

Sustainable Urban Development: Pacific Dream or Reality? A Fiji Case Study

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Abstract

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission identifies cities in Asia and the Pacific as centres of both hope and despair, identifying them as engines of economic and social development whilst struggling as congested centres of poverty and environmental deterioration. To understand the progress being made in sustainable urban development and management, it is necessary to investigate and analyse the multiple legal, political, social, environmental, economic, ecological, and cultural influences that have the potential to cloud and derail progress. The key to formulating effective policies is to first understand the existing realities and processes on the ground and then to determine ways and means of reducing the negative impacts of these processes and maximizing their positive impacts. Using the UN ESCAP template, this paper considers the reality of urban development in Suva, Fiji, through an investigation of the inadequacy of existing infrastructure, short-term goals, political uncertainty, customary land tenure, and societal confusion over aspirations for commercialism alongside traditional customary ways.

Introduction

At the start of the twentieth century only 13% of the world's population lived in cities; by 2010, the UN estimates, over 51% of the global population will be urbanized. Over the last forty years, the greater part of global urban growth has been occurring in developing

countries (Burgess, Carmona and Kolstee, 1997). However, censuses undertaken in 2000 and 2001 suggest that the world is actually less urbanised and less dominated by large cities than had been predicted by the UN twenty-five years earlier, with indications that the year that the world's urban population will overtake the rural population is now 2007 (Satterthwaite, 2002). Whilst there is a correlation between urbanisation and economic growth, Satterthwaite suggests that it is not growth, but poor governance that is the most costly impact on the environment and society.

The concept of 'sustainable development' was first given expression in the World Conservation Strategy prepared by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and launched in March 1980 (Yencken, 1994). In 1987, the Brundtland Report, also known as *Our Common Future*, alerted the world to the urgency of making progress towards economic development that could be sustained without depleting natural resources or harming the environment (WCED, 1987). From this, *sustainability* has emerged as a widely held and necessary notion to guide all future endeavours (ESD, 2003).

The Brundtland Report defined Sustainable Development as 'development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. The report was primarily concerned with securing a global equity, redistributing resources towards poorer nations whilst encouraging their economic growth (ESD, 2003). It highlighted three fundamental components to sustainable development: environmental protection, economic growth, and social equity. In June 1992, the Rio Earth Summit declared, 'The right to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations'. Sustainable Development is not just about the environment, but about the economy and our society as well.

Agenda 21 was the critical document to come out of the Rio Earth Summit. It addresses the pressing problems of today and aims at preparing the world for the challenges of the next century. It reflects a global consensus and political commitment at the highest level on development and environment cooperation. Chapter 7.27 of Agenda21 details access to land resources as an essential component of sustain-

able low-impact lifestyle. Land resources are the basis for human living systems and provide soil, energy, water, and the opportunity for all human activity. In rapidly growing urban areas, access to land is made increasingly difficult by the conflicting demands of industry, housing, commerce, agriculture, land tenure structures, and the need for open spaces. Furthermore, the rising costs of urban land prevent the poor from gaining access to suitable land (UNCED, 1992).

When the United Nations General Assembly authorized holding the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, it was hardly a secret - or even a point in dispute - that progress in implementing sustainable development has been extremely disappointing since the 1992 Earth Summit ten years earlier in Rio de Janeiro. Poverty was deepening and environmental degradation worsening despite the well-meaning intent and guidelines of Agenda 21. What the world wanted, the General Assembly said, was not a new philosophical or political debate but rather a summit of actions and results. That is the huge challenge ahead for us all.

According to the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, the 15 per cent of the world's population living in high-income countries account for 56 per cent of the world's total consumption, while the poorest 40 per cent, living mostly in low income countries, account for only 11 per cent of consumption. While most people are consuming more today — with the expansion of the world's economy in the 1990s and rising living standards in many countries — it is harrowing to observe that consumption for the average African household is 20 per cent less than it was 25 years ago (UNCSD, 2003). However, sustainable consumption is not only a matter of the equitable use of resources. If everyone in the world were to live like an average person in the high income countries, we would need 2.6 additional planets to support us all, according to the Ecological Footprint Sustainability Measure, an independent measure based on UN statistics.

