

Pacific Populations in the First Half of the 21st Century

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In June 2010, the Statistics Programme in the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) estimated the aggregate population of the 22 island countries of the Pacific to be just under 10 million. Just over two-thirds of the Pacific population was living in Papua New Guinea (PNG) (6.75 million). No other country had more than one million inhabitants, although Fiji at just under 850,000 was not far off this number (Table 1). Sixteen of the 22 countries had less than 200,000 inhabitants, and half of these had populations under 25,000.

Contemporary Pacific populations

There is enormous variability in the sizes of populations in the island countries, just as there is enormous variability in their land areas and resources bases. Papua New Guinea has 86 percent of the region's land area and is significantly larger than New Zealand (Table 1). New Zealand's 270,500 km² of land is equivalent to 58 percent of the area of PNG, while its population of 4.37 million in June 2010 was the equivalent of 65 percent of PNG's estimated 6.75 million at that time (Table 1). Just over half of the Pacific countries (12 of the 22) have less than 500 km² of land area and 8 of these have less than 250 km² of land (Table 1).

The small aggregated land areas are spread over many islands in most countries. The low-lying coral islands that comprise the Pacific's atolls and reef islands are the region's most vulnerable environments when it comes to considering some of the long-term impacts of climate change – their shallow fresh water lenses are particularly prone to increasing salinisation as a result of more frequent storm surges and higher tides ('king tides'), as well as low and erratic rainfall and prolonged drought (Photo 1)

Urbanisation

Another dimension to the enormous diversity amongst Pacific countries is the distribution of their populations across rural and urban places (Table 1). At the time of the last population census in New Zealand in March 2006, 85% of the residents were living in urban places with 1,000 or more inhabitants. In the Pacific Islands less than a quarter of the 9.85 million residents

were living in towns and cities. This 'average' for urbanisation in the Pacific is strongly influenced by the very low level of urban residence in PNG (only 13% at the time of their last census in 2000). In fact, several Pacific countries are more highly urbanised than the New Zealand population, especially in the northern Pacific or Micronesia (Table 1). Guam, with its large American military presence has 93% of its residents living in town, while Nauru has everybody living in and around its former phosphate mining town. The Northern Mariana Islands (90%), Palau (77%) Cook Islands (72%), Marshall Islands (65%), and New Caledonia (63%) are also highly urbanised, while Fiji (51%), French Polynesia (51%) and American Samoa (50%) have at least half their populations living in urban places (Table 1).

During 2010 the share of the world's total population living in towns and cities passed 50% for the first time in human history. Ten of the Pacific states had reached or passed this milestone by 2010, and two more were very close to reaching it (Tuvalu and Kiribati) (Table 2). While over three-quarters of the residents of Papua New Guinea (87%), Solomon Islands (84%), Samoa (79%), Federated States of Micronesia (78%), Tonga (77%) and Vanuatu (76%) are still rural-resident, the pace of urbanisation has accelerated in all countries in recent years (Photos 2 and 3). Urban populations in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands are growing at more than 4% per annum, compared with growth rates of 2.0–2.5% per annum in their rural populations. This is a common pattern throughout the region – most countries have higher annual growth rates for their urban populations than is the case for their rural ones.

In three of the countries in the eastern Pacific (Polynesia) that have more than 60 percent of their residents living in villages there are more people living in towns and cities in countries on the Pacific rim (New Zealand, Australia, United States of America and Canada) than in the islands. If you add into the island-based populations for Niue, Samoa and Tonga the tens of thousands of Niueans, Samoans and Tongans living in towns overseas the share of their overall totals that are urban-resident rises to well over 70 percent. Niueans, Samoans and Tongans are not 'rural' people. These countries all have very extensive diaspora populations. The largest diaspora, in terms of its size compared with the island-resident population, is the 22,000 Niueans living overseas compared with the 1,500 residents on the island of Niue.

