Informal settlements in the Pacific and links to sustainable development

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This paper explores the contemporary issues associated with informal settlements in the Pacific in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11—Sustainable Cities and Communities. We explore the challenges of water and sanitation service provision in informal settlements, and describe steps being made to address these challenges. Finally, we look at the future of informal settlements in the Pacific in the context of sustainable development, examining specific examples of progress in Solomon Islands and Fiji.

As urban populations grow, so too have rates of urban poverty and populations residing in informal settlements. Given the lack of suitable housing, large numbers of new settlers have no choice but to live in temporary shelters or on marginal land. Informal settlements are characterised by overcrowding, poor access to services (including water, sanitation and electricity), roads and drainage. Settlement areas are also more highly prone to natural hazards such as flooding due to their location on marginal land including mangroves, riverbanks, floodplains and steep slopes (ADB 2016). Informal settlements can exist in many different forms, from newly established settlements of disparate individuals, to those mimicking rural villages through their more mature governance and micro-economic systems (ibid). This, along with the heterogeneity of Pacific Island countries in general, highlights the need for careful consideration in supporting the sustainable development of informal settlements—an issue that cuts across many of the SDGs. As for all complex development challenges, an inclusive approach is required, as advocated by the SDGs. Governments, civil society, the private sector, donors, multilateral organisations and other actors have roles to play to ensure development progress is made for people residing in informal settlements.

Drivers of Pacific informal settlements

Urbanisation is influenced by a combination of forces including globalisation, climate change and natural disasters.

Globalisation: The forces of globalisation are contributing to the urban pull in the Pacific, as described elsewhere in this issue of Development Bulletin. Western and capitalist lifestyles are influencing the values, goals and social norms of Pacific Islanders, resulting in a shift away from communal lifestyles to those more closely tied with individual wealth (Mecartney and Connell 2017). Community and individual expectations of what a desirable lifestyle constitutes are also changing (Connell 2010). This has led to a shift from subsistence to cash economies, and has seen Pacific residents seek paid employment, health and educational opportunities in town. These rural to urban migrants often find themselves forced to live in informal settlements due to lack of availability of affordable housing elsewhere in the city or town.

Climate change and natural disasters: Climate change and natural disasters contribute to rural to urban migration, and also impact upon the conditions and realities for those living in densely populated urban areas. Climate change is rendering some land unproductive through sea level rise and coastal erosion (Connell 2013). Subsistence livelihoods traditionally depended upon by the majority of Pacific Islanders are becoming more difficult, driving the move away from traditional lands and family. Climate change driven migration is seen by some as an adaptive strategy (Fitzpatrick 2015), however it is highly contentious given the underlying cause is the result of carbon emissions from wealthy, far away countries and the fact that Pacific Islanders have strong connections to land, which can be lost as they migrate to the cities (Smith and McNamara 2015).

Natural disasters such as tropical cyclones and droughts are expected to intensify. This, along with the uncertainty of when such events will occur next, will affect people's decisions to leave their subsistence livelihoods for urban locations. Such migration patterns will therefore continue to drive urban population growth, including those of informal settlements.

Key challenges for Pacific informal settlements

Numerous challenges surround the issue of informal settlements in the Pacific. Two are described below; land availability and tenure, and the impacts of natural hazards.

Land availability and tenure: Urban property and land rights, particularly with regards to customary land, are rarely adequately addressed in Pacific urban policies due to the complexity, diversity and key differences from public and freehold systems of land tenure (Mecartney and Connell 2017). Governments often struggle to accommodate systems that differ markedly from policy frameworks which draw on colonial legacies, and are based on historic boundaries, legislation and documented records. Urban boundaries sometimes exclude the growing peri-urban areas where informal settlements are located; therefore government agencies charged with urban management have no jurisdictional responsibilities within these areas (Jones 2012). These and other challenges are significant for informal settlements in the Pacific because newcomers to urban areas need to find ways to negotiate and be accommodated by both systems—traditional customary tenure and formal legalistic government systems. Often, the result is 'temporary' tenure claimed by squatting—and a reason why there is opposition to new urban dwellers (Mecartney and Connell 2017). This will continue to be a challenge for urban policy, particularly with climate change acting as a driver of migration, as

governments are usually reluctant to intervene in matters regarding customary land. Agreements between rural-to-urban migrants and urban customary landowners are sometimes entered into informally, lacking transparency and accountability, and thus create a source of conflict should miscommunications or misunderstandings around the detail take place (Fitzpatrick 2015).

An additional challenge for governments and policy makers is lack of data upon which to base decisions. The nature of settlements and the activities that are undertaken in them are outside the formal system, thus are not easily trackable or measurable. This challenge has been highlighted as one needing to be tackled from a sustainable development perspective, given the SDGs have sub-national goals and targets which rely on sources of data that are absent in the case of informal settlements (Arfvidsson et al 2017).

