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JENNY BRYANT-TOKALAU

## Twenty years on Poverty and hardship in urban Fiji

Here [in Suva], if we work everyday we can feed ourselves. Five days or 7 days you have to work hard. In farms you don't have to do much because once you have upgraded all the facilities on your farm it is easy for you. If you earn any amount of money here it will not be sufficient for your family. In Rakiraki [if] you've got \$50 you earn every week you can provide for your family very well because [of] all the things you can get from the farm. But here if you go to the shop, \$200 is nothing for you. Life is better on the farm. (Interview with Hassan 2007.)

I was brought up by a single parent – my Mum only. When I was young my grandparents looked after me in the village (in Rewa). I was educated in the village school from class 1 to class 6. My mum works at domestic duties. I was lucky to come to Suva for my further education. These families helped my Mum with school fees. Since I am not really a clever girl in school I left in Form 5, then I started to have a family at a very young age. I now have four children. My husband died in 2002 and I really find life difficult to raise my children since three are in school – one at high school and two at primary school. I work two days a week and earn \$40. I'm staying with my two kids at home [in the village]. One is staying with Mum who is still working and the other is staying with my aunty in Suva. (Interview with Ma 2008.)

### *Introduction: Changing interpretations*

Life is becoming harder for many urban dwellers. The stories of Hassan, a former cane farmer and now urban squatter, and Ma, a peri-urban domestic worker, demonstrate that all is not well for an increasing number of Fijian

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households. They also show that, despite major difficulties, many are resilient and continue to educate their children, build homes and find ways to earn an income in the face of what often appear to be extreme obstacles. In rural areas, whether on their own land or on leasehold, most people are able to grow food and have access to a more nutritious diet, which protects them from hardship. Today however, with changing attitudes to land, forced removal and the increasingly monetized economy, the need for cash is universal. This need is pushing people everywhere closer to poverty.

There has been a great deal published over the past 20 years concerning the urban poor, hardship and poverty in Fiji and the wider Pacific.<sup>1</sup> Now, looking back over the past two decades, it is time to take stock, and to voice concern over some of the prevailing and continuing interpretations of 'poverty' in the Pacific context. Even in the discussions about poverty and inequality, utopian myths remain as an undercurrent, partly in an effort not to offend, but largely to emphasize that despite all the difficulties and 'discontents of daily life' (Clarke 2006:129), there is a resilience in the Pacific that shall one day prevail; that somehow the Pacific is 'different' and will find its own solutions.

The major debates of the 1980s and 1990s were focused around the representation of Pacific countries as isolated, vulnerable, resource poor, lacking in modern skills and education, and aid dependent (Hughes and Sodhi 2008). However, amongst these negatives was also the view that the Pacific was in many ways a relatively safe and healthy place, with opportunities in the present and future and the means to avoid the growing inequalities and poverty affecting other parts of the world.<sup>2</sup>

The earlier simplistic and almost environmentally deterministic views against which Hau'ofa (1993) so eloquently railed reflected in part how the 'outside' world wanted to perceive the Pacific, neglecting the fact that, as part of the global system, Pacific island states face many of the same complex challenges as other nations in the modern world of global business, politics and economics. Pacific countries may be peripheral in location but they are still subject to the vagaries of the currency market, internal corruption, and national and global politics. They contribute internationally by sending sol-

<sup>1</sup> Barr 1990; Bryant 1992, 1993; Naidu 2005; Trnka 2008; *Hardship and poverty* 2004; 'Key indicators for Asia and the Pacific 2007', *Asian Development Bank*. <http://www.adb.org/publications/key-indicators-asia-and-pacific-2007> (accessed 25-6-2012); 'Workshop report: The millennium development goals in Pacific Island countries: Taking stock, emerging issues, and the way forward', *Asian Development Bank*. <http://www.adb.org/publications/workshop-report-millennium-development-goals-pacific-island-countries-taking-stock-emer> (accessed 25-6-2012); 'Solomon Islands: Analysis of the 2005/06 household income and expenditure survey: Final report on the estimation of basic needs poverty lines, and the incidence and characteristics of poverty in Solomon Islands National Statistics Office and UNDP Pacific Centre Suva, Fiji. July 2008', *UNDP Pacific Centre*. [http://www.undppc.org.fj/\\_resources/article/files/solomon%20report%20final%20LOW.pdf](http://www.undppc.org.fj/_resources/article/files/solomon%20report%20final%20LOW.pdf) (accessed 25-6-2012).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Hughes 2003, and the governments of the Pacific, as quoted in Connell 2003.

diers to Iraq and Afghanistan and afford significant employment opportunities for the staff of aid agencies. They are affected by global climate change and depleting natural resources (largely timber and fish, sugar and gold). They are also increasingly connected digitally, with inexpensive and widely available cell phones and other communication technologies extending to the most remote of islands. The islands are no longer isolated; indeed, as well as being a boost for tourism (*Pacific Economic Survey* 2008:iv), the digital revolution enables easy social contact, access to learning and the movement of remittances, demonstrating even more firmly that much of the Pacific is not on the periphery at all (Errington and Gewertz 2010; Robie 1999).

