism. Issues relating to gender equity, particularly in relation to women and girls, were recognised and understood. However, there are also gaps in people’s knowledge on GEDSI. When focusing on disability, there is little recognition by government agencies and hotel management of the different needs of tourists and the community. Few hygiene facilities were designed to be accessible by people with a disability, the elderly, or pregnant women.

There is WASH training in some workplaces, but many hotels rely on knowledge staff acquired in school or from previous work experiences. Collaboration and cooperation are key to socially inclusive engagement with female and male staff, with women in communities, and to manage the cultural activities to prepare stakeholders to manage post-COVID-19 preparedness and recovery. Some communities continue to engage in communal activities that can lead to the spread of the virus such as drinking yaqona from a shared bowl, sharing glasses, cigarettes and food, and maintaining communion and hand-shaking practices during church attendance.

The likely GEDSI factors related to COVID-19 observed elsewhere, such as an increase in domestic violence on women and children, have not been recognised or actioned.

Governance and policies to support Fiji’s development

Government must continue working with regional and provincial offices through its existing structures and consultative processes, coordinating approaches and exercising protocol when involving communities. Functional relationships are proving effective as partners join resources and share knowledge on the issues of WASH.

Key informants and hotel operators/managers are aware of tourism legislation, policies and plans; however, the greater tourism workforce requires more awareness. There is a need to ensure messaging and information is sent and received and work is done in partnership with industry stakeholders to ensure effective awareness. The data also highlighted little consultation on policies. Too often legislation and plans are developed without early consultation with the private sector or with those impacted by the decisions. While relevant legislations, policies and plans exist, there is a gap in effective implementation and enforcement.

A lack of cooperation and collaboration creates barriers to tourism development

An absence of synergy and collaborative platforms between communities, government and tourism operators creates barriers to addressing WASH issues, ultimately impacting tourism development. More effective cooperation between groups to address WASH issues in Fiji could address priority issues including:

- Supporting destinations to recover from COVID-19 and prepare to reopen to international visitors;
- Improving WASH practices in the community;
- Enhancing wastewater disposal and waste management in the communities;
- Offering training to increase awareness and create behaviour change;
- Improving GEDSI access and outcomes.

Improved collaboration and planning processes are required to engage with the community and gather their inputs into policy making, and for the community to provide a response into planning when the opportunity is supplied.

Implications and Next Steps

Inclusive access to WASH is important for the tourism sector to maintain a strong reputation with tourists, especially during times of COVID-19, and social licence to operate from local communities.

Stakeholders envision tourism success contributing to an improved economy and growth in the industry, increased sustainability within the destination including community and environmental health, and a stronger focus on culture and local identity. To achieve this vision, a number of changes are required linked to GEDSI WASH. The following recommendations are made as steps towards achieving the vision of Fiji as a tourism destination benefitting all stakeholders:

Recommendations

1. Government

- 1.1. Develop programs to incentivise and subsidise household water tanks.
- 1.2. Support community management of water systems. For example, provide training to communities in operation and maintenance of water tanks
- 1.3. Department of Water and Sewerage to increase awareness and strengthen implementation of water related policies and guidelines.
- 1.4. Ministry of Health (MoH) advise councils to improve public area infrastructure, facilities and cleanliness of public toilets. This should involve reviewing how many public toilets are provided, ensuring there is soap available in all public facilities and that water is safe and that drinking fountains are available and maintained.
- 1.5. Improve standards for residential sewage treatment and disposal in areas where houses are not connected to the main.
- 1.6. MoH schedule more visits to communities and share information relating to COVID-19, hygiene and handwashing, for example through COVID-19 preparedness and inclusive WASH training. Hereby, community communication should be improved (providing schedules in advance and confirm visits via text or phone calls) and engagement.
- 1.7. Collaboration between MoH and MoE to be increased to ensure WASH is part of curriculum and material is sufficiently engaging to reinforce practices.
- 1.8. Continued support for inclusion of GEDSI across all areas of WASH policies and plans and strengthen their implementation.
- 1.9. Support current community systems that contribute to WASH such as the Village Nurse and 'Tiko Bulabula' programs.

