

# HISTORY AND CONTEMPORARY DISPLACEMENT IN SUVA'S INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

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## **Land-Grabbing and Gentrification – Some Conceptual Views**

The concept of 'land grabbing' has its origins in rural societies (Zoomers et al., 2017). Vast areas of land were alienated by (mainly) European powers during colonialism, often in association with plantation agriculture. Explorers, 'successful' military officers, and at times ordinary settlers, received land grants from their rulers as award for duties performed for their countries (Belmessous, 2020; Nugent, 2020). More recently, and related to urbanization in the Global South, a separate debate has emerged relating to land-grabbing in urban areas (Steel, van Noorloos, & Klaufus, 2017). Fast urbanization has led to huge flows of investment in housing, infrastructure and urban economic development, triggering an enormous hunger for land (Feola et al., 2019).

Increasing urbanization caused by rural to urban migration can enhance crucial links between rural and urban areas. Access to cities and secure residential status is a precondition for poorer sections of societies to establish multi-local livelihood systems. Such systems play important roles in diversifying livelihoods, reducing risks and making livelihoods more secure (Peth, & Sakdapolrak, 2020).

Land grabbing, displacement and gentrification are closely connected. The latter term is especially contested in social science discussions: does gentrification happen only when building stock is upgraded, social differentiations emerge and displacement of the initial population occurs? Or is it also gentrification when the development of new residential areas changes the character of an entire neighborhood to the extent that existing residents are driven out by higher rental costs, clearing activities of authorities, and/or other causes?

Ghertner (2014) argues that gentrification theory has failed in 'much of the world' as the protagonists of gentrification theories frequently ignore what he calls 'tenure diversity.' "Customary land use and intermediate forms of tenure can sustain relatively equitable forms of social reproduction" (p. 554). Central to his criticism is that many authors on gentrification concentrate too much on places where corporate capital has already taken over, ignoring the complexity of land tenure situations in urban settings. They overlook that

“to a large degree [ ... ] these knotted terrains cannot be disentangled from highly localized histories, nor can they be rendered legible outside of similarly localized land management practices” (p. 555; see also Das, 2021; Garmany & Richmond, 2020). Concerning African urbanism and possible land grabs arising from international capital inflows to African cities, Steel, van Noorloos and Otsuki (2019) advocate to apply a diverse and dynamic approach, as African cities and towns are different in their historical, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions. Karaman, Sawyer, Schmid, and Wong (2020) introduce a concept of *plotting urbanism* in which they argue similarly. They look at urban housing plots that have formed over time, often with limited official planning, creating spaces, opportunities, and gains for individuals and special groups. Such diversities, “which often result from multiple overlapping modes of territorial regulation, land tenure and property rights,” allow lower-income residents who lack access to social housing to find affordable land (p. 2). The three case studies (Istanbul, Shenzhen, and Lagos) show that *plotting urbanism* happens in very specific contexts that are difficult to compare. They also show that poorer sections of societies do not always benefit. They often suffer as a result of the formalization/commodification of housing built on such plots.

Another reason to critically reflect on the concept of gentrification is that it cannot adequately deal with processes happening in the Global South in which rather than focusing on the rehabilitation of “built environments for the middle and upper classes,” focus on mass demolitions of living spaces and eviction/displacement of the people living there (Shearer, 2020, 193). An extreme example is what happened to poor people/people living in informal settlements in Dhaka, Bangladesh (Lata, 2020) when the state and municipality completely withdrew from social housing. A few wealthy and powerful housing estate developers took control over land and housing markets. They developed and implemented housing projects for the middle classes, making little or no efforts for poorer sections of Dhaka’s population. On the contrary, hundreds of thousands of people were forced out of their informal settlements to provide space for housing and other developments.

The *Right to the City* (Lefebvre, 1968) has been replaced by neoliberal ideas and frameworks. More than that: people in informal settlements are criminalized beyond the notion that they illegally reside on particular lands. State authorities perceive slum dwellers as ‘improper citizens’, ‘inferior,’ and sources of many unwanted characteristics of a city like crime and congestion (Lata, 2020).

In Brazil, similar processes are expressed by the term *Higienização* (hygienization). State authorities propagate a rigid formula for cleaning up cities from unwanted, unhygienic elements. The protection of health and avoidance of epidemics for orderly citizens are provided as a superficial justification for such action (Garmany & Richmond, 2020). Meanwhile, real sentiments and perceptions about the poor are rooted much deeper. Urban (re)organization / urban displacement is undertaken to keep particular sections of society away from urban centers: beautification and *higienização* go hand in hand.

The South African apartheid city represents the climax of population segregation (Davies, 1981). Wherever segregation became an important element of urban planning, notions of hygiene and public health appear as corresponding ideas. Often so-called *cordon sanitaires* (buffer zones) were introduced for purposes of health, but also for control, security, and domination (Colombijn & Barwegen, 2009). They became symbols for social injustice (Garmany & Richmond, 2020).

