What Has Happened to Urban Reform in the Island Pacific? Some Lessons from Kiribati and Samoa

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Introduction
The importance of towns and cities in the future development of Pacific island states is inescapable. Researchers have underlined many key features of the urbanization process, ranging from the high population growth rates found in Melanesian towns,[1] the importance of urbanization as a key driver of national economic growth,[2] the effects of high rural-urban migration[3] and the increasing urban crime and poverty,[4] to problems of urban management throughout the region.[5] The national experience has not been uniform, raising the question why urban reform in some limited parts of the region appears to have been relatively successful whereas elsewhere it emphatically has not.

The measure of what constitutes "success" or "failure" in Pacific island development is portrayed in various ways and points to considerable regional differences. In the past, mainstream development agencies like the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) have seen it largely through comparisons between national human development indicators.[6] More recently,

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1   Donovan Storey, "The Peri-urban Pacific: from exclusive to inclusive cities," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, vol. 44, no. 3 (2003), pp. 259-279.
2   Paul Jones, "Urban Development in the Pacific," paper presented at the ESCAP/POC Pacific Workshop on Managing the Transition from Village to City—the Pacific Urban Agenda, Nadi, Fiji Islands, December 2003.
3   John Connell and John P. Lea, *Urbanisation in the Island Pacific: Towards Sustainable Development* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 47-68.
4   W. Clifford, L. Morauta and B. Stuart, *Law and Order in Papua New Guinea*, vols. 1 and 2 (Port Moresby: Institute of National Affairs and Institute of Applied Social and Economic Research, 1984); John Connell, "Regulation of space in the contemporary postcolonial Pacific city: Port Moresby and Suva," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, vol. 44, no. 3 (2003), pp. 243-257.
5   Paul Jones, "Changing face of the islands: urban management and planning in the Pacific," *Australian Planner*, vol. 33, no. 3 (1996), pp. 160-163; Paul Jones, "Managing Urban Development in the Pacific—Key Themes and Issues," *Australian Planner,* vol. 42, no.1 (2005), pp. 39-46; Donovan Storey, "Urban Governance in Pacific island Countries: Advancing an Overdue Agenda," *State Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 2005/7*, (Canberra: Australian National University, 2005).
6   See, for example, United Nations Development Program, *Kiribati – United Nations Common Country Assessment. Final Draft* (Suva: Office of the UN Resident Coordinator, February 2002).

the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), comprised of 22 member countries, including several that remain colonial territories, has assessed the state of development of the region against the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).[7] Significantly, MDG Goal 7, to "ensure environmental sustainability," which includes targets to halve the number of those without safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015, and to have significantly improved the lives of one hundred million slum dwellers by 2020, also includes important urban components. Whilst information is available for SPC member countries on water and sanitation conditions, no records have been returned with regard to the slum dwellers. Yet strategies to overcome the former are inseparable from the latter and the tendency by international agencies to marginalize urban concerns and the consequent assumption that urban poverty is somehow less serious than rural poverty has been identified.[8]

Others have contrasted the relative stability found in most of independent Polynesia with the detrimental social and economic effects of successive politico-economic crises characterizing conditions in Melanesia. Reilly,[9] for example, has provided persuasive evidence that the high levels of fragmentation which have occurred in parts of postcolonial Africa, best represented in the Pacific by the considerable ethno-linguistic diversity found in Melanesia, have many parallels with current conditions in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Division between indigenous and Indo-Fijian populations in Fiji has also destabilized that country for almost 20 years.[10] By contrast, in Polynesia, so the argument runs, almost complete ethnic and linguistic homogeneity has fostered favourable, though modest, economic progress. This status is greatly assisted by considerable temporary and permanent out-migration to Australia, New Zealand and the United States, a route not available to most Melanesians. Further, residents of the Cook Islands and Niue have the right to come and go as they please into New Zealand under an agreement of free association, as do islanders in Micronesian countries enjoying similar arrangements with the United

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7 Secretariat of the Pacific Community, *Pacific Islands Regional Millennium Development Goals Report 2004* (Noumea: Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2004).

8 David Satterthwaite, "The Millennium Development Goals and urban poverty reduction: great expectations and nonsense statistics," *Environment and Urbanization*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2003), pp. 181-190.

9 Benjamin Reilly, "The Africanisation of the South Pacific," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 54, no. 3 (2000), pp. 261-268; Benjamin Reilly, "State functioning and state failure in the South Pacific," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 58, no. 4 (2004), pp. 479-493.

10 Evidence emerging in the immediate aftermath of the fourth and latest military coup in Fiji in December 2006 suggests causes based on new divisions in the ethnic Fijian community itself. Parliamentary bills proposed by the former government, which favoured indigenous Fijians, were judged by the new regime to be "unfair to the island's ethnic Indian minority." "EU threatens to withdraw aid," *Islands Business*, 18 January 2007, available online at http://www.islandsbusiness.com/news.

