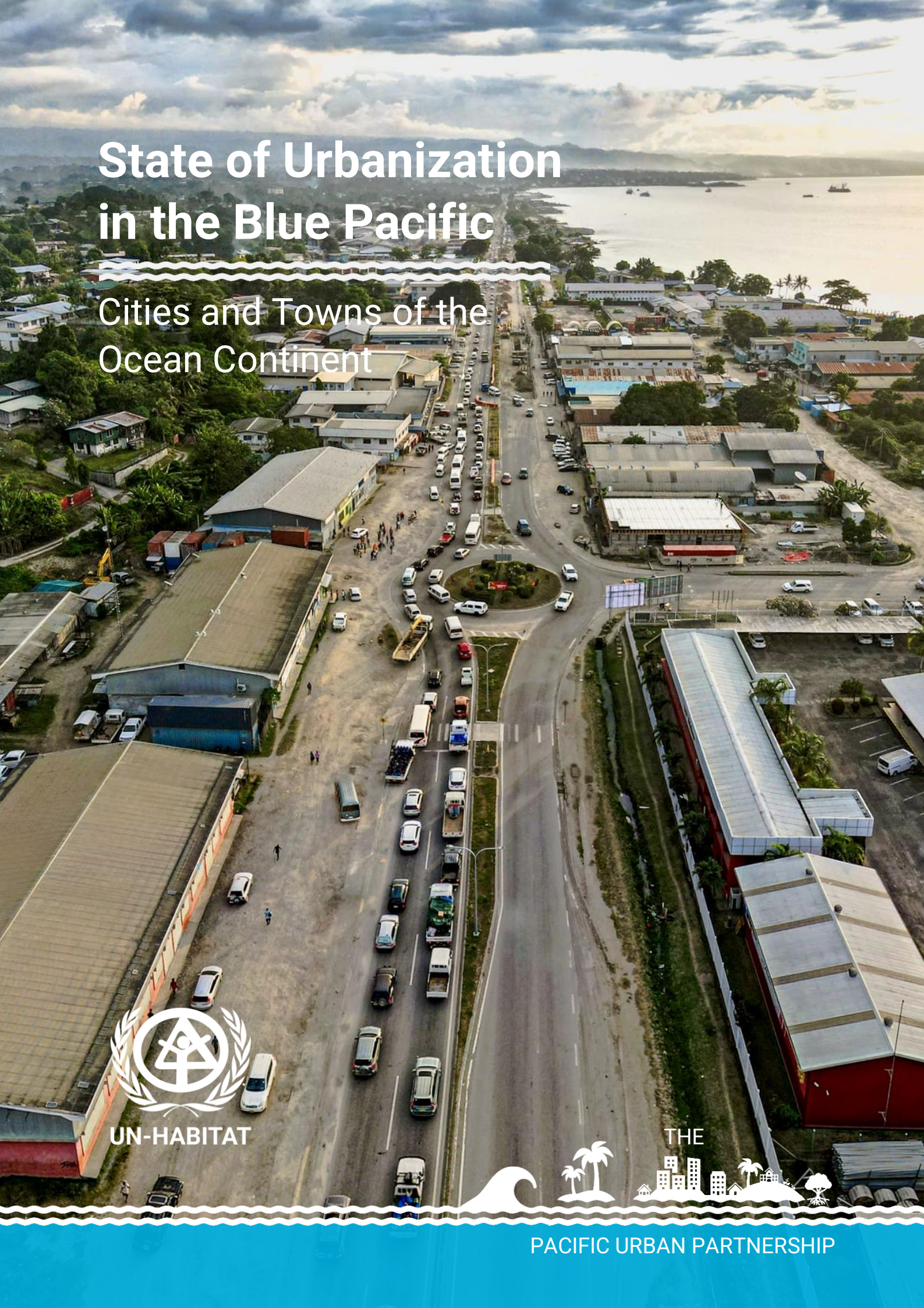

State of Urbanization in the Blue Pacific

Cities and Towns of the Ocean Continent

UN-HABITAT

THE

PACIFIC URBAN PARTNERSHIP

2025 State of Urbanization in the Blue Pacific Report

United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)

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State of Urbanization in the Blue Pacific

Cities and Towns of the Ocean Continent

Commissioned by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), funded by the United Nations Development Account and supported by the Pacific Urban Partnership

UN-HABITAT

THE PACIFIC URBAN PARTNERSHIP

Foreword

It is a pleasure to commend this report to you on behalf of both UN-Habitat and the Pacific Urban Partnership, the first such effort to comprehensively review the state of urbanization across the Blue Pacific in nearly a decade. It culminates a nearly two-year journey of planning, stakeholder input, and support by a wide range of partners from across the Blue Pacific, including global development partners, national and local governments, CROP agencies, and civil society.

Some of the initial analysis that underpins this report was presented at the 6th Pacific Urban Forum in September 2023. There, stakeholders agreed that an in-depth analysis of urbanization trends, challenges, and opportunities was critically needed, given how much the world and the Blue Pacific had changed since the previous Pacific Urban Forum was held in Nadi (in July 2019).

The continuing acceleration of climate-related disasters, paired with underlying shifts in climatic and associated environmental norms, was for a time overshadowed and compounded by the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Whilst COVID-19 has by no means gone away, we now face a concurrence of multiple shocks and stresses with often unexpected outcomes. Armed conflicts and global economic disruptions – often far from the Pacific – are driving fluctuations in inflation, fuel shortages, and shifting patterns of migration in a post-lockdown world continue to wreak havoc on labor supplies and associated economic opportunities.

Amongst this milieu of drivers of change is rapid urbanization. This global phenomenon is continuing or resuming post-Pandemic, including within the Pacific, with associated development challenges continuing to call for global attention. The housing crisis being faced globally is compounded within the Pacific, where affordability of housing continues to decrease while poverty thresholds in the region's cities and towns increase in line with inflationary pressures on food and fuel.

Climate shocks such as cyclones, flooding, and even wildfires are increasingly being shown to be locking Pacific Island Countries and Territories in a loop of GDP loss and recovery as governments and households alike repeatedly rebuild infrastructure and livelihoods. The pressures to rural livelihoods – such as saline ingress into crop areas, and coastal inundation of low-lying settlements – is at the same time beginning to be observed in rural-to-urban migration patterns, with cities and towns offering crucial adaptation pathways.

The communities of the urban Blue Pacific are remarkably resilient. The challenge remains one of how best to leverage these distinctly Oceanic urban systems, strengths, and structures in the face of global pressures and change.

Mr. Bernhard Barth

Chair, Pacific Urban Partnership

United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)

Peri-urban housing development in Central Honiara, Solomon Islands
Photo Credit: Alexei Trundle (2024)

01

Introduction

Experiences of urbanization across the Blue Pacific Continent are fragmented and varied, with complex histories of the region's cities and towns intertwined with colonization, commercial alienation of land, and vested interests. Nonetheless, the urban Pacific continues to grow steadily.

Of the sixteen Pacific Island Countries and Territories that are members of the Pacific Islands Forum (excluding Australia and New Zealand), nine have more than half of their citizens living in urban areas, seven of which are two-thirds urbanized.

In aggregate, the Blue Pacific's urbanization level reflected in UN statistics is currently just over 30 percent, as shown in Figure 1. However, this regional average is skewed heavily downward by Papua New Guinea's nine million predominantly rural inhabitants, which account for nearly two-thirds of the Blue Pacific's total population. Individual PICT urbanization levels and trends, however, differ widely. This variation is one of several factors that have contributed to the limited consideration of urbanization or sustainable urban development in the frameworks and plans of the Council of Regional Organizations of the Pacific (CROP) agencies and associated regional policy platforms to date. The need to address urban issues in the Blue Pacific, including through strong regional positioning on and advocacy for sustainable urban development, is nonetheless increasingly urgent.

Between 2020 and 2050, even conservative growth estimates (such as the official UN figures used in Figure 1), project that half of the region's total population growth will occur in urban areas. This equates to a more than doubling in size, to a total population of nearly seven million Pacific urban citizens. A recent 'uptick' in urbanization in the larger Melanesian archipelagos suggests that this projected rate will be substantially exceeded.

By 2050, the urban Pacific will double in size to a total population of more than 7 million.

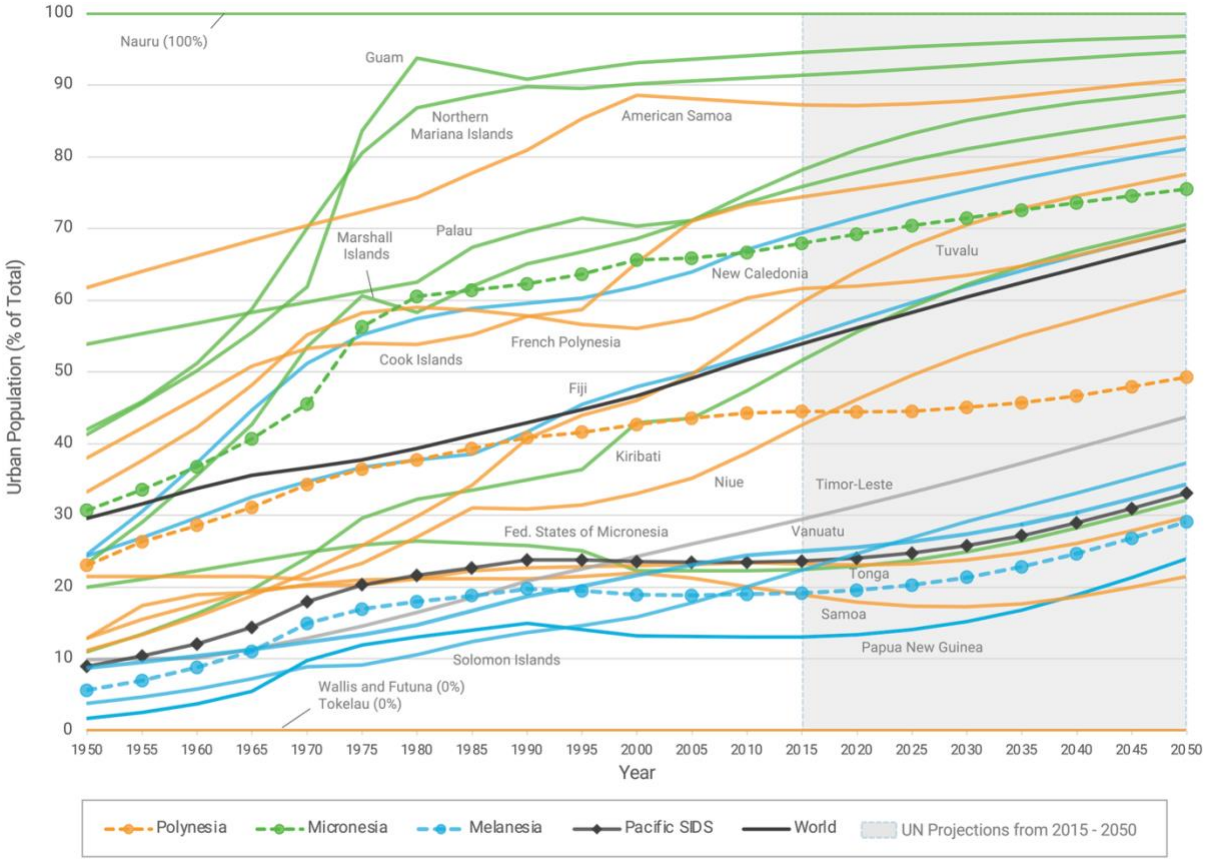


Figure 1: Estimates of Urbanization in the Pacific, derived from UN DESA's 2018 World Urbanization Prospects (Trundle 2020)

Updated projections suggest that the area of Greater Port Moresby, National Capital District, will reach one million people by mid-2025.

Cities and towns account for more than half of national GDP in most Pacific Island Countries and Territories. They contain major infrastructure, including critical health facilities, which have functions beyond the immediate urban populations. Capital cities dominate salary-based employment, provide opportunities for education and training, and facilitate international trade and travel.

