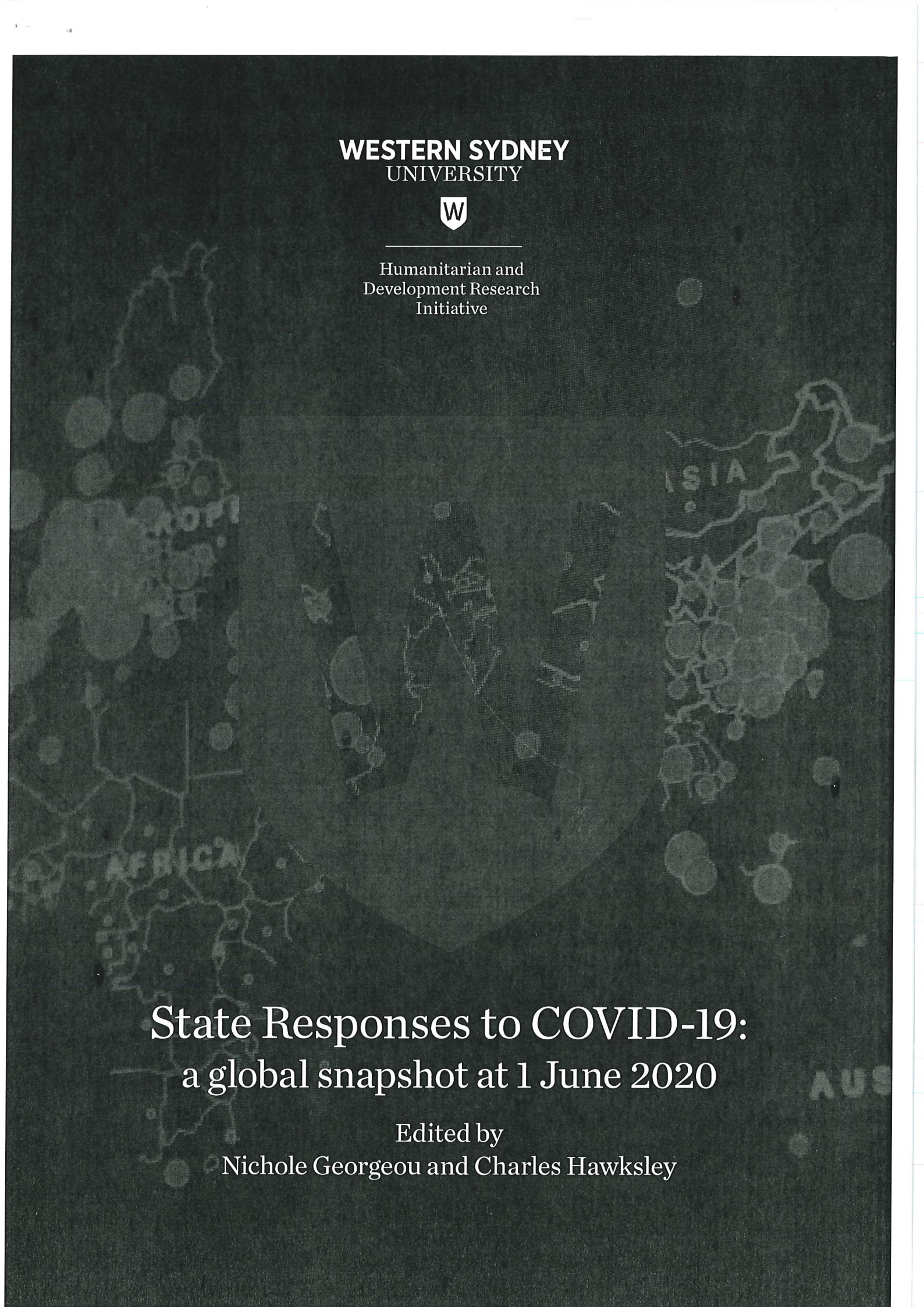


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State Responses to COVID-19:
a global snapshot at 1 June 2020

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ISSUES PAPER

PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES

DECISIVE ACTION, EXPERT ADVICE AND SOCIAL CAPITAL*

Samoa, Tonga, Fiji and New Zealand were still recovering from the 2019 measles outbreak when COVID-19 arrived. The measles outbreak alerted Pacific leaders to the perils of epidemics in the region. Experiences with measles testing, nation-wide vaccinations and contact tracing became valuable skills during the COVID-19 response. In both instances, decisive and determined leadership by national frontline agencies became critical in containment efforts.

