

2

Urban Melanesia: The Challenges of Managing Land, Modernity and Tradition

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Introduction

All Melanesian countries exhibit rapid urbanisation, and yet, in development, policy, and academic discussions, they are often regarded as simply rural, since a large proportion of the population lives in rural areas and there is a strong cultural affiliation to the land. However, half of the Fijian population, more than a quarter of that in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, and substantial numbers of Papua New Guineans are urban residents. Growing numbers, often now extending beyond formal urban boundaries, emphasise the need to recognise urbanisation and urbanism, and its permanency, and understand these new urban contexts, the processes utilised by different communities to access land and services, and how this influences and requires urban development and management.

Modernisation and globalisation have brought fundamental changes to Pacific societies, affecting values, goals and social norms. In 2008, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, through its Land Management and Conflict Minimisation Project, recognised:

a shift taking place from communal lifestyles, to lifestyles where there is a greater emphasis on individual economic wealth accumulation, leading to increasing pressures to derive economic benefits from customary land. Basic human follies of greed and personal power influence people who are in positions of power, so that their decisions are at times being made for their own personal gains, and not in the interest of the landowning group as a whole (PIFS 2008: 19).

It did not, however, address the question of how non-customary owners and nationals access land, the varying notions of property rights in urban environments and their hinterlands, and how and why urban land issues have otherwise rarely been at the forefront of development planning. Although Melanesian towns and cities house increasingly larger proportions of national populations, they have become ‘the elephants in the room—ignored in policy and practice, perhaps an aberration, a circumstance in transit—hopefully not really there and surely not the “real Pacific”’ (Connell 2011: 121; see also Wittersheim and Dussy 2013). Policy, practice and perception largely ignore urban growth, despite its obvious centrality and underwhelming visibility.

It is scarcely surprising that policy makers have struggled with urban land. Land issues have made urban development particularly difficult, notably where land is mainly owned by local indigenous groups, as it is throughout Melanesia. Like other states, the current Solomon Islands government maintains land acquisition as a priority area for the broader development of the country and seeks ‘to continue to pursue customary land mobilization and reform by looking at ways to bring customary land into productive usage as land remains fundamental in the country’ (GoSI 2014: 6). That is a major challenge since access to land is zealously guarded as a critical, unique and enduring source of wealth, especially in towns and near urban boundaries where it seems most under threat, and problems have confronted external efforts to encourage land registration and privatisation, and thus an ‘orderly, regulated and planned’ urban development. Consequently, a distinctive form of urbanisation has developed, associated with the rights, or lack of rights, of residents to land in urban areas. Urban centres are increasingly characterised by a core ‘modern city’ and rapidly growing uncontrolled fringes of peri-urban customary land, settlements on marginal lands, and pockets of traditional villages swallowed up in the expanding modern town. This chapter examines these issues and the questions they raise about how rapidly changing cities can be managed, how they can contribute to national

development, who have ‘rights to the city’, and what public policies might most effectively enable a more managed urban growth that can create space for the inclusion of multiple, diverse urban communities.

Urbanisation in Melanesia

Melanesia is rapidly urbanising at a pace that has increased significantly in this century, with accelerating social, economic and environmental changes placing pressure on access to urban land. Part of this urbanisation consists of suburbs and tower blocks (increasingly in gated communities) with formal tenure, that would not be out of place anywhere in the world; part consists of settlements largely constructed by the residents with diverse forms of formal and informal tenure; and part is composed of ‘urban villages’, where established villages—famously at Hanuabada in Port Moresby—have become surrounded and engulfed by expanding cities. The three parts symbolise the juxtaposition of modern and traditional, formal and informal, homogeneous and heterogeneous, whether of culture, housing or employment (Jones 2011a). Each part is composed of people and communities with social networks, governance structures, and various ways of life. Urban residents, short-term and long-term, are born there or come from all islands and provinces; they include professionals, unskilled people, migrants, customary landowners and squatters, all with different formal and informal tenure arrangements, on state-owned or custom-owned land, and with different reasons for being in the city.

All Melanesian towns and cities have informal and squatter settlements, with each of the four independent Melanesian states having 30–50 per cent of their urban populations living in these communities in 2010 (Connell 2011). Informal settlements are growing particularly quickly as the supply of land and formal housing is inadequate to meet needs. Informality occurs where incomes are low and irregular, public housing policies fail to meet demand for low-cost housing, and urban planning and management are weak. It is unsurprising that settlements are thus widely perceived as social, economic and environmental problems, and that there is opposition to rural–urban migration. Vanuatu and Solomon Islands have the highest current rates of urban growth in the Pacific at 2.8 per cent and 3.7 per cent per annum respectively. Such growth rates mean a doubling of population size in less than

20 years. In Honiara, this means about 1,500 additional residents looking for housing and land every year. In Port Vila, the minimum official area of residential plots is 600 square metres, and an additional 10,000 residential plots will be required in the next 16 years. Pressures on land are already obvious, in terms of demands on government authorities, extension of housing into more distant areas, inadequate infrastructure and service delivery, pollution and problematic environmental management. The geographical spread and spatial pattern to the distribution of changes in land use highlight a rapid rate of lease 'sales' in and around towns and cities, which is matched by increased struggles over land and growing political opposition to land sales. Pressure on land for commercial, agricultural and residential purposes produces a highly competitive environment, accompanied by increasing inequality, rising informality and, in some communities, a lower quality of life, especially where informal settlements are built on marginal, hazard-prone land, as land shortages necessitate, so contributing to a 'coastal squeeze' and intense pressures on land and housing in such areas (Jones 2011b; Connell 2013; Bryant-Tokalau 2014).

