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# Belize Community Needs Assessment

Impact of COVID-19 on  
fishing communities

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## Summary

Between April 30th and 23 May 2020, 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted by Blue Ventures staff with men and women from fisheries-dependent households, community leaders and healthcare professionals in order to assess how Belize's coastal fishing communities are being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Key results

- Fishers, tourism-workers and daily or informal workers have lost, or have seen a drastic reduction in their livelihoods opportunities and income across Belize. This is having an immediate effect on people's ability to afford food and basic necessities, and raises concerns over malnutrition in the long term especially among vulnerable groups such as older people and children.
- Where possible, people are practicing subsistence fishing or farming. In the long term, this raises concern over households financial security and potential increase in debts.
- Closure of international borders leading to the collapse of the tourism industry has created many uncertainties for the future of the domestic seafood market.
- As restaurants have been closed in the United States (US) the international market for lobster has been seriously depressed, with low prices being offered at seafood processors at the opening of lobster season on June 15.
- Interventions are needed to support the reorganisation of the seafood industry to support new market realities in the era of COVID-19.

**Northern Belize:** Impacts are most greatly felt in the northern region where communities have expressed an urgent need for support with basic needs, and food security for vulnerable groups. For a region heavily dependent on fishing, many people are left unable to make a living.

**Belize City and tourism-based communities:** Most severely affected by the collapse of the tourism industry. Short- and long-term financial impacts threaten people's abilities to source basic necessities, while uncertainty and a lack of political direction sit at the forefront of people's concerns.

**Southern and Central Belize:** Fishing communities in central and southern Belize have suffered from the halt in tourism with disruption spreading through the economy. Occasional subsistence fishing and door-to-door selling of goods exists but support with other foods is needed.

## Method and sampling

The objectives of the assessment were to:

- 1) Assess the social vulnerability of fishing communities impacted by COVID-19 disruptions.
- 2) Estimate how fishers and fisher households were impacted to assist response and recovery activities.
- 3) Identify the public health needs and available resources to address the unmet needs of communities most vulnerable residents.

A community needs assessment was conducted across 14 coastal communities in Belize to establish how fishing communities had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Community responses were gathered via semi-structured telephone interviews conducted by Blue Ventures (BV) staff members and a quota sampling method was adopted to select key informants that represent a wide cross-section of target communities. The interviews targeted village chairs & religious leaders, government healthcare workers and men and women from fisheries dependent households. Respondents from fisheries dependent households were selected if they were active members or producers of either of Belize's two largest fishing cooperatives: National Fishermen's Cooperative Society Ltd. and Northern Fishermen Co-operative Society Ltd.

Factors such as age, gender and socio-economic status were considered to minimise selection bias across communities. Interviews were conducted in the language the respondent felt most comfortable (English, Spanish, Creole). Respondents were asked to refer women who manage households dependent on fishing and religious leaders for further interviews to ensure gender inclusion. Location was also taken into consideration to ensure that an adequate representation of all communities was achieved. In order to accomplish this, respondents were chosen from four regions across Belize:

- Northern Belize (coastal fishing communities in mainland Orange Walk and Corozal Districts)
- Belize City
- Tourism-based (coastal fishing communities that have transitioned to a tourism-based economy - Caye Caulker, San Pedro, Placencia)
- Southern and Central Belize (all other coastal fishing communities)

From 30<sup>th</sup> April to 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2020, 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviewing methods were consistent across callers and all respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary, their answers were confidential and participation did not indicate eligibility for any future aid. Three variations of the topic guide were used according to interviews, occupation and role in the community (see topic guides in Appendix 1). Questions covered:

- Community/household context prior to the pandemic
- Knowledge of COVID-19 and sources of information used

- Short and longer-term Impacts of COVID-19 on the household/community

Respondents were asked to refer religious leaders and women who manage households dependent on fishing until a minimal quota of respondents for each region was reached (see Table 1).