Pacific urban areas also account for a disproportionate share of young people, reflective of a deeper structural change in the region. In the longer term, as the climate crisis accelerates, cities and towns will provide critical adaptation pathways for those most severely affected by climate-induced migration, which is already becoming evident in some low-lying areas.

It is recognised by both independent experts and the PNG government itself an accurate national census has not been conducted in the largest Pacific Island Country since 2000. There is consensus that the 2011 census significantly undercounted the largest Pacific Island Country's urban population.

Official re-analysis of building footprints and local headcount data by the PNG National Statistics Office and the National Capital District Commission suggests that Greater Port Moresby had reached a population of 760,000 by 2019 – 62% higher than official figures – and may have already reached the one million person threshold by mid-2025.

Honiara, capital of Solomon Islands, doubled in size over the last decade, with the city council reaching a population of 130,000 ten years earlier than expected. The country's urban demography is skewed towards young Solomon Islanders in search of employment; however, opportunities are scarce.

In Vanuatu, peri-urban growth outside of Port Vila's formal boundary means that the capital's population is underestimated in official records by almost 43%. When added to the country's second city, Luganville, the total adjustment increases Vanuatu's level of urbanization by 10 percent to nearly one-third of the national populace, a level of urbanization not expected until 2050 in the official UN projections shown above.

The failure to adequately plan for this urban growth across many Pacific SIDS has resulted in large informal settlement areas and associated economies, infrastructure shortfalls, and ineffective support and technical expertise within local government and associated institutions. This has had significant secondary effects on local environmental conditions (particularly in terms of waste management and sanitation), health outcomes (in terms of communicable disease), and social stability (as reflected in several recent riots and civil disorder events across the region).

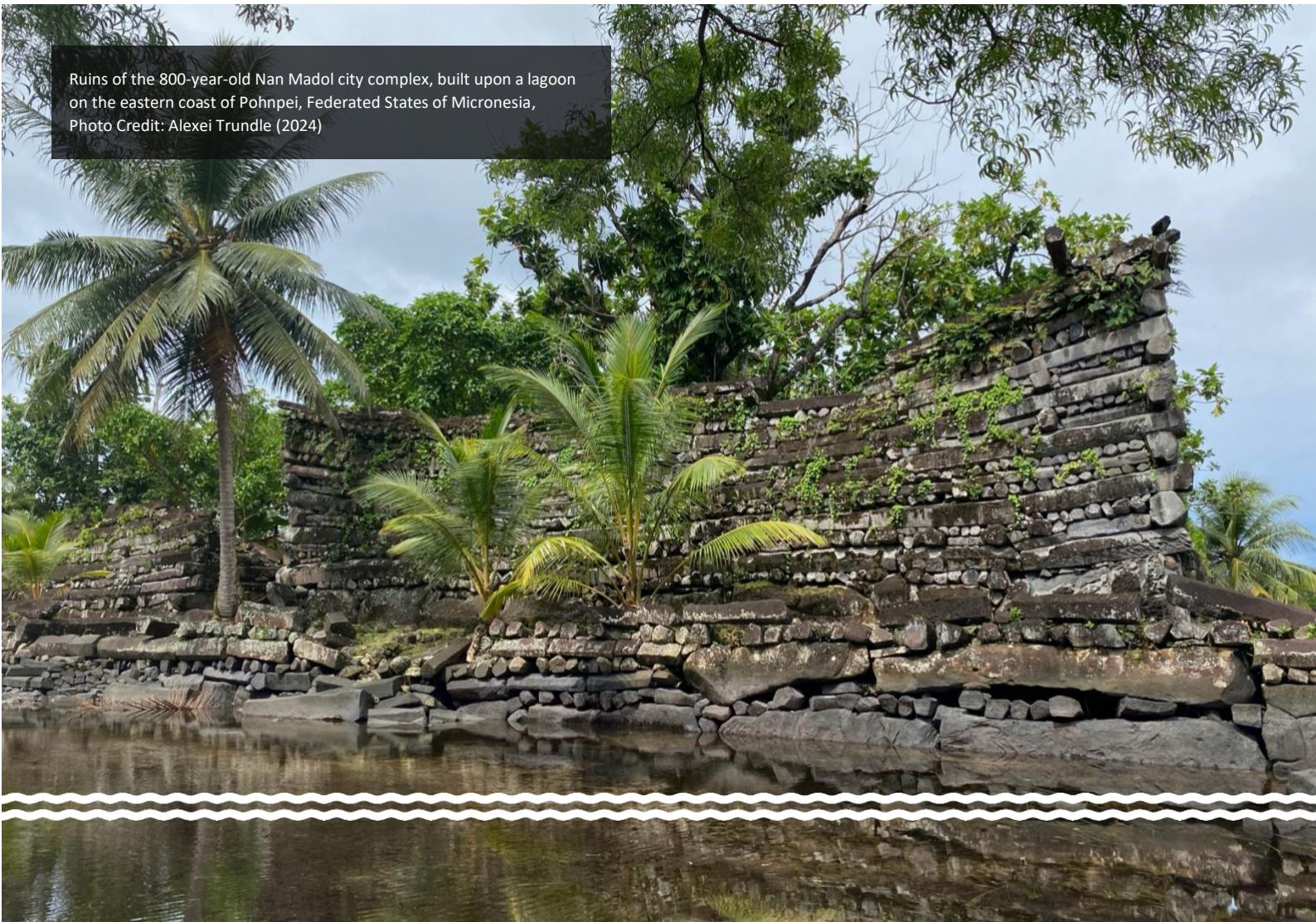
Although estimates vary significantly, calculations in Port Moresby and Honiara using building analysis suggest that more than half of each of these city's buildings are now informal and lacking legal land tenure, presenting a major security risk that could destabilize the region. For informal households, the lack of secure tenure adds additional pressure to precarious livelihoods, disincentivising climate resilient housing investments, and compounding health risks associated with factors such as vector-borne disease and poor sanitation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also seen profound disruptions in urban economies and livelihoods, as well as rural-to-urban migration trends.

At the same time the region's cities and towns offer uniquely Pacific alternatives to Western urban design and 20th Century urban planning. This 'Oceanic urbanization' is better able to kinship, embed cultural practice and support community and traditional knowledge, and incorporate ecosystem services and nature-based solutions, but needs stronger support through national and regional architecture if it is to be effectively sustained and supported by development partners.

Addressing specific urban development challenges must go hand in hand with regional and national urban strategies and planning frameworks. Infrastructure funding alone is not enough to make urban areas function in equitable and sustainable ways; deeper strategic connectivity, forward planning, and capacity build are required.

New LiDAR analysis has found that Tonga's first urban settlement on the island Tongatapu is more than 1,700 years old.



Ruins of the 800-year-old Nan Madol city complex, built upon a lagoon on the eastern coast of Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia, Photo Credit: Alexei Trundle (2024)

02

A Blue *Urban* Pacific

The last comprehensive reporting of Pacific urbanisation was completed in 2016, with little regional attention being paid to the cities and towns of the Blue Pacific over the subsequent decade..

The Pacific is often overlooked as an area of urbanization. In part, this is a function of its scale relative to other global regions. The most recent UN compendium on national rates of urbanisation, World Urbanization Prospects 2018, for example, estimated that, as of 2015, Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand had slightly less than 2.6 million urban inhabitants out of a total population of 11.1 million; an urbanisation rate of 22.9%. This total encompasses all 14 countries and 7 territories shown in Figure 2 below.In contrast, Asia, with which the Pacific is often grouped, recorded 2.2 billion urban inhabitants in 2015.

The Pacific's closest comparator, the Caribbean, had nearly three times as people living in cities and towns, at a level of urbanisation more than three times higher (70.0%) (UN-Habitat, 2022). Despite this, within the Blue Pacific Continent these comparably smaller urban areas play as critical a role in mobility, trade, governance, and services as those in any other region.

With economies often characterised structurally by the MIRAB model – encompassing migration, remittances, overseas aid, and bureaucracy – this is even more critical (Barnett & Waters, 2016; Bertram & Watters, 1985).

Tokelau and Wallis and Futuna are the only two PICTs with no official urban areas.

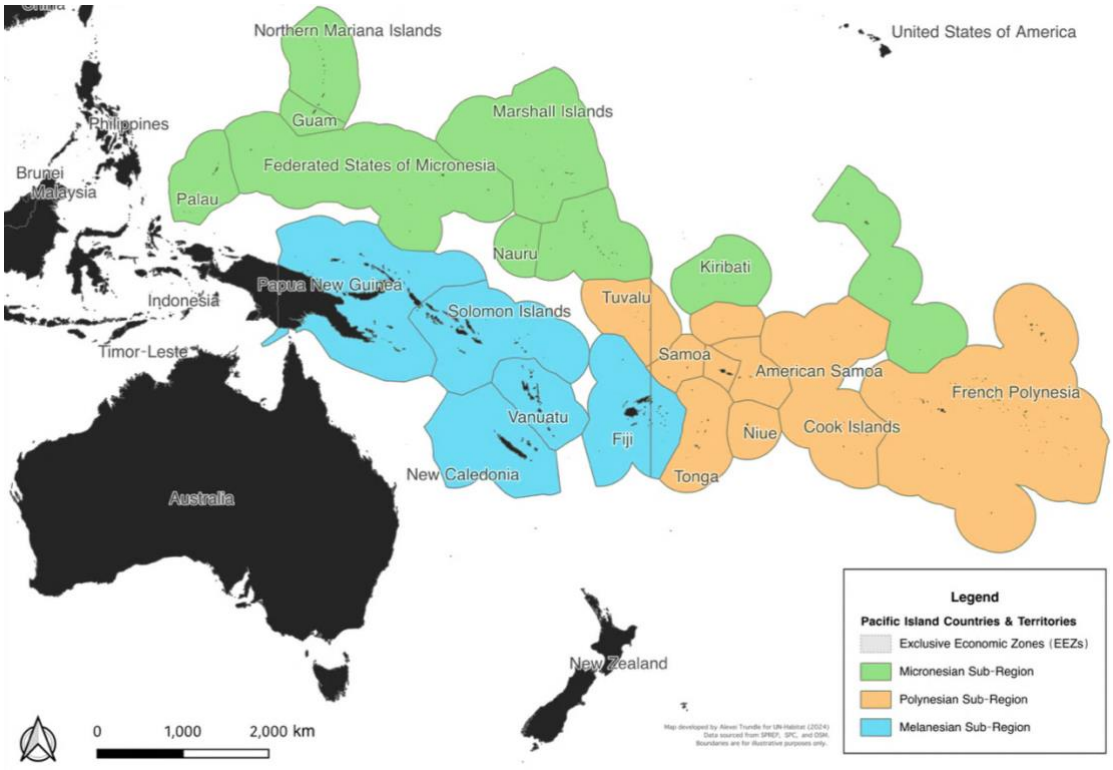


Figure 2: Map of Pacific Island Countries and Territories (source: author)

Official UN DESA data on urban change in the Pacific is now on average more than 15 years old.

This first section of the 2025 State of Urbanization in the Pacific report focuses on updating regional urbanisation figures, considering the substantial disruption to migration patterns, livelihoods and economies through and following the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Since the release of the UN's World Urbanization Prospects report in 2018, most PICTs have undergone a national census, the benchmark for analysing urbanisation (and the basis for the 2018 UN study's data in most countries and regions). As shown in Figure 3, the decadal nature of most national census collection cycles in the Pacific means significant shifts can occur between each national census, making a regional update using these new datasets critical for contemporary policy development and decision-making.

As shown in Figure 2, many of the most recent census enumeration processes were undertaken following the onset of the pandemic, which had differing impacts across the Pacific. In Vanuatu, for instance, early border closures delayed the arrival of the virus until after the census was conducted; however, this had major impacts on urban employment due to the collapse of the tourism sector (Hakkert & Pontifex, 2022, p. 68). In the case of Papua Guinea, the scheduled 2020 census was postponed repeatedly and is only now being conducted, with modelling in 2021 the only viable approach to approximating urban growth in the region's largest country. With an average of only 4.7 years since census counts across the region, the data available for this report is comparably current to the 2018 UN compendium (5 years) at the time of its release.

