

Water for Women Fund: COVID-19 New Initiative:

WASH, foodways, markets, women and COVID-19 preparedness in Vanuatu



Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has shocked global and regional economies. Although Pacific Island Countries (PICs) have thus far recorded only a smaller number of COVID-19 cases, many countries have declared a state of public health emergency and implemented numerous mitigation measure, such as border closures, lockdowns, curfews, social distancing measures, and restrictions on the movement of people and goods. Many PICs have a narrow economic base and have suffered from a decline in overall economic activity, disruptions to supply chains, and job losses (DFAT, 2020). The pandemic is exacerbating pre-existing inequalities, particularly gender inequality (UN Women, 2020), and exposing vulnerabilities in social, political, economic, and biodiversity systems. Dampened economic activity, in particular, has serious repercussions for the developmental outcomes of PICs and their ability to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Lockdowns and disruptions have revealed the fragility of people's access to essential goods and services, especially health systems, safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services, and food systems.

Food supply chains are of particular concern, proving vulnerable to various COVID-19 induced challenges. In the short food supply chains that dominate many PICs food systems, vulnerabilities have developed due to closures and restrictions imposed on informal markets. Such measures stem from the risks posed by markets due to their high density, often poor WASH service availability, and low capacity to enforce hygiene and social distancing. A market in Wuhan, China, is believed to have been 'ground zero' for COVID-19 and elsewhere in the world markets have become "hubs of infection"; recent tests from market houses in Lima, Peru, found four out of five market vendors positive for COVID-19 (Collins et al., 2020). Numerous restrictions have been imposed on key markets in some PICs, such as Vanuatu and Solomon Islands. Such public health responses are warranted but at present address only one key determinant of infections (social distancing); the ability to maintain hand hygiene at markets is not addressed, and thus the vulnerability of food workers and the public to COVID-19 infections remains a great concern.

Markets are a key driver of economic prosperity that provide a much needed source of income for the most vulnerable members of society – workers in the informal economy generally and women more specifically (e.g. Georgeou et al., 2019; Leslie, 2013). Markets are important reservoirs of resilience and sustainable economic practices, enhancing self-reliance and supporting not just economic but social and cultural well-being. Importantly, markets are a crucial source of food security in urban locales and remain the principal means by which many people obtain their food (World Vision, 2018). Elsewhere in the world, informal market restrictions and closures due to COVID-19 are disrupting the availability of affordable and nutritional food (IPES, 202), and there is concern that this may occur in PICs (UN, 2020a & b).

In addition to the informal market sector, other critical agricultural domains include rural cooperatives and the cattle industry, both of which are important revenue sources at household, community and national levels. These combined arenas – informal markets, cooperatives, cattle farming, and short food supply chains – make-up the most salient features of Vanuatu's foodways. However, the WASH situation in these contexts remain little understood. Moreover, real challenges surround the question of how best to effectively address WASH in these settings and how to balance roles and responsibilities between the public, business, and government.

Research Approach

This research aims to strengthen the WASH dimensions of the current raft of socioeconomic research responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Pacific islands (especially Vanuatu), better inform policy responses and ultimately improve WASH services and outcomes through a strategic research-to-policy collaborative approach that has discrete (national) and wider (regional and global) benefits across short, medium and longer-term timeframes. The key objectives guiding this research are to:

- I. Understand the current WASH situation in informal **markets** in the context of three areas of Vanuatu (Port Vila, Luganville and Lakatoro)
- II. Identify **WASH weak points** in short food supply chains and **opportunities** where WASH actors, services and/or messaging could be more strategically delivered to further enhance WASH outcomes, including protection against infectious diseases such as COVID-19
- III. Assess informal market vendor, market regulator, food/agriculture workplace employee and workplace management **WASH knowledge, practices, policies and capacities**
- IV. Identify **WASH gaps** and **opportunities** in salient **policies/regulations** and implementation activities
- V. Build **collective understanding** amongst stakeholders of links between WASH, protection against COVID-19 and other infectious diseases, urban food security, and livelihoods, in particular relating to market houses and food supply chains
- VI. Build WASH knowledge, capacity and applied research skills amongst select **research partners**.

The research utilises a mixed methods approach consisting of surveys (market vendors, cooperative members, employees, managers, regulators etc.), structured facility observations, food supply chain analysis, and targeted key informant interviews.

Key target audience for the research are the Vanuatu Government, local and extra-local civil society organisations (CSO's), and industry bodies (e.g. cattle association and cooperative representatives). A core objective of the research is to identify where WASH weaknesses and opportunities lie in regards to short food supply chains so that government and CSO's can make more informed and effective policy and investment decisions – including awareness outreach campaigns – to improve WASH knowledge and services, support urban food security and protect local livelihoods.

Expected Outputs

Key outputs include a Country Synthesis Report and Policy Briefs (for government, industry, market administrators, workplace employees and owners/managers, donors) with recommendations for more appropriate and effective WASH infrastructure implementation and messaging strategies for vendors/employees/food supply chain contributors. Other project outputs include stakeholder workshops, three individual market reports, a journal article, and training USP students. Research is being conducted between October 2020 and March, 2021.

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