Globally, studies of cities and development, or of poverty in urban areas, tend to neglect what is happening in the small nations of the Pacific, where urbanization is as much a 'concentration of human energies' (Beall and Fox 2009:3) as elsewhere. Donors and development agencies work in the towns and cities of the Pacific, but their approach is often characterized by the desire for 'quick fix' solutions and simple causal explanations. Many of the ills of Tuvalu and Kiribati, for example, are currently blamed on climate change,<sup>3</sup> an explanation that ignores the complex human, economic, social and political histories that, combined with environmental change, have made those nations what they are today. Although the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have, in a sense, forced countries to recognize some of the many threads which lead to poverty and inequality, there remains this tendency to simplify.<sup>4</sup>

A less understood issue is the fact that, within the wider frame of global impacts and externalities, internal land issues prevail and remain contested. The political wrangling and disputes taking place in several Pacific nations (especially Fiji, but also Tonga, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea) can be labelled 'internal,' but debates surrounding land, identity and poverty are also affected by history, global economics and trade as well as regional (and

<sup>3</sup> For example, Richards 2003; 'Future uncertain for Pacific Islands like Kiribati', *United Nations Development Programme*. <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/articles/2009/12/10/future-uncertain-for-pacific-islands-like-kiribati/> (accessed 25-6-2012); see also *An inconvenient truth*, a 2006 documentary film directed by Davis Guggenheim about former United States Vice President Al Gore's campaign to educate public about climate change. New Zealand Aid Programme (now under the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade) is very aware of the complexities of Pacific societies, the history and cultures of the nations, and its policy on climate change is designed around those considerations (<http://www.aid.govt.nz/> (accessed 25-6-2012)). Australian policy on the other hand places climate change at the centre of its Pacific programmes, whilst recognizing the history of Pacific nations, as expressed by the following statement, 'Australia recognises that the poorest people are often the most vulnerable to the impacts of environmental degradation, and that climate change now threatens to worsen these problems and set back progress towards the Millennium Development Goals' (<http://www.ausaid.gov.au/aidissues/environment/Pages/home.aspx> (accessed 25-6-2012)).

<sup>4</sup> Radcliffe et al. 2010:100. For a discussion on neo-environmental determinism and the dangers herein, see Radcliffe et al. 2010.

global) politics. Land and its 'ownership' is so deeply imbedded in the life of Pacific islanders that global interpretations often fail to take account of and to understand its local meaning, and thus solutions and interventions coming from outside the region rarely achieve the intended consequences. Given the fact that wars and conflict throughout the world have always been about land and resources, such failure by donors and governments to understand its significance gives cause for concern, especially given that there are so many academic studies emphasizing its importance (Miyazaki 2007; Ravuvu 1988; Weiner and Glassen 2007).

An explanation for these shallow representations may be found in the fact that Pacific nations have for at least the last century been regarded as the 'backyard' of New Zealand, Australia and, more distantly, France and the United States (Crean and MacMullan 2008; Dyer 1999). Now in the twenty-first century they are increasingly regarded as 'next door neighbours' to newly emerging, outwardly looking powers and partners on the Pacific rim such as the People's Republic of China, Taiwan and Korea (Crocombe 2007). Under Australia's and New Zealand's earlier benevolent largesse Pacific nations were regarded in a similar manner to the nations of the Caribbean: variously imagined as tropical paradises and subsequently subjected to both external and internal forces. This has often resulted in a failure to comprehend the diversity of Pacific countries, and the layered responses to different imaginings and solutions to the various crises of 'development' (see, for example, Skelton and Mains 2009:151-7; Bryant-Tokalau and Frazer 2006).

Given this historical and global context, is it appropriate to continue to discuss Pacific poverty as not 'real' poverty, as less likely to lead to starvation and genuine hardship than poverty in other parts of the world?<sup>5</sup> As the geopolitical framing of the world moves from 'geopolitical social' to 'geo-economic' perspectives (Cowen and Smith 2009:22), where does the search for trade and economic stability place the 'moral confusions' of Pacific states in their pursuit of the right path for the future, involving good governance and continuing loyalties, alongside indigenous modes of production (Clarke 2006:145), complex and long histories and the quest for better access to, if not a larger share in, global wealth?

### *Pacific poverty*

In contrast to the late 1980s and early 1990s, when discussions of poverty in the Pacific were relatively few and controversial, there is now general agree-

<sup>5</sup> Abbott and Pollard 2004:1. Abbott and Pollard were commenting on the widely held view that Pacific traditional and cultural obligations were in effect a safety net for the poor. They also added that with the passing of time such safety nets have begun to fray and in some cases have broken.

ment that poverty exists, that there is greater hardship and growing inequality, and that urban areas can be places of misery, as well as hope, for a growing number of people. Some of the tourist visions, the paradisiacal Pacific, are also now being challenged. No matter how poverty is defined (and the definitions are many) (Abbott 2006; Barr 1990; Bryant 1993), there is no doubt that it is increasing (Abbott and Pollard 2004; Narsey 2008; Wood and Naidu 2008). It has also long been understood that discussions of 'averages' (wages, gross domestic product per capita, growth) do not reflect the true situation for those at the 'bottom' (Collier 2008:11), and that goals of reducing poverty based on a measure of less than one dollar per day are inappropriate (Wood and Naidu 2008:18). Earlier analyses tended to focus on the poverty of income and consumption, but it is the poverty of opportunity that impacts most on people no matter where they are, and especially in rural areas (Chung 2007). Other broader and more relevant measures – relating to human rights, political freedom, access to basic human needs and more representation for previously silent groups of people – are increasingly recognized and commented upon (see, for example, Fraenkel and Firth 2007; Trnka 2008).

Statistical measures of poverty and inequality, as well as the global list of Millennium Development Goals, may seem anathema to those living in conditions of hardship who are concerned with simply getting through the day (Bryant-Tokalau 2009:230). Yet governments, planners and donors claim that with participatory planning these days, people have a wider understanding of the meaning of what hardship and poverty entail. However poverty is now understood as arising from a combination of factors such as health, access to land, corruption, political instability, lack of education, income and environment, or solely as an income figure, such as less than \$1 per day, a more credible and telling measure is the fact that the governments of the Pacific now openly use the word 'poverty' in official reports. People themselves also widely acknowledge that life is increasingly difficult and that there is more suffering and hardship. Corruption, political instability and violence affect many, particularly those in urban areas; under such circumstances, opportunities for citizens to access a decent life are more limited than ever before. Loss of faith in formal government is endemic.

