Pacific Island cities have some of the most rapid rates of urbanisation in the world, attracting rural migrants in search of education, jobs and urban opportunities. Within these cities significant political and social transformations are occurring. How well these transformational processes are handled will determine whether Pacific cities become drivers of economic growth and development, or sources of social tensions.

Attempts to put urbanisation on the development agenda in the region have often failed to gain political traction, reflecting sensitivities about urban land settlement and development, rural-urban migration, foreign workers, service shortfalls and cultural change. But urbanisation continues to accelerate; it is a permanent regional dynamic. This State, Society and Governance in Melanesia (SSGM) publication series on urban development aims to explore the pressing issues facing cities and the many opportunities available.

Our research in urban environments involves working collaboratively with planners, officials, business people and communities to consider how the development of cities can best meet their needs for secure living places and livelihoods. Through participatory and action research approaches, we are working together with our Solomon Islands colleagues to map out place-specific challenges and future pathways. Some of the In Briefs and Discussion Papers include the voices of those with whom we have spoken in communities; others are written by, or with, those who live in these cities and are experiencing the Melanesian urban transformation.

It is our goal at SSGM to generate research on urban development and governance that contributes to a better understanding of the challenges facing urban communities, governments and development partners, and how these challenges might be addressed. It has generated considerable interest, and is filling a gap in both policy, development and academic spaces. While the research is ongoing, the papers in this volume consider:

> the nature of urban development across Melanesia
> the challenges of urban land management
> gender issues in the city
> the rise of peri-urban development and the implications
> the views of those living in informal settlements, and
> urban youth in the city — their experiences and needs.

We hope you find this compendium of SSGM’s research to date on urbanisation in Melanesia useful, and invite you to engage with us as we develop the research program further.

Meg Keen
Project Leader
### Urban Development Overviews

- In Brief 2015/64: Pacific Urbanisation: Changing Times  
  Meg Keen and Julien Barbara
- In Brief 2016/9: Urban Politics in Melanesia: Shallow Roots  
  Julien Barbara and Meg Keen
  Jessica Carpenter
- In Brief 2015/62: Urban Melanesia: Insights from the European Society for Oceanists  
  John Cox

### Urban Governance: Finance, Land and Planning

- In Brief 2017/5: Solomon Islands’ Urban Land Tenure: Growing Complexity  
  Joseph D. Foukona
- In Brief 2016/32: Visions for Henderson: A Workshop on Managing Peri-Urban Growth in Solomon Islands  
  Julien Barbara, Meg Keen, and Jessica Carpenter
- In Brief 2015/56: Show Me the Selen: A Fiscal Snapshot of Honiara, Solomon Islands  
  Daniel Evans
- In Brief 2015/67: Constituency Development Funds in Solomon Islands: State of Play  
  James Batley
- Discussion Paper 2016/6: Sharing the City: Urban Growth and Governance in Suva, Fiji  
  Tarryn Phillips and Meg Keen

### Urban Settlements: Housing and Livelihoods

- In Brief 2016/28: Priced Out of the Market: Informal Settlements in Honiara, Solomon Islands  
  Meg Keen and Luke Kiddle
  Michelle Nayahamui Rooney
- In Brief 2015/44: Money and Values in Urban Settlement Households in Port Moresby Part 2: Understanding Spatial and Income Inequality Through Housing Choices  
  Michelle Nayahamui Rooney

### Urban Settlements: Women’s and Youth Issues

- In Brief 2016/30: ‘Luxury’ and ‘Disturbances’: Women’s Views on City Life in Honiara Settlements  
  Jenny Munro and Jessica Carpenter
- In Brief 2016/31: Women's Livelihoods in Honiara Settlements  
  Jessica Carpenter and Jenny Munro
- In Brief 2017/3: Conflicts over Credit: Challenges to Women’s Economic Empowerment in Solomon Islands  
  Richard Eves
- Discussion Paper 2016/7: Hard Work: Youth Employment Programming in Honiara, Solomon Islands  
  Daniel Evans

### Urban Disaster Response

- In Brief 2016/13: After the Floods: Urban displacement, lessons from Solomon Islands  
  Meg Keen and Alan McNeil
Forthcoming:


For more information about the Urban Development in Melanesia research program, please contact Meg.Keen@anu.edu.au

All reports can be found at: http://ssgm.bellschool.anu.edu.au/tags/urbanisation
Pacific island countries are rapidly urbanising. In nearly every country in the South Pacific, the urban growth rate exceeds the national population growth rate (Figure 1). As a result, the urban population will double within the next 25 years. In Melanesian countries, urban growth is particularly high. Most striking is Solomon Islands; its urban population is increasing at about 4.4 per cent, almost twice the rate of national population growth — at this rate urban inhabitants will double in less than 17 years. Papua New Guinea (PNG) faces similar pressures; its urban population is expected to double by 2030, reaching about 2 million (DNPM 2010:84). Without adequate urban policies, planning and services, rapid urban expansion can hinder economic growth.

Throughout the Pacific islands, urban planning and management remain largely neglected. A few Pacific island countries, like PNG, have tried to better manage urban pressures, but implementation of initiatives has been patchy at best; for example, there has been little action on the 2010 PNG National Urbanisation Plan (Jones 2012). While donors recognise urban centres as major drivers of economic growth (ADB 2012), few Pacific leaders have come to terms with the reality of an urban Pacific and the need to manage cities. This In Brief examines some of the key urban challenges in the Pacific islands, and some promising innovations.

**Pacific Island Cities: Dense and Dilapidated …**

Throughout Melanesia, increasing urban populations are leading to sprawling settlements — many unserviced, adding to social, health and economic woes. To imagine the living conditions, consider that several urban settlements, including in Vanuatu, Kiribati and Marshall Islands, exceed the population density of megacities like Hong Kong and Singapore with a fraction of the services and no comparable high rise apartments. It’s no wonder that urban poverty is rising, with associated health and social issues. For example, Port Moresby has the highest concentration of tuberculosis (25 per cent of cases) in the country (John 2015).

Political engagement with urbanisation issues has been lacking, despite increasing pressures on urban health, land and housing. There are few forums to facilitate public consultation, and few members of parliament representing urban interests, despite the rising numbers in urban electorates. Popular media, when it addresses urban issues at all, is nearly uniformly negative. Only Fiji, Samoa and PNG have government ministries dedicated to better housing and urban development; even so, progress has been slow. Donor aid programs are largely lacking and, where they exist, are rarely sustained or strategic.

With patchy services and few social safety nets, kinship systems are vital to urban dwellers struggling to meet their basic needs. Settlements in Port Moresby and elsewhere in Melanesia have been referred to as ‘city villages’ with order maintained largely through custom or informal governance systems. Many urban settlements are without services or basic infrastructure. Linkages to villages are fading as new generations grow up in settlements. Urban-based informal safety nets are being stretched as costs of living escalate, and many struggle to gain steady wage employment.

**Figure 1: Urban population growth mostly outstrips national growth (per cent)**

![Urban Population Growth Chart](chart.png)

Note: Statistics in the South Pacific are variable in quality. The growth rates should be interpreted as indicative of relative relationships.

Against this backdrop of urban woes, small changes are occurring. Advances in mobile phone technology, more accessible finances, and road and sea transport gains are creating stronger urban–rural linkages. Better connectivity between rural and urban areas underpins new economic activities, including more urban services, goods and markets, and financial transfers between urban and rural areas in times of need. For example, urban–rural remittances were significant during the last PNG drought in 1997–98, increasing by about US$7.8 million compared to remittances before the drought (Mike Bourke pers. comm. 6/11/2015); and urban youth and new migrants are often supported by their rural families to achieve education and economic goals.

Urban markets are increasingly important to rural and urban livelihoods, serving as financial transfer mechanisms, reaching back to peri-urban and rural areas. New initiatives are boosting economic prospects for some, including safer transport via women-only public buses in Port Moresby, and upgrades to markets. The more value chains can be extended, forward and backward in the economy, the more robust economic systems will be.

Investment in urban infrastructure remains inadequate, but is increasing in recognition of its importance to economic growth and development. Over AU$300 million has been invested in Lae for road infrastructure over the past five years; the Lae Chamber of Commerce believes this could boost growth, assuming the roads are maintained — seldom achieved in Pacific island cities. State-owned enterprises remain weakly managed in the Pacific islands, but in some countries like Solomon Islands, corporatisation of selected utilities and telecommunications has extended coverage and added to efficiency.

As cities grow, they can contribute to a more diversified and service-oriented economy — more than 50 per cent of GDP is generated from urban areas in Fiji, Kiribati and Samoa (ADB 2012): transport, information technology (IT) and other small- and medium-scale enterprises are increasing. Partnerships between government and the private sector are also opening up opportunities, such as government–bank partnerships to increase access to finances, and partnerships between regional businesses and urban educational institutions, like Lae UniTech in PNG, to enhance IT access and work experience. Most innovations are ad hoc and in the pilot phase, but they are setting templates for the future.

What’s Next?

More job opportunities and services in comparison to rural areas create a strong social pull to cities, so the rapid rise of migrants will continue. Urban issues need more attention now if the Pacific islands are to avoid urban degradation and social tensions. With strategic and greater investment in urban areas — especially in governance, housing, infrastructure and livelihoods — there is scope to enhance development opportunities, reaching far beyond city boundaries. Unfortunately, funding and planning have been grossly lacking. Basic statistics on households, rural–urban linkages and demographics are patchy, hindering action on an issue that will affect national development.

Because urban issues are cross-cutting they can fit easily into existing aid programs, if there is the political will. For example, the Australian aid program in the Pacific has six priority areas — education and health, effective governance, infrastructure, agriculture/fisheries/water, gender equity and building resilience — all relevant to urban development. Strong and long-term partnerships would help — with donors, but also between local-level governments. Donors intermittently support urban issues, mostly in the form of project aid, but efforts are rarely sustained or extended to include maintenance plans, public engagement and governance structures. Better urban management could make a big contribution to achieving economic growth and national stability.

Author Notes

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References


Urbanisation rates are rapidly rising in Melanesia (Keen and Barbara 2015) as a growing number vote with their feet and move to cities in search of a better standard of living. Despite growing pressures on urban housing, services and infrastructure, political pressure for better urban management and investment remains muted, allowing unresponsive local and national governments to persist (Connell 2011). The result is too little investment in Pacific cities given their strong role as drivers of development. This In Brief considers why the rapid growth of cities is failing to translate into greater political pressure for urban investment and more equitable representation.

Melanesian Cities: Shallow Political Roots

Politics in Melanesian cities is being constrained by a number of factors which make it hard for urban dwellers to put their issues on the policy agenda. Electorally, a rural bias exists in many Melanesian countries with efforts to ensure broad provincial representation coming at the expense of urban representation. In Solomon Islands, about 15 per cent of the population lives in the capital, Honiara, but is represented by only 3 of 50 national representatives (Craig and Porter 2014). So most national political leaders direct resources to regional electorates, pursue regional development and growth centres, or push to devolve power to the provincial level where their power base resides.

Overwhelmingly, the dominant political discourse in Melanesia is one of decentralisation and of spreading public expenditure equally around the nation despite the very uneven distribution of the population and variable contributions to national development, service delivery and productivity. Idealised notions of traditional ‘grassroots’ communities as the immutable bedrock of Melanesian society (Cox 2014) allow misconceptions to persist of urbanisation as antithetical to national interests. The dominance of rural interests is reinforced by the rise of constituency funds in Melanesia which are allocated on an electorate, rather than per capita, basis and therefore channel resources away from urban population centres, reducing funding for municipal and provincial governments (Batley 2015).

The dearth of widespread urban political activism also reflects the fragmented nature of urban communities which struggle to recognise collective interests because of poor connectivity (many settlements have limited internet and few cheap and quick transport options to the city), narrow social networks split by ethnic and income divisions, and limited understanding of political processes and legal rights. Urban ethnic diversity and lingering concerns about outsiders accessing customary land adds to the lack of urban cohesiveness. Ethnic groups are largely concentrated in their own settlements which works against a knitting together of the social and political fabric of the city.

Collective action is also limited by the dispersed nature of economic activity in Melanesia with its low levels of industrialisation in cities and high dependence on resource exploitation and subsistence agriculture which are scattered about the country. Only about 20 per cent of Melanesian populations are urban. The contribution of urban spaces to the nation’s economic vitality is significant, but largely based on small or foreign businesses that don’t lend themselves to organised labour.

Urban political institutions such as municipal councils are responsible for driving urban development but lack authority and resources to strategically manage urbanisation. Lacking credibility and capability, municipal governments are unable to provide adequate urban services and support investments in urban infrastructure. This further undermines their legitimacy as a relevant tier of government and forces urban communities to look elsewhere for support (donors, non-government organisations, professional associations and private provision).

Another Pacific Paradox?

Melanesian cities thus find themselves in a paradoxical situation. They are increasingly driving growth as the hub of
the nation with the major transport, service and government facilities, and are housing more of the nation’s population, but have little political voice and few avenues to exercise political demands to improve urban environments. This dynamic raises important questions about whether change is possible given the sociopolitical context.

There is presently little evidence of an urban consciousness that could underpin an urban-focused political movement in Melanesia. The urban middle class is very small, economically dependent on the state, and generally implicated in rural-focused patronage politics (Barbara et al. 2015). There are individual examples of urban activism, but these tend to be focused on very specific issues and disconnected from any social or political movement able to put urban issues firmly on the political agenda. For example, the Young Women’s Parliamentary Group in Solomon Islands has had some success in highlighting the need for improved urban transport (Spark 2014), but political commitment to improving transport services has received little support at the bureaucratic level. Similarly, the growing cohort of tertiary-educated urbanites capable of political organisation may be urbane but most lack a strong commitment to urban politics.

**Urban Politics: Looking for Leverage Points**

There are few entry points for donors and activists seeking to energise urban politics, but there are some positive examples on which to build. Innovation in the city is happening at the local level where communities like Panatina Valley in Honiara have self-organised to improve drainage, public facilities and employment, and to access government and non-government resources — setting an example for others. Urban services, including electricity, water and ports, are slowly improving as a result of donor-led sectoral changes in legislative frameworks and management. Urban security is boosted by new models of networked policing linking police forces, community chiefs and private providers. These are valuable flagships that can provide strong demonstration effects; the approach is opportunistic but lays the footings for political and policy change.

Other catalysts for action may emerge if we were not flying so blind with little basic information about urban growth rates, public priorities, environmental hazards and health risks. Knowledge is power and those committed to change such as urban planners, business people and activists have a very weak evidence base on which to generate public interest, pressure and policy initiatives. In Suva, evidence of heavy metal leachates from the city’s Lami Dump into urban coastal areas used for aquatic gleaning was a key factor in attracting donor investment and public pressure for better waste management. Similarly, the recent and severe impacts on the cities of Port Vila and Honiara following extreme weather events have provided the evidence of vulnerability and the political impetus to drive policy and practical urban planning and disaster preparedness actions.

Politics are dynamic, but at present the most productive approach to progress urban issues is likely to involve focusing on bottom-up and sectoral initiatives as political opportunities and evidence of high returns arise. Over time, such efforts may support the emergence of a constituency inclined to organise politically to demand additional gains for urban environments and investments. At that stage, a more integrated approach to urban management may be possible.

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**References**


Jessica Carpenter

One of the greatest challenges and opportunities facing the South Pacific is rapid urbanisation, and Solomon Islands faces some of the most pressing urban growth stresses in the region. Its urban population is increasing at around 4.4 percent, almost twice the rate of national population growth—a tempo that will double urban dwellers in less than 17 years (Keen & Barbara 2015). As part of a broader study of urbanisation in Honiara, this In-Brief examines online urban news articles from July 2014 to June 2016 reported in the main newspaper, Solomon Star. The study investigates the capacity of press media to accurately and independently communicate urban issues.

The study has some limitations. Although most national news stories are published online, there are some gaps. The *Island Sun* newspaper was not included because of the large overlap in stories. Social media was not evaluated—most active participants in the major medium for social media commentary in Solomon Islands, Forum Solomon Islands International, do not reside in the country, let alone the city (Finau et al. 2014).

Of the 4910 news articles examined, 884, or around 18%, were urban news stories specifically about, or related to, Honiara. Of these, the vast majority dealt with law and order (38%) or services (33%), trailed by infrastructure (8%). The service that received the most commentary was health (13% of total urban reporting), followed by education (7%), waste management (3%), and water and sanitation (3%).

Law and order reporting focused largely on court cases, followed by criminal activity, police operations and police capability. Key issues concerning services related to the National Referral Hospital, access to toilets, unsightly rubbish heaps, and short bus routes. Roads and traffic concerns were the most reported infrastructure issue, with housing also prominent.

The majority of the *Solomon Star* readership resides in Honiara (Iroga 2008). Noting this, one might posit that law and order was the overriding concern of city residents. While it is an issue of concern for many, most urban stories reported were not based on investigative journalism, but were drawn from press releases and other news feeds, mainly from government agencies and the police. Almost 25% of articles were word-for-word press releases; much of the remainder relied heavily on direct feeds.

In particular, the large composition of law and order reporting largely reflected an ease of access to information. According to a senior media officer, an active police media unit facilitated weekly press conferences and daily press releases, and the unit was highly responsive to media enquiries.

Urban news articles were also largely reactionary. The majority of articles focused on a specific event or circumstance, such as a forum, workshop or commemoration. Reports on urban youth and gender issues were the most reactionary, with at least 90% of articles based on press releases or reports of what was said at meetings.

One implication of this type of reporting is that while information on urban issues is made available to the public, it occurs in a largely uncritical manner, reflecting primarily
the interests and priorities of government and other key stakeholders. Professional journalism needs to look beyond official news releases and the opinions of the elite to question self-interested representations of issues (Devi and Chand 2008). But this takes time and resources — both in short supply for newspapers run on shoestring budgets.

In an attempt to gain better insights into matters of concern to Honiara citizens, 720 items in the Letters to the Editor section over the same period were assessed. Just over 10% of letters were on urban issues and were written by Honiara residents. Although a smaller proportion and a limited group, they may provide a clearer indication of urban issues of most importance to Honiara’s population. Services, again, were significant (30%), while law and order (18%) and infrastructure (19%) received similar attention. This is consistent with the 2013 RAMSI People’s Survey, which found that Honiara residents largely believed services, specifically education and health, should be prioritised.

There was more commentary in letters on trends than on specific issues (just over 50%) — possibly indicating a greater public concern about trajectories of urbanisation and socioeconomic implications. Urban employment, which received greater commentary than in news articles, focussed more on informal sectors and business opportunities, as opposed to the articles’ focus on job creation. Letter-writers mostly concerned themselves with markets and self-help for small business initiatives. This may be representative of the divide between government’s prioritisation of the formal sector and the importance of the informal sector to the livelihoods of a vast majority of Honiara residents. The heavy reliance of the Solomon Star newspaper on news feeds for urban reporting allows the media to be used as a mouthpiece of key players, and results in short-term, reactionary media responses to urban issues. Issues of most importance to city residents, such as the informal sector, are not receiving sufficient attention in press media.

The low levels of independent and rigorous reporting reflect challenges that face many media outlets across the Pacific, including media ownership and convergence, limited financial resources, and inadequate education and qualifications (see Robie 2014). But even with limited resources, journalists can benefit from issue-based briefings and support to boost their understanding of urban issues and key sources. For example, the additional support for a complex issue of national importance, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) drawdown, assisted with more accurate and critical reporting.

For newspapers to play a role as knowledge brokers, opinion shapers and catalysts for social dialogue, they need to report on issues of high social relevance, and represent the outlooks of both the elite and the marginalised in the city. Arguably, the Letters to the Editor section is filling an important role in opening up a space for people to express their views on urban policies and practices, even if those expressing views are part of a literate elite. Ideally, as the media develops further, it will improve its capacity to seek out a wide range of views. This could allow the media to play a stronger role in national development by reflecting social needs and shaping informed decision-making.

References


Endnote
1. Senior media authority, Honiara, personal communication, 6/7/2016.
The 2015 European Society for Oceanists conference was one of the largest-ever gatherings of scholars of the Pacific. This In Brief reviews the day-long session on Urban Melanesia, convened by two eminent anthropologists: Lamont Lindstrom and Christine Jourdan. In addition to the convenors, the session included a mix of established scholars (Jenny Bryant-Tokalau, Annelin Eriksen, Debra McDougall and Knut Rio) as well as promising early-career researchers (Tait LeFevre, Tim Sharp and Chelsea Wentworth). Presentations included all Melanesian countries: Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji, providing the opportunity for interesting cross-regional comparisons but leaving Indonesian West Papua as a major omission. All papers were satisfying works of scholarship that documented and analysed important contemporary issues for Melanesian cities and towns, tracing the contours of emergent social divisions as they are articulated in everyday life, economic activities, housing policies, political forums, new forms of leadership, class and ethnic distinction, and religious discourse.

Each presenter addressed a different aspect of social inequality and its consequences in Melanesian cities. Most Pacific towns began as colonial outposts where ‘natives’ were second-class citizens. In the post-colonial era, explicit racial exclusion is no longer practised but there are new economic divisions that dictate who is welcome or unwelcome in the contemporary Melanesian city. Frequently, what might be considered ‘middle-class’ perspectives shape the ways that cities are governed and planned. Sharp’s paper on the recent ban on betel nut in Port Moresby provided a striking example of how the informal sector can be marginalised by a politics of space based on middle-class aesthetics or elite imaginings of what appearance a global city should have. Bryant-Tokalau presented on the implications of new housing projects on government-owned land in Fiji. Government investments in upgrading settlements are dwarfed by middle-class housing developments funded by foreign capital that displace urban squatters. Nevertheless, there are non-government organisations and policy responses that do advocate for the needs of the urban poor in Fiji (Bryant-Tokalau 2014).

As high costs of living eat into their modest incomes, the middle classes are not always flourishing (Cox 2014). Jourdan and Rio each took up the perennial challenge to the budgets of Melanesian townsfolk, namely unsustainable pressures from visiting relatives. Jourdan, foreshadowing the themes of her forthcoming book on middle-class Solomon Islanders, argued that Honiara’s middle class is renegotiating kin obligations (cf. Barbara et al. 2015). Within these negotiations, ‘fairness’ has become a way of explaining the limitations of urban salaries and is often successful in encouraging rural visitors to contribute more during their stays in town. Residents of the Port Vila settlements Rio studies have established local trade stores as a service to the neighbourhood. He argues that this has the effect of setting up new rules for communal sharing that are based on buying from the store, where credit is expressly forbidden and so unreasonable demands from relatives are minimised. However, ‘demand-sharing’ may still be acceptable for children. Wentworth brought a public health approach to the study of malnutrition among children in Port Vila. In some neighbourhoods, children are able to eat well at local feasts, supplementing their otherwise inadequate diets.