Gentrification does not fully capture displacements of large numbers of very particular sections of society. What began as a colonial concept to distinguish and separate Indigenous

populations from colonial rulers has become a crucial spatial element to distinguish and separate social classes of Indigenous ethnic backgrounds. Still, local differences vary widely. Forced, often violent displacement of the ‘unhygienic’ poor becomes a method through which the creation of *hygienic places* leads to treatment of the urban poor “as an infection harmful to the greater social body” (Garmany & Richmond, 2020, 129). Economic processes highlighted by gentrification theory play important roles, but explanations for ‘extra-economic violence’ need to go beyond gentrification (Shearer, 2020, 195). Clearing urban areas of an unwanted population often goes hand-in-hand with subsequent upgrades of locations and improvement of infrastructure. Making places more attractive and displacing poorer sections are therefore two elements of the same process (Ghertner, 2014).

Where authorities and international development agencies introduced ‘sites-and-services’ schemes, resettlement and displacement from established livelihoods, social networks, and sub-cultural characteristics of poorer sections became an integral feature of moving people from their present places to areas “where land is cheaper – further into the periphery, and into more precarious or disaster-prone places” (van Noorloos, et al., 2020, 40). Crucial aspects of incremental housing schemes that involve resettlement include: access to and security of sites, and finance for construction activities, services and utilities, building materials, and construction workers / specialists. Yet, a central aspect not included in the reflections by van Noorloos et al. (2020) is the disruption of livelihood systems as a result of relocation.

### **An Overview of the History of Land Tenure in Suva**

The first European settlers, who arrived in Fiji at the turn of the 19th century, depended on the support and benevolence of local rulers. Relationships were reciprocal – a handful of Europeans brought items for trade, including firearms to support Indigenous leaders in tribal wars. Some Europeans enjoyed the protection of chiefs and were permitted to settle in or near iTaukei villages (Routledge, 1985; Derrick, 1950).

The situation changed considerably when the number of Europeans arriving increased, and their economic interests diversified. Control over land was not required for the ongoing raid on natural resources, including sandalwood, *bêche-de-mer* (sea cucumber) and other exotic products harvested from the wild. More essential was the cooperation of chiefs, who ‘arranged’ workers to harvest and (when necessary) process resources. However, as more Europeans arrived, colonial plantation agriculture slowly emerged. Coconut plantations provided the foundation of copra production, used to produce coconut oil. The establishment of cotton plantations was incentivized by the decline of American cotton production and soaring world market prices during the Civil War in North America (1861–1865).

At this point, real estate became a lucrative business in Fiji. Settlers no longer came as adventurers, prison escapees, ship-wrecked 19th-century beachcombers, nor as traders. Those arriving to start plantation agriculture needed (to buy) land. An era of land grabbing commenced to an extent that has not been seen since. It continues to have impacts on land tenure, especially in Fiji’s capital, Suva. From the 1860s, colonial companies from Australia, most importantly the Polynesian Company, acquired land on a large scale (Watt, 2019). In 1868, the company bought some 200,000 acres of land from Ratu Seru Cakobau, the self-proclaimed King of Fiji (Tui Viti), that included the entire Suva peninsula (Nicole, 2010).

In the mid-1860s, Cakobau got into trouble with the American government in relation to claims that the American commercial attaché Williams had against Fiji. On US

Independence Day (July 4) 1849, Williams' house on Nukulau Island was burned down by fireworks. Williams sought damages because, rather than helping to extinguish the fire, Fijians on Nukulau were alleged to have ransacked the attaché's house. Williams estimated his damages at USD 3,000. Whenever an American warship called at Fiji, he tried to put pressure on Cakobau to pay for the damages. Cakobau was able to avoid Williams' demands until June 1867, when the American warship USS *Tuscarora* called at Fiji. By now, Williams' demand had increased to USD 45,000 and the US government insisted on payment. As collateral, it seized three islands in the Lomaiviti group and forced Cakobau to sign a document committing him to pay a first installment in May 1868 (Watson, 2014).

A few days later William Moore, of the Wesleyan Missionary Society in Fiji, met with a Melbourne land speculator, W.H. Brewer. The two worked out a plan to relieve Cakobau of his worries: they proposed that Cakobau convey 200,000 acres of land to the Melbourne Polynesia Company, which would then assume Cakobau's debts in return. Moore's involvement was surprising, since the Wesleyan Missionary Society strictly prohibited missionaries from engaging in land transactions. Little bothered by this, not only did Moore become Cakobau's most important advisor in the negotiations with the Polynesia Company, but he also became one of the largest landowners in Fiji at the time (Samson, 1998).