Impacts of natural hazards on informal settlements: Natural hazards such as tropical cyclones and flooding are a key challenge for people living in informal settlements. When natural disasters occur, it is these areas that are most severely affected, as occurred with tropical Cyclone Winston in Fiji in 2016. Emergency shelter relief and assistance with sanitation in informal settlements in Suva and other urban areas in Fiji was a priority post-Cyclone Winston given the widespread damage to housing in communities (IFRC 2016). Another example comes from the Solomon Islands, where the 2014 flooding prompted a review of the vulnerability of Honiara's informal settlements to natural hazards and climate change. This review revealed numerous issues including pollution of drainage systems, lack of basic sanitation, and erosion of coastal areas upon which communities were located and risk of landslides (Trundle and McEvoy 2016). These issues are likely to worsen as further natural disasters occur, and when the impacts of climate change become increasingly apparent.

Urban development planning can undermine resilience to climate change and natural hazards, which can have serious implications for residents of informal settlements. For example, the removal of natural protective barriers such as mangroves can exacerbate the impacts of sea level rise and erosion. These unintended consequences of poor urban planning increase the vulnerability of informal settlements. For this reason, targets for SDG 13 (Climate Action) require governments to integrate climate change considerations into national policies, strategies and planning—including policies related to urban and city planning. SDG target 13.1 calls on governments to implement local risk reduction measures that enhance the resilience of ecosystems (UN 2016). Such measures would act to protect residents in informal settlements in the Pacific, given their typical proximity to coastal areas vulnerable to flooding.

Case study: WASH in informal settlements

The delivery of adequate and equitable water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services is essential to upgrading informal settlements in the Pacific In addition to providing a foundation for healthy and dignified lives, accessible and appropriately managed WASH services enable sustainable communities through control of pollution, development of local economies via a healthier workforce, and improve the agency of women who are disproportionately affected by restricted WASH services. However, informal settlements in the Pacific typically suffer from WASH services that fail to meet the basic needs of their inhabitants, and effects of climate change could be expected to worsen those conditions.

While urban populations in the Pacific generally have high rates of access to improved water and sanitation infrastructure, regional figures belie troubling evidence that thousands of people living in informal settlements are routinely denied rights to safe water and sanitation. Global monitoring suggests 71 per cent of Pacific urban populations reportedly have access to improved sanitation and 93 per cent have access to improved water supplies (WHO et al 2015). Yet, recent investigations in informal settlements in Melanesian countries have revealed the prevalence of overcrowded and unreliable standpipes, unhygienic pit latrines, and open defecation (Schrecongost and Wong 2015).

These conditions are particularly stressful for women who are subsequently exposed to a heightened risk of physical insecurity, harassment and sexual violence (Amnesty International 2011). Informal settlements in Polynesia and Micronesia are also frequently characterised by limited access to piped water and an absence of sewerage and wastewater treatment (McKay 2009).

The poor state of WASH in informal settlements in the Pacific region reflects a worldwide trend amongst developing countries, but small Pacific Island developing states face unique challenges arising from their natural geography. Low lying atoll countries like the Republic of the Marshall Islands and Kiribati rely on scarce groundwater resources that are threatened by sanitation pollution and unchecked water extraction. Fringing reef systems, which provide invaluable livelihood resources for many Pacific communities, are degraded by the discharge of untreated wastewater into the ocean. Finally, Pacific Islands are highly exposed to severe weather events that frequently disrupt water and sanitation services, and with climate change can be expected to intensify. The precarious, improperly designed, and unregulated water and sanitation systems found in informal settlements thus often vitiate and are vitiated by the natural environment to a much greater degree than found elsewhere in the world.

Groundwork to improve the delivery of WASH services in Pacific informal settlements is underway. Water utilities in Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have made efforts to improve services to these settlements. Examples of such efforts include provision of community standpipes with special tariff rates that allow

users to share a single meter, placement of meters at the edge of settlements to sidestep land tenure requirements, improved understanding of customers' willingness to pay, and creation of a special fund for financing new water connections for low income users (Schrecongost et al 2015). Meanwhile, the Sanitation Marketing and Innovation Program in these same countries, driven on the ground by Live and Learn Environmental Education, seeks to engage women and men in facilitating self financing enterprises that improve public and environmental health through construction of appropriate sanitation facilities and promotion of hygienic activities in informal settlements (Civil Society WASH Fund 2015).

The SDGs and the future for Pacific informal settlements

Ensuring an equitable and sustainable future for people living in informal settlements requires an integrated and inclusive approach that addresses the range of issues present in such areas. The SDGs provide an integrated framework for tackling this challenge—one that recognises the importance of various actors' participation in decision making. The SDGs offer an integrative framework for tackling the multi-dimensional challenges in the Pacific, including those associated with informal settlements. The SDG Goal 11 includes targets to achieve safe, resilient and sustainable urban settlements (UN-Habitat 2016). It specifically addresses the challenges associated with informal settlements and slums, given that adequate access to shelter and housing targets 820 million people worldwide.