Not all contemporary urban social divisions are framed in terms of class: intergenerational, ethnic and religious cleavages are also in play. LeFevre documented the ongoing legacy of French colonialism in contemporary moral panic over the (Kanak) ‘youth crisis’ in Noumea. Kanak youth resist being typecast as adrift in time and lacking a future and turn these characterisations back on both traditional leaders and settlers. Lindstrom outlined his Vanuatu-based research on the proliferation of ‘respect’ as an urban discourse that includes laments about the bad conduct of others (young people, urban settlers) and prescribes ideal civil conduct for the sometimes uneasy situation of strangers.
meeting in town. McDougall analysed changing social connections and identities in Honiara: more and more Solomon Islanders struggle to maintain ties with rural kin while working in town. McDougall (2016) argues this is producing more fixed and exclusive groups in town and that new forms of urban ‘ethnic’ leadership are emerging. Eriksen’s paper on Pentecostal Christians in Port Vila demonstrated that practices of exclusion and experiences of alienation in cities can also be articulated in religious practices. For growing numbers of Melanesian Pentecostals, the city is often imagined as a place of spiritual peril, needing to be purged of satanic influences and demanding prayerful vigilance.

During the session, Melissa Demian, a contributor to the previous (2010) European Society for Oceanists session on urban Melanesia, noted that most panellists had represented the city as a problematic space, perhaps reflecting the long tradition of what Connell and Lea (2002) called ‘anti-urban bias’ in the Pacific, where towns are seen to be bad places of cultural decline, immorality, poverty and crime. Demian challenged presenters to give an account of Melanesian cities and towns that captures the diverse motivations of the populations that seek out urban life and does not simply represent them as mistaken hopefuls drawn to the ‘bright lights’. Some more positive renderings of urban Melanesia were assembled in response to this question. However, considerable work seems to be needed in order to articulate the productive possibilities for urbanisation in the region (e.g. Richards (2015) on youth culture in Manokwari, West Papua).

In an era when town life is the norm for most of the population in several Pacific countries (Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands), the study of urbanisation in Melanesia is still strangely marginal. With exceptions — notably the presenters in this panel — many scholars, policymakers and Pacific politicians and their publics still cling to the romance of the village as the authentic mode of social life for Pacific islanders. This session provided rich accounts of the lived experience of urban Melanesians and examined the emergent social and economic structures (and accompanying political debates) that are reshaping life in the towns. For the most part this was done at a local level, focusing on particular communities within a given urban setting but giving less attention to the workings of the city at a larger scale. The session added to the growing momentum of new scholarship addressing the challenges and opportunities of urban Melanesia, not least around economic questions (Sharp et al. 2015), gender (Demian forthcoming; Spark 2011) and class divisions (Barbara et al. 2015; Besnier 2009).

**Author Notes**

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**References**


This In Brief discusses contemporary land complexities in Solomon Islands with reference to land dealings around the capital city of Honiara. It provides a brief history of land in Honiara before discussing urban land use, planning, and development.

Background
In Solomon Islands, all land was once held under customary land tenure. During the colonial period, laws were enacted to create new forms of land tenure: private land and state land. At this time, customary land deemed vacant was granted as freehold to individuals and entities, usually foreign. A new land law was enacted in 1959 (Land and Titles Ordinance). From 1961, the Land Trust Board (abolished in 1964) and the Commissioner of Lands were authorised to grant perpetual and fixed-term estates using public land.

Just prior to independence in 1978, amended legislation converted freehold and longer leases held by foreigners into fixed-term estate leases of 75 years, while the state held the perpetual estate title. Along with state-held perpetual estate titles in Honiara, this system created a pool of land that could be leased to private individuals and entities. After independence, the new constitution restricted land ownership and holdings by foreigners, and protected the interests of customary landowners, ensuring customary land transactions comply with rules of custom.

Who Owns the Land?
Most land in Solomon Islands is still held under customary tenure, where every member of a landholding entity, such as a tribe, clan, or family, is vested with the rights to use and access it. Non-owners usually have limited rights (usufruct rights), such as right of use, easement, or right of way. However, most land within the Honiara town boundary is government land held mainly as public land. Public land can be leased for either residential or commercial purposes (Williams 2011).

The Commissioner of Lands has the power to administer public land and allocate interests to others. Once land is registered, the estate title owner has indefeasibility, except for overriding public interests or when the High Court issues an order to set aside the registration because of fraud or mistake (Land and Titles Act). Estate titles are subject to the payment of premiums and rentals, and also to any development conditions prescribed originally by the Commissioner of Lands, now the Land Board. In theory, failure to comply with these conditions results in the forfeiture of the estate(s).

Over time, there have been issues of outstanding land rental payments and non-compliance with development conditions. Getting people to pay their dues and removing people from forfeited estates remains a challenge — evictions rarely happen in Honiara. There has also been abuse of discretionary powers by the Commissioner of Lands in the granting and transferring of registered estates. Individuals or entities with money have gained control of land in and around Honiara. Urban land has become expensive to acquire, contributing to the expanding of informal settlements onto customary land.

Today, under the Land and Titles (Amendment) Act 2014, the Commissioner of Lands’ discretionary power can only be exercised subject to directions of the Land Board. Established in Dec 2014, the board produced an annual report 2015 detailing how it allocated land. While this demonstrated transparency and accountability, access to some of the land allocated by the board is a challenge. This is because someone else has already occupied the land, boundary marks have been altered, or officers in the Ministry of lands have made excuses to not transfer the land.

How is Land Managed and Utilised in Honiara?
The Honiara Town and Country Planning Board is responsible for establishing a planning scheme for all planning areas within Honiara. The board considers this planning scheme with other prescribed considerations before granting permission for any
Development within Honiara (Foukona and Paterson 2013). Enforcement of planning requirements has always been a problem. Settlements, housing, land reclamation, and other activities do not comply with town planning requirements. This can increase urban vulnerability to disasters and health risks due to overcrowding in settlements and poor housing structures.

Solomon Islanders who have title in either a registered perpetual or fixed-term estate can transfer the proprietary interest during their lifetime or by will. Such persons can also lease their estates to a Solomon Islander for any specified period, or to a foreigner with written consent from the Commissioner of Lands (now the Land Board). Legislation allows for the granting of easements over perpetual and fixed-term estates and registered leases. The Land Board can grant leases of public land under periodic terms and licences to occupy public land for a period not exceeding three years.

**Customary Land Use Agreements**

Since the change in land law in 1959, there is no legal provision allowing customary land owners to lease their land to locals or foreigners. Even so, customary law does allow customary land owners, particularly near Honiara, to permit the occupation of their land subject to implied or expressed conditions. These dealings are common due to the increasing number of people settling outside of the Honiara’s municipal town boundary. The land dealings usually involve the customary practice of feasting or *chupu* (traditional gift exchange). Such customary practice provides the basis for people to assert their claims to customary land (Monson, 2015).

Trends such as urbanisation have put tremendous pressure on traditional institutions responsible for the management of customary land, but there has been little state intervention to facilitate adaptation to the cash economy or to support customary land development. Consequently, appropriate processes of access and acquisition of customary land outside the Honiara town boundary are unclear, of dubious enforceability, and largely unrecorded. The situation is made more complex because of the lack of land records and registration, contested land boundaries, questionable valuation methods, unscrupulous land administration practices, and unaccountable landowner representatives.

**Repercussions and Ways Forward**

Honiara’s land tenure system has had a major impact on urban planning and development. The state is unable to meet public demand in the urban areas it controls, and demand for urban land for residential, recreational, commercial and livelihood purposes is rapidly increasing. Despite the Land Board’s effort to allocate land in a transparent manner, access to urban land remains a challenge. The default options available to people are: encroachment onto customary land, informal settlements, and constructing houses without building permits. Policy attention to different types of land tenure, and particularly customary land tenure, has not been well balanced.

There is no single solution to these issues. The starting point is to find ways to forge partnerships, negotiation platforms, and more inclusive processes between the state, other stakeholders, and customary landowners to address pressing planning and development issues with Honiara’s urban land tenure system. Customary land use agreements and processes should be supported through state intervention or legislative reform. There should be tighter controls on the use of customary land through leaseholds and planning laws to ensure there is equitable access to land. If this doesn’t happen, the problems with land arrangements in Honiara are highly likely to translate into law-and-order problems in the near future.

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**References**


Visions for Henderson: A Workshop on Managing Peri-Urban Growth in Solomon Islands
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In Brief 2016/32

In most Pacific nations, urban growth far exceeds planning capacity and designated urban zones, resulting in people spilling into jurisdictions not covered by urban planning schemes or city council services (ADB 2016). In Solomon Islands, rapid urbanisation is leading to unplanned urban expansion, inequitable access to development benefits, and feelings of marginalisation — some familiar themes from assessments of factors that led to the ‘Tensions’ (Allen 2013:56–60) and still cause social friction. With available land in Honiara nearly exhausted, development pressures are being felt in Guadalcanal province, particularly in Henderson — an area east of Honiara encompassing the international airport as well as mushrooming market, retail and commercial developments.

Boundaries between Honiara and Guadalcanal appear well defined on maps, but, on the ground, these lines are blurred with people and goods easily flowing between the two, and settlements straddling jurisdictions. The reach of services such as waste and sanitation to the peri-urban areas in Guadalcanal are patchy given their distance from existing utility networks and service provision zones. Peri-urban areas, such as Henderson, could benefit from a more integrated and inclusive approach to urban planning for the greater Honiara area, particularly if development opportunities are to be harnessed and regional harmony sustained.

In August 2016, the ANU partnered with Guadalcanal Provincial Government to convene a workshop to explore visions, priorities, and options for the future development of Henderson. The workshop was designed to support a constructive dialogue on urban development opportunities. This In Brief sets out key insights raised by stakeholders during the workshop and analyses how future research and policy engagement could better address rapid urbanisation in Guadalcanal. Around 30 participants attended the workshop from national, provincial and local government agencies, members of the Guadalcanal Provincial Assembly, and community groups. The enthusiasm to create new pathways for local urban development was strong.

Getting (Community-Supported) Action
Participants were acutely aware of the significance of peri-urban development issues given the history of the ‘Tensions’ and ongoing sensitivities around urban migration, land ownership and access to economic opportunities. Many commented that the workshop was the first time since the ‘Tensions’ that peri-urban development issues had been officially discussed and that such discussions were well overdue. As one participant reflected, Guadalcanal is ‘at a stage where we need expertise to develop awareness of what development can bring, both good and bad, and how we can strike a balance between the two’.

There was widespread recognition of the opportunities that could be gained from better planned urban development in Henderson, but participants stressed that planning needs to be more inclusive — no forums exist to give voice to community concerns. Information is scarce on the new developments springing up. Gender exclusions also persist, with one women’s group representative noting ‘we want to be included in any development taking place at Henderson … we understand that there are conditions to be met, including environmental, social and economic, and women can be inclusive [sic] in all of these facets of development’.

Youth representatives observed that long-term planning and commitment appear to be lacking: ‘it’s one thing to build something, it’s another to look after it’; the next generation would ‘pay the price’ for poor development choices. Despite the concerns, there was a general level of support for development and a common vision for Henderson as ‘a modern town, the face of the city’.

The Challenges Ahead
The technical and political challenges ahead were well recognised. While in theory the laws and powers exist to better
manage urban growth, in practice planning mechanisms do not affect outcomes: ‘today everyone is free to do what they want’. The Honiara Local Planning Scheme (HTPB 2015) does not address peri-urban development beyond the city boundaries, and current efforts to develop a Henderson LPS will likely take some time before it will be in place. Key technical challenges stem from the lack of capacity to enforce building and development codes and laws, further hindered by the lack of revenue. Institutional arrangements were unclear, a senior Guadalcanal provincial officer lamented that ‘there is no clarity on the provincial government’s role in terms of managing urbanisation’ and existing powers are not fully used — for example, few provinces have a functioning Town and Country Planning Board.

Participants were conscious of the deeper political economy challenges shaping Henderson’s development. Land ownership and the control of productive resources in the Henderson area was seen as a particular challenge, which marginalised communities and limited scope for inclusive development. One participant noted that ‘land is the catalyst of [social and security] problems’. Perceived inequitable funding from the national government, service provision which favoured Honiara, and the lack of support for, and economic benefits from, customary land development in Guadalcanal province were all aired as major challenges.

**Critical Junctures and Pathways for Development**

Participants were aware of the difficulties of putting Henderson’s development squarely on political and policy agendas. Part of the challenge was changing the way urban people and politicians view Henderson — that is, as an important part of Greater Honiara rather than a separate rural community. One stakeholder noted the need to better acknowledge the continuous flow of services, people and influences from between the city and adjacent Guadalcanal areas. Handled well, geography could be an asset. For example, proximity could allow Guadalcanal to capture benefits from national events such as the Pacific Festival of Arts in 2012, which resulted in infrastructure development for road improvements in Henderson. The upcoming 2023 Pacific Games, which Solomon Islands will host, is another such opportunity. Accommodation and facilities for the Games could be located in Henderson, helping to expand infrastructure and services such as housing, waste disposal and water treatment facilities, and create new sources of provincial revenue and amenity.

A proactive approach is still needed, however, to resolve issues that have been critical for other major developments such as Tina River Hydro, including clear procedures for accessing customary land, and structuring benefit-sharing arrangements among landowners and government agencies. Given the urgency for timely action, participants thought this could be a good topic for a future workshop in order to ensure that national government deliberations have strong and supportive community roots.

Participants were acutely aware of the importance of political agency in addressing Henderson’s development, but also the difficulties in exercising it given the diverse forms of local land tenure following central and colonial governments’ alienation of customary land for public and private use. As a senior Guadalcanal provincial officer summarised, ‘we don’t own the land, but we can control what we put on it’. There was a strong desire by Guale participants to become drivers, rather than ‘spectators of urban development’. While progressing Henderson’s development would not be easy, participants felt strongly that ‘the absence of formal planning should not legitimise a lack of action’. Participants were keen to obtain support from development partners and the private sector to help them progress urban management and investment.

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**References**


A cursory review of any government policy in Solomon Islands over the last 20 years will reveal all manner of failed plans. Most relate to rural development. In an effort to stem urban growth and spark a revitalisation in non-urban spaces, successive governments have advocated ‘rural growth centres’, ‘bottom-up’ development, discretionary funds for MPs’ rural expenditure, and, most recently, the creation of ‘special economic zones’. The corollary of this approach is a neglect of the urban. Adopting the position that official pronouncements in Solomon Islands have historically been a poor indicator of policy intent, money flows become a critical de facto gauge. This In Brief is concerned with the fiscal realities of Solomon Islands’ only city, Honiara. Looking at budget and cost of living issues, it will examine the extent to which contemporary public investment is keeping pace with the importance of this vibrant but largely unloved metropolis.

**Budget**

As the first mutterings of impending independence were floating around the halls of the British Colonial Office, the protectorate government in Solomon Islands was busy shoring up its post–World War II capital. In contrast to contemporary narratives of urban neglect, an overemphasis on Honiara in the late 1960s was a cause for concern: ‘villages believed that Honiara received most of the money spent on the development of an infrastructure’ (Bennett 1987:326). And, as Bennett attests, they were right. At a time when only 5% of the population were resident there Honiara received a vastly disproportionate sum of the (largely British) public purse. Fast forward 50 years and the disinterest with which the capital is held has seen a marked reversal of this position. The city is in a fragile fiscal state with no signs of imminent change.

Honiara City Council (HCC) draws its budget from three main sources: internal revenue mainly in the form of rates and licenses; national government allocations, including a direct grant; and donor contributions. Today, Honiara’s annual appropriation figures are meagre, averaging around US$3.7 million over the last five years. This money is used to service a city that is home to anywhere between 65,000 and 100,000 people and growing, crudely equating to expenditure of US$57–$37 per resident per annum. Taking 2013 as a guide, appropriation per capita for Port Moresby was around six times that of Honiara, despite a lower proportion of the country’s population residing there. Expenditure is directed towards services such as medical clinics, schools and works. Although with one-third of the budget typically spent on administration, the tangible outputs of this outlay are thin on the ground.

HCC spending is complemented by discretionary development funds opaquely managed by the three national MPs whose constituencies fall within the city. In a significant case of electoral malapportionment, in 2014 urban constituencies averaged around 9,900 registered voters, compared with 5,500 for their rural counterparts. This sees further urban neglect with funds being dispersed across a greater number of voters. This year, urban MPs collectively controlled monies exceeding the city’s budget, spending it on a raft of incongruous measures. In the past this has included cocoa and coconut development (no plantations have been sighted budding in Honiara’s backblocks). Despite these MPs being *ex officio* members of the council, there is no evidence of fiscal coordination.

Relative to population, and arguably, importance, there has historically been minimal donor engagement with the city. The notable exception is New Zealand. Over the last decade it has provided modest assistance to the HCC, most recently through a direct grant funding arrangement which in 2015 was around US$775,000. This is focused on, *inter alia*, technical assistance, solid waste management and market infrastructure. Other donors operating in the urban space include the World Bank through the Rapid Employment Project and UN-Habitat with its Participatory Slum Upgrading Programme.

**Cost of Housing**

Honiara has always been expensive. In the late 1960s the Protectorate forewarned would-be expatriate residents of the high costs of every-
day essentials such as men’s white stockings (BSIP 1968:11–12). A lack of housing stock has also been a perennial problem, dating back to the colonial period. For many of today’s urbanites finding housing is difficult, contributing markedly to the cost of living. An increase in public servants and advisers following the civil conflict has contributed to this situation, reflected in official statistics: following the ‘tension’ housing and utilities have consistently experienced the sharpest increase as measured by the Honiara Consumer Price Index.

Honiara’s housing market is acutely segmented. Landlords of executive housing peg their rental to the upper ceiling paid by the main aid agencies, typically SB$25,000 (approx. US$3,200) per month, a figure unimaginable for those on an average wage. Public servants are entitled to a government housing allowance, a government-owned house or rental payments. For junior workers an allowance translates to around US$20 per fortnight or less. Many residents end up pursuing low cost housing options, including living with family and wantoks (Honiara households average seven occupants: SIG 2013b:37) and in privately rented rooms or lodges. Others are pushed out of the city to largely unregulated ‘settlements’, with the two main wards to the east of the city experiencing annual growth of 16.4% between 1999 and 2009 (SIG 2013a:xxvi).

An Urban Future
Assuming that by 2050 the Honiara population has caught up with the urban global average of 50%, the city would be home to more than 600,000 people — surpassing the total population of the country on latest census data.4 Efforts to expand Honiara’s boundary have been resisted by contiguous landowners, meaning this figure would likely be squeezed into 22 square kilometres (placing it in the top 10 cities in the world for population density on today’s figures) with spillover onto unserviced customary land.

The successful management of future growth requires a long-term focus and, above all, consideration of the economic realities of running a city and of living in it. Benefiting from economies of scale, urbanisation is typically associated with improved service delivery and coverage. And while this is true of contemporary Honiara — with the non-urban comparator setting a low bar, government having only a tenuous connection with rural communities — it is equally evident that revenue collection and spending is not keeping pace with the current population, let alone a vastly expanded one.

Responding to this situation will require government and its partners to focus on a number of issues, including the management of urban public land (Williams 2011), investment in key urban infrastructure, and innovative solutions around service delivery, particularly for informal settlements. This, however, is predicated on an acknowledgement of the advantages that urbanisation can bring together with the requisite political will — attributes that have, to-date, been missing.

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Endnotes
1. Selen or seleni is Pijin for money, derived from the English ‘shilling’.
2. Over the last decade the national government has provided a grant of around US$175,000 per annum.
3. Terence Wood 22/9/2015. Crawford School of Public Policy, personal communication.
4. Based on a population of 1.3 million using a ‘medium population scenario’: SIG 2013a:164.

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BSIP (British Solomon Islands Protectorate) 1968. Conditions and Cost of Living in the Protectorate. Honiara: BSIP.
Constituency development funds (CDFs) are attracting an increasing level of academic attention internationally (see Baskin and Mezey 2014). To date, work done on CDFs in the Pacific, and in Solomon Islands specifically, has lagged behind work done on Africa, South Asia and other regions. This is anomalous given that 2015 has seen CDFs in Solomon Islands rise to historically — indeed globally — high levels. This In Brief outlines the current state of play on CDFs in Solomon Islands, and suggests areas for further research.

**CDFs in Solomon Islands: A World-Beater**

The 2015 budget, brought down in April of this year, provides for the largest CDF allocation, in absolute and proportional terms, in Solomon Islands’ history. Within the development budget the core CDF, the Constituency Development Program, is budgeted at SBD260 million (USD32m). This is supplemented by Taiwanese grant funding for the same program of SBD70m. In addition, the development budget provides for a Constituency Water and Sanitation Program (SBD21m), a Constituency Renewable Rural Electrification Program (SBD5.16m), and an allocation for ‘Constituency Ships’ (SBD30m). Taken together these various budget lines amount to some SBD386m (USD47.6m), just over one third of the consolidated development budget.

Additionally, two lines in the recurrent budget provide for MP-controlled funds: the MPs Discretionary Fund Grant (SBD25m) and the MP Scholarship Award Grant (SBD15m). Grossed up, MP allocations from the development and recurrent budgets amount to some SBD426m, equivalent to just over 12 per cent of total budgeted expenditure for 2015, or SBD8.5m (USD1m) per MP.

Moreover, there is reason to believe other budget lines within the development budget are in fact managed through MPs as CDFs, even though they are not identified as such. It is possible the above figures understate CDF allocations for 2015 by about a quarter, or around SBD2.5m per MP, which would bring CDF allocations to around 45 per cent of the development budget.

These uncertainties aside, the trends are clear: CDFs in Solomon Islands are growing steadily both in dollar terms, and as a proportion of budget outlays. Indeed, the comparative literature (Baskin and Mezey 2014) suggests Solomon Islands may be something of an outlier internationally in terms of the proportion of budget outlays allocated for CDFs, and even in terms of the absolute dollar amount allocated per MP.

Solomon Islands is also an outlier in terms of the relative absence of governance arrangements in place for CDFs (Baskin and Mezey 2014). The 2013 Constituency Development Funds Act remains the first and only legislation specifically covering CDFs. The Act is notably shorter and less detailed than comparable legislation in other parts of the world. Supporting regulations have been drafted but not yet issued. Anecdotal evidence suggests, in the absence of anything other than basic accounting requirements, MPs develop their own systems for managing CDF funds.

**Understanding the Role and Impact of CDFs in Solomon Islands**

Public discussion and debate about CDFs in Solomon Islands reflect themes familiar from the experience of CDFs elsewhere around the world: issues around transparency, accountability, corruption and waste, effectiveness, the proper role of MPs, and the extent to which CDFs influence political behaviour — both that of voters at elections and that of MPs in Solomon Islands’ fluid parliamentary system (Fraenkel 2011).

A recent World Bank report (World Bank 2014) comprises perhaps the most up-to-date and comprehensive analysis of the performance of CDFs in Solomon Islands (alongside smaller, centrally managed community programs). The report draws on both local expertise and that of individuals involved in implementing and monitoring CDFs in Kenya and Jamaica. In rating the performance of Solomon Islands’ CDF the report finds the key measure on which it performs well is the speed at which funds...
are disbursed. Against other criteria — efficiency and effectiveness; accountability, transparency and dispute management; and sustainability — the CDF performs poorly.

