

COVID-19, human security and the plight of informal settlements

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COVID-19 has emerged in the Pacific region not only as a health issue but as a potential security crisis for the most vulnerable. Residents living in informal settlements face innumerable security challenges in meeting and sustaining their basic needs, including securing access to land and housing, clean water, and adequate sanitation. In addition, many must mitigate health problems that arise from living on flood prone/marginal lands and dealing with natural disasters and climate change impacts. The pandemic has elevated residents' insecurities related to the quality of housing, land tenure, social protection systems, and maintaining livelihoods. In the short-term, this also includes the inability of residents to meet basic COVID-19 social distancing principles and access to clean running water.

Consequently, the COVID-19 pandemic will have a far-reaching impact on the lives and livelihoods of those most vulnerable in Pacific informal settlements, further delaying access to basic human rights. Key messages emerge; firstly, for communities living in dense informal settlements with limited access to clean water and formal healthcare, it is impossible to apply the World Health Organization (WHO) 'middle-class' preventive measures around hand washing, social distancing and other measures. Secondly, a surge in COVID-19 cases in the Pacific and globally will have its greatest impacts on those urban residents who are already disadvantaged given their already unequal access to health facilities, their existing tenuous health, lack of affordable and adequate housing, uncertain land tenure, lack of access to basic services, and reduced livelihoods. Thirdly, when considering the security of shelters for those in informal settlements, COVID-19 highlights the need for refocusing and supporting 'bottom-up' models of urban development and urban growth in the Pacific.

By the beginning of February 2021, 11 Pacific Island Countries (PICs), namely, the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Wallis and Futuna recorded 23,014 positive cases of COVID-19 and 203 deaths (SPC 2020). While COVID-19 is of concern in all PICs, community transmission is a major risk in French Polynesia and Guam where cases continue to increase. As of early February 2021, reported cases in PNG continued to increase gradually with the virus having been reported in half of PNG's provinces. There remains a major fear of a significant outbreak in a country that is resource rich but has limited institutional, management and system capacity (McClure 2020). While in comparison to their Pacific neighbors, New Zealand and Australia, the number of recorded PIC COVID-19 cases are small, PICs have still implemented travel and tourism restrictions by closing borders, thus severely constraining international flights, cargo and tourist shipping. Solomon Islands is typical of many PICs, having shut down shops, bars and local markets, while youth impacted by school closures have migrated back to their home islands to ensure the security of their family networks and to access subsistence resources (Ride and Kekea 2020).

With limited testing capacity combined with poor infrastructure and management capacity, all PICs have enacted public health emergencies that have resulted in lockdowns, school closures, market closures, curfews, and social distancing to contain and limit COVID-19 transmission (Bruce 2020). Identified health risks include the lack of necessary laboratory equipment to undertake in-country testing. This presents a major challenge of access to care if the number of COVID cases spikes. At a broader level, the dramatic reduction in tourist arrivals plus impacts from reduced shipping, fishing and general trade disruption is having a major impact on the local economy and livelihoods (SPC 2020). There has been little attention given to those residents hit hardest by COVID-19 and its PIC towns and cities, a trend observed elsewhere in Asia (Jones 2020).

Figure 1: Attempts to close local markets such as those in Port Moresby and Suva have been problematic as they are fundamental to sustaining livelihoods and maintaining household cohesion.



Source: Paul Jones

With its high dependency on tourism, the Pacific has greatly suffered from border closures and lockdowns, with consequences spreading into the overall economy and impacting supply chains and job security (International Monetary Fund 2020). The contraction of local economies means many of the urban poor who are self-employed or running small-scale enterprises are struggling to maintain their livelihoods. Globally, declining employment is expected to reduce remittances by approximately 20 per cent. Excluding PNG, remittance flows in the PICs average approximately 10 per cent of GDP with major impacts likely to be felt in Tonga where remittances exceed 40 per cent of GDP compared to approximately 15 per cent in the Marshall Islands and Samoa (International Monetary Fund 2020). Seasonal workers from PICs unable to work in Australia and New Zealand due to border closures further impacts on workers and their remittance flows to families. Collectively, a reduction in remittances and country-to-country migration flows will contribute to weakening family cohesion and social networks, especially where existing ties are already fragile and under stress.

