

Unsettled: Informal settlement living in the Pacific

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Informal settlements of the Global South are among the least prepared for the seismic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Corburn et al. 2020). Secure and adequate housing, safe water, toilets, sewers, drainage and waste collection are scarce or non-existent; space constraints and overcrowding make physical distancing and self-quarantine impractical and the rapid spread of infection more likely. Violence is often prevalent. Further, informal settlement residents, often reliant on precarious wage labour or the informal sector, are economically extremely vulnerable (Fèvre and Tacoli 2020). The tipping point into extreme poverty is easily reached (Ezeh et al. 2017).

Settings

In the 1994 *Human Development Report* the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) broadened the notion of security from the protection of the state and its border by the military to the protection of individuals from a range of threats to wellbeing including chronic hunger, disease, repression, and other significant and hurtful disruptions (UNDP 1994). The 2012 adoption of General Assembly Resolution 66/290 was also a significant milestone in the global application of human security. In Resolution 66/290 the United Nations (UN) agreed that human security is an approach to identifying and addressing ‘widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihoods, and dignity of people’. Seven key types of insecurity were identified: economic, food, health, environment, personal, community, and political. The United Nations Human Security Framework also promoted three key ‘freedoms’:

- freedom from fear;
- freedom from want; and
- freedom to live in dignity (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security 2016).

In our region, Pacific leaders have also welcomed a wider understanding of security, notably recognising climate change in the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security as ‘the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific’ (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2018).

Pacific populations are increasingly concentrated in urban areas. For example, 2018 data show Micronesia was 69 per cent urban, Polynesia, 44 per cent and Melanesia, 19 per cent urban with Melanesian urban areas growing particularly quickly (UNESCAP 2019a) accompanied by a rapid growth of informal settlements. An estimated 20–45 per cent of those living in Melanesian capitals reside in informal settlements (PRIF 2015). Often located in coastal areas or on other environmentally marginal land such as steep hills and thus very vulnerable to storm events,

informal settlements are at the forefront of numerous coal-escing stresses on human security and wellbeing in the Pacific.

Informal settlement health

A globally-focused literature review of the health of slum residents published in *The Lancet* in 2017 showed that, overall, people living in slums have much worse health than those living in non-slum urban areas, specifically:

- inadequate water supply, sanitation, drainage and waste collection in crowded environments predisposes residents to diarrhoea and diseases such as typhoid, cholera, and hookworm.
- children are especially vulnerable to diarrhoea, stunting, and impaired cognitive development given under-nutrition, low breastfeeding rates, and poor sanitation.
- reservoirs and vectors for infectious diseases flourish in slum environments.
- the typically cramped physical and social environment of slums exposes residents to harm from fire, extreme weather, and crime.

Overall, slum health has been neglected in the literature and warranted separate attention from urban health to assist in implementing particular slum related priorities in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and NUA (Ezeh et al. 2017).

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

In 2015, the World Bank, via the Pacific Region Infrastructure Facility (PRIF), published ‘Unsettled: Water and Sanitation in Urban Settlement Communities of the Pacific’, a synthesis of WASH in urban settlement communities of the Pacific, with a focus on Melanesia (World Bank 2015). While consolidated data is scarce, Melanesian informal settlements are poorly served with water, sanitation, electricity, waste management, drainage, and roads (PRIF 2015). Table 1 (next page), for example, shows urban water and sanitation access across the Melanesian capitals.

Utilities in Melanesia are often constrained by technical, financial, and legal barriers to serve informal settlements, largely because they do not have a clear obligation from central government to do so (PRIF 2015). In addition, where authorisation to deliver services does exist, utilities tend not to prioritise extending services, often due to greater technical, legal, and commercial challenges than serving formal communities (ibid). Furthermore, even when services are provided, settlement households may not have access to them due to unmet land tenure requirements, such as the need to show some evidence of occupation, financial constraints, or cultural norms. For example, rural migrants