So how do we measure 'development'? By a growth in the gross national product (GNP), which is currently running at 4.4% in Fiji (ESCAP, 2003)? For many developing countries, enhancement of economic growth is often the major macro objective of economic development. We assume that sustainable poverty reduction is a bi-product of economic growth and will occur by way of a trickle-down

effect. However, the linkages are more complex than that and the reality is that such growth can only come at the expense of the planet. Clearly we need significant changes to the value systems that have inspired Western attitudes to development and progress (Yencken, 1994). The term *sustainable development* goes beyond the boundaries of science and business development and trade to include human development, values, and differences in cultures. In fact, many organizations are referring to *sustainable human development* as opposed to sustainable development in order to emphasize issues such as the importance of gender equality, participation in decision-making processes, and access to education and health.

Cities have become the focal points of these components as major consumers and distributors of goods and services. However, many cities tend to be large consumers of goods and services, while draining resources out of external regions that they depend on. Increasing consumption of resources, and growing dependencies on trade, causes the ecological impact of cities to extend beyond their geographic locations.

It has been recognised that the concept of sustainable development is an evolving, and a debatable, term. It means different things to different people/societies. So let us look at the definition of sustainability for the Gagudju people. During their 40,000-year history, the Gagudju people of Kakadu, Australia, have never destroyed land, nor diminished its spirit (National Geographic, 2002). This is indeed an excellent testament to sustainability, but is it development? Today, there remain only a handful of elders, old men looking after the sacred sites, struggling to keep the spirit alive. The spirit of the land endures; it is the spirit of the people that has diminished. The younger generations want the global dream and do not want to be tied to the land. This is the challenge – customary ways or consumerism. The primary strategy of the Declaration emanating from the 2002 South Pacific Land Tenure Conflict Symposium detailed this coherently by identifying the need to explore and reach consensus on where people/citizens want to be located between the extremes of traditional customary ways and Western materialism (Boydell, Small, Holzknicht and Naidu, 2002). This is a serious challenge to Pacific Island nations in addressing urban development.

During the preparatory meetings for the URBAN21 Conference

(Berlin, July 2000), the following definition was developed to define sustainable urban development:

Improving the quality of life in a city, including ecological, cultural, political, institutional, social and economic components without leaving a burden on the future generations. A burden, which is the result of a reduced natural capital and an excessive local debt. Our aim is that the flow principle, that is based on an equilibrium of material and energy and also financial input/output, plays a crucial role in all future decisions upon the development of urban areas (FOBRP, 2000).

Contextualising the Pacific

Perhaps we need to step back and contextualise the Pacific Island nations, which range from 12 nations to 22 nations depending on the definition of various regional organisations.¹ Swaying palm trees, white sandy beaches, thatched villages and turquoise waters purvey the idealised idyllic image of the Pacific Islands that inspires plane-loads of tourists to escape their own modern urbanised metropolis to snatch a few brief weeks in 'paradise'. However, each one of these countries has at least one major administrative centre and capital city of its own, whose existence is vital to national survival. The towns and cities of the Pacific Islands are small by world standards and their environmental problems may seem of little consequence by comparison (Overton & Storey, 1999). Yet for their inhabitants, with anticipated rapid population growth, the issue of working towards a more sustainable urban environment is no less pressing. As with all matters surrounding the Pacific, it is essential to consider what is *appropriate* to the region.

The evolving cities of Pacific Island nations are part of a changing kaleidoscope. Over the last two hundred years, they have grown from a village on a quiet bay to a trading town and port with the onslaught of colonialism. The deteriorating infrastructure and relics of a

¹ The University of the South Pacific (USP) incorporates twelve Pacific Island Nations, whereas the South Pacific Geoscience Commission (SOPAC) has a membership of 19 Pacific Island Countries/ Territories and the South Pacific Games (SPG 2003) in Fiji includes 22, encompassing the full width of the Pacific Ocean, with an administrative responsibility for one-seventh of the earth's surface (i.e. double that of the USA and almost triple the area of Australia).

foreign war litter the region's wharves and airstrips. Following the surge of post independence optimism, the search for commercialism led to urban drift that the prevailing social, cultural, and planning constraints cannot accommodate (Simpson, 2003). Infrastructure and services are stretched to their limits. Political will is clouded, if not compromised, by the forces of economic rationalism and individualism at a personal and national level.