In addition, reduced economic activity and spending will have serious consequences on maintaining and improving PIC developmental outcomes including their ability to achieve the relevant UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 that calls for an end to poverty in all its manifestations by 2030, and SDG 11 which seeks the development of safe and sustainable cities. Given the nature of the global economy, it is becoming increasingly clear that PICs will continue to see increased economic and social disruptions generated from the decline in the trade and tourism industries.

In this setting, the COVID-19 pandemic will have a far-reaching impact on the urban poor living in dense and

overcrowded informal settlements. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that people:

- clean their hands with water and soap or use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser;
- maintain at least a one meter physical distance from other persons; and
- avoid contact with eyes, nose and mouths to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (WHO 2020).

It is impossible for residents of informal settlements to apply these ‘middle-class’ preventive measures given that they have limited access to clean water and are constrained in physical living conditions in terms of both their dwelling size and surrounding open space. Population density combined with shared water standpipes and toilets loom as major sites of transmission. Many residents also have limited financial resources to consistently fund hand sanitisers and masks, assuming they are available. In this setting, access to soap-based products and good hygiene practices are equally important in fighting COVID-19 (Lal, Lucas and Slatyer, 2020).

The Impact of COVID-19 on the security of informal settlements

With over 95 per cent of the total global cases of COVID-19 concentrated in urban areas, the pandemic will have its greatest impact in poor, underserved and densely populated urban areas, namely, informal settlements and slums which are estimated to account for approximately one billion residents (UN-Habitat 2020a). The residents living in these areas include rural-urban migrants, refugees, and the displaced. A 2016 Asian Development Bank (ADB) assessment

indicated several key features relevant to the status of informal settlements and the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Firstly, the report indicated that in 2012, some 800,000–1,000,000 Pacific urban residents lived in informal and squatter settlements, as well as native and traditional villages, and that by the end of 2015, this number would increase to more than one million residents. In the absence of formal baseline data on slums and squatter settlements compiled at PIC national and regional levels, and noting the continued upward trajectory of urban growth and informal settlements in the Melanesian capitals of Port Moresby, Honiara, Port Vila, and Suva as examples, an estimate of two million residents living in some form of urban village is not an unreasonable benchmark.

Secondly, all PIC towns and cities contain to varying degrees a mix of urban villages plus formal development,

with the largest number of informal settlements located in Port Moresby where over 50 per cent of the population lives in some type of informal urban village (Jones, 2016).

Thirdly, the report discussed opportunities to address the growing scale and proportion of informal and squatter settlements (urban villages) given their increasing number, size and density in PICs. The assessment makes clear that it is urban residents who experience the greatest insecurities, being least able to access adequate land, housing, services and infrastructure in PIC towns and cities.

Finally, the report questions who constitutes the urban poor and disadvantaged, including who is increasingly moving into informal settlements to seek affordable land and housing and challenging both the typology and concept of what is an informal settlement and slum in the Pacific.

Figure 2: COVID-19 reporting in the Pacific will bring to the fore the neglected but critical data challenge of what comprises an informal settlement and who are the urban poor.



Source: Paul Jones



Unfortunately, little urban analytics and baseline data exists to understand the process of transformation and change to the Pacific urban fabric.

Whilst the impact of COVID-19 may differ across PICs, the underlying characteristics of PICs pose a major structural hurdle in dealing with COVID-19. These include the small size and proximity/remoteness of PICs; gaps in infrastructure provision, and institutional and system capacity, especially health systems and land administration systems; provision of basic services; existing health and workplace safety compliance; high economic vulnerability due to limited export base and a high dependence on imports; migration and flow of remittances; existing hardship and poverty with low formal social security safety nets; and high environmental vulnerability including climate change impacts. Whether large or small Pacific islands, these challenges are exacerbated by COVID-19 impacts and

the lack of security will be most visible for those living in informal settlements.

Despite these growing challenges, urban planning and management of PIC urbanisation remains weak and largely misunderstood and an absence of political will to act (Barbara and Keen 2015; Jones 2012). Planning approaches remain an inheritance of colonial times and Euro–American systems, with little appetite to develop coherent Pacific urban planning. Regional policy approaches are disconnected from national and city initiatives, resulting in good practice knowledge and contextual approaches of ‘what works’ not being shared. The misalignment of policy is exacerbated by planning approaches that fail to support the growing number of informal settlements (Jones, 2017). In this setting, the impact of COVID-19 on the social, economic and cultural dimensions of (1) water supply and sanitation, (2) housing and land, and (3) livelihoods, social

cohesion and community resilience, highlight the challenges residents and households face in accessing and sustaining basic goods, services and support and most importantly, their overall security.