Over time, urbanisation has become more permanent, especially where urban residents or their ancestors have come from small and remote islands (Connell 2011). It is a tired romanticism that everyone has land to 'go back to' or, indeed, wishes to return to traditional villages. Many urban households have effectively severed connections with rural areas (or their distant rural kin have severed connections with them), have come from places where little land is available (even were they to seek to 'return'), or have children who have grown up without the language, aptitude and social connections for rural life, and who have relatively permanent urban employment. Urban residents may contemplate return but remain in town for their children's sake (Mecartney 2001). In some places an urban middle class has emerged with only tenuous connections to rural areas (Gewertz and Errington 1999). The importance of towns and cities for the future of Pacific Island states is inescapable, whether as drivers of economic growth, centres of social conflict, or simply centres of modernity. Yet national political leadership and urban bureaucracies are often still unwilling to accept the reality that urban populations will not only stay, but will continue to increase. Without that acceptance and more effective management, conflict may become more evident than economic growth. Resolving underlying land issues is thus crucial.

Contemporary Customary Complexities and the Right to the City

Within most Melanesian towns and cities, and especially the largest ones, multiple forms of land tenure exist, accompanied by even more ways of thinking about and owning urban and peri-urban land. Claims to land may come from colonial or post-colonial law, possession, purchase, customary ownership, or recognition by customary owners. That diversity, and the entanglements of ideologies, raise basic and severe challenges for governments for effective planning and controlling urban development and management. Government ownership is common in urban areas, dating from colonial era acquisition, with smaller but significant areas under customary tenure or individual freehold. On the fringes of towns, where expansion has become significant, customary tenure is much more important, and poses problems for the conversion of rural land to urban uses. A general problem exists in 'adapting tenures which derive from combined customary and colonial precedents, to serve the needs of non-customary, post-colonial societies' whilst 'traditional precedents are not relevant to modern urban living' (Crocombe 1987: 386, 390). The unresolved task of bringing customary land into a modern realm has resulted in substantial areas of capital cities especially being quarantined from urban development, whether for housing, garbage dumps, or other modern uses.

Melanesian countries place great store on the continuing role of customary land in support of national values. After Independence, Vanuatu went further than any other country in abolishing all freehold land tenure and returning land to traditional owners; in urban areas land titles were converted to automatic leases on the assumption that land rents would pass to customary owners (Rodman 1995). Customary landowners fear the loss of ownership of their land, and seek to protect it from alienation, yet feel they have little control over urban migrants who have settled on their land, even though, in most cases, permissions and some form of agreement have been made. Simultaneously, many feel threatened by overcrowding, lack of employment, and the rise of facets of contemporary life that are seen as problematic, such as excessive drinking, drugs, new diseases and brash youth, that challenge perceptions of tradition and the good life. Some traditional owners, such as the Motu-Koitabu in Port Moresby, have thus fought strenuously to prevent further settlement and gain more adequate compensation for land alienation (Connell and

Lea 2002: 131–2). However, over time, migrant groups have grown in number, size and authority, by dint of their growing power and status in urban society. Conversely, despite the growing semblance of permanency attached to the gradual acquisition of services and improvement to housing, settlers often have no security of tenure. Acquisition of secure land title is the most basic and greatest single need for most residents (Kiddle 2010), in itself also an indication of the extent of intended urban permanency. Uncertainty has resulted in their unwillingness to invest in housing and infrastructure, and so improve their quality of life.

Land issues are further complicated both by uncertainties about the nature of group ownership of particular tracts of land, and by indecision, uncertainty and division between landowners concerning the future of the land. In urban areas, local ‘communities’ are increasingly dispersed, leadership is fragmented, putative ‘real owners’ multiply and, via marriage and migration, once unknown ‘others’ may claim some form of ownership. The fact that there are multiple classes of claimants to a particular parcel of land, no strong tradition of delegated authority, and no statute of limitations with regard to customary claims, means that it is extremely difficult to come up with schemes by which landowners can pool resources to convert customary land into modern, alienable property (Fukuyama 2008: 21).

Such complexities can seem insuperable and have posed severe problems for urban development. At Blacksands settlement (Port Vila), some landowners lived in the settlement while others were quite distant; more distant landowners wished to legally subdivide the land to lease to possible investors, others sought to increase the number of settlers paying rent, some preferred the removal of settlers, and still others had no desire for any change (Mecartney 2001). Some customary landowners acknowledge the mutual benefits of opening up land for development on one side of the scale (for example, the Ifira Land Trust in Vanuatu), while others aggressively curtail any consideration of urban expansion or use of custom land for residential purposes. All were conscious that their need for land was likely to grow in the future, but there was no organisation, formal or informal, for them to articulate sentiments, fears and plans. Insecurity of tenure poses problems for landowners, settlers and urban managers.

That is further complicated where footholds in the city are tenuous, for example, where landowners who have negotiated leases with urban settlers die and new arrangements are negotiated. This has sometimes resulted in

landowners attaching more stringent regulations on land, for example, banning some economic strategies such as fishing, using mangrove swamps for collecting crabs, shells and wood, and restricting gardening, numbers of houses (and ethnic groups), and the establishment of trade stores (Numbasa and Koczberski 2012). Such changing practices attest to increased competition for land (for housing and agriculture), marine access, and other urban resources. Many urban residents survive rather than prosper in the city, sometimes by holding several jobs, a situation of ‘occupational multiplicity’, or holding none at all, and merely ‘killing time’ (Mitchell 2013). Claims on the city vary substantially, urban dreams can remain elusive, and the city can seem a threatening place of strangers.