Major donors, particularly the United Nations system, Asian Development Bank and bi-laterals, couch aid in various guises depending on the tenor of the time. Themes such poverty reduction (previously alleviation), democratic governance, crisis prevention and recovery<sup>6</sup> are moulded and reshaped to suit contemporary perceptions. Overall, however, they aim to reduce poverty and hardship which, in whatever forms they take, are increasing in the Pacific – which has been identified as one of two regions<sup>7</sup> that will fail to meet

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.undp.org>; <http://www.aid.govt.nz/> (accessed 25-6-2012).

<sup>7</sup> The other region failing to meet the MDGs is sub-Saharan Africa.

the Millennium Development Goals.<sup>8</sup> In a sense, the MDGs act as catalysts for governments and non-government organizations, helping them to focus more on monitoring and assessing development outcomes and the status of human development in the region. It has been estimated that as a result of the world economic crisis combined with problems of distribution, cost and availability of food and fuel, in 12 Pacific nations 'for which data are available, the poverty rate has worsened over the last two years as the incomes of the poorest and most vulnerable people declined'.<sup>9</sup>

One question for this article concerns availability of data and whether or not it is necessary to prove that Pacific poverty is a reality. It is probably more important to understand poverty and hardship through the eyes of those most affected, but it is also helpful to have in mind the wider context, bearing in mind the difficulties of accessing accurate statistics (Bryant-Tokalau 1995:112-3). This article contains some analysis of such data as are available, while recognizing that statistics are not the full picture. The personal stories of people living in conditions of hardship provide a picture of daily life.

### *Urban poverty over the decades*

More than a decade ago it was argued that the extent and intensity of urban poverty had been underestimated in the Pacific, and that urban poverty's many dimensions – health, housing, living conditions, school attendance and income – were not being fully acknowledged (Bryant-Tokalau 1995). Drawing on reports of housing and conditions facing urban squatters, that paper presented an overview of urban poverty in the wider Pacific region and focused in some detail on Fiji.

Examples of the situation in Fiji before the first coup of 1987 demonstrated that urban living has long been a struggle for some:

A five year old infant was admitted two weeks ago from Delainavesi, Suva. He had suffered from a cough and fever for a week and had refused to feed for three days. His mother didn't really feel that there was a need for any urgent medical treatment and only brought the child to the hospital because he wasn't eating. The mother has never breastfed the child, but has always relied heavily on her older daughter and the extended family to look after this infant. They live in a single room with a corrugated iron roof and timber walls, and there are seven other siblings. Although the family lives in an urban area they have only a pit latrine. The father is a carpenter and the mother is a house girl. (Robertson 1988:20.)

<sup>8</sup> 'The Millennium Development Goals Report 2009', *United Nations*. [http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/MDG\\_Report\\_2009\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/MDG_Report_2009_ENG.pdf) (accessed 25-6-2012).

<sup>9</sup> <http://content.undp.org/go/newsroom/2010/february/helen-clark-calls-for-increased-social-protection-in-the-pacific.en?categoryID=349433> (accessed 16-2-2010).

Now, 17 years later it is useful to examine what has changed and why, despite the many proactive approaches taken, life is in many ways harder, not easier, for a significant proportion of Pacific Islanders. Much of the difficulty surrounds land, its tenure and the ability of settlers to deal with the vicissitudes of urban living when their very existence is precarious. Recent interviews with settlers in Suva's Riverside Road,<sup>10</sup> for example, raise the same issues noted in donor agency assessments and studies carried out in the 1980s and 1990s. Little has changed:

Squatters have no money so we have to stay like this. Lots of problems, especially water waste from the kitchens going into other areas – neighbours. Then people start fighting – main cause of problems. People don't have a place to throw their rubbish here. In flooding time we face problems as 70-80 houses are under water when the flood comes. There is no river here, but when flood comes you will see big flood down below – most of the houses are underwater. Last year there were 7 floods in this area and people lose all the things. Two times my house was under water too. We even can't eat properly with the bad smell coming from outside [sewage]. People are getting sick every day. This is the things people are facing here.<sup>11</sup>

Hassan's comments reflect the findings of McKinnon et al. who described the situation of informal settlers in urban areas of Fiji as clearly unsatisfactory (McKinnon et al. 2007:17) and in need of 'early and decisive intervention' (McKinnon et al. 2007:ii).

The worsening of urban living conditions, especially for the poor, confirms Connell and Lea's assessment of prospects for urban management and planning in Melanesian cities in 2010 (Connell and Lea 1993). Calls for participatory planning, sound planning for the future and appropriate local government systems were all viewed as crucially important and might have been widely supported today if political, social and economic issues had not become dominant. Irrespective of planning regimes, land is increasingly coming under pressure in much of the urban Pacific as people move in search of new opportunities. Urban areas are generally growing at higher rates as compared to 20 years ago, and despite significant international and local attention to planning and management of infrastructure, housing and services continue to manifest conditions which make life more difficult for

<sup>10</sup> Hassan and Ma (not their real names) were involved in a wide range of interviews carried out in the informal settlements of Suva, Nausori, Nasinu, Ba and Lautoka in the period July 2006 to 2008 as part of a film project *The Qoliqoli in Town: Traditional Fishing Grounds and Squatting in Urban Fiji*. That film has been used in part for teaching purposes, but visuals for the entire 50-minute script are in the process of being edited, and returned for comment to interviewees during 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Hassan, 2007.



poorer groups. The growth of squatter<sup>12</sup> and informal settlements, although previously acknowledged and recognized,<sup>13</sup> is becoming a more pressing issue as governments and community groups struggle to provide services for the growing numbers of people living without adequate water, sewerage and housing.

*The statistics: Measuring urbanization and poverty*

In the early 1990s most countries were around one-quarter urbanized; by 2004 half had more than 50 per cent of their population classified as urban.<sup>14</sup> The implications of this urban growth for land – particularly coastal land near cities (Bryant-Tokalau 2008), housing, water, education and employment, especially for youth (Vakaoti 2009:436), are becoming very clear. The inability of governments to deal with the growing numbers facing hardship is already apparent in the Melanesian nations, and increasingly so in others, especially in Micronesia and in Samoa and Tonga.

