

Press release

Urbanization in the Pacific reaching a crisis point

“Urbanization is a crisis on our doorsteps that requires urgent action on the ground, we need a sense of urgency”, says Max Kep, Director and Chairman of the Office of Urbanization in Papua New Guinea.

It was in 2005 when the Pacific Leaders recognized that failing to address key urban issues would compromise the economic prospects and security of the Pacific islands. While progress has been made in strengthening urban management, this is not keeping up with the rapid pace of urbanization in Pacific island countries.

Pacific island governments and development partners met in Nadi, Fiji at a 3-day Pacific Urban Forum, to mobilize action in support of Leaders’ commitment to address issues in the Pacific. The Pacific Urban Forum was organized by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), UN Habitat and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) and was attended by national planners, local government representatives and development partners representatives.

Reflecting on the phenomena of growing poverty, Derek Brien of the Pacific Institute of Public Policy noted that poverty in the Pacific was now an urban problem that cannot continue to be ignored in “this current state of policy paralysis”.

Population pressures in urban areas of the Pacific are striking. Alastair Wilkinson, an expert on social policy in the Pacific, informed the meeting that in the Marshall Islands, Jenrok’s population density was equivalent to 33,950 persons per square kilometre. In Kiribati, Betio has a population of 12,509 people on 1.45 square kilometres.

Port Vila’s population has trebled in size since the 1980 while in Suva, 730 new households are being added to informal settlements each year. In Port Moresby, the annual population growth rate is approximately 7.8 per cent while in Honiara population has been growing at an annual average of 6 per cent, nearly twice the national rate of 3.5 per cent

Land ownership is a critical issue to address in urban management in the Pacific particularly in cases where “practice related to ownership of land and water is not always compatible with the requirements of modern urban development” said Jan Overbeek from the Pacific Infrastructure Advisory Centre (PIAC).

An important aspect of effective urban planning is addressing the adaptation challenges posed by climate change. This includes current exposure to natural hazards and the concentration of population and infrastructure in vulnerable coastal areas.

The meeting agreed on ways of providing support to the Pacific in urgently addressing the challenges of urbanization and in enhancing the contribution of urban centers which while “messy” were still the engines of economic growth.

- - -

For more information, please contact:

- David Smith, Deputy Head and Senior Economist , UN ESCAP Pacific Office
Tel: +679 3237702 or Email: smith27@un.org; or
- Sarah Mecartney, Pacific Programme Manager , UN Habitat
Tel: +679 3237717 or Email: mcartney-unhabitat@un.org