States.[11] However, it must be pointed out that this judgement was made before the Tongan riots of November 2006, which destroyed a significant part of the capital's business district and much investor confidence along with it. In Micronesia such homogeneity is offset by the prevalence of geographically dispersed and isolated small islands and atolls, where the natural resource base provides little opportunity for economic growth to occur or living standards to rise. Thus, the outlook is not encouraging for externally supported policy reforms by major foreign aid donors, such as Australia and New Zealand, which are aimed at improving living conditions in the fastest growing urban centres in Oceania:

> … these problems are rooted in the very social structure of the countries themselves, this record of under-performance is unlikely to change any time soon, regardless of external efforts. Deep-rooted patterns of identity and culture are likely to be considerably more resilient than anything Australian policymakers can come up with.[12]

The view is also expressed that explanations for inter-country differences based on ethnic diversity have been overplayed and neglect certain deeper-seated political and economic issues, such as the increasing evidence of poverty in both rural and urban areas, caused in part by the peripheral status of Oceania in global development:

> The relative proliferation of armed struggle in Melanesia probably has more to do with the poverty and inequality which has come to characterise the societies there relative to the rest of Oceania, and is thus as much an economic class issue as anything else.[13]

This perspective holds out little hope of immediate relief but suggests that certain regional policy interventions directed towards improving the conditions under which development can occur are possible and necessary. The reality is that prospects for national economic growth and development are increasingly centred around Pacific island cities that have, in many cases, changed radically since pre-independence. The underlying causes are complex and their investigation tends to overlook the more specific nature of urban problems and the marked differences present in the region. There is evidence, for example, that the prevalence of notorious gang crime in some Papua New Guinea cities cannot be explained in terms of "poverty,

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[11] Arrangements for offshore guest workers and family reunions relieves some pressure on urban growth in Polynesia, and the flow of remittances back to islander families increases urban incomes. This is unlikely, however, to reduce demand for infrastructure and urban services in the region.

[12] Reilly, "State functioning," p. 491.

[13] Warwick E. Murray and Donovan Storey, "Political conflict in postcolonial Oceania," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint,* vol. 44, no. 3 (2003), p. 217.

social disintegration or moral imperatives generated by perceptions of social inequalities,"[14] but has more to do with problems arising from the encounter between the traditional and rural gift economy (embodied in gang behaviour) and the urban cash economy. This dichotomy and the social disruption it causes might thus be expected to long persist in a country where more than 80 percent of the population is still classified as rural.[15]

Several attempts have been made since the early 1990s to develop a regional approach to the planning and management of Pacific island towns and cities. In 1993 this issue was discussed at the Asia Pacific Regional Ministerial Conference in Asia and the Pacific, organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). In 1996, a UNDP and United Nations Center for Human Settlements (UNCHS) regional paper was published on "The State of Human Settlements and Urbanization in the Pacific Islands," and delivered at the UN Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) held in Istanbul. Building on the momentum gained from this conference, a draft Pacific Habitat Agenda and Regional Action Plan for the Pacific was prepared in 1999 and subsequently considered by the South Pacific Forum Economic Planning Ministers meeting held in July of that year. In 2001, the Habitat + 5 Conference gave further weight to the preparation of a Pacific Regional Plan of Action to address current urbanization, urban development and urban management issues. A Pacific Urban Agenda (PUA) was subsequently facilitated by UNESCAP and the Pacific Islands Forum, with the participation of Pacific island representatives, in December 2003 in Nadi, Fiji Islands. The PUA was included in the widely publicized 2005 "Pacific Plan," coordinated by the Pacific Islands Forum and which is now the subject of regional implementation (see below). A follow-up workshop on the PUA with island representatives, the Pacific Islands Forum, UNESCAP and SPC was held in April 2007, and reviewed progress on implementation of the PUA over the last three years. In 2004, the UN Habitat Asia Pacific office in Japan appointed a Pacific program manager, based in Suva, to work with agencies and donors to achieve better urban outcomes in Pacific towns and cities. This position, vacant since July, 2005, has had no separate programme funding and was orientated towards better cross-sector policy integration and improving efficiencies in existing and new urban projects.

These international initiatives provide the broad context and setting for the national and donor-funded technical assistance projects that are aimed at strengthening and reforming urban management and achieving better and quite ambitious urban development outcomes. Included in the list of goals are better access to land supply, provision of water and sanitation,

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14 Michael Goddard, *The Unseen City: Anthropological Perspectives on Port Moresby Papua New Guinea* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005), p. 118.

15 Goddard, *The Unseen City*, p. 120.

improved drainage to reduce the impact of flooding, better roads and power supplies, as well as strengthening land use and environmental planning processes. Prominent recent initiatives include a package of projects based on the South Tarawa Urban Management Plan (STUMP), prepared between 1995 and 2000, and the establishment of the Planning and Urban Management Agency (PUMA) in Samoa, from 2001 to 2003. Both stand out as rare examples of success, projects in which important lessons have been learned.[16] It should be noted, however, that neither initiative is located in Melanesia and thus they do not confront the most difficult and extreme urban conditions found in Oceania. Nonetheless, in one recent overview of urban governance in Pacific island countries, a specific call was made to investigate whether PUMA, one of the successful initiatives, could be replicated elsewhere.[17] The purpose here is to identify and comment upon the urban reform processes introduced in these two projects, by way of contributing to the debate on Pacific island development generally and urban reform specifically.