Since land is much more than an economic asset, were that not enough, and society is ‘written on the ground’, landownership is complex, embedded in cultural and personal relations, and not easily amenable to translation into Western codes and conventions. Even claiming exclusive rights to land for oneself or one’s group can negate long-standing elements of reciprocity. Clarification of land tenure, however necessary for the working of a capitalist economy, can threaten the tenuous achievement of community and unity where land tenure remains cloudy and thus flexible, and even subject to competing claims, rather than be finalised and fossilised and a source of overt contention (McDougall 2005). That is, however, incompatible with most forms and processes of urban development.

Much attention on land in Melanesia is focused on the protection and benefits of land dealings for *in situ* landowners, and ignores how this may impact on national citizens who live and work on land with which they are not culturally associated. Customary landowners (and their relatives), governments (with access to public land) and smaller numbers of people who have been able to purchase land usually have superior urban status in terms of permanence and stability. By contrast, those who are relatively recent migrants, with temporary tenure (either negotiated or claimed by squatting), and who are usually relatively poor and without good access to employment, have weaker prospects for stability or access to services. That is accentuated where they are of different ethnicity, or with distinctive cultural characteristics, from the dominant urban population group. One consequence has been opposition to urban newcomers.

In many of the larger Melanesian cities especially, deliberate efforts have been made by established urban residents, and urban and national governments, to exclude more recent migrants from urban permanency or simply refuse to grant access to such services as electricity and water supplies. In some sense this is a legacy of colonial ‘apartheid’ policies that sought to exclude ‘inappropriate’ natives from urban residence, and that were not overturned until the eve of Independence. The rise of urban populations, poverty and the informal sector (sometimes perceived as the ‘infernal sector’), has been marked by new repressions of the poor and marginalised in anti-urban policies, where residents are forced out of urban areas, most dramatically by evictions and the bulldozing of settlements, and by attempts to devolve responsibilities from the state, for example to churches, rather than efforts to devise welfare and employment policies to reduce urban problems (Koczberski et al. 2001; Connell 2003, 2011; Russell 2009; Mitchell 2011). Even urban markets (especially for betel nuts) and market vendors have been opposed by urban and national governments, despite their ability to provide food and substantial employment, and thus livelihoods, albeit insecure, for youths and women. For two decades, Port Moresby food vendors have been harassed rather than provision made for them (Connell and Lea 2002). In Honiara, governments were bulldozing markets at the same time as formal reports were recognising them as invaluable for employment generation (Maebuta and Maebuta 2009; Russell 2009). Such opposition has occurred even while urban residents experienced reduced access to garden land and coastal fishing (Wittersheim 2011). Anti-urbanism is not, however, matched by pro-ruralism.

In a form of wishful thinking, residents of informal settlements are often perceived as temporary and/or not really belonging to the city, and thus unworthy of rights and services. Beyond this conceptualisation, quintessentially in Port Moresby, settlers are seen by the wider public, and by such agencies as the police, as ‘violent and volatile’ people, responsible for most urban crime, and a security threat who should therefore be repatriated to their rural villages (Mawuli and Guy 2007: 109–11). Ideally, they should be out of sight and out of mind—rather than becoming beneficiaries of positive policy formation. Such a pervasive and long-standing moral panic has taken various forms in the past. In some cases, this sense of ‘not truly belonging’ has resulted in conflict and forced removal of urban communities. As early as 1977, opposition to settlers in Bougainville resulted in several groups of squatters being repatriated

to the New Guinea mainland (Connell and Lea 2002: 64–5). Attitudes have not fundamentally changed since then. Migrants in Port Vila, whether from Ambrym, Tanna or smaller islands, are seen as problematic and disruptive (Widmer 2013). In Honiara, violence erupted partly because of competition between different ethnic groups for scarce urban land (and equally scarce livelihoods) (Allen 2012). A correlation between urban crime levels and migration has been frequently voiced but lacks any demonstrable proof, whereas it is not implausible that social disorganisation and crime are a function of substantial inequalities in access to land, housing and other services. Practices opposing settlers have remained in the guise of achieving order and cleanliness, reducing crime and unemployment, freeing land for business development, and demonstrating that the state was not weak. No practices have contributed to developing a more inclusive city, or recognising the contribution of these residents through the provision of informal goods and services.

Opposition to settlers, and the lack of rights for customary owners, emphasise that cities are places of both inclusion and exclusion. The gradual emergence of post-colonial Melanesian ‘revanchist cities’ (Smith 1996) is characterised by discourses and actions directed at minorities, squatters, informal workers and recent migrants, creating an exclusionary version of civil society, nominally directed towards control and safety but designed to remove symptoms of poverty and difference from sight. In so doing, revanchist urban practices have displaced already marginalised people into more difficult circumstances, evaded the possibility of creating a more inclusive urbanism, and effectively denied the right to the city to a substantial proportion of the urban population. In other parallel contexts, this has resulted in calls for more substantive forms of participation and urban citizenship (Holston 2009; Stead 2015). Certain present and potential residents, and national citizens, have thus been more or less excluded from the city and its services and from the potential benefits of urban life, emphasising issues of contention, conflict and uneven power relations (Hall et al. 2011). Moreover, intensified competition over land and shifts in governance affect land use in ways that introduce new injustices (Sikor et al. 2013), while the sensitivity of land issues is a powerful political and economic tool—maximising the paradox of cultural protection and integrity against responsibility for fair land dealings for all. Modernisation has introduced new concepts and new dimensions to the use and management of customary land and the distribution of benefits derived from it. For example, resource

