

Covid-19 Impacts Push Samoan Tourism Providers to Localize their Services and Activities

Rachel Bell, National University of Samoa

Julie Tuiletufuga, National University of Samoa

Peniamina Muliaina, National University of Samoa

Lupematasila Fa'atō Sila Falaniko, National University of Samoa

Raphael Semel, National University of Samoa

Abstract

The Covid-19 impacts push the Samoan tourism providers to localize their services and activities to sustain their operations due to travel restrictions and border closures. Samoa Tourism Authority Chief Executive said Samoa like the rest of the Pacific, the tourism industry has drastically affected by the border closures. The tourism providers have up-skilled their workers and upgraded their facilities to prepare for the new normal of travel. However, the prolonged of the pandemic has made the tourism providers to turn inwardly to localize the tourism services, activities and prices of sightseeing sites, hotel facilities, food and cultural entertainments and other activities. To attract the locals to engage and participate in these ecotourism activities to generate revenue to sustain the tourism sector. The lodges, hotels, crafting stores and cultural entertainment centres are advertising their tracking trails, sightseeing sites, food, facilities, artefacts and cultural activities with the local flavour of taste and pleasure for people to visit and enjoy. This is a new shift for tourism providers to undertake and localize the tourism services to generate revenue to afloat the industry during this pandemic disruption. The income decreases in the family households, business houses and tourism sector in the country pushes for new re-emergence of initiatives and trends of how to operate and do the business activities.

Keywords: Covid-19, tourism providers, economic, impacts

Introduction

Tourism, a major industry in Samoa and the Pacific region hit hard by few flights in and out of the region and shipping a doorway to global cruise ships has been very much disrupted (Connel, 2021; Kabutaulaka, 2020). The ongoing expectation to contract the flights, shipping and tourists due to Covid-19 has slowed down the opportunity to generate and sustain the tourism in the country and the Pacific. To slow down the spread of coronavirus in the region has grounded tourism to a halt, and the number of unemployment in the tourism and affiliated sectors have spiked (Filho et al., 2020). The rates of generating less revenue for the tourism sector in Samoa is increasing. The communal living, economic growth, and supply and value chain have been very impacted by the Covid-19. The negative impacts causing vulnerabilities on the livelihoods of local communities in both the formal and informal sectors (Gounder, 2020; Filho et al., 2020).

Such hardships have driven the individuals, tourism sector and business houses to reinvent the will of soul searching to generate revenue opportunities. There came the re-emergence and formalization of

new ideas and trends to localize the tourism services and activities. Besides, the establishment of partnership to trade, market and exchange goods and services within the regional territories through social media platforms (Finau and Scobie, 2019). Two such platforms emerged namely the Facebook group pages L-Barter which launched in Samoa early this year, while the Barter for a Better Fiji launched in April in Fiji (Boodoosingh, 2020; Siutaia, 2020; Connel, 2021). A Samoan mother used Le Barter with another Samoan mother to exchange baby clothes and nappies. This bartering system taking place within these two countries interfacing with cultures that support reciprocity and history that predates the use of cash.

The utilization of social media to practice barter system is fascinating to juxtaposition of the old with the new (Boodoosingh, 2020; Finau and Scobie, 2019). The online platforms to engage, publicize, trade and barter with the territorial nations is a new phenomenon popping up in the region due to the Covid-19 fallouts.

Since the tourism sector is at halt, the bartering systems and other business activities using social media are interfacing and replacing the tourism activities to generate money during this border closures period in the region. Samoa tourism operators are on the whirlwind tapping into pull factors to attract the locals into taking part in the tourism activities (Boodoosingh, 2020; Connel, 2021). Opening the lodges and hotels facilities and amenities for families, couples and kids to use with reasonable prices. The local cuisine and dishes with sea food and Samoan flavour with affordable prices are cooked and open-invitation circulated to households and families to pay a visit and taste these dishes. The tracking trails are cleared and cleaned for interested local hikers and explorers to venture into the refreshing scenic environment around Upolu and Savaii. Alternatively, take a car ride around Upolu or boat ride to Manono or even ferry to Savaii to explore and see the traditional relics and cultural activities. The Samoa tourism sector is upgrading reef resources, control waste management, prevent leakage of water tanks in low lying areas. To sustain the environment and revive the traditional culture to draw locals to participate in the tourism activities (Connel, 2021). The tourism sector and providers are collaborating to enhance the tourism sphere of influence and attraction by using the resources sustainably, reducing waste, maintain biodiversity, integrating tourism into planning, supporting local economies and training tourism workers (Connel, 2021; Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020).

