

SUNNY CITIES:

Urbanization in the South Pacific

UTKATU NAIKER, NAIKER ASSOCIATES PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT,
CONSULTANTS IN URBAN & REGIONAL PLANNING, HOUSING, LAND POLICIES

THE ISLAND STATES OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC region covering Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia, lying at the eastern extremity of the Asia-Pacific region, account for a population of some 6.85 million. Their efforts to play a more significant role in the region and be part of the global economy are hampered by serious economic, environmental, and social constraints.

The limitations of economic development include the narrow resource base, limited domestic revenue generating capacity, small domestic markets, prohibitive distance from larger markets, high degree of dependence on external assistance and imports, the prominence of the public sector as a source of employment, and vulnerability to external shocks. The environmental dangers facing many Pacific island states include the high level of population growth in the larger countries, the precarious balance between population growth and land capacity in the atoll islands, the danger of rising sea-levels, strains on the coastal ecology from urban settlements, and disaster mitigation against cyclones, earthquakes, floods and droughts. In particular, population densities in some localized atolls are among the highest in the world, a circumstance with dire ecological consequences of its own.

A further trend, cutting across economic and environmental issues, and encompassing cultural, social and political development, is that of growing urbanization of the South Pacific populations. Throughout the region there is a movement of the population from the rural areas to the towns and cities, caused partly by the promotion of industrial development, centralization of the government bureaucracy and the growing service sector. Table 1 indicates a clear transition from a predominantly rural to a predominantly urban South Pacific.

URBAN DETRIORATION

Urbanization is a recent phenomenon for all the is-

land states of the South Pacific where governments, which in most countries are based on traditional leadership systems, have been slow to provide the appropriate institutional responses for managing the transition from living in villages to living in towns. Many Pacific capitals are primary cities, being substantially larger than the next largest city. In Fiji, metropolitan Suva population is four times larger than Lautoka and continues to attract three times more growth. In most of the urban settlements in the Pacific there is growing need for water supply, sanitation, waste management and transportation as well as the social infrastructure items such as employment opportunities, housing, schooling, health and crime prevention. Furthermore, people's expectations are rising and conditions that were adequate in the past are now considered unsatisfactory.

HOUSING PROBLEMS

One of the main physical manifestations of urbanization in the Pacific is the haphazard development of urban housing for the poor. Governments in the South Pacific have addressed this growing need with different types of public housing programs but their efforts are constrained by the scarce supply of secure land for development and insufficient financial resources to meet the high initial standards for service infrastructure.

Housing market mechanisms are not functioning even though the demand for affordable housing is increasing. The absence of security of tenure, which normally provides collateral or security for a housing loan, inhibits the development of housing finance mechanisms that could cater to different affordability levels. Therefore the building industry does not generate the level of employment opportunities that it is usually capable of. Subsidies granted on rental housing for the poor have been discontinued in Fiji and Papua New Guinea due to the need for financial sustainability of public housing programs. Conse-

quently the urban poor are left to seek their own solutions.

In most countries up to 70% of the urban population cannot afford the minimum cost of legal housing. Consequently the poor make individual arrangements with the customary landowners on affordable terms but without security of tenure. Thus the incentive for making permanent investment on shelter is absent. This has led to the development of informal or squatter settlements, often located on marginal lands such as stream banks, mangroves, flood prone areas, hill slopes and lands otherwise unsuitable for development. Families live in overcrowded conditions with difficult access to water, transportation and other services. In Suva there are over 30 such settlements and in Port Moresby almost half the population is believed to be living in informal settlements. In some towns the authorities have evicted such settlers, thus negating the economic and social investment that the poor have made in improving their living conditions.

CONCENTRATED SOCIAL PROBLEMS

The traditional leadership system which holds communities together in the villages is largely absent in urban settings. The traditional social value systems which ensured mutual assistance and the family based authoritative systems which maintained accepted norms of behavior are ineffective in the towns. Consequently, with the separation of family members between villages and towns and the loss of traditional social and economic "safety-nets," there is a growing incidence of domestic violence, divorce