Moore and his missionary colleagues Horsley, Brooks, and Langham persuaded Cakobau to conclude the deal with the Polynesia Company – against reservations expressed by British consul John Thurston. In addition to the almost 200,000 acres of land, the Polynesia Company was to receive exclusive powers in banking and control of Fiji's ports. The contract also provided for a right of first refusal over all land Ratu Cakobau sold in future (Thornley, 2002). The Polynesia Company agreed to assume all of Cakobau's debts and pay him an annual pension of USD 1,000.

Cakobau had promised the Polynesia Company land over which he had no control. The missionaries were well aware of this, but voices criticizing the land deal were few. Among them was the missionary Jesse Carey, who feared that the rightful owners of the land would fight this injustice (Thornley, 2002). However, he and other critical voices could not prevent Cakobau and six other Bauan chiefs from signing a treaty on July 25, 1868, that transferred large portions of the Suva Peninsula and Beqa Island, along with large tracts of land in Ba Province and Natewa Bay to the Polynesia Company.

Moore's involvement in the land speculation became the subject of an investigation by the New South Wales Methodist Conference. Moore was forced to resign as leader of the Methodist Church in Fiji and was replaced by Frederick Langham. The investigation revealed that Moore was not the only missionary that had acquired land in Fiji. Moore and other missionaries were mildly reprimanded for 'unwittingly' violating mission principles prohibiting land purchases. The deal between Ratu Cakobau and the Polynesia Company is a typical example of dubious land transactions in (pre-)colonial Fiji.

Later, when the British colonial government agreed to relocate the capital from Levuka, an alleged understanding was reached with the chief of Suva village to relocate to what is today known as Suvavou village (New Suva Village). The agreement was never put in writing and the descendants of Suva village have contested the validity of the agreement ever since (Chambers, 2008; Miyazaki, 2004). Around 500 cases of iTaukei being deprived of their land under fraudulent circumstances have been reported. Alienation of land usually happened through private (non-state) effort but "in many of those examples, the colonial government is said to have been implicated actually or constructively" (Chambers, 2008, 112).

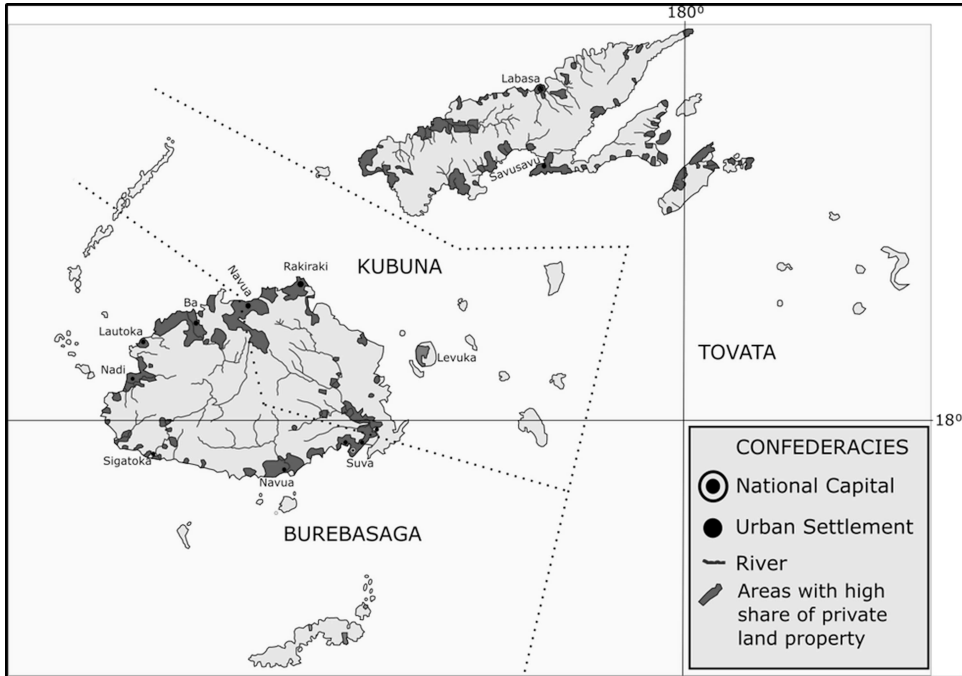


Figure 26.1 Private land in Fiji.

The Polynesia Company sold land in rural areas to settlers at high margins. Conflicts emerged as settlers occupied the best land in coastal areas. European plantations spread to the interior of Viti Levu along main rivers (Figure 26.1). The real estate boom was supported by chiefs in coastal areas. As Ratu Cakobau had sold land to Europeans that belonged to tribes in the interior, violent assaults by hill tribes against European settlers were frequent. Regular punitive expeditions by the colonial power, supported by chiefs of the eastern coastal plains, followed (Nicole, 2010).