If we adopt Simpson's definition of the average Pacific city – '*Pacifica*' – we find a city where development is restricted by sea on at least one side and for some by mountains on the other. Land reclamation has reached the limit and beyond, with high-rise buildings starting to dominate the skyline above the swaying palms. In *Pacifica*, we also have to add other critical environmental, ecological, and economic risks into the equation: cyclones, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcano, landslides, and the additional challenge of global warming consuming our raised atolls.

What Fiji aspires to achieve

On the surface, Fiji has been keen to adopt Agenda 21, the Millennium Goals, and a vision of sustainable development. Key players in the implementation of Agenda 21 have been the government and civil society organizations. The Ministry for Local Government, Housing, and Environment has played the crucial role. NGOs/CSOs have been widely involved. The National Planning Office has integrated sustainable development issues in government plans and activities. The Fiji Council of Social Services, through its Sustainable Development and Environment Action Network, has organized local seminars, publications, and dissemination of information (FCOSS, 2003).

The draft Sustainable Development Bill, a piece of environmental protection legislation proposed by successive governments since 1996, provided for the creation of a National Council for Sustainable Development, and aimed to:

- establish legal and administrative mechanisms to achieve sustainable development in Fiji;
- reform the law relating to environmental protection and re-

- source management;
- create new legal frameworks and effective administrative mechanisms for environmental impact assessments, wildlife conservation and national parks management, pollution and waste management, and integrated natural resource management;
- establish mechanisms for meaningful public participation in all aspects of environmental and resource planning and management; and,
- provide for the implementation of a number of international treaties and agreements in areas of sustainable development, environmental protection and resource management.²

On Fantasy

When confronted with such a lofty response and an ambitious list suggesting the impression of progress, one has to be permitted some doubt, if not cynicism; one could err towards the view of William Lines, who suggests that the ‘most egregious example of the flawed vernacular is the support conservationists lend to that thundering oxymoron, sustainable development. This is a code phrase for a fantasy future in which spiralling consumption leaves no ill consequences’ (1994: 19). Turner echoes these concerns, suggesting that paradigm choice is also reinterpreting the nature of development. ‘Sustainable development’ is politically required rhetoric, which is often used to paint unsustainable ‘growth’ policies pale shades of green (Turner, 1997).

On the Religion of Sport

In Fiji, one is not allowed to criticise either religion or sport. When it comes to religion, there is a view that there is *Methodism* in madness (Boydell, 2000). In Fiji, as with many other countries, there is a second religion – sport. What was heralded as the ‘Pacific at its best – the South Pacific Games 2003’ was hosted in the capital, Suva,

² The Sustainable Development Bill has been substantially modified now and renamed Environment Management Bill. For details on the modifications, see paper by Kumar in this issue.

in June/July 2003. People were told repeatedly that it was not *in the spirit of the Games* to question or criticise the SPG. There have been significant examples of ‘development’ surrounding the games. However, it is appropriate to mention certain issues that flagrantly challenge the ethos of sustainable development.

The visible legacy in Suva of the South Pacific Games is the new multi-purpose gymnasium and Olympic swimming pool provided with aid courtesy of the government of the Peoples Republic of China, now a major aid donor in the South Pacific. The SPG is not their first showcase of assistance, as the Vanuatu Parliament complex is an earlier testament to their support to the region. The case study surrounding the provision of the SPG infrastructure provides an interesting example of what happens at the nexus of legal, political, social, environmental, economic, ecological, and cultural influences.

The new sporting facilities are heralded as world class, and are arguably the best in any Pacific island country. They were designed and constructed entirely using Chinese labour, equipment, and materials (with the exception of locally resourced concrete). The Government of Fiji employed a supervisory team fronted by a local firm of structural engineers – otherwise everyone on the site was a Chinese national: from engineers to labourers, medical support to cooks, and the author was told, even prostitutes were imported to keep the workers happy. Very little capital escaped into the local economy, with the Chinese government supporting its own economy in terms of labour, equipment, and materials.

And what of the cost? The Gymnasium was estimated to represent FJD\$20 million of donor aid, but that is not the true cost to the Chinese government, who were paying their own nationals and returning the bulk of the capital outlay directly back into their own economy. The real cost legacy is very different: the provision of dozens of additional fishing licenses to allow Chinese trawlers to enter Fiji’s waters and plunder the riches of the reef. The fishing, it is believed, is unsustainable, with smaller reef fish being taken to keep the prized larger stock alive on the return journey. But such issues do not lose elections – it is the legacy of large new sports facilities and the trappings of commercialism that win the votes in our short-term view of society.

