



REVITALISING INFORMAL
SETTLEMENTS AND
THEIR ENVIRONMENTS

The impact of COVID-19 in Fijian informal settlements

Results of a rapid phone survey conducted in May 2020

Report date: 18 June 2020

Executive summary

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic presents unprecedented challenges for urban informal settlement dwellers in low- and middle-income countries. Very little is known, however, about the scale and impact of the pandemic on those living in informal settlements, which are usually excluded from formal census and monitoring efforts within already data-poor environments.

In response, the *Revitalising Informal Settlements and their Environments* program (RISE) implemented a rapid phone survey in 12 informal settlements in the Greater Suva Area between 25 May - 1 June 2020. The aim was to collect data on the impact of COVID-19 on informal settlement residents to develop knowledge that could help inform evidence-based policy and program targeting. The survey was completed with 408 households, representing 55% of households in RISE.

The findings indicate that the livelihoods of **one-third (37%) of households had been directly impacted due to the deteriorating economic conditions related to COVID-19**; 25% which had had their work hours reduced because of COVID-19, and 12% which had lost their job/income due to the downturn. In addition, **9% of households reported that their household is finding it difficult to meet their basic living costs and food needs.**

The findings show that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed this already vulnerable population under even greater financial pressure and indicate the need for targeted assistance to informal settlement dwellers. Tenure insecurity, limited assets and savings, job and livelihood insecurity, coupled with the prevailing cash economy of urban life, means informal settlement residents are highly vulnerable to the immediate and longer-term economic shocks of COVID-19. Without support, the positive socio-economic gains made over the past decades may be easily eroded and may negatively ripple across Fijian society in the years ahead.

The survey was intentionally kept short to reduce the burden on respondents during this difficult time. RISE is planning to repeat the survey in August/September 2020 to compare changes over time and will also add additional questions that can enrich the evidence regarding the social nuances of the impact of COVID-19 (i.e. through a gender and social inclusion lens).

List of Acronyms

GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GoF	Government of Fiji
GSA	Greater Suva Area (comprising Suva, Lami, Nasouri and Nasinu)
FNU	Fiji National University
LLEE	Live and Learn Environmental Education
RISE	Revitalising Informal Settlements and their Environments Program

Background

In January 2020 the world witnessed the emergence of a novel coronavirus from Wuhan city in the Hubei Province of China. Fiji recorded its first COVID-19 case on 19th March 2020. By mid-March the country had closed its borders and by the end of March a nationwide curfew had been implemented (10pm-5am). Cases continued to increase, with new cases emerging in the capital Suva in late April.

Through a combination of border closures, targeted lockdowns (i.e. Lautoka, Labasa, and Suva), and effective tracking and tracing and quarantine, Fiji's total reported COVID-19 caseload to date has been 18 persons. On the 5th June, the Prime Minister confirmed that the last COVID-19 patient had fully recovered, indicating that Fiji was COVID-19 free.

The economic impact of the pandemic has been deep. It is also likely to be long-lasting, particularly due to border closures and the associated impact on the tourism sector, which contributes approximately 40% towards Fiji's overall GDP.

The *Revitalising Informal Settlements and their Environments* (RISE) program utilised its research infrastructure, government and community partnerships and local team to undertake a rapid survey of impacts of COVID-19. RISE operates in 12 informal settlements in the Greater Suva area, home to more than 4,480 people. The program is researching the effectiveness of a water-sensitive approach to upgrading informal settlements to improve human health and the environment (see: www.rise-program.org). Using a localised, community-based approach, RISE has established and operates a Pacific planetary health research hub in local partnership with the Government of Fiji (GoF), Fiji National University (FNU) and Live and Learn Environmental Education (LLEE).

This report presents the findings of the rapid phone survey conducted between 25 May and 1 June 2020. The intention of the rapid COVID-19 survey was twofold. First, to reach out to study participants across the 12 sites and reassure them that although RISE fieldworkers were no longer visiting them (due to social distancing and lockdown regulations), the program would be continuing. Second, to collect data on the impact of COVID-19 on informal settlement dwellers to develop knowledge that could help inform policy and program targeting.

The report is intended for community leaders, policy makers, practitioners and RISE partners. The aim is to raise awareness of the challenges of informal settlement residents and help improve the design of interventions through evidenced-based action.

Figures 1-4: Members of the RISE team implementing the phone survey



Methodology

Survey design and implementation

A computer-assisted telephone survey was developed by, and piloted with, the Fiji RISE research team. The survey was in a semi-structured interview format. Respondents were reached through phone numbers that were recorded at the RISE baseline household survey in 2018. Phone numbers were linked with household ID and house number and cross-checked against settlement maps. The plan for the survey was discussed and agreed with community leaders in each settlement prior to implementation.

