

Coping with COVID-19

Worldwide we are all experiencing unsettling times with the emergence of COVID-19. This has had an unprecedented impact on our professional and personal lives. In an effort to bring the industry together and share some positive camaraderie, *IWP&DC* asked readers how they are coping through it all



Above: **Andrew Bird** says that the global community of resilient engineers can work together to battle this global issue

Below: **Ellan Campbell-Swann** says she has actually gained new clients since lockdown and, although nothing is ever going to be quite the same again, she not is giving up just yet!



Andrew Bird

Senior Hydropower Engineer, Asia Pacific Dams and Hydro Sector Leader at Stantec

A saying comes to me at this time that an extroverted engineer is an engineer who looks at the shoes of the person he is talking to rather than his own. Therefore, for those of us who do look at other people's shoes, lockdown time in 'self-isolation' is a hard time. I find myself craving human and colleagues' company as it is from their energy that I feed and this both inspires and motivates me to do a good job, and come up with innovations and ideas to win and deliver projects.

I have always disliked working from home. Some people find it more efficient, however I find it to be time consuming and lacking in excitement. I find myself having those 'coffee conversations' with everyone I Skype call rather than actually having a coffee and conversation with the same colleagues at the same time. As someone who has struggled with mental health issues over many years and battled through them, I feel the deepest sympathy for others, not only in the industry who are suffering at this time, but the many other millions over the world struggling with the effects of being deprived of the simple things such as a coffee with friends and colleagues or a drink after work in the sun.

We are lucky in New Zealand as our government took swift and decisive action, and it looks like we will be able to enjoy some of the social privileges we miss earlier than some other countries. Our leadership has been compassionate and gone with the line of 'be a good citizen' and 'we are a team of five million' which has really seen the citizens and residents of New Zealand pull together as one to battle COVID-19.

I feel proud to be part of that team, as well as my own in Stantec who has been on the front foot with good communication and putting in place measures to make sure people are looked after and the effects of the inevitable downturn in work over the lockdown period is reduced.

I accept my work will be impacted in the short term. The majority of my projects are overseas in highly vulnerable communities such as the Pacific Islands which we must protect from the impacts of COVID-19. My travel will be curtailed and I may miss Hydrovision 2020 this year at which I was supposed to speak on a panel about my passion - small hydro. We will have to see what travel restrictions are closer to the time, whether there are flights and what they cost and make a decision then. Perhaps with the new willingness to do things remotely I can join in via virtual conference which may be the new normal going forward.

Our mantra as engineers these days is resilience. This pandemic has shown how we, as a global community,

can work together to battle a global issue. We must take stock and learn these lessons to prevent such things occurring in the future and fight against other major global issues such as climate change.

A lesson learned is a lesson earned. Let's not sacrifice the heavy costs of this lesson and make the same mistakes again. ●

Ellan Campbell-Swann

Formed Sixty7 PR Ltd in 2013 after working for the British Hydropower Association for 10 years. She continues to work in the hydropower sector offering PR and marketing support

Life has certainly changed quite dramatically over recent weeks. Even before the official lockdown, we were all being forced to make decisions we weren't expecting to be making. As travel plans and other commitments fell by the wayside, many of us were relocating to hastily set up home offices, worrying about the health of our loved ones and facing some daunting financial prospects. Not to mention those who were suddenly hurled into home schooling their kids (not me, thankfully!).

I already worked from home, so this wasn't an issue for me, but a few weeks down the line my whole life has been affected. My business, the result of seven years of sacrifice and hard work, has changed almost beyond recognition, with all events and exhibition work dropping off a cliff. And as a director of a small business, I'm one of the many that feel they are slipping through the cracks with no real lifeline from the UK Government. I've lost clients and trusted suppliers and I've watched colleagues and friends lose their jobs or become furloughed, unable to do anything but sit and wait. The first few weeks were full of fear and a pretty rocky ride for all of us, but we've had to adjust and accept this is how it is right now - for everyone.

But I've still so much to be grateful for. With many businesses now having time to do all those jobs that usually get put to the bottom of the pile when the pace of commercial life was so fast and furious, I'm now finding that my marketing services are in greater demand and I've actually gained new clients since lockdown. I've also started collaborating with other businesses whose offerings complement mine and we've been hosting weekly online business support discussion panels that have quickly gained momentum with a growing number of participants. And I've been forced to overcome my ridiculous fear of cameras and now spend hours in Zoom meetings as well as offering my workshops online (something I talked about doing for months but never quite got round to).