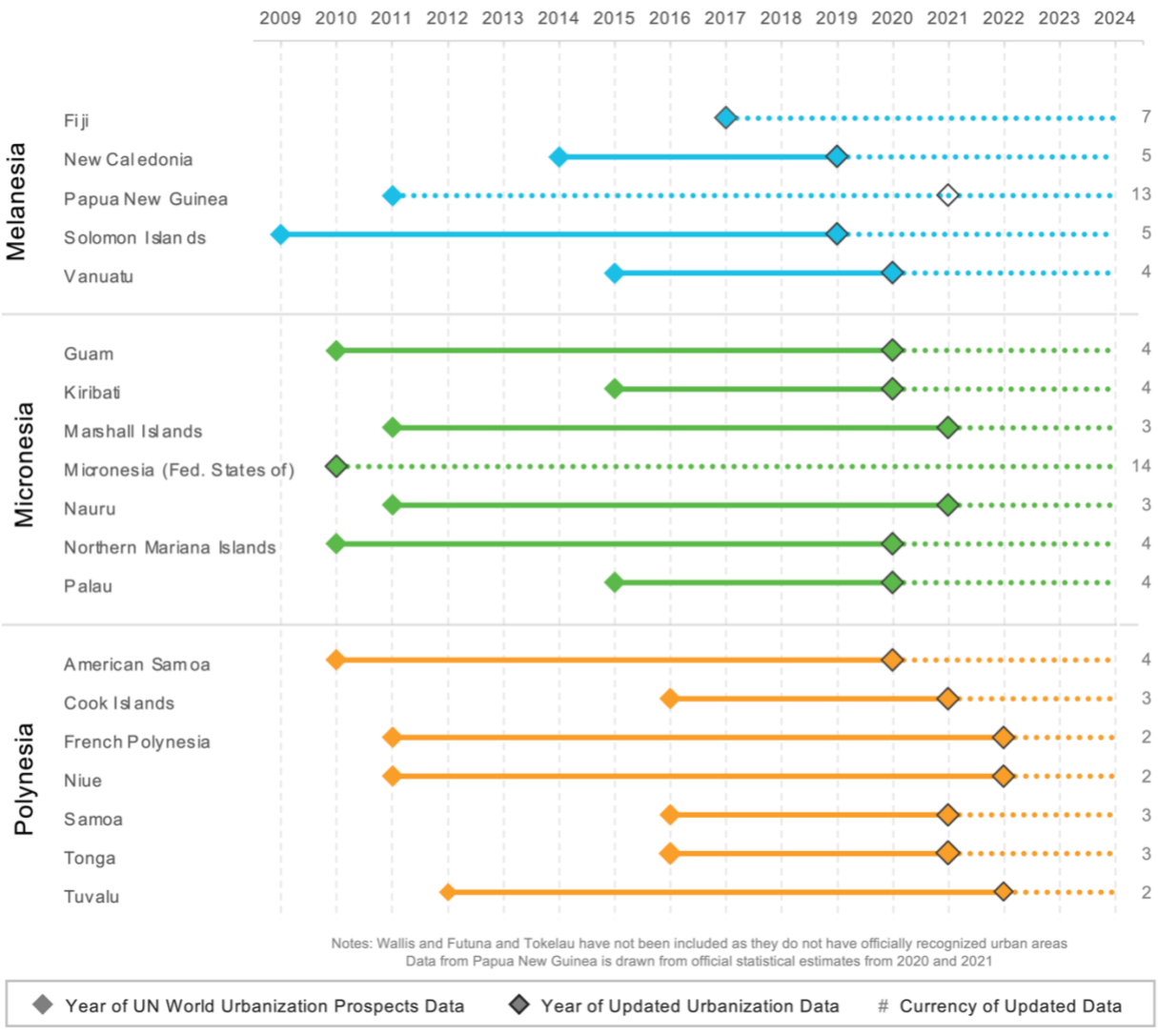


Figure 3: Available Pacific census data in 2024 compared with 2018 (source: author)

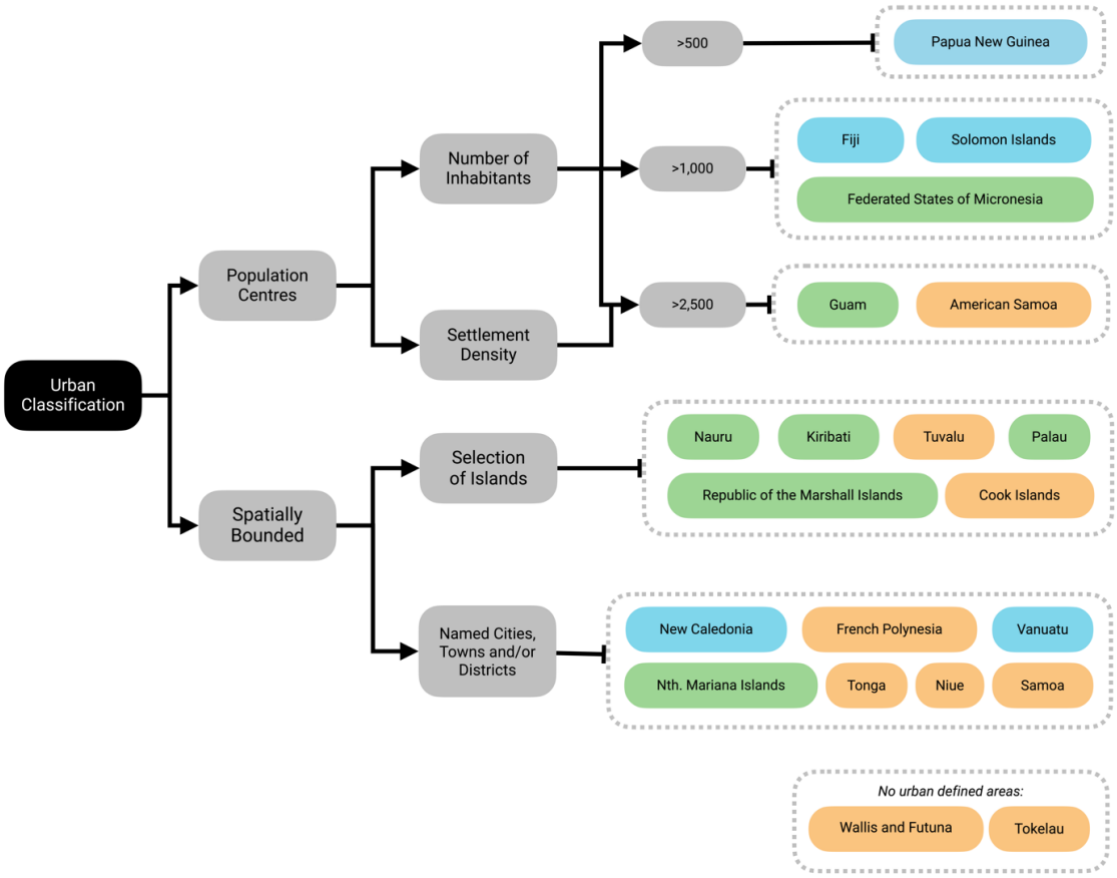


Figure 4: UN DESA classification of PICT urban areas (source: author)

The varied national and territorial definitions of urban and rural areas is a fundamental to understanding trends and differences in urbanization in the Pacific. It is also central to generating a shared understanding of what is 'urban' within the region. For instance Tokelau and Wallis and Futuna have no defined urban areas or capitals, whilst the entirety of Nauru is classified as urbanized (though the country also lacks a recognized capital city). In the Federated States of Micronesia, the administrative capital Palikir is itself beyond the urban boundary of the neighboring coastal city of Kolonia, which – as the state capital of Pohnpei – is where most of the public service personnel who work within Palikir reside.

Figure 4 depicts the variations in urban measurement across the Blue Pacific. It is derived from the UN's World Urbanization Prospects 2018 revision, which sets out in detail the current methodology chosen by each country to define urban and non-urban populations, including specific named areas where relevant (UN DESA, 2019, p. 81). As the figure demonstrates, there are broadly two classification approaches used in the Pacific: those that use the size of identifiable population centres, and those that predetermine specific spatially bounded domains as urban or non-urban.

Even within these general categories each PICT varies also. For instance, Papua New Guinea's urban count includes the smallest discrete population centres by size, including villages and towns with only 500 inhabitants. However, it also excludes mission, school and hospital population centres, as well as a subset of rurally classified settlements and villages.

As elaborated in detail later in this report, many of these definitions fall short – or have fallen behind – contemporary local understandings of 'urban' inhabitance in the region.

Pacific urban boundaries are often intertwined with colonial histories, patterns of migration, and at times conflicting state and traditional land systems.

Rawlings (1999 p. 73) notes that colonial policies attempted to "regulate or exclude" Indigenous Melanesians from South Pacific towns "through ordinances controlling movement, residence and dress."

It is notable that those countries that have spatially bounded or constituted areas, compared with those that define urban based on population centres of an agreed size or density, tend to underestimate urbanisation. This is due to the former generally under-count urban populations that result from urban sprawl and 'peri-urban' growth, with consequences for urban planning and management.

The former approach is often the result of distinct legislative structures, with boundary issues often sensitive due to historical alienation of land by colonial powers, and/or the continuation, coexistence, or reinstatement of contemporary customary ownership. In these contexts, 'urban' often has different meaning for both government agencies and urban communities.

It is important to note that these legacies of urban exclusion of Indigenous populations continue to affect urban identities in many parts of the Pacific, beyond legislative differences in tenure and governance. In observations of urban identities academics have noted that in Solomon Islands, for example, 'man blo taun' (literally a townsperson) is contended by Maggio (2018 p.70) to be a malicious troublemaker who "does not belong to any place".

Similarly Rawlings (1999 p.76) observes that 'man Vila' (person from Port Vila) in Vanuatu is primarily used "by way of insult".

For the purposes of the analysis contained within this report 'urban' is understood to reflect Pacific inhabitants who occupy or substantively engage on a 'day-to-day' basis with the settlements captured by the definitions set out above, including migrants occupying peri-urban areas not yet formally recognised as being urban.

This approach also encompasses functional townships that operate independently of these established and formally recognised urban centres. For instance, Lenakel, Vanuatu's third township, operates as a critical transport and economic hub for the southern province of Tafea, but is not recognised in the urban classification shown above.

In most PICTs, this is reflective of a contrast with rural or village life, which – juxtaposing the categorisations used in Figure 4 above – is primarily characterised by sparsity of settlement. In many cases, these 'non-urban' settings also differ in terms of livelihoods and production, whereby 'traditional' Pacific economies, social systems, and infrastructures prevail.

Frontage of the Nasinu Municipal Headquarters and Market Building in the peri-urban municipality, adjacent to Fiji's capital Suva
Photo Credit: Alexei Trundle (2022)

Northward view of Port Vila, Vanuatu, from the Nambatri area.
Photo Credit: Alexei Trundle (2017)

03

Oceanic Cities & Towns

The 'Polycrisis' has seen significant shifts in socioeconomic trends globally, with statistics –from GDP per capita to urban mobility and mode-share – breaking from long-term trends and bounds throughout the early 2020s, with elements persisting well beyond periods of lockdowns and border-closures. Analysis of new data provides insights into these disruptions across the Pacific.

As part of the initial analysis undertaken for this report a compendium of identifiable Pacific Island cities and towns was derived from national census records, government planning documents, and associated sub-national policies and plans (particularly for metropolitan agglomerations around national capitals).

A total of 101 spatially discrete urban areas were identified, with each depicted by relative scale, grouped by Pacific sub-region, and clustered by country or territory, in Figure 5. Whilst this figure does not include the relative rural populations in each country (urbanisation ratios shown in Figure 1), it does provide a context for the clusters of urban centres across the Blue Pacific.

As noted above, these urban areas include agglomerations of municipalities where they practically constitute contiguous 'metropolitan' areas.

Of the 101 urban areas assessed, nearly two-thirds (n=64) were located in Melanesia, with the remainder split evenly between Polynesia and Micronesia. Papua New Guinea alone encompassed 30 of these cities and towns, including nine of the twenty most populous, including the first, third and sixth ranked by size.