This study discussed the COVID-19 impacts on tourism industry in the Pacific and the challenges affecting the tourism providers. Also highlighted the Covid-19 fallouts on Samoa tourism services and activities resulting in no generation of revenue and unemployment on the livelihood of individuals, family units and stakeholders. It assessed and narrated the localization initiative of tourism sector in Samoan and evaluate how the local residents perceive and participate in this new trend. It provided discussion on how this new shift and trend came about to sustain and afloat the tourism providers services and activities in Samoa. In addition, how this platform initiative would attract the locals to participate in it since no foreign tourists and travellers are coming into the country. It ended with a concluding summary.

COVID-19 Impacts on Tourism Industry in the Pacific

Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have health care systems with a limited capacity to deal with pandemics, making them vulnerable to the economic and social impacts of the coronavirus pandemic (Filho et al., 2020). The health care systems within the region not prepared to respond positively and effectively to the pandemic, couple with inadequate water and sanitation treatment plus the influx of visitors from countries where the virus was active provided fertile ground for the spread of the virus within the island states. The small Pacific island states share similar challenges, including limited resources, dependence on international trade, remote locations, fragile ecosystems, and susceptibility to natural disasters. French Polynesia was among the first Pacific SIDS to report COVID-19 in mid-March 2020, followed by Guam, Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (Filho et al., 2020). By early April 2020, the WHO reported 192 confirmed cases and five deaths. The small island countries within the region serve as the tourists and travellers hub generate much revenue into the economy of each state.

To address the limited capacity of health care in Pacific SIDS, the WHO developed a six-month Pacific Action COVID-19 Preparedness and Response plan to reduce the virus spread and treat infected patients (Filho et al., 2020). The plan includes response activities such as screening passengers at major checkpoints, requiring potentially exposed persons to undergo at least 14 days of quarantine, and closing entry to non-residents. When Action COVID-19 Preparedness and Response was implemented automatically restrict the international and regional tourists and travellers to the small Pacific island nations (Filho et al., 2020). The screening passengers at major checkpoints, 14 days of quarantine and border closures impact their entire tourism industry in the region. The connectivity to small island nations is essential to economic development because they depend heavily on tourism, imports, and financial grants. For example, in Fiji, tourism accounts for nearly 40 percent of its gross domestic product and approximately 37 percent of directly or indirectly employment comes from the tourism sector (Filho et al., 2020).

The international flights within the region were reduced like Fiji Airways reduced 99 percent of its international flights (Filho et al., 2020). Followed by the suspension of domestic flights and other air-carriers also suspended travel to Pacific Island nations. International tourist cruise ships prohibited indefinitely from docking in Fiji and other Pacific SIDS. The ramifications are rippling through sectors that support the tourism industry, including agriculture, transportation, retail, lodging, food, and recreation (Filho et al., 2020). The prolonged to border closure within the region drastically reduced the GDP and increased the unemployment. The consequence of tourism stoppage is likely to cause an economic recession in Pacific SIDS. Other business activities help to boost and sustain the economy also are hindered by the Covid-19. The fishing contributes to the Pacific Island economies but the supply chain have disruptions, restrictions on international sales of fresh fish, and boat crew health issues related to the virus (Filho et al., 2020). Foreign financial assistance can help mitigate the adverse economic consequences in Pacific SIDS. Increased international cooperation and public-private partnerships to supply necessary medical supplies, promote stability and have an open trade policies. To address the economic instability (Eric, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has pushed the global economy into a deep recession. It has adversely affected trade, tourism, commodity and financial markets, global value added and supply chains (goods or services), and economic growth (Eric, 2020). Although only Fiji and Papua New Guinea have recorded cases and deaths, economic disruptions are severe hitting the region nations' tourism sectors makes. The tourism sector make the largest proportion of gross domestic product (GDP), of direct and indirect employment, and of foreign exchange earnings. Since border closures and international travel restrictions have halted tourism states, the economies of the small islands developing states (SIDS) have been impacted by a contraction in consumer and investor confidence, and global value chains (Eric, 2020; Pacific Trade Invest, 2020).