Once interviews were completed, all responses were consolidated into a single database and coded.

*Table 1 - Interview sample breakdown by region and respondent type*

	# Community member respondents (household level- fishers with and without vessels, female heads of household in fisher dependent homes)	# Community Leader respondents	# Healthcare professional in communities respondents	Total
Northern	6	4	1	11
Belize city	1	2	0	3
Tourism-based	3	3	1	7
Southern and Central	3	3	0	6
Total	13	12	2	27

## Background and context (prior to COVID-19)

In general, the background upon which COVID-19 has arrived in most fishing communities in Belize is one of fragile financial security and insufficient local provision of healthcare, and this has compounded the impacts of COVID-19. Prior to the pandemic, small-scale fishing communities lacked support from the government on human rights issues from both a policy perspective and within programme objectives. Areas that impact the lives and livelihoods of fishers have traditionally been ignored with key areas needing to be addressed including gender issues, the rights of migrants, access to quality healthcare and education, overall wellbeing, and measures to confer protection in times of disaster (e.g. hurricanes).

### **Northern**

The primary fishing communities in northern Belize struggle with poor transportation infrastructure (no paved roads, irregular bus service) and a low ability to access basic healthcare services.

### **Belize City**

Fishers in Belize's largest city are affected by poverty, extremely high incidence of violent gang-related crime, and live in areas particularly vulnerable to hurricanes and flooding. Both cooperatives have their main landing facilities in Belize City and they employ approximately 70 workers during open seasons, of which the majority are women.

### **Tourism-based**

These communities have transitioned from a fishing economy to one that relies heavily on international tourism. Fishermen in these communities rely on restaurants/ hotels to purchase their product.

### **Southern and Central**

Fishing communities in central and southern Belize struggle with poor transportation infrastructure (few paved roads, irregular/absent bus service) and a low ability to access basic healthcare services.

# Interview findings

## Life before COVID-19

### **Northern**

The fishing communities have little economic diversification and many community members rely on seasonal activities and temporary work in the fishing and construction industries. Community leaders have noted that most households are reliant upon one provider with an instability of household income. It was mentioned that community members lack skills in financial management, while financial support from family or professional networks is of little possibility. Most leaders highlighted insufficiency and low quality in local health provisions with healthcare typically requiring visits to main towns and cities where the costs incurred create an obstacle. Several key informants mentioned community members suffering from chronic health conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure and depression.

### **Belize City (small number of respondents)**

While fishing is not the primary activity in this region, similar concerns are raised. There are in the region low-income families who must rely on unsteady or poorly paid jobs, creating an inability to save. Healthcare was not a priority concern.

### **Tourism-based**

The job market in these communities is diversified and members have connections to cities, farms and other industries. Key informants highlight that while they are unsteady, there are many job opportunities. The households interviewed rely on a stable albeit small income. Communities are highly tourism-dependent with fishing being predominantly for hotels and resorts. Communities suffer vulnerability from high costs of living, and one key informant mentions lack of financial management skills and an inability to build savings. Although healthcare was not noted as a priority concern, key informants voiced concerns over the costs of consulting privately and costs of travel as local healthcare provisions are limited. Another community member is troubled over the ability to purchase medicine for diabetes, a chronic health condition echoed in the community, among others.

### **Southern and Central**

These communities are also dependent on tourism as tour guides, construction and subsistence farming. Access to healthcare is noted as an area of concern due to poor transportation infrastructure.

## Impact of COVID-19

In all regions except for Belize City, the primary concern relating to COVID-19 is access to food and nutrition. From the interviews, it would seem that these impacts are most greatly felt in Northern communities where people expressed an urgent need for support with basic needs. Other regions, though badly affected by the halt in tourism, appear to have better access to coping strategies.