extraction and infrastructure investment projects, such as those in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Solomon Islands, offer compensation payments for alienated land that have often given rise to community conflict over compensation and a recent escalation in demands, even where that land has been used for the benefit of the local community (Banks 1998). The combination of disputes over landownership, increased claims for compensation by those who often perceive this to be their most valuable asset, the individualisation of property rights previously held in common (Gilberthorpe 2007) and mismanagement have all slowed the process of urban development.

Intensified competition and struggles over land ‘coupled with shifts towards flow-centred governance has generated land uses involving new forms of social exclusion, inequity and ecological simplification’ (Sikor et al. 2013: 522). Increased demands for land that surrounds towns have created a parallel increase in land ‘ownership’ claimants (just as around mine sites). Such land has high value due to demand, and is also the site of blurred civic responsibilities. Little clarity on the roles and rights of involved actors exists in the absence of clear national or cultural guidance in this growth space, so that, as in Southeast Asia, ‘claims to land on the basis of indigenous or ethno-territorial basis in which one group asserts precedence and the right to exclude on the grounds of historical and affective claims to place, raise especially troubling dilemmas’ (Hall et al. 2011: 11). The resultant urban fracture zones are evident, as in Vanuatu, with the creation of the Vete Indigenous Land Association, a ‘registered’ group of individual and group claimants primarily from the island of Tongoa and the Shepherd Islands, who state that they have been excluded from land decision processes on Efate, which they assert is their traditional land (Wilson 2011). Once again an increased number of claimants, using different strategies for claiming landownership, in urban sites where land is obviously becoming more valuable and in demand, does nothing to ease the task of urban management and development.

The Trouble with Land

Balancing the rights and needs of customary owners and migrant citizens represents a critical challenge for urban management, and, other than in Fiji, there has been a marked reluctance of government to intervene in customary land matters. Politicians deliver promises rather than plans.

Urban land has, to date, been conscientiously placed in the ‘too hard basket’ due to a lack of recognition of its contribution to development finance, and because cultural politics threaten future plans and vested interests oppose change. Nonetheless, throughout Melanesia, land mobilisation strategies have been pursued that would secure land for urban development, and in PNG finance has been secured for land development through the state becoming the lessee of customary land enabling lease-leaseback schemes for customary land mobilisation, bringing land into use without it becoming alienated (see Chapter 6, this volume). However, if land policies are piecemeal, exclude the role of the resource ‘owner’ and ‘user’, and fail to deal with the underlying systems for land rights allocation, land use planning and the land market, inefficiency and discontent may prevail.

Larger cities, greater urban permanency and environmental concerns raise new challenges, but especially the need for appropriate and accessible land for residential purposes and the management of growth (planning, infrastructure investment). There is a widespread and growing perception that institutions—whether state, customary or hybrid—are ineffective in managing land issues, and fail to deliver equitable or durable outcomes, hence their legitimacy is increasingly questioned. This imposes multiple stresses and costs on three critical fronts:

- restricted business development, whether small or large, local or foreign, through inadequate guarantees of security, making this less profitable, less durable and more uncertain;
- inefficient delivery of public assets—roads, schools, clinics, water and electricity—where disputes over rights, compensation and lease payments result in higher costs and delays; and
- decreased social cohesion, with intra-community and intergenerational tensions as a consequence of unresolved contests over benefit-sharing arrangements.

Thomas Sikor and colleagues (2013) note a discernible trend in land governance away from the classic territorial forms that had become dominant with the rise of the modern nation state, such as land use regulations made by central governments, land use planning conducted by local governments, and land management undertaken by local communities to guide access to and development of land. In Melanesian towns and cities, communities do not have a strong role in land

management, nor is there clear action or an articulated role for customary landowners in contributing substantially to land management or use in peri-urban environments, the contemporary zones of crisis (Storey 2003).

Many urban land managers—land use and physical planners, housing and environmental officers—in Melanesia are confronted with multiple land challenges when seeking to address sustainable urban development issues. Land issues offer problems of:

- ambiguous and inadequately defined rights;
- frequent and unrecorded land use changes;
- land conflicts;
- land grabbing by powerful elites (access to urban land being a prime area of corruption);
- a lack of information (sometimes none at all or simply not in digital form);
- ambiguous and/or outdated, and poorly monitored and implemented land use plans;
- outdated legislation;
- over-regulation (with rules that are unknown and unenforceable with current staff capacity or without the technical ability to assess non-compliance);
- a lack of effective development control;
- fraudulent valuations; and
- a weak private land sector and market.

Whereas urban land management needs to be systemic to produce sustainable development, urban land managers are constantly forced to make instant, non-sustainable decisions about fundamental issues such as environmental concerns, climate change, and the occupation of vulnerable and disaster-prone locations. Beyond such problems there are few enough land managers or supportive institutions.

