

Good news for the Pacific on COVID-19

by Stephen Howes and Sherman Surandiran

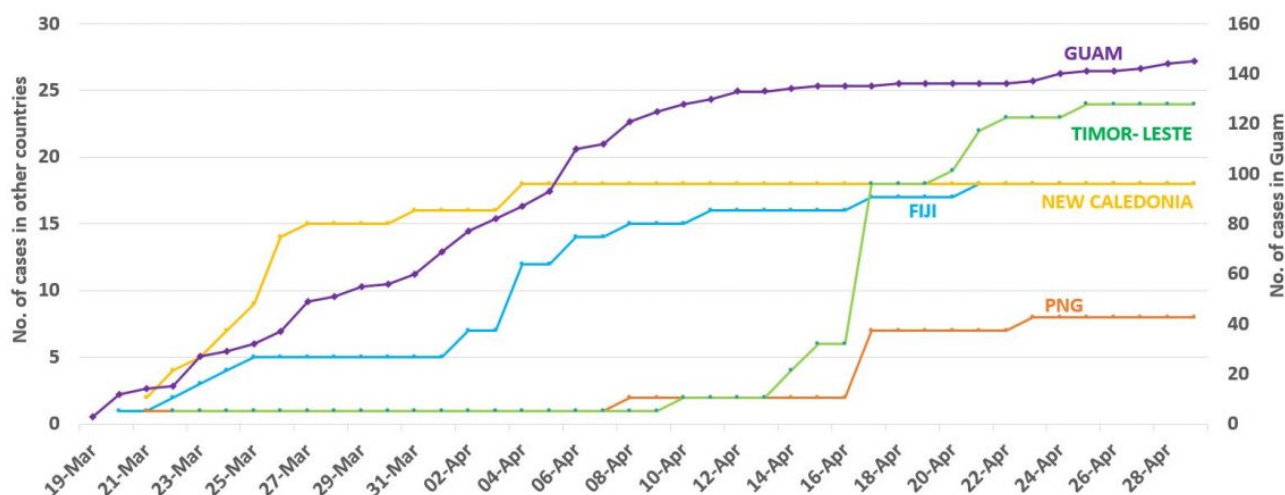
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(Credit: Nathan Hughes Hamilton/Flickr/ CC BY 2.0)

As the weeks go by, the COVID-19 health threat is starting to look less severe for the Pacific. Counting from April 29, the last confirmed case was 30 days ago in New Caledonia, 8 days ago in Fiji, 6 days ago in PNG, and 4 days ago in Timor-Leste. Cases continue to mount in Guam, but slowly. In the first week of April, cases almost doubled in Guam. The second week saw about 20 per cent more new cases and a handful of new cases were registered in each of the last two weeks. Other countries in the Pacific – Kiribati, Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu – remain COVID-19 free (at least in terms of confirmed cases).

Cumulative number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the Pacific and Timor-Leste

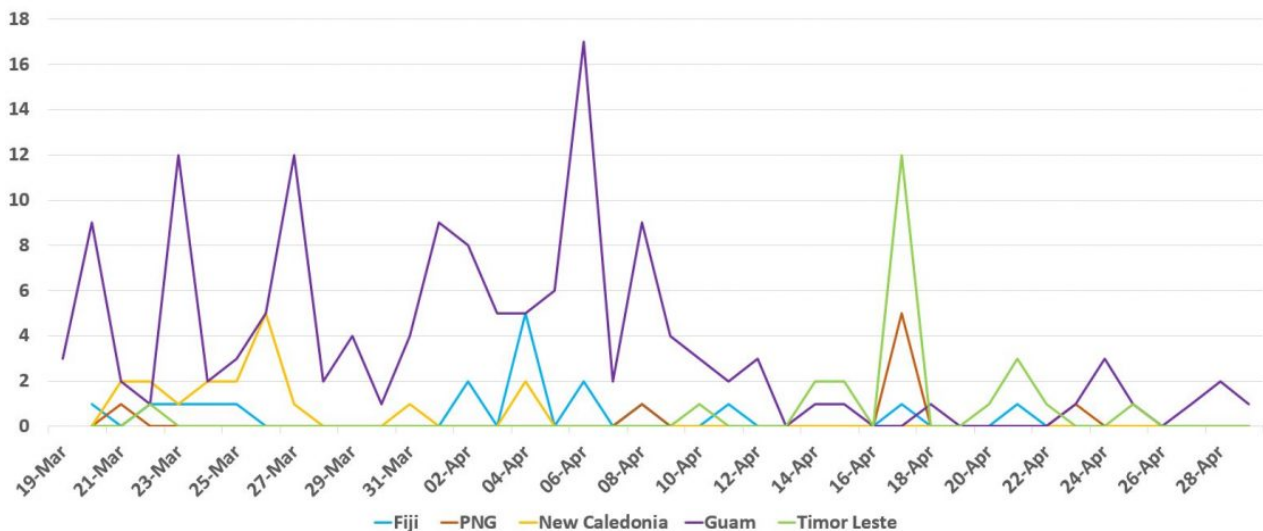


It is widely believed that with more testing there would have been more confirmed cases, but there is no evidence that testing effort has reduced over time.

To be sure, these countries are not out of the woods. There are particular concerns for PNG and Timor-Leste, in part because of their shared border with Indonesia, and due to unexplained transmission paths.

But things certainly look better than they did a couple of weeks ago. When cases in Timor-Leste increased from 6 to 18 on April 17, or in PNG from 2 to 7 on April 19, or in Fiji from 7 to 12 on April 4, there was naturally concern that, with the power of exponential growth, cases would soon be in the hundreds if not thousands. As the number of daily new cases reduced in size and frequency (diminishing spikes in the graph below), that looks less likely now. And the longer most countries go with no confirmed cases of COVID-19, the more likely it is that they indeed have none.

New confirmed COVID-19 cases in the Pacific



Why are things looking up? Prompt action to close international borders must have helped. So too the imposition of domestic lockdowns to varying degrees. There are some scientists who believe that COVID-19 is transmitted less in hot, humid climates, and there are also claims that Bacille Calmette-Guérin (BCG) vaccinations (for severe forms of tuberculosis in children) – more prevalent in developing than developed countries – provide some protection. These theories remain unproven ([link](#) and [link](#)).

Whatever the reasons, it is good news for the Pacific. Countries are already reacting by [easing lockdown restrictions](#). If the number of cases continues to stay at or revert to zero, the next step will be to end international isolation. That is where the idea of the [Trans-Pacific “bubble”](#) becomes important: relaxations of travel restrictions between Australia, New Zealand and low-infection-rate Pacific nations to promote both tourism and labour mobility.

Source for graphs and numbers: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus>. Data used for the two charts can be found [here](#). This post is part of the [#COVID-19 and the Pacific](#) series.

Author/s:**Stephen Howes**

Stephen Howes is Director of the Development Policy Centre and Professor of Economics at the Crawford School of Public Policy at The Australian National University.

Sherman Surandiran

Sherman Surandiran was a Research Officer at the Development Policy Centre until July 2021.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/good-news-for-the-pacific-on-covid-19-20200501/>