1. Water supply and sanitation: The provision of potable water and clean sanitation facilities are important given that washing hands with a soap, sanitiser and clean water are the key tenets of the public health response. Confronting the needs of underserved populations in informal settlements, especially those who may share toilets and do not have their own water supply, becomes paramount in improving overall health security and seeking local solutions for COVID-19. Shared water stands, for example, presents risks for social distancing such as queuing for water and maintaining physical distance. Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) interventions are often considered purely physical interventions, often independent of their deeper public health role and implications. WASH services are critical elements in stopping COVID-19 transmission and maintaining public health in underserved informal settlements.

Most PICs do not have sufficient handwashing services and WASH interventions to improve public health outcomes have been limited to Suva, Fiji (Lal, Lucas and Slatyer, 2020). WASH services may be suspended or reduced in operational capacity, put on hold or deferred, or affected by a states of emergencies, school lockdowns, and border closures impacting those with existing insecurities the most. This impact will be further dependent on gender, social and kin dynamics, as well as general institutional capacity at state and local levels.

2. Housing and land: Residents living in informal settlements and slums where population densities are high are acutely vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 as they live in crowded conditions, lack direct household access to water and sanitation, and suffer from poor drainage and ventilation. Unlike housing in middle class urban environments where mono-functional rooms and spaces are often delineated by physical partitions, housing in informal settlements serves many functions including sleeping, cooking, eating, washing laundry and a place for general sociality, increasing the likelihood that they will be used by residents suffering from health issues as well as others in the residence.

The complexity of the spectrum of land tenure arrangements in PICs make it difficult to generalise about land tenure security as much of the response will be locally nuanced (see, for example, McEvoy, Mitchell and Trundle, 2019). Where cash or in-kind services are required to pay rent to secure ongoing land tenure arrangements or make mortgage payments, deferral of payments or renegotiation may be requested if residents are unable to meet timelines. From a COVID-19 perspective, securing rooms or housing for those required to isolate or facing eviction arises as a major challenge. It may be unachievable in the urban setting requiring a move back to their rural village and home islands. In this context, land emerges as a strong form of financial and social security for landowners, but as an insecurity for the lessee who may have no socio-cultural ties or connections to the traditional or communal lands on which they live.

Figure 3: Pre-existing land and financial issues will be compounded by COVID-19 if residents are unable to meet rent and mortgage payments.



Source: Paul Jones

Where population and housing density of settlements is high, the notion of what constitutes a household in informal settlements will be fluid as a single dwelling can contain more than one household as related residents move between houses and share food and sleeping spaces. Households may comprise the extended family including grandparents or the nuclear family. Thus, understanding the physical condition of the dwelling, the size of the house and composition of the household are also important in understanding household security and the potential implications from COVID-19. What these scenarios make clear is the tenuous trade-offs residents in informal settlements make on a day-to-day basis. In other words, residents are tasked with making a home that enables them to access urban jobs and educational opportunities, whilst accepting the underlying insecurity that may come with informal land and housing agreements that are not recognised by the formal system (Kiddle 2018).

3. Livelihoods, social cohesion and community resilience: While a small proportion of those living in informal settlements may work in government institutions or the private sector, the majority work in mini-stalls, operate small scale home based entities such as laundries, pre-school care or motor repairs, act as suppliers to markets (from household gardens), work as market vendors, or simply look after the household. COVID-19 in its most basic form attacks socio-cultural protocols by enforcing social and physical

distancing which impacts on the proximity amongst people who live and work in a particular social group and community. When mobility restrictions are fragmented or stopped, livelihoods and income streams will be hardest hit, challenging family and household stability and social cohesion. With limited or no access to formal social protection systems and networks, women who do the bulk of unpaid household work whilst engaging in small scale economic activities will take the brunt of the burden. In this context, COVID-19 will attack the four basic elements central to maintaining social cohesion in PICs. These are:

1. place attachment and development tied to ethnicity and kinship;
2. kin-based social organisation;
3. land tenure based on customary practices; and
4. the persistence of subsistence-based household activities, such as home gardening, necessary for food security and maintaining market orientated trade (Jones 2016).

With households and social settings in informal settlements at the forefront of experiencing the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, traditional governance, community decision-making, and support from informal social protection systems – as already seen in urban settings – will come strongly into play in the absence of limited impact from government formal systems. If these norms are not effective, the implications will include an upward trajectory in domestic violence, most notably in PNG which already displays some of the highest rates of sexual and family violence in the world (Bruce 2020).