The proportion of those living in urban areas in Polynesia and Micronesia has not changed significantly in the past decades and in some cases has declined, largely due to emigration to metropolitan centres. Although it is acknowledged that the peoples of these nations *are* urbanizing, it is frequently not in their home countries.<sup>15</sup> In Melanesia however (and some countries of Micronesia), urban populations are expected to double in one generation, with the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu likely to achieve this in around 16 years, and American Samoa, Kiribati and the Northern Marianas in 20 years' time (Haber Korn 2008:110). Despite these predictions, Pacific planning departments and local governments, with their massive resource constraints and lack of capacity, find it difficult to respond. Many have voiced concern at the implications of such growth for basic services, housing and land, and they have noted growing social issues (for example, Bedford and Hugo 2008; Mohanty 2006; Storey 2006), but local governments have limited ways and inadequate planning regulations for dealing with the predicted growth and the inevitable impact on urban environments.

<sup>12</sup> Squatters or squatting are terms used widely in Fiji and do not necessarily mean illegal occupation of land. These are largely informal arrangements to live on unoccupied land, sometimes with the agreement of the landowner (known as *vakavanua*).

<sup>13</sup> For example, Bryant 1990a, 1990b; Goddard 2005; Jones and Lea 2007; Walsh 1978.

<sup>14</sup> Haber Korn 2008. It should be noted that urban statistics for the Pacific can be misleading, for example, Nauru and Guam have been characterized as being 100 per cent urbanized which is in fact not the case, notwithstanding different definitions of the term 'urban' (Haber Korn 2008).

<sup>15</sup> It is, however, well known that urban areas in Kiribati and Tuvalu have become increasingly densely settled.

As recognized in the introduction of the Millennium Development Goals (UN 2000), urban poverty analysis as well as sheer physical growth are more than just a case of numbers. There are many representations of data reflecting Pacific poverty, such as statistics on child and maternal mortality, life expectancy, causes of death, access to water and sanitation, and on household income (Abbott 2006; Bryant-Tokalau 1995), but such measurements also involve shortcomings with regard to appropriateness, interpretation, accuracy and availability that beleaguer statistics and their use. At the very least, however, longitudinal recording of such data does give an indication of changing circumstances which populations undergo. Governments in the Pacific now use the terms poverty and inequality more readily, and are prepared to admit that poverty or hardship do exist.

Using the basic needs poverty line (BNPL),<sup>16</sup> Narsey found that ethnic differences in instances of overall poverty in 2002 accounted for 34 per cent<sup>17</sup> (Narsey 2008:3). No matter which way Narsey (2008:3) broke down the figures, the poorest people lived in rural areas (with Indo-Fijians scoring higher), but in urban areas the proportion of people considered poor was also significant: 33 or 26 per cent of Indo-Fijians, and 23 or 25 per cent of indigenous Fijians.<sup>18</sup> Narsey's work is important, as it is one of the few in-depth statistical analyses of collected data over the past decade.<sup>19</sup> Figures quoted in newspapers and by political parties have varied wildly over the years and Narsey critiques the ethno-nationalism inherent in these. The main point, however, is that life is becoming more difficult in both rural and urban areas, and since 2008-2009 when the most recent Household Income and Expenditure Survey was conducted there has been little, if any, improvement.

Narsey may be too focused on the ethnic and locational aspects of poverty. Urban poverty is very much driven by conditions in rural areas, and vice versa. Wratten (1995:7, 11) calls attention to the continuum of urban and rural and the inherent relationships and linkages which endure and may include rural change and production, land lease changes, war and conflict. So whilst accurate data on poverty may not be available, and bearing in mind the

<sup>16</sup> Narsey (2008:3) commented on the fact that in poverty literature there is great debate about the choices of standards for the BNPL, 'both with respect to international relativities, and internal differentiation. Regional differences (such as urban and rural BNPLs) draw little criticism because of the obvious possible differences in prices of essentials, such as food, housing, fuel and transport'. This is significant because in Fiji many of the discussions about poverty stress rural and urban differences in poverty as well as ethnic differentials. Narsey worked out a revised BNPL for Fiji utilizing two essential components – the food poverty line (FPL) and the non-food poverty line (NFPL) – based on actual expenditure patterns revealed in the 2002-3 HIES.

<sup>17</sup> To obtain this figure, Narsey demonstrated slight differences in results by ethnicity with 3 per cent lower for Fijians and 8 per cent higher for Indo-Fijians

<sup>18</sup> These figures vary depending on which BNPL (2002 or adjusted 1997) is used.

<sup>19</sup> Although there have been several analyses of poverty in the Pacific since the 1980s, most are not based on new statistical data but extrapolated from earlier figures.

political use to which such data are put, the growth of informal or squatter settlements, problems of health, water, sanitation and abandoned children give some indication of the scale of what is happening in Fiji in recent times. In the wider Pacific, where such data are imperfect, intermittently available and manipulated at times for political purposes, deteriorating urban and peri-urban living conditions are a reality.