Six PICTs had a singular urban centre, whilst ten urban areas encompassed multiple local authorities in varying metropolitan configurations. Across the region 48.8 percent of urban dwellers lived in capital cities or districts (including peri-urban and metropolitan areas around officially bounded areas). Nauru, where the district of Yaren houses much of the government administrative buildings, is included in its entirety in Figure 5, as the Micronesian country does not officially identify as having a capital. The capital of FSM is also not an official urban centre.

Five cities in the Pacific have a population of more than 100,000. Eight more are larger than 50,000. 42 more have a population of more than 10,000

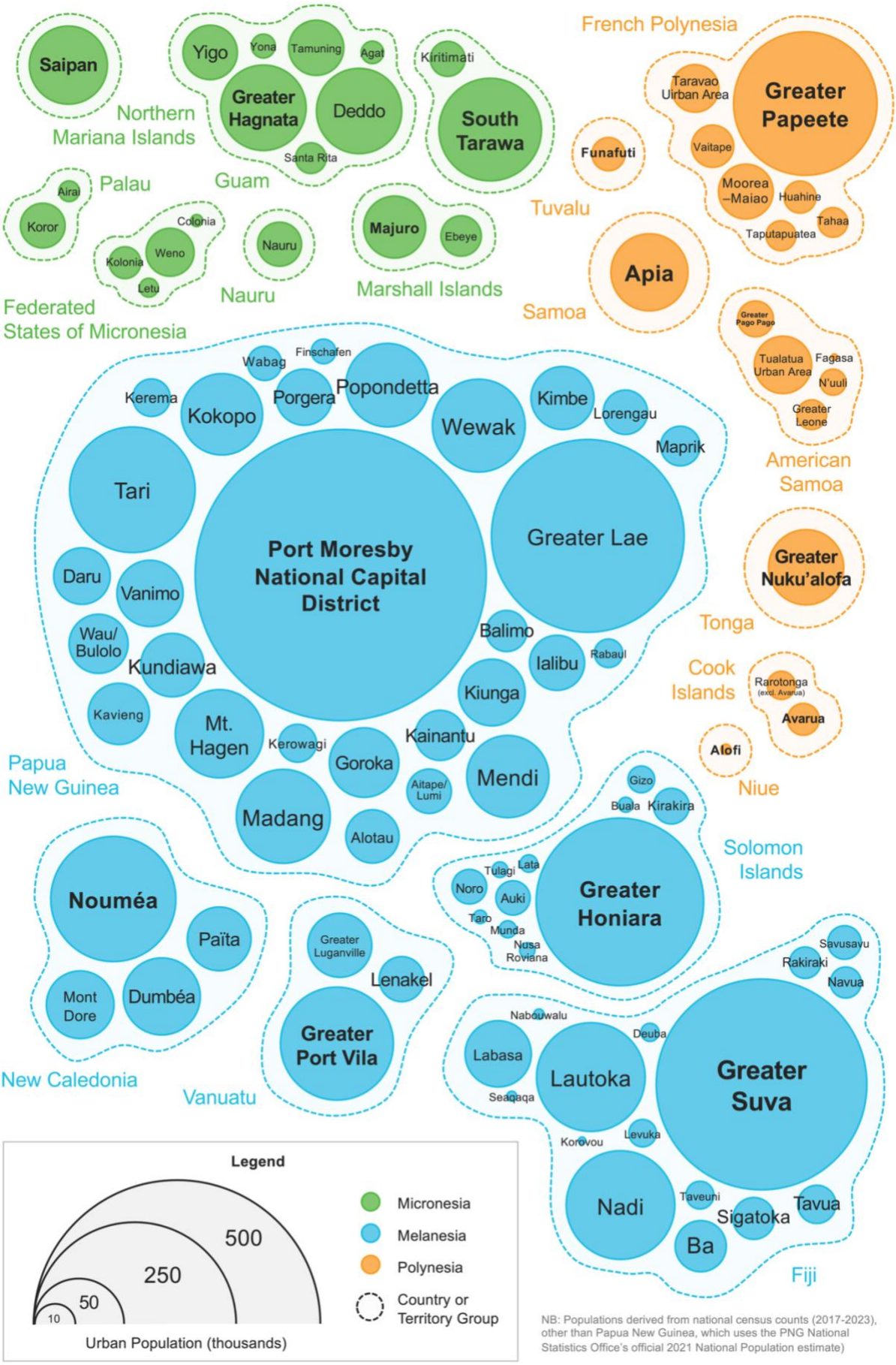


Figure 5: PICT urban areas scaled by most recent population estimate (source: author)

04

The Pacific in the Polycrisis

Climate change shocks and stressors, natural disasters, the Covid-19 pandemic, and a wide range of socio-political upheaval has dramatically shifted urbanisation trends that had been relatively stable since the wave of independence movements in the Pacific through the 1970s and 80s.

Projecting population change over decades, particularly at smaller scales, is extremely challenging. In the Pacific between the 1980s and early 2000s, however, changes in total population at the national or territorial scale were relatively predicable. Limited outward and inward migration across most of the Pacific Small Island Developing States allowed use of registered births and deaths, along with analysis of trends in mortality, to estimate future changes with relative accuracy.

At the sub-national scale, however, movement to and from urban centres – even prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic – was far harder to predict, and contingent on complex national circumstances. Policy and social factors, ranging from social unrest to shifting access and affordability of education and health services, have been identified across the region as having led to spikes in internal migration and displacement.

These fluctuations have left urban planning and policy lagging behind development and infrastructure needs, with a mismatch between projected and observed rates of urban change. One such example is Solomon Islands, where growth in the capital Honiara and provincial towns was heavily under-estimated between 2009-2019, as shown in Figure 6 below. This period saw the Honiara City Council area reach a population of more than 130,000 eleven years earlier than expected, with the Greater Honiara area doubling in size over the decade.

Forward projections beyond 2020 also appear similarly flawed, presuming a significant decline and near cessation of rural-to-urban migration by 2040. In contrast, if the pace of Honiara's growth were to continue to 2030, Greater Honiara would reach a population of nearly 330,000 citizens, equivalent to 35.4 percent of Solomon Islands' projected population.

It was projected that Greater Honiara's population by 2020 would be 101,773.

By 2019 it had already reached 169,721.

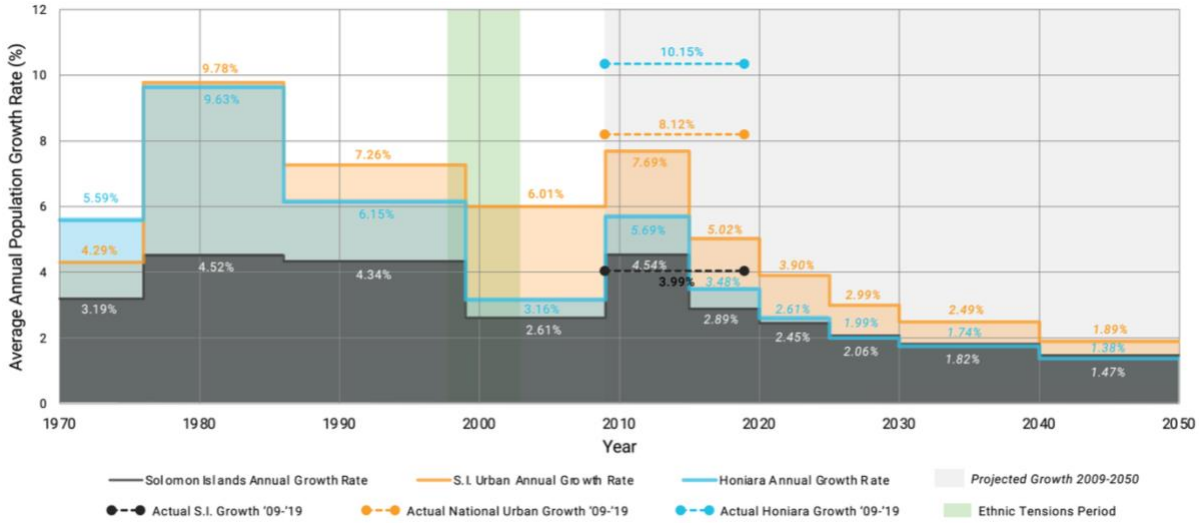


Figure 6: Historical, projected, and actual urban growth in Solomon Islands (source: author)

Tourism makes up 40% of Vanuatu's GDP. After six weeks of border closures 70% of the country's tourism jobs were lost, mostly in Port Vila.

The COVID-19 pandemic played out in a distinct manner in the Blue Pacific, where early use of border closures – coupled with the physical remoteness, relatively small population size, and disparate populations of many PICTs, led to several remaining 'Covid-free' throughout 2020 as the first wave of the pandemic unfolded.

However, within the region's cities and towns the impacts of border closures, along with secondary impacts on tourism-based employment, services, and the capacity to migrate for seasonal and other work, were severe. The continuing impacts of disasters – such as Tropical Cyclones Harold, Zazu, and Ana, as well as droughts across the north Pacific – also stretched and in some cases localised humanitarian responses, further complicating internal displacement.

As shown in Figure 3, sixteen PICTs have completed and released a national census since the release of the UN's 2018 World Urbanization Prospects Report. Fiji, which completed its most recent census in 2017, is not due to complete another until 2027. Delays to the planned 2021 census in Papua New Guinea – the most logistically complicated in the region – saw counting begin in 2024, with surveying in 333 local government areas completed by late 2024.

In the case of PNG, issues identified with the 2011 – including undercounting in urban areas – resulted in two recent efforts to model estimates of both the Port Moresby National Capital District and national populations (including in urban areas). By the PNG Government and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). The former was developed as part of the Port Moresby Towards 2030 planning process, and included an NCD population estimate for 2019, and the latter included modelled National Population Estimates down to local-level governments for 2021.

Sub-national data from the 2023 Federated States of Micronesia census was not complete at the time of the writing of this report. However, some insights were able to be gained from preliminary state-level counts, which showed a significant acceleration of the out-migration observed since 2000 (heavily contrasting 50 years of national population growth observed through the second half of the 20th century).

As demonstrated in Figure 7 below observed urban growth differed dramatically from the 2018 projections in all but a few PICTs. This is in spite of several national statistics offices including measures of temporary displacement resulting from the pandemic.

Abandoned house in peri-urban mangroves in Popua, Tonga
Photo Credit: Alexei Trundle (2025)

Figure 7: Variance between PICT urbanisation projections and census data by size and percentage (source: author)

Despite containing two-thirds of the Pacific's cities and towns, Melanesia, as discussed earlier and depicted in Figure 1, is the least urbanised Pacific sub-region. Although Melanesia's aggregate urbanisation level is disproportionately impacted by the size of PNGs largely non-urban population, only New Caledonia recorded a level of urbanisation significantly above the global average in the 2018 World Urbanisation Prospects report, with Solomon Islands and Vanuatu both reporting urbanisation levels well below the Pacific average.

This is particularly notable as these two countries, along with PNG and Tonga, reported the most marked departure from projected rates of urbanisation, as shown in Figure 7 above. Collectively, Melanesian countries and territories reported an urban population size that exceeded UN estimates by more than 575,000 inhabitants. This is all the more notable given the absence of updated data from Fiji, whose 19 urban local governments accounted for a further 504,000 Melanesian urban dwellers in 2017.

Much of this variation is due to the combined impact of the higher NCDC estimates for Greater Port Moresby's total population, and the similarly higher levels of urban growth in PNG's 29 other urban centres. Provincial capitals have been the primary source of this secondary city and township growth. For instance, the population of Greater Lae (incorporating the peri-urban Ahi Rural locality), increased from 148,934 in 2011 to 224,983 inhabitants in 2021.

Tonga's higher than expected urban population in 2021 was largely due to the National Statistics Office's administrative incorporation of 'Greater Nuku'alofa' – an area comprising the districts of Kolofo'ou and Kolomotu'a –in the census report, rather than an increase of the country's total number or share of urban inhabitants, which have both been effectively stable since 2011.