The RISE team of community fieldworkers implemented the survey between 25th May - 1 June. Fieldworkers called the phone number that RISE had on file. Three attempts were made to reach each household after which time the household was marked as 'not reachable' (for the purposes of this survey). To increase response rates, surveys were conducted in the evenings and weekends, as well as during work hours. SurveyCTO was utilised to record responses and collate the data. Surveys were delivered in iTaukei, English, and/or Fijian Hindi language depending on the preference of the respondent. The primary target respondent was the head of household; however if this person was not home any consenting adult that was willing to participate was surveyed.

The survey lasted an average of seven minutes (min: 3 minutes, max: 10 minutes) and included the following sections:

- Opening introduction: passing a message of support, providing updates on the RISE program; cross-checking the respondent and house number, and obtaining consent to participate in the phone survey.
- Question 1: "How are you/your family coping with this COVID-19 pandemic?"
- Question 2: "In your view what is the main problem faced by the residents in informal settlements during this pandemic?"
- Question 3: (a) "During this COVID-19 Pandemic, did any of the members of your household/family move elsewhere? (i.e. did anyone move out of the house); (b) If yes, where did they move?", and (c) "Have other family members moved into your house from outside or within the community?"
- Contact details for local services (i.e. Fiji Domestic Violence Helpline, Police Helpline, Lifeline, Crisis Helpline and Psychological First Aid, Social Welfare Helpline) were provided if respondents raised issues beyond the scope of the RISE team's capacity to address and/or if respondents requested referral information to assist them address challenges they had raised.
- Closing remarks: Thanking the respondent and indicating the next steps for RISE.

Response rates

RISE successfully reached 430 households and completed the full phone survey with 399 households that provided consent. A total of 1,081 calls were made in an attempt to reach the 742 households in the RISE settlements (Table 1). 242 households were not surveyed as the number on record did not reach the intended household or the phone number was unavailable/disconnected. 36 households could not be reached with at least 3 attempts (the phone kept ringing but no answer).

On average 54% of households in the 12 RISE settlements consented to and completed the phone survey (399 completed surveys from a total of 742 households). There were variable response rates across the 12 RISE settlements (Table 1). The lowest response rate was in Settlement D with only 35% of households completing the survey (7 out of 20 households). The highest response rate was in Settlement C with 76% of households completing the survey (78 out of 102 households). It appears that this variability could be an indication of high rates of changing of phone numbers across informal settlements. Some reasons for changing numbers are sharing of phones by the family, switching service

providers because of better data/call deals, and expired sim cards because they haven't been recharged (money put in them) for a bit of time.

Table 1: Response rates for phone survey

Settlement	Total number of households	Total number of calls	Consented and completed phone surveys	% households reached
Settlement A	90	121	45	50%
Settlement B	40	61	26	65%
Settlement C	102	143	78	76%
Settlement D	20	28	7	35%
Settlement E	44	69	19	43%
Settlement F	35	52	22	63%
Settlement G	74	118	35	47%
Settlement H	83	112	36	43%
Settlement I	133	205	63	47%
Settlement J	71	94	43	61%
Settlement K	22	30	13	59%
Settlement L	28	48	12	43%
TOTAL	742	1,081	399	54%

Findings

Impacts and coping during COVID-19 pandemic - household experiences

Respondents were asked: “How are you/your family coping with this COVID-19 pandemic?”. Respondents replied by explaining to the surveyor their experience. The surveyor registered a top/primary answer first from a predetermined set of options, followed by secondary response options from the same response options list.

For the primary answer, half of respondents (n=201, 50%) responded they are coping well, with the breadwinner still being employed (Table 2). Just over one-third (37%) responded that their livelihoods had been impacted in some way due to the deteriorating economic conditions related to COVID-19, comprising 25% which had had their work hours reduced because of COVID-19, and 12% which had lost their income due to the downturn. 9% of households (n=32) noted their household is finding it difficult to meet their basic food needs and are struggling, living day-by-day.

There was considerable variation across the 12 settlements (Table 2). For example, only 25% of households in Settlement L reported that they are coping well with the breadwinner still employed compared with 78% in Settlement H. Some settlements reported higher rates of job and livelihood loss, for example Settlement J where 61% of households had either reduced job hours or lost their job, compared with Settlement A with 17% of households. Some respondents that did not report significant job loss or reduction in their households did report difficulty in meeting basic needs, for example in Settlement F (18%) and Settlement K (15%). Note that some variability also reflects different response rates across the 12 sites.

Table 2: Coping and impacts on resplendent households (% of households reached through the survey)

	Coping well, breadwinner is still employed	Impacts on household			
		Reduced job/livelihood hours due to COVID-19	Lost job/livelihood due to COVID-19	Finding it difficult to meet basic needs/food needs	Struggling, living day-by-day
Settlement A	67%	13%	4%	7%	2%
Settlement B	54%	15%	15%	0%	8%
Settlement C	40%	41%	9%	0%	6%
Settlement D	71%	29%	0%	0%	0%
Settlement E	58%	26%	11%	5%	0%
Settlement F	45%	18%	14%	18%	5%
Settlement G	54%	23%	3%	9%	6%
Settlement H	78%	17%	6%	0%	0%
Settlement I	49%	19%	21%	6%	0%
Settlement J	33%	33%	28%	0%	2%
Settlement K	38%	31%	15%	15%	0%
Settlement L	25%	33%	8%	8%	17%
Average	50%	25%	12%	5%	4%

Problems as a result of COVID-19: perceptions of informal settlement problems

Respondents were asked: “In your view what is the main problem faced by the residents in informal settlements during this pandemic?”.