Tourism sector development is one of the key strategies for economic growth established in Fiji and Vanuatu as a vital source of business, investment, employment, and entrepreneurial activities (Gounder, 2020). These nations have mobilized the tourism industry as a key player to create prosperity for sustainable development. In considering the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism sector (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020).

Covid-19 Fallouts on the Samoa Tourism Activities

The COVID-19 pandemic knows no borders resulted in the nationwide negative economic and social impacts in the formal and informal sectors. Currently there is no Covid-19 cases or deaths in Samoa but its effects has caused fallouts destruction to the national global gross domestic product (GDP) of the country (Duffin, 2020). The national economic recovery dependent entirely on international and regional trade partners and the disruption to shipping schedules, port calls, cruise ships and flights impacting the public and private sectors. The main goods and services supply chain has been disrupted along with border closures and travel restriction has hindered the tourism activities, business houses trading and other generating income activities (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020). The adverse economic impacts have been significant affected a large portion of the economy dependent mainly on micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the tourism and services sectors. The MSMEs make up the majority of Samoa's economy with small and medium enterprises alone comprising an estimated 88 per cent of all Samoan businesses (Samoa Tourism Authority, 2014). Samoa's real GDP contract by 8.6 percent in last 12 months having severe negative impact on employment and business confidence in the country (Central Bank of Samoa, 2021).

Since the onset of the pandemic, entrepreneurs have faced declining sales, liquidity, cash flow challenges and workers layoffs amid a climate of uncertainty about the business ability and tourism survival. The small and medium enterprises like tourism operators are encountering difficulties to generate revenue to service their debt obligations (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020). The local tourism industry and its operators faced greater resilience issues than other business enterprisers because they depend heavily on tourists and travellers and with border closures and restrictions affected their operations. The tourism operators do not want to take risk of borrowing given the unpredictability of the current economic environment (Central Bank of Samoa, 2021). Even the

commercial financial providers are not really comfortable to allow the enterprisers and tourism operators to seek loans.

In 2019, Samoa was hit by the measles outbreak resulted in the declaration of a state of emergency with the cancellation of public gatherings, schools, holiday-related events and more than 80 deaths (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020). A mass vaccination effort was done in the end of 2019 and early 2020 and brought the outbreak under control. The emergence of COVID-19 threat gave no room for the country to recover. As a result of both the Covid-19 and the measles outbreak adversely affected the Samoa's GDP contracting to 8.6 percent by the second quarter of 2021 (Central Bank of Samoa, 2021).

The Samoa's private sector is facing the following potential challenges – the disruptions to international and regional supply chain reduced the demands in both the domestic and overseas markets leads to decline in businesses' revenue generations, gross operating profits and cash flow (Eric, 2020). The disruption to internal and external supply chains reduced the commodity prices affected the agriculture sector. The tourism industry continued to be severely affected last year and this year resulting in widespread economic fallouts (Ministry of Finance, 2020).

The reduction in remittance inflows also negatively affected the consumer spending. In April 2019 total remittance was WST 40.25 million (USD 15.2 million) and in April 2020 the total remittance inflow was WST 36.74 million (USD 13.9 million), representing a decline of 7.2 per cent (Central Bank of Samoa, 2020). The ongoing problems for indebted businesses managing loan repayments have negative consequences on both the financial providers and the borrowers. The negative impacts on the profitability of commercial finance providers making them tightening the credit measures for smaller businesses.

