

Responding to the urbanisation of Melanesia's populations: a critical 21st century challenge

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Rowan Callick's (1993) deliberately provocative 'doomsday scenario' for an increasingly impoverished and marginalised Pacific by 2010 was primarily designed to challenge a prevailing tendency at the time towards complacency about medium-term prospects for a region where the great majority of the population remained rural-resident. Now that we are approaching the end of 2010 it is interesting to reflect on some of Callick's (1993: 2) observations

By 2010, population growth in the Pacific islands is careering beyond control. It has doubled to 9 million. Malnutrition is spreading. Levels of unemployment are high. Deaths from AIDS, heart disease and cancers have greatly increased.

Government services have been privatised or in many cases have lapsed. Crime has increased. Pollution and land degradation has spiralled. Much of the surviving rain forest has been logged. Coastal fisheries have been placed under threat from overfishing. Skill shortages in the labour market yawn wide.

Population projections prepared by SPC demographers suggest that the 9 million

mark was passed sometime in 2006. By 2010 there were estimated to be just under 10 million people resident on the islands that comprise the Pacific, and the SPC's latest projections suggest a further 8 million could be added to this total by 2050. Around 77 per cent of the region's 9.9 million in 2010 were living in three countries, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, where the indigenous inhabitants currently have very limited opportunities for short-term or long-term migration to other countries.

The share of the region's population living in Polynesia and Micronesia in 2010 was 12 per cent or around 1.22 million. The indigenous inhabitants of most of these countries have, as a result of their colonial histories, some outlets for short-term and long-term movement to countries on the Pacific rim. By 2010 around 500,000 people born in Pacific island countries, roughly the equivalent of the total population of Micronesia in that year, were living in towns and cities on the Pacific rim, mainly in Auckland, Wellington, Sydney, Brisbane, Honolulu, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Vancouver.

Looking ahead, two of the major challenges that are going to demand more

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than national responses in the region during the 21st century are the impact on local populations of increasing environmental degradation, some of which is linked with global warming, and accelerating urbanisation in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The global warming challenge has received considerable attention from academics, politicians and the media in recent years. Much less attention has been given to some of the implications for population movement between countries of the accelerating urbanisation of Melanesia's population.

In the year ended March 2010 there were 54,500 short-term overseas visitor arrivals in New Zealand recorded for citizens of Pacific countries. Only 9 per cent of these arrivals (5,000) were from PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. These three countries currently have less than 25 per cent of their populations living in urban places: only half the global average. Their combined urban population in 2010 was around 1.7 million (1 million in Papua New Guinea). This compares with around 3.7 million in New Zealand (85 per cent of the 4.4 million total population).

If we assume that by 2050 the share of the population that is living in urban places in the three Melanesian countries has caught up with the current world average of 50 per cent (which happens to be the situation that currently prevails in over half of the Pacific countries), then the number of people in towns and cities in PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu could total as many as 7.5 million. This is the equivalent of their combined total population in 2010 and significantly higher than New Zealand's projected urban population of around 5 million in 2050 if 85 per cent of the total population still lives in towns and cities in that year. PNG could have at least one city that is much bigger than Auckland or Brisbane; by 2050 there could be as many

as 6 million urban residents if 50 per cent of that country's projected population of 13 million was living in towns and cities.

The progressive urbanisation of Melanesia's populations will need to be accompanied by improved access to opportunities for international travel as tourists, students and workers. That said, the great majority of the new urban residents in PNG, Solomons and Vanuatu will have to be absorbed into their own informal and formal economies, and this in itself will be a major challenge, especially as most of the major towns and cities in the region are in coastal locations that could be subjected to increasing environmental pressure from changes in sea levels and climate regimes associated with global warming.

There will be much more intensive international mobility of Melanesian elites in the coming decades, and a key challenge for politicians, policymakers and the public in New Zealand and Australia will be to ensure that increasing numbers of Melanesians are able to take advantage of opportunities offered by international migration to further their education, skills enhancement, work experience and personal and family wellbeing. In reality, this is not asking for much more than what is currently allowed to those travelling on New Zealand and Australian passports. It is what those Pacific people who have managed to acquire Australian or New Zealand citizenship actually have. In the interests of promoting a more prosperous region in a world where small places will need to present a much more united front to protect their essential heritages in the future, opening up options for greater circulation of all of Pacific peoples would be a very constructive move that would go a long way towards easing current tensions and anxieties.

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Reference

Callick, R.,1993. 'Pacific 2010: a doomsday scenario? in R. Cole (ed.), *Pacific 2010:challenging the future*, National Centre for Development Studies, Canberra:1-11