The use of case studies to illustrate examples of urban reform in a region as diverse as Oceania raises the question of representativeness. Several common features of the urbanization process provide the setting in which reform may take place. Connell and Lea have noted that there are at least four descriptors characterizing urbanization in small independent countries of the kind found throughout Oceania: first, urban issues are increasingly emphasized in discussions about development; second, much urban infrastructure was constructed in colonial times for towns that were smaller than today; third, past living standards no longer match present expectations; and fourth, the countries concerned are small, with a history of limited economic growth, where skilled workers are in short supply and where urban planning is a national rather than local responsibility and is divided among many government departments.[18] A fifth characteristic present in all but the smallest and most economically depressed areas is strong rural/urban migration and the consequent expansion of peri-urban settlements outside the control of formal urban authorities. However, it is the institutions of urban governance that have a responsibility to deliver better managed cities, and their ability to do so rests on many factors, not the least being the scale of growth and the homogeneity of the urban population. The two case studies examined here are placed at the lower end of the crisis spectrum, both through their location in small island states with homogeneous populations and their quite low rates of rural urban migration.

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16 John Connell and John P. Lea, *Island Towns: Managing Urbanization in Micronesia* (Honolulu: Center for Pacific Islands Studies, University of Hawaii, 1998); P. Jones, I.Taule'alo and J. Kolhase, "Growing Pacific towns and cities–Samoa's new planning and urban management system," *Australian Planner*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2002), pp. 186-193.

17 Storey, "Urban Governance in Pacific Island Countries," p. 10.

18 Connell and Lea, *Island Towns*, p. 14.

The urban conditions addressed by STUMP (in South Tarawa) are also found in the low-lying atolls of Polynesia (Tuvalu, Tonga) and Micronesia (parts of the Federated States of Micronesia and the Marshall Islands). Indeed, the circumstances of Ebeye on Kwajalein Atoll and Majuro, the capital of the Marshall Islands, reveal the extreme pressures of urban growth in a setting that is similar geographically but different socio-economically. Kiribati and Marshall Islands cities are located in the same broad region of Micronesia, but their colonial histories are very different and this has influenced approaches towards urban governance.[19] The second case study, PUMA (as established in Apia and Samoa), has relevance for several Polynesian countries that possess very similar ethnic and colonial development backgrounds (for example Samoa, Tonga and the Cook Islands). PUMA is an example of how a reform process has sought to address local urban needs after some 40 years of postcolonial inaction.

Internationally, a consensus is emerging that efforts confined to strengthening existing local government institutions in developing countries has prevented adequate recognition of the potential contribution of other community stakeholders. As pointed out by Donovan Storey, citing the work of Richard Stren, urban management needs to be viewed in terms of wider local governance, rather than restricting it to the institutions of hierarchical local government, as has been the pattern in the islands of the Pacific.[20] This altered perspective is less about regulation and has more to do with collaboration and locally appropriate and often non-hierarchical arrangements. This means embracing so-called non-state actors such as the churches, women's and environmental groups, as well as the traditional authority recognized in those parts of the cities and towns still held under customary land ownership, such as is the case in South Tarawa and Apia.

Contemporary Pacific towns are not the colonial places inherited at independence, though few of the changes in urban administration that have occurred in them since reflect this fact. However, change is underway, even if specific reference to the urban situation is often hard to find. The "Pacific Plan" sponsored by the Pacific Islands Forum of 14 independent island member countries, plus Australia and New Zealand, is linked to a good governance work programme for 2006-2008, which recognizes the importance of participatory democracy. In addition, the plan includes an initiative to be completed by 2008 to "develop policies and plans for urbanization," and an attached milestone undertakes to "intensify policies and plans development for consideration of the Forum in 2007, taking into

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19 Connell and Lea, *Island Towns*, pp. 73-77.

20 Storey, "Urban Governance in Pacific Island Countries," p. 5, citing Richard E. Stren, "Introduction: Towards the comparative study of urban governance," in P. McCartney and R. Stren, eds., *Governance on the Ground: Innovations and Discontinuities in Cities of the Developing World* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2003), pp. 1-30.

account the PUA."[21] Nongovernmental groups have been brought into the identification of community aspirations in Samoa. For example, the O le Siosiomaga Society, an environmental NGO, has canvassed the views of villagers about the MDGs adopted in Samoa and the opportunities for meeting them. But here, where government has made considerable progress in reforming the urban land-use planning and development process, commentary on the goal of environmental sustainability leaves out direct mention of slum dwellers.[22]

Importantly, the two projects reviewed here, together with the recent national and metropolitan urban sector studies undertaken in Fiji in 2003 and 2004, represent the main examples of urban reform conducted in Oceania in the last decade. Whilst it is usually possible to gain immediate access to project reports in the Pacific, the task of following up what actually happens during their implementation is difficult and relies on the rare occasions when consultants and advisers are involved in the longer term and upon the good offices of islander officials.[23]

The Urban Pacific

In table 1, the 14 independent Pacific island countries that are members of the Pacific Islands Forum are grouped according to their sub-regional location in Oceania. Listed are the national populations according to the last census (which in almost every case apart from the tiny states of Nauru and Niue are estimated to be larger now than the totals shown), the name of the capital city, the percentage of the population living in urban areas at the last census, and the urban population growth rate. Population growth has generally been higher in the urban than rural areas and it has been estimated that more than 50 percent of the populations of half of the 22 Pacific island countries and territories live in the towns and urban areas even though, overall, only one in four Pacific islanders lives in urban areas.[24] This trend towards an urban future for the region contains within it disturbing evidence of increasing poverty and inequality. In a recent study of urban conditions in the three island countries of Fiji, Vanuatu and Kiribati, Donovan Storey has found that poverty is "… poorly measured and understood. The concerns of the poor go beyond income and encompass the desire to have access to

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21 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *The Pacific Plan for Strengthening Regional Cooperation and Integration, updated December 2006* (Suva: Pacific Islands Forum, 2006), p. 19.

