



# Pacific Island Towns and Cities

A resilience agenda for  
urbanisation and urban growth  
in Pacific Island Countries

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## About ACFID CoPs

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The Network began in 2009 in response to a collective desire to widen debate on international development and to strengthen collaboration between academics and ACFID's membership. Since this time, the Network has continued to grow; promoting positive relationships between NGOs and universities, and facilitating the sharing and contestation of evidence and ideas.

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## Executive Summary

**This paper provides an outline of the unique challenges of urbanisation and urban growth in the Pacific. It provides the following:**

- a detailed understanding of why it is important to address Pacific island urbanisation and urban growth, its unique features and a focus on informal settlements;
- the challenge of urban strategy implementation in the Pacific context;
- a recommendation to apply an urban resilience approach to address the unique challenges faced by Pacific island countries; and
- practical recommendations for relevant stakeholders on how to build urban resilience in Pacific towns and cities.

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## Introduction

**We are living on a rapidly urbanising planet. The 2016 policy paper by the former ACFID Shelter Reference Group, *Prosperous and Sustainable Cities for All* (hereafter referred to as the ‘2016 policy paper’), identifies urbanisation as “both one of the greatest development challenges and opportunities facing the world today”.<sup>1</sup> The battle for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>2</sup> will be won and lost in the world’s cities and towns<sup>3</sup>, – hence, the 2016 policy paper’s case for action to build an Australian Development Agenda for urbanisation in the Asia Pacific.**

The 2016 policy paper set out some important recommendations from an Asia Pacific regional urban perspective. However, it is important to note that such a regional perspective can obscure the impact of urbanisation and urban growth in the Pacific context.<sup>4</sup> For this reason this stand-alone paper will specifically address the Pacific urban context.

The need to understand and manage urbanisation is extremely relevant in Pacific island countries (PICs), but urban growth in the Pacific is often overlooked due to the region’s small population size.<sup>5</sup> Although PICs are small in size and population, the impacts of urbanisation manifest themselves in PICs in a similar way as they do in the larger cities of Asia, though the context may look very different.

In order to understand urbanisation in the Pacific context, it is important to acknowledge the variations in urban conditions across the three Pacific subregions: Micronesia, Polynesia and Melanesia (see Figure 1). A 2012 Asian Development Bank (ADB) report<sup>6</sup> identified the urban challenges in Melanesia as being more diverse and complex than those in Micronesia, Polynesia and Timor-Leste. Melanesia has the largest towns with the largest urban populations, and the largest population numbers living in informal settlements.<sup>7</sup>

This PIC-focused paper provides a contextual understanding of the challenges and opportunities that are unique to Pacific urbanisation and urban growth. This paper has four sections. The first section provides a more detailed understanding of why it is important to address Pacific island urbanisation and urban growth. It focuses on informal settlements, as these have been identified as a key challenge in the PIC context, particularly in Melanesia.

The second section outlines current urban strategy in the Pacific. It is necessary to understand the historic approach to urbanisation in the PIC context and how it is currently understood.

The third section recommends an urban resilience<sup>8</sup> approach to address Pacific urban challenges. This approach addresses long-term development goals in tandem with climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction. It supports an understanding of the unique features of Pacific urbanisation and its key challenges.

The final section provides nine practical recommendations on the way forward to promote urban resilience in the Pacific context.

The paper also contains two short case studies of ACFID Urban Community of Practice (CoP) member activities within urban contexts in the Pacific. These case studies highlight activities that are contributing to urban resilience.

Overall, the paper provides support for the idea of changing the way we conceptualise PIC urbanisation and urban growth and how it is managed. As noted in the 2016 policy paper, Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Australian aid sector have an opportunity to impact on PIC urbanisation issues and, through careful and considered actions, have significant positive humanitarian and development outcomes.