Although Samoa's projected and observed urban growth were nearly identical, Tauaa & Schoeffel (2019) note that this excludes the peri-urban corridor extending towards Samoa's international airport, North-West

As of 2021 PNG's urban population in is estimated to have reached more than 1.7 million, half a million more than projected by that time just a few years earlier.

Updated analysis of the Pacific's urbanisation suggests the region is now more than 36.4 percent urban; higher than the UN projected for 2050 (33.1 percent).

Upolu, which they characterize as urban on the basis that it is: densely populated; occupied by large numbers of inhabitants that lack access to agricultural land; and comprises recent commercial and residential subdivisions, overlaid on freehold, church, and customary tenure (ibid, p.8).

In contrast the more heavily urbanized PICTs, most of which are in Micronesia and Polynesia, generally saw lower than expected growth in their projected urban populations. This was especially the case in the US-Affiliated Pacific Islands, which saw large outward population movement to the United States of America and elsewhere over this period.

New Caledonia has seen significant social unrest and at times riots and violence over the more than a decade since the 2011 census was undertaken. A sequence of three independence referendums, proposed governance changes by the French legislature, and widening social inequality, culminated in protests and riots in May 2024 that led to more than a dozen deaths, property destruction, and deployment of the French army.

The departure of more than one-in-ten of New Caledonia's inhabitants between 2014-2019 – a rate double the previous five years – is likely to be also driving the declining size of the territory's capital Noumea.

Overall, as shown by the differentiated sizes of each country or territory's bubble in Figure 7, the projections for urbanization across the Pacific contained within the 2018 World Urbanization Prospects Report have significantly underestimated Oceania's urban growth.

The net addition of a further 524,000 urban inhabitants by 2020 increases the region's urbanization level from a projected 30.3 percent to 35.9 percent. By 2025, the addition of these half-a-million citizens to existing projections – without any further adjustments to account for accelerated rates of urban change – would see the Pacific's urban population having passed a total of 3,660,000, a total accounting for 36.4 percent of the region's citizens.

Informal Settlements in South Honiara, Solomon Islands
Photo Credit: Alexei Trundle (2024)

05

Urban Peripheries

The emergence of a peri-urban Pacific represents a distinct shift in the region's cities and towns, with 'urban villages' being subsumed by sprawling low-density suburbia and a patchwork of land tenure systems that bring customary, state, and alienated land into conflict and contradiction. At the same time, interconnected local government areas are emerging with varying levels of legislative and jurisdictional compatibility, impacting on urban services and representation.

One of the legacies of colonisation across the Pacific is the jurisdictional, legislative, and cultural separation of many established cities and towns. Following the wave of independence movements across the region from the 1960s onwards, efforts to reconcile pre-colonial, customary tenure systems with imposed colonial legislative frameworks and governance systems across the region varied (Connell 1981).

Even in countries such as Vanuatu, which enshrined customary land tenure's pre-eminence in its constitution, the cities of Luganville and Port Vila remain in a contested state of alienation, as declared 'public land' (Rawlings 1999 p.76).In such contexts, efforts to move urban boundaries or reclassify functionally urban areas as municipalities are vexed. In Vanuatu's case, previous efforts to reconcile Port Vila's governance with the five surrounding customary communities led to protests, property damage, and violence (Trundle 2020 p. 44).

In nearby Solomon Islands unresolved compensation of the customary land owners of the island of Guadalcanal, upon which the capital Honiara was built following World War II, and urban migrants from other islands (particularly Malaita) was a key factor in the so-called Ethnic Tensions (Foukona & Allen 2017).

This five year period of social unrest and ethnic violence resulted in deployment of a regional peacekeeping force, RAMSI, for more than a decade, but ultimately did little to resolve the colonial land alienation of both the Honiara City Council and much of its surrounding peri-urban expanse. Large portions of the latter, primarily former plantation land held prior to independence, remain before the courts, with the Solomon Islands Government seeking to acquire these Fixed Term Estates to accommodate Honiara's ongoing rapid expansion.

Peri-urban expansion elsewhere is also being necessitated due to the impacts of climate change. In the case of Tuvalu, the pressures of sea level rise, saline ingress, and tidal flooding on the capital, Funafuti, led to the implementation of the Tuvalu Coastal Adaptation Project (TCAP). The TCAP initiative has reclaimed 7.8 hectares of lagoon at a height designed to remain above climate change induced sea level rise until at least the end of this century, whilst also providing a buffer for existing urban areas. Reclamation is complete, with the site to be handed over to the Funafuti Kaupule for development following a period of monitoring and observation.

In other parts of the Pacific peri-urban expansion is impacted by colonial legacies in differing ways. The Higher Ground Initiative (HGI) in Nauru has been developed to allow for the country's urban population to partially retreat inland, away from areas exposed to coastal inundation. However, the strip-mining of phosphate – primarily by British, Australian, and New Zealand corporations – has rendered the two-thirds of the island's land mass that are elevated uninhabitable and extremely expensive to rehabilitate.

"Urban centres are increasingly characterised by a core 'modern city' and rapidly growing uncontrolled fringes of peri-urban customary land."

(Mecartney & Connell 2017)

In Guam, only 13,522 citizens live in Hagåtña, but 44,212 live in the 'Greater Hagåtña' area.

As noted earlier, the constrained extent of the Apia Urban Area in Samoa is likely to have led to an underestimation of the country's rural-to-urban migration. This is further evidenced by one-third of families in the area not having access to agricultural land, reflective of their isolation from both local customary land ownership systems, and a shift towards a cash-based livelihood and economy.

In Vanuatu, the difference between 'official' urban population figures and the practical population of of its two major urban centres – Port Vila and Luganville – has been quantified as part of the analysis for this report. In the case of Port Vila, UN-Habitat workshops in 2016 identified a metropolitan 'boundary' to the capital, aligned with area councils and cadastral boundaries.

This extent – shown in Figure 8 below – was built stakeholder consultations, the development of infrastructure and utilities, and analysis of in-migration from Vanuatu's outer provinces. As Figure 8 shows, data from the 2016 Mini Census shows Port Vila experienced significantly higher rates of growth beyond the municipal boundary, contrasting with declining populations within much of the city's formal extent.

At the national scale the failure to properly account for urban in-migration to these peri-urban areas has a significant impact on perceptions of Vanuatu's overall levels of urbanisation. Inclusion of these areas in reanalysis of the 2016 National Mini-Census, increases Vanuatu's urbanisation level from 28.7 percent to 34.6 percent.

Comparative inclusions of the peri-urban, rapidly-growing areas of Luganville (South East Santo) and the Sanma provincial capital Lenakel using 2020 National Census data increase the archipelago's urban population from 66,753 to 113,890. This notably higher level of urbanisation – 38.0 percent, rather than the official level of 22.2 percent – radically shifts perceptions of the needs for urban development assistance, investment, and governance.

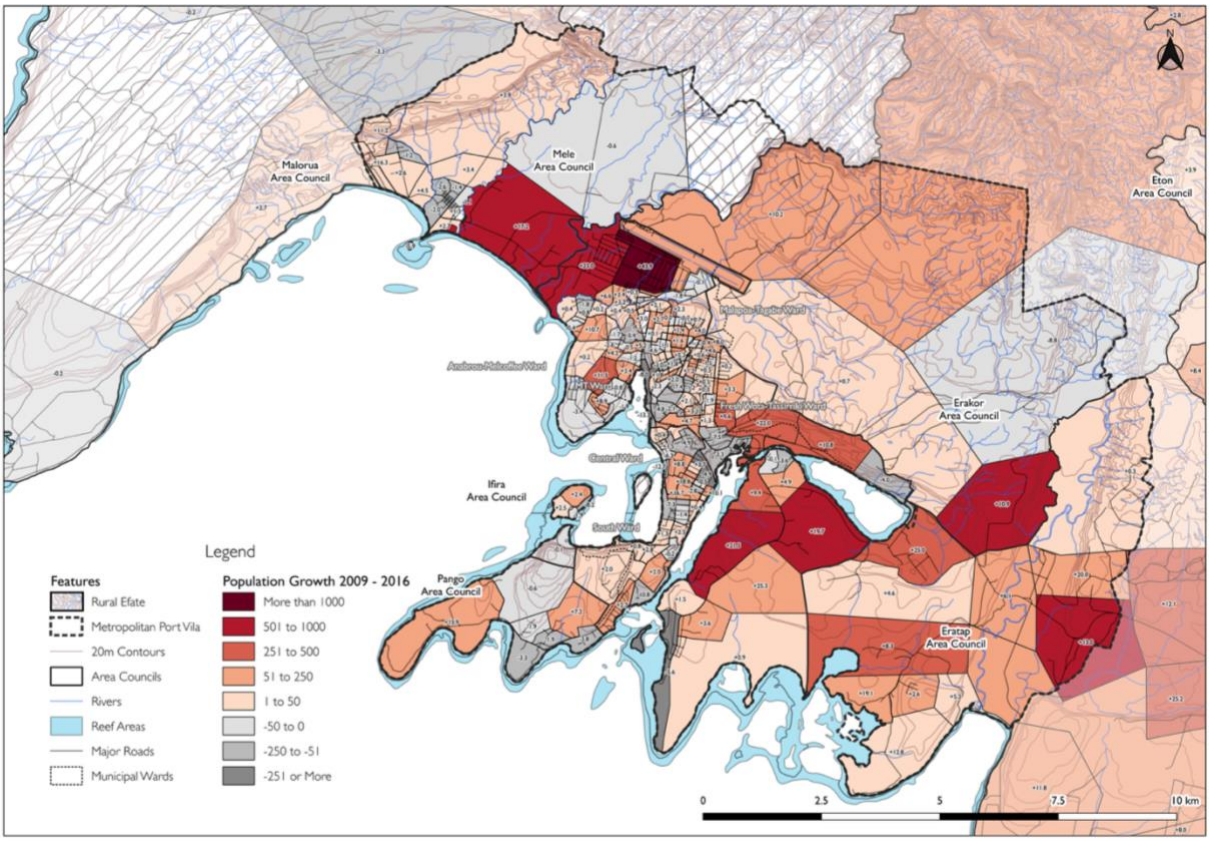


Figure 8: Population Growth around Greater Port Vila 2009 - 2016 (source: author)

Government Buildings in Palikir, the Capital of the Federated States of Micronesia
Photo Credit: Alexei Trundle (2024)

Although the definitional issues of urban boundaries are problematic for the purpose of enumeration and regional analysis, it is issues of governance and service access that are of immediate, practical impact on these peri-urban Pacific areas. For instance, in Solomon Islands, the area of the Honiara City Council (HCC) operates through different legislative and governance mechanisms to the rest of the country, which is effectively governed as a federation of provinces (including surrounding areas of the island of Guadalcanal).

While HCC operates under its own designated national legislation (the *Honiara City Act 1999*), peri-urban areas within Guadalcanal Province are governed through the *Provincial Government Act 1997*, consistent with the other eight provinces of Solomon Islands. This legislative division has also resulted in a parallel division of line ministry responsibilities for these areas of local government: in the case of the former, the Ministry of Home Affairs, and the latter, the Ministry of Provincial Government.

Similar issues exist around Port Vila, in Vanuatu, where the Shefa Provincial Government Council manages peri-urban land outside of the Port Vila City Council's jurisdiction. In the case of Vanuatu nd outside the city is subject to customary law by members of the *Malvatumauri* (Vanuatu's National Council of Chiefs) with any modifications to these *kastom* land uses and management regimes requiring compensation. As a result, any proposals to expand the Port Vila municipal boundary to integrate peri-urban areas remain highly contested by affected stakeholders, with the differing governance 'systems' acting as a barrier to cross-border provision of services and strategic planning for ongoing urbanisation.

In smaller PICTs, such as Nauru, Niue, and Palau, urban governance is largely subsumed by national government development strategies and needs. However, urban peripheries face significant environmental and sociocultural challenges due to the limited carrying capacity of these island contexts. In these PICTs, alignment of local planning needs with national governance structures remains an issue (see, for instance, the Koror-Babeldaob Regional Urban Development and Strategic Action Plan).