It's true that nothing is ever going to be quite the same again as we adapt to a new way of life, but everyone I

have spoken to has expressed a fondness for the quieter pace of life and I think we've all learned to appreciate and value many things we used to take for granted. I'm not saying it's easy - I really don't know what will happen to my business and I worry constantly about how or if I'm going to keep it afloat. But I still have my health, I live in a beautiful part of the country with lots of country walks on my doorstep, the weather has been kind to us, the birds are singing and the air is clean, so I'm not giving up just yet! ●

Tammy Chu
Managing Director of Entura

Life certainly has changed in recent months. At Entura we're (mainly) working from home, but we're keeping our projects moving and our spirits up.

As part of the Hydro Tasmania Group, we have robust protocols and plans for keeping our people safe and maintaining business continuity. Our incident management teams meet daily to monitor the evolving situation, keep communication flowing and respond appropriately.

We have offices in Australia (Hobart and Melbourne) and India (New Delhi) and people in Laos and the Philippines, so we are already well set up and practised in remote working and virtual teaming. We're now applying these same technologies and methods to communicate with the colleagues and clients we'd usually see face-to-face.

Many of us have found that this has enabled more personal and deeper connections, as we see each other's home workstations, pets, slippers (!) and even family members. The sense of 'being in this together' has positively affected many of our relationships with our clients and across the business as we pull together with a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose.

The integration of home life and work life isn't easy for everyone, though, so we are providing as much support to our people as possible, with daily wellbeing checks, increased communication, and support information. Personally, I'm just finding it hard to get enough exercise now that I'm not walking around the office, so I have to check that my buttons still do up!

A particular challenge for our business is the inability to travel interstate or internationally at present; however, we are finding innovative and productive solutions, and we're seeing great communication, flexibility and problem-solving. We're maintaining and increasing our level of communication with our clients and each other, and we are sensing a strong appetite for this increased connectivity. Together with our clients, we're scrutinising existing and upcoming projects to determine whether any components can be rescheduled so that desktop activities can progress. We're also partnering with local clients to continue their projects close to home. We're finding ways to share site information via photographs, video or drone footage where an onsite presence isn't possible, and, of course, where the risks of any information loss are manageable. Although some of these ideas may seem straightforward, their practical implementation is anything but.

Our business is also starting to consider how life and work might look as restrictions ease. We're inviting our people to contribute their ideas so we can manage that transition in a way that continues to keep everyone safe but also capitalises on what we've gained through

this experience. It will be interesting to see whether we continue embracing more flexible working conditions, and whether we maintain a lower level of travel by embedding the approaches we've practised during this time.

Although current circumstances aren't easy, there is every reason to remain optimistic and maintain our momentum and achievements. I'm proud to be part of a team that is rolling with the challenges and getting on with the job. ●

Madeline Cowley
Project Manager, Bombora Wave Power

Based at Bombora's European Head Office in Pembroke Dock, West Wales, I am responsible for the management of the 1.5MW mWave Pembrokeshire Demonstration Project, part funded by ERDF through the Welsh Government.

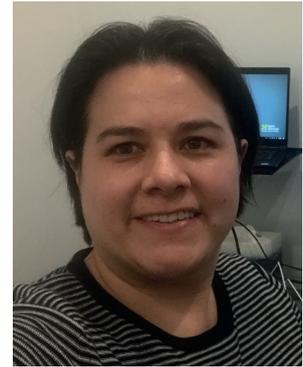
Bombora identified Coronavirus as a project risk in January. In the weeks running up to the lockdown the management team put in place COVID-19 policies and our 26 employees prepared for remote working. Wifi connections were checked and boosters supplied where necessary. When the lockdown finally came at the end of March, the team transitioned quickly. With home-working already a practised arrangement for many of Bombora's staff, we were well adept at video conferencing day-to-day, making the process of staying connected remarkably smooth.

With the safety of staff and logistics taken care of as a priority, the management team were able to focus in the first weeks on risk assessment, scenario modelling and ensuring the company could weather the financial implications of a prolonged period of lockdown. As a pre-revenue company we were not eligible for the initial government support packages. However, ongoing communication and guidance from the Development Bank of Wales and Welsh Government have been instrumental to our planning.