22 F. Elisara, "The Samoa MDG," paper presented at the UNESCO International Expert Group Meeting on the Millennium Development Goals, Indigenous Participation and Good Governance, New York, 11-13 January 2006.

23 Paul Jones, the first named author, was directly associated with the projects in Kiribati and Samoa from the outset.

24 Gerald Haberkorn, "Current Pacific population dynamics and recent trends" (Noumea: Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2004). Available online at <http://www.spc.int/demog/en/index.html>.

Table 1:
Comparative Population Figures for Selected Pacific Island Countries

	Last census				Annual urban growth rate
	National population	Census Year	% urban	Capital city	
Melanesia					
Fiji	824,700	1996	46	Suva	2.6
Papua New Guinea	5,190,786	2000	13	Port Moresby	2.8
Solomon Islands	409,042	1999	16	Honiara	4.3
Vanuatu	186,678	1999	21	Port Vila	4.2
Micronesia					
FSM	107,008	2000	21	Palikir	-2.4
Kiribati	92,500	2005	44	Sth Tarawa	1.9
Marshall Islands	50,840	1999	65	Majuro	1.6
Nauru	10,065	2002	100	Yaren	0.3
Palau	19,129	2000	81	Koror	2.2
Polynesia					
Cook Islands	18,027	2001	68	Avarua	-1.9
Niue	1,788	2001	34	Alofi	-4.3
Samoa	176,710	2001	22	Apia	1.3
Tonga	97,784	1996	32	Nuku'alofa	0.8
Tuvalu	9,561	2002	47	Funafuti	1.4

Source: Secretariat of the Pacific Community (available online at <http://www.spc.int/demog/en/index.html>); Government of Kiribati, *Draft Population Census Kiribati 2005* (South Tarawa: Kiribati National Statistics Office, 2005).

urban infrastructure and services and to be able to have a say in urban affairs" and, furthermore, they do not have the means to pay for it.[25] This is the reality that confronts island governments embarking on the process of urban reform.

Urban reform in an atoll town

The Republic of Kiribati gained its independence from Britain in July 1979 and had, by 2005, reached a national population of only 92,500 persons.[26] It covers a huge marine territory in excess of three million square kilometres, of which the land component is only 811 square kilometres, with Kiritimati Island, located in the Phoenix Island group far to the east of Kiribati

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[25] Donovan Storey, "Urbanisation in the Pacific," *State Society and Governance in Melanesia Targeted Research Papers for AusAID* (Canberra: Australia National University, 2006), p. 13.

[26] Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MFED), *Preliminary Population Census 2005 Figures for Kiribati* (Tarawa: National Statistics Office, November 2006). A formal MFED report on the 2005 population census is expected in 2007.

and southwest of Hawaii, comprising half of that land. Modest economic growth is underpinned by the sale of fishing licenses, minor copra production, government activity and a proportionately large amount of foreign aid. The bulk of the outer island population leads a traditional subsistence lifestyle based on fishing and copra production. Not surprisingly, the GDP growth rate is low (approximately 1.5 percent per annum) and GDP per capita is approximately US$650 to $700, placing Kiribati among the poorest nations in the Pacific.

South Tarawa, the capital of Kiribati, is built on a series of linked atolls and islets covering an area of 17.6 square kilometres stretching over some 30 kilometres. Residential density is relatively high in response to an average islet width of only 150 metres and by the time of the 2005 census the city's population of 40,200 represented 44 percent of the national total. Growth has been rapid, with an inter-censal rate between 1995 and 2000 of 5 percent per annum, compared with 2.2 percent for 1990 to 1995. By the period from 2000 to 2005, urban growth had stabilized at 1.9 percent, with major population gains being made in North Tarawa (which contains the expanding peri-urban areas of South Tarawa) and Kiritimati Island. South Tarawa continues to experience major planning and urban management problems as a result of this population increase and the associated pressures of urbanization. Symptoms include overcrowding, a rising number of informal settlements, increased squatting on urban water reserves and government leased lands, a polluted Tarawa lagoon, rising levels of domestic waste, failing reticulated water systems, increasing disputes about landownership and boundaries, rising urban crime and youth unemployment and a general decline in living conditions.[27]

Given the above situation, the government of Kiribati approached the Australian Government Agency for International Development (AusAID) in 1995 to provide assistance by supporting an institutional strengthening programme to raise the capacity of urban management and planning specifically, and land management generally. Building on a new urban management plan (STUMP 1993-1995), also funded by AusAID, comprehensive project aims were directed at transforming the urban environment, including: improving land administration; facilitating land use and growth plans for urban development based on STUMP; establishing new processes for improved urban planning and management; developing land and resettlement policies; undertaking legislative changes to improve the land subdivision system; establishing a community education and awareness programme on land and urban planning matters; and introducing a geographic information and management system. The three-year project commenced in June 1997 and concluded in June 2000, focusing strongly on

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27   Jones, "Urban Development in the Pacific," p. 19.

building capacity in the Land Management Division in the then Ministry of Home Affairs and Rural Development.