Two-thirds (66%) of respondents answered that being made unemployed and/or having a reduction in livelihood activity and income were the main problems resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 3). 18% responded that they perceived that informal settlement residents were struggling to make ends meet was the main challenge, indicating the issue of providing food and meeting household expenses and other living costs. Very few respondents noted items that have anecdotally been highlighted as impacts of COVID-19, such as having children at home requiring home schooling (1%), theft (<1%) and stress associated with COVID-19 (4%).

Table 3: Main problem faced by informal settlement residents.

Settlement	Unemployment	Struggling to make ends meet	Stress	Need assistance	Theft	Children at home	other
Settlement A	73%	18%	2%	2%	2%	0%	2%
Settlement B	81%	12%	4%	0%	0%	0%	4%
Settlement C	77%	14%	1%	1%	0%	1%	5%
Settlement D	71%	14%	0%	0%	0%	0%	14%
Settlement E	63%	11%	16%	5%	0%	5%	0%
Settlement F	36%	23%	14%	18%	0%	0%	9%
Settlement G	69%	23%	3%	6%	0%	0%	0%
Settlement H	78%	14%	0%	3%	0%	0%	6%
Settlement I	62%	21%	5%	8%	0%	2%	3%
Settlement J	60%	23%	2%	12%	0%	2%	0%
Settlement K	23%	38%	8%	31%	0%	0%	0%
Settlement L	50%	17%	17%	8%	0%	0%	8%
Average	66%	18%	4%	6%	0%	1%	4%

Movement in/out of settlements as a result of COVID-19

Respondents were asked: 1) “During this COVID-19 Pandemic, did any of the members of your household/family move elsewhere? (i.e. did anyone move out of the house); 2) If yes, where did they move?”, and 3) “Have other family members moved into your house from outside or within the community?”

Overall, there is very little reported movement in/out of the 12 sites as a result of COVID-19. There were 14 households that reported that household members had moved out of the house, including Settlement

A, Settlement B, Settlement G, Settlement K and Settlement L (n=1 each); Settlement C, Settlement H and Settlement J (n=2 each), and Settlement I (n=3).

There were 12 households that reported that people had moved into the house. These include Settlement A, Settlement E, Settlement H, and Settlement J (n=1 each); and Settlement A, Settlement G, Settlement I and Settlement L (n=2 each).

Conclusions and next steps

The findings show that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed this already vulnerable population under even greater financial pressure and indicate the need for targeted assistance to informal settlement dwellers. Tenure insecurity, limited assets and savings, job and livelihood insecurity, coupled with the prevailing cash economy of urban life, means informal settlement residents are highly vulnerable to the economic shocks of COVID-19. Without support, the positive socio-economic gains made over the past decades may be easily eroded and may negatively ripple across Fijian society in the years ahead.

As with any survey, there are limitations that need to be considered, including: (1) the sample size is only half of the populations in these settlements and so results do not represent all households; (2) it is unclear if there is anything different about the unreached households which cannot be captured here; and (3) whilst we couched questions asking respondents to identify impacts and difficulties arising during the pandemic, it is possible that some responses may also reflect pre-existing challenges.

Usually RISE surveys are conducted face-to-face. Social distancing and lockdown measures made this unfeasible. The phone survey was a first attempt to reach RISE participant households through telephone and so it was also an opportunity to extend the RISE research infrastructure and adapt to changing circumstances. The survey response rate (54%) was lower than anticipated but sufficient to represent the conditions across the 12 sites.

There are several methodological and logistical lessons from this experience:

- Variable hours were important to enable the surveyors to reach people at a time that was convenient for respondents, which included 'after hours' (5pm-10pm) and during the weekend.
- Respecting respondents' time was very important; surveyors often arranged follow-up calls at a time convenient with respondents.
- The surveyors estimate that approximately 90% of the respondents were receptive and happy to participate in the phone survey. During this pandemic respondents noted that RISE was the first organization to reach out to these communities. The participants were not hesitant to share the challenges they faced during this difficult time.
- Referral systems are important. During the introduction, it was made clear to the participants the purpose of the phone survey and the limitation of RISE financial and psycho-social support. During the survey respondents were referred to the specialized organisations if the team felt that they needed the aid given their responses provided.

Next steps

The survey was intentionally kept short to reduce the burden on respondents during this difficult time. RISE is planning to repeat the survey in August/September 2020 to compare changes over time and will also add additional questions that can enrich the evidence regarding the social nuances of the impact of COVID-19 (i.e. through a gender and social inclusion lens).

The RISE program is a consortium of partners on a mission to transform water and sanitation servicing in urban informal settlements.

For more information see: www.rise-program.org