One of the issues addressed in the academic literature is the question of whether CDFs can play a positive role in linking MPs to their constituents and, by extension, in processes of democratisation and broader state formation. To some extent these questions are reflected in the scant literature on CDFs in Solomon Islands, which dwells on the weakness of the formal state apparatus and the effect that CDFs have had on the effective and stable functioning of the state. Fraenkel (2011) is unequivocal in seeing CDFs as inconsistent with strengthened state capacity. He cautions donors against ‘endorsing the kinds of analyses that depict such schemes as potentially positive instruments for improving the functioning of states.’ While noting the corrosive effect of CDFs on the state, Craig and Porter (2013) also ask — albeit tentatively — whether institutionalisation of CDF arrangements may ‘in time provide a stable, effective provisioning system that is gradually folded into mainstream state mechanisms’.

**Good Questions — But Where’s the Evidence?**

One of the most distinctive characteristics of Solomon Islands’ CDFs is the enormous gaps in our knowledge about: how CDFs are managed by MPs and their staff on a day-to-day basis; how effective and sustainable CDF expenditure is; public attitudes and expectations; the impact of CDFs on voter behaviour; the attitudes of MPs themselves. The World Bank report makes the point that ‘there is very little information as to how [CDF] funds are used, at all levels of government and society.’ There is also widespread ignorance among ordinary Solomon Islanders about the workings of the CDF. One consequence of this is that much commentary on CDFs in Solomon Islands is poorly supported by evidence.

Reflecting this, one newspaper (Solomon Star 1/9/2015) recently reported as a ‘staggering revelation’ news — theoretically freely available to all Solomon Islanders — that CDFs totalled SBD334m a year. In fact, the figure is at least SBD100m higher than this: possibly more.

Public awareness is one of the key issues being addressed in a two-year (2015–16) project, the CDF Community Audit, currently being undertaken by Transparency Solomon Islands with funding from the UN Democracy Fund. The project is aimed at raising awareness of CDFs and raising demand for accountability from MPs. The project has not released data to date but will be gathering valuable evidence from communities that may be highly relevant for future research in this field.

Better evidence is important, first and foremost for the citizens of Solomon Islands, on whose behalf CDFs are spent. Better evidence may get us closer to understanding the political impact of CDFs and their effect on state-formation. It may also be a means of changing the nature of the dialogue between Solomon Islands governments and donors on this subject. For many years this has been a dialogue of the deaf: donor opposition to CDFs has gained no traction, while the CDF budget has grown inexorably. At a time when Solomon Islands’ largest donor, Australia, is keen to pilot innovative approaches to development, better evidence about CDFs could assist in designing fresh and more effective approaches to it.

**Author Notes**

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*Solomon Star* 1/9/15. $334m to MPs a year.

Introduction

Fiji is the most urbanised state in Melanesia. Its main city, Suva, is facing many challenges of rapid growth. With more than 50 per cent of its population now living in its cities and that number set to increase to about 60 per cent in the next decade (UN-Habitat 2012a), Suva officials and residents are working to address the pressures of urbanisation and to capitalise on its opportunities.

Rapid growth has given rise to familiar urban problems in Suva, including unemployment, poverty, informal settlements and patchy services — about a fifth of the Greater Suva residents live in informal or squatter settlements, many in poverty with poor services and connectivity to the city. Yet despite the inequities and service gaps, positive gains from urbanisation are being made in Suva. The challenge for urban managers and residents is to capitalise on the potential of cities to boost productivity, connectivity and infrastructure coverage while better managing emerging social, cultural and service delivery divides. There are some positive signs. While unemployment in Fiji is high, at about 7.6 per cent, it is declining; Suva remains a strong driver of national economic growth, accounting for about a third of gross domestic product (GDP); and while urban poverty persists, it is falling (World Bank 2014). Moreover, emerging institutional arrangements are attempting to reconcile the impetus for growth with customary values and land tenure.

As part of a broader study of urbanisation by the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia (SSGM) program at the Australian National University, this paper outlines some of the tensions and innovations that have occurred in Suva with respect to urban development and informal settlements over the last decade. ‘Informal settlements’ is an umbrella term used in this paper to encompass settlements of ‘squatters’ (the vernacular term for those who reside on freehold or state land without legal title), and people who have made informal arrangements with owners to reside on customary land. Both situations tend to mushroom in rapidly urbanising contexts, and Fiji’s attempts to grapple with this and other urban issues might be applicable across the Pacific region. The research involved reviewing government documents and literature, and conducting interviews with high-level government officials in the Ministry of Lands, Department of Housing, Suva City Council and Nausori Town Council, as well as with key community stakeholders. We consider the lessons that can be learnt from Suva’s experiences and the challenges that lie ahead. In particular, we are concerned with addressing issues of exclusion, inequality, and access to urban land and shelter.

Cities as Drivers of Development: Competing Priorities

Globally, interventions to address urban poverty are strongly underpinned by neoliberal ideology which holds economic growth as the central priority and considers the free market and property rights as the most effective means to achieving urban development. When neoliberal approaches address poverty and social marginalisation, they often do so through ‘supplements’ or incentives that are pro-development and market-friendly (Schilcher 2007). In many cases, mechanisms to tackle rising poverty and social marginalisation involve a further ‘roll-out’ of neoliberal approaches, as exemplified by Bogaert (2011) in his case study of Morocco. Faced with urban social unrest and rising urban inequalities, ‘slum upgrading’ programs worked closely with the private sector, supported by international agencies, to integrate...
slum dwellers into the formal (economic and property) market, and increase access to finances and low-income housing. While this approach meets the needs of some, the framing of urban poverty in developing countries as largely a technical problem to be solved by market-oriented approaches neglects political hegemony and deeper social or cultural divides (Bogaert 2011; Rigon 2014).

In Fiji, and Melanesian cities in general, neoliberal approaches to urban development must jostle for authority with customary values of mutual obligation and reciprocity, and customary land tenure arrangements. Colonial history also has unresolved land tenure and equity issues, leading to calls from religious, political, ethno-nationalist and non-government organisation (NGO) parties to improve equity, address historical wrongs and alleviate ethnic disadvantage (Sakai 2016). Further complications to the implementation of neoliberal ideologies are encountered in much of Oceania because of customary landownership, particularly in the rapidly growing peri-urban areas. This land is not directly controlled by government, nor do neoliberal frames have particularly strong resonance with many traditional owners. This aligns with the ‘moral confusions’ found in many Pacific states, as they seek to reconcile good governance with ‘continuing loyalties, indigenous modes of production … complex and long histories, and the quest for better access to, if not a larger share in, global wealth’ (Bryant-Tokalau 2012). These ‘confusions’ are compounded by those that ‘capitalise on culture’ for personal gain (Rutz 1987; Ward 1995).

Various authors (Jessop 2002; Peck and Tickell 2002; Thibault 2007) have argued that in urban contexts where state reach is limited and social exclusion rising better connectivity between neoliberal and neo-communitarian approaches could boost inclusiveness and harness under-used and undervalued community resources. Neo-communitarianism has particular resonance in the Melanesian context, with its emphasis on the contribution of the ‘social economy’, customary values and the links between economic and community development (Jessop 2002). In practice, this involves greater support to, and involvement of, multi-sector partnerships and networks by moving beyond private–public partnerships to engage alliances among communities, NGOs, religious groups and social networks in order to fill national service gaps. This leverages human skills and financial resources in community and harnesses social and economic resources in the informal sector for the co-production of goods and services of value — culturally and materially — to residents (Albrechts 2013; Ostrom 1996). In Melanesian cities, where urban sprawl affects customary land, and a good portion of economic activity is informal, linkages between the formal and informal, and between social sectors, seems inevitable and, arguably, favourable.

Dealing with urban poverty is about creating opportunities wherever they occur — building social and physical assets, managing risk, increasing access to credit, strengthening community empowerment and political governance, and reducing inequality (World Bank 2001b). Achieving these lofty goals will require engagement that spans all living spaces and socioeconomic realms of the city. Importantly, it will mean putting ‘community’ back into ‘community development’ — that is, using community development and human resources to deliver socially valued goods, in addition to economic development (Thibault 2007).

The Changing Urban Politics of Fiji

In the past, Fiji’s attitude towards the societial problems of urbanisation has been rightly criticised, particularly for its denial of poverty (Khan and Barr 2003) and harsh policies that skirt underlying causes of urban poverty and crime. Those in the informal sector have historically been forcibly removed, with the eviction of squatters or unlicensed vendors such as juice sellers and ‘shoe-shine boys’ (Connell 2003; Connell and Lea 2002). In 2006, the minister for Housing, Adi Caucau, uncompromisingly advised that:

‘the more than 10 percent of the country’s population who are forced to survive as squatters are like thieves because they live illegally on someone else’s land … and police should make every effort to round them up and remove them’ (Bryant-Tokalau 2010, quoting Cacau 2006).
But such hardline attitudes fail to deal with the underlying drivers of urban problems; they disregard the significance of customary land tenure and values, lack of livelihoods, limited financial accessibility, and growing inequality, all of which combine, on occasions, to fuel social tensions (cf. Simmonds 13/7/2016; Moceituba 20/7/2015). Perverse economic incentives, such as extremely high land costs and taxes, and inefficient land administration systems — erratically enforced — make squatting the rational response to land shortages, inequitable land allocation systems, and rising inequity (Chand and Yala 2008; Keen and McNeil 2016). These can be exasperated by ethnic divides, social instability and unemployment resulting from policy frameworks that fail to create linkages between formal and informal sectors. Outside of the Pacific, studies have found that viewing the informal and formal sectors as independent, separate and even antagonistic to each other leads to missed opportunities for development with respect to economic growth, service delivery and inclusion (Jessop 2002; Rao 1996). If cultural tensions and perverse incentives are neglected, programs targeting resettlement or ‘slum upgrades’ might shift urban problems around the city, or create pockets of relief, but will not necessarily stem discontent.

Yet, over the last decade there has been a discernible shift in urban policy in Fiji, both in rhetoric and practice, which is evident in our own research and corroborated by others’ experiences (cf. Bryant-Tokalau 2010, 2014; World Bank 2015). The shift has been partially in response to external pressures and partially a shift in local attitudes. For example, the UN Declaration of Human Rights recognises the basic human right of access to housing and necessary basic services (Article 25), and this is reinforced by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) which produces urban profiles of cities highlighting the extent of urban shelter and service shortfalls and the need for ‘slum’ or informal settlement upgrade programs (cf. UN-Habitat 2003, 2012a). Further external pressure to put urban issues higher on the policy agenda comes from the UN-Habitat push for a ‘New Urban Agenda’ to address entrenched informality and politics of exclusion.

Global and local initiatives to benchmark and improve life in informal settlements — to which the above programs contribute — can help to focus political and policy attention. Urban policy and NGO/government activities were spawned around the globe in response to the Millennium Development Goals: like Target 7c to ‘halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation’, and 7d to ‘achieve, by 2020, a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers’. The most recent UN Sustainable Development Goals sharpen the focus on sustainable cities further; for example, Goal 11 which aims to ‘make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’. Benchmarking and international frameworks may not determine national policy, or even produce outcomes in all contexts, but they can provide a valuable policy nudge.

Fiji’s shift in attitude to the city has been recognised by the World Bank — in contrast to that of other Pacific islands countries. The World Bank notes that the Fijian national government has ‘a progressive policy perspective to dealing with the challenges of urbanisation, and sees settlers as important contributors to society’ (2015:xi). This attitudinal shift has been reflected in the National Housing Policy of 2011 and the 2013 constitution amendment (section 39.1); the latter enshrines each Fijian’s right to freedom from arbitrary eviction:

Every person has the right to freedom from arbitrary evictions from his or her home or to have his or her home demolished, without an order of a court made after considering all the relevant circumstances.

A senior government official observes that he has witnessed a shift away from evictions throughout his career working on urban issues:

It previously used to happen that we would take informal settlers to court. Now the government doesn’t want to evict people forcefully. Because they also want to comply with the UN charter for human rights. So now the government tries to look for space then asks the squatters to relocate.
During the last election in 2014, the need to constructively deal with housing for informal settlers was a central election issue (Tuwere 6/8/2014), suggesting citizen as well as official concern. The Bainimarama government placed urban development higher on the policy agenda than ever, likely driven by a desire to appeal to the growing numbers of urban voters, particularly in the Nausori–Suva–Lami corridor, and to harness the development potential of the cities given the stagnation of the agricultural sector (Lal 2014; MacWilliam 2015).

**Suva: The Changing Face of the City**

Between 2002 and 2010, Suva’s urban population increased by 5 per cent to a total of 51 per cent of the Fijian population. The Greater Suva Urban Area (GSUA) comprises Suva City (the capital) and three municipal towns: Lami, Nasinu and Nausori. Suva and Nasinu comprise around 57 per cent of the urban population, with an estimated 244,000 people living in the Suva–Nausori corridor (UN-Habitat 2012a). According to the same report, average population growth hovers at around 1.7 per cent, and approximately 30 per cent of the national GDP is generated in the GSUA — making it the country’s economic centre.

The population of Fiji is comprised predominantly of Indigenous Fijians (57 per cent), commonly referred to as iTaukei, and Indo-Fijians (38 per cent) who are mostly descended from migrants forced into indentured labour by British colonisers (FIBOS 2007). Until the 1960s, indigenous migration to urban areas was tightly restricted by colonial administrators across the Pacific (Chung and Hill 2002), virtually confining iTaukei to the villages as a way of ‘preserving’ indigenous culture and controlling urban development. Since these restrictions were lifted, there has been significant rural-to-urban migration amongst both iTaukei and Indo-Fijian demographics.

The urban drift is caused by a number of socio-historical and politico-economic patterns. The expiry and non-renewal of thousands of sugar-cane leases in the Western and Northern divisions between 1997 and 2014 pushed (and continues to push) many farming families and unemployed farmhands to urban areas (Naidu and Matadradra 2014), and fuels much of the current debate over Fijian land (Bryant-Tokalau 2012). Between 1997 and 2007, the number of Indo-Fijian farming families fell by about 25 per cent (Market Development Facility 2013).

While poverty has dramatically decreased by 34 per cent in urban areas since 2002, incidences of poverty in rural areas have increased by 6 per cent during the same period (FIBOS 2011). This may be linked to expiring land leases, as well as to the decline in the sugar industry, both factors pushing people out of rural areas in search of better opportunities in the cities. The perception of better employment prospects and improved educational opportunities for children have pulled many families towards Suva and surrounding areas, as illustrated in Table 1. Thus in just 20 years, Fiji transformed from a predominantly rural to a predominantly urban society — similar trends or rapid urbanisation can be seen throughout Oceania.

In the GSUA, a lack of urban infrastructure has made it difficult for authorities to accommodate the needs of the rapidly expanding urban population. With the urban centre nearly at capacity, the growth is mostly concentrated in the outer informal settlements. Due to the housing shortage, many families have resorted to settling on marginal lands without a formal lease leading to Nasinu being dubbed the ‘squatter town’ (Fiji Ministry of Local Government, Urban Development, Housing and Environment 2011). Figures from the Ministry of National Planning (2009) suggest that squatters constitute approximately 7 per cent of the Fijian population.
population as a whole and 15 per cent of the urban population. However, accurate data on squatters and informal settlers generally is notoriously difficult to access: social commentator and advocate for the poor Father Kevin Barr argues that socioeconomic surveys inadequately capture this demographic and that the nationwide figure is more like 20 per cent.\(^3\)

As in many cities, informal settlements in Suva vary in size; they range from two or three households on the side of a road to Jittu Estate in Suva, in which 850 households were counted in the last socioeconomic survey. Most informal settlements are on marginal lands, including flood-prone areas, unstable hillsides, stream banks, and areas adjacent to rubbish dumps or industrial areas (Gravelle and Mimura 2008; World Bank 2001a). The recent devastation of Cyclone Winston was a harsh reminder of Suva’s vulnerability to natural hazards, particularly in the informal settlements. Although these residents face insecure land tenure, overcrowding, poor housing and patchy access to services, the situation is improving and is more manageable than elsewhere in the Pacific, as explained further in sections below (cf. World Bank 2015).

In Fiji, little is more important than land — it forms part of Fijian identity and to some extent guarantees indigenous privilege (Ward 1995). Urban sprawl encroaches upon all three types of land that exist in the GSUA: state land, which is managed by the Department of Lands and Survey; iTaukei lands, which are managed by the iTaukei Lands Trust Board (TLTB); and privately held land (UN-Habitat 2012a). The vast majority of land across Fiji is customary, approximately 88 per cent. The land in the GSUA is also mostly iTaukei land, though Crown and freehold land occurs in chunks

Figure 1: Land Tenure in Greater Suva Urban Area (GSUA).
throughout the city, initially alienated by British colonisers, as illustrated in Figure 1.

While maps like the above neatly delineate landownership, disputes persist. The majority of growth is occurring on iTaukei land for which planning regulations are weak and dependent on cooperation with traditional landowners. Part of Suva’s success in urban management has been the densification of urban development on alienated land, and the use of the TLTB to facilitate urban development by the private sector on customary land through long-term leases. But as outlined below, both have not escaped tensions and difficulties, so systems of urban management continue to evolve and officials look for ways to better support development on both alienated and customary land in urban and peri-urban areas. Solutions tend to be hybrid institutions (at least in theory). These hybrids aim to blend neoliberal and customary systems of governance. In practice, the driving motivation leans strongly to neoliberal goals of commercialising land and drawing customary landowners into the market economy.

Planning for Growth: Layering Governance

Across Melanesia the rapid rate of urban growth almost defies proactive and strategic planning. Inevitably, informal settlements grow faster than the plans for serviced settlements, resulting in areas being not only poorly serviced but unhealthy and frequently vulnerable to natural hazards and disease because of poor drainage, housing, road access and services. Because many informal settlements do not officially exist, they become part of a policy and service vacuum with residents having no rights to the land, services or representation. A gulf between formal and informal systems emerges and is re-enforced by the dominant political economy, creating social segregation and disadvantage.

Marginalisation or neglect, however, does not make informal settlements disappear; their permanent nature is well accepted now, as is the need to more strategically manage the mushrooming problem of informal settlements and service shortfalls (Lucci et al. 2015). Because government reach is limited across Melanesian cities, much urban assistance is externally driven by donors, religious groups and NGOs, often functioning in collaboration with communities. Given the limited capacity of the state, urban institutional safety nets are not systemic, but rather dependent on ‘self-care’ (Lemke 2001 as cited in Bogaert 2011), or external agents/donors.

The governance of urban growth in Suva is undertaken within a framework of town planning schemes and by-laws (UN-Habitat 2012b), and is predominantly focused on alienated land and the formal sector. The Town and Country Planning Department, which sits within the Ministry of Local Government, Housing, Environment, Infrastructure & Transport, regulates land-use patterns and has zoning under its jurisdiction. The municipal councils of Suva, Lami, Nasinu and Nausori towns each use approved town planning schemes as their key planning instrument. Lessees need to seek approval for development from their municipal council, who then gain approval from Town and Country Planning, creating multiple layers of governance.

Competition and gaps between national and local planning agencies also still persist. Each municipal chief executive officer (CEO) oversees everyday operations of the local councils, but the local agencies are also overseen by a ‘Special Administrator’ appointed by the central government, who is particularly focused on improving rate collection, and thus economic viability of local governments. Suva City Council is self-funding, no longer reliant on central government transfers now that rates and revenue collection is much improved; this is far from the case for other Melanesian cities like Honiara in Solomon Islands. Nevertheless, the fact that the councils are not fully independent from national government agencies causes significant delays in approval processes and jurisdictional tensions. For example, it is claimed that the overlap between the CEO and the Special Administrator leads to confusion and a high turnover of staff (UN-Habitat 2012a). It also has the potential to reduce responsiveness to local values and priorities.

Customary Land: Shared Responsibility

Local councils have much less direct governance powers over customary land, which falls to spe-
cialised national agencies. The iTaukei Land Trust Board sits within the Fiji Department of iTaukei Affairs, and is mandated to protect and negotiate customary landowner rights and manage commercial transactions over the use of these lands. When customary urban land is developed, the power is given to the mataqali (see Box 1). Some historians claim that the control of the mataqali over customary land management was a colonial ‘invented tradition’ that enabled easier access to inalienable, customary land, but did not necessarily reflect customary landowners traditions and values (cf. Rutz 1987). While benefit-sharing continues to vary, outcomes favouring customary landowners and priorities may be compromised if mataqali act in their own self-interest or do not have the skill-set required to maximise community benefits.

The TLTB’s contemporary focus is on facilitating private investment through leases and licences for tenants and managing the proceeds for the mataqali beneficiaries. As iTaukei land cannot be sold, the land can only be accessed through leasing. The core tension in iTaukei customary land law is the conflict between inalienability of land and the need for economic certainty to underpin investment (Dodd 2012).

The issue of equitable benefit-sharing when customary land is developed remains a sensitive one. The TLTB officially recoups no more than 10 per cent for administrative costs and the rest flows to the landowning community, though there are allegations of problems with accountability, distribution and rent transparency. In 2010, the Bainimarama government amended the Leases and Licenses Regulations of the Native Land Act to pay TLTB lease income directly to the individual bank account of iTaukei landowners. This decision was aimed at addressing allegations of corruption and inequitable rent distribution within communities. Still, ethno-nationalists argue that the ‘capitalist’ notion of individual payments undercuts iTaukei communities and values like solesolevaki (working together) and veirogorogoci (Sakai 2016). They also allege that income earned from communally owned land will not necessarily end up supporting the maintenance or development of the community, or funding community obligations like funer-

**Box 1: Vanua and Customary Landowner Rights**

Customary landownership is inextricably linked to the iTaukei concept of vanua, which literally means land but is a holistic term that also incorporates community, environment and spirit. Each vanua is made up of several yavusa (tribes) which are in turn constituted by the mataqali (clans). Each mataqali has a chiefly system within which people inherit their social roles, which come with communal obligations and reciprocity; values that are inherent in iTaukei culture. Although each mataqali is represented in the vanua, chiefly rivalry remains strong, particularly at the local level (Norton 2007). As chiefs inherit their titles, accountability and equity are variable from community to community, and are often criticised because of the high rates of abuse (Delaibatiki 17/3/2015).

The concept of a native land trust was established by the colonial government which recognised mataqali (clan) landownership and glossed over the multilayered and complex forms of ownership predating colonialism (Sakai 2015). Chiefly landownership was once fluid and contestable, but European administration grafted particular mataqali to particular lands. There is also a long-standing gender bias to Fijian leadership: women, while typically well-represented in informal community politics, have historically benefited less than their male counterparts in the chiefly system and remain under-represented in contemporary national politics (Spark and Corbett 2016).

So, there remains contestation over the ongoing legitimacy and authority of the chiefly system in the current political climate, as well as who should rightfully represent customary community interests. While it has lost some authority at a federal level, the traditions of family obligation, reciprocity and hierarchy remain socially and locally powerful, all of which complicates contemporary urban issues.
als (admittedly an expensive affair) or recovery from natural disasters. However, there was never any legal obligations for chiefs to redistribute lease monies, or spend them on traditional obligations to begin with (ibid.). While this is true with respect to ‘black letter law’, arguably there remains a social expectation on chiefs to help meet the needs of their people.