There has also been significant co-operation from our global supply chain to navigate a clear path through this uncertain time together. Where possible, components have been relocated from suppliers' premises across the UK and Europe to our fabrication and assembly workshops in Pembroke Dock. This will enable a speedy return to the assembly of our 1.5MW mWave once the necessary health and safety risk assessments and mitigations have been implemented and work commences again in workshops.

The company has been carefully monitoring staff wellbeing, listening to feedback and implementing flexible arrangements to accommodate the new world we find ourselves in. As well as human resources keeping a check, we are fortunate to have always had a dedicated group of staff volunteers focused on activities to develop and enhance 'Bombora Team Culture'. These colleagues have done a great job in boosting morale and have introduced some new initiatives to keep us connected. We have turned to social media style App Yammer to post daily quiz questions and challenges, both mental and physical. There is a Bombora group on Strava to encourage us to stay healthy. Personally, I'm enjoying the fact that I can use the time I save on commuting to cycle or run instead.

We run a Friday 'Lunch & Learn' 30-minute session entitled 'Something to Chew On' which is always ●



Above: Entura's Managing Director, Tammy Chu, says a sense of 'being in this together' has positively affected many client relationships across the business as everyone pulls together with a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose

Below: Madeline Cowley says that Bombora Team Culture in Wales has been flourishing through lockdown imposed by the Covid-19





Above: **Craig Emmett** says that he is really impressed with how the whole business has handled Covid-19, particularly on the frontlines

Below: **Simon Kidston** says he cannot stress enough how important it is to prioritise mental health, particularly during these uncertain times



good fun. Bombora staff are encouraged to share their knowledge and passion for all the interesting things that they get up to when not building a Wave Energy Converter. So far, we've had a talk on goats, the history of Pembroke Dock and another on Welsh rugby! I hope we keep this going post-lockdown.

All these initiatives help fill the gap until we can be back in the office together again, despite returning to work with a DIY haircut, it is a day I am very much looking forward to. ●

Craig Emmett

Operations General Manager for Hydro Tasmania

As if working in self-isolation wasn't enough, imagine suddenly finding yourself in the middle of one of the strictest coronavirus regional lockdowns that your country and company has seen. This was the situation I found myself in.

Australia is an island nation, which has helped to spare the country from some of the coronavirus's impacts. This isolation has also protected Tasmania, which is Australia's island state to the south of the mainland. But in April 2020, Tasmania's north-west became a coronavirus hot spot and the region went into strict lockdown, which included my hometown of Devonport.

This was an enormous change for a man who was previously a weekly traveller from one end of Tasmania to the other, including frequent flights to surrounding islands.

I've spent the best part of 12 years working remotely. I've had at least two to three nights a week away from home. I saw myself as a COVID-19 risk to our site teams if I was to be moving between geographical operational areas, so now it's full time at home.

However, my roaming work life has actually helped me. The operations that I lead are quite widespread geographically and in some ways this has proven to be an advantage for our group, as we had been using phone and video conferencing pre-coronavirus.

It's been great how our business has responded and how the technology has kept up with it. There was previously some reluctance on the uptake of this technology, as face-to-face communication by senior managers was preferred, but now everyone has just embraced it, which is a real positive.

However, I do feel pretty flat after a full day of video conferencing. Early on, it was like 10 hours a day of video conferencing as everyone got used to operating in a COVID-19 environment.

Thanks to the fast and effective application of Hydro Tasmania's pandemic plan, coronavirus has not impacted Tasmania's energy security. In fact, there may even be benefits to the organisation which will emerge over time.

We are working very differently now, with smaller teams, social distancing, hygiene and a lot of controls in place. More paperwork is being done electronically and meetings are on video rather than face-to-face. I've actually been really impressed with how the whole business has handled it, particularly on the frontlines.

The most severe lockdown restrictions in North West Tasmania have since begun to ease, but still I've barely stepped outside of my house for over nine weeks. I am lucky though to own a couple of acres of land where I can enjoy time with my wife and young children.

We had three months together as a family in our caravan last year touring Australia and the kids have commented a few times that at least our house is a lot bigger than a caravan! ●

Simon Kidston

Executive Director of Genex Power Limited

It does not matter whether you work in a bar, hotel, café or office, everyone's working life has been affected by this virus and impacted the way we work – one way or another. Genex has implemented a compulsory working from home policy with the office only available to employees on a one by one basis. This means that all business meetings are now held via Zoom, (which I wish I was a shareholder of pre COVID-19!) and means meetings can be run more efficiently and removes annoyances such as travel time and costs.