### By Region

#### **North**

Because of COVID-19 most respondents have been unable to make a living, affecting their access to food, resulting in many members eating less and in some cases, some respondents have flagged that children are going hungry. These impacts are expected to worsen in the long-term as COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc on the job market and seafood industry. Concerns over malnutrition are expressed for vulnerable community members, as well as general concern for single mothers, large families and those reliant on fishing. Respondents highlighted that the financial fallout from COVID-19 affects more than food but also bills, medicine and healthcare which was already insufficient. Worries arose over possible debts and security in the community.

#### **Belize City (small number of respondents)**

The concern in this region is unemployment resulting in poverty due to COVID-19, especially for those in tourism and people are mostly concerned for the elderly and the poor. One fisher states that likewise in other regions he is subsistence fishing and selling door to door.

#### **Tourism-based fishing communities**

Impacts of tourism dependency have been strongly felt and concerns over short- and long-term financial security are at the forefront of people's minds, with worries over access to food and in the long run, the ability to purchase medicine and access healthcare. People are relying on their savings and although some people can practice subsistence fishing, it has been noted that people cannot live on fish. Comparably to other regions, concerns are higher for vulnerable groups, those with underlying health issues, low-income families and tourism workers. Key informants feel a lot of uncertainty and worry over both the economy's ability to recover and the lack of direction from government while loss of revenue has affected the village council funding.

#### **Southern and Central**

All respondents have expressed concerns over access to food for their family or community members. Some community members were able to put alternative strategies in place, such as fishing for subsistence and selling door to door as well as planting of crops, but one respondent still mentions concern over malnutrition in the longer term. The loss of tourism has massively affected these economies, with job and client losses translating into



difficulties paying bills and purchasing essential goods. A council member points out that the loss of revenue impacts the village council's ability to support the community. High on the list of concerns are vulnerable groups, single mothers and people with underlying health conditions, while low income families, large families and those in the tourism and fishing industry are also mentioned. Access to healthcare is not a top priority amongst respondents, however, worries over the ramifications of current hardship on mental health are voiced as well as concern over the lack of preparation for COVID-19 in the local health system.

### Impact on fishers across all regions

COVID-19 has impacted the fishing industry through the closure of fishing cooperatives and the halt in tourism. Seasonal Coop closures have affected fishers, with one mentioning the need for subsidised ice. While some have been unable to work, others have become subsistence fishers and door to door sellers, but there are concerns for the crews they cannot help. Most fishers look to the imminent long-term effects of the crisis on market prices while the lobster fishing calendar has been a source of uncertainty and there are suggestions that this should change. A council leader has shown apprehension over the lack of enforcement of fishing regulations as this could encourage poachers, this is reflected by one fisher troubled by illegal fishing affecting the coops.

### Community

All regions share similar issues. The general opinion is that while governmental financial support has been awarded to some, its existence is insufficient in both the number of receivers and the sum. Other sources of support (e.g. NGOs and village council) have focused on food distribution and gained traction as welcome assistance, yet are seen as sporadic and insufficient. Concerns have been raised over the criteria for eligibility and fairness of distribution.

An increasing need for food assistance is prevalent among all communities, in greater quantities and frequency, and in the Southern region respondents emphasised a need for healthier foods. Respondents call for further government support, in terms of financial support for bills and access to healthcare and in providing medicines. Long-term measures are also proposed and among those suggested are, vocational training, saving schemes and financial education.

### Fishing

In regions where fishing is a dominant industry, some respondents have asked for reviews of the fishing calendars for lobster and sea cucumber seasons with one fisher suggesting bringing forward the forthcoming lobster season. Another calls for the reopening of the industry with improved protocols and regulation for COVID-19.

A northern Village Council leader reports that the village council is attempting to get special authorization for local people to be able to fish including for those without licences and it is

not clear whether this is for subsistence or commercial fishing. There are also reports that while some communities are subsistence fishing and selling door to door, others are not authorized to do so. Other existing concerns are for illegal fishing practices and the reopening of the coops.

