

Post-COVID Challenges for the Pacific Islands: Some Potential for Small Island Cooperation

Richard Herr OAM PhD*

Abstract

Being an island has often proved a health benefit in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, after a year of the pandemic, virtually the only COVID-free countries are island states and territories. While both Australia and South Korea have fared well by global standards, their island provinces, Jeju and Tasmania done even better. The small island states of the South Pacific region leveraged their insularity by swiftly closing borders, tough quarantine, social distancing and public health measures when a pandemic was declared.

Their marine moat contributed significantly to health security for these islands but at great cost to their fragile economies especially those with some dependence on tourism. Vaccines promise the opportunity to reopen borders to international commerce and traffic. However, the transition out of the pandemic will less swift and less secure than the initial dramatic first response. The apparent inevitability of COVID becoming an endemic disease will require ongoing public health measures as well as political decisions at the level of individual countries as when decide their pandemic measures can be relaxed. Travel bubbles are touted as a likely transitional stage for the global recovery but these have proved more aspirational than practical thus far. Post-COVID financial revitalisation will even more challenging for small island states. It is here that both Jeju and Tasmania can assist their national government in meeting the needs of the Pacific's small island states. They have relevant island-adapted human and physical technologies that, if recognised and mobilised, could make appropriate niche recovery aid more effective.

Key words :

Pacific Islands, COVID-19, Post-COVID recovery, Pandemic, Jeju, Tasmania.

* Professor Richard Herr is the Academic Director of the Parliamentary Law, Practice and Procedure Course in the Faculty of Law, University of Tasmania. He is the former Hon Director and Adjunct Professorial Fellow in the Centre for International and Regional Affairs at the University of Fiji.

Introduction

Normally, as an Honorary Citizen of Jeju, I am asked to contribute to this magazine on themes that my home island of Tasmania might share with Jeju. On this occasion, I have been approached to contribute a reflection on how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on the small islands of the South Pacific where I have worked much of my academic life. I am honoured to do this. I believe that small islands like Jeju and Tasmania with established economies have developed a range of island-appropriate coping technologies to solve the twin challenges of smallness and insularity. It is my hope that this relevance might be better recognised and shared and even contributed to the post-COVID recovery of this region.

COVID in the Pacific Island Region

Insularity has often been a blessing in dealing with the COVID pandemic. This can be seen in the statistic that, at the end of January 2021, 12 of the 14 countries and territories reporting no cases are islands.¹⁾ Even within countries that have experienced COVID, the value of “islandness” can be evident. Australia and South Korea have fared well by global standards. Yet, Jeju and Tasmania done even better. Both have ranked at the bottom of their national infection rates.

The small island states of the South Pacific region have done exceptionally well in keeping COVID at bay. Using the surrounding ocean as a protective moat contributed real health security benefits but this has not been without sacrifice. Avoiding the health consequences of the pandemic has inflicted serious economic damage. All these states acted early and swiftly to close borders and impose strict public health measures at great cost to their fragile economies especially those with some dependence on tourism just as Jeju and Tasmania have found.

While a range of potent vaccines now appear to promise an end to the global nightmare, the island

states will confront new public health choices. Having sheltered safely behind their natural moats for more than a year, they will have to decide when and how to drop the figurative drawbridge to open their countries again to international trade.

There will be no global announcement to proclaim the end of COVID as a threat. Rather than COVID being eliminated, the World Health Organisation has said the “destiny” of COVID-19 is to become endemic, not to disappear.²⁾ By this, the WHO means that COVID will simply be reduce to a level that governments will accept as “normal” rather like the seasonal ‘flu.

The decision to change the status of COVID from pandemic to endemic will be complicated as the WHO will not be able to decree the change as authoritatively as it did in declaring it a pandemic, especially for the Pacific Island states. Pandemics are essentially an epidemic which occurs simultaneously across a number of countries and, as in the case of COVID, worldwide.

The WHO has grappled regularly with how to describe the threat level of disease in order to help members shape effective public policy.³⁾ Its definition of an epidemic holds that it is “an illness... clearly in excess of normal expectancy”.⁴⁾ However, since COVID is a novel corona virus there is not yet a baseline for what might be expected as normal.