Population processes

Another demographic dimension of diversity amongst the Pacific populations that is relevant for this discussion of challenges and opportunities in the future relates to their fertility, mortality and overseas migration rates. Some simple indicators of contemporary Pacific demography are given in Table 2. There are significant variations in total fertility rates (TFR, the average number of children a woman will have during their reproductive ages), ranging from 4.6 in the Solomon Islands to 1.6 in the Northern Mariana Islands. Eight of the Pacific countries have TFRs of 4.0 or more – almost double the current TFR for New Zealand, and well above the TFRs for all of Europe's populations (Table 2).

A useful indicator that is used for mortality is the average life expectancy

of a person at birth in each of the countries. None of the populations have a life expectancy at birth of 80 years, the level for New Zealand's total population around 2009 (Table 2). Ten of the 22 populations have life expectancies in excess of 70 years, and only two (PNG and Nauru) have life expectancies in the mid-50s (Table 2). In general, the Polynesian countries have the higher life expectancies, with somewhat lower ones in Melanesia and Micronesia (Table 2).

In the case of international migration, most countries are experiencing net losses of people overseas (Table 2). The highest rates are in the small island countries of Polynesia and Micronesia, especially those with privileged access to a former colonial power on the Pacific rim (the United States in the cases of the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands and the Northern Mariana Islands; New Zealand in the cases of the Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau, and Samoa). Some countries have very little net out-migration and the most prominent of these are PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. These three large populations have no significant diasporas – options for entry of their citizens into Australia, New Zealand and the USA are much more restricted than is the case for most other Pacific populations.

As a result of their high fertility and very limited net migration losses, PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu all have rates of population growth in excess of 2.0% per annum. None of the Polynesian populations, and only two of the Micronesian ones, reach this level. The exceptions are Guam (which experiences extensive immigration of military-related personnel from the United States) and Nauru which has no emigration outlets. Most of Polynesia's populations have growth rates of less than 1%, largely as a result of net out-migration.

In terms of population growth rates there are, in effect, three Pacifics: the 'high-growth' populations in the large countries of Melanesia (average annual rate of population growth of 2.0%); the 'medium growth' populations in the small island countries of Micronesia (average annual rate of population growth of 1.5%); and the 'low growth' populations in Polynesia (average annual rate of population growth of 0.7%) (Table 2). In most of the countries the growth in employment opportunities outside of village agri-



Photo 2: Village scene, Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu 2009

culture is much slower than the growth in the size of the labour force.

The search for job opportunities overseas

One of the greatest challenges that the leaders of Pacific states are facing is the provision of work in towns for their burgeoning youthful populations. Under-employment and unemployment of what is often termed the 'youth bulge' is a growing cause of concern to governments in several

countries, especially PNG, Solomons, Vanuatu and Kiribati. Through the first decade of the 21st century there has been increasing pressure placed on New Zealand and Australia to open up their labour markets to greater immigration from the Pacific. A recurring theme at the annual meeting of Pacific leaders, the Pacific Islands Forum, has been access to employment opportunities in two countries that have major shortages of labour in their primary production sectors, especially agricul-

Region/country	Land area (sqkm)	Population (est. 2010)	Population distribution (%)	
			Rural	Urban
Melanesia	542,370	8,641,900	80	20
Fiji	18,270	847,800	49	51
New Caledonia	18,580	254,500	37	63
Papua New Guinea	462,840	6,745,000	87	13
Solomon Islands	30,400	549,600	84	16
Vanuatu	12,280	245,000	76	24
Micronesia	3,150	547,300	34	66
Federated States (FSM)	700	111,400	78	22
Guam	540	187,100	7	93
Kiribati	810	100,800	56	44
Marshall Islands	180	54,400	35	65
Nauru	20	10,000	0	100
Northern Mariana Islands	460	63,100	10	90
Palau	440	20,500	23	77
Polynesia	7,990	663,960	62	38
American Samoa	200	65,900	50	50
Cook Islands	240	15,500	28	72
French Polynesia	3,520	268,800	49	51
Niue	260	1,500	64	36
Pitcairn Islands	5	60	100	0
Samoa	2,940	183,100	79	21
Tokelau	12	1,200	100	0
Tonga	650	103,400	77	23
Tuvalu	25	11,200	53	47
Wallis and Futuna	140	13,300	100	0
Pacific Islands	553,510	9,853,160	77	23
New Zealand	270,500	4,367,700	15	85