Two crucial decisions were made by the first substantive British Governor, Sir Arthur Gordon in the second half of the 1870s, at the very beginning of colonial rule. The first was to ban further land sales in the colony. Land that was not already alienated in pre-colonial times became protected under the control of the iTaukei and their ‘traditional’ structure of paramount and lesser chiefs (Heath, 1974). Control over land rests with small family units (*tokatoka*), clans (*mataqali*), and tribes (*yavusa*) (Chapelle, 1978). Paramount chiefs exercised control over *mataqali* and *yavusa*. They protected ‘the way of the land’ (*vakavanua*), which was formally strengthened through institutions installed by the British. The Great Council of Chiefs (*Bose Levu Vakaturaga –BLV*), an important link between the colonial administration and Indigenous leaders, was established in 1876. The BLV became the most important Indigenous institution to advise the colonial power on how best to govern Fiji’s Indigenous population. It was “an instrument of colonial rule” (Norton, 2006, 98) rather than of Indigenous autonomy.

In 1876, a commission under Victor Williamson looked into claims concerning alienated land. Although claims by Europeans were often refused or reduced, some 400,000 acres of

land were registered as freehold (private), including a meaningful proportion of good agricultural land. In 1880, the Native Land and Fisheries Commission (NLFC) was established to investigate claims by Indigenous landowners. Around the same time, leases were introduced with a duration of 21 years. Crucial for today is the establishment of the Native Lands Commission under the 1905 Native Land Ordinance. The commission is central to the land tenure system in colonial Fiji; it confirmed Gordon's policy to disallow iTaukei to alienate their (native) land (Young, 2001).

In the 1880s, Suva became Fiji's colonial capital after land speculators put their weight behind the decision. Virtually all native land that had existed on the territory that became Suva, Fiji's capital, had disappeared. Today around 90 percent of the land in Fiji belongs to iTaukei groups, except in Suva where there is no native land. The grabbing of land had paved the way for Suva to become Fiji's capital.

After Suva became Fiji's colonial capital, it grew quickly on the western side of the peninsula, where the Queen's Wharf was constructed in 1883. Here Suva's commercial, administrative and residential functions were concentrated. Population numbers in Suva exploded due to migration from rural areas. Many people who came to Suva found themselves in informal settlements at the city's outskirts, such as in its eastern part. Once at the very rim of a modest colonial capital, today these settlements are located in a fast-growing urban agglomeration, surrounded by locations of prime commercial and residential development for the middle and higher middle classes.

### **Informal Settlements in the Eastern Part of Suva Peninsula**

Today, only 6 percent of Fiji's territory is private land, around 4 percent is owned by the state (incl. municipalities), and the rest is native land. Colonial economic activities concentrated initially on rural areas for agricultural plantations (after the 1850s) and mining sites (since the 1930s). World War II brought some push towards urbanization, but major changes commenced only when Fiji became independent in 1970. In 1911, just 4 percent of the country's population was living in urban areas; by 1966, this had increased to a third (Chandra, 1985). The 50 percent mark was crossed in 2004 (ADB, 2012). By 2022, just under 60 percent of Fiji's population were living in urban areas.

The modernization optimism that existed at the time of independence soon faded. A rapidly increasing urban population brought many unresolvable social, ecological, cultural, and planning challenges. The provision of infrastructure, including low-cost housing for a rapidly increasing urban population, lagged behind growth. Many informal settlements emerged in locations with adverse environmental conditions (Weber, 2021). Often these conditions are severe and detrimental to human habitation, 'dangerous places' by any measure (Weber, Kisson, & Koto, 2019).

The exact number of informal settlements in Fiji is unknown – they are not treated as special enumeration areas in the country's decennial censuses, instead being mixed with formal residential areas. In 2003, it was estimated that some 15 percent of Fiji's population lived in informal settlements, around 140,000 people distributed between 190 – 200 settlements (Kiddle, 2010). Figures from 2007 put the number of informal settlements in Suva alone at 85 and the numbers of residents at just under 55,000. UN Habitat (2019) estimated the number of informal settlements in Greater Suva at 117, followed by Lautoka (19), Nadi (14), Ba (5), Labasa (4), and Levuka (2).

