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Crises and Opportunities



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PREFACE

“Crisis” is a word in wide use these days, principally in regard to the global economy and the ever-worsening prognosis for the world’s environment. The only prediction that is holding up well is that we will experience an accelerating pace of change; some of this change will be for the better, but some will be quite disconcerting.¹ While the word “crisis” is usually associated with a poor or dangerous state of affairs—an emergency or catastrophe—it can also mean a testing time, a turning point, or a crossroads in political, social or economic affairs. It is in this more optimistic sense that we examine development issues facing the Pacific islands region in this series of papers, giving consideration to the challenges that confront us but also looking for opportunities that lie within them.

Like all small island States in their susceptibility to economic and environmental shocks beyond their control, Pacific islands are well familiar with crises and abrupt changes in fortune. The region is especially vulnerable to natural disasters, in both their frequency and their enormous impact on small communities. A large proportion of a country can be affected by a single event and decades of development effort destroyed in a few hours, as happened when Cyclone Heta hit Niue in 2004. The changing climate is likely to bring storms and droughts of greater frequency and ferocity as well as rising sea

¹ A. Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York, Random House, 1970).

levels.² Particularly on the more crowded islands of the Pacific, the degradation and exploitation of almost all critical natural environments put at risk the health and the social and economic well-being of people. An international scramble is under way for the region's natural resources, especially timber and tuna, with scant regard for the fragile ecosystems of the Pacific islands or the living conditions of their people. The cost of poor environment management on a global, national or local scale has been evident for a long time but too little acted upon. The true cataclysm may be creeping up right under our eyes.

In recent decades, the Pacific region has barely emerged from one down-turn before wallowing into the next. These problems have been compounded in some countries by weak governance, widespread corruption and bouts of political instability or civil violence. In the past decade, political coups, civil unrest or violence has occurred in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and (more briefly) Tonga and Vanuatu. The World Bank has calculated that chronic shocks to Pacific island economies during the 1990s averaged 2-7 per cent of gross domestic product in both disaster and non-disaster years.³ The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Commonwealth Secretariat estimated that since independence in Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon Islands and

² WHO, 2008. *Sanitation, hygiene and drinking water in the Pacific island countries: Converting commitment into action*. Manila: WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific.

³ World Bank, 2006b. *Not if, but when. Adapting to natural hazards in the Pacific Islands Region* Washington: The World Bank

Nauru, crisis and instability has cost almost \$75 billion in foregone incomes.⁴ At the Regional Review of the Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2001-2010, it was noted that the costs of violence, instability and conflict are visible in curtailed economic growth, reduced trade and investment flows, and declines or stagnation in human development indicators.⁵

The global economic crisis that began in 2007 is still reverberating through Pacific economies, deepening the pre-existing problems of stagnating growth, limited prospects, falling food and fuel security, and the atrophy of livelihoods. Lower commodity prices are drawing down export incomes, and tourism income and remittances are being affected by the economic recession in source economies.⁶ Most public offshore investment funds have declined in value. Some large private sector operations dependent on offshore demand and funding are at risk. The growth forecasts for most Pacific countries have been progressively downgraded as the global economic crisis has deepened. ADB predicts the economies of the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Palau, Samoa and Tonga will contract in 2009 and conditions will probably be tough in most Pacific economies into 2011.

⁴ ADB and Commonwealth Secretariat, 2005. *Towards a New Pacific Regionalism. Report to the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat*. Manila: ADB.

⁵ ESCAP, Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States. "Report of the Regional Review of the Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2001-2010", (LDCCU/POA/RR/Rep), 14-15 March 2006, Bangkok.

⁶ ADB, 2009. *Taking the Helm: A Policy Brief on a Response to the Global Economic Crisis*. Manila: ADB

Forecasts for a wide range of development concerns—summed up in the Millennium Development Goals—are not bright. Several recent reports have noted that the Pacific island region is unlikely to meet the Goals. Although the prospects for some countries are better than others, and some Goals are quite attainable, the attainment of these Goals by other countries is quite elusive. It is difficult to reduce such a diverse list of development issues across such a very diverse region to simple statements. Some countries in this region began this decade in a much worse state than others. For some indicators, such as primary school attendance, making good progress is easier when starting from a low base, that is, with few children attending school. For countries that began at a much higher base, making progress requires that they address pockets of disadvantage. Retreating from this numbers game, the real marks of progress are whether living standards are improving for most people or not, and whether the large differences in development conditions between and within Pacific island countries are narrowing.

Two papers in this publication focus on emerging demographic issues, namely the changing age structure of the region and the opportunities this raises, and the growing urban concentration of Pacific island populations, and the challenges this poses. The world population has surprised even demographers with the speed at which it is aging, and the supply of young working people is dwindling.⁷ In the 1980s and 1990s, many studies about the Pacific predicted that the high level of remittances would soon fall. Yet they continue to rise as more and more young Pacific islanders head to jobs abroad and send money home. Young people from the Pacific are now in great demand as soldiers in foreign armies and as carers of elderly people in developed countries, jobs that are well-

⁷ UNFPA, state of world population 2009. Facing a changing world: women, population and climate (United Nations publication. Sales No. E.09.III.H.1)

paid but have low-skill entry points. The market value for Pacific youth will increasingly be set on international terms, and the real money is to be made in higher skilled occupations. Jean Louis Rallu and Annette Sachs Robertson discuss the demographic “window of opportunity” posed by the growing cohort of young Pacific island adults (chapter I). The growth in urban poverty is among the most pressing development issues in the region, and threatens progress on a number of fronts. Alastair Wilkinson discusses the challenges to urban planning posed by rapidly growing settlements of informal housing in and around Pacific island towns and cities (chapter II).

High food and fuel prices are reversing the gains of poverty reduction efforts made in the Pacific over the past decade. Food prices rose sharply then eased back, but may well rise again soon, compounding the problems of many households across the region, particularly the poor. Part of the remedy is to boost the agricultural sector and retrieve some of region’s lost food security. Marita Manley and Tim Martyn address the question of whether rising food prices could boost agricultural sectors in the Pacific (chapter III).

Given the enormity of disaster risks to Pacific island people and economies, more attention is being given to improving disaster risk management. Paula Holland reports on the economic advantages of investing in better risk management (chapter IV).

While tourism is highly vulnerable to economic slumps, this industry retains great potential for economic growth in the region, especially as the world market value of pristine island destinations and unique experiences continues to rise. In the final paper, Tony Everitt and David Harrison discuss how governments, together with the private sector and local communities, can address the challenges that tourism is facing so that the

sector continues to be a significant source of economic growth, and the types of policies that need to be pursued in other sectors to support tourism (chapter V).

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