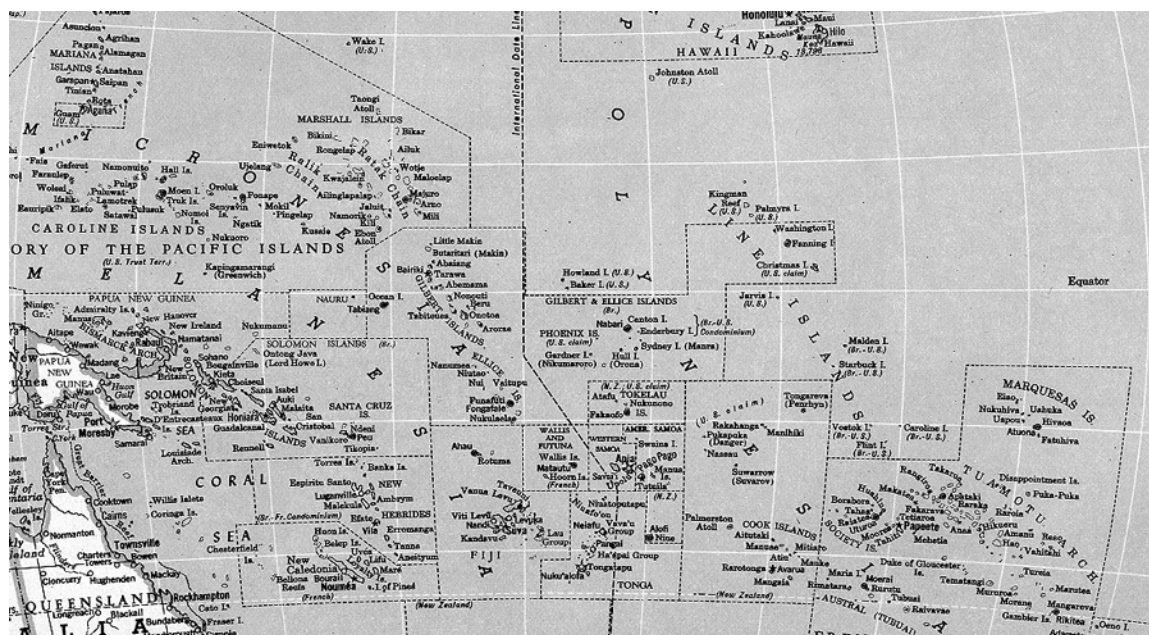
and single parent families and crime. The urban youth find themselves in a difficult situation of having to adjust to traditional and modern systems simultaneously.

Unemployment is one of the major social manifestations of urbanization in Pacific towns. Government bureaucracies have limited capacity for employment generation and various economic constraints continue to limit the expansion of the private sector. Youth unemployment is rising rapidly throughout the region. Up to one third of the urban population is seeking work in Port Moresby and some 69% of the unemployed men are known to be living through crime.

The informal sector has some potential for labor absorption but operates in contravention of many central and local government legislation and procedures. Improvements may come from the economic reform measures being implemented by several governments in the region assisted by the Asian Development Bank.

The transition from a rural village to a city cuts families off from rural food supply sources. It also means a change from a subsistence economy to a monetary one. While there is no absolute poverty in the rural areas, generally the incidence of absolute poverty has become prevalent in many of the larger cities in the Pacific. It was estimated that in Fiji in the mid-1990s a quarter of all households were below the poverty line, with the majority of those being in the urban areas.

The urban poor have to counter new health problems. Limited opportunities for urban agricul-



ture in the larger cities result in low nutrition levels among the poor. In the Marshall islands overcrowded accommodation in some densely populated atolls has led to respiratory illnesses. In Tarawa outbreaks of gastro-intestinal diseases and hepatitis are believed to have been caused by inadequate sanitation. Child mortality rates are high in a number of the larger countries.

INSUFFICIENT INFRASTRUCTURE

Insufficient financial resources is a major cause urban infrastructure such as roads, water supply, sewerage, solid waste disposal, and electricity supplies not meeting the needs of the growing urban populations. However, local management issues, including the limited capacity for maintenance and a reluctance to adopt user-pay policies, are also critical. An improvement in the infrastructure management practices could facilitate the inflow of development assistance funds.

Fortunately, most countries are well endowed with water resources, but with increasing urbanization, the level of water consumption is gradually rising. The importance of conserving water resources, however, is not fully appreciated in the region. The atoll towns in Kiribati and Tuvalu have limited water resources and water lenses are often polluted.

Inadequate disposal of human waste is one of the more serious environmental problems in the Pacific. Only 25% of the population of Metropolitan Suva and about 11% of the urban population of Papua New Guinea are served by adequate sewerage treatment facilities. Surface pollution from septic tanks in planned suburbs and pit latrines in squatter settlements cause serious public health problems. Ocean outfalls are used for sewage disposal in Honiara and South Tarawa, Kiribati. The lagoons beside Fanga'uta in Tonga, Port Vila, Suva, and Tarawa have become public health concerns due to high fecal coliform levels.

Disposable solid waste is increasing as lifestyles and consumption patterns in the Pacific change to western ways, with increasing levels of imported non-biodegradable material. Dumping on seashores is common since suitable sites for disposal of domestic garbage are not made available by the landowners. The overall impact of this unsatisfactory situation is reflected in the generally low ratings for Pacific island states in the human development indicators applied by the United Nations.