#### Available information

Social media appears to be the dominant source of communication among all respondents for information on COVID-19. The information has received mixed reviews, with some feeling sufficiently informed while some are unsure or disagree and feel the rules are confusing. Some question the quality of information from social media and in northern Belize, village leaders have highlighted the importance and lack of accessible, easy to understand information deliverable in Spanish. Other sources of information come from media channels, churches and village councils. There is also unease over residents taking restrictions too lightly and thoughts that the government needs to supply more protective equipment, adding to worries over Belize's capacity to deal with COVID-19.

# Blue Ventures recommendations

## General Community Ideas

- To promote learning in households with low literacy/ technology: Provide support to community libraries (internet, computers) and establish a schedule for students to enter while maintaining social distancing.
- As a livelihood opportunity for women's groups: support and subsidize mask sewing for sale and distribution to fishing communities, fishers, health workers, transportation workers etc.
- To facilitate access to health care: Identify and fund doctors to provide weekly visits to remote fishing communities and provide basic medication and interventions.
- Support single parent households with basic necessities (e.g. reusable diapers, feminine hygiene products, infant milk)

## Industry Ideas

- Create and distribute Safety at Sea flyers and banners regarding COVID-19.
- Suspend fees for fishers licenses for 2021 and establish automatic renewal
- Support the cooperatives in diversifying their product and developing a robust domestic market
- Create a third party to manage fisher benefits to reward sustainable and legal fishing practices
- Critical review of fishing regulations and calendars
- Enhance the influence of managed access committees

## Appendix 1 - Interview Structure

Intro script		<p>Good morning/afternoon, my name is X and I work with Blue Ventures in Sarteneja. We are calling today to ask you a few questions about how the current COVID-19 crisis is affecting you and your family. The reason for this is to make sure we understand the needs of fishers and to improve the way our organisations work to support your community.</p> <p>We will keep all of the data that you provide to us confidential and only Blue Ventures staff will have access to it. We will not record this conversation, and will keep only notes of your answers. We may publish some of the information you provide, but we will make sure you cannot be identified.</p> <p>Are you happy to provide the sort of information we have described?</p> <p>Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary and unpaid. Your participation in this interview does not guarantee that you will receive benefits. If you choose not to participate, this will not affect your relationship with Blue Ventures. If you choose to participate and then change your mind, you can tell us to stop asking questions at any time. We expect the full survey to take about 45 minutes. Do you understand?</p> <p>Do you consent to participate in this survey? Are you free now or would you like me to call back at another time?</p>		
	<b>Notes</b>	<b>Fishers and women who rely on fishing</b>	<b>Village chair and religious leaders:</b>	<b>Government Healthcare Worker</b>
		I'd like to ask a few questions about yourself and your family to understand your context prior to the current crisis	I'd like to start with a few questions about your community to understand your context prior to the current COVID outbreak	I'd like to start with a few questions about your community to understand your context prior to the current COVID outbreak
1a	Food security	What do you do to provide food or income to your family? Who is the main provider for your family? What do they do? Do others in the household provide for food and income?	What do people usually do for a living? What do most people do to provide food or income for their family?	What do people usually do for a living? What do most people do to provide food or income for their family?

1b		Do you have children? Do they usually go to school?		
2a	Healthcare access	What do you do when you feel sick? Where do you go and who do you normally visit for help? Is there anyone in your family with health problems or needing particular healthcare in your family?		Are there particular health concerns in your community in normal times?
2b				Do people with particular health conditions have good access to healthcare usually? How and where do people with particular health conditions get access to health care in normal times?
3	Pre-COVID concerns	In normal times, what are the three things you most worry about for your family?	What would you say are the major challenges/problems faced by your community in normal times?	What would you say are the major challenges/problems faced by your community in normal times?
		COVID related questions - knowledge	COVID related questions - knowledge	COVID related questions - knowledge
4	Outreach needs	Do you feel sufficiently informed? Do you think there is sufficient information about the coronavirus in your community?	Do you think there is sufficient information about the coronavirus in your community?	Do you think there is sufficient information about the coronavirus in your community?
4a		Do you know where to find information about the coronavirus in your community?		
4b			Do people know where to find information about the coronavirus in your community?	Do people know where to find information about the coronavirus in your community?