### *Environmental and social impacts of urbanization*

Some attention has been paid to environmental degradation of towns and the impact of overcrowding, increasing densities and marginal living on the health and well-being of urban dwellers (Bryant-Tokalau 1995; Storey 2006). Fifteen years after a commentary relating contagious and curable diseases to urban living conditions (Bryant-Tokalau 1995:119-21) and the obvious links between population densities and health problems, there is no appreciable improvement. Throughout the Pacific, the incidence of tuberculosis, for example, is growing, and HIV threatens to become a much greater concern (Wood and Naidu 2008:29). Haberkorn (2008) and Storey (2006) show the doubling times and raw growth of the urban populations in countries such as Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, with health concerns – reflected in high rates of tuberculosis and maternal and child deaths – closely linked to the living conditions of local communities. On Betio, the commercial centre and port in South Tarawa, in Kiribati, where over 12,509 people live on a land area of 1.2 km<sup>2</sup> (2.4 km long and 0.5 km wide), the population density is 10,400 per square kilometre – twice that of Hong Kong and Singapore (Haberkorn 2008:112). Such overcrowding has obvious implications for health, water and waste. Kiribati still has one of the highest rates of tuberculosis infection at 49.3 per 100,000.<sup>20</sup>

### *Social and human perspectives*

One of the most persistent commentators on the social and political implications of urban growth has been Kevin Barr (1990, 2009) who, although he focused largely on Fiji, has also written on urbanization and its consequences for the poor in the wider Pacific. As already noted, much earlier work focused on population growth and planning issues and less attention was paid to changing lifestyles, aspirations and the extreme stresses faced by many urban communities. Now, and throughout the 1990s and 2000s, there has been more commentary on the human experience of living in 'squatter' or informal settlements, on the impact on women and children, on employment and forcible loss of land, and on the health and education implications of deteriorat-

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.adb.org/publications/key-indicators-asia-and-pacific-2007> (accessed 25-6-2012).

ing urban conditions.<sup>21</sup> Fiji, with the expiry of its cane leases, political uncertainty and greater urban migration, continues to demonstrate growing social inequalities and hardship. Such increasing hardship is clearly represented through the stories of Ma and Hassan.

*Perspectives of the poor: Coping strategies*

This paper addresses increasing hardship in the Pacific and people's responses to the situation. There is no doubt that however difficult life becomes, people do often find new ways of coping, both by seeking new income-earning opportunities and by developing new relationships, networks and communities.

In the course of the fieldwork interviews it became clear that many people do not simply wait for assistance and even when life is very hard they find something that they can do. These include obvious activities such as gardening and fishing, but also creative pursuits which can bring in cash income. Popular activities include carving, making and painting flower pots from a range of materials such as cans and bottles, and growing flowers for sale in the market. People are also adept at identifying niche markets, such as kava<sup>22</sup> stalls, cell phone repairs or pirated DVDs. Such activities are not new of course; there has always been informal economic activity such as selling cooked food in the street or bottle collecting, but the extent of such activities has increased. Most settlers also work on their homes, and even where dwellings are extremely derelict and makeshift there is much activity to make them more comfortable. Others hire out small halls and items such as tarpaulins for community activities or, even more resourcefully, start their own churches or pre-schools. There is really no limit to what people will do in order to provide for themselves and the future of their children.

Life is a bit hard sometimes; I buy fish and sell them in the Suva market every Saturday. There are divers in the village and they bring in the fish. There are some middlemen who buy the fish and sell it again in the market. Like if I buy a bundle of fish for \$10 I can sell it again for \$15 so I can get the \$5 profit. I get about 7 to 10 bundles. Every Saturday morning I leave the village at 3 or 4 in the morning because the Suva market is not very big. Plenty people selling in the market and we have to go early so that we can have a place to sell as there are plenty of people selling fish.<sup>23</sup>

The story of Ma reflects not only her coping strategies as life becomes more difficult, but also the importance of urban centres and the need for cash income in every aspect of life, especially in the rapidly growing towns and villages.

<sup>21</sup> Barr 2009; McKinnon et al. 2007; Mohanty 2006; Vakaoti 2009; Wood and Naidu 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Kava, or *piper methysticum*, is a ceremonial drink which is widely consumed socially.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Ma, 2008.

Networks and relationships are changing in urban areas. Relationships between families are highly important to the way the settlements develop. Many Fijians have a *tauvu* relationship,<sup>24</sup> which entails sharing, and in an urban context these links can become quite significant. Of course people come to town from all over the country but there are also settlement committees being established with wider group membership than relationships based on *tauvu*, often with encouragement from non-government organizations. These are starting to replicate in other urban settlements.

Additionally, the absence of a regular cash income and the struggle to survive in often difficult circumstances cause urban ethnic Fijians to neglect and even ignore traditional arrangements and involvement with the churches. For example, Ma, when commenting on a Fijian funeral, noted that:

At the Fijian funeral the people come to give mats, *tabua*,<sup>25</sup> things like that. After the funeral we have to give something back to them, like buying cows and making the *burua*,<sup>26</sup> like meat and dalo. Plenty places we don't do that now. It's just the food that we are preparing after the burial. We just come and use up the food we have prepared and we don't have to do the other. In some places we can't afford to buy cows. Not doing the redistribution – only the food that we are preparing after the burial.

The focus in the settlements is moving away from tradition to the everyday concerns of simply getting by. In the informal settlements of Suva, for example, new leaders are emerging. In one settlement, Riverside Road, a member of the community has been elected to the Nasinu town council and can now speak on behalf of the people in his settlement. Informal settlers are starting to take action to find ways of negotiating through the bureaucracy.

A significant and obvious gap exists between the poorer and middle classes, which is also apparent in declining access to decent housing and services for the poor. The global economic deterioration has impacted Pacific islanders living overseas, many of whom remit a significant proportion of their income to relatives in Pacific countries. Declining levels of remittance also contribute to growing hardship.<sup>27</sup> Poverty is of course more complex than simply the

<sup>24</sup> *Tauvu* refers to reciprocal and joking rights between indigenous Fijians in certain parts of Fiji.

<sup>25</sup> *Tabua*: whale's tooth used for important ceremonial exchange. *Tabua* is expensive and rare, and less often circulated nowadays.

<sup>26</sup> *Burua* is when the equivalent of exchange items presented at a funeral are redistributed sometime after the funeral ceremonies have been completed. For a discussion of Fijian exchange, see J.W. Turner 1987, although he does not discuss the *burua*.