The Samoa Chamber of Commerce and Industry conducted a business survey in 2020. According to the survey 19 percent of the businesses were unable to continue operating, while 66 percent of businesses reduced business hours to cut costs and keep some staff, and 70 percent did not expect the businesses to survive if the Covid-19 restrictions remain in place (Samoa Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2020). Significant numbers of staff layoffs in the business sector especially in the tourism industry and its associates in 2020. A total of 253 men and 186 women were made redundant, and a further 211 men and 212 women were forced to take leave without pay. The most affected employee age groups were between 20 and 40 years old as the employers are reluctant to lay off their older more experienced workers (Samoa Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2020). The total unemployment levels increased by 0.4 percent in the first quarter of 2020 (Samoa Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2020) and likely would have gone up this year, 2021.

The microenterprises producing handicrafts to sell to tourists from overseas and supply agriculture products to exporters are experiencing reduced in sales. Tourist and travellers arrivals have virtually ceased and most hotels, lodges, guest houses have been dormant for almost two years now (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020). Many microenterprises do have small loans that require regular repayments, and those involved in small retail outlets will face inventory and ongoing store overhead costs. The majority of informal businesses also have limited access to financial services or

government business assistance (Central Bank of Samoa, 2021; Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020).

The small and medium enterprisers and tourism industry have significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Income losses and ongoing costs such as rent, wages of key staff and loan repayments have depleted their cash flow. The SMEs are more vulnerable to external shocks and more prone to fail in such crisis like this pandemic and sad to say the significant decline in the survival and performance of SMEs have serious implications on the Samoa's economy (Samoa Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2020). SMEs account for approximately 75 per cent of private sector employment and are crucial suppliers for important commodities, goods, and services, based on the definition of an SME as an enterprise employing between two and 25 people (Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2020; Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020).

The Samoa Tourism Authority Chief Executive Officer said 52 hotels have been closed while 48 are still in operational out of the 144 hotel operations in Samoa (Ligaiula, 2021). A survey by the Samoa Tourism Authority on employment in tourism sector revealed that a total of 3877 jobs have been affected since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic last year (Ligaiula, 2021). Tourism sector decline started towards the end of 2019 with COVID-19 getting a big blow to tourism in the country when borders shut. The tourism employment survey showed that 68.6 per cent of direct employment had been affected in some form with 48 per cent getting laid off since December 2019. During the pandemic era, the number of those who were fully employed stood at 1774, laid off workers 2706 while 1171 were in the reduced hours' group (Ligaiula, 2021).

New Shift and Trend to Localize Samoa Tourism Sector

The hardships and challenges by the Covid-19 hit hard the local tourism industry (Filho et al., 2020). The tourism businesses and operators have small loans that require regular repayments and without tourists and business travellers coming into Samoa will end up in closing down their businesses (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020). In doing so, they will incur huge cost on the loans to repay. Therefore, the tourism businesses and operators reinvent the will and shift for revenue generation opportunities. There came the re-emergence of new ideas and trends to undertake and facilitate to localize the tourism activities, facilities and amenities for locals to participate in them to generate revenue. The tourism operators are advertising their hotels, lodges, guest houses, beach fale and beaches, tracking trails, cultural activities and dances, local dishes and cuisines, surfing gears, facilities and amenities with reasonable prices (Boodoosingh, 2020; Connel, 2021). They are inviting the local people to taste, participate and enjoy them in these range of activities. With such intention and drive coming on board where the tourism operators and their associates are localizing the tourism trends and adventures (Connel, 2021; Theuns, 2014). The Samoa tourism earns the economy over \$300 million a year where government cannot ignore this revenue making industry (Samoa Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2020).

Therefore, attention and support given to this segment of the industry. The necessary short term remedial measures and the current economic challenges pressure Samoa government to secure external support to address the core constraints that have affected tourism industry and other small and medium entrepreneurs' growth in the long term (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020). The Government of Samoa introduced practical immediate measures to assist the private sector to weather the current economic turmoil. Clients, particularly women clients in tourism industry and other business entities facing difficulties meeting repayment obligations after this additional period are to be further assisted with workout strategies (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020; Connel, 2021).