The key question of course is the extent to which the project's aims were fulfilled. Whilst it was considered an initial success by the chief parties involved, namely, government and the foreign aid donor (AusAID judged the local project management arrangements to be best practice), some doubts remain over its sustainability into the new millennium. Much depends on a continuing government commitment to change and reform. Early gains were made in divisional management arrangements, including the preparation of Action Plans, new urban plans were prepared with the Local Land Planning Boards, and land policy was developed and approved to encourage resettlement to Kiritimati Island as a future and secondary growth centre. Work still continues on a basic geographic information system (GIS) to provide the equivalent of land titles, and on a fortnightly community awareness radio programme on land matters. Importantly, an Urban Management Committee (UMC), with a membership drawn from key urban sector government ministries, was established to oversee implementation of the urban management plan. An Asian Development Bank (ADB) water and sanitation project for South Tarawa, completed in early 2006, was one of a number of significant undertakings which built on the work of STUMP.[28]

By 2005, the UMC was continuing to meet intermittently every six to nine months to address the many issues that continue to arise as high population growth places major economic, social and environmental strains on South Tarawa and Kiribati. In this context, the UMC functions as an overarching body providing strategic direction on resolving settlement issues, especially in respect to providing basic infrastructure and services to accommodate major increases in population. Its main role is to coordinate cross-sector urban management and planning so as to optimize the contribution of these sectors to the economic, social and environmental development of Kiribati. The UMC, like most governance arrangements in a small island state, enjoys strictly limited resources—human, technical and financial—and its cross-sector nature and reliance on other arms of government, including Cabinet, makes it difficult to function effectively. In this instance it is the Land Management Division which provides the necessary supporting secretariat, with UMC recommendations forwarded to Cabinet by the minister for Environment, Lands and Agricultural Development.

In the Kiribati context, the scale of the problems facing South Tarawa appears monumental. They include: dealing with the strength of the prevailing socio-cultural order, with its strong attachments to family land and outer island values; minimal gains in economic growth and few job

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28 The name of this project was the Sanitation and Public Health and Environment (SAPHE) Project.

opportunities; and the limited pool of human, technical and financial resources available to address these issues. It has been difficult to get broader planning and urban management issues on the national agenda, given that most of the urban population is preoccupied with the day-to-day household survival needs on an overpopulated atoll, as well as trying to supplement cash incomes with subsistence activities. The recently completed ADB water and sanitation project, while reluctantly seen by many I-Kiribati as necessary and in the "public interest," has raised many sensitive issues for government. These include protecting public water reserves from squatting and occupation by traditional owners; dealing with land owners affected by civil works and subsequent issues of compensation; and, importantly, general maintenance and human resource issues associated with managing, implementing and sustaining such a major project. Infrastructure requires payment for services and the prevailing trend of non-payment for services, including land rent for subleases in South Tarawa, makes it hard to sustain major urban infrastructure, including roads, water and sanitation systems.[29]

With circular migration between the capital city and outer islands common, traditional outer island behaviour is still pervasive in South Tarawa. The use of well water and beach defecation, for example, is commonplace among most of the urban population. There is limited economic potential to raise low per capita incomes, living standards and livelihoods, and to address the environmental degradation so often characterizing the areas of hardship and poverty, such as Betio and Temaiku Bight. The growth of the private sector, typically cited as the most progressive engine of economic growth, is strongly constrained by various socio-cultural factors, such as egalitarianism and reciprocity, which permeate everyday family and household living. Private sector development, especially foreign investment, is held back by lengthy procedures, including short-term land leases offered by government, difficulties in accessing land held under customary tenures, as well as access to state lands on Kiritimati Island. Importantly, with only five out of 43 national members of Parliament representing urban South Tarawa, it is difficult to ensure a consistent and sustained approach to resolving urban issues backed by strong political commitment. The reality is that urban reform must compete with the legitimate demands of the rural outer islands, whose concerns dominate the political process. Kiritimati Island, far from the national capital and some 3,000 kilometres to the east of South Tarawa, with only a population of approximately 5,500 persons, has now been touted by government as one of several new island "urban growth centres."[30] Subject to resolving various land-related matters on Kiritimati, such as the increase

29 Outstanding land rent arrears by tenants in South Tarawa who sublease land from the government were in the order of AUD$700,000 in January 2007.

30 Government of Kiribati, *National Development Strategies, Kiribati, 2004-2007* (South Tarawa: Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, 2004).

in squatting, and rising rent arrears owed by existing lease occupants, the island is likely to be investigated in 2007 for its suitability as an "economic growth centre" (as opposed to other possible island development models).

Looming behind the immediate urban issues in Kiribati is the future threat of climate change and rising sea levels, of obvious concern to atolls and their coastal settlements. As noted by the United Nations, "All of the human settlement, industry and vital infrastructure of Kiribati, the Maldives, Marshall Islands and Tuvalu lie very close to the shoreline. Some islands are already severely affected with losses not only of shoreline but also of houses, schools and other infrastructure."[31] Kiritimati Island has developable land one to one-and-a-half metres higher than the main western atolls in the Republic, and is thus less subject to the devastation forecasted from sea level rise. This advantage may be a key factor in deciding whether and when to promote Kiritimati's growth potential, despite its many present development constraints and the fact that the government itself currently emphasizes other development problems.[32]

A new urban management agency for Samoa

The second significant new urban reform project reviewed here is in Samoa, the Polynesian state which was the first South Pacific island country to gain its independence, in 1962. Physical conditions here are markedly different from Kiribati, with a total land area of 2,944 square kilometers, comprising nine islands, four of which are inhabited by an estimated national population of just over 178,000 (as of July 2003). The economy is based on timber exports and fishing, together with increasing tourism, a small amount of manufacturing and processing and a growing private sector.[33] The majority of Samoans (76 percent) live on the narrow coastal plains of Upolu, where the capital Apia is located, and most of the rest reside on the adjoining island of Savaii. The country is successful in regional terms, with both the GDP growth rate, at 5 percent, and GDP per capita, at US$5,600, being among the highest in the South Pacific. Samoa has seen a net outflow of population for many decades, with the result that 200,000 Samoan-born Samoans live outside the island state and contribute as much as 22 percent of national GDP in the form of remittances.[34]

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31 United Nations, *Climate Change Small Island Developing States* (Bonn: UNFCCC Climate Change Secretariat, 2005), p. 21.

