

Samoa's Effective Response to COVID-19: A Preventive Strategy

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Abstract

Samoa has effectively remained Covid-19 free due to a successful set of measures under a national State of Emergency. While these have had negative economic consequences for its tourist industry and seasonal migrant worker programme, on families separated by international borders Samoa has so far successfully avoided a catastrophic situation that would certainly have arisen if Covid 19 spread among its population. The success likely reflects lessons learned by the government and the public during the 2019-2020 measles epidemic.

Keywords: Covid-19 protocols Effective controls, Preventive Measures, Quarantine, State of Emergency Orders

Introduction

Samoa has one Covid-19 case with no community infections, transmissions or related deaths (*The Guardian. 2021*). On 18 November, Samoa confirmed its first case: a sailor who had returned from Auckland, New Zealand. The sailor had undergone managed isolation who tested positive the previous night but subsequently tested negative during a second test. Although the World Health Organization (WHO 2021) has reported more than 167 million COVID-19 cases as at the end of May 2021 worldwide, with approximately 3.4m deaths. Remarkably, Samoa is one of the very few countries to have effectively eliminated the entry and transmission of the virus. In 2019, Samoa faced a measles outbreak leading to a declaration of a state of emergency (SOE 2021) which included cancellation of public gatherings, schools, holiday-related events but because the response was too late to stop the spread of infection there were more than 80 deaths. After a mass vaccination effort and by the end of 2019 and early 2020, the outbreak was under control. The experience has taught Samoa the importance of acting fast and early (Boodoosingh et.al 2020). When the COVID-19 threat was recognised in early 2020, the government of Samoa immediately recognised Samoa's But on the basis of the transmission and infection record so far, it appears the recent experience in dealing with infectious disease has enabled the Samoan government make adequately preparations leading to an effective response, but with some measures that might be considered extreme in the absence of the virus on her shores In this article we present an overview of the measures taken.

Samoa's Containment Strategy

The Government of Samoa closed the country's borders on March 2020 and launched Phase 1 of a stimulus package in March 2020 to assist with the impact of COVID-19. This included financial assistance provided by the Samoa National Provident Fund to its members, and through commercial banks, and measures such as exemptions for vehicle registration, and extensions to income tax filing periods. In addition, The World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Australian Aid and New Zealand Aid contributed

funds to assist preventive measures. Phase 2 was more focused and targeting those that have been laid-off due to COVID-19 with an additional grants to assist hard-hit enterprises.

Since border closure on March 2020 all travel into and out of the country must be approved by the government and only for travel that is classified as necessary, which excluded all travel for social as well as holiday purposes. Stringent vetting of all requests prior the travel have been applied, including requests from non-citizens and people with dual nationality. Residents needing to travel overseas for medical attention must apply for permission both in Samoa and in the country to which they propose to travel, and overseas trips by government officials must be approved by cabinet. Quarantine has been extremely strict and even those permitted to quarantine at home are placed under the supervision of security guards, and checked daily by health workers, just as they would be if they had been required to stay at a quarantine centre.

All those wanting to enter Samoa from overseas are assumed to be potentially exposed to the virus, so permission is only given on a case-by-case basis. This has so far effectively prevented infection and transmission in Samoa. All those who qualify to travel into Samoa must provide a negative Covid-19 test results, a medical clearance certificate, a compulsory Medical Clearance Health documentation Check-in form, 21-day quarantine upon arrival into Samoa. These stringent requirements mean that, any possible contamination or exposure to the virus would have been picked up during the regular testing during the quarantine period and thus preventing any further transmission. The only development, which has come into force since mass immunization recently became possible, is a medical report that shows that the traveller has already received an approved Covid-19 vaccine and meets all the other requirements set by the government. This however, does not exempt the traveller from the quarantine period. The time from exposure to symptom onset (the incubation period) is thought to be two to 14 days, though symptoms typically appear within four or five days after exposure. Because of the limitations on the number of people who could be effectively quarantined every 14 days, and because of the limitation on air services to Samoa, thousands of Samoans were stranded overseas for many months before they could get back home.