A capital injection into Development Bank Samoa to provide support for clients (tourism operators and other small and medium entrepreneurs) facing difficulties especially in technical support to upgrade the staff business project assessment and delinquent account workout management skills. This technical support will assist Development Bank Samoa to manage non-performing loans and strengthen its overall loan portfolio. A concessional loan to South Pacific Business Development earmarked for additional and extended small and medium entrepreneurs' credit will benefit a range of business activities including tourism (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020). An immediate technical and financial support from Development Bank Samoa to roll out their revised women-focused microfinance scheme of business and tourism activities in all parts of the country (Connel, 2021; Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020). Also the reallocation of the remaining funds in the Samoa Agribusiness Support Program to the Samoa business hub to help the business industry (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020).

Many tourism operators and small and medium entrepreneurs will need to re-schedule their debt obligations and some will require re-financing packages that will be difficult to secure from commercial financial providers (Central Bank of Samoa, 2021). So the Development Bank Samoa to provide this support but before mobilizing funds for such processes, the bank need to provide both additional funding and technical support to carefully vet and structure the credit packages. While such measures will be beneficial for borrowers, bank liquidity and capital reserves need to be considered so risk mitigation approaches and measures need to be considered prior to undertaking this initiative (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020).

These short term remedial measures from the Samoa government encouraged the hotels, tour operators and other tourism providers to localize the industry to strengthen their operations (Connel, 2021). The tourism operators and providers created the opportunities for locals to access and utilize the resources available in the hotels and tours for reasonable prices. Apart from localizing the tourism this year, an initiative launched in 2017 called the Foundation for a Sustainable Samoa – which was the travel philanthropy fund (Samoa Tourism Authority, 2017).

This initiative mission was to maximize community benefits from tourism in Samoa by creating opportunities for local people to improve their well-being and safeguard their natural and cultural resources. The Foundation is dedicated to support small-scale destination stewardship initiatives that

contribute to the following four sustainable pillars: youth career development, environmental education, community economic development, and waste management (Samoa Tourism Authority, 2017). This program created a new funding mechanism for projects in need of financial assistance where the fund will raise awareness for the travellers and residents on the key environmental and social issues facing the islands (Samoa Tourism Authority, 2017). The fund will inspire collaboration from stakeholders to effectively solve social and environmental problems to highlight Samoa's commitment to sustainability.

Raising awareness for tourists and residents on environmental and social issues around the country and in the absent of international travellers due to Covid-19 the tourism operators and providers are doing awareness through social media platforms inviting locals to take part in the tourism activities and utilize the facilities and amenities in hotels and lodges (Connel, 2021). The hotels and lodges are cooking sea food local delicacies and dishes for families and residents to taste some traditional cuisines.

While the government, tourism providers, stakeholders and other business entities are tapping into new ideas and trends to sustain the businesses and national economy – the mid to long-term support measures to address the key hurdles barring the re-emergence of a vibrant small and medium entrepreneurs sector also need to be considered too (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020). The government is also up-skilling the tourism employees who have been laid off so they can do other informal business activities while staying at home.

Data Collection

This paper uses a desk research approach synthesizing existing data sourced from the internet, journals, newspapers, government archives and social media platforms (McNaughton et al., 2021). Much of the data gathered are from the government and non-government archives and these archives contain verifiable information provides useful insights on varying degree of Covid-19, economic and tourism research contexts in the Pacific and Samoa. The annual reports, plans and other documents serve as the research data information too. Also, information collected from academic published articles from international and regional journals on the Covid-19 impacts on the global and regional economic performances.

The current information on the Covid-19 and its impacts on the social and economic sectors in the Pacific region and Samoa and its fallout in the tourism industry were seriously analysed and assessed. This study assimilates this large pool of online data on tourism in Pacific and Samoa, but cautious measures were applied to use the authentic sites. The study organizes, collates and analyses these previous research data onto this research context to valid and expansion the discussion and conclusion on the Samoa current tourism trend (Sun et al., 2021).