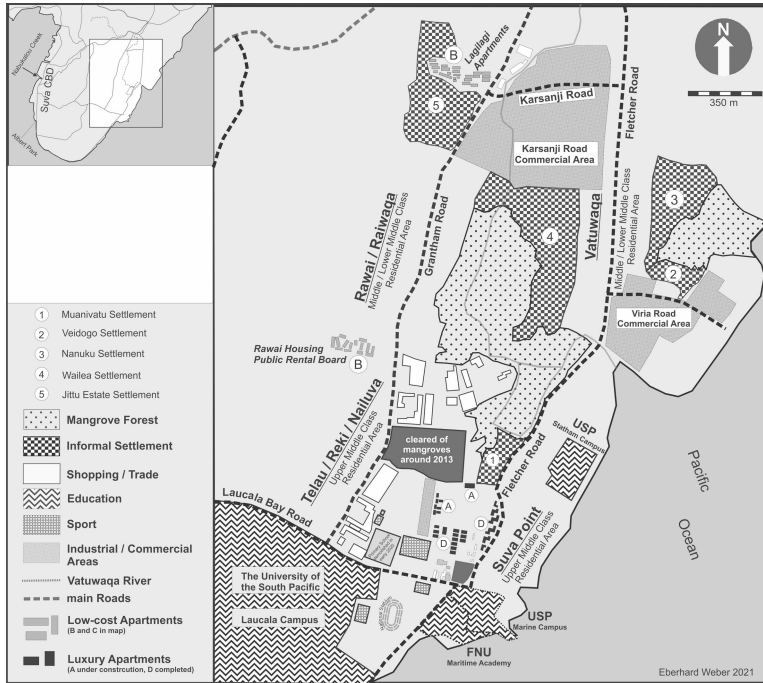


Figure 26.2 Southeastern part of Suva peninsula.

Nasinu, a town northeast of Suva, has the highest numbers of informal settlements. The largest settlements, however, are in the south-eastern part of Suva peninsula. Here there are fewer than ten settlements, but they are the biggest in Fiji. They are close to commercial areas, which provide employment to many residents of nearby settlements such as Veidogo and Nanuku. Both are earmarked for relocation to allow for the expansion of Viria Road Commercial Area, which lies to the south of the settlements (Figure 26.2; see also Devi, Lowry, & Weber, 2017). The two settlements combined have some 540 houses with around 2,600 residents. The first people to arrive were displaced by the Karsanji Commercial Area in the 1970s. Now they are expected to move again. Plans for this have existed since 2006, but resettlement has yet to commence as of May 2022.

Other large informal settlements are Waileka, one of the oldest and biggest informal settlement in Fiji with some 485 houses and approximately 2,500 residents, and Jittu Estate with some 470 houses and 2,400 residents. Muanivalu, the youngest settlement in the area, has some 120 houses, with around 600 residents. The settlement increased from seven houses, shown on aerial images in 2002, to some 90 houses in 2016, to almost 100 houses in 2019, and around 120 houses in 2022.

### ‘Interventions’ to Informal Settlements in the Eastern Part of Suva Peninsula

Informal settlements emerged near commercial areas in the outskirts of Suva, close to residents’ workplaces. Low, or even no rents, and low transportation costs help to keep industrial wages low. Food costs are also lower as many residents of informal settlements

are migrants who benefit from agricultural produce (including kava) sent from rural areas. They often live in trans-local household arrangements: some household members live in villages, others in urban areas. There is constant communication and flows of goods, money and people between different sections of the same households.

Efforts to criminalize residents of informal settlements are frequent but communicated in very subtle ways. The common expression for ‘informal settlement’ in Fiji, ‘squatter settlement’, highlights an illegal activity: to squat is to stay in a place with no right to do so. While attempts to evict people residing in informal settlements have occurred, they are relatively rare and not always successful. The ‘passive resistance’ of residents has made many such attempts futile – people just do not leave. Past evictions have affected smaller settlements, usually erected on private land, including land owned by religious and educational institutions (for details, see: Kiddle, 2010).

In early 2009, residents of the Villa Maria settlement received eviction notices signed by the then Archbishop of the Catholic Church, which wanted to use the land to build a school. Immigrants from Wallis and Futuna were residing on the land. The Church’s attempt to use its own land failed and the settlement continues to exist today. Informal, ‘customary’ tenure systems do indeed create spaces (Ghertner, 2014).

In June 2009, some 160 residents of Namara settlement received eviction notices to make space for a Housing Authority scheme. Most of the residents, descendants from Solomon Islanders who were brought to Fiji in the 19th century, indicated that they were not willing to leave. The Housing Authority developed alternative sites for them, allowing residents to stay in the settlement until the construction of alternative houses had been completed (Fiji Sun, September 11, 2009). It took until September 2013 and financial assistance of FJD 10,000 before the last residents were willing to move (Fiji Sun, September 15, 2013).

At times residents of informal settlements appear to be on the losing side of challenges as authorities regularly try to criminalize them (Fattah, & Walters, 2020; Mercan, & Şen, 2020; Storey, 2020). As is the case elsewhere, criminalization does not only refer to residents’ status as ‘squatters’ living illegally on land owned by others. In June 2010, residents of Jittu Estate came under pressure when the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Environment wanted to have all tenants removed and their houses dismantled. The Minister did not mean all residents, just tenants: residents who did not live in their own houses, but rented a house from others (Fiji Sun, June 10, 2010). Three days later, the same minister warned residents of Wailea, Jittu Estate, and Muanivatu to behave orderly or face eviction. They were told to clean their surroundings, keep drainages and creeks in good shape, and refrain from illegal activities (Fiji Sun, June 12, 2010). In both cases, it went no further than the threat, but these and other similar cases make it clear that authorities are not concerned only with strictly economic issues, but also issues of Higienezação (hygienization).