<sup>27</sup> Connell and Brown 1995, 'Social protection in the Pacific: A review of its adequacy and role in addressing poverty', *Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID)*. [http://vanuatu2010.un.org.fj/resources/uploads/attachments/documents/Social%20Protection%20in%20the%20Pacific%20%E2%80%93%20A%20Review%20of%20its%20Adequacy%20and%20Role%20in%20Addressing%20Poverty%20\(2\).pdf](http://vanuatu2010.un.org.fj/resources/uploads/attachments/documents/Social%20Protection%20in%20the%20Pacific%20%E2%80%93%20A%20Review%20of%20its%20Adequacy%20and%20Role%20in%20Addressing%20Poverty%20(2).pdf) (accessed 25-6-2012).

issue of economic decline. Corrupt, less trustworthy and unstable governments as well as the sheer inability of local governments to cope aggravate the hardships that poor people face.

[...] the people get settled, they get pulled out. Still no place to stay. They build houses but anytime any government department can come and tell you to move out. Every week, every day there are people moving in from other parts of the island as they are losing their land and ... what I have seen is that there are major problems in education here (more people coming into this area and all the schools are overcrowded). They are having 7-800 children in school. One class when I talked to the head teacher and he said one teacher is now teaching 80 students – it's very tough for them.<sup>28</sup>

Hassan, as a former farmer, has many technical skills and can plant, build his house, mend cars and so on. He also sees the wider picture and expresses his concern about what is happening.

#### *The case of Fiji*

Whilst it is important to avoid applying a Malthusian population approach to the situation of the urban Pacific, it is also important to point out that the concentration of populations on small areas of land is taking its toll on living conditions. In the urban areas of Fiji, for example, increasing densities in marginal areas are apparent. Squatter settlements are growing, with some estimates of around 140,000 people living in 190 informal housing or 'squatter' settlements (McKinnon et al. 2007:ii). Out of a total population of around 900,000, it is estimated that between 25 and 33 per cent of the Fijian population live in poverty, many of them in the settlements.<sup>29</sup> In addition, as many as 20 per cent are living in 'unacceptable housing' (Lingam 2005), and at least 54,000 people are considered to lack basic food requirements, that is, they are suffering from food poverty (Narsey 2008:54).

If my children get sick I take them to the district hospital. I don't take them to private doctors as they are very expensive. Sometimes I just treat them at home with Fijian medicines. We have shops in the village that sell panadols and other medicines. But if the kids get very sick I take them to the government hospital.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Hassan 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Mohanty 2006; McKinnon 2007. There continues to be disagreement over the 'real' number living in poverty. Some claim that it is higher than 33 per cent and others lower, for example, in Fiji's Household Income and Expenditure Survey of 2009. Since definitions of poverty vary and regularly change, it is preferred here to simply state that the number of those in hardship is growing, with real incomes falling both nationally and for families and individuals.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Ma, 2008.

As Ma's situation demonstrates, the health and social consequences for those living in the settlements and peri-urban villages are significant. For thousands, water for domestic consumption is unclean and supplied intermittently. Yet formal statistics claim that 97.5 per cent of the urban population have access to safe drinking water.<sup>31</sup> Other studies claim that at least 53 per cent of the population have no access to safe water (Lingam 2005). The health disaster that was 'waiting to happen in, for example, Suva, Nadi, Ba and Labasa' in the 1990s (Bryant 1993) has effectively come to pass. It is not a population 'problem', but rather an issue related to distribution, politics, economics and social change; moving or reducing these populations will not solve the problem. In Fiji, for example, typhoid not only remains endemic in urban areas, but it is increasing. In 2008, 208 cases were reported nationally in the first nine months, and by the first week of March 2010 there had already been 112 cases, concentrated in two Suva squatter settlements, Wailea and Jittu Estate.<sup>32</sup>

### *Recent history of urban Fiji*

When I lost my land it was a big blow to me. I had to pull my house down from the area but didn't have a chance to pull it down properly because the Fijian land-owners, they enter my house and grab all my properties. So I got nothing to bring with me because things were taken. I reported the matter to the police and other government departments but no action was taken.<sup>33</sup>

While the origins and history of Fiji's urbanization are well known and recorded (for example, Walsh 1978; Bryant 1992), it is the recent history with its tide of growing urbanization and poverty that warrants concern. In the past four years this author has been interviewing urban settlers in Fiji, asking them their housing and migration stories and trying to gather their views on their situation (Bryant-Tokalau 2006). It would be easy to blame the present crisis on the current government, but in fact hardship had been growing for a considerable time – well before the first military coup in 1987 – as can be seen in the writings of Walsh (1978) and Barr (1990). Indeed, many argue that the seeds of poverty were sown during colonial times and in the period of post-colonial economic change (Naidu 2005). Certainly that is also true. Whatever the reasons, the current situation of people in the settlements is not any better, and in many ways it has become worse as urban densities grow.

<sup>31</sup> National Planning Office, Ministry of Finance and National Planning, 'Millennium Development Goals: Fiji National Report', November 2004, p. 58. <http://www.paddle.usp.ac.fj/cgi-bin/paddle?e=d-010off-paddle--00-1--0--0-10-TX--2-----0-111--11-en-50---20-fsm---10-3-1-000--0-0-11-0utfZz-8-00&a=file&d=fj24> (accessed 25-6-2012).

<sup>32</sup> 'Residents fail to heed warnings', <http://www.fijitimesonline> (accessed 9-3-2010).

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Hassan, 2007.

Changes to land leases and the violence which sometimes accompanied those changes have made for unsettled and unhappy conditions (Bryant-Tokalau 2010). Some of the stories recounted here give a vivid portrayal.

### *'Frank's' coup*

The most recent coup in Fiji took place in 2006 and it was partially carried out by the military commander, Commodore Voreqe 'Frank' Bainimarama, as a response to three pieces of legislation being debated by the then Qarase government. One of the proposed pieces of legislation was the *Qoliqoli Act*, intended to ensure that the rights to the seabed, foreshore and indigenous fisheries of Fiji were invested with indigenous landowners. The *qoliqoli* essentially comprises coastal land and water courses out to the reef, including traditional fishing grounds not yet returned to native landowners.<sup>34</sup> It is home to most of the urban population, particularly squatters, as well as to local villages. This legislation, if ever revived, could be at the root of future disharmony in Fiji, particularly in urban areas.