Table 1: Size and distribution of Pacific Island populations, 2010

Source all tables: SPC-SDP



Photo 3: street scene, Vila 2009



Photo 4: Tongan workers in Motueka, 2009

ture (including horticulture and viticulture) in New Zealand, as well as mining in Australia. The Australian government has never given any special priority to migra-

tion from Pacific countries, including its former colony, PNG. However, in 2009 it began experimenting with a small pilot project to bring in seasonal workers required in the horticulture

and viticulture industries from four countries – Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Kiribati, and Tonga. The numbers actually recruited under this Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme have been very small to date (less than 500) but this is a significant departure in policy for Australia in response to pressure from Pacific governments.

New Zealand's response has been more generous. In 2007 a managed seasonal work scheme was introduced for the horticulture and viticulture industries which prioritises employees from Pacific countries (see also Jana Prochazkova's contribution in Pacific News 34). Five countries have been supported in their engagement with the scheme (Kiribati, Tuvalu, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu) and up to 5,000 work permits were made available in the first year of what is known as the RSE (Recognised Seasonal Employer) work policy. In 2009 the number of permits was increased to 8,000 and by November 2010 over 20,000 permits for work in New Zealand had been issued under the RSE since its inception in April 2007.

The RSE scheme has proved to be very popular with New Zealand employers seeking to resolve chronic seasonal labour shortages. In addition to providing a stable core to the peak workforces required for picking, pruning and packing fruit, the scheme has had a major impact on church attendance

Region/country	Fertility rate per woman	Life expectancy at birth	Cruel net migration rate	Population growth %/year
Melanesia	c. 4,2	c. 60	-0,6	2
Fiji	2,6	65	-7,7	0,5
New Caledonia	2,2	75	4,6	1,5
Papua New Guinea	4,4	54	0	2,1
Solomon Islands	4,6	61	0	2,7
Vanuatu	4	67	0	2,5
Micronesia	c. 3,7	c. 68	-2,4	1,5
Federated States (FSM)	4	68	-14,7	0,4
Guam	2,7	74	13	2,7
Kiribati	3,5	61	-1	1,8
Marshall Islands	4,4	68	-18,4	0,7
Nauru	3,3	56	0	2,1
Northern Mariana Islands	1,6	75	-15,8	-0,1
Palau	2	69	0	0,6
Polynesia	c. 3,2	c. 72	-8,5	0,7
American Samoa	4	73	-7,1	1,2
Cook Islands	2,5	73	-6,3	0,3
French Polynesia	2,2	74	0	1,2
Niue	2,6	72	-28,1	-2,3
Samoa	4,2	73	-16,7	0,3
Tokelau	4,5	69	-16,2	-0,2
Tonga	4,2	70	-16,6	0,3
Tuvalu	3,7	64	-8,8	0,5
Wallis and Futuna	2	74	-13,2	-0,6
Pacific Islands	c. 3,9	c. 65	-1,2	1,9
New Zealand	2,1	80	-3,8	1

Table 2: Demographic rates, Pacific Islands 2010

in many small rural communities (Photos 4 and 5). The scheme is also popular back in the islands – it is the second biggest employer of ni-Vanuatu outside of their own civil service, and a major contributor of remittances to rural communities in the islands.

Projected population growth

The RSE and PSWPS, while very welcome initiatives, do not have the capacity to do much to assist with providing work for the rapidly increasing numbers of young Pacific islanders who are seeking wage employment, especially in Melanesia. Over the next 40 years the total population of the Pacific islands is projected to almost double again and to exceed 18 million by 2050 (Table 3). PNG's population could exceed 13 million, more than four times larger than it was in 1990 when it was close to the same size as New Zealand's population. While PNG's population is projected to increase by more than 6.4 million between 2010 and 2050, New Zealand's is likely to grow by only 1.4 million. The demographic futures of New Zealand and Australia and their island neighbours to the north will become increasingly divergent as the century progresses.