Public media regularly features two other accusations raised by authorities: 1) informal settlements are breeding grounds for petty crimes such as sex work, drug abuse, burglaries and thefts. (Fiji Sun, May 16, 2012; Li, 2020), and 2) residents of informal settlements are not poor (Fiji Sun, July 22, 2010). The ‘evidence’ provided is that many households possess dish antennas, taxis and other ‘luxury items’ (Fiji Sun, January 17, 2010). A variation of this construction is that ‘squatters’ have land or residential properties elsewhere and do not need to live in informal settlements. A related accusation is that people are making big money renting out properties they own in informal settlements (Fiji Sun, June 1, 2020). While such cases may exist, it is also the case that there is not enough affordable formal housing in Suva.



Informal settlements create spaces for rural immigrants. For authorities, rural to urban movements are unwelcome, while for migrants, they are part of a livelihood diversification strategy (Kuiper, & Greiner, 2021; Rooney, 2021). Moves to drive out all poor, unwanted elements from urban spaces, forcing them back to their villages, or to peri-urban areas is detrimental to people's efforts to secure their livelihoods through diversification of livelihood sources (Ntsonge, & Fraser, 2021).

### **Resettlement and Land Reclamation for Commercial Development and Middle-Class Housing**

Nanuku and Veidogo are informal settlements in the eastern part of Suva peninsula built into mangrove forests. They occupy land belonging to the family of a goldsmith that left Fiji in 1975 to start a jewelry business in Canada. They remained big real estate owners, around the Karsanji Road Commercial Area in Suva. In 2009, and again in 2016, the Fiji government announced plans to relocate both settlements. In 2016, the Attorney General personally visited Nanuku to inform people of the proposed resettlement to Makoi, some 10 km away (Fiji Sun July 13, 14 and 15, 2016). As of May 2022, nothing had yet happened. The property owner aims to complete resettlement as quickly as possible in order to sell land for the extension of Viria Road Commercial Area. The development is worth FJD 60 million, including FJD 12 million that the landowner has agreed to provide for sub-dividing 25 acres of land in Makoi into 300 plots, and for the provision of water, electricity and sewerage (Fiji Sun, June 1, 2020). Equipped with a 99-year lease, people are expected to build their houses according to their preferences following an incremental housing/site-and-service approach (Mohanty, 2020). The landowner has agreed to provide each household FJD 1,000 to cover the expense of moving to the new location. Many people, including authorities, are optimistic that a lease title will secure mortgage loans of up to FJD 10,000 for residents. This amount would be sufficient to start building a house, but not enough to complete it.

There is considerable confusion about the number of households and people earmarked for relocation. In October 2018, the Attorney-General announced the relocation of some 2,500 people living in 300 households (Fiji Sun, October 25, 2018). While the number of people is realistic, the number of households appears underreported. In August 2020, it was reported that 200 plots were available in Makoi (Fiji Sun, August 16, 2020). This would be an insufficient number of plots for all of the households currently residing in Nanuku and Veidogo. The analysis of aerial images reveals that some 540–560 households exist in the two settlements. Conflict over who receives a plot are inevitable. Some people have expressed concerns that the allocation of plots might become an issue in the 2022 elections.

According to the Nanuku settlement president, many residents do not qualify for lots in Makoi because they have land elsewhere or own houses that are rented out while they stay in Nanuku (Fiji Sun, June 1, 2020). Few iTaukei would qualify for a plot under such criteria ('have land elsewhere'). Many, if not all, have land in their villages, land that belongs to their mataqali (clan). They have a 'use right' over this land. The application of such criteria would be significantly detrimental to people's livelihood strategies, which are built on translocality and on having different members of the same household in different places in order to support the diversification of livelihoods and reduce risk.

The relocation plan ran into further trouble before it commenced. In early August 2020, it emerged that some people were selling land in Makoi, in the exact locations to which people from Veidogo and Nanuku were to be resettled. At least 80 people made deposit payments,

totalling more than FJ\$ 150,000, to secure plot titles in the sub-divided settlement in what became known as the ‘Makoi Land Scam.’ Receipts issued in exchange for the deposits bore the stamp of the Minister of Local Government & Housing. A person identified by media as one of the ‘masterminds’ of the ‘Makoi Land Scam’ was found dead hanging from a tree on August 20, 2020. No further information was provided (Fiji Sun, August 23, 2020).