The hybrid TLTB system aimed at creating a linkage between neoliberal and neo-communitarian urban systems often falls short of meeting legal and customary expectations, and of controlling rent-seeking. Outcomes and implications of the system can differ between landowning units, influenced by divergent traditional leadership structures, shifts in power within the community, and community expectations. Even so, state control over leasing regimes is likely to tighten to achieve dominant economic/functional sector objectives; this will increase financial accountability but decrease control for landowners (Dodd 2012). Once landowners lease their land to the TLTB the terms of the investor’s lease is largely out of their hands, including, in some cases, the returns to the community. The lack of control of land management and land rents once customary landowners lease the land through the TLTB remains a sensitive issue (Rawalia 30/7/2015; Sakai 2016).

Another, more recent, pro-development initiative encouraged by the National Housing Policy of 2011 has been to establish the Land Bank (Box 2). Benefit-sharing arrangements under the Land Bank are far from assured and interest has been low. The Lands Department is concerned that too few owners are aware of the benefits of land development, and sees one of its principal ongoing objectives as increasing awareness amongst iTaukei landowners of the development options open to them. The reluctance of landowners to engage with the Land Bank model was predicted when the Land Bank was first established (Prasad 2012). It is not clear whether the problem really is a lack of understanding of long-term economic benefits; or a higher prioritisation of communitarian values. The Land Use Decree restricts the jurisdiction of the courts

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**Box 2: Establishment of the Land Bank**

The Land Bank — administered by a Land Use Unit within the Department of Lands — was established by the 2010 Land Use Decree for the purpose of generating economic activity through proper land use. The decree controversially reduces the powers of the Land Bank’s competitor, the TLTB (McDonnell 2015).

Native landowners or mataqali (see Box 1) lease their land to the government through the Land Bank, after which the land will be subleased to investors (mostly foreign) or farmers for a period of no more than 99 years. If the proposed development is on the portion of iTaukei land categorised as ‘reserved’, it requires consent from over 60 per cent of the mataqali. The Land Bank does a feasibility survey of the registered land, puts it on the market for tender and works with Investment Fiji to secure investors for the development of the land. The Land Bank brokers the development deals between the landowners (represented by the TLTB) and the private investor. While landowners can state their preference for the land’s use, they have little control over who the land is subleased to once it has been registered. For example, if a construction firm undertakes the development on a block of apartments, premiums and rental are determined at market rates after land valuation by the Ministry of Lands, and a royalty is then paid to the landowner.

Unlike the TLTB, the Land Bank is not bound by customary obligations, allowing for quicker processes to finalise leases. Although customary land title holders retain ownership of the land, they do not retain authority over it. The establishment of the Land Bank was an effort to encourage development on iTaukei land, particularly in rural areas, which has underutilised development potential or which is lying fallow. But it has also been applied in the city; for example, in Wailekutu in Lami. By 2014, 64 landowning groups in both rural and urban settings who deposited their land leases with the Land Bank had successfully rented out to investors, bringing in around AU$470million worth of business to Fiji (Chand 7/7/2014) — generating much needed income but sacrificing customary control.
and therefore limits the ability of landowners to seek protection and redress. Moreover, while the decree states that leases will be issued in the ‘best interests’ of landowners, this is balanced ‘against the wellbeing of the economy’ and there have been some controversies over the extent to which landowners rights are protected, and whether they are receiving their ‘fair share’ of revenues from development leases on their lands (McDonnell 2015).

Frustration with the inadequacies of formal institutions has led to a rise in vakavanua arrangements, which enable informal access to native land granted directly by customary landowners in response to traditional requests or in exchange for offerings (Kiddle 2009; Ward 1995). Landowners pursue these arrangements because the economic returns are higher than through the TLTB arrangement, and because they are able to maintain greater control over the use of, and the terms of access to, the land. While the informal arrangements are less secure for those leasing the land, the shortage of urban land and high costs of access assures that there are plenty willing to accept these informal arrangements.

At the moment when iTaukei landowners lease their land to developers or settlers directly through unofficial means, significant problems can arise for tenants who may have unregulated payment schemes levied on them, be evicted, have poor or no access to basic services, and be forced to live in substandard housing (Naidu and Matadradra 2014). Landowners are also vulnerable to unscrupulous investors and may not get contractually enforceable fair rents. vakavanua arrangements are likely to persist despite insecure tenure and little (if any) legal recognition, so it may pay to consider how these arrangements can be recognised and made more secure without eroding the advantages they provide to the community.

While Fijians have not resolved the vexed issues around urban land development on both alienated and customary land, they are experimenting with models and options to better enable landowners to develop their land, facilitate interactions between investors and title holders, increase revenues, and maintain customary control over land and its diverse social, as well as economic, values. The success of the solutions being implemented for both national and communal development is dependent not only on legal frames, bureaucratic competency and economic efficiency, but also on the sociocultural values and frames that shape behaviour. To a large extent, the models in place aim to facilitate economic growth and investment and improve accountability, but are less strong on protecting customary and community values and benefit-sharing. The latter, if neglected, has the potential to fuel social resistance to private investment and to urban newcomers.

‘Regularising’ Land Tenure: Linking Formal and Informal Systems?

Suva was one of the first Pacific islands countries to recognise the rights of informal settlers and extend services to them — in essence creating a policy bridge between the informal and formal sector. One reform it has established is to regularise land tenure, which means granting squatters a title to the land at low cost, allowing them to enter the formal housing sector. The rationale behind regularisation on state land — though sometimes expressed in pro-poor rhetoric — is largely about neoliberal economics: it is considered better to have a property market, in which authorities can be aware of land-use and ownership, collect rates from known owners, and provide basic services to improve public health and security, than to ignore informal settlements or risk the political fallout from mass evictions.

A rigorous study of the costs and benefits of regularisation has not been done, but even though less revenue may be earned directly on individual lots by lowering land tenure fees, the lower costs may well provide greater overall revenue through compliance and rate payments — this is an area where more data would be valuable for decision-makers. Holding the costs of legally obtaining leases at extremely high rates can result in low legal compliance and foregone revenues from squatters. For example, in Honiara, fixed-term estate leases were allocated to flood victims but very few were purchased when the costs of leases were high, resulting in informal settlement of the allocated site (Keen and McNeil 2016).
Land regularisation in Fiji happens through a government leasing system under the Crown Lands Act. The Department of Housing has a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Lands and is thus given the lease at no cost. The Department of Housing then engages consultants to prepare subdivision scheme plans and eligible ‘sitting’ tenants are issued with approval notices, after which they are required to start paying rates to the municipal council. Engineering then begins for the subdivision, with contractors employed to undertake civil construction works and the relevant authorities engaged to organise services such as roads, electricity and water. Although services are technically required to meet the relevant authority’s standards, in an effort to make the lease more affordable for squatters, some of the building requirements are waived in this context. For example, instead of 10 metre easements for roads, 6 metres will be permitted and instead of a 2 metre yard clearance between houses, 1 metre may be permitted.5 There are obvious benefits in these shortcuts, because they enable greater affordability and density of housing. However, a reasonable concern is that substandard housing may disadvantage tenants and create long-term vulnerabilities.

Once the civil works are completed, the government subsidises 50 per cent of the land premium and the sitting tenants in the settlement collectively pay the remaining 50 per cent, equally shared amongst the community. Residents are given a six-month grace period to save and pay for the premium, and the Department of Housing also provides a support letter for each resident to the Fiji National Provident Fund (NPF), the superannuation fund, so they can be eligible for housing assistance to help them pay for these costs.

Those without regular income, particularly those engaged in the informal sector, are still likely to be disadvantaged in accessing finances and securing land/housing; they may ultimately be forced to move if they cannot raise funds by the end of the grace period. And, it is not just lease financing that is needed. Following upgrading, each resident must also pay land registration and stamp duty. For example, in the case of Bangladesh squatter settlement in Nasinu, purchasing the title and stamp duty cost residents a total of approximately FJ$2500 or AU$1600. Thereafter, each resident continues to pay ground rental to the Ministry of Lands (or the TLTB, if the settlement is on iTaukei land), which equals approximately FJ$200 (AU$128) per annum, depending on the premium, and is reassessed on a five yearly basis. Annual rates continue to be paid by each resident to the relevant municipal council. According to the Fijian Islands Bureau of Statistics the median household income in urban areas in Suva was FJ$17,037 when last calculated in 2009 (about AU$10,800) (FIBOS 2011).

Due to the heavy government subsidisation involved and the need for full servicing, land regularisation is costly and can face delays. In the words of one senior government official, ‘one of the key challenges is the non-availability of serviced housing lots. Our construction of those are slow’.6 Further funds are being sought from international aid organisations, like the World Bank, to finance this subsidisation program, but that can come with its own conditions and constraints. In addition, property speculation is recognised as an ongoing problem. As a result, there is a restriction in the lease conditions which dictates that residents are unable to sell their title for 10 years. If they do so, they will be required to pay back the whole of the development costs. However, translating policy from paper to practice can be fraught and enforcement is difficult, so there remains the potential for sales to continue to happen informally.

The dominant approach followed to date assumes that investment will only occur when land rights are secured through formalised legal frameworks, but there is evidence that this hardline dichotomy between legal (good) and illegal (bad) is not shared by all in the city. In his study of Fiji settlements, Kiddle (2010) found it was far more informative to focus on a perceived security-of-tenure framework which took into account actual settlement perception and behaviours. ‘Good enough security’ may allow for housing upgrades and a feeling of community security and belonging in the city, and the way to achieve this is to put in place institutional arrangements which remove the fear of eviction (see Box 3).
There are also initiatives that attempt to assist squatters to regularise their claims to customary land, such as The Town-Wide Resettlement Program. This is a native land leasing system in which the housing department consults with the TLTB and the concerned landowner. Under the leasing agreement on Crown and private land, the developer is usually required to pay 100 per cent of the land premium before the TLTB will issue a lease, but in informal settlements on customary land, the premium may be negotiated at a significantly reduced price — often by 50 per cent per acre. Those settlers with allocated lots will collectively share the cost of the premium for that piece of land. While this program has been implemented in Nadonumai in Lami town, and Waka Ni Sila in Nasinu, this formalisation process is lengthy and involved. The attractiveness to customary landowners is not strong, rents and control are higher under informal (vakavanua) arrangements (Kiddle 2010).

**An Alternative to Urban Living? Rural Resettlement**

A second program to manage urban growth in the GSUA is a rural resettlement program, which ultimately tries to move urban migrants back to rural areas. The program was developed by the Department of Housing, Ministry of Agriculture and TLTB in collaboration with an NGO, and is heavily funded by NZAid. Its first iteration involved relocating families who were squatting in the Suva Jittu Estate squatter settlement to rural areas. So far, squatter families have settled on 30 acres of land in Lomaivuna in the interior and 200 acres in Vanuakula, Naitisiri.

**Box 3: Regularising land tenure: ‘Bangladesh’ squatter settlement case study**

Mr Didar (pseudonym) moved his wife and three children into a semi-permanent house on Crown land in the Bangladesh squatter settlement in Nasinu in 1990. He purchased the house from his brother for FJ$2800 (about AU$1800), and he had been working night shifts in a chicken factory in order to finance it. With a leaking roof, pit toilet and holes in the floor, Mr Didar says the house ‘was not safety [sic] for the children,’ and they were scared of eviction.

In 1992, Mr Didar formed a volunteer committee, which advocated for land tenure security and services for the settlement. They held meetings directly with the Ministry of Lands and frequently lodged complaints about blocked drains with Nasinu and Nausori town councils. The Bangladesh land was eventually surveyed in the mid-1990s and lots were allocated to families. Because the squatter houses had been built in an ad hoc way and sandwiched together, there were some houses that overlapped on each other’s lots, and certain people were made to demolish their houses and relocate to other lots within the community, or relocate to another settlement close by. After struggling to provide all of the documentation to prove their eligibility, temporary ‘approval notices’ were granted for most of the Bangladesh squatters in 1999. Mr Didar felt ‘50–70 per cent security’ after receiving the approval notice, and built a permanent concrete section at the front of his house in 2000 (which now houses 12 members of his extended family).

Disputes over lot ownership, as well as the need to provide fully approved sewerage, water, electricity, telephone, sealed roads and fire hydrants before the titles were formalised, caused delays. However, 19 of the squatters were eventually granted a 99-year lease on 14 December 2010, with a further 38 having their lots reserved until they could pay. Mr Didar’s lease cost FJ$2085 (AU$1340) and stamp duty totalled FJ$440 (AU$283). The announcement just before Christmas in 2010 was met with great celebration amongst the residents, some of whom had been there for 35 years (Swami 17/12/2010). As Mr Didar said,

> When we received the title we were so happy, so happy. At least it was something for our kids’ future. You die? Never mind, no problem, at least your kids have got something there. They’re going to strive for their daily needs, daily bread, to put something on the table, but they will be happy to have the shelter.
The families have been trained in farming skills, and provided with agricultural tools — the cost of which they repay from the revenue from farming their newly acquired land.

This can, however, be a slow process that struggles to meet demand: when a notice about the resettlement program was posted in Jittu Estate asking for expressions of interest, it had to promptly be removed because it was filled so quickly. Further, success is difficult to measure and the program can be costly. Of the 16 families who initially took part in the relocation, 11 of them left for various reasons. Since the initial phase, a total 40 families have now been relocated but it is too early to say how many will remain (Tokona 8/9/2015).

In some ways this policy is reminiscent of past (value-laden) Pacific policies, in which it was believed that people would lead more fulfilling lives if they returned to rural areas (Connell 2003; Khan and Barr 2003). The high demand from squatters themselves for this rural resettlement program suggests that many of them also hold these views, but, equally, the large number of leavers from the first phase suggests expectation of rural life may be misconceived, especially if social networks are not strong. Costs may well be high for long-term outcomes, and there is no guarantee the children of those who choose to stay in rural areas will not migrate to the city.

The Mediated Urban Response

A third initiative designed to manage informal settlements is to hold negotiations with settlers, relevant private or customary landowners, the TLTB and other relevant government agencies in order to come up with a mutually beneficial and socially negotiated relocation scheme. One example of this exercise is in Nanuku, Vatuwaqa, where there is 64 acres of freehold land owned by an Indo-Fijian family. Over decades, 381 squatters had informally settled on their land, which the owners (who reside overseas) now wish to subdivide into industrial estates. The Department of Housing successfully negotiated with the TLTB to access 31 acres of available customary land for the relocation of these families. In addition, it was agreed that the Indo-Fijian owners would contribute to the relocation, providing $1000 compensation per family. A further request, still in negotiation, is that the landowners also concede a portion of their property; in this case 10 of the 64 acres, which will be used to house some of the squatters.

While better than eviction, there were some concerns raised about whether the families will be disconnected from their sources of income and subsistence as well as their social networks once relocated, and that the sheer numbers involved make it unlikely all families will be adequately resettled (Bryant-Tokalau 2012). There is also the potential for rent-seeking if families sell their new lots and resettle in other informal settlements. Yet another concern is that this approach sets in place an incentive to squat. While these are all legitimate concerns, it appears the government feels the potential perverse incentives are outweighed by the benefits of developing the urban land and avoiding evictions and legal wrangles. This social tangle of rights and relationships to urban land opens a small window on the complexity of applying a rights-based approach to urban development; it is very unclear whose rights should be the basis of urban development frameworks. The solution may only be found through context-specific and flexible social negotiations that bridge neoliberal and neo-communitarian governance values.

Finding Shelter and Meeting the Bills

Access to shelter and housing is a cornerstone of livable cities and thus an indicator of sustainable development, as noted above. While accessing housing is related to land availability and affordability, the two are not the same — as evident in rental properties and housing upgrades. In terms of housing governance in Fiji, this sector is managed by the Department of Housing, which sits within the Ministry of Local Government, Housing, Environment, Infrastructure & Transport. One challenge in Fiji’s governance of housing has been to develop a legal and institutional framework that can efficiently meet the demand for housing by a rapidly growing urban population. Prior to the National Housing Policy of 2011, urban housing development was regulated by over 25 different Acts covering finance, lands, environmental planning, infrastructure, ser-
vices and construction; a conglomeration that often confused matters and delayed approvals. In informal sectors, full compliance is rare.

One of the major recommendations in the 2011 Housing policy was to try to bring the administration of the informal settlements, emergency housing and private housing under the one framework, and thus reduce overlapping approval processes, remove delays, and enable faster housing and land development with higher levels of compliance. Although this policy has brought about some positive integration, budgetary constraints have restricted the implementation of some of the recommendations and an overarching legal framework is still in progress. Moreover, a senior official in the Department of Housing expressed concern that his office is charged with the responsibility of rolling out programs and regulating settlements, without the sufficient authority to do so effectively: ‘We are enforcing the programs but don’t have the legal power … we’re having to be reactionary rather than proactive’.

The People’s Community Network (PCN), a national advocate for informal settlers and the poor in Fiji, has coordinated government agencies and Catholic aid to build Lagilagi, a high-rise, low-cost housing estate that is being built in several phases to gradually rehouse residents of Jittu Estate squatter settlement. The PCN has a system in which long-term informal settlers of Jittu undergo social and economic empowerment workshops and are encouraged to save over time, after which they can access a strata title to one of the houses to be paid off at a reduced rate over 12 years. Residents can also contribute ‘sweat equity’ toward the cost of the shelter — reducing the financial burden and tapping into considerable human resources within the community while building skills. Like many projects, this venture has faced rumours about nepotism and bias in allocation (Rika 2016). Since nepotism relates to the favourable treatment of relatives expected within social structures of reciprocity and obligation, tackling this issue, and the need for greater accountability, may be seen as a challenge of neo-communitarian urban governance. Nevertheless, over 70 households have successfully been relocated with a further 70 to follow.

Another key player in the housing sector is the Housing Authority of Fiji (FHA), which is a commercial statutory authority that began by providing affordable accommodation for those unable to secure a home, but has since expanded its reach to include mortgage financing for middle- to high-income earners. The interest rates of an FHA loan, after the first 12 months, are comparable to a bank loan. However, the requirements are more flexible with the authority than with the banks, and the authority will not assist high-income earners, whereas the banks — obviously — will. The required deposit amount is also less (10 per cent versus 20 per cent) and may be drawn from the Fiji National Provident Fund.

According to the FHA website, the general requirements to obtain a loan through the authority are Fijian citizenship, proof of employment,
to be aged at least 21 years and to earn less than FJ$50,000 per year (increased if it is a joint application). The FHA offers refinancing (bringing an existing home loan under their scheme) or new mortgages. It contributes to the goal of the Fiji Housing Policy aimed at ‘affordable and decent housing for all communities by 2020’, launched in 2011. The home loan rehabilitation policy implemented as part of this strategy was aimed at helping people struggling to repay their mortgages which includes those who have paid more than the principal amount, customers who are unemployed, and any customers facing financial difficulty. Prime Minister Bainimarama said at its launch:

This is a social policy and is in line with the government’s commitment to ensuring the Housing Authority plays a key role in empowering our people and promoting home ownership. This policy is not a hand-out but is a social desire to assist the marginalised and those most at risk of losing their homes. (Fiji Government 22/1/2011).

Here we see a dual discourse which, at one level, is a communitarian leg-up for the disadvantaged and, at another, a market-friendly supplement to promote ongoing participation in the neoliberal economy. Yet the existence of the housing authority is in contrast to other Melanesian countries; like the Solomon Islands who do not have such an entity to provide housing finance for home buyers, and is instead reliant on banks, Solomon Islands NPF or private lenders — all of which can be costly, putting home ownership out of reach of the majority (Samuel 2016).

Recognising that not all in Fiji can buy homes, Fiji has also established a Public Rental Board. On recommendation by the World Bank, the Public Rental Board is separate from the housing authority and managed by a separate Board of Directors, although there is continuity with the same chair sitting on both. The Public Rental Board acts as a commercial statutory authority that seeks to monitor rental flats for underprivileged tenants, and provides government subsidies when a disproportionate percentage of a tenant’s salary is allocated to rent. It currently manages 20 rental estates with approximately 1550 rental flats. However, the agency self-reports that it struggles to keep up with the demand for affordable housing (Public Rental Board 2016) and there is an extremely long waiting list. The current calculation for subsidies is listed in Table 2.

Officially, all can access this assistance: rents are subsidised for those who can prove their low income (or no income) by producing their pay slips or a recommendation from the Social Welfare Department. However, simultaneously, there is strong sociopolitical concern that undeserving people are being granted assistance in a number of these programs, giving rise to a push for better surveillance over applicants for assistance. A cabinet submission is currently being debated that increases the threshold of proof of eligibility. As a senior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weekly Gross Income (WGI) Range ($)</th>
<th>Criterion (% of Income)</th>
<th>Tenant Contribution (% of WGI)</th>
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<td>1 0–80</td>
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<td>2 81–100</td>
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<td>3 101–125</td>
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<td>4 126–150</td>
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<td>5 151–175</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 176–200</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Public Rental Board.

Note: All PRB properties undergo a property valuation to determine market rent charges. The 2010 subsidy is applicable to the estates where general renovation has taken place and rent has been reviewed.
official in the Ministry of Lands stated: ‘We have to ensure only the genuine qualify. We conduct a socioeconomic survey and they must provide proof. Then we conduct a search of all landowners’ other holdings. They can’t hide from us’.11

However, for those who are very poor or earning a living in the informal sectors, income can be largely undocumented and irregular; thus making access to this system almost impossible. Most street vendors, for example, live in informal settlements rather than formal public rentals.12 Thus, while these policies go some way to increasing accessibility to shelter and finance, and thus improving urban equity, there are those who remain marginalised.

Servicing the City: Connecting Places and People

The provision of services to settlements such as water and waste collection is a challenge faced by all Pacific islands countries, due to both geographic and technical barriers. In some, service-providers require legal land tenure before they provide access to urban services. However, the water authority of Fiji has established an arrangement whereby they accept government-issued identification credentials and will provide ‘temporary water connections’ if the tenants have formal permission from the Department of Housing and/or the landowners — creating a subtle recognition of the dual formal/customary tenure systems in operation. Fiji is recognised as a ‘clear leader’ in providing piped, treated water services for urban households, including in customary and informal settlements (World Bank 2015); 94 per cent of Fiji’s urban population has access to clean water (ADB 2014b). Though, in some cases, residents may have a connection but only intermittent, and sometimes unhygienic, supply (UN-Habitat 2012a).

Water theft is still a problem in many informal settlements and water agencies throughout Melanesia, resulting in large losses of revenue and water. In Fiji, though, the water authority has sought to place customer meters at the edge of a settlement rather than at each household, and the community must then install distribution piping to each household and collect fees; an acknowledgement that leveraging social capital may work better than centralised regulation and individual pricing mechanisms. This approach places more responsibility on the household and community to monitor water theft (World Bank 2015). A challenge for many poor settlements, however, is that they are expected to pay for, and establish, their own pipes.13 This has the potential for unequal service access, and poor plumbing which may lead to contamination.

Waste management has been an ongoing problem in Suva, as well as all other Melanesian cities. However, in Suva collection and management has markedly improved over time and it leads Melanesian cities in service delivery. Suva City Council has significantly increased the budget for waste collection and contracted out the services for organic waste. Due to issues with contractor non-compliance or inefficacy in the past, the council has stringent, binding contract conditions and the waste collection contractors are monitored closely. Garbage collection now happens efficiently three times a week, which is facilitated by Suva City Council’s substantial rate base.