A similar argument applies to timber resources. China has sup-

posedly been promised access to prime rainforest timber resources as the other part of their payback, albeit that the real long-term economic value of such timber and fishing licenses remains open to speculation.

Decisions of this type are made with regularity under the neo-colonial umbrella of aid that pervades in economically weak developing island nations, as short-term development rationalisations of this type wreak potentially disastrous consequences on the environment. As Groucho Marx once remarked: 'What do I care for posterity? What's posterity ever done for me?'. It is at times like this that we should perhaps pause for a moment, and remind ourselves of the Cree Indian saying 'Only when the last tree has died and the last river has been poisoned and the last fish been caught will we realise that we cannot eat money'. A cynical view is that one-day the people of Fiji may go hungry, but at least they will have somewhere to play sport and practice their religion.

It is also interesting to observe the politics and neo-colonialism of aid identifying that the Australian, New Zealand, and US governments are starting to take notice of the longer term 'infiltration' into the Pacific by China. This ruffling of feathers will inevitably result in financial benefits to the ever open-handed island nations, as they play global politics to their advantage. When looked at positively, outsiders have the potential to bring critical elements to the process of sustainable development: cash, ideas, commitment, skills, and awareness of the wider implications of environmental change (Overton, Scheyvens and Purdie, 1999). This is not to imply that such will is absent locally, but often the synergy between local and outside views, if managed with sensitivity and due respect for indigenous culture, can better catalyse positive and pro-active change, and heighten awareness and understanding.

Whilst the *development* surrounding Fiji's SPG infrastructure is, in its own way, a positive product of globalisation, no less importance can be attached to the growing environmental crisis that inevitably accompanies such evolution. Although globalisation has increasingly become a fact of life, arriving at an effective definition of the phenomenon is an elusive process. The scope of globalisation certainly goes beyond economics and embraces science, technology, politics and culture (Burgess, et al., 1997). Likewise the processes of sustainable development and globalisation both run the risk of being clouded,

if not derailed, by the very same multiple legal, political, social, environmental, economic, ecological and cultural influences.

The examples of the culture of sport and the culture of religion have been used to highlight a particular conflict to sustainable development. However, indigenous culture is an important perspective of sustainable development that must be included, rather than overlooked, as it often has been by outsiders (Hau'ofa, 1993). In the Pacific, beliefs, values and protocols are central to the way people conduct their daily lives, and are integral to their sense of self-esteem and dignity (Overton, et al., 1999). Custom is critical to understanding, explaining and regulating the human relationship with nature. It is carried through by the social phenomena of land stewardship and land tenure systems throughout much of the Pacific. Culture, like land tenure systems, is not static and evolves through the replacement of animism with Christianity, subsistence to urbanization, the growing move from communalism towards individualism, and likewise the ways in which people interact with their environment. As Overton *et al* observe, cultural change has been a driving force for environmental change. When we look at sustainable development theory, there must be as much importance placed on culture as there is on botany, science, and economics.

On Urbanisation

Chandra suggests that urbanisation is a positive aspect of development, which cannot be stopped. Any attempt to slow it down artificially will also slow down the development of the country (Chandra, 1998). Interestingly in Fiji, politicians and others have previously argued against urbanisation, but the rationale for so doing has more to do with the management problems of urban centres and the overall development problems of the country than urbanisation *per se*.

Fiji has changed from being a rural society (4% or 5,770 urban population in 1911) to one that is 40% urbanised (277,000 urban population in 1986). There are fifteen urban centres in Fiji, two of which are cities (Suva and Lautoka). Chandra describes Suva as a 'primate city', a situation where one city exerts an overwhelming dominance over the rest of the urban system in the country. Suva now contains more than half of Fiji's urban population (400,000 in greater

Suva on current 2003 estimates), whilst Lautoka contains around 14% (1986 figures). The next five largest urban centres have a population of 10,000 - 20,000. Figure 1 shows the locations of urban centers and their populations.

Compared to other developing countries, Fiji has seen a comparatively slow rate of urban growth and thus does not have such a severe collection of some of the more extreme urban problems, although shanty-towns, health and hygiene problems and problems of waste disposal, do exist in Fiji. The high-income nations take for granted the institutional support of urban service providers. Fiji, however, remains challenged with outdated water and sanitation systems, inadequate to serve a growingly sophisticated urbanised population. Likewise, the provision of electricity is hampered by hydro-schemes that cannot service demand and the threat of power shortages due to the high cost of diesel generation to complement supply.