Discussion

The Samoa Tourism Authority Chief Executive Officer said 52 hotels have been closed while 48 are still in operational out of the 144 hotel operations in Samoa. From the 52 hotels, 26 of them are currently being used by the Government to quarantine returning citizens and residents. A survey by the Samoa Tourism

Authority on employment in tourism sector revealed that a total of 3877 jobs have been affected since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic last year. Tourism sector decline started towards the end of 2019 with COVID-19 getting a big blow on tourism in the country when borders shut.

The tourism employment survey showed that 68.6 per cent of direct employment had been affected in some form with 48 percent getting laid off since December 2019. Figures shown in the survey indicated that the total workforce before the COVID-19 pandemic and the measles epidemic was at 5651. However, during the pandemic era, the number of those who were fully employed stood at 1774, laid off workers 2706 while 1171 were in the reduced hours' group.

The accommodation sector, food and beverage and car rentals felt the impacts of the decline with all losing more than half of their employees and jointly contributed to 88.5 per cent to overall job losses. With the current situational challenges and turmoil Samoa is facing in regard to business operations and activities - the government is doing its best to sustain the economy and control the Covid-19. The government prepared the citizens and residents by vaccinating them in case the Covid-19 comes into the country. Samoa government conducting a COVID-19 mass vaccination for two days in September 2021 to boost the coverage to reach 99 percent vaccinated population to protect the families, communities and country. The Ministry of Health vaccination teams, district hospitals, villages, women and men worked with communities to every residence to do the vaccination. Individuals who are unable to be vaccinated are pregnant mothers, patient who are bedridden, individuals with weak immune system and allergic to vaccine.

The Samoa government, donor partners and New Zealand government are assisting the Samoa tourism sector to localize the tourism services and activities. They are publicizing destination marketing and direct marketing for properties in Samoa. The Samoa Tourism Authority and tourism providers are doing a lot of marketing on social media, including Tafaoga and Kuka documentary series to let people know what tourism can offer in terms of its potentials in the country. To attract the local residents and international tourists by chance go fishing, go golfing, go hiking, eat Samoa traditional delicacies and cuisines. The tourism authority and tourism providers are collaboratively together to harness and sustain the tourism by pushing ecotourism.

They are promoting the nature walks, forestry, waterfalls and reefs areas around Savaii. While in Upolu, they are marketing Moataa mangrove protected areas, Palolo deep, kayaking sites and fixing Masamasa trail for hiking and trekking. The tourism authority and providers believe that local market can always substitute and help the tourism sector in one way or another.

Conclusion

The Samoa tourism sector has been very much affected by the Covid-19 impacts with the closure of the borders. The closure of borders gave a big blow by shutting up 52 hotels, 3877 jobs have been affected, laid off workers 2706 and 1171 were in the reduced working hours. These fallouts have financially impacted the individuals, family units, tourism sector and the national economy of Samoa. The decline in tourism revenue, shutting down of tourism businesses and laying off workers have forced the Samoa

government, donor partners, New Zealand government, Samoa Tourism Authority and tourism providers to promote and localize the tourism services and activities to the local people and the residents.

These concerned partners are collaboratively providing financial assistance, upgrading tourism skills, advertising ecotourism, promoting traditional cuisines and delicacies, cultural activities, facilities and amenities with the local price tags. The tourism authority and tourism providers are using social media platforms, print media, radio and television to publicize ecotourism like natural walks, waterfalls, coral reefs, mangrove areas, diving spots, kayaking sites and hiking and trekking trail. Also advertising the local food and cultural activities like fire dance, hula dance and other traditional artifacts for local customers to taste and enjoy.

The shift into localizing tourism with good marketing strategies likely would help sustain some of the tourism providers to continue to operate, create job opportunities for the locals and contribute to the national economic growth. The re-emergence of this initiative is the way forward to sustain and maintain the tourism services and activities locally with affordability prices and flavours.

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