Another settlement in the vicinity looks to have a different future. Under the *Revitalising Informal Settlements and Their Environments* (RISE) project, Muanivatu is undergoing a face-lift, due to be completed in 2024. Muanivatu is among 12 informal settlements in Greater Suva to be upgraded through the RISE-project, led by Monash University in Melbourne. The aim of the project, for which Muanivatu is ideally located, is to revitalize informal settlements through water sensitive approaches that are cost-effective and improve environmental conditions. Except for a few patches north and west of the settlement, the mangroves of Vatuwaqa River are completely destroyed (Weber, 2021). Residents are happy to be able to avoid eviction / relocation, having been issued five eviction notices, never yet implemented, during the short lifetime of the settlement (Weber, Kissoon, & Koto, 2019).

When people first settled in Muanivatu some 20 years ago, they built houses right into the mangrove forest. The environmental challenges of the area provided security from eviction, as nobody else was interested in using the land. Today the environmental situation in the settlement has worsened as commercial and housing development schemes are being built immediately adjacent to it. Land in surrounding locations has been reclaimed and filled up, so that it is now considerably higher than the settlement. Heavy rainfall, coinciding with king tides, regularly produces flooding (Weber, 2021).

The success of RISE interventions depend on the ability to retain the original residents and prevent gentrification in an increasingly attractive residential and commercial neighborhood.



*Figure 26.3* Construction of luxury apartments some 200 m from Muanivatu (Weber; Feb. 2021).

Less than 300 meters away, executive apartments go for monthly rents of between FJD 5,000 and 6,000 (Sky Apartments, 2021). Closer to Muanivatu, more apartment blocks are under construction (see Figure 26.3). Where RISE improves housing quality and environmental standards, there is considerable risk that people won't be able to stay in the long term. Elsewhere, there are cases where the upgrading of informal settlements has led to a type of gentrification (Balboni, Bryan, Morten, & Siddiqi, 2021; Cummings, 2015). This has occurred when residents of informal settlements / social housing projects were driven away by economic forces that were created when the quality of life improved in the locations where they lived.

When settlements like Muanivatu, Veidogo, and Nanuku were established a few decades ago, they were on the periphery of urban Suva. People built their houses in environments nobody else wanted to use because of severe environmental challenges: along rivers and creeks, and into mangrove forests. With the expansion of Suva, many informal settlements have found themselves occupying prime locations (Weber, 2021; Weber, Kissoon, & Koto, 2019).

### **Apartment-Type Housing for Poorer Sections of Suva's Population**

Demand from middle-class people for apartments along Grantham Road has led to long waiting lists. In the early 1960s, well before Fiji's independence, major housing projects for low-income earners were built. Multi-story apartment buildings were erected at Raiwai and Raiwaqa by the Public Rental Board (PRB). Rural migrants were motivated to move in and obligatory courses on living in the city were taught (Walsh, 1978, 156). The buildings were demolished in 2008 and many of the 2000 residents moved to informal settlements (Kiddle, 2010).

In 2014, the first residents were able to move into 500 new flats that had been built in Raiwai and Raiwaqa with the help of a loan of over FJD 20 million from the People's Republic of China. Less than two km north along Grantham Road, a local non-governmental organization (NGO), the People's Community Network (PCN) has built another apartment complex for people from informal settlements. The Lagilagi Housing Project was to provide affordable housing to residents of Jittu Estate settlement (Halter, & Matadradra, 2020). In November 2018 allegations arose suggesting that many residents were staying illegally in the Lagilagi apartments. It appears that bribes had helped illegitimate people to get to the top of the waiting list (Fiji Times, Nov. 15, 2018). In June 2019, the Fiji government took over the Lagilagi Housing Project (Walsh, 2019).

Apartments built for poorer sections of Suva's population often change hands and better-off people take over. In most instances, this goes unnoticed; changes in occupancy, and at times also in ownership is rarely formalized. Those for whom the apartments have been constructed receive an additional source of livelihood when they rent the flat out or when they sell it. For their own residence, they have to move further to the rim of the city, where they start living in informal settlements again.

What happened in Lagilagi and the PRB apartments in Raiwai may also happen to the people of Munaivatu once the RISE project is completed. When the quality of building structures improves, water supplies become reliable and safe, and sanitation services are upgraded, these neighbourhoods become highly attractive. It then becomes more likely that poor and vulnerable residents will be induced to leave.

The processes described earlier are not new to Suva. In 1993, Namadai informal settlement was upgraded by the Methodist Church of Fiji. The in-situ upgrade of Namadai

transformed the socio-economic and spatial landscape from an (illegal) informal settlement to an upgraded residential sub-division. By 2018, some 70 percent of the original residents still lived there, but 30 percent had moved elsewhere over the years. They either settled along a nearby proposed highway as squatters, moved back to their villages or bought residential lots and houses elsewhere (Koto, 2018).

