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After the Floods: Urban Displacement, Lessons from Solomon Islands

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The severity and frequency of extreme climatic events in the South Pacific are set to increase, creating additional pressures on urban settlers occupying densely populated, flood-prone land. In 2014, Cyclone Ita left Honiara and surrounding areas with 22 people dead, about 675 destroyed houses, and huge recovery costs (GSI 2014). Some people could never return safely to their homes. However, in a city with little affordable housing or vacant land, there were few places to go. This In Brief documents the challenges government authorities — the Honiara City Council (HCC) and the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Survey (MLHS) — faced when they created a new subdivision for the displaced, April Ridge, and considers the lessons for more responsive planning.

Urban Land Scarcity — A Big Hurdle for Resettlement

Land is scarce in Honiara and demand for housing high. Squatter settlements comprise about 35 per cent of the city's population (HTCPB 2015) and are rapidly spilling over into adjacent land in Guadalcanal province, where some settlements are reportedly growing at over 9 per cent per annum (SINS 2012:21–22). The mushrooming squatter settlements are ill-equipped to deal with severe weather events because most have no services, many no road access, and nearly all inadequate drainage and sanitation. In the words of one senior official interviewed, 'all planners and utilities can do is chase the people, and we are falling behind'.

In this environment, proactive planning and effective responses to displacement rarely occur. Following disasters, finding secure land for resettlement is complex. Not only is land scarce, but tenure can be uncertain even on alienated land. Much land in and around Honiara was alienated during the time of the British Protectorate, and some of these acquisitions are still disputed by descendants of customary owners (*Solomon Star* 2014). Even on customary land, especially in peri-urban areas, land access disputes can arise because of intra-clan conflicts over benefit distribution and the authority to allocate land to outsiders (Foukona 2015; Monson 2015).

April Ridge: Only a Partial Solution

After the April 2014 flash flooding of settlements along the Mataniko River, the HCC and MLHS decided to create a new land subdivision away from flooding hazards, mainly for the displaced. They selected April Ridge in East Honiara because it was one of the few remaining areas inside the city boundary where the government owned the alienated land, and subdivision or substantial settlement had not occurred. This subdivision, and a recent subdivision at nearby Mount Austin (also in East Honiara) are rare cases of the MLHS taking a proactive approach to land scarcity issues.

Unfortunately, the urban planning solution to crisis management fell short. The MLHS officers pegged out the subdivision and advertised 268 lots for lease by public tender, with preference given to flood victims. Over a thousand applications were received. It took more than a year, given limited capacity, to finalise allocations. But flood victims needed an immediate solution, so politicians allegedly offered land to their displaced supporters to win favour and to free up much-needed schools and public buildings that were being used as evacuation centres (*Island Sun* 2014). Over a hundred people moved to the area before the planning and allocation processes were completed. Most, but not all, were legitimate refugees from Koa Hill but with no legal land rights.

By the time the lot allocations were completed, the immediate crisis was over and the area substantially settled. The rigid and formalised planning process was ill-suited for disaster response. The current squatters won't make way for others, even if they are successful applicants who purchase their leases; most have nowhere else to go and feel they have a legitimate land claim.

Challenges Facing April Ridge Response

In effect, the MLHS was attempting to create a legal settlement option. However, there are few incentives for settlers or political leaders to support this option. In addition to the mismatch of planning timelines to the immediate housing

needs following a cyclone, there are other flaws in the current planning process regarding regularising settlement for the urban displaced and new migrants. Importantly, the land charges exceed the settlers' ability to pay, so hardly any of the 268 lease offers have been taken up. To register a fixed-term estate (FTE) — a lease of up to 75 years — there is an unimproved land value charge of SBD40–70,000 (AU\$7–12,000), plus annual land rental and council rates. For many, illegal squatting is simply the more economically rational option. Suggestions by a few senior officials that costs should be reduced have been resisted by urban authorities reluctant to forego much-needed revenue (even if it rarely materialises).

Local politicians and most senior public servants have no appetite to enforce resettlement criteria through eviction — the risk is a loss of political support or rioting. Most feel obliged to respond quickly to settler needs following an extreme weather event, regardless of the planning rules or long-term implications. A legal challenge by government is also not attractive. In Solomon Islands' clogged courts, legal proceedings can be prolonged and results uncertain. Land disputes often halt development for years, increasing pressure on other unencumbered land.

Thus, governments have never forcibly removed squatters in and around Honiara. In other Melanesian cities, such as Port Moresby, unwanted squatters have been forcibly evicted, creating social tensions but rarely resolving land access issues. But the more accommodative approach is not problem-free. At April Ridge, yet another unplanned settlement has emerged, and the first wave of squatters are policing the new arrivals and their claims, creating social tensions (*Solomon Star* 2015).

Lessons Learned

The barriers to responsive planning are political, institutional, and cultural. The April Ridge experiment to create a safe, planned, and orderly response to displacement tried to address pressing housing needs with a lengthy land allocation process — the result was a mismatch between community demand and planning responses. April Ridge was further inhibited by the high costs of securing land leases.

So what must change? There is a pressing need for more housing options that don't require low-income people to secure land tenure. In other cities, some alienated land is dedicated to high-density and affordable housing that can

be leased from public or private developers. Low-cost credit schemes for housing are also being trialled in Port Moresby and elsewhere to increase access to finances. For those willing to rebuild their homes, access to low-cost, cyclone-resistant housing such as that being piloted in Suva could also increase urban resilience.

As for the existing 'unplanned settlements', they are here to stay, so working with communities to make them safe, secure, and well-serviced is in the public interest. For low-income households, FTEs will only work if they are affordable, subsidised or can be paid incrementally, and if they convey real economic advantage for access to services and finance. Finally, political commitment and institutional capacity to implement the orderly settlement of new subdivisions need strengthening for the public costs of this approach to be justified — not currently the case, but approaches to urban management are rapidly evolving.

Author Notes

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