**Figure 1:** Pacific subregions

Source: 'Major culture areas of Oceania', Commons Wikimedia, 2018

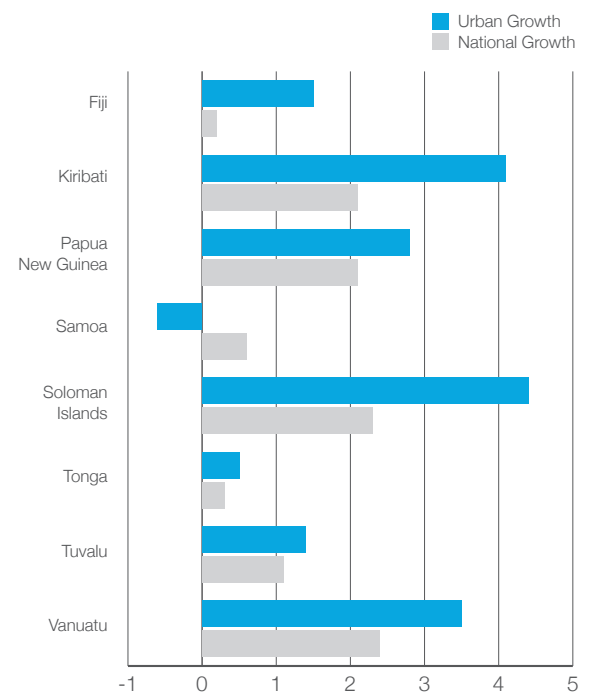
## Why address urbanisation in the Pacific?

Urbanisation is often understood as a shift from a predominantly rural to urban society, and is arguably one of the most complex socio-economic phenomena of the twentieth and twenty-first century.<sup>9</sup> The Pacific region is experiencing increasing rates of urbanisation, although this has not been uniform. Melanesia generally exhibits lower rates of urbanisation than some areas of Micronesia, the region has some of the largest cities and towns and has the largest population living in informal settlements.<sup>10</sup> In all but a few of the PICs, the urbanisation growth rate exceeds the rate of rural population growth.<sup>11</sup> This aligns with the broader global trend of a continuing rise in the proportion of the total population living in urban areas.<sup>12</sup>

This urban<sup>13</sup> expansion in the Pacific region is generally coupled with general population growth, a stagnating rural economy, poor urban management (including lack of building codes and urban plans), and a high level of exposure to natural hazards and climate change impacts. If left unaddressed, many of these factors will continue to provide sustainable development challenges in the region in the long term.

These challenges include high levels of unemployment and poor health, lack of access to safe and adequate housing, degraded environmental conditions and increasing levels of crime and violence.

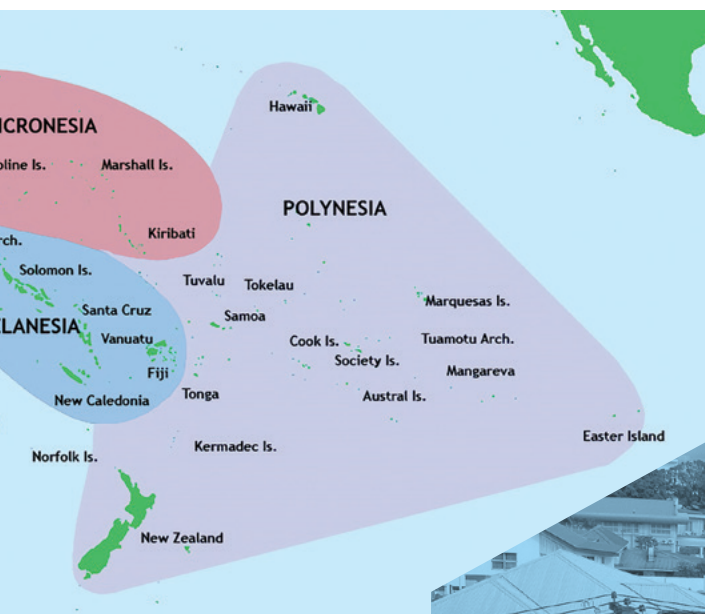
Pacific island vulnerability to climate change is also highly relevant to the urban context. Most Pacific towns and cities are based on the coast and are therefore more vulnerable to sea level rise and other climate change effects. Building the resilience of cities and towns, so they can adapt to the impact of climate change and reduce their vulnerability to natural hazards, is crucial to ensure that development gains in the region are not reversed.



**Figure 2:** Urban population growth mostly outstrips national growth (per cent)

Source: Jones (2012), SPC (2012), UNFPA (2014)

Note: Statistics in the South Pacific are variable in quality. The growth rates should be interpreted as indicative of relative relationships.



