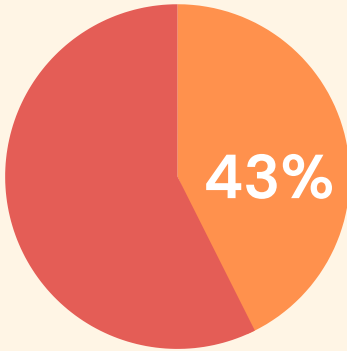


COVID-19 & POVERTY



81,052 people or 43% of the work force applied for Phase One Unemployment due to the COVID-19

RECESSION & UNEMPLOYMENT

Prior to COVID-19, many Belizeans already faced significant economic vulnerability, including income fluctuations and social exclusion. Almost a **third of households already live below the poverty line**. Most likely, COVID-19 will make this situation worse. The entire Caribbean region is expected to enter a deep recession due to declines in tourism. Working women will be especially vulnerable to this economic downturn as **80% of all Belizean female employment is in the service sector**.

The closure of hotels, restaurants, tour operations, and other businesses in the service and tourism sectors has already led to massive unemployment. Two unemployment relief programs are in effect. However, these programs suffer from bureaucratic hurdles, funding shortages, and technical problems. **Many Belizeans have found it difficult to access unemployment aid.**



FOOD SECURITY & SANITATION

Food insecurity has spiked in the Caribbean since the beginning of the pandemic. **Closing the borders caused interruptions in agricultural supply chains**. Additionally, farmers saw losses from disruption in export markets and declines in domestic spending. Many farmers were already experiencing unemployment and income loss due to drought last year.

There are **informal settlements** in both urban and rural Belize, most of which **lack running water and toilet facilities, making it harder to practice safe hygiene**. These Belizeans will face the greatest health risks from the pandemic.



FUNDING DEPLETION

Addressing the critical needs posed by poverty during the pandemic will require vast amounts of funding and resources. This expenditure, plus investments to build back damaged sectors after the pandemic, could potentially drain national resources. This will likely make it harder for national and local governments to respond to future challenges, such as droughts and hurricanes.

GUIDANCE

- Providing **basic emergency incomes** to people living in poverty must be prioritized, ideally complemented by an extension of **food provision services**. The Ministry of Human Development is working with UNICEF to expand the BOOST Cash Transfer Programme and implement a COVID-19 Food Assistance Programme, but additional borrowing and international support will likely be needed.
- The Ministry of Labour has said that **errors on applications** posed the greatest challenge for the government in processing the first phase of the Unemployment Relief Program. **Public education efforts** should be directed at raising awareness of how to correctly complete the application.
- One way to boost **national and regional tourism** could be done by prioritizing investment in **unique natural amenities and historical/cultural** sites that could be attractive to more visitors. Much of the current tourism is based around coastal areas, but **investing** in inland areas as well could help to bring an influx of spending to less visited areas. Additionally, investment in natural amenities offers the co-benefit of boosting climate resilience.
- In Belize City, **revitalization of the historical downtown** could boost local commerce and entertainment. This will make the area more enjoyable for both Belizeans and foreign tourists once the pandemic subsides.
- **Comprehensive planning** is suggested for a more sustainable tourism in the post COVID-19 pandemic era. The planners on housing, transportation, environmental protection, wetland preservation and other areas should coordinate better with each other, and aim to produce better comprehensive planning to improve the tourism and economy.

COVID-19 & OUR HEALTH



HUNGER & MALNUTRITION

Disruption of school programs and food access has increased financial burdens on families and can lead to increased malnutrition.

Even prior to the pandemic, **25% of Belizean households skipped meals**. Food insecurity contributes to malnutrition, and **15% of children under age 5 suffer from stunted growth**. As **food assistance programs are being interrupted due to COVID-19 closures**, families that depend on these programs will face increased vulnerability to food insecurity.



PRE-EXISTING CONDITIONS & NON-EMERGENCY CARE

Continuation of care for non-COVID and COVID patients will be a challenge during the pandemic.