While the rates of growth will fall for all Pacific populations over the next 40 years, the absolute numbers added to the numbers living in PNG, the Solomons and Vanuatu will increase. In 1990 these three countries accounted for just over 4 million (68%) of the Pacific's 5.9 million. In the 20 years between 1990 and 2010 their combined populations increased by 3.5 million – the equivalent of 88 percent of the region's 3.9 million population increase during the period, and more than the total population of New Zealand in 1990 (Table 3).

Over the next 20 years (to 2030) the population of PNG, Solomons and Vanuatu will grow by a further 3.6 million – the equivalent of 90 percent of the region's 4 million increase between 2010 and 2030. In the 20 years between 2030 and 2050 the populations of these three countries could grow by 3.9 million – the equivalent of 93% of the region's total increase of 4.2 million. If these projections prove to be reasonably reliable, the three coun-

Region/country	Mid-year estimates		Projections (2010)	
	1990	2010	2030	2050
Melanesia	4,986,700	8,641,900	12,431,600	16,475,700
Fiji	739,3	847,8	946,3	1,060,700
New Caledonia	168,8	254,5	323,2	359,4
Papua New Guinea	3,608,000	6,745,000	9,899,600	13,271,100
Solomon Islands	323,3	549,6	876,4	1,245,800
Vanuatu	147,3	245	386,1	538,7
Micronesia	414,3	547,3	675	748,8
Federated States (FSM)	96,3	111,4	121,1	137,6
Guam	133,2	187,1	243,1	267,8
Kiribati	72,3	100,8	137,5	163,3
Marshall Islands	44,7	54,4	62,4	61,2
Nauru	9,4	10	13,7	16,3
Northern Mariana Islands	43,3	63,1	74,6	80,1
Palau	15,1	20,5	22,6	22,5
Polynesia	543,7	663,9	759,5	825,8
American Samoa	46,8	65,9	83,7	98,3
Cook Islands	17,5	15,5	16,3	16
French Polynesia	196,5	268,8	321,8	348,8
Niue	2,3	1,5	1,2	1,3
Samoa	160,5	183,1	197,7	209,7
Tokelau	1,6	1,2	1,2	1,2
Tonga	95,9	103,4	111,7	123
Tuvalu	8,9	11,2	12,5	13,9
Wallis and Futuna	13,7	13,3	13,4	13,6
Pacific Islands	5,944,700	9,853,100	13,866,100	18,050,300
New Zealand	3,410,400	4,367,700	5,200,000	5,800,000

Table 3: Pacific populations, estimates and projections, 1990-2050

tries in Melanesia that currently have no significant outlets for emigration, could add more than three times New Zealand's total population in 1990 to the region's population by 2050.

The major migration-related challenge facing Australia and New Zealand in the Pacific region in the next 40 years is not going to be responding to the impact of climate change on low-lying coral atolls and reef islands or the 'drowning' of islands by sea level rise if this occurs. This will be a relatively easy demographic problem to address. A much more difficult one is going to be responding to the changing social and economic conditions in the big island countries of Melanesia. Already these countries are being termed an 'arc of instability' on Australia's eastern border. New Zealand and Australia

are key participants in the regional assistance mission (RAMSI) in the Solomon Islands that is endeavouring to re-establish a viable governance system there. Fiji's several military coups have profoundly disrupted that country's development. PNG and Vanuatu have quite fragmented governments.

Conclusion

The second half of 20th century saw the extensive migration to the United States from Micronesia and to New Zealand and later Australia and the United States from Polynesia. During the first half of the 21st century it will be Melanesians who are seeking migration outlets, and New Zealand and Australia will be the logical destinations for many of those seeking work and opportunities overseas.

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