32 Asian Development Bank, *The Potential of Kiritimati Island as an Economic Growth Center – An Initial Assessment. Draft Report of Technical Assistance Project No. 4456 – KIR, Preparing the Outer Islands Growth Centers Project, Kiribati* (South Tarawa: October 2005).

33 Asian Development Bank, *An Integrated Urban Planning and Management System for Samoa. Final Report of the Joint Government of Samoa and ADB Technical Assistance Project No. 3566, SAM Capacity Building in Urban Planning and Management* (Apia, December 2001).

34 Deborah C. Gough, "Mobility, Tradition and Adaptation: Samoa's Comparative Advantage in the Global Market Place," *Graduate Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2006), pp. 31-43.

Since the early 1990s, the increasing urban concentration in Apia, which had acquired just over a third of the national population by 2001, has contributed to a rising share of the national population in Upolu, at the expense of Savaii. Accompanying this growth has been a steady rise in demand for land, infrastructure and services and housing, together with popular concerns about the physical direction of Apia's urban development into both freehold and customary lands, as well as spreading into the upper catchments.[35] The deteriorating state of the urban environment, for example, has led over many years to calls for action in the media: "Here is a small town battling a terminal illness threatening to put her down. Filth and disease are swimming in swamps and puddles everywhere. … The saddest thing of all is that nobody seems to know what to do."[36] Over the last decade, there has been increased awareness about these problems, and there is now a solid waste collection service for all households on both Upolu and Savaii. Significantly, however, sanitation in Apia remains limited to septic tanks, pit latrines and a number of small sewerage treatment plants in commercial buildings.

Until a new body, the Planning and Urban Management Agency (PUMA), was established in early 2002, the historically slow pace of urban growth took place in the absence of a specific legislative and institutional framework. Since the colonial era, a succession of town planning advisory committees had operated for 60 years, and had demonstrably failed to introduce effective planning procedures.[37] There were no overarching urban planning and management structures capable of coordinating the service providers and regulatory authorities responsible for Apia's existing and future growth. A building approvals process offered a basic development control system, but there were no legislative and administrative systems for preparing land use plans and policies, undertaking development and planning assessment or ensuring the hoped-for integration of environmental planning.

These shortcomings, together with rising urban growth pressures, led the Government of Samoa to embark on developing a new planning and urban management system with ADB assistance in July 2001. The two-year project was designed to unfold in two phases: first, the development of preferred institutional options and policy arrangements for the structure of a new system; and second, capacity building, including development of an enabling framework in which land use planning would now operate. The latter included a wastewater and sanitation project in the low-lying areas of Apia and the central business area, made possible by ADB funding. Throughout

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[35] Two of the five urban catchments are watersheds providing a source of reticulated water supply to the growing Apia urban area, as well as to villages in North West Upolu.

[36] "Editorial," *The Samoa Observer*, 25 February 1992, cited in Connell and Lea, *Urbanisation in the Island Pacific*, p. 157.

[37] Connell and Lea, *Urbanisation in the Island Pacific*, p. 113.

the latter half of 2001, the government consulted extensively with urban and rural stakeholders to identify needs, issues and concerns regarding possible new planning arrangements. Several common findings emerged, including the need for better popular participation, catering for both freehold and customary land tenure systems, and recognizing the importance of embracing the traditional customs and norms embodied in the term *fa'a Samoa*. It refers to the Samoan way of life, which emphasizes the maintenance of traditional values, with its social, economic, political and religious dimensions.[38] This approach had not been tried in Samoa before; such recognition accepted the fact that previous "[a]ttempts by development funding agencies and aid donors to introduce a planning regime backed by legislation appear never to have investigated why Samoan governments have been so resistant to changes affecting controls over land title."[39]

Institutional options for introducing a new planning and urban management system in Apia included various possibilities: a new planning authority or commission, an urban district council, local councils or, possibly, a land use planning division within an existing government agency. The result of consultations and analysis was agreement by the Government of Samoa on March 27, 2002 to the establishment of PUMA (figure 1). The agency was seen as an incremental, step-by-step option, which could evolve in the medium to longer term into an authority or commission. It was to be autonomous and independent but located in the short term within the Ministry of Lands, Surveys and Environment (subsequently changed to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment in late 2002).[40] PUMA would be responsible for both urban and rural planning, with a key focus on management and coordination of urban development, including priorities like dealing with the rapid urban expansion of Apia into the North West corridor containing predominantly customary lands. New offices were opened in Vaiala in Apia in July 2002, with a then staff establishment of 25 situated in five key functional sections: strategic planning; regulation, including environmental impact assessment (EIA) and monitoring; urban services; disaster management; and special projects, including climate change and ozone.[41]