Caring for COVID-19 patients effectively **isolates medical staff**, leaving them unable to care for other vulnerable groups, including pregnant women. Certain **underlying medical also increase the risk for severe illness from COVID-19**. However, many Belizean communities lack preventative care that could identify and address these conditions. **Access to family planning care** may be especially challenging for women during the pandemic. **Interruptions in supply may limit access to contraceptives**, and shortages may affect more than 1,500 women.



THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

A shortage of medical workers and supplies is taxing the health care system.

Out-migration of Belizean health care workers to the United States and other countries has created a **“brain drain” for the healthcare sector**. To address the pandemic, the health care system is **dependent on international cooperation to supply doctors**. The Caribbean region is also **dependent on imports for medical products** essential for treating COVID. The shortage of medical professionals is also hampering our goal to **expand continuous care and preventative screenings for non-communicable diseases**, which contributed to **67% of deaths in 2018**.



STAY-AT-HOME CHALLENGES

Sheltering-in-place can be a challenge for people with mental health concerns or who have unsafe housing.

Quarantining and self-isolating can **worsen mental health challenges** such as loneliness, depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. For some LGBTQ+ people, sheltering at home can be challenging or dangerous if they **face violence or ill-treatment** from unaccepting family members. **Indigenous people and LGBTQ+ communities are especially vulnerable** as they are more likely to live in **unsafe or low-grade housing**, and have **limited access to medical care and up-to-date information**.

GUIDANCE

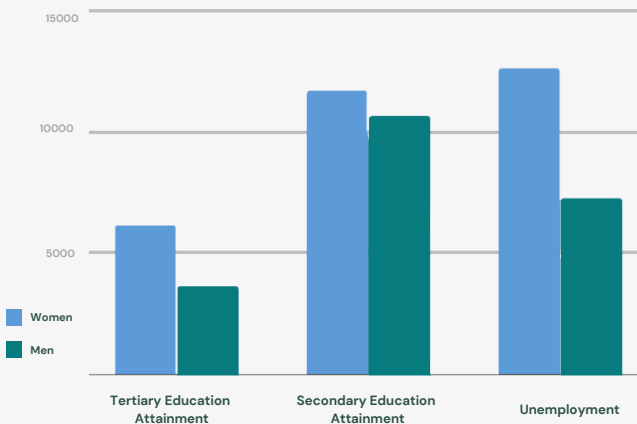
- To prevent the spread of COVID-19, **universal access to health care** must be ensured irrespective of gender, sexuality, or migratory status. Accessible health care also helps to **identify and address pre-existing conditions**.
- Public health and safety campaigns around **mask wearing, physical distancing, and hygiene** help to **reduce strain on health care systems**.
- **Identifying vulnerable populations** and especially clusters of vulnerable populations (e.g. informal settlements) can help to **target education, food, and basic supplies** to practice safe hygiene.
- **Non-governmental groups can mobilize** to help Belizeans stay informed and obtain funding about COVID-19, including how to protect themselves and how to access aid.
- **Resources and awareness for women**, including sexual and reproductive health services, must be prioritized to ensure safe family planning and proper nutrition for children. This must include access to information about breastfeeding and access to food.

COVID-19 & GENDER EQUALITY



SOCIAL GENDER ROLES

Even prior to COVID-19, the **unemployment rate for Belizean women was stubbornly high**. Much of this is linked to cultural expectations. Women are expected to serve as primary care providers. Even women who work outside the home often remain responsible for domestic duties. **Societal expectations when combined with the pandemic could increase the caregiving pressure on women.** Sheltering at home, school closures, and sick family members will add additional caregiving demands. This further limits the ability of women to access gainful employment.



ECONOMIC GENDER BIAS

Belizean women have higher educational attainment than men, yet they own less land, fewer businesses and have less access to credit. **This lack of traditional forms of collateral, combined with the demands of caregiving roles, decrease women's ability to start small businesses or microenterprises.** Men also far outnumber women in managerial positions and positions of power.

These disparities result in women being concentrated in positions that have less flexibility and that are more impacted by economic shocks. Physical distancing and lockdown measures will also decrease spending in the service sector, including tourism, which employs a high share of women.