The media often echoes the voice of local ‘rate payers’ who are concerned about the ‘eyesore’ of informal settlements and particularly the perceived ‘indiscriminate dumping of rubbish’, which is deemed to cause environmental damage and reduce surrounding property values (e.g. Fiji Sun 3/12/2008). However, there are a number of structural constraints that contribute to waste problems in these settings — informal settlements have fewer roads and infrastructure making waste collection harder than in other areas of the city —
a situation that could be exacerbated by lowering infrastructure standards to reduce social and community costs of upgrading (see earlier remarks). In response to mounting waste complaints but limited roading, the Suva City Council has installed skip bins at the edge of squatter settlements, which is a strategy to allow settlement residents to dispose of waste at any time and for the community to take greater responsibility.

Conclusion: Policy Implications

The quest for sustainable urban development is ongoing in the GSUA, but there have been some notable keys to policy success. While sometimes at odds, communitarian and neoliberal approaches to urban growth need not be binary. Policy-makers have necessarily straddled the two systems of governance, arriving at policy solutions which — though not perfect — are making some headway in better facilitating the inexorable march of urbanisation in a uniquely Fijian sociocultural context. The mix of land tenure types — state, customary and private — will persist, as will tenure arrangements like vakavanua which are rooted in custom and spread the benefits of urban land access more widely. To boost urban equity and justice, these arrangements need to be nested in legal systems that can enforce the rights of landowners and tenants when disputes arise. Ideally, this will involve an arrangement which draws on both neoliberal and communitarian values now entwined in the Melanesian city.

Although the GSUA has no single mechanism for coordinating services to manage urban growth, it has a good level of multi-sectorial and multi-layered cooperation, which has led to a number of successful initiatives that go some way to addressing the shortage of affordable housing and services. The rural resettlement program and the regularisation of land tenure have involved collaboration between the TLTB, Public Rental Board, Housing Authority, Ministry of Lands and Department of Housing, Town and Country Planning, municipal councils and NGOs. Regularising land tenure has been a particularly crucial aspect of Suva’s experience. As demonstrated in the case of Bangladesh squatter settlement, being granted tenure can give people a stronger sense of security as well as increase their sense of civic pride. When done across a community it can also build social capital.

In terms of challenges ahead, Suva authorities still struggle to fully support different land tenure types and to spread access to customary land more equitably across landowners. Building well-serviced, low-cost housing fast enough to cater for the rapidly expanding urban population also remains a challenge. In the words of the Director of Housing, there are five pressures on the housing sector: 1) security of tenure, 2) sanitation, 3) overcrowding, 4) water and 5) decent housing. If any one of these is not adequately addressed, the squatting problem will potentially grow. Moreover, successful management and recognition of the informal sector remains crucial to ensuring the equitable distribution of benefits and effective roll out of assistance policies to those in most need. But, there are the very vexed issues of who has rights in the city and how trade-offs between those claiming rights are resolved. Suva at least is trialling the facilitation of mediated solutions for land claims, involving a range of stakeholders.

Given the cultural context, it is likely that sustainable urban development will be a blend of neoliberal and neo-communitarian approaches, but getting the mix right is a real challenge. There is a palpable, progressive momentum with regards to urban governance in Suva at the moment, but ongoing political commitment and genuine financial backing must be sustained to maintain and progress successes to date, and to reach an equitable sharing of the city.

Acknowledgement

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Notes on Authors

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Meg Keen is Senior Policy Fellow, SSGM Program, ANU, Canberra.

Endnotes

1 Father Barr, personal communication 2/6/2016 about...
Suva’s informal settlement population and the work of the People’s Community Network. UN Habitat (2012a) put the figure at about 17 per cent, Barr’s estimate takes into account population growth in informal sectors and personal experience.

2 Senior Government Official 1, personal communication 26/5/2015.

3 Barr, personal communication 2/6/2016.

4 Senior Lands Officer, personal communication 28/5/2016.


10 Senior NGO Representative 1, personal communication 6/6/2016.


12 Senior NGO representative 1, personal communication, 6/6/2016.

13 Informal Settlement Worker, personal communication 22/6/2016.

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Informal urban settlements are rapidly growing in the greater Honiara region, including peri-urban areas in Guadalcanal Province, with some areas growing at rates as high as 12 per cent per annum (SINSO 2012:21). Most informal settlements’ residents do not have legal land tenure and usually lack services, adding to urban inequalities. Government-led responses have been limited; the main initiative to date has been to offer informal settlers 75-year leases on state land (that is, ‘fixed term estates’), but the process has many bureaucratic steps and often ends with an insurmountable hurdle when most cannot afford the lease price, which can be over five times median incomes. Adding to frustrations, the process has also suffered from a lack of transparency.

Responding to growing pressures, the Solomon Islands Government is expanding its urban agenda to address deep-seated urban management challenges. For example, the Commissioner of Lands who had sole responsibility (but little accountability) for allocating urban land has been replaced by a Land Board of 12 voting members in an effort to depoliticise land allocations. An informal settlement upgrading strategy, supported by UN-Habitat, is also taking first steps to address the nexus between land, services and governance issues, although progress has been mired by unclear roles and responsibilities from the local level up and concerns about how interventions may affect (informal) land access and power relations. National framing documents, including a national urban policy and a national housing policy, are also being developed, adding to the paper commitments. Getting traction will depend heavily on community engagement, political will and resourcing — all currently patchy.

This In Brief reports on recent work, supported by UN-Habitat and donors, aimed at creating a profile of Honiara’s informal settlement situation and the challenges ahead. We then focus on one key missing element: the critical need to improve housing affordability.

Mushrooming Informal Settlement

Best available information emerging from UN-Habitat’s profiling suggests there are close to 4000 informal settlement households within Honiara’s municipal area; that’s about 28,000 people or around 40 per cent of Honiara City’s population (UN-Habitat 2016). Many of these informal settlers live in 36 ‘informal settlement zones’ mainly on state land, a delineation created by the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Survey (MLHS) for administrative reasons. For most residents the boundaries between formal and informal parts of the city are irrelevant. A recent survey of residents from seven of these zones found only 5 per cent had a temporary occupation licence; all the other respondents either didn’t know what tenure they had (44 per cent), forgot (9 per cent) or claimed the information wasn’t available (42 per cent) (Pauku 2015:7).

The most rapidly growing informal settlements outside municipal Honiara are on peri-urban customary and registered land in Guadalcanal Province. Numbers are unclear but likely in the hundreds, if not thousands, of households. There is little support for customary landowners wanting to develop their land, and there are few legal protections for those with informal agreements. Melanesian studies have found that adaptation, not replacement, of customary tenure is the preferable approach because it builds on existing arrangements (Fingleton 2005). Social acceptance of customary tenure is evident from Honiara’s housing investment patterns. Investment is correlated most strongly with time in place rather than legal tenure — particularly in informal settlements — which suggests de facto or perceived security of tenure is a key (but neglected) driver of investment; as in Fiji (Kiddle 2010).

Informal Settlements Are Here to Stay

The MLHS is now committed to upgrading informal settlements through subdivision planning and converting state tenure to leased land. There are plans for most informal settlements within the Honiara town boundary. The government has accepted the permanence of many informal settlements on
state land. Evictions are extremely rare; actions reminiscent of the recent tensions related to ethnicity, land and economic benefits disputes, most intense between Guale and Malaitan ethnic groups on Guadalcanal, especially in Honiara, are avoided. The majority of informal settlers in greater Honiara are Malaitan.

Infrastructure and services — particularly better sanitation, solid waste collection, and access paths and roads — are rarely available in informal settlements. Refeshingly, both the major utilities are taking a more pro-poor, progressive attitude to informal settlements. The utilities have, for example, been piloting and planning ways to reduce costs of connections (Solomon Power) and introduce prepay mechanisms (Solomon Power and soon Solomon Water) to boost services to informal settlements. Even so, one utility executive noted they would be ‘chasing the people’ for a long time yet.

Other opportunities for better urban management exist. Coordination between key agencies — including national government, Honiara City Council, the utilities and non-government organisations — could be greatly strengthened. Financial shortfalls mean that development partners, both private and donors, will be needed for a timely and comprehensive settlement upgrade program, although cultural fit and sensitivity will be key. Importantly, Guadalcanal Province must be engaged much more. Concerned about the lack of inclusion in urban planning, one senior Quale politician made clear that process mattered for constructive relationships: ‘It’s not about opposing development, it’s about how government recognises [our] customary land ... about getting revenue resources’.

One Missing Element: Improving Housing Affordability

Tellingly, at the inaugural Solomon Islands National Urban Conference in June 2016 local delegates referred to informal settlements as ‘affordable housing areas’. This is no surprise. Honiara housing is expensive; a situation worsened during the RAMSI period and its large influx of staff. Solomon Islands Home Finance Limited (SIHFL) — charged with developing affordable homes — has been selling dwellings at SB$495,000 (AU$82,500) to SB$735,000 (AU$122,500) (SIHFL 28/6/2016) — that’s about 50 to 70 times the median wage. These costs are far, far beyond the reach of even the most senior civil servants. The result is that 97 per cent of SIHFL homes built in the past six years have been sold to the government to house public servants.

Opening up more land for development, although difficult, is part of the answer, and that will mean working with Guadalcanal and customary landowners for sustainable solutions. Housing costs could be cut by requiring more modest, but safe, standards and creating higher density housing — all steps taken in Suva (Phillips and Keen 2016). New options are also needed: the MLHS is preparing legislation to allow strata titles, hoping to increase accommodation supply and reduce costs. There is also a push for cheap modular and prefabricated housing to cut expenses. Low-income public housing is needed, too, as provided elsewhere in Melanesia, but this is likely to need donor and/or non-government organisation partnerships to meet costs.

For most residents in greater Honiara, there currently remains no option but informal settlement because of high land and housing costs. Perhaps the forthcoming informal settlement upgrading strategy and national housing policy will generate new options. But progress will depend on addressing hard issues about locally appropriate ways to address the rapidly rising urban demands on customary land for which there are next to no formal supports, and on expanding affordable housing options. Without targeted and sustained action many more citizens will be ‘priced out of the market’.

Author Notes

Meg Keen is a senior policy fellow in SSGM and Luke Kiddle is an independent urban consultant who has worked for UN-Habitat on urban issues in Honiara.

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SIHFL (Solomon Islands Home Finance Limited) 28/6/2016. Presentation at Solomon Islands National Urban Conference.
UN-Habitat 2016. DRAFT Honiara City-Wide Informal Settlements Analysis.
This In Brief presents some preliminary findings of my doctoral research examining the political-economy context of livelihoods in urban informal settlements in Papua New Guinea (PNG). It highlights the gendered dimensions of economic engagement, household livelihood choices, and the importance of situating these issues within economic processes occurring in the urban context. My fieldwork was carried out over a six-month period in 2013 in the ATS settlement (an acronym that derives from the settlement’s location near the PNG Defence Force Air Transport Squadron compound) in Port Moresby, the National Capital District (NCD), which is located roughly two kilometres ENE of Jacksons airport. It included: interviews with representatives of the NCD, development agencies, non-government organisations, and local institutions; in-depth interviews with key informants; and a survey of 32 households of one migrant group within the settlement. This sample of households is around 30 per cent of the households I identified as part of this group of migrants, and comprises a robust representation of the group. Data collected on 230 individuals residing in these households, selected on the basis of complete information and qualitative data, form the basis of this and others in a series of In Briefs.

The fieldwork was undertaken in the urban context of burgeoning informal settlements, increasing population, and developments in property markets that render formal housing prohibitively expensive for many residents. Although the estimated population of the NCD of 364,125 represents 5 per cent of PNG’s population and is growing at 3.3 per cent per annum (NSO 2011), anecdotally, some observers estimate that it is closer to 1 million. Nearly half of NCD’s population live in informal settlements (Galgal 2011; Jones 2011).

In the NCD, although women are increasingly engaged in wage employment, they continue to dominate the informal sector, which has increased in importance in terms of income (Gibson 2013). Of the 230 people surveyed, 82 had an income. Of these, 2.5 per cent and 56.1 per cent of people were on pensions and waged employment respectively, most of whom were men (Figure 1). Most people on waged employment were engaged in the low-skill services industry (Figure 2) and over 90 per cent of these were employed by the private sector.

Out of the 82 economically engaged residents, 41.4 per cent were engaged in the informal sector, most of whom were women who operated small residential markets near their homes (Figure 3).
Residential market stalls varied in size and array of items sold, including betel nut, cigarette, biscuits, drinks, rice, candles, soap, laundry detergent, noodles, and phone credits. Galgal (2011) and Barber (2003) found similar patterns in other settlements in the NCD.

Women operating residential markets played an important social role in the community. They flexibly balanced income-earning with other household and community engagements, such as: childcare; collecting firewood in the nearby hills; and queuing for water at the communal taps. Residential markets were important sites for social interactions and sharing of information. People often shared stalls or supported each other by minding a stall while the vendor attended to other matters. Umezaki and Ohtsuka (2003) also note this mutual support among women.

Security factors in NCD and low incomes combined to create rather insular economic conditions: settlements’ economies were connected to the city economy through wage earners but were distinctly localised. The levels of trade at residential market stalls were low, relied on cash circulating within the settlement, and fluctuated with the pay cycles of wage earners, who were the key source of cash entering the settlement. This link between wage and informal local incomes was important for managing household incomes. Wage and market income complemented each other. Wage earners bought or borrowed from residential markets, and offset these borrowings or replenished stocks during pay weeks. When the household faced shortages of cash or food, its first point of access was the residential market. Residential markets broke down when stocks depleted as a result of dishonoured repayment commitments by wage earners.

Policy insights emerging from these findings for programs aimed at urban economic engagement include the need to: (i) recognise the gendered dimensions of local economies; (ii) engage with women where they are already economically active and acknowledge their important social roles; (iii) recognise that settlement economies operate under local conditions that are connected to broader city political economy developments, such as the availability of wage employment; and (iv) seek innovative partnerships with the private sector where it dominates wage employment so that waged labour contributions to local settlement economies can be enhanced.

**Author Notes**

Michelle Nayahamui Rooney is a PhD candidate with SSGM at the Australian National University.

**References**


This In Brief highlights how different land and housing regimes in Port Moresby, the national capital of Papua New Guinea (PNG), drive spatial and income inequality in the city. Among the issues I explore in my PhD research are the housing challenges that people face in Moresby and the strategies they pursue to access land and housing in settlements. I draw on two sets of preliminary data collected as part of my research. The first is ethnographic and income data based on a survey of 32 households in the ATS settlement1 in Moresby where I conducted fieldwork over a six-month period in 2013. The second dataset, comprising advertised rental and sale prices of properties in Moresby, is compiled from newspaper advertisements.

Most people I interviewed had been obliged to leave formal housing because of ‘housing problems’. Factors driving housing problems included loss of government-provided accommodation upon retirement, loss of employment, eviction by landlords, conflict and overcrowding in relatives’ homes, defaulting on mortgage repayments resulting in bank repossession of property, eviction from government housing, and the sale of houses to meet financial obligations. Only one family moved from another settlement. Six households were established by people who had grown up in the settlement.

The move into the informally demarcated spatial sphere of the settlement involves a shift from formal tenancy and state land title leases based on contracts transacted under normative legal conveyancing laws towards social and relational arrangements with customary landowners or other settlers. Such arrangements are increasingly practised by migrants in PNG (Numbasa and Koczberski 2012). Formal arrangements offer security of tenure but depend on employment conditions, income levels, landlord decisions or the goodwill of host relatives. On the other hand, arrangements in the settlement typically involve two tiers. Collectively, people liaise with customary landowners or the state to access large tracts of land for the group to settle. Individually, people foster relationships with kin or friends living in the settlements to facilitate their access to a piece of land. Although they offer a cheaper alternative for housing, settlements are characterised by weaker police presence, a lack of services and lack of secure tenure over land.

Urbanisation trends are important for understanding how poorer sections of the city become dispossessed (Harvey 2008). Reflecting the devaluation of the PNG kina and high inflation in the 1990s, average real property sale and weekly rental prices fell. With sustained economic growth from the early 2000s (ADB 2014), average property prices increased substantially from 2005 (Table 1). Reflecting increased diversity in types of housing available, there is wide variability in prices. These patterns are similar across all suburbs, with historically similar property values. The increase in prices and numbers of investment-type properties being advertised during the 2000s also suggests that investors view the city as a profitable place to invest capital surplus.

Contrast these property prices with incomes of people living in settlements. Among the households I surveyed, the average household income was around K700 per fortnight. Around 10 households had an income above K1000 per fortnight but could not afford housing in the most affordable suburbs. Taking into account all occupants in their homes, including children, the unemployed, the ill and the elderly, more than 65 per cent of households earned an average income of less than K100 per fortnight per person.

Apart from the spatial and income inequality that divides those who can and cannot afford formal housing in the city, two further insights can be drawn from this data and fieldwork observations. First, trends in property market prices and expansion of the city have driven up land values. In order to free up land for property investments and ongoing city development such as road construction, city authorities increasingly opt to relocate, sometimes with force, people living in settlements (Martin 5/8/2014; Sayama and Wapar 12/3/2013).

Second, with around half of the city’s residents living in settlements (Jones 2011), formal property prices are leading more people to consider informal land access arrangements. During my fieldwork it was apparent that wealthier people were obtaining land in settlements and building substantial houses. Prospective ‘settlers’ offered to ‘pay’ for land and some existing settlement residents succumbed to the pressure for money and ‘sold’ their land. Prices involved in these transactions ranged anywhere from zero if the arrangement was made through kin or friends up to K30,000. Although these prices are very low compared to those evident in Table 1, such transactions contribute to tension, including violence, as conflicts occur over land that is transacted outside established settlement norms.
Table 1: Advertised property sale and rental prices, 1985–2010 (PNG kina)*

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<td>Weekly rental prices for 2- and 3-bedroom houses in Port Moresby suburbs</td>
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<td>Maximum</td>
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<td>4,554</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Maximum</td>
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<td>211,456</td>
<td>356,934</td>
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<td>32,532</td>
<td>56,358</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>268,875</td>
<td>116,497</td>
<td>32,532</td>
<td>56,358</td>
<td>291,223</td>
<td>175,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Downtown, Port Moresbyb</td>
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<tr>
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</table>

* Converted to 2010 prices based on urban Port Moresby CPI, Bank of PNG.

Policies aimed at fostering urban property markets and development need to simultaneously consider access to land for housing. In this context it is also important to recognise the rights of customary landowners living in urban villages. They face similar dynamics in income inequality and pressure to share land while being doubly marginalised by settlements and the city’s development.

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Endnote
1 The settlement draws its name from the abbreviation ATS, which stands for Air Transport Squadron of the Defence Force, located adjacent to the settlement.

References

People with the lowest incomes are least able to negotiate land under pressure from wealthier newcomers because their daily budget decisions revolve around basic needs such as food. For example, one elderly informant gave up his land to a relative on the understanding that he would be paid. He moved to a more peripheral piece of land in the settlement. After several years his relative still had not paid him the promised funds, which he had hoped to use to repatriate his family to the village.

Thus, apart from facing collective eviction threats by city authorities, residents of settlements come under considerable pressure to share or sell the space they occupy.

Urban inequality in PNG needs to be understood in relation to spatially and legally defined regimes and as a dynamic process in which developments in the formal sphere flow on to the settlement sphere. The price and regulatory environment of the formal property sector excludes some people from the market and as these people seek affordable housing in settlements, others become further marginalised.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect those of the ANU or the Australian Government. See the SSGM website for a full disclaimer.
Increasing numbers of men and women have established homes, livelihoods and families on lands in Honiara they cannot own (see also Keen and Barbara 2015). Settlers come from all the nation’s islands, may attend school, work in formal jobs, and/or earn a living in the informal sector. Their struggles illuminate and challenge the idea that land is the crucial basis for social protection, food security, identity and social relations in the region. SSGM’s research on urbanisation in Honiara aims to engage with government, business, and settlement communities to inform and mobilise urban planning, policy and research priorities. From August to September 2016, the authors partnered with World Vision Solomon Islands to conduct five focus groups involving 50 women aged 18–65, from three of Honiara’s settlement communities: Sun Valley, White River, and Lord Howe.1 The research aimed to generate insights into women’s experiences and priorities. This In Brief describes women’s views on and experiences of city life.

There is diversity among and within settlements (see Lacey 2011). The settlements we worked in are all relatively longstanding and have road access. Sun Valley is a peri-urban area on the eastern outskirts of greater Honiara in Guadalcanal province. Lord Howe is a small, high-density community in the centre of town adjacent to the hospital. White River is a large, more dispersed settlement on the western edge of Honiara, with its own school and market. Women’s experiences in settlements in hilly areas without road access would differ from those with whom we spoke.

Happy to Call Honiara Home
Participants were clear that they preferred living in Honiara to rural areas. With the exception of a few women who only visited the city because their husbands lived in the settlements, none of the women spoke of wishing to return to a rural home. Some women had lived in their community for 50 years. As one woman from Sun Valley noted, ‘we have been here a long time, we cannot leave’.

Both younger and older women said they preferred Honiara because it offered the most opportunities to earn a living and access government services. The ways they could earn money, although challenging, were said to enable an ‘easy life’ relative to rural living and subsistence gardening.2 Women have a more significant role to play in cash generation in the city than in the village, allowing them more access to the finances necessary to provide for their and their family’s needs. Women said they valued the city lifestyle for a number of reasons, including the variety of goods available for purchase, availability of transportation and markets, and access to schooling. ‘We found it much easier to generate income to send our children to schools’ (Sun Valley participant). Younger women praised diversity, technology, and ‘luxury’ in the city (see also Knot 2009).

Getting Service: Not All Easy Going
Women identified common challenges of city life. Available services were not necessarily easy to access. School fees were said to be too high and this hampered children’s participation. Available transportation was not necessarily affordable or convenient. There were also community-specific challenges. Young women in Lord Howe mentioned they were sometimes prevented from attending school by their parents once they reached a certain age at which they were expected to stay home and focus on domestic duties. Mothers in White River noted young men were not necessarily attending school and this had negative effects on their behaviour and economic prospects.

Some services were unavailable. Women in Lord Howe expressed frustration and dismay regarding the lack of water and sanitation facilities that forced them to wash and defecate in the ocean. This deficiency has a disproportionate impact on women, especially those of menstrual age, who may also be exposed to security risks while bathing or defecating in public spaces, and whose role it is to gather water for the family. While White River has piped water, there are not enough
Looking for Peace

Women spoke of violence, often alcohol-fuelled (see WHO 2013). Many said this was caused by the failure of cultural norms to maintain a strong influence on youth in urban environments. Younger women attributed violent ‘disturbances’ to law and order problems, rather than waning cultural influences. Young women in Lord Howe, at the centre of town, said their parents restricted their mobility and insisted they wear lava-lava (patterned cloth skirt) when outside the settlement in part because of concerns about violence. Young women in Lord Howe did seem to face the most conservative gender norms overall— an important illustration of how urban living may reflect or produce gendered cultural controls on women in different ways depending on the context. Older, married women were concerned that perpetrators of violence might be their sons, nephews, or husbands, and wanted interventions with young men (see Evans 2016). Women also referred to intimate partner violence, suggesting it is more common in urban areas, including Honiara, than in rural areas (SPC 2009).