The population statistics illustrated in Figure 2 indicate that Pacific urbanisation is inevitable and will continue to grow rapidly.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly “no country has ever achieved sustained economic growth or social development without urbanisation”.<sup>15</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this paper to draw further conclusions about how this statement might apply within each Pacific island town and city, these urban centres do “play a pivotal role as engines of growth, both nationally and regionally”.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, there is a need to understand and manage urbanisation in the Pacific context to contribute to improved economic and developmental outcomes.

### Expansion of Informal Settlements

The concern within the PIC context is that most urban growth in the region is occurring without adequate urban planning or urban management, largely due to a lack of institutional capacity.<sup>17</sup> This unmanaged urbanisation creates development challenges which are nowhere more evident than in the informal settlements that are a common feature of many Pacific towns and cities. Pacific towns and cities contain a proportion of informal settlements, to varying degrees<sup>18</sup>; it is estimated that up to 50 per cent of the urban population in Melanesia is living in informal settlements.<sup>19</sup> Informal settlement population numbers are likely to be higher than projected since the expansion of these settlements into peri-urban zones is not included in census data. The growth of informal settlements signals a concentration of poverty in urban areas and inequality in PIC towns and cities.<sup>20</sup>

Informal settlements are sites of significance as they experience vulnerabilities linked to unmet long-term development needs, such as lack of access to basic infrastructure and services. Their lack of tenure legitimacy means they rarely receive government services or support for disaster risk reduction, response and recovery. In addition, they are especially vulnerable to the impact of natural hazards and climate change, given that they are sometimes located on marginal land,

for instance in areas that are flood prone. Also, despite their growing numbers, they have little formal recognition or voice. They have rarely been considered in urban planning or infrastructure plans and have therefore evolved in an unplanned way. However, while informal settlements experience the combined pressures of high levels of hazard, vulnerability and risk, they are also sites of opportunity where communities exhibit endogenous resilience and adaptive capacities.<sup>21</sup> This is despite their circumstances and out of necessity, largely due to the absence of government provision.

A contributing factor to community level resilience is linked to social capital through the existence of local governance and the capacity to organise internally.<sup>22</sup> For this reason, a deep understanding is required of what this social connection and structure looks like within informal settlements in the Pacific. Socio-cultural hierarchies that are expressed in rural areas through Pacific norms and values interface with the urban context in unique ways – this is readily observed in informal settlements. A 2012 ADB report<sup>23</sup> observed that these settlements ‘exhibit the physical, social and cultural characteristics of rural villages, including ethnic and kinship groups, but within an urban setting’. Also known as ‘rural villages in the city’ this phenomenon is most prevalent in the larger cities and towns of Melanesia due, in part, to the sub-regions cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity.<sup>24</sup> These socio-cultural hierarchies can influence community resilience however as towns and cities rapidly urbanise these cultural and social networks may become eroded.

To address the challenges faced by people living in informal settlements, an understanding of their unique socio-cultural hierarchies is essential. This is not least in order to achieve the SDGs, particularly SDG 11 – the commitment to ‘make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’ and to achieve the commitments of the New Urban Agenda.

Within these complex and unique settings, new approaches are required that address the intersection of development, climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction. The Honiara Urban Resilience and Climate Action Plan (HURCAP)<sup>25</sup> is one such strategy. Adopted by the Honiara City Council and the Solomon Islands Government, it adopts an urban resilience approach with a particular focus on informal settlements. A key recommendation of this paper is the need for or more research and action to implement urban resilience approaches, such as the HURCAP, in order to address the unique urban challenges facing the Pacific.

Informal settlements often sit on the edge of Pacific towns and cities and lie outside the boundaries of urban local level government jurisdiction. As a result, it is even more challenging to access basic amenities, such as water, thereby further increasing their vulnerability. *The Water for Women* project of Habitat for Humanity supports people living in informal settlements in the peri-urban context. The following case study outlines how this project is addressing Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) needs in peri-urban informal settlements.

## Case Study

### Habitat for Humanity Fiji

Habitat for Humanity's *Water for Women* project is 'strengthening community resilience and inclusion through improved Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services in Fiji'. It is a participatory and socially inclusive community development project which aims to strengthen the resilience of 50 rural and peri-urban communities through increased access to equitable and inclusive WASH services. This project will address the WASH needs of those who are most marginalised in rural communities and peri-urban informal settlements, specifically focusing on women and girls, people with disabilities, and people from the LGBTIQ+ community.

