



Fiji's social protection system responds to the COVID-19 crisis



Australian Aid

Image caption: image features a Fijian woman in a market space, looking at pineapple and corn. The sun shines behind her.

Fiji has one of the most well-established social protection systems in the Pacific and it proved to be an asset in the Government of Fiji's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. With international tourism making up 39 per cent of Fiji's gross domestic product in 2019 and accounting for 36 per cent of total employment, border closures and the downturn of the tourism industry had a substantial impact on Fiji's economy. Existing social protection programs were leveraged, and new programs quickly put in place to achieve a rapid, national response to get financial support to those affected by loss of livelihoods and income.

Four existing schemes, designed to provide regular benefits to elderly people, people living with disability, households with vulnerable children and households living in poverty, were topped-up as part of the national COVID-19 response. This provided an immediate way to cushion the economic effects for poor and vulnerable people. The Government was also quick to provide additional benefits, including paid COVID-19 sick leave for workers, top-ups of provident funds for formal workers, and cash transfers for registered street vendors.

However, COVID-19 highlighted the lack of available support for informal workers within Fiji's existing social protection system. A series of schemes were put in place to fill this gap, providing unemployment benefits for informal workers affected by crisis. The new programs, introduced following the second wave of COVID-19 in early 2021, allowed people to register for assistance via mobile phone text message. This allowed for fast sign-up and payment processes, while accounting for movement restrictions and supporting social distancing. In August 2021, 260,000 people received payments through these new programs. Overall, the Fijian Government reached 60 per cent of the Fijian population through social protection measures as part of their response to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19.

Budget support provided through the Australian Pacific COVID-19 Response Package included AUD 20 million in sector budget support for social protection payments. This sector budget support ensured the Government of Fiji could maintain funding for social protection schemes despite significant budgetary pressures resulting from impacts such as the loss of tourism revenue. Australia's broader general budget support also contributed to expansion of the social protection system to include unemployment benefits for both the formal and informal sectors.

Australia's Disaster READY program, implemented through the **Australian Humanitarian Partnership (AHP)**, provided ongoing support to the COVID-19 response, enabling increased collaboration between Government and Australian NGOs in the region to support Pacific communities and governments to better prepare for and respond to disasters. In Fiji, this support included a mechanism for paying beneficiaries via mobile phones and provides additional transfers to vulnerable Fijian households.



Australia's budget support allowed for it to assist programs that already existed... This meant assistance was targeted to those already identified as the most vulnerable and using the government's already existing machinery there is more accountability and transparency.

Rupeni Fatiaki, Director of Social Welfare Department (Fiji)



For more information about Pacific responses to COVID-19, see **Social protection responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Pacific: A tipping point for the sector?**

Photo credit: Giorgia Doglioni



The Pacific COVID-19 Response Package provided \$304.7 million across FY 2020-21 and FY 2021-22 to assist Pacific countries and Timor-Leste to weather the economic shocks of COVID-19 and position the region for economic recovery. For more information on the Pacific COVID-19 Response Package visit: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/development-assistance/pacific-regional-covid-19-response-packages>