Since its establishment, PUMA has focused on developing an enabling framework in which to operate and best relate to its stakeholders. Capacity-building activities since late 2002 have included: development of PUMA business and action plans; agreeing on implementation priorities with

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[38] Unasa Leulu Felise Va'a, "The Fa'a Samoa," in *Samoa National Human Development Report 2006* (Apia: UNDP and the National University of Samoa, 2006), pp. 113-125.
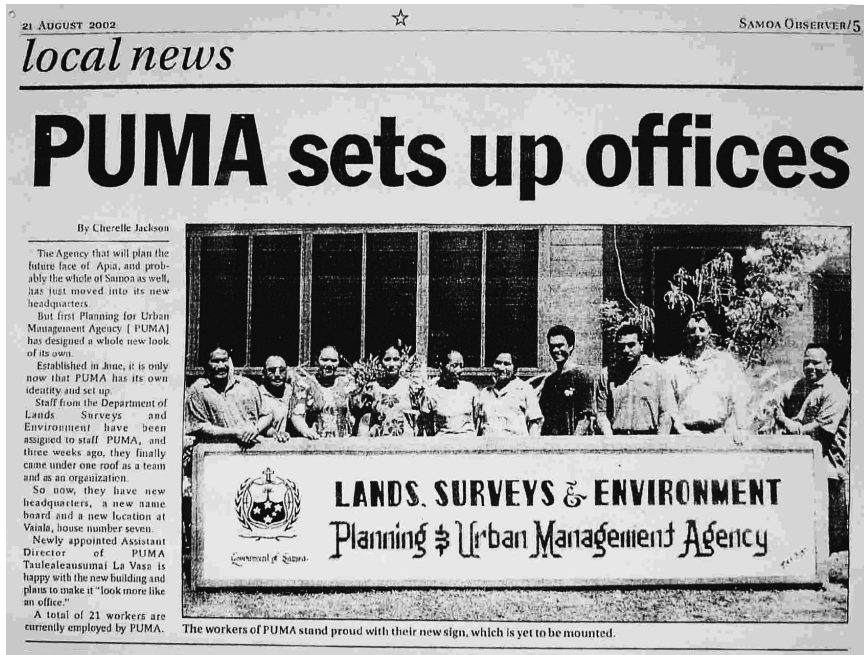
[39] Connell and Lea, *Urbanisation in the Island Pacific*, p. 113.

[40] The name of this ministry was changed to the Ministry of Natural Resources Environment and Meteorology (MNREM) in 2006.

[41] PUMA is staffed by a group of well-qualified professionals, all of whom trained in the Pacific region.

Figure 1:
PUMA makes local news when established in Samoa in 2002

Source: *The Samoan Observer*, August 21, 2002, p. 5.

stakeholders; preparing housing and land planning guidelines for urban development; developing a physical framework plan and policies for Apia's growth, as well as protection of coastal infrastructure; development of drainage and sanitation plans as a basis for a current ADB investment project in Apia; development of coastal infrastructure management plans, with the support of the World Bank; and preparing new planning and urban management legislation. Generally, the early transition phase has been unproblematic, primarily because of the incremental approach adopted by the government to raise the profile of urban planning and management. The government has also been astute in ensuring PUMA was supported locally as much as possible, with technical support by the overarching ministry. Also of key importance is the reinforcement provided by selective support from donors and development banks such as the ADB, the World Bank and the UNDP.

A new Planning and Urban Management Act was passed in Samoa in February 2004, and came into force in July 2004, providing the legislative basis for integrated land use and environmental planning, as well as enabling the operation of PUMA and the appointment of a board to oversee

implementation of the Act. The PUMA Board is both the development consent authority for Samoa as well as being responsible for setting work priorities for the agency itself. Following the resignation of the former minister for Natural Resources and Environment (MNRE) to take up a position in the Samoa judiciary, PUMA was moved from the MNRE to the Ministry of Works, Transport and Infrastructure (MWTI) early in 2005. However, it was relocated back to the MNRE in July, 2006, following decisions made after the national elections in early 2006.[42] The government of Samoa has clearly made a major commitment to improved urban planning and management outcomes for all stakeholders via the new policy, institutional and legislative arrangements. This situation compares favourably with the experience of other Polynesian states like Tonga, where little progress in urban reform has been made. The fact that it has occurred in Samoa, in spite of potential conflicts with established traditional authority such as the *matai* (chiefs) and village *fono* (customary village councils), is a significant achievement, even though it is still early days. While there have been issues of acceptance and understanding by both government and villagers of the new rules, regulations and processes to be applied, PUMA has grown in confidence and is slowly gaining credibility, despite detractors such as some developers, landowners and government ministries. Central questions remain about the extent to which these reforms, as well as several others previously noted, including those in Kiribati, can retain government support and become locally sustainable, and whether they provide a relevant model for possible adoption by other countries in Oceania. Importantly, the changes in Samoa are now institutionalized and a comprehensive legislative framework is in place.

Lessons from the reform experience

Evidence thus far suggests that urban conditions in the postcolonial Pacific are uneven, have worsened almost everywhere and are most acute in parts of Melanesia.[43] Various features of life in rural Melanesia have transferred to the cities in a way that has not and probably will not occur in the small Polynesian and Micronesian states, where the reform examples illustrated here are situated. Firstly, urban reform only appears on the agenda where there is a strong presence of political will, commitment, ownership and

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42 There were varied reasons for the move to the MWTI but concerns existed over the impact on the community of the new development control and assessment processes contained in the PUMA legislation. With the MWTI itself undergoing restructuring, including creation of a Land Transport Authority (supported by the World Bank), there exists the possibility that PUMA will return to the MNREM.