Pacific Island Countries (PICs) were not spared the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, decisive, determined and collaborative leadership bolstered by geography and social capital proved indispensable in PIC governments' responses to COVID-19. Pacific island leaders demonstrated confident and determined leadership, despite having inadequate resources to fight the invisible enemy. What can the rest of the world learn from PICs and their responses?

HOW DID PICS REACT?

Firstly, Pacific leaders verified and willingly accepted world expert advice and acted immediately, although some felt PICs should have closed their borders even earlier. The islands' vulnerability to external exposure and natural shocks made it necessary for political leaders to be firm. The Marshall Islands declared a State of Emergency (SOE) on 7 February, restricting air and sea travel, well before the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020.¹ On 24 February, Samoa imposed compulsory screening of passengers at all ports arriving from or transitioning through China, Hong Kong, Macau, Japan, Singapore, Thailand, South Korea and Italy to self-quarantine. Passengers were asked to quarantine for 14 days in the country they were travelling from, before proceeding to Samoa, and to bring a medical certificate confirming virus-free status.

Other PICs reacted to reports of increased COVID-19 fatalities in Asia and Europe. The first confirmed case in the region was a Tahitian representative in the French National Assembly,² which led to border closures on 7 March 2020. Fiji declared a mandatory 14-day quarantine and stricter border controls for air and sea travellers on 19 March. Lautoka city, where Fiji's first case was confirmed,³ initiated lockdown from midnight that same day. This was followed by the lockdown of the capital Suva two weeks later, with tighter enforcement of social distancing, imposition of a 8pm-5am national curfew, and a stop to

inter-island sea and air travel. Tonga declared a SOE on 20 March,⁴ followed by Solomon Islands on 27 March. These states had similar restrictions, and followed WHO advisories on hand washing and social distancing. Pacific Islands leaders responded to expert advice in unison and acted decisively to control the spread of the virus by shutting down national borders.

GEOGRAPHIC ISOLATION

With the exception of Papua New Guinea (PNG), all PICs have international maritime borders, which has been a great bonus to their containment efforts. Travel restrictions and the closure of public amenities and institutions contributed to restraining the spread of COVID-19. Contact tracing and isolation were also successful in Fiji, which by the end of May had recorded 18 confirmed cases. Their isolation and contact tracing processes were effective, and authorities managed to identify five sources of infection. Close contacts of infected individuals were quarantined, tested, and when confirmed to have COVID-19, isolated and treated.

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Leaders in PICs agree that this is a fight they cannot afford to lose. A visible feature of the Pacific leadership response to COVID-19 was the ability to implement decisions with conviction, confident that a particular course of action was the best, given the possible options and circumstances. To make matters worse, Tropical Cyclone Harold ravaged Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga at the peak of the COVID-19 alarm, pushing leaders' resilience further. Despite the dire need for international relief and support following Tropical Cyclone Harold, Vanuatu and Tonga's borders remain closed in an effort to prevent a coronavirus disaster.

The capacity of leaders in respective PICs to collaborate, despite disagreements on exact approaches,⁵ demonstrated good leadership in volatile situations. Tonga collaborated with stakeholders such as its Reserve Bank to develop a \$US25.5 million economic and social stimulus package,⁶ as did Samoa (\$US23 m),⁷ Fiji (\$US400m),⁸ Vanuatu (\$US32m),⁹ Tuvalu (\$US7.07m),¹⁰ and Solomon Islands (\$37.5m).¹¹ Some economic packages include suspension of loan repayments, relief support to laid-off workers, free repatriation¹² to home villages, additional support to sponsored and private students, and for nationals stranded overseas, and other important services.