Table 1: Urban water and sanitation access in urban Melanesia

	PNG	Solomon Islands	Vanuatu	Fiji
Urban water access estimates (%)				
Piped onto premises	55	61	51	96
Other improved source (public taps, standpipes, wells, boreholes, springs or collected rainwater)	33	32	47	4
Unimproved (unprotected well or spring, carted tank or drum, raw surface water, bottled water)	12	7	2	0
Urban sanitation access estimates (%)				
Improved facilities (sewers, septic, composting)	56	81	65	92
Shared facilities (2 or more households sharing a single facility)	9	n/a	33	4
Other improved (bucket or hanging latrines, no sanitary platform, no effective waste containment)	31	10	2	4
Open defecation	4	9	0	0

Source: Adapted from PRIF 2015 (2012 data)

may be accustomed to receiving water and possibly sanitation services without payment (ibid; Gooden 2017). Often a pragmatic approach to delivery of services is needed. As a state owned enterprise, Solomon Water, for example, is mandated to provide water to gazetted urban areas only. However, the utility has been providing some reticulated water to informal settlements in urban Honiara and peri-urban areas in Guadalcanal Province using a variety of approaches. These include reduced connection costs; community standpipes (with community water tariffs); prepaid 'cash water' trials; and campaigns to increase willingness to pay and reduce illegal connections and water theft that is common in informal settlements (ibid).

Women in informal settlements

In Melanesia, it is women who bear primary responsibility for collecting water, cleaning, washing, cooking, and caring for children and the sick (PRIF 2015). Amnesty International profiled the burden and risks faced by women in Solomon Islands informal settlements, noting two major concerns: firstly, a lack of clean water and proper sanitation near homes, and secondly, a high prevalence of violence, particularly sexual violence, against women. Women face high rates of physical and sexual violence when they are crossing poorly lit settlements to collect water in the early morning and evening, bathing, or toileting at night. Amnesty International argued that informal settlement communities in Solomon Islands, and notably their women, were deprived of their fundamental rights to water and sanitation and subjected to a 'myriad of indignities'. 'Overall, it is very clear that women and girls are disproportionately impacted by poor water and sanitation services—an experience applicable across the Pacific region' (Amnesty International 2011; Munro and Carpenter 2016; PRIF 2015).

Personal security

Data on personal security and crime rates in Pacific informal settlements are limited. World Bank research on trends in crime and violence in Papua New Guinea has shown how crime tends to be concentrated in urban areas, particularly Port Moresby and Lae. Data also show that significant proportions of crime involve violence, including the use of firearms. The World Bank research highlighted that certain parts of urban areas are 'hotspots' for crime and violence, yet evidence that crime and violence is concentrated in urban informal settlements is mixed. For example, the research noted that crime was also high in some affluent areas of Port Moresby (Lakhani and Willman 2014).

My research has shown that personal security was identified as a key concern for many informal settlers but it was notable that many respondents associated, and perhaps conflated, security of tenure with personal security. This conflation was particularly common for Indo-Fijian residents of informal settlements where personal security was frequently an overriding concern and housing investment often included making informal settlement 'plots' and dwellings more physically secure (Kiddle 2011).

[I feel insecure as] sometimes good, but sometimes drunken people cause the problem. And the thieves [sic], three times they broke my house and steal the things. (Indo-Fijian resident of Tomuka in Lautoka).

If we have developed land we can fence our area and put the burglar bar. The way we stay here anyone can be a *mataqali*¹ and threaten [us] to leave this place. As far as we are concerned if we have proper title we are secured. (Indo-Fijian resident of Caubati Topline in Nasinu, greater Suva) (ibid:224,230).

Khan (2010) has also documented that personal security is a major concern for female residents of Jittu Estate in central Suva, one of the oldest and most congested

informal settlements in Fiji. Indeed, language of insecurity, particularly for Indo-Fijians, is omnipresent in describing socio-political and everyday realities in Fiji (Pangerl 2007).

The view that informal settlements are ‘crime riddled’ is, however, problematic. Negative stereotypes of informal settlements and settlers persist across the Pacific. Goddard (2001:3), for example, writes that informal settlements in Papua New Guinea are often stereotyped through linked themes of ‘uncontrolled migration, unemployment, extreme poverty, and crime, characterising settlement populations as maladjusted and undesirable in urban society’. The imagery that Goddard and others argue does not reflect the true diversity of urban informal settlements (Barber 2003). In Papua New Guinea especially, these stereotypes, usually legitimised as part of a ‘war on crime’, have influenced, and been used for justification for, forced evictions from informal settlements (Koczerski et al. 2001). Construction ahead of big events in Papua New Guinea, such as the 2018 Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, has also seen the eviction of informal settlement communities, including approximately 3,000 settlers at Paga Hill to make way for hotels and the APEC meeting venue (CIVICUS 2018, Woods 2018). In other Pacific Nations there has been a history of informal settlement evictions. Fijian authorities, for example, frequently evicted informal settler communities prior to a change in government approach around the late 2000’s (Kiddle 2011).