The 21st Century has seen a shift in Pacific governance of cities and towns. Multi-jurisdictional and post-colonial urban areas are emerging and need resources and policy support.

In 2025 Fiji is aiming to reestablish municipal elections for the first time in nearly two decades for the country's two cities and ten townships.

The distinct policy, development, and governance needs of the Pacific's peri-urban areas are highlighted in Table 1 below, which illustrates the different levels of service and utility access in Honiara's peri-urban fringes. Across the majority of the categories shown below, the settlements across the Guadalcanal wards of Tandai and Malango are distinct from both the rural areas elsewhere in Solomon Islands and are simultaneously distinct from those parts of Honiara within the town boundary itself.

A product of both legislative constraints in service provision, and more subtle differences in perceived responsibilities by and capacities of local authorities, the below table highlights key areas in need of particular focus in the peri-urban domain. For instance, the opportunity to drastically enhance household electrification, including through emergent off-grid technologies, is demonstrated by slightly more than one-in-ten households using electricity for cooking. At the same time, prevalent use of shared water services suggests a behavioural opportunity to re-think urban potable water supply systems in a more collectivised way, aligned with community structures (and, at the same time, with cost benefits for development funders and partners).

A commonly shared barrier in several Pacific Island peri-urban contexts is inadequate, or malapportioned representation in wider decision-making bodies. Over time, this has led to under-resourcing of services and a lack of attention within wider development frameworks. This is all the more significant given the prevalent – albeit contested – role of Constituency Development Funds, which are allocated directly by elected representatives on a per-electorate basis, and provide a major source of direct infrastructure and asset funding at the community level (Barbara, 2019).

In the case of Solomon Islands, despite the Solomon Islands Constitution requiring that a review is conducted of constituency boundaries at least once a decade (with reviews able to occur more frequently if requested by the relevant minister), this has not occurred since 1997, with the Constituency Boundaries Commission at the time calibrating allocations on the basis of the 1986 census (MHA 1996; Commonwealth Secretariat, 2019). Urban growth, has resulted in significant inequality in levels of representation, with the Tandai Ward Member representing 14,914 constituents in 2009, while the Member for Tetekanji in East Guadalcanal represented only 1,114 (SINSO 2014).

Table 1 – Comparison of household services and energy use in Greater Honiara (source: 2009 Solomon Islands National Census)

Greater Honiara – Services & Energy		Honiara	Peri-Urban Guadalcanal	Greater Honiara	Solomon Islands
Primary Drinking Water Source	Metered (Solomon Water))	75.4%	37.4%	66.6%	9.2%
	Communal Standpipe	3.9%	23.0%	8.3%	35.1%
	Private Tank	9.6%	10.7%	9.9%	12.5%
	Communal Tank	1.5%	5.2%	2.4%	10.6%
	River or Stream	4.7%	9.4%	5.8%	24.5%
Households washing in ocean/rivers		4.9%	22.0%	8.8%	32.7%
Households without sealed sanitation		17.3%	50.5%	24.9%	77.9%
Energy for Cooking	Electricity/Gas	40.2%	12.9%	33.9%	6.0%
	Wood/Coconut	53.0%	85.5%	60.5%	92.5%
Households with metered lighting		64.4%	18.5%	53.8%	11.8%
Households with Refrigeration		38.8%	9.4%	32.0%	5.7%

06

Informality & Land Tenure

Land tenure in Pacific cities and towns is extremely diverse, with differing definitions of informality, and varied levels of tenure security outside of formal leasehold and freehold structures. Much of these departures from Western urban tenure 'norms' are intertwined with highly resilient social networks and systems of reciprocity. These systems support extended family housing structures, and customary land occupancy agreements with varying levels of recognition by the state.

As with urban population figures as a whole, the Pacific's share of the world's now more than one billion urban informal inhabitants is small in total. A high percentage of the Pacific's cities, towns, and urban settlements, however, are characterised by mixed, informal, or other tenured housing conditions. For households in these areas, tenure security, service provision, and/or support by formal governance institutions can be limited. At the same time, local governments and national authorities have little capacity to plan these areas, and face severely reduced revenue from rates and land transactions.

As with urban areas themselves, official classifications of informality are contested and vary from one PICT to another. Use of the term 'slums', or describing informal settlers as 'squatters', is generally viewed as derogatory, with 'informal settlements' the preferred terminology in the region.

In 2002 UN-Habitat, in partnership with the UN Statistics Division and Cities Alliance established an expert working group to agree to an operational definition for slums as part of measuring progress towards the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs). The agreed definition of a 'slum household' has continued to form the basis of the measurement of slums and informality in the MDGs' successor, the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, which sets out the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The definition classified informal settlement households as those facing one or more of five deprivations, being a lack of:

- Access to an improved water source;
- Access to improved sanitation facilities;
- Sufficient living area;
- Housing durability; and
- Security of tenure.

UN-Habitat estimates that by 2030 3 billion people will be in need of adequate & affordable housing.

An informal community in Blacksands, Port Vila, Vanuatu
Photo Credit: Alexei Trundle (2017)

Although tenure is a key identifier of informality, definitional differences across city contexts mean it is challenging to measure globally.

Specific definitions of each of these deprivations are set out in the UN-Habitat Urban Indicators Database, consistent with those used to calculate SDG indicator 11.1.1, which measures the proportion of urban population living in slums, informal settlements or inadequate housing. These figures are partially reported across the Pacific for three Polynesian countries, four Micronesian countries, and all of the Melanesian countries.Consistent with UN guidance, only the first four deprivations are used in these calculations. The fifth, tenure security, is too complex to aggregate across countries with differing tenure systems.

A summary of these reported indicators is shown in Figure 9. As the figure shows, a reclassification of the estimated informal urban population outside of the countries named above in 2021 – show in grey as the regional 'remainder' – saw a reduction of this component of the Pacific urban population by nearly 80,000 inhabitants. Unfortunately, the rationale behind this methodological adjustment was not able to be uncovered prior to publication of this report.

Other significant discontinuities in reporting reflected below include: the cessation of reporting in Nauru from 2017 onward; a jump in the share of Samoan urban citizens living informally from 0.3 percent in 2020 to 34.6 percent in 2021; and half of Tuvalu's urban inhabitants being classified as living informally from 2020 onward (compared with less than one percent in 2011).

On face value aggregated regional figures suggest a post-COVID drop in informality in the Pacific. However, comparison of the underlying informal settlement population totals with national data suggests a different trajectory, particularly in Melanesia.

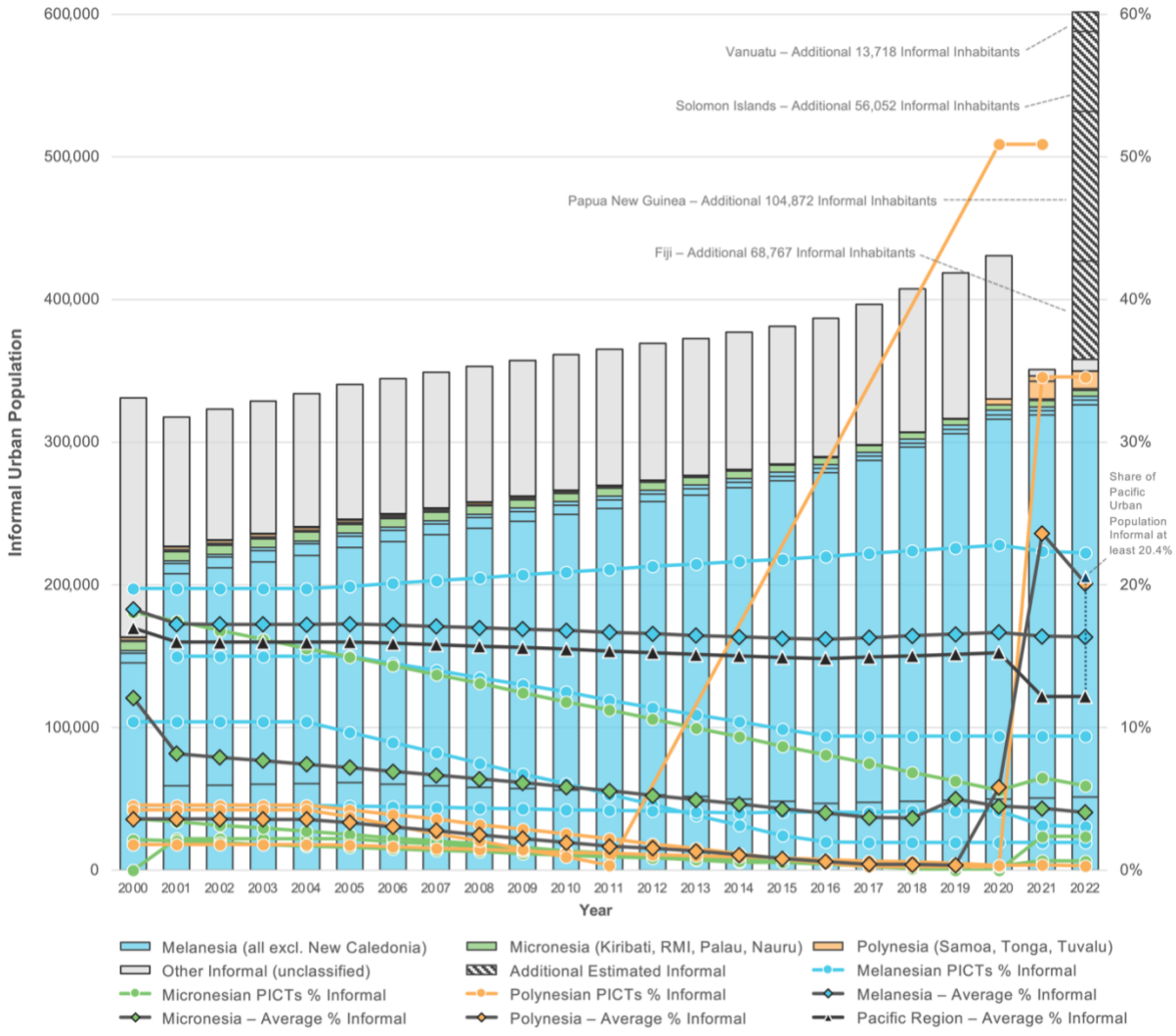
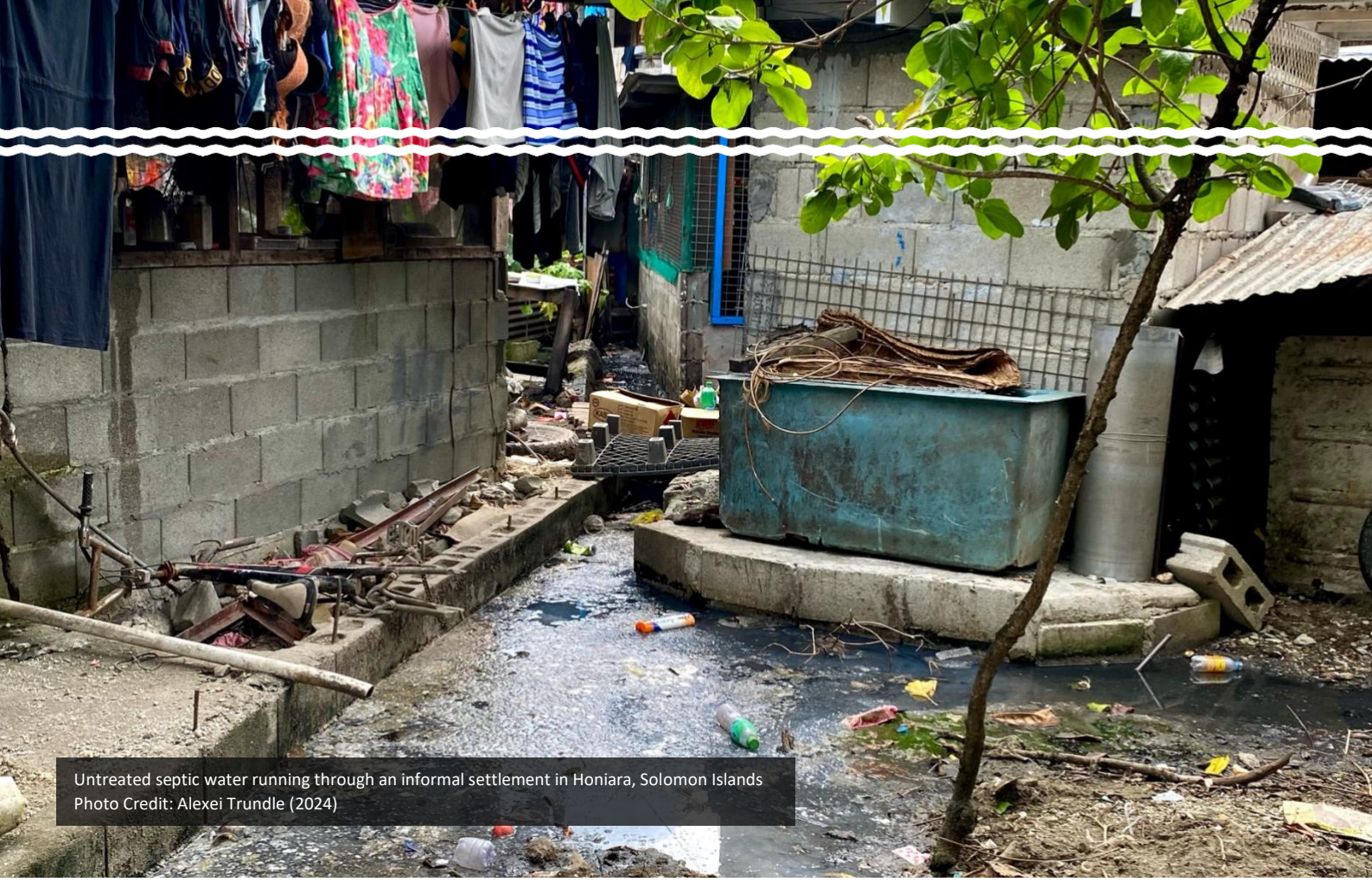