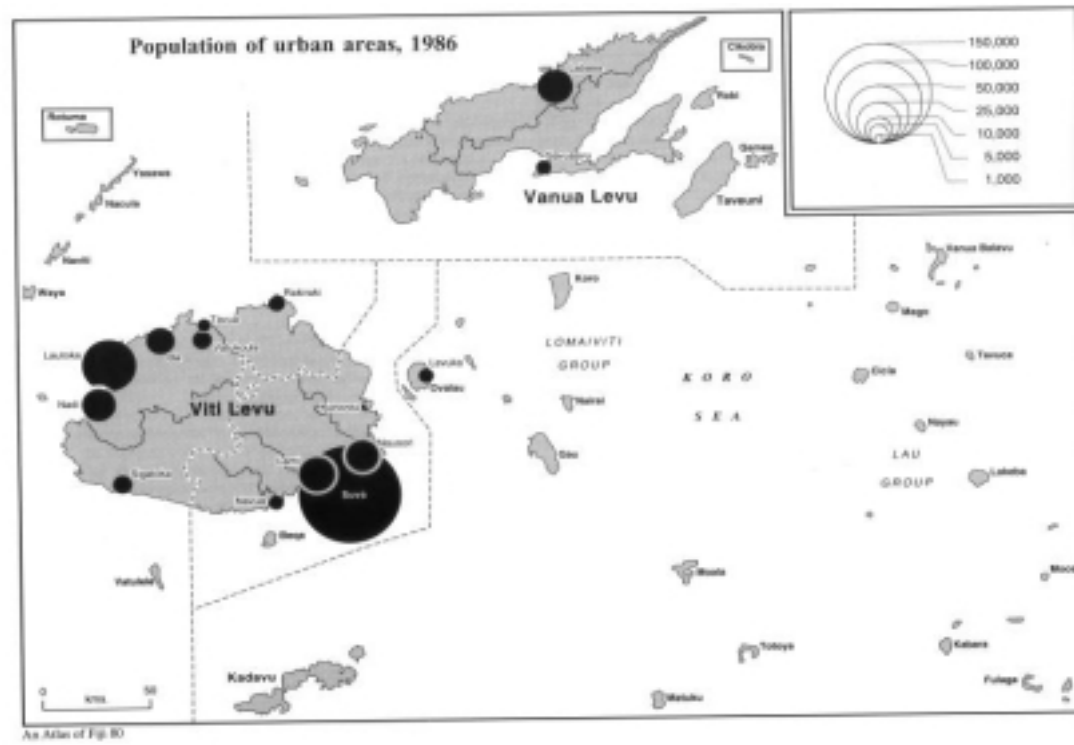
Meanwhile, there are small-scale environmentally acceptable moves towards renewable energy that demonstrate a positive attempt to move away from reliance on hydropower generation. Whilst there is a long history of attempts to provide renewable utilities, such initiatives have been fraught with implementation difficulties. Interestingly, where tourism is concerned, we see an increased provision of infrastructure facilitated by the government using loan finance from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the European Union, with the ultimate debt indirectly serviced by the urban income earners and tax payers.

On Squatting

Land markets in developing countries tend to flourish best in urban and peri-urban areas where commercial opportunities are high and migration (in Fiji's case rural-urban drift) can stimulate the land market development (Dale, Mahoney and McLaren, 2002). In Fiji, people who are squatting know that they are in illegal occupation of land, but it appears to be condoned, especially by government. Moreover, extra-legal ownership potentially creates a new level of 'legal' ownership.

A combination of urban drift, expiration of farming leases, unsustainable wages, and a lack of both adequate available shelter and land has resulted in a housing and shelter crisis in Fiji.

Figure 1: Fiji Islands – Population of Urban Areas 1986 (Chandra, 1998)



This has resulted in social, environmental, technical, and financial problems in all aspects of life. It is associated with the global trend of urbanisation, which brings an increasing number of people into urban centres with aspirations of employment, higher wages and associated improved health care and educational opportunities.