Tim Anderson (2011) and others downplay the need for land reform, promoting the productivity of customary land, its social value and the livelihood opportunities it supports. While this remains crucial in rural areas—especially in the face of land grabs (Filer 2011)—it is less valid in densely populated, fast growing, heterogeneous urban communities. Virtues exist in recognising flexibility, but what works in rural areas

among largely homogeneous cultural groups is impossible to implement in cities. Here ‘fuzzy boundaries have the virtue of enabling flexible accommodations’, yet lack of clarity enables officials at various levels to ‘act as tyrants, using the power invested in them erratically to evict, intimidate [and] make a grab for resources’ (Hall et al. 2011: 12). Such ‘regulatory fuzziness’ poses greater problems at the peri-urban interface. Regulating access to land and exclusion from it are carried out by both state actors and customary groups, involving at least four areas of regulation that determine boundaries between pieces of land, prescribe the types of land use that are acceptable, determine the kinds of ownership and usufruct claims made with respect to different areas of land, and make claims about which groups have rule-based claims to any particular piece of land. Unsurprisingly, in such circumstances, regulation is not always effective, as reflected in the lack of compliance with land use plans, zoning strategies and local planning schemes that exists in both Port Vila and Honiara. Typically, therefore, in Honiara, although the Town and Country Planning Act allowed for stakeholders to take part in the development of a local planning scheme, the city council planners were not effectively implementing this provision (Hou and Kudu 2012: 25).

The two key actors promoting (and also opposing) changes in land relations are currently limited to national governments and customary landowners—the latter being dominated by male representatives (both individuals and as collective groups). The blurred administrative lines and boundaries of urban centres and their peripheries result in fuzzy responsibilities that allow state actors and customary owners to exclude urban settlements and their communities from access to services and fair land dealings. There is a need to address current urban boundaries and how any potential redefinition impacts on the rural edge, with its stronger traditional governance structures and norms, like the large settlement of Blacksands near Port Vila, which is largely ignored by all levels of government in Vanuatu. In recent years, there has been investment in institutional strengthening of state and subnational agencies to improve delivery for development planning, but customary landowners have not benefited from this, despite their relevant knowledge, being excluded from the more intimate but formal interactions of urban contexts. However, at a rather different scale from capital cities, a unique arrangement has been gazetted for the small urban centre of Lenakel (Tanna, Vanuatu), where the town’s administrative area has been declared a ‘physical planning area’, and thus subject to national planning and zoning regulations, whilst the

ownership of the land remains with the 12 customary land claimants. The management of the town is overseen by 13 councillors comprising representatives of the landowners, youth, women, churches and business houses. Its success remains to be seen, and what is possible in a town of no more than 4,000 people may not be easy to transfer elsewhere.

Remarkably, neither urban nor state land has expanded spatially since independence was gained, but few significant changes followed, beyond exceptional cases such as the gazetting of Nasinu as a new township in Fiji (within the Suva-Nausori corridor), and also Rakiraki. With rapid growth, there have been increasing calls to expand city and municipal boundaries (as in the case of Port Vila). The Solomon Islands government has listed, among its top 10 priorities, a desire 'to see the Honiara Boundary issue resolved so that sensible discussions can begin to occur about developments outside the original Honiara Boundary' (GoSI 2014: 6). This has been identified as a priority in recognition of the need for urban equity, social stability and economic growth, but will not be easy to implement in a contested area. Generally, there have been reactions rather than positive responses to expansion statements (emanating largely from government and private sector sources that seek economies of scale and social protection views). Local communities have demonstrated concern over land use, access and affordability, whilst landowners fear a minimisation of their roles as resource custodians, and a perceived loss of both cultural identity and a source of revenue. However, dialogue has often been maintained 'offline', outside formal meetings and often on an individual basis, and while many officials agree on the nature of the problems associated with land use, needs and management, few evince any real confidence that they can be overcome. A lack of enterprise, initiative and domestic leadership is difficult to ignore, and bodes ill for improving urban land governance and for development in a broader sense.

Towards Strategic and Inclusive Urban Planning

In Melanesia, public policy has largely been formally directed at rural development, transport and service provision. Policy or action for urban spaces is often absent, and the social ramifications of this are not well understood by national decision makers or citizens. Attempts at urban planning are scarcely new, and even flourished on the eve of decolonisation,

and yet, half a century later, in rapidly changing cities with no tradition of planning and management, there are no demonstrable Melanesian success stories.

Urban planning—even land use planning—is rare in Melanesia, and unregulated urban expansion has increased the costs of urbanisation, especially for infrastructure provision. Public space and recreational space are scarce. Many settlements are entirely unregulated, and governments simply cannot keep pace with service provision, producing anarchic, dysfunctional and partial housing and land markets. Policies that once had some ephemeral success have been overwhelmed by rapid changes, especially urban population increases, bureaucratic inefficiency and, again, land shortages (Jones and Lea 2007). Management has worsened rather than improved. Few effective housing policies exist, and state housing is undeveloped and beyond the reach of the poor, so that people have had little option but to provide for themselves. Even ‘site and service’ schemes have become rare. In PNG, the National Capital District Commission’s *Settlements Strategic Plan, 2007–2011* focused on upgrading settlement areas and developing site-specific plans related to distinctive land tenure situations, but it made little progress (Jones 2012). Basic infrastructure is rarely the result of public initiatives. Governments have demolished as much as constructed, so that many people are in effect urbanising the towns themselves, in the face of formal intransigence and neglect. Even then, urban communities find it increasingly difficult to access land for housing and other individual purposes. Five key challenges are the lack of access to land, acute competition for land, variable knowledge of land tenure, affordability, and the availability of adequate housing. These are most prevalent in the peri-urban interface where land markets are subject to competitive pressure as urban centres expand and speculation is frequent. Fiji’s National Housing Policy (GoF 2011) therefore adopted a fundamental shift in the role of government, from provider to enabler of both affordable housing and improved access to land through innovative partnerships.