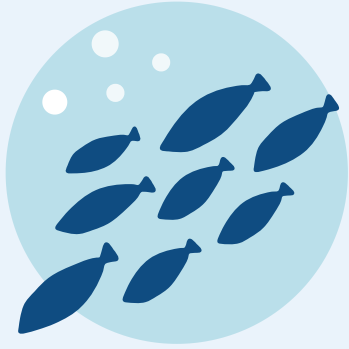
VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Women (and their children) who already face domestic violence or intimidation will be at greater risk if they are sheltering at home with their abusers. **Since the pandemic started domestic violence, femicide, and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence have increased throughout the Caribbean region.**

GUIDANCE

- Government and non-governmental organizations (including nonprofits and faith-based groups) should **increase social support structures** for women especially around issues such as accesses to childcare and job readiness support.
- **Special credit programs targeted at supporting women-owned businesses** will be necessary to help women overcome barriers to access to opportunity. These programs can offer credit enhancements like loan guarantees to help women find access to capital on the private markets. Belize has an economic development finance program called the Belize Rural Development Project (BRDP), this program could be adapted to support women in urban areas as well.
- Domestic violence prevention and awareness should be a priority of response and recovery efforts. **Reporting of domestic violence** should be reported and the laws that protect women from violence should be enforced. **Women-only safe shelter areas** should be set up that could be offered to women and children who do not have safe places to isolate during the pandemic.

COVID-19 & OUR OCEANS



ECOTOURISM & FISHERIES

Declines in hospitality and tourism are threatening the livelihoods of vulnerable fishers.

Belize's natural resources are intrinsically linked to its economy. **Ecotourism and fisheries have propelled conversation efforts, while also creating new jobs, and reducing poverty and hunger.** But COVID-19 may threaten the environmental strides Belize has made.

Fisheries are already suffering devastating income losses from the pandemic. Demand for seafood both locally and internationally has declined, and fishers are struggling to sell their catches. Many who work in this sector are already economically vulnerable. Fishers now face loss of income, hunger, and potential loss of housing, also of which increases COVID-19 exposure risk.



ECONOMIC LOSS & ENVIRONMENTAL ROLLBACKS

COVID-19 related economic losses could threaten environmental conservation and climate resilience.

Belize is seeing significant revenue loss in fishery exports and ecotourism. These losses could make it more difficult to continue or expand conservation programs, enforce regulations, or address emerging environmental issues. **Any rollback of environmental protections poses an additional threat to the economy.** In fact, Ambergris Caye was already seeing declines in ecotourism due to pollution and overcrowding *before* the pandemic.

Expenses related to recovery from the pandemic could also drain national funding away from climate resilience efforts. Adaptation projects, infrastructure upgrades, livelihood programs, and more could be delayed or neglected. Yet coastal areas like Belize City will remain highly vulnerable to climate change impacts. **Failure to address climate planning measures now could result in worse problems in the future.** This may include the collapse of water supply and sanitation systems, significant damage to homes or property, or the loss of lives.

GUIDANCE

- Fishers need to **diversify their livelihoods** so they can weather both the pandemic and future climate change. **Seaweed farming** represents one pathway for income diversification, but this alone is likely not enough. Fishers will need additional **education** and **job training**. Strengthening **fishing cooperatives**, particularly around issues of transparency and organizational capacity, can help ensure fishers have a strong voice in their own economy recovery.
- Sustainable development could provide a pathway for **accelerating economic recovery** after the pandemic. Public and private sector investments in **sustainable infrastructure**, access to **clean water** for all residents, and environmental services, such as **reforestation** or **eco-restoration**, could create jobs and co-benefits, including **improved public health**. Additionally, **integrating sustainability into the tourism sector** by strengthening environmental protections, as well as ensuring **social benefits** and **protections for workers**, will improve the sector's resiliency and economic recovery.
- **Climate resilience planning** will be critical post-pandemic. Many Belizeans will be especially vulnerable to extreme weather and other climate shocks as they recover from COVID-19 income losses. Protecting communities now will prevent greater spending in the future and can save lives. Ultimately, the UN estimates **the benefits of investing in climate-proofing outweigh the costs 4 to 1.**