Figure 9: Informal settlement inhabitants across PICTs as reported under UN SDG11.1.1 (source: author)



Untreated septic water running through an informal settlement in Honiara, Solomon Islands
Photo Credit: Alexei Trundle (2024)

As with other regions informality – as reported, and within national frameworks of land tenure – varies widely across the Blue Pacific. Of the officially reported populations that comprise the totals shown in Figure 9, the vast majority of informal settlers are found in the larger cities of Melanesia. The rapid urbanisation facing many of these countries correlates strongly with other areas with high levels of urban informality, where urban planning, land registration, and infrastructure and services are unable to keep up with inward migration.

Of the more than 350,000 informal urban dwellers reported under SDG11.1.1 in the Pacific in 2022, 92.7 percent resided within Melanesia. However, this was in large part a function of the relative size of the sub-region's cities and towns, with Samoa having the highest share of informal residents of its urban population, and Kiribati ranking fourth by the same measure.

A more detailed analysis of Melanesia in relation to the five deprivations elaborated on above reveals that the apparent decline in urban informality as a share and a total subset of the Pacific's urban population is, unfortunately, incorrect.

In Solomon Islands, SDG11.1.1 reporting suggests only 1.9 percent of urban inhabitants live in informal settlements, equivalent to 3,350 people. However, analysis by the Solomon Islands Ministry of Lands, Housing and Survey in 2014 identified that between 35 and 40 percent of Honiara's inhabitants lived in informal settlements without legal tenure, with the growth in these areas over the last decade outpacing formalisation and upgrading efforts by the government. UN-Habitat also identified as early as 2012 that there were several informal settlements emerging in Auki, the capital of the neighbouring province of Malaita, with these areas characterised by overcrowding and a lack of services. 2021 Census figures also demonstrate that 17.2 percent of urban dwellers across Solomon Islands continue to lack improved sanitation – itself only one of the five deprivations – further evidencing the underestimation in published UN estimates.

The NCDC report Port Moresby Towards 2030 cross-referenced government informal settlement areas with changes to building footprints evident in through satellite imagery and remote sensing, and concluded

In contrast to SDG11.1.1 reporting, analysis for this report suggests that the share of Pacific urban dwellers living informally is increasing and is now at least 20.4%.

More than 400,000 Pacific urban dwellers face unimproved or open sanitation facilities in their homes, equivalent to one-in-five of the urban inhabitants of the countries analyzed by the ADB.

that "over half of Port Moresby's inhabitants live in informal settlements" (NCDC 2020 p.13). Without analysis of PNG's 29 other cities and towns, this updated total for the capital alone adds more than 100,000 informal dwellers to regional estimates.

In the case of Fiji, the National Government's Fiscal Review Committee noted in 2023 that there were presently between 120-140,000 urban inhabitants living informally across the country's 170 informal settlement areas (see Salinger et al. 2024).

Meanwhile, analysis in Vanuatu using 2009 population data found that untenured informal settlement areas around Port Vila account for 21 percent of the capital's metropolitan population, a figure that would increase national urban informality estimates from 3.1 to 14.2 percent (before accounting for known informal settlements in Vanuatu's second city, Luganville).

The addition of these undercounted informal inhabitants across the four Melanesian PIC capitals, as shown to the right of Figure 9, increases the share of the Pacific's urban population living in informal settlements to 20.4 percent. In total, based on the reanalysis outlined above, the Pacific has at least 600,000 urban informal inhabitants; significantly more than the 358,000 reported as part of SDG data aggregation.

That adjustment is before accounting for further undercounting outside of capital cities (including that excluded by restricting the above estimates for PNG, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu to the capital cities themselves).

Conversely, critical analysis of Samoan and Tuvaluan figures, which spiked in reporting after 2020, has not been able to be completed as part of this report. In the case of Samoa, transparency in UN figures in relation to measures of urban deprivation would provide key insight, given the assertion by respected Samoan scholars that 'squatter' settlements do not exist in a conventional sense across the country. Similar contentions are made in Tonga.

Nauru did not report informal tenure as part of its 2021 National Census, despite 3 percent of the country's entirely urbanised population self-reporting that they were 'squatting' in the 2011 Census. However, 2021 data also showed that 29.4 percent of households in Nauru lacked either septic or sewerage facilities. Overcrowding was not explicitly measured, but in 2021 14.3 percent of Nauruan households had more than ten inhabitants despite less than 10 percent of dwellings having five or more bedrooms.

Regional urban sanitation access analysis by the Asian Development Bank summarised in Table 2 identified nearly 400,000 urban inhabitants facing this key deprivation, equivalent to 21.4 percent of the urban populations of the countries analysed. This included 23 percent of I-Kiribati urban dwellers; significantly higher than the 5.9 percent shown in Figure 9.

Table 2 – Urban Sanitation Access in 11 Pacific Countries (source: author, derived from ADB 2021)

Country / Region		Basic	Limited	Unimproved	Open	Deprived (U+O)	Total Deprived
Melanesia	Fiji	96%	4%	0%	0%	0%	0
	Papua New Guinea	55%	9%	32%	4%	36%	356,569
	Solomon Islands	76%	15%	0%	9%	9%	11,563
	Vanuatu	61%	32%	6%	1%	7%	4,823
Micronesia	Kiribati	49%	14%	22%	15%	37%	18,234
	Marshall Islands	95%	0%	2%	4%	6%	2,321
	Nauru	66%	31%	1%	3%	4%	400
	Palau	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0
Polynesia	Samoa	98%	0%	2%	0%	2%	733
	Tonga	97%	1%	3%	0%	3%	763
	Tuvalu	92%	0%	2%	6%	8%	480

As the example of sanitation deprivation demonstrates, differentiation of Pacific forms of informal land tenure by not only deprivation type, but also by legal and sociocultural status, local governance alignment, and the community structures within them, is critical to engaging effectively with these rapidly growing urban areas. This includes the distinction between those that fall within established, formally classified urban areas, and the 'peri-urban' areas discussed above, which plays a key role in enabling more novel informal tenure systems within customary land domains in the region.

Figure 10 below, developed by Trundle (2020) based on analysis of the Melanesian sub-region of the Pacific (see McEvoy et al. 2019), sets out an informal settlement typology based on these additional factors. In addition to consideration of UN-Habitat's five dwelling deprivations, four key elements are added at a settlement scale, categorised as: jurisdictional; cadastral; regulatory; and sociopolitical.

Key urban governance differences emerge in each of the four levels of the Figure 10 decision-tree. Beyond the more obvious jurisdictional considerations discussed above, existence of cadastral boundaries, for instance, can be key to utility connection, whilst zoning non-compliance is often seen as grounds for demolition or penalisation.

More complex are sociopolitical agreements – and disputes – relating to informal areas. The presence of hybrid, semi-traditional governance systems can often provide more viable pathways for response to conflict or recovery from disaster impacts than conventionally recognised state governance mechanisms (e.g. see Bryant-Tokelau 1995, Parthasarathy 2015, Mecartney & Connell 2017, and Fitzpatrick et al. 2019).

Failure to sustain sociopolitical licenses for occupation often results in settlement clearances and evictions. However, where settlement patterns – features including collective title, re-establishment of displaced migrant communities, and development of shared cultural facilities and assets – are not directly prevented or in conflict with formal state governance, novel urban systems have emerged. These patterns, which do not comply with Western land use zoning and planning processes, often enable deeper forms of 'endogenous' social resilience, which can be deployed in response to urban challenges, shocks, and stresses.

This wider 'spectrum' of informality does, however, further increase the region's informal areas. That includes a further 15 percent of the French Polynesian urban population, and an increase in Tonga's informal urban population to 34 percent, per SPC reporting on SDG11 in 2023.

Informal settlements differ when analyzed collectively in ways not evident in individual households. In the Pacific, urban social systems can depend upon unzoned community spaces, as well as social systems of reciprocity and non-state traditional governance.

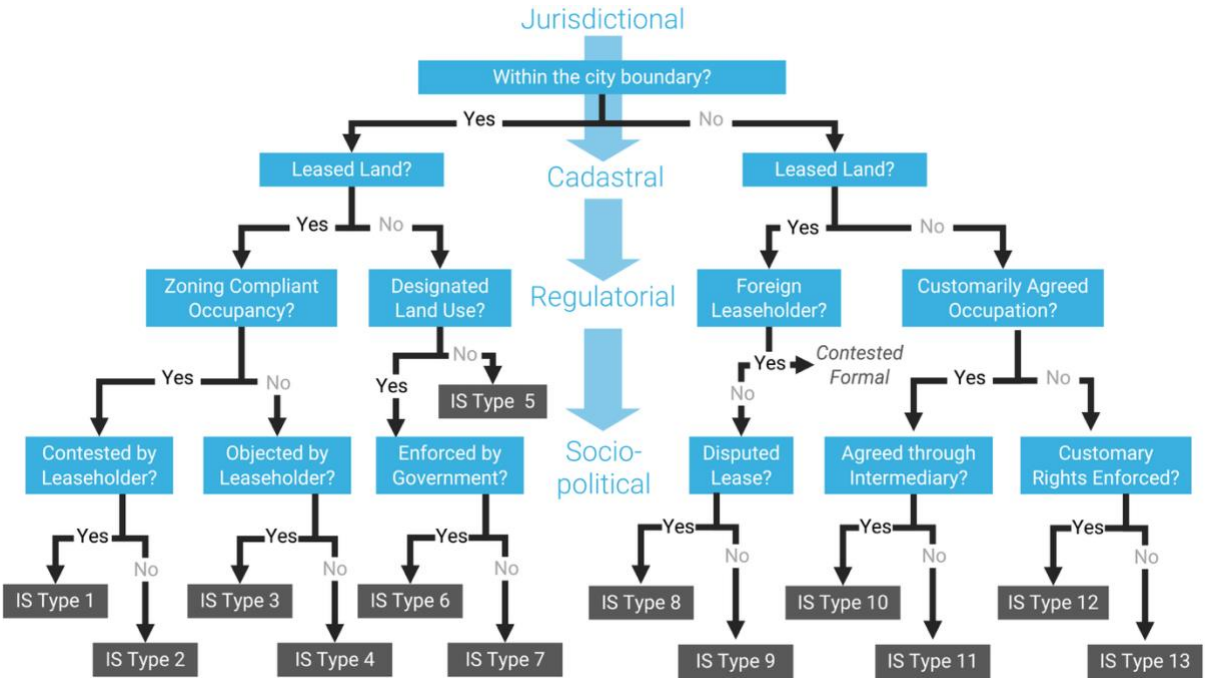


Figure 10: Melanesian Informal Settlement Typology (source: adapted from McEvoy et al. 2019))

Informal food gardens on public land in central Suva, Fiji
Photo Credit: Alexei Trundle (2022)

Pre-COVID-19, informal employees made up 60-80% of the region's workforce, according to the ILO.