Despite the weakening of the social organisation of informal settlements through urbanisation, informal social protection systems such as making space available for visiting relatives, minding school children from outer islands, sharing food derived from subsistence, and providing remittances and cash to support family members continues to underpin and bind family, household and clan solidarity helping constrain poverty levels, maintain access to basic goods and services, and keep health, income and socioeconomic inequalities at lower levels than what they would be without such systems.

Conclusion

Security in the Pacific encompasses social protection and safety systems, gender discrimination and domestic violence, human rights, security of fishing rights and economic zones, and cyber and food security among many other issues.¹ At a national level, for example, in 2017, Solomon Islands became one of the first in the Pacific region to launch a *Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan, 2017–2021*, addressing women's rights and participation in maintaining security and advancing peace, and emphasising the States' responsibility for ending sexual and gender based conflict and discrimination.

At the local level, the COVID-19 crisis has revealed the depth of gaps in basic services and associated insecurities cutting across land, housing, and social protection systems facing the most vulnerable communities in informal

settlements. In PICs, the COVID-19 pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on households and communities that cannot secure access to potable water, hand cleansers, masks, and knowledge of personal hygiene, and cannot maintain physical distancing principles. These and other socio-economic inequalities are most prevalent in informal settlements, thus increasing the risk of disease transmission to the wider population.

While the exact levels of COVID-19 transmission in PICs are capped by low testing capacity, unreported cases, poor state of national 'disaster' response infrastructure and borders that are isolated due to distance, it is the impacts of COVID-19 on the socio-economic aspects of Pacific life that are deepening existing inequalities and insecurities in informal settlements. Despite the dearth of published baseline data on Pacific informal settlements, ongoing land and housing insecurities, the tenuous state of livelihoods, and low levels of access to basic services and social systems pervade urban areas. In this context, the spread of COVID-19 further constrains the 'informal' lifelines necessary to support livelihoods and maintain socio-cultural structures especially for those in informal settlements. This magnifies the inequalities and vulnerabilities in basic human rights, highlighting marginalisation, exclusion and gender inequality as well as exposing how reliant PICs have become on larger countries outside of the region for their economic survival.

More than ever, notions of security become an all-embracing concept, with COVID-19 highlighting again the need for revisiting models of urban development and urban growth in the Pacific. At the household level, security as expressed through the condition of physical shelter, land, basic services and social support systems, becomes all important in sustaining livelihoods, while at the neighbourhood level, it is reflected in the physical condition of homes and the social mix of communities that influences public perceptions of safety, law and order. How do we address the insecurities and fundamental issues of urban equity and inclusion when many PIC leaders will not address the harder issues of imbalanced resource allocation and transparency of governance? What do these mean in individual PIC contexts where accurate social data on the most vulnerable is missing, and lower education levels of residents often only increases the spread of misinformation? Collectively, these are all threats to human security in the Pacific region.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 crisis should be used as an opportunity to do things differently, focusing on improving living conditions, particularly housing, services and land tenure, whilst at the same time providing an opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved since the introduction of the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda (NUA). Central tenets of the potentially transformative 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as adopted by the 193 United Nations member states in 2015 was to ensure 'no one will be left behind' and 'to reach the furthest behind first' In 2016, the NUA as adopted in Quito, Ecuador, confirmed 'no one will be left behind' as the leading principle in supporting implementation of the SDGs

and taking centre stage in renewed efforts to manage urbanisation. However, COVID-19 across PICS has exposed the problematic nature of implementing these ‘global to local’ principles in a period when the gap between the ‘haves and have nots’ is increasing.

In respect of the important role of WASH, only the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), have data on hygiene facilities and household handwashing. To achieve the objectives of the SDGs and other top down development imperatives, COVID-19 has exposed that ‘business as normal’ is not good enough. Inevitably, policies and programs will have more success if driven from the ‘bottom-up’ having relevance to community notions of security and their priority needs (land, housing, services, livelihoods) rather than imposed notions of what is best. Asking the key questions of ‘security for whom?’ as well as ‘security of what?’ will expose the deeper political and human dimensions of policies, including who is included and excluded in urban development processes (Jones 2016, 2017).

Notes

- ¹ See, for example, *Development Bulletin No. 78* on ‘Urban Development in the Pacific,’ and section on Urban Security, 63–78.

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