Moving Ahead

Settlements are a reality of rapidly urbanising towns and cities, and play a powerful role in shaping future national economic and social developments. As income earners with real life expertise, women’s voices, challenges, and experiences must be reflected in urban policy. Some aspects worth following up include: women’s mobility between settlements and rural areas; diversity in women’s circumstances and the intersections between gender, income, and power in settlements; women’s caring responsibilities, including for school-age migrants; and how young women are navigating the positives and negatives of city life. It is important to understand gender norms or fears of violence that may inhibit female education, mobility, and economic participation, and to explore what leads to violence. Given political leaders, policymakers, and the women with whom we spoke are all considering questions of culture in the urban space, further explorations are needed on how cultural identity and wellbeing can fruitfully be part of community and policy responses to urban challenges.

Acknowledgements

We thank the World Vision researchers and the participants for their contributions to this research.

Author Notes

Jessica Carpenter is a senior research officer and Jenny Munro a research fellow at SSGM

Endnotes

1. Discussion groups with men took place in October 2016.
2. See SSGM In Brief 2016/31 on women’s livelihoods.

References

SPC (Secretariat of the Pacific Community) 2009. Solomon Islands Family Health and Safety Study: A Study on Violence against Women and Children. Noumea: SPC.
Women’s Livelihoods in Honiara Settlements

Jessica Carpenter and Jenny Munro

In Brief 2016/31

The gender disparities in employment in Solomon Islands are well documented (see ADB 2015). This In Brief describes recent research on women’s informal urban livelihoods and economic participation. It forms part of the SSGM project Honiara Urbanisation: Managing Change, Harnessing Opportunities, which aims to better inform donors and policymakers about development priorities, opportunities, and prospects by engaging with a range of stakeholders, including settlement communities. From August to September 2016, the authors partnered with World Vision Solomon Islands to conduct five focus groups with a total of 50 women aged 18–65 from Sun Valley, White River, and Lord Howe settlements. The findings reflect the complexities of women’s livelihoods, which encompass not just engagement with the labour market, but traditional gender roles in the urban family and community, and networking and associations such as lending schemes and savings clubs.

Earning a Living in the City

Women clearly stated there are more livelihood opportunities for them in the city than in the village — most importantly, opportunities for generating cash income. Women identified their main livelihood activities as informal, including: selling baked food such as cakes or fish and chips; selling betel nut; and selling fresh food, both garden produce and fish. They sell these items either at the markets or at roadside stands near their homes. The ease of access to informal employment was one reason living in the city was often referred to as an ‘easy life’. Women said more women work in the informal sector than men. This is consistent with other research that found women dominated in agriculture and catering — similar to gendered patterns of work in village settings (Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA), and that 90% of market vendors in Solomon Islands are women (PIFS 2013). As one woman from Sun Valley noted, ‘we say men are the breadwinners, but in the city women are the breadwinners’.

Informants identified lending schemes as a prominent livelihood activity spreading ‘like wildfire’ through the city, partly motivated by the pressing need to access finances to support urban families and livelihoods. While Lord Howe women also described a community savings plan, it was noted in Sun Valley that it is a lot harder to save money in the city than the village as earnings are used to purchase food that would otherwise be grown in rural areas. The most prolific urban lending scheme is the South Pacific Business Development (SPBD) Microfinance Institution, which has disbursed over AUD$5.8 million and 9,102 loans since commencing operations in January 2013 (SPBD 2016). Participants noted there are a huge variety of lending schemes in each settlement, both community-based and individually operated. While not regulated, most lenders provide small loans of around SB$2000 (about AU$300), at a 20% interest rate, for a one-year term. Women said the loans are used to pay for school fees, house upgrades, and commodities such as a car, or just to ‘buy something nice for yourself’.

Women’s engagements with microcredit are complex, and the effects on empowerment are debatable (see Mayoux 2000). The women we talked to identified both positive and negative impacts of lending schemes in their communities. Beyond access to finance, women said lending schemes connect women and enable their co-operation. One woman from Sun Valley noted the schemes encouraged women to work together to generate livelihoods, which was often a challenge. Schemes such as SPBD also offer financial literacy education aimed at improving women’s skills. Alternatively, participants acknowledged that debt distress is a definite risk with lending schemes. Intimidation tactics are used when repayments are delayed, and borrowers were said to call upon relatives at times to help repay debts, which spreads the negative effects of debt and could create tensions. Despite the risks and pressures, most women view lending schemes as a helpful and positive initiative.
Common Challenges

Several common challenges to livelihood activities were raised, notably: the lack of a diversity of goods to sell, which creates competition and drives down prices; high transport and other running costs; and geographical and environmental challenges. In Sun Valley, garden areas flood every year, ruining produce grown for sale and consumption. In Lord Howe, there is no space for gardening, which reduces livelihood options and removes the safety net of self-grown produce when cash to purchase food runs short. This is also a problem in White River, with only one woman noting she had access to land, but it was a long walk from her house. Access to the markets was a significant challenge, with many women lamenting increasing fees, the lack of space and poor facilities. A representative of the Guadalcanal Council of Women noted that ‘markets are not just an important need. It’s a great need… It is urgent.’ Another young woman from White River also stressed the importance of market facilities, saying ‘no market means no food’.

Women’s ability to earn income and sustain their families is also affected by gendered norms and expectations. Women balance earning a living with many other competing roles and duties, including cooking, cleaning, and caring duties. Some women attributed higher levels of domestic violence in the city to women earning more money than their husbands or partners, especially in the context of urban socioeconomic pressures. A participant in Sun Valley argued that women were keeping silent on this reality and needed to speak up. Some women said men spend women’s income without consulting them, which undermines their ability to provide for their family. In this sense, women were pointing to the importance of decision-making, not just income generation, in managing livelihoods. This is a significant issue impacting on empowerment, urban planning, violence and poverty (see also ADB 2015).

Next Steps

While microfinance is well researched across the region (see Singh 2011), the impact of lending schemes and their debt pressures on women in Honiara, where financial literacy is sparser and expenses are higher, needs further attention. Women’s urban associations, or lack thereof, as a means of social, political, and economic empowerment, warrant further study. How and when do women work together towards livelihood goals? What makes co-operation and organising difficult? There is increasing recognition that women may experience violence in relation to their income and financial decision-making when the norms and conditions underpinning male dominance go unchallenged (Eves and Crawford 2014).

Possible future policy directions were also identified. Work with couples, families, and communities could open pathways for women to have more control over financial decision-making, which tends to produce more family investment in education, health and nutrition (PIFS 2013). But there is also a need for space for women’s livelihood goals and challenges to be voiced and discussed at broader political and governmental levels of decision-making.

Acknowledgements

We thank the World Vision researchers and the participants for their contributions to this research.

Author Notes

Jessica Carpenter is a senior research officer and Jenny Munro a research fellow at SSGM.
Conflicts over Credit: Challenges to Women’s Economic Empowerment in Solomon Islands

Richard Eves

The practice of giving to others is generally considered a central characteristic of Melanesian cultures, including Solomon Islands where giving is deemed to be a cultural and moral imperative. People are encouraged to be generous and to share with family and other relatives who may be in need, and this system of helping wantoks (literally those who speak the same language but meaning members of one’s clan or subclan) is often considered to be a social safety net and social protection. However, an aura of romanticism sometimes surrounds giving and such positive glosses tend to ignore the fact that people often give because they feel compelled to give. This is demonstrated in the requests made by relatives who confidently expect that such requests will be acceded to. Failure to comply can have unpleasant consequences, for a person who does not yield to such requests may be subjected to social ostracism.

This In Brief looks at the challenges to women’s economic empowerment posed by the cultural pressure to give. Though the pressure to give affects everyone who has an income, women are more likely to be intimidated by it and so particularly disadvantaged. Solomons men, having been raised to be very assertive, are more able to refuse such requests with confidence. Moreover, women’s income-generation activities are more likely to expose them to requests, since their income often comes from marketing of garden produce and cooked food, and people can see that money is being gained. Men, on the other hand, more often gain income through paid employment or from cash crops, like copra or cocoa, sold in bulk. Certainly, a significant number of the women interviewed during research into women’s economic empowerment in Solomon Islands bemoaned that requests for money or goods undermined their attempts to save, to meet the needs of their families and to improve their lives. A significant number of women said that requests for credit undermined their businesses, making them less viable, and a small number of women were even forced to abandon their business ventures entirely.

Coercive Kaon

Many of our respondents commented on the considerable pressure they come under to give money or goods on ‘credit’ (Solomon Islands Pijin: kaon) to relatives or others, credit that is rarely repaid. Sometimes the pressure borders on harassment, particularly when alcohol is involved. One woman from Makira gave up selling second-hand clothes because drunks would harass her for money when she was selling them. She surmised that these people believed she made a lot of money from this type of business, because she was not subject to such harassment when she sold food at the market. She said she generally complied with the requests for money because she was afraid: ‘When they asked me I would give them the money. I was afraid of them because they were drunk and they might want to hurt me. My husband was like that too, he would get drunk and ask me for money.’

Women from Malaita reported that their husbands sometimes get beer on credit and then expect them to repay the debt, a practice which causes conflict in the marriage. Women from Malaita also complained that earning an income brings with it demands for credit. One woman from Honiara, whose husband is old and infirm and unable to earn any income, supports both of them by marketing garden produce, but mentioned receiving many demands for credit, including from drunks who accompany their demands with threats.

Women experience pressure to hand over money, not only from husbands but also from children, siblings, parents, in-laws, all manner of other relatives and others who are not related or are only distantly related. Some women in Honiara were pressured by their sons, particularly those who were dependent on drugs such as alcohol and cigarettes. One woman in formal employment recounted that on payday her son would demand money from her to buy alcohol and cigarettes and would throw rocks and destroy household effects if she refused. The only way she could stop the violence and intimidation was to accede to his requests,
though sometimes she sought to minimise the risk by sleeping in other places. This woman also found it difficult to say no to her brother’s requests for cash because of cultural and kinship norms. She remarked that she was ‘very tired’ of the practice and finds it hard to save money for her children’s school fees.

In addition to direct demands for ‘credit’, people who are in employment in urban centres report how difficult it is for them to save when they are overwhelmed by many visitors who come and stay and need to be fed. One married couple who lived in Auki, the Malaitan provincial capital, said they found it difficult to save in town because people were always coming to stay and had to be provided for. Another couple in Honiara, who were both in employment, said that in the evening they often have 14 people to feed.

The women interviewed during the Do No Harm research talked about the difficulty in responding to requests and some felt they had no choice but to respond by giving (see also Maebuta and Maebuta 2009:124). One woman from Makira, for example, said that she was taught to share things when she was growing up. ‘You must share your things and not be selfish. If anyone asks you for something, you must give it them,’ she remarked.

There is a contradiction between the customary obligation to respond to requests and people’s desire to improve the living standards of their immediate families. One of the difficulties for women who are trying to bring in money to support their families is how to negotiate the tension inherent in this custom. While there remains a strong ethos of supporting wantoks, in contexts where life is precariously balanced this is not always possible and it can push women and their families back into poverty.

Author Notes
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Endnotes
1. Not only can wantok refer to those who share kinship ties, but, depending on the context, it extends to people who share the same language, or who are from the same area, the same island or the same region of the world (Brigg 2009:153). So, any person from Solomon Islands who comes across a compatriot in another country may refer to them as wantok.

2. Some of this reflects the tendency to see gift exchange in entirely positive terms as unquestionably good and moral and to see commodity exchange as bad and immoral. As Jonathan Parry has noted, anthropologists ‘often stress that gift exchange and commodity exchange are premised on fundamentally opposed principles’ (1989:64). Such a radical contrast in the principles underlying the two types of exchange is associated with an equally radical contrast in their moral evaluation (ibid.). ‘Gift exchange is safe and good; commodity exchange is threatening and bad’ (Parry 1989:65).

3. Fieldwork, including 85 in-depth interviews with women, was undertaken in 2014 in two provinces, Makira (23 women) and Malaita (40 women), and the capital, Honiara (22 women), as part of the research project Do No Harm: Understanding the Relationship between Women’s Economic Empowerment and Violence against Women in Melanesia (see Eves and Crawford 2014). The research team comprised Richard Eves, Stephanie Lusby, Thomson Araia, Rose Martin and Mary-Fay Maeni. The research is a collaboration between the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program and the International Women’s Development Agency and funded by the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s Pacific Women program.

References


This paper will endeavour to: i) describe youth employment issues and constraints in Honiara; ii) examine international evidence and experience relating to job creation programs and their capacity to address youth unemployment; iii) provide a summary of the two Honiara-based employment programs together with an overview of available data relating to their effectiveness (as well as a discussion of evidence gaps); and iv) within the limits of the available evidence, assess the extent to which these programs are fostering youth work and addressing employment constraints in Honiara, reflecting lessons from international experience.

A further point of discussion will be the extent to which these programs can be said to be contributing to increased social stability in the capital.

The first part of the paper commences with an overview of the position of youth in Solomon Islands, including a discussion of the youth labour market in Honiara and factors influencing the formal and informal employment dynamics of the country. A broader examination of Solomon Islands' economic and sociocultural context is then provided, including issues of political economy. This analysis suggests that employment in the Solomon Islands context is, and will remain, different from that experienced in many other contexts, requiring targeted policy responses.

Having set the context for the analysis, the second part of the paper commences with an overview of international practice in the area of youth employment programming, before turning to an overview of REP and Y@W, together with an assessment of their achievements using available program data. Drawing on this analysis, a number of tentative policy implications for current, and future, youth employment initiatives are presented.
Figure 1: Solomon Islands’ Urban Youth ‘Bulge’ and Rural Youth ‘Dent’, 2009

Source: Adapted from SIG (2013c); reproduced with permission of the National Statistics Office, Ministry of Finance and Treasury, Solomon Islands Government.
Setting the Scene: Youth in Solomon Islands

Solomon Islands, an archipelagic nation of around 1000 scattered islands in the Southwest Pacific, is a fragile, post-conflict state. With a population of a little over half a million people, it is characterised by a large number of young people that are often undereducated, underemployed and increasingly urban. It has all of the hallmarks of a country experiencing a significant urban youth bulge (see Figure 1). According to the latest census, 60 per cent of the Solomon Islands population is aged 24 or under, with Honiara exhibiting similar dynamics, with around 56 per cent of the population being 24 or under (SIG 2013b).

From 1998 to 2003, Solomon Islands experienced a low-level civil conflict, locally known as ‘the tension’. This period had a profound, although largely undocumented, impact on youth (Evans 2016). Young people were key actors in the fighting that transpired, both as combatants and as victims. Many of today’s cohort of teens and those aged in their twenties were subject to or witnessed displacement, violence, and a breakdown in government services, including education. The legacy of this episode of death, destruction and dislocation hangs heavily over the country today, although it is not commonly spoken about in public discourse, particularly amongst young people.

There is a widespread societal expectation in Solomon Islands that young people will attend school. Almost all children will undertake a period of primary schooling, although the quality is variable with low functional literacy rates. At secondary school, enrolment and completion rates decline markedly. Large numbers of students are ‘pushed out’ — that is, fail to pass national examinations in order to proceed to higher levels of education — in standard/grade 6, form 3 and form 5. In 2005, it was reported that 40 per cent of the nation's youth were 'push outs' (Ministry of Women, Youth and Children Affairs 2010).

Those with minimal education levels face severe hardship when it comes to entering the formal labour market, with jobseekers vastly outstripping employment vacancies. It has been documented that there are 10,000 school leavers in Solomon Islands each year (Asian Development Bank 2016; Bartlett 2015; World Bank 2010b). While not longitudinal, government figures for the period 2012–14 suggest that this may be an underestimate. The number of new jobs generated by the formal economy per annum is equally difficult to quantify. Although the figures fluctuate, from 2007 to 2015 the national public service added an average of around 930 employees per annum. Using active National Provident Fund accounts from 2007 to 2014 as a proxy for employment — a flawed measure — private and public sector employment grew by around 3200 positions per annum. That equates to a shortfall of over 6000 jobs for youth every year.

The prospect of future poverty awaits those with limited education, especially those residing in urban environments. The link between poverty and education levels in Solomon Islands has been demonstrated by the country's most recent poverty profile (SIG 2015). It found that around 40 per cent of those defined as living in poverty reside in households in which the 'head' does not have at least six years of primary school education. As education levels increase, so too does the prospect of employment and moving out of poverty.

Finding formal employment in Honiara is a difficult endeavour, especially for young people. It can entail responding to advertised positions and word-of-mouth offers, but school leavers rely more frequently upon the largesse of employed relatives and friends. There is only one employment agency, and very little reliable data on job market demand or supply within the city. So despite high levels of unemployment, employers anecdotally report difficulty finding people with the right skills to fill their vacancies.

There are no accurate formal unemployment figures for youth in Solomon Islands, with reported rates varying widely (see Close 2012). More reliable reports have suggested a youth unemployment rate of around 70 per cent. World Bank research conducted in the 'squatter settlement' of White River, west Honiara, in 2010, found 67 per cent of youth reported that they had no regular source of cash employment — either formal or informal — and were seeking work (World Bank 2014). The Solomon Islands National Youth Policy states that in...
2005 the unemployment rate amongst those aged 15 to 19 was 75 per cent (Ministry of Women, Youth and Children Affairs 2010; see also Jourdan 2008). Reflective of this uncertainty, in 2016 the International Labour Organization (ILO) suggested a youth unemployment rate of, ‘above 35 percent’ (ILO 2016). Whatever the real situation, all of these figures would place the country amongst those with the highest youth unemployment rates in the world (see Antoniou and Dalla 2015). Rates of informal employment are similarly unknown, although census data would indicate that 37 per cent of the workforce earns a livelihood through informal means, such as selling betelnut, cigarettes, handicrafts and other consumables, particularly fruit and vegetables (Donnelly and Jiwanji 2010; Maebuta and Maebuta 2008; World Bank 2014). Informal work opportunities for young people are not well studied. It is known that casual cash-in-hand service provision is prolific across most age groups, especially amongst mature males, including building, carpentry, electrical work, transport services, small-scale timber extraction and mechanical repairs. House cleaning and child care are more typical carried out by women and girls.

Recognising that crime can be an occupation like any other, young people in particular are involved in the trade of illicit substances, with cannabis, kwaso and ‘black market’ alcohol sales being common. These can be highly lucrative as seen in Box 1, making the risks of detection incommensurate with the potential financial rewards. Theft, typically of a petty nature, is a further means which a minority of citizens, especially young people, employ to support themselves, or maintain their preferred lifestyles.

Creating Youth Livelihoods — The Challenges Ahead

Youth unemployment is considered a key development and security issue. The link between joblessness and criminality is well documented, with a significant amount of literature, often utilising vast datasets across a variety of contexts, pointing to a positive correlation between crime and unemployment. The association between employment and economic advancement is similarly well established.

Box 1: Earning a Living from Illicit Trade

The production and sale of kwaso is widespread across most provinces in Solomon Islands and is particularly prolific in Honiara to the extent that it appears to have become a ‘normal’ livelihood strategy. Kwaso ‘cooks’ can be charged under the Liquor Act for making liquor without the necessary approval. A husband and wife interviewed in mid-2016, at their home in a settlement on the eastern outskirts of Honiara, stated that their last ‘cook’ earned them SBD $1100, over seven times the minimum weekly wage (excluding labour costs and following expenditure of around SBD $230 on ingredients). This was for minimal labour input with a key appeal being the ability to generate ‘fast cash’, the fermenting and distillation process generally taking three to four days. Like cannabis, in some places in Solomon Islands kwaso has become a form of currency for the payment of services, particularly manual work carried out by youth.

Youth unemployment in the Pacific region is said to represent a significant economic loss, calculated at approximately USD $828 million in 2011, increasing to USD $3.18 billion by 2020 (SPC 2015b). Slow growth and job creation affect all age groups, but particularly young people who have a higher job turnover than adults and take longer to find employment (World Bank 2013a).

A common refrain in post-conflict Solomon Islands has been the need to address youth unemployment. In addition to higher-level policy commitments, no fewer than eight public reports in the post-conflict period have made recommendations relevant to youth employment. Youth unemployment in the urban environment raises concerns around a number of issues which Urdal’s ‘youth bulge’ speaks to, including grievances linked to low rates of economic growth and the limited means by which young people can influence the political process (Urdal 2004). Within Solomon Islands such anxieties extend further, encompassing exclusion, boredom, substance abuse and violence.
Popularly, unemployment in Solomon Islands is framed as a security imperative, with an underlying concern being that large numbers of unemployed, urban youth, particularly males, will fuel future disorder, both public and private. And while the genesis of the tension has been attributed to a number of complex, underlying causes (see Allen et al. 2013), youth unemployment is not commonly cited as one of them; although some have suggested a link:

Unemployment creates demoralisation and has been identified by many observers as one of the underlying causes of the 1999–2000 armed conflict (ACFOA 2000). ‘The bulk of Solomons youth has been schooled for non-existent urban jobs, effectively alienating them from their village resource base and branding them as failures in a system foreign to their lives’ (Roughan 2000). (Chevalier 2001)

Despite the above circumstances, it would be inappropriate to narrowly render ‘employment’ in Solomon Islands to that most commonly experienced in developed countries. The Solomon Islands labour market functions differently. It is highly dualistic, characterised by a large, and mainly rural, informal sector and a small and predominantly Honiara-based formal employment market.

Employment in Solomon Islands does not strictly mean a full-time position in the public or private sector with a prescribed minimum wage and associated benefits. This is not to say that such arrangements will not exist in the future and will not remain important; however, they will be the exception, not being the path that the vast majority of citizens will follow in order to earn an income and raise their living standards. And the youth labour market will remain particularly fraught, being largely informal, small, and characterised by instability as young people move in and out of work.

The future development trajectory of Solomon Islands will also differ from various other countries that have transitioned from rural subsistence agriculture to economies based on export-driven manufacturing and services. A number of fundamental constraints related to geography, limited resource diversification and ‘weak governance and limited capacity for regulatory and economic policy reform’ (World Bank 2010b) mean that the Solomon Islands economy will, at least over the medium term, remain small and niche. The following World Bank analysis (2014) encapsulates this: ‘Pacific island countries are unlikely to experience export-driven development and associated employment creation of the scale and nature seen in much of the East Asia Pacific region, even with the best possible business environment.’

The economic reality for the vast majority of Solomon Islanders, including young people who are part of the estimated 80 per cent of the population residing in rural areas, is that reliance on small-holder agriculture for their livelihoods will remain a constant over the medium to long-term. Personal consumption will, when the conditions are right, be supplemented by income generated from the sale of excess product. For this group the employment programs discussed in this paper are, in the main, irrelevant. Enhancing their livelihoods will require a whole different set of policy responses.