		COVID related questions - impact on the household	COVID related questions - impact on the community	COVID related questions - impact on the community
5a	Immediate impact	How is your everyday life being affected? What has changed for your family since the beginning of the outbreak? How? (Eg prompts: Are the members of your households able to work? Are you able to access healthcare if you need to? Are your children able to continue studying?)	What has changed in your community since the beginning of the outbreak? Have you seen any particular changes in your community? How would you say your community is being affected?	What has changed in your community since the beginning of the outbreak? Have you seen any particular changes in your community? How would you say your community is being affected?
5b		What are your main concerns for your family now during the outbreak? Why?	What are your three main concerns for your community now during the outbreak? What do you most worry about? Why?	What are your three main concerns for your community now during the outbreak? What do you most worry about? Why?
6	Long term impact	How do you think your family is going to be affected in the longer term? What are your concerns for after the outbreak has passed? Why?	How do you think the community is going to be affected in the longer term? What are your concerns for after the outbreak has passed? Why?	How do you think the community is going to be affected in the longer term? What are your concerns for after once the outbreak has passed? Why?
7	Vulnerable groups	Are there particular groups of people, in your family or wider community, you are particularly concerned about during this outbreak? Why? How are they being affected?	Are there particular groups of people you are particularly concerned about during this outbreak? Why? How are they being affected?	Are there particular groups of people you are particularly concerned about during this outbreak? Why? How are they being affected?

8	Existing support	What services/support are currently being provided to the community through this period? And by whom? What are they doing? What is working and what is not? Why not? How can it be improved?	What services/support are currently being provided to the community through this period? And by whom? What are they doing? What is working and what is not? Why not? How can it be improved?	What services/support are currently being provided to the community through this period? And by whom? What are they doing? What is working and what is not? Why not? How can it be improved?
9	Primary needs	What do you think could help your family or your community (or particular groups depending on previous answers) to better cope during the outbreak? If you had to prioritise one thing, what would it be? / which of these would be the most important to you and your family?	What do you think could help the community (or particular groups depending on previous answers) to better cope during the outbreak? If you had to prioritise one thing, what would it be / which of these is the most important?	What do you think could help the community (or particular groups depending on previous answers) to better cope during the outbreak? If you had to prioritise one thing, what would it be / which of these is the most important?
		We are interested in involving women/religious leaders in this assessment.	We are interested in involving women/religious leaders in this assessment.	We are interested in involving women/religious leaders in this assessment.
	Contact referral	Can you recommend a woman who manages a household that has a high dependency on fishing who might be willing to participate in this interview?	Can you recommend a woman who manages a household that has a high dependency on fishing who might be willing to participate in this interview?	Can you recommend a woman who manages a household that has a high dependency on fishing who might be willing to participate in this interview?
	Contact referral	Are there any other religious or spiritual leaders we should talk to?	Are there any other religious or spiritual leaders we should talk to?	Are there any other religious or spiritual leaders we should talk to?
		Which places of worship have the greatest following in your community?	Which places of worship have the greatest following in your community?	Which places of worship have the greatest following in your community?

		Can you please share contact details for all the people you have mentioned?	Can you please share contact details for all the people you have mentioned?	Can you please share contact details for all the people you have mentioned?
Exit script	<p>Thanks - do you have any questions?</p> <p>If you have any further questions you can contact Maritza Rodriguez (672-9074).</p> <p>We will share a summary of our findings with you - what is the best way for us to do this?</p>			
Reflections	<p>Interviewers' reflections on the suitability of the interviewee to input to review of recommendations, e.g. connectivity, forthcomingness</p>			





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