2. Hotels

- 2.1. Where hotels are responsible for community water supply, ensure the operation and maintenance of these water supply services. This may include hotels to provide or support training to communities for maintenance of water supply systems (e.g. checking of key water connections, ways of cleaning these, cleaning of water filters etc).
- 2.2. Hotels to review and update, where necessary, staff facilities, in particular staff toilets (availability and distance from workstations) and female changing rooms.
- 2.3. Explore cost sharing opportunities with communities on wastewater/septic tank maintenance.
- 2.4. Provide updated pandemic and WASH training annually to staff and communities as component of CSR. This should create awareness of staff risk and responsibilities when commuting between hotels and community.
- 2.5. Continue to adhere to high standards of hotel cleanliness and staff hygiene practices as important to protecting staff and guests' health, as well as guest satisfaction. This involves management to strictly monitor practices and reinforce hygiene and sanitation SOPs and should include hygiene training, especially handwashing with soap, for all staff.
- 2.6. Ensure safe WASH access for all guests (ramps, rails etc. for people with limited mobility).
- 2.7. Encourage hotels to conduct a risk assessment for the safety of people with a disability, the elderly, pregnant women and older staff members, particularly in hotel public areas, public toilets and guest bathrooms.

3. Community / Civil Society Organisations

- 3.1. Expand the role of existing rural and peri-urban village committees to support household WASH management.
- 3.2. Community to support and, together with staff, co-design (drawing on traditional knowledge and past practices) community on-site waste management (solid and liquid) programs and provide ongoing maintenance.
- 3.3. Community to review and enhance accessibility of toilets, in particular for children, elderly, people with a disability and pregnant women.

- 3.4. Collaboration from communities with hotels to ensure training is provided.
- 3.5. Hotel workers share WASH practices they learn at work at village and church meetings and via women's and youth groups .
- 3.6. Community members and parents practice good handwashing with soap behaviours and reinforce these messages to children.
- 3.7. Maintaining COVID-19 awareness in community of staff risk and responsibilities when commuting between hotels and community.
- 3.8. Install footpaths for safety and ramps for disability access, especially during flood events, to help vulnerable people.

4. All Stakeholders

- 4.1. Review suitability of water systems design to cope with natural disasters such as heavy rainfall and encourage risk-based management (e.g. water safety planning).
- 4.2. All stakeholders to support the improvement of drainage in urban and per-urban areas for protection against extreme events such as storm surge. Hotels to improve drainage for sanitation and protection of staff and guests. Communities to improve drainage for protection of people with disability, children and vulnerable members and prevention of diseases carried by mosquitoes.
- 4.3. As a disaster management and/or climate change response, following extreme rainfall events, ensure all community members are aware of water hygiene practices.
- 4.4. Initiate engagement and collaboration between stakeholder groups. For example, communities to engage with hotels for access to used cleaning and leftover soap and cleaning products. MoH, Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and Ministry of Waterways and Environment, hotels and communities to collaborate in knowledge about production/ use of appropriate traditional cleaning and handwashing products where access is limited.

- 4.5. All stakeholders to maintain awareness of COVID-19 health information and requirements in post-pandemic environment via relevant updated training and monitoring of staff and guest practices.
- 4.6. GEDSI training is provided across all areas of inclusive WASH, including training and awareness on menstrual hygiene management in the tourism sector and communities.
- 4.7. Consider GEDSI and inclusion of all relevant groups in WASH decision-making.

This practice note shares the summarised findings from formative research stages, providing a basis on which to further develop inclusive GEDSI WASH-at-Work tools and approaches.

Acknowledgements: The research project, *Engaging corporate actors for inclusive WASH-at-Work*, is supported by the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and implemented by Griffith University's International WaterCentre as part of the Water for Women Fund.

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