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A SYSTEMATIC VIEW OF THE PROBLEMS OF LOW COST HOUSING IN THE PACIFIC REGION

by

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The problems of low cost housing particularly when associated with the rapid growth of towns, are not isolated phenomena and must be viewed as part of the whole urban 'system'.

The problems of improving public health measures, increasing economic development, the social adjustments necessary for those moving from village to town life, the control of the rhinoceros beetle, higher educational standards, town planning controls, marketing and import policites, political development, family planning measures, changing land tenure systems, the growth of responsible local government, increased tourist activity and the provision of adequate housing are all inter-dependent and inter-related.

It is quite likely therefore that the real long-term answers to the housing problem lie not in concentrating narrowly on technical solutions to housing as such, but in acting on some other part of the system.

On family planning, for example, to reduce the numbers that will need housing, or on increasing economic activity to raise family incomes so that better housing can be afforded.

As human and financial resources are limited and have to be carefully allocated, it is important that efforts should be concentrated where they will achieve maximum impact.

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There is an understandable tendency on the part of those called upon to make projections and predictions for the future to stress the paucity of the available data and to want more research before making any predictions.

The overall trends in the Pacific area, however, even with inadequate statistics, seem to me to be painfully clear and at the risk of repeating data well known to you, I propose setting /down

has also occurred when economic opportunities have made it possible (from the Gilbert and Ellice Islands to Nauru, and from the Wallis and Futuna Islands and the New Hebrides to New Caledonia).

There is no doubt that if politically possible and acceptable, migration out of the area could be a highly desirable safety valve to further reduce the pressure on housing, jobs, etc.

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The Economy

If the economies of the Pacific territories were expanding at the same rate as their population there would be many short term problems but none that might not be solved in the long term.

Geographic and economic realities, however, would appear to impose serious limitations to economic growth in the area.

Economic patterns are dominated by agriculture, with subsistence production playing a major role. The overall picture, gained from studying the available export statistics is the heavy reliance for export income on agriculture and related primary products such as copra, coffee, timber, sugar and fish. One notes also the reliance of the economies of most territories solely on one or two products. For example, Nauru's sole dependence on phosphates, American Samoa's heavy reliance on tuna and fish products, New Caledonia on nickel and Fiji on sugar. New Guinea emerges as perhaps the exception where make up of exports is not so one-sided.

Agricultural products are, of course, precisely those that are vulnerable to variations in world prices or that can be affected by physical factors such as storm damage, insect pests and plant diseases.

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The expansion of agricultural production to support rapidly increasing numbers of people and to increase income from exporting the surplus is therefore of prime importance.

Obviously scope exists for improving output by modernising methods of production, eliminating diseases and pests, and by better systems of marketing, without considering the question of how much more land is available to be brought into production.

The situation in some of the smaller territories such as the Gilbert and Ellice Islands and the Tokelau Islands seems only too clear. There is little surplus land not in production and resources are strained by the existing population. For them solutions such as migration and/or population control are necessary.

In most of the other areas there appears to be no immediate shortage of land (as far as detailed Survey information is available) although sometimes the rate at which it can be brought into production is controlled by internal factors such as the existing land tenure system and external factors such as the

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There are considerable prospects for large scale tourist developments in the area with the increasing affluence of the developed countries, increasing interest by the major airlines in the Pacific region and the presence of an unusal variety of attractive environments to be visited.

Tourist development would provide more jobs and foreign exchange income as well as having desirable multiplier effects on other sections of the economy such as in construction and the service industries. Fiji, New Caledonia, New Guinea and American Samoa have encouraged tourism and the rate of expansion has been impressive. Encouragement of tourism is never without some misgivings of the undesirable impact it can have on traditional ways of living and certain areas such as Tonga and Western Samoa have actively opposed large scale tourism.

A Private Members Bill created the British Solomon Islands Tourist Authority [redacted] in the Legislative Council in Honiara December 1969. The same conflict was clear in the debate on that Bill, between the need to encourage economic activity and a desire to prevent the indigenous culture being disrupted.

Even without encouragement, however, it is likely that tourist activity in the area will increase and it should therefore be planned for so that its impact both socially and environmentally is absorbed. The same goes for the impact of mining wherever exploitable deposits of minerals are found.