Closed borders means that Boats, ships and yachts are prohibited from Samoa unless bringing essential goods or approved by cabinet. There is a restriction of the number of ships that can dock at the wharf within 48 hours, with no crew permitted to come on-shore, whilst the date of departure from the last port, and exchange of crew must not be within 28 days before arriving at the Apia port. Public gatherings were initially restricted but then permitted, but subject to observing applicable safety rules, and gatherings at the airport or wharf are prohibited.

This means that there have been no overseas tourists coming to Samoa for over a year, a decline that began before the Covid 19 restrictions due to the measles epidemic in Samoa. The effect has been to bring the tourist industry to a standstill, except for businesses catering to locally resident travellers and holiday makers. Another measure is the prohibition of entry to health facilities by anyone who is not staff, an admitted patient or an approved carer; that seeking outpatient medical attention must sit in tents outside the hospitals.

All fundraising dances, bingos, restaurants, theatres, casinos, hostels entertainment, selling of alcohol are all under strict opening times. Street vendors are allowed but there's a ban on selling goods on footpath and children under 16 selling goods are prohibited. Other restriction include a ban on many Sunday activities, such as, swimming at beaches; use of ferry services and most other public transport; market operations and all other businesses, with the exception of approved essential services. Markets, small shops, supermarkets and businesses have been restricted to 11 hours opening on Monday to Saturday and no one is allowed to sleep at the market overnight.

Small shops, petrol stations, pharmacies, and restaurants are allowed to open from 3pm onwards on Sundays whilst Supermarkets can open between 3pm and 10pm on Sundays. Night clubs and bars, including hotel bars, may open for 17 hours during the working week and 12 hours on Saturday but must be closed on Sundays. While these measures are said to reduce the number of people who can congregate and thereby potentially transmit the virus, there is no Covid 19 virus in Samoa and all these services operate from Monday through to Saturday when restricted hours may increase the number of people using them at one time. It is likely that the government of Samoa, in response to the deep religious beliefs of the people has increased existing Sunday restriction since the pandemic began, to secure and to give thanks for God's blessing in keeping the virus away from Samoa.

Conclusion

Overall, the preventive measures taken with regards to Covid-19 have had a major impact on business operators, employees, and households. Samoa's economy has paid a heavy price, particularly in tourism and the seasonal labour programme, with severe knock-on effects on employment and a diversity of economic activities. Many hotels and beach fale in rural areas have had to close while others have continued to operate on a very limited basis with few staff. Further research will likely find that more effective assistance could have been given to accommodation providers through a job-holder funding scheme, as was applied in New Zealand. This would have helped both operators and workers to maintain tourist facilities for future re-opening. Until early 2020 about 2000 workers a year were travelling do seasonal work in the horticulture industries of New Zealand and Australia, sending home money to families to buy cars, build houses and provide for other family needs. Another aspect has been the effect on families. Samoan families are mobile multi-national entities who travel for funerals, weddings and family reunions, which keep the family bonds strong despite the distances that a travelled by thousands every year for these functions.

However on the positive side Samoa has so far successfully avoided a catastrophic situation that would certainly have arisen if Covid 19 spread among its population. Samoa's success at keeping Covid-19 at bay with zero transmission of the virus is directly attributable to effectiveness of the Covid-19 State of Emergency (SOE 2021) measures despite the cost to the economy. It has relied on effective leadership, cooperation between all government agencies, and public support. The core preventative measures have been tight regulation of the borders to prevent the virus from entering the country and effectively isolating the few who have come in. This meant almost complete close of borders seeking government approval prior to travel and limitation to essential travelling only. Based on the records so far, this strict and unique strategy is comparatively the best strategy at least at keeping the virus out of the country.

Hopefully Samoa's achievement will be rewarded with inclusion in New Zealand's 'travel bubble' before too long, but this may depend on how well Samoa's vaccination program, which began on April 18th 2021, achieves coverage. So far the number of eligible individuals that had received their first shot of the COVID-19 vaccine in Samoa is 32,399. (WHO 2021).

References

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