Photo credit: Habitat for Humanity Fiji



## Urban strategy in the Pacific

**The emphasis on ‘small island’ and the notional rural idyll of the Pacific region have obscured the reality of Pacific urbanisation. “That postcard perfect landscape is changing, the population numbers are not as dramatic as the world’s mega cities, but the Pacific is facing simultaneously high population growth and rapidly accelerating urbanisation”.<sup>26</sup> Against this backdrop, Pacific urban issues have been largely overlooked – locally, nationally, regionally and internationally.<sup>27</sup>**

The literature suggests an anti-urban bias within PICs at the local and national level. This is reflected in the attempt, in previous decades, to halt rural-to-urban migration by upscaling rural development programs.<sup>28</sup> Barbara and Keen have observed, “This rural bias has dominated Melanesian politics since pre-independence days, consistently prioritizing provincial representation and programs”.<sup>29</sup> As a result, urban issues have struggled for traction at the national level.<sup>30</sup> Institutional planning in urban governance and planning at the local and national level is largely weak and under-funded and this has contributed to unplanned urban growth in many Pacific towns and cities. According to Connell, “Urban institutional development in Melanesia has failed to match the growth of urban communities, resulting in policy and political neglect”.<sup>31</sup>

The 2012 ADB report<sup>32</sup> identified that this fractured urban governance is also a result of poor relationships between Western government systems and local traditional structures, particularly in Melanesia. The two systems are inevitably at odds with each other and this is nowhere more obvious than in the context of land rights where traditional customary arrangements interface with Western statutory and legal land administration. Hybrid approaches to urban management have important implications for unresolved land tenure issues on formal and customary land. It is an area of contention which consistently resurfaces in response to urban development expansion, as in the ethnic tensions that erupted in Honiara in the early 2000s.<sup>33</sup>

This local and national situation has been further aggravated by the challenges of implementation in addressing urbanisation at the regional level. While significant advances have been made, such as the formalisation of the Pacific Urban Agenda recommendations in a regional framework, implementation challenges have stalled progress. Both the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) and The Pacific Community (SPC) cite technical and human capacity constraints.<sup>34</sup>



At the international level the 2015 Pacific Urban Agenda – specifically Recommendation 2, which links resilience with urbanisation – has some parallel objectives with the New Urban Agenda. However, its implementation is challenged by many factors in the Pacific island context, a key factor being a lack of political support on a number of levels.<sup>35</sup>

Jones,<sup>36</sup> identifies little interest in the urban sector on the part of DFAT. The need for a dedicated team and technical expertise within DFAT was one of the key recommendations of the 2016 policy paper<sup>37</sup> and remains the case. Sitko and Goudswaard,<sup>38</sup> recently note that urbanisation management is ‘too important to fail’ and, based on DFAT’s current work, recommends that the Department is well positioned to be known as a donor that actively and thoughtfully engages with the complexities of urban management. It remains to be seen how this recommendation may be implemented.

Looking to the future, it is clear that coordinated local, national regional and international action is needed to harness the development opportunities in towns and cities in the PIC’s. The convening power of international initiatives such as the 2016 New Urban Agenda and the SDGs, in particular SDG 11, can help leverage this action.

There is no doubt that addressing unplanned urbanisation in the Pacific island context is challenging. In the absence of government intervention, it is sometimes the case that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) advocate and respond to fill the gaps. There are some examples of local NGOs and community-based organisations engaging in this space. However, International NGOs are more likely to focus on sectoral programs as opposed to integrated programming and are often less equipped to operate in the urban context. This criticism is not unique to the Pacific; it applies globally, since many tools and approaches in the development and humanitarian sector have traditionally been established and applied in the rural context.

As Ramalingam and Knox Clarke identified, “The new urban reality of density and dynamism is a mismatch for the rural assumptions and traditions that underpin much thinking in humanitarian aid”.<sup>39</sup> New tools are needed in the aid sector that are adapted to the Pacific urban context.

While some development and humanitarian actors are active in the Pacific island urban context, there is growing recognition that multiple actors at many different levels are required to address the challenges of unplanned and unmanaged urbanisation. This further strengthens the case for a different approach which is intersectional and multi-disciplinary, involving multiple stakeholders.