Recognition of the considerable challenges and the disappointments of urban planning and management brought belated external intervention to coordinate and exchange ideas, strategies and plans for urban development that culminated in the Pacific Urban Agenda (PUA). The PUA was developed in 2003, endorsed by the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders in 2005, and further accepted by the Pacific Urban Forum in 2007 (and again in 2011), as an effective mechanism for raising awareness

and improving understanding of urban matters at country and regional levels, and one that could be used as a basis for the inclusion of urban issues in national development plans. The PUA was never formalised as a document, but was buried within the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat's *Pacific Plan* (PIFS 2007), and without any regional agency tasked with putting it into place. Nonetheless, the PUA provided moral and practical support for effective urban policies and enshrined a set of themes and guidelines for establishing institutional frameworks, building technical capacity, and raising political awareness. In a region devoid of institutional support for urban management, it was a necessary development.

A set of interventions centred on four thematic areas:

- institutional framework: strengthening capacities (particularly local government);
- urban environment: integrating environmental and disaster management issues into urban development decision making;
- access to serviced shelter: strengthening provision of serviced land for urban development; and
- urban quality of life: recognising community and traditional decision-making structures where appropriate; engaging with vulnerable groups; addressing livelihood and employment; community-based safety nets.

The PUA did not directly advocate improved access to land for all, instead taking a less confrontational approach within the goal of improving institutional structures for better management of urban growth and the provision of infrastructure for basic services for urban communities. Land and housing were identified as priority areas in the PUA and reinforced at various meetings, such as a national urban forum in Vanuatu (2010), national housing policy consultations in Fiji (2011), the Papua New Guinea National Urban Forum (2012), the Pacific Housing Workshop (2012), and the Rights to Housing in Melanesia Workshop (2013). However, conspicuous in their absence at such meetings, or with limited representation, have been traditional landowners and leaders, the private sector and the community (in numerous possible versions of civil society)—three critical groups of actors who have significant influence in shaping their space and managing its use, and with their own rights to the city, but who have not always been organised or recognised. A key challenge within the PUA has been that of government agencies not proactively seeking dialogue with the identified customary landowners and the local community. Dual challenges of workload and regulatory responsibilities,

along with uncertainty over how to actually engage with landowners and community alike, have frequently resulted in a lack of action or dialogue. Different ministerial portfolios do not support effective urban management or forward planning, such as city development strategies, and fragmentation of responsibilities is not conducive to effective and cohesive responses, especially where managerial expertise is scarce. Urban management requires a multisectoral coordination with governance, land, planning, investment, environment and community components, which allows interactions with people and politics.

Despite obvious constraints, the PUA has enjoyed some success as an advocacy platform, but its implementation at the regional level has suffered from limited technical and human capacity, a lack of (multipartner) commitment, and inadequate resources to implement priorities such as access to land and housing in the wider Pacific Plan. The difficulty of mobilising land for urban development deterred widespread embrace of the PUA, and enabled only limited efforts at participatory governance and the application of innovative skills and approaches required for unlocking customary land for urban growth. This reflected caution by both governments and politicians in evaluating the social, economic, environmental and political implications of urban change, rather than a conscious decision not to address urban issues. The weighing up of the implications of urban change (including evaluating financial costs), assessing the ramifications of urban improvements versus deferred expenditure in rural areas, the costs of the conditions and caveats attached to development loans and grants (more difficult to access for those not in the finance sector) and their impacts on local landowners, were all paramount considerations. Urban development was constantly deferred.

Some selected lessons learned through the application of the PUA are that Pacific Island countries require committed and active leadership (and champions), along with well-articulated, resourced and integrated plans for (urban) development. Such plans and strategies need to be developed through effective community consultations and then strong partnerships between national and local governments, public corporations (service providers), traditional leaders and landowners, community-based organisations, the private sector and development partners. These partnerships are critically important in addressing potential threats that undermine living standards, sustainability and economic growth, and in creating healthy and safe living environments across urban and peri-urban areas. That is no small challenge.

Management, Public Policy and Dialogue

The limited impact of the PUA has emphasised how urban plans and policies have been piecemeal and largely ineffective in managing rapid expansion at the urban fringe. Throughout Melanesia, national frameworks to guide urban growth and promote a more equitable share of the benefits of development are required. Partial land use and urban policies have been formulated in Vanuatu, Fiji and PNG, but with varying degrees of participation and sectoral integration affecting their impact. PNG has recently endorsed an Urbanisation Policy (GoPNG 2010), which clearly sets out the benefits and advantages of planned and managed urbanisation, but may be destined to become another moral statement rather than an effective practical plan. Nonetheless, settlement assessment and upgrading is being undertaken, and is supported by political leaders, while communities are organising themselves into collective associations to dialogue with state actors and better understand what their rights are within regulated and political urban environments.

Since 2007, several Pacific Island countries have commenced actions to manage urban growth. These have included the establishment of Planning and Urban Management Agencies (in Samoa, Tonga and Kiribati) with integrated work plans with land agencies, several policy dialogues, and policy formulation in consultation with other national government agencies, but these initiatives are yet to be effectively extended to the larger Melanesian states. Solomon Islands has continued to regularise temporary occupation licences in Honiara, thus giving settlers more security of tenure. Many such efforts have been conducted with little support from other sectors, thus highlighting the critical need to extend participation, since a key lesson is that exclusion of interest groups results in slow progress and a lack of a holistic ownership for improved urban management.