Informal urban systems are, however, more housing and associated dwelling areas. A much broader, and often overlooked, set of associated informal land uses and ecosystem services underpin large parts of many Pacific cities' and towns' economies, as well as the livelihoods of their residents.

Informal, or 'unplanned' markets, are a common feature of many Pacific urban centres. In Port Moresby, an estimated half of the National Capital District's households are engaged in the city's informal economy, including three-quarters of the population of the city's nearly 150 settlement areas. The NCD's informal economy is estimated to generate around 750 million Kina per year.

Small scale agriculture in the form of urban gardens is similarly prevalent, being both distributed through local markets, and also drawn upon for subsidence by many urban dwellers. These gardens vary, from backyard, small scale beds and fruit trees, to larger peri-urban allotments. Analysis in Solomon Islands by Keen and Ride (2019) identified a dozen informal markets across Greater Honiara, with 70 percent of stalls selling produce that had been grown or caught by the market vendors themselves (or by their immediate families).

Analysis of ecosystem service use by 10 communities across Greater Port Vila by Komugabe-Dixson et al. (2019) identified a wide range of other informal ecosystem services, from sand mining for construction, through to extensive firewood harvesting for cooking purposes.

Other examples from across the region included the harvesting of invasive seaweed within the Funafuti lagoon in Tuvalu (Weir et al. 2023), whilst the collapse of traditional tribal ecosystem management systems in Nauru is attributed for the overfishing and depletion of near shore fish stocks (Trundle et al. 2024).

Importantly, many of these informal economic activities are highly gendered, with women playing a disproportionate role in staffing and running market stands, the harvesting of garden crops, in many cases travelling significant distances whilst undertaking additional home and caring duties (McKinnon et al. 2016; Gurney 2022). This is compounded by gendered land tenure; for instance, in Tonga, where crown land is almost exclusively leased to 'common men', with the exception of widowed women (Tecun & At Siu'ulua 2023). Conversely in Guadalcanal, male-dominated state systems have undermined matrilineal customary tenure (Monson 2022).

07

Pacific Urban Regionalism

The first Pacific Urban Forum was held in 2003 and gave rise to the Pacific Urban Agenda., which was integrated with the 2005 Pacific Plan. Ownership of urban issues, PUA, and outcomes of subsequent PUFs by the Pacific's peak CROP agencies, however, remains ambiguous.

2024 marked two decades since the first Pacific Urban Forum was held in Nadi, Fiji. Initially titled the Pacific Region Workshop on Urban Management, the inaugural forum was facilitated by the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

It was at this event that the first Pacific Urban Agenda was developed, which was subsequently endorsed by Asian and Pacific UN member states at ESCAP's 60th Session in Shanghai in 2004 (E/ESCAP/RES/60/7). The PUA was formally adopted and included as a high priority initiative (13.5) in PIFS' 10-year regional Pacific Plan in 2005, with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) being designated by PIFS as the primary body for implementing the PUA.

The second forum was again held in Nadi in April 2007, being facilitated by PIFS, the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF), ESCAP, and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and resulted in two subsequent workshops later that year in Suva, Fiji and Brisbane, Australia.

In tandem, these two workshops led to development of a revised PUA (PUA2), a Regional Action Plan, and a commitment by AusAID to support and fund a Pacific Island Planners Association (PIPA), supported by the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA).

The PUA2 was re-endorsed as part of the review of the Pacific Plan at the Forum Retreat by Pacific Heads of State and representatives in Vava'u, Tonga in October 2007, as reflected in the 38th PIF Forum Communiqué.

The 2011 Pacific Urban Forum, the first to be so formally named, re-affirmed the revised PUA, with the PUF Outcome Statement underlining the PUA's four thematic areas: urban policy & institutions; urban environment; access to services and shelter; and urban quality of life.

PUF4 was held in March 2015, again in Nadi, convened by UN-Habitat and CLGF Pacific. The event coincided with regional preparatory processes for the Third vicennial United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III), as well as the finalization of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its constituent set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

PUF4 set out to revitalise the PUA, with delegates resolving to endorse a New Urban Agenda for the Pacific (NUAP), built upon four revised pillars:

1) Social Equity;
2) Environment, Resilience & Urbanization;
3) Urban Economy; and
4) Urban Governance.

Although the NUAP was not formally endorsed by regional bodies, the PIFS Secretary General requested that a workshop be held at the Australian National University (ANU). This was facilitated in Canberra in 2017, leading to the development of strategies to address the rapid urbanization occurring throughout the Pacific.

The Pacific Urban Agenda was endorsed by the Pacific Islands Forum in 2005, with urbanization included in the 2005 regional strategy, the 10-year Pacific Plan

An interim workshop of local and national government stakeholders held in December 2018 reiterated the request for partnership with PIFS. A fifth pillar, Urban Infrastructure, was also put forward for consideration alongside those contained within the PNUA.

The fifth Pacific Urban Forum was held in Nadi in July 2019, hosted by the Government of Fiji and co-organized and sponsored by a consortia of organizations, led by UN-Habitat. PUF5 was attended by 185 participants from 25 countries, including two heads of state (Tuvalu and Fiji), six Pacific ministers (representing Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu), and executives from urban line ministries from Vanuatu, Samoa, and Cook Islands.

PUF5 resulted in adoption of a Declaration reaffirming the commitment of Pacific Islands Countries towards the New Urban Agenda for the Pacific. The then incoming Chair of the Pacific Islands Forum, Hon. Mr. Enele Sopoaga, Prime Minister of Tuvalu, committed to tabling the outcomes of the PUF at the 50th Forum Leaders Meeting, to be held in Funafuti, Tuvalu in August 2019. Subsequent regional implementation efforts resulting from PUF5 were, however, waylaid by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2020 saw the launch of the Pacific Partnership for the New Urban Agenda (PP-NUA), a coalition of development partners committed to assisting the implementation commitments made at PUF 5.

The PP-NUA facilitated a Virtual Pacific Urban Forum in 2021, which built on a series of virtual interviews and presentations by ten national urban focal points from across the region. Interview findings published as part of the VPUF proceedings were categorized based upon progress towards the four initial NUAP pillars, alongside a fifth consideration of the urban impacts of COVID-19 and associated public health responses.

PP-NUA was renamed the Pacific Urban Partnership (PUP) in 2022, continuing to provide input into various regional events and meeting regularly in a virtual capacity, as well as establishing an online presence through a website and social media channels.

The global review of the 'urban' Sustainable Development Goal, SDG11, saw renewed interest in localization of the SDGs in the region, with members of the PUP embarking on the development of the Pacific's first Voluntary Local Review in partnership with Suva City Council. A Memorandum of Understanding was also established between UN ESCAP and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, providing a formal framework for engaging on issues of sustainable urban development.

A Virtual Pacific Urban Forum was held in 2021 to stocktake progress towards the NUAP.

Impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic on regional sustainable urban development were also analysed.

PIF Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor closing the 5th Pacific Urban Forum in 2019
Photo Credit: Pacific Urban Partnership

6th Pacific Urban Forum Delegates
Credit: Pacific Urban Partnership

08

PUF6 at PIFS

The 6th Pacific Urban Forum was hosted by the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat in Suva, Fiji, from the 5th to the 7th of September 2023. PUF6 was coordinated by the Pacific Urban Partnership, with the additional support of the Government of Fiji and Suva City Council.

For the first time in its 20-year history the sixth Pacific Urban Forum traversed the island of Viti Levu for PUF6, shifting from Nadi to be hosted by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat at their headquarters in Fiji's capital, Suva.

This change supported not only a deep level of engagement with PIFS, who physically hosted the forum, but also a range of multilateral and domestic actors and governmental entities based in the Fijian capital, including the Suva City Council, and the metropolitan, 'Greater Suva' town councils of Lami, Nasinu, and Nausori. PUF6 was also scheduled to run in sequence with the Pacific Housing Forum, hosted by Habitat for Humanity, with bridging sessions bringing findings from the PHF into the housing stream of the PUF.

The 327 registered delegates represented 29 countries and 76 unique cities. In addition to Fiji, Pacific Island Countries and Territories represented included Cook Islands, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Western Samoa.

Attending Pacific dignitaries included Fiji's Deputy Prime Hon. Prof. Biman Prasad and Hon. Maciu Nalumisa (Minister for Local Government) and Papua New Guinea Minister for Housing, Hon. Dr. Kobby Bomareo. Although unable to attend in person, Prime Minister of Samoa and AOSIS Chair Hon. Afioga Fiamē Naomi Mataʻafa opened the Forum with a video message. A full list of delegates is provided at the end of this report.

PUF6 coincided with planning for the regional implementation process for PIFS' 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.

PUF6 included a record 36 breakout sessions, developed by more than 30 organizations from diverse sectors, countries, and areas of expertise.

The PUF6 Programme was structured thematically over the three days of the Forum. Day 1 focused on revitalising the Pacific New Urban Agenda. Following the official opening of the event breakout sessions were grouped into the four pillars of the PNUA, prior to afternoon events that allowed for caucusing of key stakeholder groups. The official PUF civic reception was hosted and sponsored by the Suva City Council, with Deputy Prime Hon. Professor Biman Prasad the official guest of honour for the event.

Day 2 drew attention to the foremost issue of concern for the Pacific region: climate change. As set out in the Boe Declaration on Regional Security and reflected in numerous regional strategies, policy documents and joint statements, climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security, and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific.

The meeting highlighted that development challenges and vulnerabilities associated with climate change are to be seen within the context of other crises, not least COVID-19 recovery which, in a mutually reinforcing manner, impact Pacific Islands severely, risking leaving ever larger numbers of vulnerable community members behind.

Nonetheless, proceedings demonstrated that more attention needs to be drawn exclusively to both the impacts of climate change on Pacific cities and towns, and the role that they play in providing adaptation pathways for climate-induced migration.

Day 2 closed with plenary sessions focused upon upcoming multilevel climate action opportunities for addressing these gaps, particularly COP28's Ministerial Meeting on Urbanization and Climate Change.

Day 3 broadened the previous day's focus on climate action to the suite of regional and global platforms relating to sustainable urban development in the Pacific. These included efforts to localize the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through mechanisms such as Voluntary Local Reviews, but also examined other platforms such as regional programmes for affordable housing delivery, local government sustainability leadership, and other bridging frameworks such as the Commonwealth Sustainable Cities Initiative.

The second half of Day 3 was led by PIFS, with thematic breakout sessions designed to mainstream urban issues into the implementation framework for the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. Closing plenary sessions then looked towards the 8th Asia Pacific Urban Forum (held in October 2023) and the 12th session of the World Urban Forum (to be held in November 2024). PUF6 was closed by Hon. Mr. Maciu Katamotu Nalumisa, on behalf of the Government of Fiji.

The final PUF6 Report provides a detailed account of session proceedings, with recordings of each plenary session available on the Pacific Urban Partnership website.

The Sixth Pacific Urban Forum was support by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, the Government of Fiji's Ministry of Local Government, Suva City Council, and a range of organisations within and beyond the Pacific Urban Partnership:

PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM
FIJI MINISTRY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT
SUVA CITY COUNCIL
UN-HABITAT
COMMONWEALTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT FORUM
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GLOBAL COVENANT of MAYORS for CLIMATE & ENERGY
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2025 State of Urbanization in the Blue Pacific Report

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