## An urban resilience approach to address Pacific urbanisation challenges

**This paper identifies that Pacific urbanisation and urban growth is increasing and has unique characteristics. The combined challenges of urbanisation and climate change point to the need for a different approach, one that considers wider development concerns, the growth of urban poverty, the threat of natural hazards and the impact of climate change.**

Taking what is known as an urban resilience lens allows for this level of analysis. It also allows for consideration of actions before, during and after a catastrophic event to reduce its impact and enable people and communities to "maintain continuity through all shocks and stresses while positively adapting and transforming toward sustainability".<sup>40</sup> It is therefore as much a development concern as it is a humanitarian one.

Such an approach requires multi-disciplinary collaborations involving multiple stakeholders and partnerships, such as governments (both local and national), not-for-profits, private sector actors, academics and multilaterals, such as the World Bank and the ADB, among others. The development of initiatives like APCUS-SP are a good start to building important collaborations between NGO actors civil society and academics in the Pacific region.

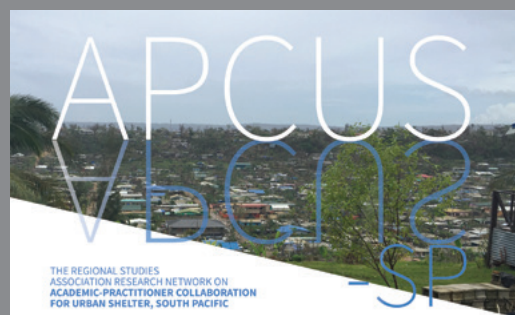
The recognition of the need for a more holistic approach to adaptation that addresses long-term development is gaining traction in the Pacific with the incorporation of 'resilience' in the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific 2017–2030.<sup>41</sup> The framework is a regional policy for the Pacific region which aims to align national policies on climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction.

The concept of building urban resilience was endorsed in the New Pacific Urban Agenda (PUA) at the 2015 Fourth Pacific Urban Forum.<sup>42</sup> The PUA recommends a closer alignment between urban planning, disaster management and climate change. Additionally, the 2013 ADB report, *Moving from Risk to Resilience: Sustainable Urban Development in the Pacific*, recommended a shift away from top-down land use planning to bottom-up solutions.

### Case Study

#### Academic Practitioner Collaboration for Urban Settlements South Pacific (APCUS-SP)

Established in May 2018, APCUS-SP is a research network dedicated to bridging the practice–research divide in humanitarian emergency management – in preparedness and response, and from recovery to development. The network seeks to create channels for sharing knowledge between academics and governments, civil society, humanitarian emergency and recovery personnel, and development actors. Linking these groups is vital because they hold bodies of knowledge that are often unshared. Current academic–practitioner collaborations are constrained by institutions and the limits of personal networks. There is much to be gained by making more academic knowledge and expertise accessible to practitioners involved in disaster response and long-term development activities.



The HURCAP,<sup>43</sup> mentioned earlier, is another strategy that supports an urban resilience approach. The strategy was developed after wide consultation with those living in Honiara's informal settlements.

This policy imperative is encouraging. However, an ongoing in-depth desktop review<sup>44</sup> being undertaken by UNSW has identified that there is relatively little research on what urban resilience could look like in the Pacific context. While there is a wealth of research on 'traditional' and indigenous coping strategies for climate change and disaster risk reduction in the Pacific rural context, there is significantly less research on understanding the ways in which the urban poor are addressing these challenges themselves, particularly in informal settlements. More research and understanding of this reality is urgently required, to enable support for such processes.

More can also be done to ensure that the policy imperative for urban resilience is actually implemented. But how can this be measured and what does this look like in the Pacific island context? Da Silva et al. identified that, due to the fact that resilience is an "attribute of the urban system's behaviour, it cannot be measured directly other than in terms of changing performance in response to shocks and stresses".<sup>45</sup>

It is important to recognise that since resilience is due to multiple actors composed of individuals, communities, institutions, businesses and systems, it can only be achieved through multiple interventions and therefore cannot be attributed to a specific intervention. A 'systems approach'<sup>46</sup> would therefore assist in comprehensively addressing these challenges. The 2016 policy paper highlights the need for a systems approach in planning and implementation of urban programs in order to consider the multi-disciplinary and multi-sector dimensions of projects.<sup>47</sup> Many definitions of urban resilience, including the one used in this paper, identify towns and cities as a 'urban systems' lending credence to the systems approach.