We have also implemented daily management calls to discuss key updates across the business and ensure we are staying on task. All staff have responded well to new working environments and the business has continued as usual with COVID-19 presenting no major impacts to Genex.

I am based in the Sydney head office but Genex and UGL are still performing business as usual at our 50MW Kidston solar farm site at our remote site in far north Queensland. Genex has implemented a policy to restrict visitors to the site and accommodation facilities such that only essential personnel approved by Arran McGhie, Genex Power's Chief Operations Officer, are permitted. Construction continues at our Jemalong solar project located near Forbes, New South Wales. Our EPC Contractor, BEON, is following all state and federal government directions to ensure the safety and health of employees on site.

As a company our travel has been severely impacted by COVID-19. For example, I had several business trips planned which to date have all been cancelled or postponed. All the conferences I had lined up for 2020 have been cancelled or postponed. Fortunately, due to current technology, a lot of these conferences are aiming to take place virtually. With reference to meetings, the transition to virtual meetings has been seamless and stress free and I have not experienced any cancellations of meetings due to COVID-19.

Like most people I do have concerns for the future. While there is no vaccine available at the moment, there is always a risk that transmission rates will significantly jump when people start emerging from their homes and returning to work. Until there is a working vaccine distributed, it is imperative that people follow the social distancing rules to reduce the risk of spread.

Of course, there are positives to the current situation. To name a few, we have seen air and water quality dramatically improve in areas that have implemented shutdowns. There have been drops in emissions and the demand for coal and oil is lower than it has been in a long time which is largely due to the decline in demand and slowdown in manufacturing worldwide.

I am coping well. Some days are overwhelming, with the kids being home schooled and my wife and I both working from home. It is nice to be home more often – the cabin fever hasn't completely kicked in yet.

There have been numerous articles published about the benefits of working from home. Not only does it decrease emissions from a reduction in transport to ●



Above: **Bayardo Materón lives in Brazil. He has had to quarantine in his home but has been able to work virtually**

Below: **Rachel Pether carrying out an internal inspection of a service reservoir during happier times. Whilst reservoir safety inspections are classed as essential works and are therefore continuing, additional safeguards have been required to keep individuals safe and prevent the spread of Covid-19**



and from work, but it has also been shown to increase work-life balance. Parents can spend time with their kids, exercise more and enjoy their own personal hobbies which in turn results in an increase in job satisfaction. If anything, this situation has forced companies to acknowledge the benefits of working from home whether they are financial, environmental and/or mental.

I cannot stress enough how important it is to prioritise mental health, particularly during these uncertain times. With unemployment rates exceeding 10% nationwide, it is expected people's mental health will take a toll as many are now struggling to put food on the table, pay mortgages and school fees. I encourage anyone who is feeling overwhelmed or experiencing signs of anxiety and depression to not suffer in silence. Reach out to your loved ones.

I am looking forward to returning to the office and working in a 'team' environment. While Zoom and other video conferencing platforms do well at bringing people together, they cannot mimic being in the office, with a group of people collectively working towards a goal.

I believe it is important to not be too hard on yourself during this unique time. These are difficult times for everyone. It is okay to have days where you feel down, unmotivated, and generally overwhelmed – just know you are not alone and there are always people who will help if you reach out. ●

Bayardo Materón Hydro and Rockfill Consultant

As a consultant for the design and construction of rockfill dams, I have had to participate in "virtual" meetings working at home because the mandatory quarantine imposed as a preventive measure for COVID-19.

I currently live in the city of San Pablo, Brazil, where the coronavirus has spread in an uncontrolled way, affecting more than 130,000 contaminated people in a period of two months and causing deaths today that exceed 3000 people in the city.

As a consequence of this sad record and due to my age, it has been necessary to remain at home in rigorous quarantine conditions – but without abandoning my work as I have been able to participate virtually in advising various projects in various countries.

I am still a member of consultant boards and during these two critical months we have had virtual meetings of advisors. We have been working with the simultaneous participation of distinguished professionals from different countries, including Spain, France, Switzerland, Germany, Argentina, Chile, the US and Brazil. Taking advantage of the technological advances in communications, it has been possible by teleconference to obtain positive results in recommendations for projects in design and construction.