Fiji, by contrast, has a more active program (in partnership with land trusts, local governments, non-governmental organisations and communities) aimed towards eradicating poverty by the provision of housing and land opportunities for all. Fiji has recently clarified the role and responsibilities of the state in urban environments, settlements and accessing iTaukei (customary) land in a manner that strives for equitable benefits. However, the cost of management is high, both financially and politically, for the state, and the implementation of actions for improved

access to land for all has commenced cautiously on a small scale, primarily directed at vulnerable communities in the Greater Suva Area. In 2014, the Ministry of Local Government, Urban Development, Housing and the Environment launched its Town-Wide Settlement Upgrading Programme, which targets settlements on iTaukei land within urban areas. The implementation strategy has been established by:

- facilitating the provision of basic infrastructure services and affordable and decent housing opportunities;
- providing some form of security of tenure (communal leases and regulated subdivisions as two options); and
- improving compliance with the Urban Policy Action Plan (2004), Urban Growth Management Plan (2006), and National Housing Policy (2011).

As this clearly demonstrates, numerous agencies and institutions must work together in urban areas.

The role of urban and peri-urban formal and informal settlements in policy dialogue has been marginalised, affecting well-intentioned but ill-formed policy goals and implementation. For ‘fuzzy governance’ at the peri-urban interface, hybrid systems—legal or perceived—are likely to be required, like those set up in the small town of Lenakel. Some states are moving in this direction. Thus the Constitution of Vanuatu (1980) recognises custom, and a range of statutory and regulatory instruments prescribe governance roles for several organisations rooted in custom, such as the National Council of Chiefs (Malvatumauri), the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, and Customary Land Tribunals. These arrangements have so far enabled Ni-Vanuatu to reaffirm local identity and *kastom* while pursuing economic and political liberalisation in ways that have eluded other Melanesian nations. Necessarily, though, this hybridity is incomplete, leaving gaps, overlaps and inconsistencies in the framework as the rapid pace of transformation from pre-market customary institutions to global institutions throws up unresolved policy contests, and also challenges the capability of existing institutions to effectively regulate and mediate transactions and ensure the affordability of both land and housing. Continuing globalisation of the economy, and the expected acceleration of investment and development affecting customary land, will pose additional challenges. The institutions responsible for managing these stresses—governmental, commercial and traditional—are coming under increased pressure (see Chapter 6, this volume).

Little can be achieved without advocacy and champions, and the involvement of landowners and settlers in more robust processes. Advocacy, public policy and dialogue are all being used to varying degrees to address improved access to land, property and services, and to resolve land conflicts. The experience of attempts at Pacific urban management over the last decade clearly indicates that there is a need to develop pragmatic and culturally acceptable solutions to packaging native and customary land for urban development, as little formal land supply has been provided. The task of developing relevant and robust planning responses to these challenges rests not with urban experts, but with the ability of central, provincial and local government to work *with* rather than *for* landowners and urban communities and respond to their needs rather than define their needs on their behalf. Recognising local community needs on the one hand, whilst integrating regional and international concerns on the other, calls for good communicators. Public policy can provide guidance when well formulated and inclusive dialogue contributes to developing practical goals and the sustainability of policy actions. However, such effective integrated activity is rare in any country, let alone in Melanesia.

Political urban champions are emerging but require more technical and financial support to implement the socially inclusive development they advocate. Without collective action to elevate urban and land challenges on development agendas, resource commitment will remain low. The additional challenges posed by natural disasters, and the adverse impacts of climate change that affect settlements and residential patterns, also demand the recognition of a continuum of land rights and action. For example, following the 2007 tsunami in Gizo, Solomon Islands, many did not want to return to their previous places of residence due to the perceived risks they would face if there were repeated natural disasters. However, due to land disputes and lack of clarity over land tenure, permanent places for resettlement were not identified. The government appeared unable or unwilling to take an active role in settling the disputes, and three years later security of tenure remained an issue, since the land disputes had not been formally settled and many of the affected population had rebuilt on Crown land with no legal permission. Such problems of resettlement are familiar throughout Melanesia and the wider Pacific (Connell 2012) and, yet again, indicate the land constraints to modern development.

Capacity constraints within both national and municipal governments affect the ability to get policy ‘right’, and its implementation remains a significant challenge. Despite genuine and considerable efforts in Melanesia, no single entity exists that can deliver on targeted and effective urban policy on its own. Greater integration and coordination need to be recognised across government agencies alongside genuine engagement with non-government actors, supported by greater political commitment and stronger administration, since these cannot be sustained by external partner support or on the moral basis of the PUA. More home-grown options must examine the role of the private sector and how it engages with the city and customary landowners. The voices of many people—notably the youth, women and urban residents (including non-customary landowners)—are muted in public consultation, where that exists. Community participation in urban discourse has been piecemeal and limited. While some urban communities are not as socially cohesive as rural and outer island communities, though these too lack cohesion, greater efforts need to be made in engaging affected urban communities in the planning, design and development of their locales.