The data can be confusing, but whichever figures are adopted they all highlight a significant and growing urban problem. The Fiji Ministry of Local Government, Housing, Squatter Settlements and Environment estimated that in 1999 there were 9,231 urban households living in informal housing. This equates to 46,155 people or 12.8% of the urban population. By 2002, this figure had increased to 60,000, through natural increase and in part due to the expiration/non-renewal of native agricultural leases. The Fiji Poverty Report provides a higher figure, estimating that 71,000 people, or 23% urban population, are squatters (UNDP, 1997). Interestingly, late in 2002 the Minister for Local Government, Housing, Squatter Settlement, and Environment put the urban population at 52% of Fiji's total and estimated that squatters represent 17% of the urban population or 9% of the total population (Ragigia, 2002).

Social housing is available through the Public Rental Board (PRB), which administers 1742 flats, 1121 being in greater Suva. When PRB took these over from the Housing Authority in 1989, monthly rents increased from FJD\$50 to FJD\$130, significantly above the poverty line of FJD\$100. It is not surprising that over 40% of the tenants are in rental arrears. This accommodation largely fails to comply with basic Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) requirements (Brochu, 2002). With globalisation putting an emphasis on home ownership, there is a move to sell PRB housing to sitting tenants, further reducing potential stock despite a waitlist of more than 2600 applicants for public sector urban rental accommodation (Ragigia, 2002).

A squatter in the Fiji context can be defined as a person who is in occupation of state, freehold or native land illegally or without any form of security of tenure, or without consent of a landowner. Some squatters have quasi-authority/permission of the landowners and paid a one-off fee, or a weekly rent in informal *vakavanua* (tenant-at-will) arrangements. Such arrangements offer no security. They offer overcrowded conditions, with inadequate provision of electricity, water,

sewage, and roads. With time, the number of squatters can increase and evolve into settlements, with landowners (state, private or native) losing track of the occupants (Brochu, 2002).

In 2002, the Fiji Government allocated FJD\$1.6 million to squatter development. This is an interesting example of governmental regulation of what is seemingly illegal squatting. The intent is to acquire and develop land for squatters and provide the basic amenities to the squatter settlements. For example, the *Jittu Estate*, which currently has 1,000 squatter properties in the settlement, is being 'developed' into 470 regularised lots, in six stages. This was not a new initiative (the Housing Authority proposed development plans for this and related schemes back in 1986 during the International Year for Shelter for the Homeless); its successful implementation is. Looking constructively at the current development, the regularisation provides for road access, power, water, and sewerage. The downside is that it displaces 530 existing families to add to overcrowding in other settlements.

It is important to question the figures and see if they can realistically be matched by the intent. The government allocated \$F6.7 million towards squatter development for 2003. The cost to resettle a squatter household has been estimated as \$F28,000 per family.³ With indications of approximately 20,000 family units squatting, there is a need for \$F560 million to eliminate the squatter problem. Making the naïve assumption that there is no increase in population and no additional urban migration, a conservative estimate would indicate that Fiji will remedy its squatter problem in approximately 100 years at the current level of government commitment. Obviously, this is highly unrealistic, as is the current financial commitment to this critical sector of managing urban development.

Conclusions

As the latest ESCAP report highlights, despite the existence and use of a large number of environmental policies and programmes, the record of accomplishment in improving the state of the environment in the Asia-Pacific region does not speak highly of their efficacy (ESCAP, 2003). The report suggests that the tension between growth

³ This was the average cost of resettling an agricultural leaseholder whose lease was not renewed between 1997-9.

and environmental objectives can be resolved in prudent environmental policy design and implementation, but failed to recommend how to achieve this at a regional or local level. This is the challenge confronting us all.

We know what needs to be done; we just do not know how to get it done (Guild, 2003). Sadly, the challenges of implementation derail many positive initiatives before they come to fruition. This is important, for the key to formulating effective policies is to understand the existing realities and processes on the ground, striving to reduce the negative impacts whilst maximising the positive impacts (ESCPA, nd). As ESCAP identifies, the process of formulating and implementing land policies for sustainable urban development and management is not only politically and technically difficult, but as with the Fiji examples, can be costly not just in economic terms, but also socially and environmentally. However, the costs of not formulating and implementing them are much higher. Society cannot abdicate responsibility to government alone, it is for all levels of civil society to find the will to ensure that sustainability can be achieved as an integral requirement (rather than an aspired to goal) of urban development and management.

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