43 "Solomon Islands—Disquiet in the Air," *Islands Business* (July 2006), pp. 16-24.

leadership. As in Samoa, such will and commitment may emerge where there is a groundswell of support from stakeholders and local champions for urban change. Island politicians invariably weigh up the implications of promoting urban sector reforms vis-à-vis the benefits and costs that will be gained by their constituents, many of whom may live outside the city. The latter reality partly explains why the new planning system for Samoa, which was originally devised only for Apia, was ultimately applied at the national level in terms of institutions created and legislation passed. There was a perception that there should be national spatial equity in the new rules and regulations, as well as fairness in bearing the costs and receiving the benefits flowing from the new system. Regardless of other factors, preparedness to implement significant change is what distinguishes both Samoa, and to a lesser degree Kiribati, from almost everywhere else in the island Pacific.

Political will and commitment is also linked to other factors. Urban reform in Kiribati must compete with calls for rural and outer island development. It is hard to include pressing urban issues on the national political agenda with only a small number of current national MPs representing urban South Tarawa, despite the capital accounting for almost half of the national population. The recently completed ADB-funded water and sanitation project in South Tarawa is seen by many I-Kiribati as essential for a growing urban area, but it was reluctantly accepted, given its social and economic implications for change at the local level. Unfortunately, the gains in water supply, for example, have yet to reach much of the population, such as those living in overcrowded Betio. The ADB-supported Fiji urban sector reform of 2003 is another example of a project which included an emphasis on upgrading urban squatter areas and providing low-cost building land in the greater Suva Nausori corridor; it has also struggled with slow progress. One reason for this is that the issue has largely been viewed as one of "urban versus rural development" in Fiji, with benefits flowing to urban constituents, rather than offering a recognition of the interdependence of town and country.

Secondly, financial concerns, coupled with an absence of technical know-how, have dominated attempts to upgrade and improve deteriorating urban infrastructure across Oceania. Although there are many examples of valuable research and support by civil society in Polynesia, urban reform in the region is invariably initiated and undertaken by government itself. Nearly all urban reform in the Pacific, whether it is in Melanesia, Polynesia or Micronesia, has been supported, facilitated and financed by international and local development banks and donor agencies. It is the international development banks, such as the World Bank and the ADB in particular, that have taken the lead in assisting countries that desire to improve their urban outcomes (even if such countries are initially unsure of what these outcomes should be or look like). These banks specialize in infrastructure development (including sites and services and associated urban development policy,

institutional and regulatory reform).[44] Not surprisingly, island governments are cautious in accepting loans for development purposes, generally preferring grant money instead. Whether grant or loan financed, nearly all urban development assistance comes with its own set of preconditions, including caveats on the introduction of user-pays charges, institutional strengthening, legislative change and public sector realignment (including implications for job losses) and the introduction of new rules and regulations whose impacts are often unknown. All this further contributes to reluctance in island countries to promote urban change, despite many citizens seeing such a need as a necessary step in their national development.

Thirdly, countries like Samoa which have achieved a modest level of economic growth, including sustained gains in environmental management and national planning generally, appear most likely to implement a well-planned agenda for urban change. A reason for this is the increasing presence of urban communities that have achieved a better standard of living, plus the activities of local champions, who have traveled and lived elsewhere, typically in Pacific Rim countries like Australia, New Zealand and the United States, and who now seek better urban conditions at home. Day-to-day survival is no longer the dominant preoccupation of many urban (and rural) households and other aspirations, such as the desire for better urban services (and an ability to pay for them), have emerged. With PUMA in existence, a framework is now in place and supported by the new legislation, allowing residents to activate its provisions, including the reporting of illegal developments, and offering the ability to make complaints regarding amenity issues such as noise from churches and night clubs, the location of private shipping containers on public streets, and the like. This economic precondition has not been evident in the Kiribati situation, however, raising questions about the sustainability or otherwise of new urban infrastructure projects there, given the absence of much in the way of community support for comprehensive urban change, including the ability to pay for and maintain assets.

Overall, the urban reform experience has been mixed in Oceania and the question of how to achieve better results and an improved enabling environment is complicated by the additional need to first understand and then revitalize urban policy and institutional and regulatory frameworks. As indicated, understanding why there is a reluctance to start such a process means addressing some complex and problematic issues. Clearly, urban reform includes the interplay of a myriad of issues, concerns and factors, including hitherto intractable factors such as the mobilizing of customary or traditional lands. More often than not, urban infrastructure and service

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44 World Bank, "Managing Pacific Towns," in *Cities, Seas and Storms—Managing Change in Pacific Island Economies*, vol. 2 (Washington DC, 2000).

projects are medium to longer term in length, and last well beyond one term of government. Caution is inevitably shown by island governments when weighing up the social, economic, environmental and political implications of urban change, including assessing the often significant financial costs against benefits for the population and implications for rural constituents. The reality, however, is that the future for many Pacific island states is an urban one, though this fact has yet to be reflected in most national economic development plans and policies.[45] Indeed, it is rare to find the needs of the primate city fully identified and prioritized in such plan documents. How much longer the poor and deteriorating conditions in the towns and cities can be tolerated before the necessary change in outlook occurs is the central question.

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45   See, for example, Government of Kiribati, *National Development Strategies.*