Climate change

Approximately 50 per cent of the Pacific’s population (7.5 million people), live in coastal settlements (UNESCAP 2019b). Climate change is bringing increased frequency and intensity of storm events. Pacific cities, where populations are increasingly concentrated, are at a growing risk as informal settlements in particular are often located upon marginal lands such as riverbanks, floodplains, accretion areas, and other coastal areas. The vulnerability of Pacific urban areas to climate related impacts, especially informal settlements, is intensified by non-durable housing, deficits in WASH and other critical infrastructure, and institutional capacity challenges influenced by weaknesses in governance and land use planning (Kiddle et al. 2017). Finally, in some Pacific nations a persistent rural bias remains, where the particular challenges of land management and planning in urban areas are ignored (ibid).

Urban vulnerability has been illustrated through a number of devastating storm events in recent years in the Pacific region. In Honiara, for example, where it is estimated that one in three households is within 500 metres of a river or coastline (Wilson 2018). All 24 fatalities in the 2014 floods were from informal settlements located on the banks of the Mataniko River in central Honiara. Thousands of people were displaced to evacuation centres across the city, and just weeks after the flood, informal settlements and evacuation centres experienced a spike in diarrhoea cases linked to the contagious rotavirus. Studies later showed that over 4000 people, and in some informal settlements, more than 50 per cent of children were affected. The outbreak

then spread to other areas of the country, with 27 fatalities recorded, most of whom were children under five years of age.² (ibid).

Conclusion

Despite relatively scarce data, it is obvious that informal settlement living in the Pacific brings significant risk for residents. Climate vulnerability of informal settlements is acute. Informal settlement living also clearly brings health and personal safety risks, particularly for children and women. There is much to be done to meet the central tenet of the New Urban Agenda of ‘cities for all’ that are ‘just, safe, healthy, accessible, affordable, resilient, and sustainable’ and the three freedoms of the United Nations Human Security Framework, particularly ‘freedom from fear’ and ‘freedom to live in dignity’.

The 2015 Pacific Urban Forum endorsed a Pacific Urban Agenda that notably aimed to comprehensively respond to the impacts of climate change in urban areas and enhance social equity (Kiddle et al. 2017). The subsequent Pacific Urban Forum in 2019 aimed to galvanise action and partnerships for implementation of the Pacific Urban Agenda, although much more than rhetoric is needed for pathways that drive real change (Keen and Kiddle 2019). Informal settlements are at the forefront of the challenge. More work is required to improve the climate resilience of informal settlements. Further, across the region, investment in WASH in informal settlements should be prioritised. Economies of scale and increasing returns on investment in often dense informal settlements are on offer (Lilford et al. 2017).

Some Pacific nations, particularly Papua New Guinea in recent years, are still forcibly evicting informal settlers from long established communities. However, global agencies such as UN-Habitat recommend pursuing alternatives such as less disruptive *in situ* settlement upgrading (Kiddle 2010). Upgrading involves a variety of responses including the provision of infrastructure, WASH improvements, and a range of mechanisms to increase security of tenure and thus promote housing investment (ibid). All upgrading responses are likely to increase resilience to climate change and other shocks such as COVID-19.

For many, living in an informal settlement does not bring the safety or dignity that the New Urban Agenda or the United Nations Human Security Framework envisage. Despite some focus on informal settlements from Pacific governments and development partners, much more needs to be done. In the Pacific, where the absolute numbers of informal settlers are not overwhelming, quick gains could be available through concerted, partnered efforts.

Notes

- ¹ Land owning tribal group/unit. Sometimes used to refer to an individual.
- ² Diarrhoeal diseases have become the fifth leading cause of death in Solomon Islands (Wilson 2018).

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