Bainimarama was concerned by the Act particularly because tourist operators (almost all the hotels in Fiji are on the coast) were worried that if the coastal land and the sea area out to the reef reverted to traditional ownership, there would be claims from landowners over tourist activities (Keith-Reid 2007). Along with the concern about how hoteliers would react to the *Qoliqoli* legislation was the knowledge that tourism is the backbone of the Fijian economy and a major provider of employment – as a source of revenue for Fiji, tourism has surpassed sugar. Although not explicitly stated, the concern was that the *Qoliqoli* legislation would impact the tourism market and negatively affect the nation's economy.

Salient issues in the discussion of coastal land concern the future of Fiji's urban coastal housing and businesses, and recreation facilities. Fiji's urban areas are largely coastal and people continue to make use of the *qoliqoli* for fishing, gathering shellfish, building and gardening. As mentioned earlier, there are now more than 190 squatter settlements in Fiji housing somewhere around 140,000 people, with an additional 30,000 new houses anticipated in the next 15 years (McKinnon et al. 2007:ii). Most of these settlements are found on coastal land. The *Qoliqoli* or coastal zone is a very rich food source and a source of livelihood for the urban population, many of whom have been removed from or have voluntarily left their land for extended periods.

To further complicate the issue of coastal land, there are increasing numbers of squatters<sup>35</sup> in the *i-qoliqoli*, largely as a result of expiring sugar cane

<sup>34</sup> 'Qoliqoli Bill 2006 (Bill No. 12 of 2006)', p. 4, *Fijibuzz*. <http://www.fijibuzz.com/bills-and-acts/the-qoliqoli-bill-2006> (accessed 25-6-2012).

<sup>35</sup> Between 1999 and 2003 the Fiji government estimated that squatting had grown by 78 per cent, with 60 per cent of approximately 80,000 squatters living in the greater urban area between Suva and Nausori (Mohanty 2006).



leases<sup>36</sup> as well as growing urbanization. These will continue to put pressure on coastal areas. In Suva, where coastal settlements are expanding, there are some communities who have occupied the coastal areas for generations. Urban settlements in mangrove areas around Suva are now less secure, even where permission to build has been granted by *vakavanua* agreement with landowners through a *sevusevu*, or traditional presentation of kava (*piper methysticum*) or a *tabua* (whale's tooth) (Kiddle 2009:23). Long-held lease agreements are being terminated and the impact will be greatest on poorer sections of the community (both indigenous and otherwise) who have limited options. The seeds for an increase in urban tensions therefore seem already present.

To build a house here I brought some materials I managed to pull away from my house in Rakiraki but the rest was taken by the Fijians. Here I have to buy so I go to places where I can find second hand materials like tin and other things – you see the roof today is still rusty. In most places the house is leaking now, but we are still happy that we have got a place to stay because we can't rent a place in Suva – very hard because income is low. So [the] main reason why squatter settlements [are] coming up is because people can't pay rents and stay in houses. That is [the] reason they build small houses and huts with 5-10 families. What we earn now is just enough to feed family. In my house I have 6 people working and it is not sufficient. How can families with one or 2 working earning \$50 per week, how can they survive and send kids to school, eat for a week and pay bus fares? Each and every house faces this.<sup>37</sup>

Much of the current debate over Fijian land and land rights surrounds the expiry of agricultural leases and the consequences for rural sugar cane farmers. Other discussions surround the migration of dispossessed farmers to urban areas and the impacts on land there, particularly the mushrooming squatter settlements of the main towns (see, for example Larry Thomas's 'Struggling for a Better Living: Squatters in Fiji', 2007).

Hassan's own story, recorded during several lengthy interviews in 2006 and 2007, demonstrates the impact of expiring leases – the uncertainties, the loss of hope, and then the determination that his family would succeed in the face of many adversities.

Born in Rakiraki, because family is there – I [had a] farm and business. I was a truck operator as [I] had my own truck for harvesting my sugar cane. I was harvesting 4-5000 tonnes of cane per year, but in March 2002 the lease expired on my land and the landowner wasn't prepared to renew. At that time I was the age of 45. I had that idea that if people have worked hard all their lives that by age 45 the

<sup>36</sup> It is estimated that around 13,000 sugar cane leases will expire between 1999 and 2028 (Storey 2006:15), potentially displacing as many as 75,000 people.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Hassan, July 2006.

hard times will be gone. They have done much to survive themselves and need a place to stay in peace and enjoy themselves. But at that time what I find instead is very hard. For my children it was a time they were going to school and having an education. I was the only person who was supporting my family. So when the expiry time of the lease came we had to cut down our projections of sugar cane and to leave the land. At that time all our businesses were coming to an end, so especially when we harvested, we have to leave the land like that, we can't do anything on it – even plant any sort of vegetables or other things to support our family. And I had to move from there because when I went to Native Land (NLTB) they informed me that the landowners will not renew the lease.<sup>38</sup>

### *Potential solutions*

Since Bainimarama took power, there have been a number of government and non-government attempts to address the issues of informal settlement and poverty. Several formal efforts by the Ministry of Lands, as well as Ministry of Town and Country Planning have been aimed at resettling Fiji's squatters from both state and native land, including the *qoliqoli*. Some old established settlements, such as Jittu estate in Suva, on land owned by the Methodist Church, are being redeveloped and housing standards and facilities improved. This has meant the displacement of up to 300 families, many of whom have lived in the area for 30 to 40 years (Kikau 2009). The Housing Authority has plans to move Suva squatters onto land which is further inland, towards Nausori airport, but despite these efforts to improve their living conditions, the squatters will then be a very long way from their sources of income and subsistence and their networks. The sheer numbers involved make it unlikely that all will be adequately resettled, or even should be, as issues of use and ownership of urban land are likely to continue unresolved.