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This recitation of some of the facts that control the balancing parts of the urban system, although well known, should sober and quicken the urgency of our discussions this week. The best that can be hoped for are rates of economic growth that can keep pace with burgeoning populations. The problems of housing the poorest sections of the population will get much more difficult in the decade ahead.

Also, as the population grows the problems of housing will then be exacerbated as increasing numbers of people move from rural villages to the urban centres. The rate of growth of the population will be accompanied by the even more rapid growth of the towns.

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The deliberations of the earlier conferences on low cost housing at Suva 1963 and Noumea 1966 contain papers that show how, with great ingenuity and skill, the sizes and costs of houses have been reduced down to the lowest possible levels but that when economic rents are calculated these rents are still too high for the majority of those needing housing.

I worked for four years in the Housing Division of the London County Council in the early fifties on low cost housing and we faced the same problem in England at that time. No matter how cheaply we built and how cleverly or ingeniously we increased densities or reduced space standards there was always a gap between the economic rent and what people could afford which had to be met by a rent subsidy from the Central Government.

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One virtue of self-help housing such as this is that it keeps pace with the income of the family. They build what they can afford. As family size grows and family income increases they can add more space and upgrade the standard of their dwelling. The process utilises the maximum use of the occupiers' own labour, which boosts morale and helps encourage self reliance, adaptation to town life and the acquisition of new skills.

There are various ways that have been tried to assist the self-help process, by the provision of small loans at particular stages, or by making building materials available at low cost. So-called 'Roof Loans' are often given - i.e., money is lent for the roof, doors and windows once the walls are up. This method enables some control to be maintained over standards.

The Port Moresby Urban Development Study just completed by Consultants describes one experiment in this direction that I think is very encouraging:-

"An experimental programme of particular significance is being carried out for the small squatter colony at Rabia Camp. The objective of this programme is to provide building sites for squatters (with security of tenure), planned in such a way that the area can be progressively upgraded. By offering building lots with security of tenure, squatters are encouraged to develop their own housing to standards they can afford, maximising the use of their own initiative and abilities. Moreover, since the settlement will be built according to a planned layout, it will be possible to progressively upgrade the area and add additional urban services, when these can be afforded by the population. At present, this approach is being applied only to the rationalisation of the existing squatter settlement at Rabia. It is felt, however, that the basic approach has far wider applicability..."

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It is my opinion, therefore, that limited resources can be put to better use by providing land, basic services and loan assistance to guide and control self-help housing rather than in the actual building of minimum low cost housing which will be beyond the resources of most of the population.

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Traditional statutory town planning schemes are suspect in the conditions prevailing in most of the Pacific territories. The skilled manpower to prepare and administer them is usually not available, and a more flexible, simpler tool is needed to guide urban development.

A continuously evolving Strategic Plan is more suitable - a simpler document and yet in a way a more sophisticated one in terms of evolving to meet changing circumstances. A Strategic Plan is a basic policy document from which all other policies, plans and programmes are derived and must illustrate the desired broad

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APPENDIX I

POPULATION - PROJECTED GROWTH 1970-1980

	1966	1970	1980	Rate
Cook Islands	19,247	24,000	33,000	3.16
Fiji	476,737	540,000	715,000	2.85
Gilbert & Ellice Islands	54,500	62,000	87,000	3.43
Nauru	6,048	7,000	10,000	3.63
New Caledonia	95,000	104,000	137,000	2.80
Papua/New Guinea	2,184,986	2,421,000	3,126,000	2.57
New Hebrides	77,983	85,000	112,000	2.80
Niue	5,194	6,000	8,000	2.91
American Samoa	24,000	29,000	39,000	3.00
Western Samoa	131,553	150,000	197,000	2.76
Solomon Islands	142,740	156,000	206,000	2.83
Tokelau Islands	1,832	2,000	3,000	4.14
Tonga	77,429	87,000	117,000	2.98
Wallis & Futuna Islands	8,334	9,000	13,000	3.76
TOTAL	3,305,383	3,682,000	4,803,000	2.71

Source: United Nations World Population Prospects 1965-1985