The impact of COVID-19 has produced noticeable changes in the air transport industry, affecting previously programmed plans to other countries or localities and forcing the countries where works are being carried out, to define and decree new foreign entry rules to control the penetration and expansion of the virus.

I have heard of colleagues who had scheduled a meeting in a South American country at the beginning of March, but the members of a European board of consultants had to plan a hasty return to their countries of origin so as not to be held in a hotel indefinitely

during lockdown. With each member safe at home, they virtually communicated about the work and were able to generate a final report with positive recommendations.

Although virtual meeting procedures have their advantages, since they reduce costs of mobilisation and food with accommodation, they are currently incomplete due to the lack of visual site inspections which help to recommend solutions.

It is possible to see that in the near future, photographic cameras and the tele-video and video-conference media will progress in such a way that it will be possible to participate in the progress of the works, virtually, with positive results taking advantage of the experience of professionals who due to their age have had the privilege of participating in various works. ●

Rachel Pether Director of Water Utilities and an All Reservoirs Panel Engineer at Black & Veatch

As both an All Reservoirs Panel Engineer and a leader in Black & Veatch's Consultancy business in the UK, my working life usually involves a lot of travel, to B&V and client offices, and also construction and operational sites. At Black & Veatch we are doing everything we can to support the effort to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and so almost all of my time is now spent working from home, with many virtual meetings to stay connected with colleagues and clients.

Reservoir safety remains a priority however, and so my team and I continue to carry out reservoir inspections, having put in place social distancing and other COVID-19 related control measures for these visits. I am tremendously proud of the way that our team has responded to this challenge and grateful for the excellent support that Black & Veatch is providing to all of our professionals who are still carrying out essential work in the field.

As a manager I am very conscious of the mental strain that the current situation is placing on individuals. I myself have three primary school aged children and so my husband and I are now home-schooling alongside our fulltime jobs. I know that this is the reality for many people in the UK and beyond right now. Some colleagues are either shielding or supporting friends and family who are in this situation, and sadly some have already faced the devastating loss of a loved one to COVID-19. I am a strong believer in offering flexibility and choice to professionals and having trust in my team. I think at this extremely difficult time, it is the only viable approach to enable each of us to manage our personal and professional commitments whilst also trying to be mindful of the mental and physical impact that events are having on our own wellbeing.

As part of my reservoir safety role I normally make regular overseas trips to inspect reservoirs, but so far this year I have had to cancel two trips, with a further trip later in the year also looking tentative at this stage. Whilst discussing these trips I was inspired to learn from colleagues in our Hong Kong and Singapore offices that the Chinese symbol for 'crisis' consists of two characters, one of which means a problem or danger, and the other a chance to change or an opportunity. Together the symbols can give the idea of a turning point and the possibility of either changing a bad thing to good, or conversely the danger of loss, depending on how we resolve the problem. I think this is very true of the current

situation and it will be a real test of character, both for individuals and also for companies, in the way that we choose to respond and support both our clients and colleagues at this time. As the saying goes, 'this too shall pass' and I look forward to happier times for all of us in the future. ●

Martijn Proos

Director at Ninety One, the managers of the London-based Emerging Africa Infrastructure Fund (EAIF)

For me lockdown is being spent in my native Zeeland in The Netherlands, seeing out the crisis with my wife and children. My normal life is divided between my home in London, Ninety One's London HQ and frequent travel to Africa. The virus crisis means that I have been at home for longer than any time since I began working in London in 2008. Spending time with the family has been fun and very rewarding. In times of great worry across the world it is good to be with loved ones and in the comfortable and familiar surroundings of home.

Often I pack my bag on Sunday nights to fly to Cape Town, Lagos or Kigali. Not that the pattern of my new life has been a challenge of filling time. The very opposite. I am fantastically busy with work.

When COVID-19 brought lockdown across Europe, my colleagues and I were just starting to get familiar with working for a business that had been floated off from the Investec group and changed its name from Investec Asset Management to Ninety One. We had just completed the process of communicating the change and what it meant, spending a lot of time with EAIF's parent organisation, the Private Infrastructure Development Group (PIDG), when lockdown arrived.