Goal 6 (clean water and sanitation) has targets to reach universal access and progressive reduction in inequalities including for those in informal settlements. The initiatives described in the WASH case study above represent important steps toward improving the accessibility of WASH in informal settlements and thus contribute towards both Goals 6 and 11. However, their scale and scope must be widened to deal with cascading effects on social and environmental sustainability.

Interlinkages also exist across other SDGs. For example, the promotion of gender equality (Goal 5), which is sorely needed in the Pacific where there are disturbingly high rates of gender based violence and discrimination (UN Women 2011). Goals 13 and 14 (protection of life on land and below water) are also relevant for informal settlements, given the fragility of ecosystem services in the Pacific (Duncan 2011). At the time of writing, efforts are currently underway to make choices on the SDG targets and indicators on which the Pacific region will prioritise, and within this, a firm commitment to addressing the situation in urban informal settlements is much needed.

Some authors have noted that international frameworks, such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights and indicators associated with SDG 11 may not provide national governments with adequate motivation to alter their national policy. However, they may provide some indication and guidance of the type of policy directions needed to address the complex problems associated with informal settlements (Phillips and Keen 2016) and can be a point of leverage for civil society and other actors.

Examples of progress

Developing effective urban policy in the context of the abovementioned challenges in the Pacific is a complex task, requiring participation from diverse actors from a range of sectors. Genuine engagement with informal settlers and their communities is needed, including those typically excluded from such decisions—women, youth, and urban non-customary land owners (Mecartney and Connell 2017). Such engagement is rare and there are few forums and opportunities for these discussions to take place. Furthermore, media coverage of urban issues are usually negative and rarely cover the many opportunities (Keen and Barbara 2016), setting the scene for narrow, problem-focused public discourses.

There are some examples of positive change, however. In the Solomon Islands, Honiara City Council has worked with external agencies to develop the 'Honiara Urban Resilience and Climate Action Plan', released in March 2017, (Trundle and McEvoy 2016). The plan includes mention of informal settlements and the need to address pressing environmental issues. The document notes that comprehensive community consultations were undertaken, including with government and non-government organisations. Despite these positive first steps, informal settlements residents still remain largely excluded from these dialogues, and this will likely continue until ways are developed to support greater inclusion in policy making and formal planning processes, for example by legislative reforms that ensure equity for informal settlers (Foukona 2017).

The Fijian government was one of the first in the Pacific to extend rights to informal settlers. There has been a significant shift in urban policy with regards to how informal settlers are viewed. For example, the National Housing Policy and even the Constitution include protection against arbitrary eviction (Phillips and Keen 2016). Senior government officials have also acknowledged the need to adhere to the UN Charter for Human Rights, with regards to the government supporting informal settlers in finding adequate housing (ibid). A progressive policy has been established to allow informal settlers to access land at reduced costs. Such a policy has mutual benefits for both informal settlers and the government. Settlers are provided with an entry point to the housing market and access to basic services (ibid). Furthermore, the government has a greater awareness of population numbers in peri-urban areas and can therefore better plan for service needs into the future. This approach addresses the informal settlement challenge head on, as opposed to dodging the issue by excluding such areas in urban population records, as is done elsewhere (Jones 2012).

Along with these location specific examples, social and technical change across the region—including in technology, finance and transport—is also providing progress for residents of informal settlements. Mobile phone technology provides better connectivity between urban residents and their rural dwelling families (Keen and Barbara 2015). Finally, Jones (2012) and ADB (2016) note the growth and expansion of 'urban villages' in the Pacific, which are urban, often unplanned and 'informal' settlements, with traditional rural village-like characteristics, including kin based governance structures, micro-economic activities (for example, mini-stores and canteens) and home gardening. They bring higher levels of urban social security and provide social mechanisms for dealing with urban poverty and hardship. (ADB 2016). Settlements such as these are likely to continue to grow and expand, requiring a rethink and adjustment of how urban planning and policymaking take place to accommodate the needs of these populations.

Conclusion

The role and composition of urban areas in the Pacific are diverse and ever changing, with informal settlements becoming a key feature of all Pacific cities and towns. Urbanisation patterns are likely to continue on the same path, meaning increasing numbers of urban residents and growing populations living in informal settlements. Climate change, natural disasters and the forces of globalisation will continue to drive such migration patterns, forcing governments of the region to directly address the needs of an increasing number of residents in urban areas.

As rural livelihoods grow more untenable and as growing urban populations necessitate more social welfare, the pressure increases for governments to proactively plan how to provide the structure for people to secure their wellbeing in towns and cities. The next steps are to draw on progress to evolve more effective policy approaches for addressing the complex sustainable development issues facing informal settlements within the Pacific Island context.

The SDGs provide a framework and policy guidance for tackling the complex challenges associated with informal settlements. Some governments, for example Fiji and the Solomon Islands (among others) are implementing policies and plans that aim to address these issues. Concerted efforts are needed by national and subnational governments, as well as donors and the non government sectors, to harness the potential of informal settlements and provide residents and their communities with a future that offers the possibility of fulfilment and wellbeing.

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