REFORMING LAND RIGHTS

Many problems of sound urban planning and investment in the Pacific are due to the inability of the land market to meet the demands of growing urbanization. Land is generally not available for infrastructure, industrial estates, housing, waste disposal, social facilities and recreational needs.

Land rights are an integral part of Pacific cultural and social systems and some 80% of lands in the Pacific island states are under customary tenure. Customary land owners are not culturally disposed to alienating land and have a tendency to retain full control of their lands for possible need by future generations. The administrative and technical procedures for leasing and development of customary land are either not well developed or are very complex due to the varying interests of the different owners of a particular parcel of land. The incomplete land mapping and titling process add to the constraints. Governments rarely exercise the powers of eminent domain to obtain land for public purposes.

There are minimal opportunities for land reclamation from lagoons due to the negative impacts on the ecology and on food sources. In the atoll countries the shortage of land is a serious issue for the people as well as for the government. There is thus an immense need in Pacific island states to facilitate the use of customarily owned lands for purposes arising from modernization of the country and ensure equitable access to the fruits of modernization to all, especially the poor. As has been demonstrated in some parts of Fiji, the customary owners in and around urban areas have the opportunity to make substantial gains from the urbanization process.

NEW URBAN GOVERNANCE

Urban management is a new level of public administration that needs to be strengthened in several countries. This involves locally developed political processes for democratic representation, urban planning for public and private investment, revenue mobilization, service delivery management, human resource development and community participation.

National governments now play a key role in providing the major infrastructure services in urban areas but the crucial role for local government is the planning and coordination. Local government authorities, either based on Western models e.g. in Melanesia and Micronesia or on local traditional leadership structures e.g. in Samoa, have insufficient capacity to manage and respond adequately to the

pace of urban growth. Almost all urban local government bodies operate with insufficient funds, relying largely upon property taxation. They are rarely able to finance regular service functions and have no reserves for undertaking minor capital works. They are unable to collect rates on unleased customary land or on land occupied by squatters and there are political difficulties in raising municipal rates.

Most governments recognize the need for a tier of government at the urban level but there is limited political or financial support for the growth of local government. External aid is rarely provided for increasing local government capacity.

Urban planning has brought about systematic development in specific parts of some cities (e.g. Fiji, Papua New Guinea and the Solomons) but in many others there is limited application. In some countries in Polynesia and Micronesia several physical development plans exist but there is lack of institutional

and human resource capacity for implementation. Factors such as the land tenure system, topography, non-availability of services have created an interrupted pattern of urban development, with areas of undeveloped lands breaking the physical continuity of development. This has resulted in uncoordinated and fragmented growth, difficulties in the provision of services, inefficient transport planning and lack of public spaces.

The types of urban governance needed in the Pacific are institutional arrangements at the urban level that can proactively cater to local needs with the support of national governments. Public participation in decision making for urban management through public consultations, urban and civic forums and similar organized groupings is rare in the region. The information revolution could facilitate this process and enable people to meet their rising expectations. ■

Country	National Population (2000 mid-year estimate)	GDP per capita (in US\$) [year]	Child Mortality (per 1000 live births)	Percentage of population that is urban	Country Population Growth (% per annum)	Urban Population Growth (% per annum)	Rural Population Growth (% per annum)
Melanesia							
Papua New Guinea	4,790,800	1,079 ['97]	77	15	2.3	4.1	2.0
Solomon Islands	447,900	856 ['95]	38	13	3.4	6.2	3.1
Vanuatu	199,800	1,430 ['95]	45	21	3.0	4.3	2.5
Fiji	824,700	1,660 ['97]	20	46	1.6	2.6	-0.5
Polynesia							
Tonga	100,200	1,786 ['97]	19	32	0.6	0.8	0.1
Cook Islands	18,700	4,625 ['97]	25	59	-0.5	0.6	0.4
Samoa	169,200	1,026 ['96]	25	21	0.6	1.2	0.4
Kiribati	90,700	661 ['96]	62	37	2.5	2.2	1.0
Tuvalu	9,900	1,433 ['96]	29	42	0.9	4.8	0.0
Micronesia							
Nauru	11,500	na	13	100	1.8	1.8	0.0
Marshall Islands	51,800	1,894 ['95]	37	65	2.0	1.8	1.5
Fed. Micronesia	118,100	1,962 ['96]	45	27	1.9	0.4	2.5
Palau	19,100	5,058 ['90]	19	71	2.2	2.9	1.2
Total	6,852,400						

TABLE 1: URBANIZATION IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC.

SOURCE: PACIFIC COMMUNITY: PACIFIC ISLAND POPULATIONS DATA SHEET 2000; UN ESCAP: ASIA PACIFIC IN FIGURES 1998.