With lockdown came wall to wall digital meetings. EAIF has over 42 projects in over 18 African countries. Most are fully operational and include hydro, solar and thermal power plants, ports, telecom companies and fertiliser plants. Some are under construction; hydro and solar plants, affordable housing and a water treatment and supply plant. We have been in regular touch with all our borrowers and other project stakeholders to assess the potential impact of any interruption to business continuity.

Infrastructure, particularly in the energy, water, telecommunications and food supply sectors is essential to the management of the coronavirus crisis. Helping maintain vital services not only supports public health and wellbeing, it also underpins economic and social stability. Apart from looking to help with corporate financial matters where we can, we have also worked with a number of our clients to help find funds to pay for personal protection equipment for employees and nearby communities. Minimising the spread of COVID-19 is another key element of keeping essential infrastructure operating. PIDG has been leading from the front with clear strategies and clear messaging. We all now know each other better than ever. That will have lasting business benefits when the crisis recedes.

"Crisis management" has been just one part of the digital conferencing world. Business goes on. In late May we won a joint mandate to raise the debt funding for a new hydropower plant in Kenya. We work across nine infrastructure sectors and currently have projects moving towards signature or financial close in agribusiness, hydro and solar plants,

telecommunications and public services. Our new business pipeline is in pretty good shape.

In the 12 years I've been involved with the Emerging Africa Infrastructure Fund I've built great friendships among colleagues at Ninety One and in many companies across Africa. Together we are part of building greater economic stability and resilience in Africa. We are foot soldiers in the great battle to fight poverty. I'm looking forward to seeing my friends and colleagues again. I'm looking forward to being again a small cog in building new infrastructure and new futures. ●

Stephen O. Simmons

Kiawah Consulting Group in the US

My consulting practice focuses on segments in the engineering and construction industry, on the environmental side of the business. My experience in this period is that business has changed substantially, as my clients and colleagues all work remotely, rather than with their teams in the offices of their businesses. Fortunately, technology has allowed the businesses to be sustained remotely, to a substantial extent. Interestingly, a phone conversation will usually start with those that I may have never met before, talking for a few minutes about their own personal difficulties they encounter in getting their jobs done, which runs into managing kids that are home from school, and spouses similarly trying to get it all done at once.

Travel, as we know it, has ended for now, as far as we once knew it. It is gone; Zoom video meetings are routine. A conference of business executives I was scheduled to attend in March, as the COVID-19 epidemic began to take root, was postponed, but a video chat opened to all registered participants was still conducted. To kick the chat off focused on the immediate impact of COVID-19 on business in the short run. The conference is now rescheduled for about six months.

One of my colleagues in a big design firm is working on a water power project in Pakistan. He recounted to me a few weeks ago the effort to get folks that were on site back to their home countries, through a tangled web of airports where flights were disappearing from schedules by the minute. Those engineers were said to rather have stayed on site, but for their own safety, still had to return to their home locations. They asked why can't we just stay and work? It might it have been safer.

As for the future, it is hard to predict, as we are beginning to see certain sectors open up in the economy. The unanswered question is will economic activity continue to pick up? Can it be done safely? And how much political jockeying will occur as we move forward with a mix of science, politics and the need to sustain global economies on a worldwide basis? The global economies should not be allowed to drift to a level that will cause lasting damage that negates growth for a substantial period of time.

Many, in this short period of time, have found it overwhelming. The positives that emerge include professionals that are learning to work efficiently from home and adapt to technology that contributes to efficiency. Travel will likely become way more efficient as those that need to travel to meet, may use technology more often and digital applications that serve the need to discuss what business needs to be done.

Positive mental wellbeing is so important and has ▶



Above: **Martijn Proos is looking forward to seeing his friends and colleagues again, and being a small cog in building new infrastructure and new futures**

Below: **Stephen Simmons believes that the positives to emerge from this crisis include learning to work efficiently from home and adapting to new technology**





Above: **The Tina River Hydro project is in the Solomon Islands, one of the only countries in the world with no active cases of COVID-19** (at the time of writing)

to be recognised by those that interact, supervise and lead their colleagues. No one knows what is going on in a colleague’s mind in their home office, so tread lightly, share stories or anecdotes that display empathy for your co-workers, clients and their families. Consulting is personal, take it seriously so that we can all get to the end of this epidemic and feel the successes of camaraderie. ●

Tina River Hydro Development Project

Currently being developed in the Solomon Islands and is set to become the largest hydropower scheme in the Pacific region. Project Communications Consultant, Sarina Laurence, gives an insight into how COVID-19 is affecting work there

At the time of writing, the Solomon Islands is one of the only countries in the world with no active cases of COVID-19. However, the SIG (Solomon Island Government) has declared a state of emergency with various restrictions now in place in preparation for a possible case. These restrictions have not affected the work zones of the project.