The role of non-government organizations in working with many of the urban settlements should not be underestimated. Although the informal settlers are vibrant, energetic and frequently very innovative, as shown above, they have also had the support of many organizations such as ECREA,<sup>39</sup> Save the Children Fund and FSPI,<sup>40</sup> as well as the Fiji Women's Rights Movement

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Hassan, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> The Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy (ECEA) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Suva. It started in 1990 and its founding principles remain 'to address social, religious, economic and political issues that confront Fiji'; see <http://www.ecrea.org.fj/> (accessed 25-6-2012).

<sup>40</sup> The Foundation of the Peoples of the South Pacific International (FSPI) is a regional secretariat for a network of 10 independent community-based organizations working in the Pacific to foster self-reliance and sustainable development. It has a number of locally based projects including building the capacity of villages/settlements in Fiji to develop and implement village-level develop-

(FWRM) and creative activist groups such as Women's Action for Change (WAC). These organizations and many others like them work closely with those living in and facing hardship, actively promoting the empowerment and independence of the poor. In some cases, such as with ECREA, they assist with the establishment of settlement committees, challenging people to take control of their lives and stressing the importance of speaking out (Barr, personal communication 2006). Others, such as WAC, encourage and assist those facing difficult times to express themselves through dance and drama, leading to more confidence and a sense of empowerment (Clery and Nabulivou 2011).

*What do we know about Fiji and Pacific poverty?*

The outlook for the poor and others living in Pacific urban settlements today can be illustrated through the stories of Ma and Hassan in Fiji, and many others living in similar circumstances.

As has been discussed, Pacific countries are facing widening disparity in standards of living, with increasing numbers facing poverty and hardship. The Pacific region is not on track to meet the Millennium Development Goals. However, MDGs are not the focus of this article, nor are assessments and interpretations. Instead, this article is concerned with particular instances of hardship and giving some background through the eyes of Fijian urban squatters about their life in the new century. The Pacific has always been 'connected'. People came from distant lands to settle the islands and colonizers brought their own forms of pressure and change. The interconnectedness of the Pacific may in some ways be a strength, but it is also a weakness as the impact of global pressures limit local choices. How to respond to increasing hardship is an urgent task for the peoples of the Pacific in partnership with the rest of the world, the mandate of every government, every non-government organization, church and school in the region.

The picture presented here may appear unrelentingly gloomy, but the Pacific nations are not just a stereotypical 'basket case' and there are many positive responses to current events. As shown by Ma and Hassan, people are resilient; even in the midst of hardship they find ways to earn cash, build houses and send their children to school. But other, sweeping events such as military coups, the global economic downturn, unbalanced trade agreements and events involving the 'forces of nature' such as hurricanes and tsunamis mean that daily life is more difficult. There have always been perceptions of the Pacific as being somehow 'different' from the rest of the world, with romantic visions of palms and beaches, an apparently easy life and a pleasant climate – a place where poverty does not quite exist.

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ment plans or 'life plans' through a process of participatory planning, decision-making, action, and learning; see <http://www.fsfi.org.fj/index.php/programmes/sustainable-livelihoods-v> (accessed 25-6-2012).

While there is no doubt that Pacific towns, the focus of this article, are places of 'energy', they are also places of despair and stress for a growing number of people. Life is not easy. Whether urban migrants have been forced from their cane farms into over-crowded settlements and poor living conditions, or have the 'luxury' of a nearby village with access to land and sea resources, life is a struggle with many demands on their limited income. That is the reality in much of the Pacific today.

The words of Hassan and Ma very much reflect the situation of others in the towns of Fiji:

In 2000 when many new people came to Riverside, there were already 100 to 150 houses here. People were coming from different parts of the country because their lands had been 'reserved'.<sup>41</sup> We had lands, everything, our business was there, we got cane farms, and fresh chickens, goats and vegetables. But when we came here we saw that facilities [were] not good here. We don't have any place to stay.

Everyday there are problems. When we were farmers we had big pieces of land – 20, 30, 40 acres. In this system people are living too near; before they had separate lives, now too close. In Fijian settlements, in *koros*,<sup>42</sup> they live near [to each other], but in Indian settlements it is very different – they live apart. Sometimes (here) we face problems. People fight amongst one another.

And:

When my husband died I don't have any money at all with me because he was sick for about three weeks and the fourth week he went to the hospital. They just gave him medication and he came back, but when we took him to Suva it was too late. We were staying in the village and we had plenty of relations. They all helped with the funeral – especially my Mum. I am very thankful to her. But even she doesn't get much money but she is doing plenty savings and she is the one who is helping us all these years especially with my children's school fees. So during that funeral, people came for the *reguregu*,<sup>43</sup> to come and give. Some bring monies, relatives helped with buying the coffin, giving donations for the funeral gathering of mats and kava. Fijian funerals – that's a very big one and it's a waste of money. We have to buy cows and plenty foods, but sometimes when we talk about this, time is changing. Sometimes people can't afford to buy such things. Sometimes when we sit we talk about how to cut this short. Not to make big ones, because we can't afford to buy all those things like cows. In some places they are doing that.

<sup>41</sup> He is using 'reserved' here to mean that the leases expired and the land has been returned to indigenous Fijian owners.

<sup>42</sup> *Koro* – Fijian village.

<sup>43</sup> *Reguregu* is a period of time after a death, which is set aside for mourning. It is when people come to pay their respects and it takes place before the burial.

Hardship faced by Pacific Islanders most certainly exists, and it is challenging traditional institutions and relationships. As in the rest of the world, life is becoming increasingly difficult. Cash is needed and even where people have access to land, it is increasingly contested, leading to the alienation and exclusion of increasing numbers of people. The hope engendered by migration to urban settlements, even where life is hard and uncertain, hinges around possibilities – the possibility of education and the possibility of employment, whether informal, part-time or erratic. For many people, this hope – the ‘possibility of opportunity’ and a small share of global wealth – is enough.

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