Fiji experienced just this question in August 2020 when the government declared a significant rise in dengue fever and leptospirosis disease as an outbreak while continuing to deal with COVID as a pandemic. Yet, at that time, there was only one COVID death but four from dengue and ten from leptospirosis.⁵⁾

Whether COVID is a pandemic, epidemic or a viral endemic disease is not just medical semantics. The public health consequences flow through to a range of social and political policies. For most of the

1) <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/slideshows/countries-without-reported-covid-19-cases>

2) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/29/who-warns-covid-19-pandemic-is-not-necessarily-the-big-one>

3) <https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/89/7/11-088815/en/>

4) <https://www.who.int/hac/about/definitions/en/>

5) <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/423925/fiji-declares-dengue-and-leptospirosis-outbreak>

world, COVID is a serious pandemic that will not be reduced to a manageable endemic disease until we have adequate vaccines and therapeutics to allow commerce, education and social life to return to normal.

Presently, the global expectation is that vaccines, more than therapeutics, will be the best immediate hope for ending COVID as a pandemic. This view might be derailed if new strains prove resistant to the vaccines currently available. Nevertheless, hopes remain high that the world will be able to stand down from being on pandemic status.

Pacific Island policy makers will have to confront two related challenges in intransiting out of their pandemic measures. One will be the decision that their internal capacity is adequate to allow them to safely reduce the drastic public health measures used to hold COVID at bay. The second concerns the level of trust in the measures of other states to open borders securely.

Given that the global policy transition out of the pandemic will be sequential rather than instantaneous, the on-going search for safe travel bubbles points the most likely way out of the COVID nightmare. However, connecting the few real bubbles that exist have encountered frustrating policy decisions. This is especially the case for the Pacific Islands where their insularity has preserved large stretches of COVID-free “bubbles”.

To date, international travel bubbles have been more aspirational than practical. However, for the Pacific Island countries, internal bubbles are potentially a very pertinent domestic issue. All but two (Guam and Niue) of the countries in the region are archipelagos. Thus, virtually every country is, in effect, a set of nested bubbles. Once the national borders are open, very significant differences in risk will have to be managed internally across a wide range of islands with varying levels of contact internationally.

Since these countries have had virtually no community exposure to COVID, the Pacific Island

face some difficult choices before opening their borders fully. Tourist destinations like Fiji are keeping designated hotels open as quarantine centres for visitors willing to limit their stay in this way. More permanently, these countries want to achieve the relative safety of herd immunity through mass vaccinations before opening more fully to international visitors.

Yet here, the Islands’ access to vaccines appears beset by continuing technical difficulties in both vaccine production and roll-out across the world.⁶⁾ Agreements such as the COVAX Facility for ensuring fair access to vaccine for developing economies are looking less certain to provide the intended equity.

The Economist Intelligence Unit recently predicted that most low-income countries would not “have wide access to a vaccine before 2022–23.”⁷⁾ Moreover, there is some granularity to this prediction for the Pacific Island countries which will contribute to significant regional variation. For example, America’s Pacific territories and former dependencies reportedly are likely to match the rate of vaccine rollouts within the US.⁸⁾ Elsewhere, the regional timetable appears variable with some projections suggesting a final date as late as 2025 notwithstanding Australia’s pledge of \$80 million to support the COVAX programme in the region.⁹⁾

Conclusion

Both Jeju’s and Tasmania’s national governments are contributing significantly to meeting the COVID emergency in developing states including the islands of the Pacific. The scale of the challenges is such that the national governments calling on any special “island” advice from either Jeju or Tasmania is unlikely. Their small island is of a scale that limits what they can do beyond what they have done so

6) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/28/vaccine-rollout-covid-19-economic-unrest/>

7) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/28/vaccine-rollout-covid-19-economic-unrest/>

8) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-05/palau-may-become-first-majority-vaccinated-covid-19-coronavirus/13030012>

9) <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/2020-21-budget-protecting-australias-national-interests-and-trade-relations>

well – keeping their own populations safe from COVID. However, the post-COVID economic and social recovery will be a different story. Here the two islands do have an opportunity to contribute. Jeju and Tasmania can assist their national government in meeting the needs of the Pacific’s small island states through their home-grown and relevant island-adapted human and physical technologies. These are not often recognised for their value to other small islands. However, if mobilised for the national aid to the Pacific, this rich experience in “islandness” could genuinely help to make appropriate post-COVID niche recovery assistance more effective.

Receiving Date : February 1, 2021

Reviewing Date : February 8, 2021

Reporting Date of Article Appearance: February 15, 2021