The invisibility of communities is most marked in fringe squatter communities, such as Burns Creek on the edge of Honiara, where thousands are without the most simple access to water and sanitation facilities, living in conditions of poverty but not demanding improved access and opportunities either from the state (national and subnational) or from landowners for fear of violence or eviction. On the other hand, recent (February 2014) land reforms in Vanuatu insist on the inclusion of women and youth in decision dialogue with an Ombudsman for Land as a mediator should the case arise. A hybrid system, where modernity meets *kastom*, offers promising ways forward, but this too requires courageous champions and leaders. Customary landowners and indigenous structures will have a greater means of influence than they have exercised in the past and over a larger area. This requires governments to be sensitive to this scenario and less reliant on their own prerogatives. The cost of avoiding ‘sensitive’ land issues is too high a price to pay.

In this century, land summits and similar meetings have tended to focus on customary landowners, providing little space for the local population residing on or wishing to access non-state lands for residential/family purposes. Indeed, urban residents are caught between a place-of-living versus a place of traditional identity, in many ways disempowering their contribution to decision making. They may elect local councillors and

national members of parliament, yet their engagement as ‘non-customary’ landowners in policy and other decision-making processes is currently limited. Greater efforts are needed to nurture the inclusion of urban residents in national land dialogues if a more equitable and people-centred development is to be achieved. Provision for dialogue has not been adequately provided in urban settings that at best operate symbolically, with chiefly representatives to mediate social situations that do not include access to ‘foreign’ land. People in the Pacific, regardless of where they live, have cultural knowledge of successful ways of resolving land-related conflict. This knowledge needs to be recognised, respected, supported and extended. Extra care needs to be taken to protect the interests of local people and to establish open dialogue and capacity building so that all involved parties understand the full consequences of development and investment and can make informed decisions.

Future Challenges

Land is a ubiquitous and problematic feature of development throughout the Pacific, and land management is unusually challenging in Melanesia, yet it is at the core of sustainable urban and increasingly national development. Limited understanding exists of the roles that towns and cities play in national development, and whether there is sufficient engagement of landowners, the private sector and the community in the management of this growth. Immediate urban problems may stem from land issues, absent policies and management limitations, but underpinning these are circumstances of limited economic growth, political instability and diverse development priorities. Customary land has tended to be a nation divider rather than a foundation for state building—ironic given that land tenure was a unifier in paths to independence in Melanesian countries. In PNG, where urbanisation was relatively late, towns were anticipated, on the eve of Independence, to become centres of national social, economic and political development—nothing less than ‘crucibles of nationhood’ (Ward 1970, cited in Connell 2011: 121). That optimistic era has long gone. Identity remains inseparable from land and, in revanchist cities, crucibles boil over. Over time, attitudes to urbanisation have hardened, through prejudice against squatter settlements rather than any idealist vision of rural development policy. There is no going back to *taem bifo*. People have moved and will continue to move, and genuine efforts between customary landowners, the state and community must recognise changed ways of living, and broader rights to the city.

The Pacific future is decidedly urban. Recognising this reality will help focus the efforts of governments and traditional leaders, and ordinary citizens, on practical measures to manage this growth, as well as address the critical discussions and decisions in relation to land. Yet for several decades, antipathy to migrants and settlers has been pervasive, emphasising how:

The identity of the modern city is created by what it keeps out ... In order to determine itself as the place of order, reason, propriety, cleanliness, civilisation and power, it must represent outside itself what is irrational, disordered, dirty, libidinous, barbarian and cowed (Mitchell 1988: 165).

Melanesians are rarely easily cowed, but such pervasive representations emphasise exclusion and denial of agency and minimise the possibility of comprehensive and strategic urban planning and management. There is an urgent need for practical discourse on the mutual benefits of accessing and developing customary land whilst respecting customary tenure systems. Just as urbanisation evolves and changes over time, so does custom, requiring modalities that recognise cultural protection and the need to provide basic services for all citizens while also taking into account equitable access to land. Critically, Pacific cities and their management demonstrate and require elements of hybridity that offer solutions in other realms of development and change (Connell 2013). The modern city must be built, grounded and inspired by traditional foundations. This is particularly significant where the physical boundaries of urban areas do not coincide with their administrative boundaries, and peri-urban areas play an important role in the provision of food, water resources and land. This peri-urban interface is also where processes of urbanisation are most intense, and where some of the most obvious social and environmental impacts are located. If well managed, the interactions between town and village provide the basis for a balanced regional and sustainable development. Yet, despite a greater engagement with the broader community for management approaches that are grounded in the principles of equity, justice and human rights, and the right to the city, inevitable problems exist in seeking to embrace competing philosophies of land tenure, under pressure and in contexts of rapid change and mobility, respecting different groups with varied interests, knowledge, wisdom and objectives, but among whom consultation and collaboration are required.

Committed political and traditional leadership is needed to accept the reality that urban populations will continue to increase and urbanisation will intensify. Urban solutions depend on economic growth, slower population growth, more effective service provision and management, and innovative approaches to land provision. The level of protection and respect of human rights will be tested as countries continue to urbanise. Advocacy for the recognition of increasing urban permanency, public policy for managing urban growth, and creating space for the inclusion of urban communities in land discussions are crucial. Champions, plans, and skilled, competent and neutral managers, and considerable general goodwill and political will, are all required. Actions must work for both short and long-term periods. There needs to be genuine collaboration across multiple stakeholder groups for meaningful actions in managing urban growth whilst ensuring fair land dealings for all and not just for a selected few. That is no gentle challenge or easy agenda where economic prospects are constantly changing. But the consequences of continued inaction and an imbalanced discourse may result in conflict and increased poverty in both urban and rural environments.

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