Intricately linked with the above are the existing employment dynamics in Solomon Islands, or what can loosely be referred to as the ‘culture’ of employment. These are complex, unlikely to change anytime soon, and are of equal importance to young people as they are to adults. They, too, render a neat portrait of formal, ‘nine-to-five’ employment problematic.

In contemporary Solomon Islands, particularly urban areas, many people, including the young, combine formal and informal income generation, or even opt out of secure formal employment because they can earn more from informal activities. Discussions with male youths in a settlement to the east of Honiara problematise the notion that obtaining full-time formal employment with an established business in Honiara is the Holy Grail of all young job seekers. A number of young people indicated that having found such employment they thereafter resigned, variously citing ‘stress’, a desire to ‘rest’, or the paucity of the wages as the reasons for doing so.

Further, a stigmatisation around certain jobs is evident amongst pockets of urban youth, also discouraging involvement in potential livelihood
activities. A focus group discussion with young people involved in the two employment programs discussed in this paper indicated a strong preference for formal employment, especially ‘office work’, describing the ‘shame’ that attaches to activities such as street cleaning or grass cutting.19

Casual ‘moonlighting’ on the side or running a business in addition to a full-time job in a government ministry or with a private company is not unusual in Honiara. Depending on the position, a job in the formal sector, especially with government, can be leveraged to award (or block) all manner of benefits to friends and family, including contracts, permanent employment and promotions. Far from demonstrating inflexibility, the existing labour market in Solomon Islands is highly dynamic, periodic and creative. People may be economically inactive at one moment, and lucratively employed in a variety of legitimate and illegitimate ways the next.20

A further feature of this discussion is the absence of a national policy dialogue around employment, or indeed, the long-term macro-economic position of the country. Due, in part, to issues relevant to Solomon Islands’ political economy (see Haque 2012) the government course of action on many issues in Solomon Islands — beyond written documents — is often difficult to determine, with politics being acutely localised and personal. A coherent national approach to unemployment (beyond what are largely generic aspirational policy statements) is difficult to discern. An example of this is demonstrated by the latest National Development Strategy with its non-descriptive (and unrealistic) goal of, ‘full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people’ by 2030 (SIG 2016).

**Common Approaches to Youth Employment Programs**

Youth employment is a complex and challenging issue. It frequently involves a multipronged response encompassing a variety of macro- and micro-economic interventions. Presented here are three common government and donor-supported employment approaches for youth: skills training programs; demand-side labour programs, namely large-scale public works schemes; and entrepreneur capital programs. These initiatives, either stand-alone, or more usually in combination, routinely feature in post-conflict, developing contexts, so much so that is has been said that ‘nearly every fragile state’ has adopted one of these approaches or a variation upon them (Blattman and Annan 2016). Solomon Islands is no exception.

The logic behind adopting any one of the approaches described here, and others, is largely linked to context and the underlying objective/s of the intervention. Different initiatives typically focus on different parts of the youth employment problem. Accordingly, some programs are best targeted at informal employment (e.g. entrepreneur capital programs) while others are more appropriately directed towards formal employment (e.g. skills training which encompass business internships).

While the three approaches discussed are common responses to youth unemployment, other initiatives which are not presented include: improving the general business and investment climate; introducing or easing regulations around the hiring of young people, such as introducing a youth sub-minimum wage; microfinance provision for youth; and providing subsidies or other benefits to employers who hire youth. As discussed, any of the approaches outlined need to be assessed in the given context, in particular an understanding of what, if any, constraint/s exist within the labour market. Multiple constraints will mean utilising a blend of approaches.

**Skills Training Programs**

Skills training provides job seekers with skills that will enhance their prospects of finding work. These can be technical, managerial, vocational, business and/or ‘soft skills’ (non-technical skills pertaining to, *inter alia*, social interaction, character and work ethic). The methods by which these skills are taught vary and commonly include classroom teaching, and/or on-the-job or vocational learning.

Skills training is a common feature of employment programs and is a component of the two main Solomon Islands initiatives discussed in this paper. Its ubiquity is demonstrated by the fact that from 2002 to 2012 the World Bank and its client governments invested nearly USD $9 billion in
93 skills training projects, equating to nearly USD $100 million per project (Twose 2015, quoted in Blattman and Ralston 2015).

International evidence tends to suggest that on balance the returns from skills training, of all types, are low relative to their costs. The reasons for this are not clear. Blattman and Ralston (2015) assess a handful of international examples of technical and vocational training programs and show a combination of high dropouts, modest or ambiguous effects on labour market outcomes, and high program costs. They question if the problem ‘is with the approach to training and the targeting of disadvantaged youth, or if the assumptions underlying the programs — that low skills and skills mismatches are impeding development in some countries — are themselves wrong’ (ibid.:10).

An important feature of seemingly all youth employment initiatives in Honiara, and true of REP and Y@W, has been ‘soft skills’ training. These are sometimes referred to as ‘transferable skills’ (see Rankin et al. 2015). They are distinct from the other skills discussed and frequently encompass social and emotional learning. Soft skills may include topics such as work culture, gender and diversity, healthy relationships and anger management. Preliminary international evidence suggests that this type of cognitive behavioural training may be effective at reducing crime and violence, but less successful for employment outcomes. However, results remain difficult to discern. One of the most recent and comprehensive evidence gap evaluations of soft skills for youth in medium- to low-income countries suggests that, ‘more high-quality evidence is needed to inform’ the design of these programs (ibid.).

In Honiara there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that soft skills are especially valued by employers. In particular, employers have lamented the lack of employee readiness for work, highlighting the need for training in matters of work culture, behaviour and expectations.

**Demand-side Labour Intensive Programs**

Demand-side labour programs are typically temporary in nature and often follow a cookie-cutter modality, entailing short-term, low-skilled, labour-intensive work for a minimum wage. These types of initiatives are most common in high unemployment contexts where supply-side initiatives (such as skills training) are of ‘little impact’ (World Bank 2013a). An important feature of these types of programs is that they generate the work which participants undertake. In this regard, rather than operating to create sustainable employment they function as social safety nets and temporary income generators in hard times.

Large-scale variations of these types of schemes have been carried out globally, often in low-income, post-conflict countries and they often employ tens or even hundreds of thousands. Solomon Islands’ REP — described in detail below — is a quintessential example of this type of program with its objectives of providing skills to participants, helping to distribute money in the form of wages, and providing small-scale infrastructure to disadvantaged communities.

A number of assumptions flow from these demand-side initiatives, including that they will have a multiplier effect on local economies following an injection of cash, and that credit-constrained participants will use earnings to invest in physical or human capital, such as skills, education or tools, to commence a small business. Despite their prevalence, evidence as to their performance is sparse:

Strikingly, there is little to no rigorous, counterfactual-based evidence of the effects of a workforce program in a low-income country. A range of casual, often descriptive evaluations suggest that these programs help people boost their stock of savings or pay off debts. It is not clear, however, whether there are lasting effects on poverty or income-generation, or whether post-crisis programs help stimulate recovery. (Blattman and Ralston 2015:19)

The above assessment would generally accord with a limited number of World Bank evaluations (World Bank 2013a). In Argentina and Colombia, impact evaluations of these types of demand-side labour responses reported short-term positive income effects, ‘related to the income transfer received, but no information on post-program employment’ (ibid.:40). Yet typically the *raison d'être* of such programs is not post-program work,
with the rates of returns on infrastructure and wages being their primary justification.

**Entrepreneur Programs**

Capital or credit entrepreneur programs, which often go by other titles, such as ‘capital-centric programs’, endeavour to stimulate employment by relieving capital burdens, a common feature of fragile states and particularly true of Solomon Islands. Capital comes in various forms, including cash transfers, in-kind (such as equipment) or credit. The objective is to encourage recipients to use the capital provided in order to set up or expand small businesses. This is frequently in combination with skills training, often in topics such as small business management, budgeting and business plan development. Supervision and mentoring is also a common feature of these initiatives. Depending on context, business initiatives which entrepreneur capital programs may seek to support include smallholder farming, petty trading and unskilled service provision.

As elaborated upon in greater detail below when looking at the Honiara experience, the evidence of an increasing number of evaluations is that capital entrepreneur programs can stimulate self-employment in a cost-effective manner. These point to a combination of inputs being required, in particular both training and capital, particularly cash.

**An Overview of Contemporary Youth Employment Programs in Honiara**

In response to the context described, the Solomon Islands Government, with significant donor support, instigated REP in 2010 and Y@W in 2012. Both initiatives utilise different modalities when it comes to addressing urban youth unemployment, although they share a number of commonalities.

Y@W and REP are simultaneously supply-side and demand-side. On the supply-side, each has components that provide skills training, while an aspect of Y@W entails small, non-cash capital for youth entrepreneurs. However, in the main, and in contrast to Y@W, REP is a classical demand-side project, increasing labour demand for participants through a variety of public works.

Initiatives like REP and Y@W are not new to Honiara, although their scale is. One of the earliest organised youth employment schemes can be traced to the mid-1970s — the ‘Masta Liu Youth Project’. A modest and largely organic scheme, it shared a number of commonalities with its contemporary incarnations, focusing on addressing youth unemployment through skills training and the provision of a small wage and equipment to carry out agricultural work (Palmer 1979).

**The Rapid Employment Project**

The REP seeks ‘to assist targeted vulnerable urban populations’ primarily through short-term labour-intensive activities, such as the construction of small-scale urban infrastructure and road rehabilitation and maintenance (World Bank 2010a). These works are created by the project. A second feature is classroom-based life skills and employment training, referred to as ‘pre-employment training’ (PET). This is directed towards improving participants’ ‘knowledge, experience and basic employment skills that are valued in the work place and society’ (ibid.:v). PET involves a week of classroom training following a syllabus designed by the project. Participants in the public works component of REP must initially undertake PET.

REP activities take place in Honiara, with a small number outside of the city boundary. It is funded through World Bank–administered trust funds and is managed and administered by Honiara-based staff employed by the project’s implementing agencies, the Honiara City Council and the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development.

REP is not specifically cast as a youth employment initiative, although it does seek to have 50 per cent youth participation, defined as those aged between 16 and 29. Over 2015 some 53 per cent of participants fell within this age group (REP 2016). And while REP seeks to foster ongoing employment, principally through the transfer of appropriate skills and experience, it is largely concerned with distributing money in the form of wages and in providing small-scale urban infrastructure and services. Project documents disclose a belief that project activities would mitigate social unrest and instability (World Bank 2010a).
REP involves community groups forming into teams and completing a written application to undertake work. This includes indicating the type of work they would like to do. Common activities include street cleaning and rubbish collection, cutting grass on roadsides, drain cleaning and the construction of ‘Jacob’s Ladders’ (see photograph). Reflecting the temporary nature of the work, typically participants work for 20 days, while those engaged on small-scale infrastructure initiatives, such as Jacob’s Ladders, will work on average 54 days. Regular labourers are paid SBD $4 per hour, equal to Solomon Islands’ minimum hourly wage rate, while group leaders are paid SBD $5.

As of the end of 2015 some 12,280 participants had taken part in the urban works and services component of REP, while a total of 11,558 had graduated from PET (REP 2016).

The current phase of REP is due to come to end in December 2016, although additional financing will see it extended through to 2018. Plans are also underway for a follow-on project with a possible feature being an expansion to various provincial locations.

The Youth at Work Program

Y@W, unlike REP, is solely targeted at young people, in particular, those that the program calls ‘disengaged youth’. The development objectives of Y@W are not clearly defined in available project documentation.21 The principal modality adopted by Y@W is different from that of REP, it being largely concerned with on-the-job skills training, including mentoring.

While Y@W is mostly Honiara-based, a variation of the program previously operated in Choiseul Province and in mid-2016 it expanded to Auki, the capital of Malaita Province. As at mid-2016, funding was drawn from a variety of non-government organisation (NGO) and donor sources. The project is overseen and managed by the Secretariat of Pacific Communities.

All participants in Y@W initially undertake 80 hours of voluntary community service. Those who successfully complete this then take part in a two-week lecture-style training program (see photograph next page). This shares parallels with REP’s PET, including soft skills as described above. Participants are then channelled into one of two streams, largely on the basis of self-selection.

The first, and most popular, stream involves the placement of participants in an internship, involving on-the-job mentoring. The internships, of 3 to 12 months, may be with the private sector, NGOs,
donors or the public sector. In some instances, employers retain interns in either a full-time or part-time capacity. Interns are not paid, and therefore unlike REP the project is not concerned with income distribution, however, they do receive a modest stipend to pay for transport and sustenance.

The second stream involves further training, and funding, in small business start-up. This is called the ‘Youth Entrepreneur Program’ and commenced in 2014. In Honiara, this involves a smaller number of participants than the internship component. After a two-week period of business training following a syllabus tailored to the program by the ILO, and the development of a business plan, participants are given resources equivalent to SBD $2000 (approx. USD $260) to commence a business. Examples of past businesses include mobile phone credit ‘top-up’ services, second-hand clothes sales, jewellery making, catering and T-shirt screen printing.

Participants in Y@W are chosen on the basis of self-referral, turning up to advertised awareness sessions. As at August 2016, Y@W had reached its tenth phase. Each phase, typically two per annum, contains approximately 250 young people. In total, more than 2000 youth have participated in the internship component of the program.

Y@W will continue until at least 2020 with donor support. It is hoped that the program will then transition into mainstream government programming.

Performance of Solomon Islands’ Employment Programs

As at mid-2016, both REP and Y@W had been operational for around six and four years respectively. During that time both have accumulated data directed towards assessing their performance. Given different modalities, it is difficult to make direct comparisons between the programs. In the case of REP, participation is open to both adults and youth, although data collected has not been adult/youth disaggregated. While the geographic focus of Y@W extends beyond Honiara data collection has not, nor has it focused on the entrepreneur component of the program. Both projects use vastly different indicators and employ different monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

This part of the paper will draw on available data to examine how both projects have fared in terms of affecting youth employment levels in Honiara. In evaluating both programs, the discussion will also encompass an examination of the extent to which programs like Y@W and REP can be said to contribute to reduced social instability. It needs to be noted that a constraint with the data of both programs is the lack of a control group. This hinders an ability to make credible findings and is discussed in further detail below.
The Rapid Employment Project

The REP uses a number of key indicators to track how the project is performing.

An important caveat in relation to REP, and in contrast to Y@W, was its planned short-term focus. When it was designed, REP was categorised as an ‘emergency project’ to assist vulnerable Honiara communities from a deteriorating domestic fiscal position in the wake of the global financial crisis. According to project documentation it was not intended to be a long-term, sustainable endeavour: ‘[t]he project was not designed with sustainability in mind and consequently, there are few initiatives to secure continuity of project gains’ (World Bank 2013b).

The two main measures used to track REP’s achievements against its development objectives are labour-days generated and wages transferred — indicators commonly used in large-scale public works programs. The latest data shows that since its inception to the end of 2015 the project had generated 657,400 labour-days and had transferred a total of USD $22.6 million in wages. This data is largely internally focused, not being particularly helpful to domestic policymakers, especially the labour-days generated count, with there being no comparative domestic data against which this figure can be measured.

Of more relevance to this discussion is a semi-annual survey which the project undertakes. This involves a group of enumerators surveying around 500 to 650 REP participants. Those surveyed are randomly selected — drawn from the total pool of REP participants since its inception, although they must have completed their involvement in the project at least six months prior to the survey.

Looking at two semi-annual surveys, conducted in August/September 2015 (survey five) and November 2014 (survey four), the following results are informative (Pacific Horizons Consulting Group 2015):

- Only a minority of participants had saved wages they earnt from REP. This being 15.9 per cent from survey five and 22 per cent for survey four.
- Earlier surveys would tend to indicate that participants are spending their income predominantly on food and clothing (World Bank 2013b). While a significant amount of participants have spent their income on ‘education’ it is not clear if this is for themselves or others.

These results are perhaps to be expected given the nature of REP — it is a demand-side program concerned with short-term employment generation, income transfer, and the economic return on small-scale infrastructure and service provision. An *ex ante* economic analysis of REP points to the numerous positive economic impacts of the project (World Bank 2010a). The employment results for post-REP participants, however, are worse than any published formal employment figures for Solomon Islands, for both adults and youth. And there is no data on long-term employment outcomes. While it is difficult to draw firm conclusions, these findings seem to suggest that most participants do not take part in REP as an immediate stepping stone to future employment, instead pursuing quick money for instant consumption. Accordingly, REP corresponds with the available international evidence around demand-side labour programs: there is a short-term positive income result linked to cash transfers but evidence on post-project employment is scant.

The Youth at Work Program

The main method used by Y@W to track how the program has been performing is a series of biannual tracer studies. This involves those who have undertaken internships (not the Youth Entrepreneur Scheme) completing an online survey comprising around 20 mixed qualitative and quantitative questions. In addition, a series of focus group discussions have also been conducted with former interns. A number of employers involved in the program have been similarly surveyed.

The first tracer study was conducted in March 2013, with the last one prior to the publication of this paper taking place in April 2016. During that period respondents from new phases have been
cumulatively added, although as Table 1 shows, the number of survey participants has been slowly declining, especially following survey number four.

The underlying finding of these surveys is that as at the last survey, number seven, some 24 per cent of intern participants, or roughly one in every four, were employed in either a full-time or part-time capacity, with around three quarters of those positions being with the employer with whom they had undertaken their internship. In practice, survey seven should include a cumulative figure of all participants to have taken part in Y@W up to that phase, however, as discussed below, this is not the case.

Figure 2 shows that at each survey the employment figures have shifted, averaging around 33 per cent over the life of Y@W, or one in three survey participants having obtained full- or part-time work, mainly with the employer with whom they did their internship. The length of time they have remained in these positions is unknown. At the time of survey number three 38 per cent of participants were employed, 35 per cent at survey five, 26 per cent at survey six and 24 per cent at survey seven. It was suggested by some people spoken to during the preparation of this paper that this downward trend is indicative of Y@W saturating the low-skilled segment of the Honiara formal labour-market. However, an absence of data makes the reason/s for this scenario indiscernible. It may be the case that other factors are contributing to a declining uptake in employment.

A further concern articulated in the Y@W tracer studies is that some employers may be taking advantage of what is essentially free labour, churning through participants by not retaining old ones and engaging new ones. Perversely, this may mean the program is having a regressive effect on employment generation with employers not hiring staff and instead using a free, readily available and replaceable labour source. There is no disincentive to this behaviour and it would be wrong to necessarily view it as a negative occurrence. If the rationale of Y@W is to maximise those exposed to the formal work environment with the belief that this improves employment prospects, then the program is achieving its goal. To this end, employers may believe they are doing the right thing by engaging as many participants as possible. To fully assess employer motivations around this issue would require further enquiry.

An absence of longitudinal data makes it difficult to discern the success of Y@W in terms of long-term formal employment outcomes. As each new survey has been conducted, there has been a significant drop in the number of participants taking part from previous phases of the program. Accordingly, by survey number seven none of the earlier interns (phases one to four) were being traced. Potentially, those who have recently completed their internship are more likely to be employed, whereas those who completed their internship a year, or several years, earlier are less likely to be in work, serving to skew the figures.24 Given the above limitations, it is difficult to compare Y@W employment results with available employment data for Solomon Islands. Potentially, the different composition of the samples involved also mean that comparisons between program employment outcomes and economy-wide employment outcomes should be treated with a degree of

### Table 1: Youth at Work Tracer Study Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Number</th>
<th>Phase/s Participating</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>No. of Youth Surveys Completed</th>
<th>No. of Youth Focus Group Participants</th>
<th>Employer Surveys Completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>February 2013</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1&amp;2</td>
<td>August 2013</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1 to 3</td>
<td>Feb/March 2014</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1 to 4</td>
<td>Sept/Oct 2014</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1 to 5</td>
<td>March/April 2015</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1 to 6</td>
<td>September 2015</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1 to 7</td>
<td>April 2016</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Pasifiki Services Ltd (various dates): Tracer Study Reports 1 to 7.
caution. Nevertheless, if it is accepted that around 33 per cent of Y@W participants are obtaining work then this figure is a worse result than the national average for 15–24 year olds, with Close (2012), on the basis of 2009 census figures, indicating an employment rate of 43 per cent for this age group. Accepting the lowest published youth employment rates (see above) ranging from 25 to 33 per cent, then the program is in line with these figures or may be doing marginally better.

As is the case with REP, these results are not particularly surprising. International studies have found that formal employment skills programs similar to Solomon Islands efforts do not greatly affect employment outcomes.

In the period immediately following their internship, participants have been positive about finding work. It is less clear if, or how, this attitude changed over time given the limitations with the data. Consistently, survey and focus group participants were of the belief that their biggest hurdle to finding work was a lack of experience and/or limited education. In this regard, a positive outcome of Y@W has been its demonstrative effect, helping some participants realise that they need to acquire additional skills should they wish to enter the formal labour employment.

Evaluating the Honiara Employment Programs

At the outset, it needs to be noted that globally the evidence in this space is lacking. This is especially so for countries like Solomon Islands. The World Bank has commented that there is 'little evidence of the impact on youth-targeted programs in labour-abundant, low-income countries with weak institutions', with the evidence that does exist suggesting that they are 'less likely to be effective, and programs targeting formal employment may be regressive' (World Bank 2013a). The following analysis generally accords with this observation.

In Solomon Islands an initial question is whether the training being provided by the programs (in all forms — classroom, on-the-job mentoring — and encompassing all topics) actually leads to an increase in formal or informal employment. Blattman and Ralston (2015) state: 'The success of all of these supply-side programs depends on getting the diagnosis right: that these market failures or constraints actually exist, are binding, and that relieving them is enough to increase some employment.'

As concerns formal employment, is a lack of skills of the type being provided by REP and Y@W a binding constraint on employers taking on additional workers in Solomon Islands? There is no
evidence to suggest that this is the case. To put this another way: there is an absence of data suggesting that employers will engage more employees if such employees possess the skills that the programs are providing. Again, the lack of a counterfactual severely limits the ability to answer this question — foremost, it hinders an informed assessment of whether employees would have engaged staff irrespective of the various programs.

Available evidence on skills gaps in Solomon Islands would tend to show that these occur at the opposite end of the job market: the technical and the professional (although not exclusively). These include life-science and health professionals; extraction and building trades workers; teachers; retail and other services managers; science and engineering professionals; and physical and engineering science technicians (Curtain 2013). In contrast, the spectrum of the jobs market which both programs are targeting is characterised by an abundance of supply. In the case of Y@W this is potentially problematic as employers have a ready supply of adults who can undertake the same work as young people. An omission of either program — particularly Y@W — to examine whether target employers see a lack of skills as a constraint to investment remains a missing piece of the puzzle.

In post-conflict Solomon Islands the soft skills that both REP and Y@W impart are potentially important, although impacts are hard to measure. It is likely that these skills do not affect employment (there is no evidence to suggest that they do), but are seemingly important in terms of deterring crime and violence and contributing to social stability — attributes which do indirectly impact upon the employment conditions of the country, with a peaceful environment being conducive to business.

While there is no hard data on the outcome of these soft skills in Solomon Islands, emerging international evidence, which Blattman and Ralston (2015) describe as ‘promising but nascent’, points to a positive correlation between soft skills and reduced violence and crime. They refer to a number of studies from Africa and the United States to support their argument (see also, Blattman et al. 2015). It would be wrong to overestimate the import of these findings — being preliminary and from vastly different contexts, such that their application to Honiara is not readily apparent. Further evidence is needed, particularly from within Melanesia.