A good entry point to identifying what urban resilience could look like in the Pacific Island context, particularly for NGO's and Community Based Organisations, is to focus on social capital and community resilience. It is these features of urban resilience that are most likely to be expressed in informal settlements and help to reduce the vulnerability of these communities. This is due in part to their 'village in the city' socio-cultural characteristics and the need to devise their own social safety nets or adaptive capacities in the absence of government support and interventions. This people-centred approach is an important opportunity to ensure that urban resilience, in the words of Jones and Sanderson, will not "be seen as just another top-down global concept not grounded to the realities of the Pacific".<sup>48</sup>

A recent case study, commissioned as part of this RDI Network funded research, responds to this research gap. The case study identifies what neighbourhood-level resilience looks like in two informal settlements in Honiara, Solomon Islands.



## Recommendations for the way forward – promoting urban resilience

**The audience for these nine recommendations are those actors engaged in addressing the challenges of urbanisation and urban growth in PICs. These include but are not limited to government (local, national, regional and international), multilaterals (such as the WB and ADB), institutions, international and local NGOs, Community Based Organisations, urban civil society, academics and the private sector.**

- 01** An urban resilience approach is required to address the unique urban challenges facing the Pacific; one that covers the intersection of development, climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction. This approach should build on existing local and community level capacities and take into account levels of vulnerability and access.
- 02** In light of the urban complexity in PIC towns and cities, systems thinking is recommended and complements the urban resilience approach.
- 03** Further investment and support for urban resilience should be secured for implementation. This will support emerging thinking and a number of Pacific regional policies. In addition there is a strong business case for varied types of urban investments in resilience of which international, regional and national stakeholders should be cognisant.
- 04** Hybrid approaches to urban management should be developed. These are approaches that synthesise customary and community level governance systems with formal governance mechanisms. These approaches will support local approaches to resilience, and respect the traditional systems that have such significance in the urban and in particular the peri-urban contexts.
- 05** Building urban resilience requires a multi-disciplinary approach involving multiple actors and partnerships. Therefore, governments (both local and national), not-for-profits, private sector actors, multilaterals and academics among others should look for and develop opportunities for strong and meaningful partnerships to advance urban resilience activities.
- 06** Australian NGOs and local partners need to develop stronger urban resilience strategies for the Pacific through learning exchange.
- 07** DFAT should include urbanisation in its strategies and approaches to both development and humanitarian response. These strategies and approaches should support an urban resilience approach.
- 08** Because resilience is difficult to measure, stakeholders working in this area should develop resilience tools such as indices and assessments that can be adapted to the Pacific context and that look at the characteristics and costs of resilience building.
- 09** Research gaps must be addressed in relation to identifying social capital and community resilience in the Pacific urban context, particularly within informal settlements, in order to build effective urban resilience grounded to the realities of Pacific island towns and cities.



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5. Trundle, A. et al. (2018). Leveraging endogenous climate resilience: Urban adaptation in Pacific Small Island Developing States, forthcoming publication in *Environment and Urbanisation*.
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7. For the purposes of this paper, 'informal settlements' are characterised by illegal (according to the prevailing formal state system) or unplanned housing developments; they lack universal access to services. This paper uses the term 'informal settlements' to mean 'squatter and informal settlements' as both terms are used interchangeably in the Pacific context. Note that, in some PIC countries, the term 'squatter settlements' describes settlers ('squatters') illegally occupying state and freehold lands, while the term 'informal settlements' describes settlers occupying land with the agreement of traditional or customary land owners.
8. While definitions of resilience vary, this paper uses the UN-HABITAT definition which identifies urban resilience as "the measurable ability of any urban system, with its inhabitants, to maintain continuity through all shocks and stresses, while positively adapting and transforming toward sustainability": *UN Habitat (2018), City Resilience Profiling Program, Social Resilience Guide*.
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13. Jones, P. (2012) notes that PICs use a range of legal and administrative definitions to understand the term 'urban' – mostly defined by population density. From his investigations, the broad definition of 'urban' in the Pacific is 'a built-up area at a certain point in time, having a minimum number of people and city-like functions': Asian Development Bank (2012). *The State of Pacific Towns and Cities: Urbanization in ADB's Pacific Developing Member Countries*.
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