### **Implications of Eviction/Resettlement on People's Livelihood Systems**

Tenure insecurity, and, specifically, the fear of eviction, makes people hesitant to invest in their houses and neighbourhood. The consequences of eviction are not just the loss of housing. Evictions and relocations have severe repercussions on complex and sensitive livelihood systems that are heavily dependent on multi-local arrangements, or translocality.

Within the next few years, life in informal settlements in eastern Suva will change drastically. The residents of Veidogo and Nanuku will be resettled, while those living in Muanivatu will see an upgrade of their settlement. Research conducted in the three settlements since 2016 shows that few of the people living there came directly from rural areas. Most residents had first settled in other informal settlements within Greater Suva, or other urban places in Fiji. Muanivatu is the first urban residence after leaving their villages for less than 40% of those living there. Despite such 'urban history,' more than 90 percent of the iTaukei perceive their origins as rural Fiji – even if they have never lived there. Parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents left their villages and moved to Suva. The iTaukei who are second, third, or even fourth generation residents of Suva retain very strong links to their rural origins. The village is where their clan (*mataqali*) has land over which they hold user rights. In difficult times, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, they can return to their villages, and claim a piece of land for their own use (Weber, Kopf, & Vaha, 2021, 2022).

iTaukei maintain strong links to close relatives in their villages. These connections play an important role in their livelihood security. The most crucial consideration for people migrating from rural areas to towns and cities is often the reduction of livelihood risks: migration and the diversification of livelihoods are ways to respond to risks, threats, and shocks. Bertram and Watters (1985) coined the expression "transnational corporations of kin" in relation to international migration from Pacific Island countries to developed countries at the rim of the Pacific Ocean.

Such processes are reminiscent of discourses about modes of production in African and Asian societies that articulate the diversification of livelihood sources to minimize risks and enhance security (Elwert, Evers, & Wilkens, 1983; Neubert, 1986). There, households combine work within different modes of production, including for example capitalist wage labor in urban areas and subsistence production in the village. Households are divided with part remaining in rural areas and part moving to urban locations. They frequently communicate, visit each other, and exchange goods for private consumption or business. The 'exchange' of people such as pre-schoolers and school-aged children is another aspect of such translocal household networks.

This is entirely different to those Fijian residents of Indian descent, of whom few own land. Most have previously operated leased sugarcane farms. Virtually all have had to leave rural areas when their sugarcane leases were not renewed. This has happened to thousands of tenants since the middle of the 1990s. They lost their sources of livelihoods (sugarcane cultivation) and their houses that were built on leased land (Weber, 2005).

## Conclusion

Fiji has a large number of urban areas that have gone through many changes since they were first established in the first half of the 19th century. In many urban areas, informal settlements have emerged as an expression of rural to urban migration and in response to high land and rental prices. By far the largest number of informal settlements are in Greater Suva. Major economic activities such as tourism, kava and sugarcane cultivation have long been decentralized and rural-based, slowing the rate of rural to urban migration. People in rural areas are frequently able to find off-farm employment in tourism and commercial agricultural. Migration to Suva comes mainly from smaller outer islands to the east of Viti Levu (Lomaiviti, Lau islands) and from Kadavu Island to the south. Most migrants of Indian ancestry are former sugarcane farmers who ended up in Suva after initially migrating to a number of other locations after their sugar cane leases had expired.

The impact of Suva's pre-colonial history does not necessarily make it an ideal location for migrants, given that most land there is held by private owners. The transfer of the Suva peninsula by Ratu Seru Cakobau to the Polynesia Company in the 1860s made Suva a haven for private land speculation. This continues to this day, reaching areas where informal settlements are now perceived to stand in the way of urban commercial interests.

Poorer sections of Suva's society use their agency to make the best of a difficult situation. They frequently succeed in avoiding eviction / relocation from prime neighborhoods. The question, however, is whether housing security is sustainable or if, in the end, financial power will prevail. Tenure diversity exists in the sense that people have opportunities to negotiate the specific conditions concerning housing rights. The ongoing expansion of Suva City creates increasing pressure – locations that were once shunned by commercial investors have become lucrative neighborhoods for capitalist investment. The eastern part of Suva peninsula has become one such rapidly developing area. A few decades ago, the entire area was on the periphery of Suva peninsula. Today, it is one of the fastest growing commercial areas, greatly increasing the pressure on residents of informal settlements.

One might imagine that a social group that constitutes some 15 percent of Fiji's population would hold strong power through sheer numbers. However, politicians have neglected the interests of people living in informal settlements. For most of its history, Suva has been an urban area and informal settlements have been a crucial component of its social and economic fabric and a product of Suva's historical relationship with colonialism. There are many reasons to assume that this will continue to be so, but at the same time, there still is much need and potential to improve these places so that they can provide healthy living spaces for a large section of Suva's population.

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