Equally, there is no evidence that the skills training provided by the programs is leading to an increased uptake in informal employment. This analysis is of most relevance to the Young Entrepreneurs component of Y@W. If Solomon Islands is anything like the international experience, it is unlikely that the skills being imparted under the Solomon Islands programs will see participants make a decision to start or expand a business. According to recent available evidence, vastly more important in contexts akin to Solomon Islands is the provision of capital. Blattman and Annan (2016) outline an example from Liberia. Their evaluation found successful outcomes on various measures from a project aimed at high-risk men: ex-combatants, those occupying rural resource enclaves, and other rural ‘hotspots’. The program provided a mixture of skills training and a capital/cash injection or, indeed, the prospect of a future cash injection. The results reinforced the authors’ theoretical model: ‘if people are poor and credit-constrained then the return to skills alone will be low’ (ibid.:15).

This analysis invites the question of whether providing capital is likely to increase employment prospects in Solomon Islands. Again, owing to a lack of data it is not possible to answer this question. However, an argument can be made that capital, particularly in the form of cash, is a constraint to commencing a business in Honiara, especially for young people. Within Solomon Islands bank credit is non-existent for the unemployed. Outside of the largesse of family and friends, this potentially leaves sourcing finance to formal and informal moneylenders on unfavourable terms.

The advantages of providing capital is supported by a growing number of studies showing that the poor have high returns to capital investment. Blattman and Ralston (2015) present several international examples which suggest that the provision of cash, both conditional and non-conditional, is likely to stimulate self-employment in a cost-effective manner. They also refute concerns that participants will misuse transfers, pointing to recent
evidence from 19 studies around the world which ‘found almost no evidence of increased spending on alcohol, tobacco, or other “temptation goods”’ (ibid.:14–15). 27

Finally, returning to a further question raised in the introduction: do these programs result in less crime and violence? While ensuring social stability was a key motivation behind the implementation of REP, the answer to this question is unknown for Solomon Islands. Anecdotal and individual case studies would suggest that for some participants the structure provided by the programs, particularly Y@W, does result in various lifestyle changes, such as reduced alcohol and drug intake.

Accepting that people will rationally seek the most lucrative and stable work available, if crime pays then it is unlikely that participants will forego this income source altogether, even if involved in other licit activities (Blattman and Ralston 2015). The Liberian example discussed above is demonstrative. This provided training and capital inputs to ‘high-risk men’ in an effort to shift them away from illegal activities and mercenary recruitment. The authors found that higher returns from farming (even small higher returns) did lead to a change in participants’ behaviour, there being less incentive for crime and mercenary work, although involvement in illicit activities did not cease completely (Blattman and Annan 2016). This scenario shares some parallels with preliminary fieldwork conducted by the author in 2016 on illicit livelihoods in Honiara, with the majority of kwaso producers spoken to combining their illicit trade with licit means of income generation, both formal and informal. For others, illicit activities would typically be engaged in when additional household finances were required, usually for one-off expenditure.

A recent examination of the impact on crime of the largest demand-side public works program in the world, the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme of India, found that employment generated by the program saw a decline in both property and violent crimes, although the impact was minimal (Das and Mocan 2016). 28

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The above analysis together with the further application of international evidence has potential policy implications relevant to the programs discussed and measures directed towards reducing youth unemployment in Honiara. Given the state of available evidence, recommendations in this space remain tentative and further programming would benefit from additional empirical enquiry around a number of issues, some of which are raised below.

First, greater emphasis should be placed on informal employment programs. The international experience would tend to suggest that for an economy like Solomon Islands an entrepreneurial or capital-centric approach should take priority over formal employment programs, or, at the very least, be of equal relevance.

For example, the skills training components of both REP and Y@W place disproportionate emphasis on formal employment given the Solomon Islands context where most opportunities exist in the informal sector. Out of 30 topics taught during PET, only three explicitly relate to self-employment. 29 The initial two-week Y@W training is similarly concerned with the formal (although it has a separate business training course for those undertaking the Youth Entrepreneur Scheme).

Y@W is only distributing data around its formal employment (internship) component, there being no knowledge of how those young people who have participated in the Youth Entrepreneur Scheme have fared. And both programs invest in CV writing and job finding assistance, measures that are only of relevance to those seeking employment in the formal sector.

Neither program provides ongoing monitoring and advice for those involved in informal income-generation activities, although Y@W is seeking to do so. Finally, in what is an interesting footnote, a small number of participants who have managed to secure employment under the internship program of Y@W have left it in order to commence their own business. 30

Second, experimentation with entrepreneurship should be considered. As part of the focus on the Young Entrepreneurs component of Y@W, thought could be given to encouraging greater diversification in informal activities. In Honiara, these appear to be narrowly focused with some
activities not being sufficiently directed towards market demand. A clear understanding of prospective markets is crucial. Cash-constrained urban youth selling to similarly cash-constrained urban youth will not yield significant, long-term returns. A good alternative may be activities which target the aid economy, are niche, or which have a wide and stable consumer-base (and do not crowd out existing businesses). This is an area where additional analytical work around market demand would likely assist prospective participants.

Experimentation around credit, especially cash transfers, could also be contemplated. The method by which this is done would vary according to the nature of the employment program. It could include increasing the amount of credit provided in given circumstances (increased credit for high-risk ventures) or testing periodic conditional cash transfers (providing transfers for ‘high risk’ participants if they do not fall foul of the law, or providing additional cash to entrepreneurs when they meet business targets). There is international evidence to suggest this could be a fruitful area to trial.

Third, the failure to collect longitudinal data and implement a control group is a missed opportunity. The scale of the programs described are unprecedented in Solomon Islands with the involvement of around 9000 youth to mid-2016. A largely missed opportunity to date has been around learning. Little is publicly known about the impact that these programs have had on youth employment and social stability: what has worked and what hasn’t?

In particular, the omission of both programs to use a control group has severely affected the utility of the data collected and means there is little understanding of what dynamics drive certain segments of Honiara’s formal and informal employment markets. Further, there is little evidence that the data that has been collected has been analysed and effectively fed into the policymaking community so that learning can occur. There are also areas around which there are significant data gaps. A non-exhaustive list of examples is provided in Box 2.

Fourth, at present there is insufficient evidence to support the expansion of either program, at least in their current forms, beyond Honiara and its peri-urban environment. There are seemingly cogent reasons to expand youth employment programs beyond Honiara. As seen, the Solomon Islands rural economy engages the vast majority of the populace, a position that will not change anytime soon. However, leaving aside issues related to economies of scale, two arguments would suggest that directing scarce resources to Honiara and its surrounding areas offers the best potential return for investment and should take precedence over rural expansion.

First, and despite government aspirations, there is no prospect of reversing the rural to urban (Honiara) migration of young people in Solomon Islands. Young people are coming for a variety of reasons, with education and employment being key pull factors. Figure 1 above shows the extent

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**Box 2: Examples of Data Gaps in Honiara’s Youth Employment Programs**

- Are formally employed youth carrying out jobs ‘on-the-side’? If so, what jobs and why?
- Is involvement in illicit activities reduced by involvement in licit activities? For youth at risk, have the programs reduced delinquency in the form of contact with police or other relevant state agencies?
- Are treatment groups which have had skills training earning more than control groups? Are treatment groups applying the skills they have learnt?
- Has involvement in formal or informal employment had a demonstrative affect amongst participants’ unemployed peers?
- Do participants in entrepreneur programs earn more and remain in business longer if they receive follow-up mentoring compared with those who receive no such assistance?
- Are certain areas of the formal and informal economy employing more youth than others?
- What is happening to the youth that have been engaged in these programs in terms of employment and livelihoods? If they remain employed formally or informally can this in anyway be attributable to the programs?
to which an exodus from rural areas is occurring, especially amongst those aged 15–30. This is causing the 'bulge' in the urban population pyramid, and the 'dent' in the rural population pyramid.

Assuming that by 2050 the Honiara population has caught up with the urban global average of 50 per cent, the city would be home to more than 600,000 people — surpassing the total population of the country on latest census data (Evans 2015). Efforts to expand Honiara’s boundary have been resisted by contiguous landowners, meaning this figure would largely be squeezed into 22 square kilometres, with spill over onto unserviced customary land. This scenario would appear to encompass all of the ingredients for future conflict: a large, youthful, urban population; heightened pressure on land and services; and labour bottlenecks.

Second, to the extent that these programs are responsive to social stability, international evidence, and past experience from Solomon Islands, suggests that future conflict will be an urban phenomenon. Over the last decade, numerous strategists, scholars and development institutions have begun focusing on a future where group violence is principally an urban occurrence (see, for example, Beall et al. 2011). The only significant urban site in Solomon Islands is Honiara; a place where predictable, episodic street violence dating back to the 1970s and often involving thousands of male youth is, arguably, showing signs of becoming normalised.

Finally, a careful eye needs to be kept on issues of cost and duplication. There are features of the two programs that appear to duplicate one another, as well as other smaller youth employment initiatives in Honiara. Potentially, economies of scale could be achieved by merging the two programs or, at the very least, components of the two. While REP’s PET ceased in the first half of 2016, the classroom skills training that both programs have delivered seems a prime candidate for integration. As of August 2014, REP has provided a careers coach and set up a referral service including a resource centre equipped with computers for CV writing. These are services that Y@W also provides. The crossover seems clear and the potential for integration obvious (should REP continue such services beyond 2016). Other existing and prospective initiatives in Honiara could also benefit from an integrated approach to addressing youth work, and it may be the case that a new or existing government agency specifically mandated to address youth employment would be best placed to lead this coordination.

While the international evidence around youth employment programming remains sparse, this paper has suggested that the Solomon Islands programs presented generally conform with contexts similar to Honiara. As the population of the capital continues to grow, the issues outlined will take on a level of increased importance.

One of the key challenges moving forward will be to compile a robust evidence base on which to build future programming. While this paper has examined two Honiara-based employment interventions, a missing piece of the puzzle for Solomon Islands — beyond the scope of this paper — is a comprehensive assessment of what particular modality, scale, temporal frame and cohort of participants is best suited to addressing the country’s youth unemployment situation. Given the diversity and number of employment and skills training initiatives that have been undertaken globally, and the pressing urgency of youth unemployment in Solomon Islands, particularly Honiara, this is a question that is highly current and, as this paper has attempted to impart, for which there is a critical need for further evidence-based enquiry.

And, importantly, moving forward, expectations will need to be kept in check. It has been argued that a focus on full-time, formal employment in the public or private sector will only ever have limited success in Honiara. In this regard, the situation facing Solomon Islands today is no different from that presented by Chevalier (2001) some 15 years ago: ‘[u]niversal … employment [is] a fantasy that needs debunking’. Given this situation, it has been contended that efforts to tackle youth unemployment in the capital, and the country, will need to adopt less conventional policy approaches and focus on areas where Solomon Islands has established strengths and advantages, such as the informal sector. Even so, unemployment will remain a permanent state of affairs for pockets of the country’s population, particularly uneducated, urban youth.
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Endnotes
1 For policy purposes, the Solomon Islands Government’s definition of youth is ‘persons between 14 years of age and 29 years of age, inclusive’ (Ministry of Women, Youth and Children Affairs 2010). Unless otherwise stated, this paper adopts the same definition.

2 Falling within the World Bank’s ‘harmonized list of fragile situations’. Fragile situations include countries with a harmonised ‘Country Policy and Institutional Assessment’ (CPIA) rating of 3.2 or less. In FY 2016, Solomon Islands’ CPIA rating was 3.1.

3 According to the Solomon Islands Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development (MEHRD), in 2013 Solomon Islands has a net primary enrolment rate of 88.85 per cent (MEHRD 2013a). (Enrolment does not correlate with attendance.) Figures for 2010 indicate that 68 per cent of students had below satisfactory functional literacy and numeracy levels (Close 2012).

4 In 2008, the push out rate was said to be 26 per cent for junior secondary schools (more than 5000 students) and 63 per cent for senior secondary school (more than 6800 students): (Ministry of Women, Youth and Children Affairs 2010).

5 This data shows a drop of around 17,700 student enrolments in standard/grade 1 to form 6 enrolments (SIG 2013b). On average 20,000 students have been enrolled in standard 1 over that period, while only 2600 are enrolled in form 6, meaning vast numbers are not progressing through primary and secondary schooling.

6 Based upon unpublished figures provided by the Solomon Islands Ministry of Public Service (December 2015).

7 Based upon annual ‘active’ NPF accounts as at December each year (2007–14), excluding ‘slow active’ and ‘inactive’ accounts. Sourced from unpublished figures provided by the Central Bank of Solomon Islands. NPF is the compulsory national provident/superannuation fund to which all employers in Solomon Islands are required to register their employees and pay contributions. In reality, this does not occur with various sectors being particularly prone to not registering staff, such as the private security industry and domestic services.

8 Poverty being based on, ‘the minimum expenditures needed to obtain basic food and non-food goods taking into account prevailing consumption patterns in the country’ (SIG 2015).

9 Betelnut is the nut of the fruit of the Areca palm tree. The nuts are chewed and combined in the mouth with crushed lime. Chewing has a mild stimulant effect.

10 Kwaso is a homemade distilled alcohol introduced in Solomon Islands in the mid-1990s. ‘Black market’ is a reference to the ubiquitous, around-the-clock roadside markets that mainly sell beer without a government-issued liquor license. The livelihood activities described here are far from exclusively a youth phenomenon.

11 With a recent World Bank study (which the author was involved in) finding that petty theft was widespread across Solomon Islands, in some communities being ‘rampant and of constant concern’ (Allen et al. 2013).

12 For an overview of the evidence in this space see, for example, Das and Mocan 2016.

13 Based upon a 38-hour working week at SBD $4 per hour (being the minimum hourly wage rate for all Solomon Islander employees except forestry and fisheries workers). At the time of publication, SBD $1 was equivalent to approximately AUD $0.17. Returns increase with the number of ‘pots’ employed (gas cylinders used as part of the distillation process). In the scenario described here two pots were used.

14 Pursuant to the Labour Act (Solomon Islands) (s.84) the minimum working age in Solomon Islands is 12
(for a list of defined jobs), an age previously criticised by the Committee on the Rights of the Child as being too low (UNCRC 2003: para 19(c)).


16 According to the latest census some 32 per cent of the population aged 12 years and older in rural areas were subsistence workers, compared with 2 per cent in urban centres (SIG 2013c).

17 It is acknowledged that often employment creation programs will target agricultural livelihoods, particularly in rural areas, although this is not the case for the Honiara-based programs discussed in this paper.

18 These discussions, taking place between June and August 2016, were conducted as part of the author’s PhD fieldwork.

19 This focus group was conducted in July 2016 and included eight participants who had either taken part in REP or Y@W.

20 Dr Michael Goddard 28/2/2016. Honorary Associate, Department of Anthropology, Macquarie University, personal communication.

21 In the first quarter of 2016 Y@W was seeking a Program Design Specialist with one of their tasks being to clarify, ‘the program’s Theory of Change and primary purpose’ and ‘prepare a new Program Design Document’ (Cardno 2016).

22 A key finding being that the REP would deliver economic benefits of between USD $0.48 and $0.85 to the poor for every dollar of expenditure (World Bank 2010a).

23 Program and economy-wide comparisons need to be treated with a degree of caution. See endnote 25.

24 To some extent this is supported by the available data. For example, survey number five discloses that of the seven survey participants from survey number one who were still being tracked, none were employed. The drop-out of survey participants has been attributed to difficulties generating sufficient interest or incentives for former Y@W participants to attend to completing the survey.

25 It could be argued that participants in the Y@W program are not reflective of the overall youth demographic, with the program catering for those that are ‘disengaged’, which may mean those exhibiting worse employment outcomes and prospects than the wider youth community.

However, in practice both programs accept any youth who applies to take part. In the case of Y@W this includes those from standard/grade 6 to university graduates. Although the program does actively seek out those with a disability and former prisoners, a small minority of total program participants. REP participation is largely on the basis of place of residence. Difficulties with comparisons may also arise owing to differences between the age range of participants in the two programs and that for which Solomon Islands’ youth employment data has been collated.

26 This comprised the two-tiered provision of mainly agricultural tools/supplies and for various participants an untied amount of USD $50.


28 The crimes analysed were: murder, kidnapping and abduction, robbery, burglary, theft, and unlawful assembly and rioting. The magnitude of the impact of the program on crime ranged from -0.03 to -0.08 for property crimes and -0.03 to -0.04 for violent crimes (Das and Mocan 2016). More information on the scheme, in operation since 2006, can be found at: <www.nrega.nic.in>.

29 These relate to: i). the importance of budget, with emphasis on savings and use of bank accounts; ii). starting an income generating project; and iii). preparing profit and loss reports’ (ABU Consult Berlin GmbH 2011).

30 This was 3 per cent according to Tracer Study number 7 (Pasifiki Services Ltd).

31 For a discussion of how the aid economy can potentially be harnessed in Solomon Islands (in relation to women, but equally applicable to youth) see Haque and Greig 2010.

32 Based on a population of 1.3 million using a ‘medium population scenario’ (SIG 2013c).

33 For example, since 2011 World Vision has implemented the ‘Honiara Youth Development, Employment and Small Enterprise Project’ which also includes a classroom-style skills training component.

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After the Floods: Urban Displacement, Lessons from Solomon Islands
Meg Keen and Alan McNeil

The severity and frequency of extreme climatic events in the South Pacific are set to increase, creating additional pressures on urban settlers occupying densely populated, flood-prone land. In 2014, Cyclone Ita left Honiara and surrounding areas with 22 people dead, about 675 destroyed houses, and huge recovery costs (GSI 2014). Some people could never return safely to their homes. However, in a city with little affordable housing or vacant land, there were few places to go. This In Brief documents the challenges government authorities — the Honiara City Council (HCC) and the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Survey (MLHS) — faced when they created a new subdivision for the displaced, April Ridge, and considers the lessons for more responsive planning.

Urban Land Scarcity — A Big Hurdle for Resettlement

Land is scarce in Honiara and demand for housing high. Squatter settlements comprise about 35 per cent of the city’s population (HTCPB 2015) and are rapidly spilling over into adjacent land in Guadalcanal province, where some settlements are reportedly growing at over 9 per cent per annum (SINS 2012:21–22). The mushrooming squatter settlements are ill-equipped to deal with severe weather events because most have no services, many no road access, and nearly all inadequate drainage and sanitation. In the words of one senior official interviewed, ‘all planners and utilities can do is chase the people, and we are falling behind’.

In this environment, proactive planning and effective responses to displacement rarely occur. Following disasters, finding secure land for resettlement is complex. Not only is land scarce, but tenure can be uncertain even on alienated land. Much land in and around Honiara was alienated during the time of the British Protectorate, and some of these acquisitions are still disputed by descendants of customary owners (Solomon Star 2014). Even on customary land, especially in peri-urban areas, land access disputes can arise because of intra-clan conflicts over benefit distribution and the authority to allocate land to outsiders (Foukona 2015; Monson 2015).

April Ridge: Only a Partial Solution

After the April 2014 flash flooding of settlements along the Mataniko River, the HCC and MLHS decided to create a new land subdivision away from flooding hazards, mainly for the displaced. They selected April Ridge in East Honiara because it was one of the few remaining areas inside the city boundary where the government owned the alienated land, and subdivision or substantial settlement had not occurred. This subdivision, and a recent subdivision at nearby Mount Austin (also in East Honiara) are rare cases of the MLHS taking a proactive approach to land scarcity issues.

Unfortunately, the urban planning solution to crisis management fell short. The MLHS officers pegged out the subdivision and advertised 268 lots for lease by public tender, with preference given to flood victims. Over a thousand applications were received. It took more than a year, given limited capacity, to finalise allocations. But flood victims needed an immediate solution, so politicians allegedly offered land to their displaced supporters to win favour and to free up much-needed schools and public buildings that were being used as evacuation centres (Island Sun 2014). Over a hundred people moved to the area before the planning and allocation processes were completed. Most, but not all, were legitimate refugees from Koa Hill but with no legal land rights.

By the time the lot allocations were completed, the immediate crisis was over and the area substantially settled. The rigid and formalised planning process was ill-suited for disaster response. The current squatters won’t make way for others, even if they are successful applicants who purchase their leases; most have nowhere else to go and feel they have a legitimate land claim.

Challenges Facing April Ridge Response

In effect, the MLHS was attempting to create a legal settlement option. However, there are few incentives for settlers or political leaders to support this option. In addition to the mismatch of planning timelines to the immediate housing
needs following a cyclone, there are other flaws in the current planning process regarding regularising settlement for the urban displaced and new migrants. Importantly, the land charges exceed the settlers’ ability to pay, so hardly any of the 268 lease offers have been taken up. To register a fixed-term estate (FTE) — a lease of up to 75 years — there is an unimproved land value charge of SBD40–70,000 (AU$7–12,000), plus annual land rental and council rates. For many, illegal squatting is simply the more economically rational option. Suggestions by a few senior officials that costs should be reduced have been resisted by urban authorities reluctant to forego much-needed revenue (even if it rarely materialises).

Local politicians and most senior public servants have no appetite to enforce resettlement criteria through eviction — the risk is a loss of political support or rioting. Most feel obliged to respond quickly to settler needs following an extreme weather event, regardless of the planning rules or long-term implications. A legal challenge by government is also not attractive. In Solomon Islands’ clogged courts, legal proceedings can be prolonged and results uncertain. Land disputes often halt development for years, increasing pressure on other unencumbered land.

Thus, governments have never forcibly removed squatters in and around Honiara. In other Melanesian cities, such as Port Moresby, unwanted squatters have been forcibly evicted, creating social tensions but rarely resolving land access issues. But the more accommodative approach is not problem-free. At April Ridge, yet another unplanned settlement has emerged, and the first wave of squatters are policing the new arrivals and their claims, creating social tensions (Solomon Star 2015).

Lessons Learned

The barriers to responsive planning are political, institutional, and cultural. The April Ridge experiment to create a safe, planned, and orderly response to displacement tried to address pressing housing needs with a lengthy land allocation process — the result was a mismatch between community demand and planning responses. April Ridge was further inhibited by the high costs of securing land leases.

So what must change? There is a pressing need for more housing options that don’t require low-income people to secure land tenure. In other cities, some alienated land is dedicated to high-density and affordable housing that can be leased from public or private developers. Low-cost credit schemes for housing are also being trialled in Port Moresby and elsewhere to increase access to finances. For those willing to rebuild their homes, access to low-cost, cyclone-resistant housing such as that being piloted in Suva could also increase urban resilience.

As for the existing ‘unplanned settlements’, they are here to stay, so working with communities to make them safe, secure, and well-serviced is in the public interest. For low-income households, FTEs will only work if they are affordable, subsidised or can be paid incrementally, and if they convey real economic advantage for access to services and finance. Finally, political commitment and institutional capacity to implement the orderly settlement of new subdivisions need strengthening for the public costs of this approach to be justified — not currently the case, but approaches to urban management are rapidly evolving.

Author Notes

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