The TRHPD project has engaged teams of experts from around the globe who deliver various consulting and partnership services. Our two main construction partners are companies from South Korea. At the time of the pandemic, these partners already had the vast majority of skilled workers mobilised for the first stage of construction and were living in Honiara. The COVID-19 global travel restrictions have meant that the consultants who commute as required are currently unable to complete these trips and are doing as much as possible via virtual meetings and correspondence.

On 25 February 2020, the Ministry of Commerce, Industries, Labour and Immigration along with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services of the Solomon Islands Government issued the Joint Travel Advisory No.2 which restricts persons from Restricted Countries, including South Korea, to enter the Solomon Islands to prevent the wide spread of corona virus. This meant that our construction partner and its subcontractor personnel were quarantined at Brisbane for 14 days but eventually made it to Honiara as there were still flights between Honiara and Brisbane. The project continued to progress with personnel available in Honiara and also remotely by consultants and experts offering their expert advice through virtual conferencing and connecting with colleagues already located in Honiara. Teams are set to be dispatched as soon as possible once the pandemic situation improves and international trips and entry to Solomon Islands is allowed.

As of the end of March, there was no impact on the critical path of the project due to the COVID-19 situation, but if it lasts more than several months, it will have an effect on commencement of commercial operation of the Tina River Hydropower Development Project. Nevertheless, the project is using all reasonable efforts to minimise the effect of the event consistent with good industry practices, such as the identification of alternative staff in Solomon Islands and adjustment of the schedule of shipping for construction equipment.

The project office team consist of local staff in Honiara who are able to continue to work in the city office and on site at this stage. The team also consists of international consultants based in Australia who continue to be able

to perform their duties remotely without any impact.

It is business as usual on site with the construction teams mobilised and work underway on the first component of the project. Local labour makes up the majority of the unskilled workforce required for the current construction and of the skilled labour force needed, the majority of them were already deployed to the Solomons and where residing in the country when the pandemic occurred.

Several important meetings have had to be cancelled because the required personnel could not fly into the country. Some of them continued as virtual meetings and others have been postponed until travel restrictions have been lifted.

There are always concerns with the unknown. At the moment, procurement of goods and services is our major concern if the travel restrictions continue past 2020 as the project partners can claim Force Majeure due to the imposed travel restriction and delay to the proposed commercial operation date which will incur additional cost to the overall project cost.

The project office has also been working closely with the relevant ministry and the SIG on solutions past the current construction phase of the workers’ camp and forward planning for construction of the access road, if travel restrictions continue past 2020.

Looking to the future our main concern is the termination of the project if the pandemic situation continues for more than a year. Terminating the project will result in a lot of rearrangement and may result in incurring additional cost to project parties. Also, the SIG and the people of the islands will be denied the opportunity of having access to clean and cheaper electricity.

There are fears around the Solomon Islands about not being well equipped to handle any COVID-19 cases. The general public are concerned, including our local team, and uncertain about the potential impacts of the pandemic. In saying this, our team are staying positive and looking ahead. Tina Hydro is even more important to the people of the Solomon Islands now; to bring hope for a brighter future.

In addition, it is great to see the lenders on the project, such as the World Bank, remaining consistently focussed on supporting Tina, even though their attention is divided by what is urgent (COVID-19) and what is important (Tina) for the future of the Solomon Islands. Although some scenarios around the broader project concepts have had to be postponed for the time being due to overwhelming workload demands, all parties involved have managed to be able to control the impact of the situation so as to not yet directly affect project deliverables.

One of the lessons we have learnt here is the ability of the team to remain focused and continue to work together in these challenging times. The use of appropriate communication technology such as the internet and utilising work programmes such as Microsoft Team is making it almost like the entire project team is in one place and the same office.

However, the team relies on the face to face input of international consultants, partners and lenders who travel frequently to the project providing valuable on the ground support. When the travel restrictions are lifted, this will be a welcome return to the norm and we will have on the ground support from our international team in Honiara. ●