1 *An earlier version of this paper appeared in DLProgram's blog on 18 May 2020. This version has been updated by the author with details of stimulus packages and is republished with the author's permission. For the original version please see: <https://www.dlprog.org/opinions/pacific-islands-leadership-responses-and-lessons-from-the-covid-19-pandemic> <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/409150/marshall-islands-bans-overseas-govt-travel-over-coronavirus>

2 <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/411544/tahiti-parliamentarian-is-pacific-s-first-coronavirus-case>

3 <https://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Centre/Speeches/PM-BAINIMARAMA%E2%80%99S-STATEMENT-ON-THE-FIRST-COVID-19-C>

4 <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/412240/tonga-and-samoa-declare-states-of-emergency-because-of-covid-19>

5 <https://www.fijivillage.com/news/We-support-some-of-the-measures-in-the-COVID-19-response-budget-however-its-a-disappointing-and-dishonest-budget--Prof-Prasad-f5x4r8/>

6 <https://consumer.southpacificislands.travel/tonga-announces-covid-19-stimulus-package/>

7 <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/413644/samoa-parliament-debates-us23m-covid-19-budget>

8 <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/412772/covid-19-fiji-govt-unveils-us400m-stimulus-package>

9 <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/413128/vanuatu-s-salwai-announces-covid-19-stimulus-package>

10 https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Tuvalu_COVID%20Policy%20Responses.pdf

11 <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/415630/solomons-stimulus-package-to-be-worth-us37-point-5m>

12 <https://www.solomontimes.com/news/mp-repatriate-electors-as-measures-against-covid19-heightens/9663>

In terms of capacity, countries like Fiji and PNG quickly revamped their molecular labs, while others, including Solomon Islands relied on Australian labs – until China, Australia, and New Zealand established a Solomon Islands COVID-19 testing laboratory. Leadership in PICs recognised the grave danger posed by COVID-19 and acted decisively based on expert advice.

COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

Decisive, determined and collaborative political leadership aided by social cohesion and social capital through Melanesian, Micronesian and Polynesian social systems—the *wantok* system,¹³ *Fa'a Samoa*, *Faka Tonga*, and other networks across Oceania—mitigated potential livelihood disasters during the pandemic. Such informal networks exist both globally and within PICs, showing the benefit of family and relational support during crises. Importantly, outside of major cities and towns, many people in PICs are supported by local customary land tenures; they grow, and often sell, their own foods, which can be a strong basis for successfully operating sustainable businesses and generating funds. During the COVID-19 lockdown, those who suddenly became unemployed returned to their local communities; with support from relatives, they continue to sustain themselves and their families. There may however be tensions in accompanying such long-term repatriation in some instances.

WHAT CAN THE WORLD LEARN FROM PACIFIC LEADERSHIP?

While small and usually marginal to global affairs, the experience of PICs with COVID-19 demonstrates important lessons:

1. Decisive, determined and collaborative leadership is essential in pandemics and disasters.
2. Expert technical advice must be sought, verified and acted upon in unison by the entire global community in future pandemics.
3. Leadership in PICs during COVID-19 was effective because of collaboration and clear communication between leaders at the national level and in other public institutions; the private sector; civil society organisations, and local communities.
4. Pacific leaders must treasure, strengthen and utilize informal social capital and safety nets that protect and sustain Pacific island families in times of distress. Developmental leadership must recognize such forms of socio-economic and cultural capital and endeavour to strengthen them for the future.

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¹³ [https://www.in-formality.com/wiki/index.php?title=Wantoks_and_Kastom_\(Solomon_Islands_and_Melanesia\)](https://www.in-formality.com/wiki/index.php?title=Wantoks_and_Kastom_(Solomon_Islands_and_Melanesia))